

A Pivotal Role

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

The **California Art Club** has brought attention and respect to the genre of realist art

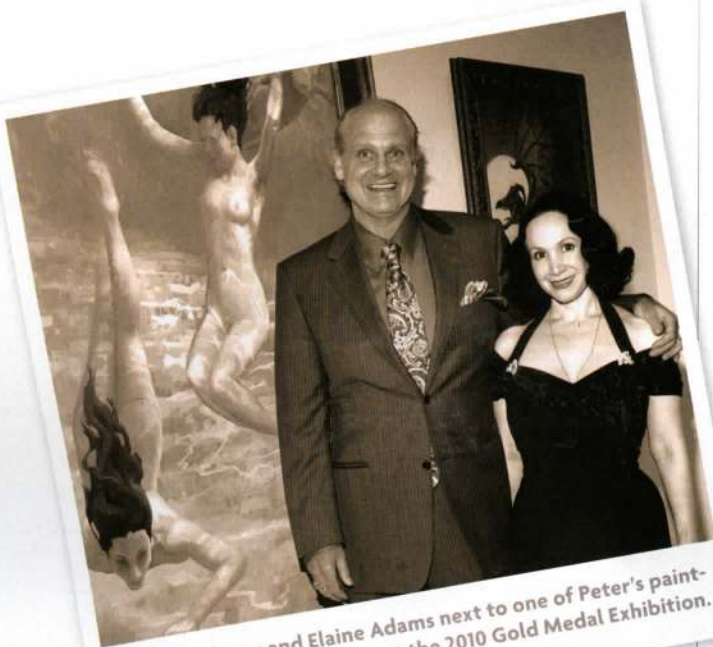
THE STORY is now part of California Art Club lore, often repeated and well known by its members: When California painter Peter Adams was first asked to become president of the club in 1992, his initial reaction was, "Absolutely not." He considered himself an artist, not presidential material. Plus, he says, "I don't even like to join things."

But later, as he was relating the request to his wife, Elaine, she challenged him, saying, "All you do is complain about the art world. Why don't you do something about it? Besides, you don't have to do anything—I will do all the work."

Her husband agreed. And nearly two decades later, the California Art Club is thriving, thanks to Peter and Elaine Adams and a core group of artists. Tim Solliday, William Stout, Dan Goozee, Steve Huston, and Stephen Mirich gathered in the Adamses' living room all those years ago to discuss new goals for the club, and they agreed on one thing: The organization needed a complete overhaul. It needed to be reborn.

It would take a lot to restore the club to its glory days. But Peter accepted the presidency, and Elaine, a former stockbroker, became the administrative force behind the organization. These days she is the executive director, a board member, and editor-in-chief of the club's newsletter; Peter remains a full-time artist while serving as president of the board and regularly attending community events to raise public awareness about the club.

In the beginning, the new leadership core decided they had one main mission—to transform a loosely knit association of Sunday painters into a professional organization. By all accounts, they have succeeded. Today the club counts more than 2,000 professional artists as members. And it has returned to its legendary roots, albeit with a new



Peter and Elaine Adams next to one of Peter's paintings at the 2010 Gold Medal Exhibition.

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—PETER ADAMS



Franz A. Bischoff (1864-1929), *Roses*, oil, 30 x 40.

voice and vision. "I'm proud that it's a grassroots movement and that we can do so many different things," Peter says. "We are not just landscape painters. We can come up with new ideas and do a show on scenes from a Shakespearean play or be inspired by Greek and Roman mythology. So many artists have joined our vision, and they have helped shape the club."

The organization was first established in 1909 and boasted a cadre of prominent artists as its founders—California Impressionists such as Franz Bischoff [1865-1946], William Wendt [1865-1946], and Carl Oscar Borg [1879-1947]. But as the years passed and many of the original members died, those artists who replaced them were not always of the same caliber. At the same time, the traditional painting style favored by the founding members was gradually declining in popularity with the press and the public.

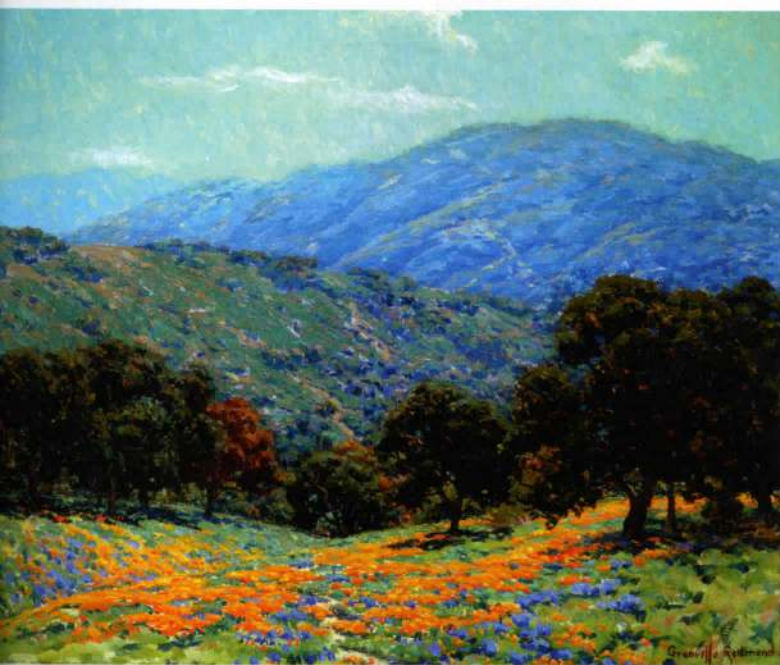
By the early 1990s, when Peter Adams was approached about the presidency, the club had all but lost its stellar reputation. Ironically, the club that had been founded in Bischoff's South Pasadena studio was revived just a few miles away in the Adamses' Pasadena living room, more than 80 years later.



Charles Muench, *Winter Orchestra—Markleeville Coda*, oil, 24 x 40, from the 2011 Gold Medal Show.



Taylor Montague, *Welcome to the Family*, oil, 16 x 20, from the 2011 Gold Medal Show.



Granville Redmond (1871-1935), *Flowers Under Oaks*, oil, 20 x 25, Courtesy Irvine Museum.

The Adamses and the other artists who formed the nucleus of the club's revival first decided that the organization had to be as inclusive as it had been in Bischoff's time, when women, sculptors, and out-of-state artists were welcomed. And to help accomplish their main goal of attracting more professional artists to the group, they eliminated painting demonstrations by members and replaced those events with a strong educational component open to both members and the public. They created programs with curators, scholars, and historians such as Jean Stern, director of the Irvine Museum in Irvine, CA; Vern Swanson, director of the Springville Museum of Art, Springville, UT; and Michael Zakian, director of the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, Malibu, CA.

Soon, monthly meetings grew from 15 to more than 150 members in attendance. The gatherings that once took place at a local restaurant were eventually moved to a spacious auditorium at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles. In 1994 the burgeoning club hosted its first exhibition under the new leadership; it was held at the Los Angeles Arboretum. In the years that followed the show moved to increasingly impressive venues and final-

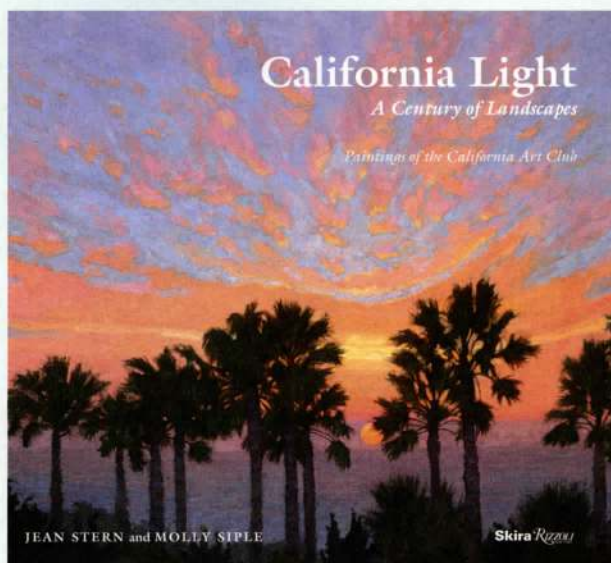
ly settled in at the Pasadena Museum of California Art for its annual presentation, the Gold Medal Juried Exhibition. This year's exhibition marks the 100th anniversary of the club's annual show, which was first held in 1911.

Today the club is an intriguing amalgam of talented representational artists, mostly based in California. Some are plein-air painters like the original members. Another contingency works in the film industry. By day they are animators and special-effects artists for Disney and Pixar Studios, working on everything from television series like *Sponge-Bob SquarePants* to feature films like *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones*. But in their spare time they pursue their own passion for fine art. Today's film-industry artists recall the tradition of the early California Scene painters like Phil Dike [1906-1990].

According to the Adamses, one of the greatest changes in the club since they reorganized it is the influx of Chinese artists, who have emigrated to the Golden State in search of better markets for their work. Prominent artists such as Jove Wang and Mian Situ bring with them strong academic training. "They have added a tremendous skill level in drawing and figure painting," Peter says. "I think it makes us all work harder and also do more figure work ourselves." It is the combination of these three groups—plein-air painters, film-industry artists, and Chinese artists—that provide the artistic backbone and strength of the club today, say the Adamses.

WHEN PETER ADAMS recalls the early days of the club's revival, he also recalls the frustration he shared with fellow artists that critics and other members of the press paid little attention to their style of painting. As a self-described "contemporary, traditional artist," he felt invisible, neglected, even alienated from the art establishment, which often placed an emphasis on the latest fad or the most shocking statement. Even artists they admired from history, such as Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla [1863-1923] or Swedish artist Anders Zorn [1860-1920], were not mentioned in art history classes.

One of the California Art Club's accomplishments has been to raise public awareness about more traditional art, both past and present, and to engage the community with a number of successful outreach programs. For example, regular paint-outs are organized at the club's headquarters in Pasadena as well as at regional satellites in Santa Barbara, San Diego, and San Francisco. Residents of those communities are able to watch the artists paint on location in places ranging from the



Celebrating the California Art Club

This month the California Art Club celebrates its 100th anniversary with the publication of *California Light: A Century of Landscapes* by Jean Stern and Molly Siple. The 264-page book from Rizzoli International presents 300 landscape paintings by both living and deceased artist members. In conjunction with the publication, the club is holding a series of exhibitions at museums and historic sites throughout the state:

The 100th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition, Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena, CA, April 3-24.

California Dreamin', California Art Club Gallery at the Old Mill, San Marino, CA, May 3-August 28.

A Luminous Land: Selections by California Art Club Signature Artists, Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, CA, through May 22.

Gold Coast: Paintings of Southern California by the California Art Club, Oceanside Museum of Art, Oceanside, CA, through June 12.

Splendor: Paintings of the Tejon Ranch, Bakersfield Museum of Art, Bakersfield, CA, June 16-August 26.

Golden State Treasures, Blinn House, Pasadena, CA, through June 30.

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historic Mission San Juan Capistrano to the colorful streets of Chinatown in Los Angeles. Onlookers learn something about the process of creating traditional art, while the artists immerse themselves in the history and culture of the places they are painting.

There have been many such outreach programs over the years, but two in particular offer strong examples of how the club has brought art to the community. In 2004, CAC artists were challenged to evoke a sense of ecumenical spirituality in a painting. About 62 artists participated,



Jesse Powell, *Cypress and Fog, Point Lobos*, oil, 30 x 36, from the 2011 Gold Medal Show.

and the resulting works were presented in an exhibition titled *Spiritual Spectrum* at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels in downtown Los Angeles.

Then last year the club partnered with the Los Angeles County Opera, and more than 50 artists created paintings evoking scenes and characters from Wagner's famous Ring Cycle. The opera-inspired show was also hung on the walls of the downtown cathedral—one of the city's major tourist attractions—as well as the nearby Fine Arts Building. When the curtains went up on the opera, the paintings were simultaneously being viewed by about 25,000 Angelinos and visitors to the city.

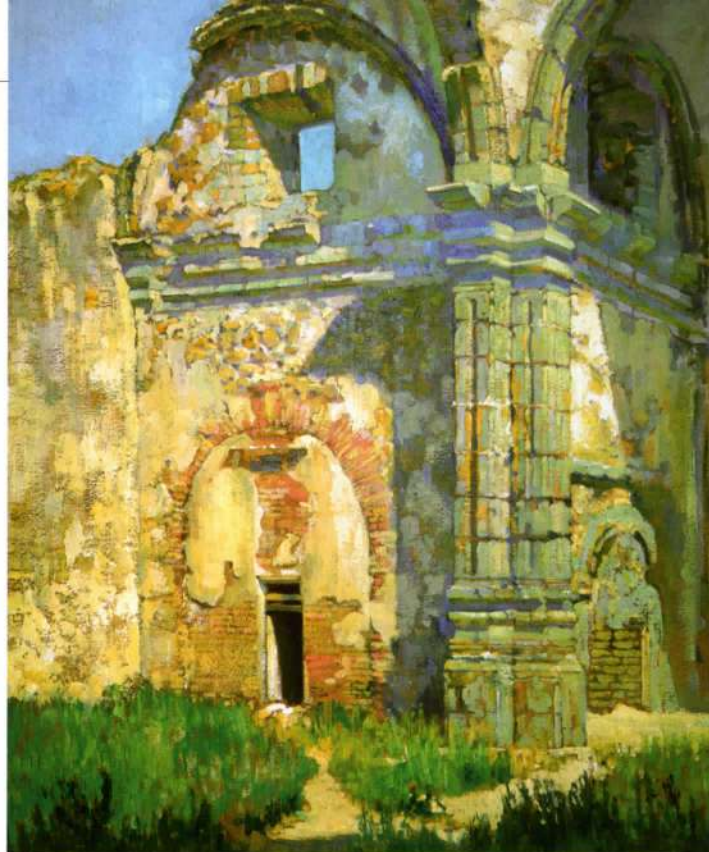
The exhibits and paint-outs held in preparation for those two exhibitions received a healthy dose of press coverage. "The club has captured in paint the many diverse cultures that live in California," says CAC artist Gayle Garner Roski, who is also a commissioner of cultural affairs for the City of Los Angeles. "Our founding fathers of art visually sent the message to the world of what a beautiful state California is, and we are carrying on that legacy. We capture in paint a moment in time. To document history—this is an important part of art and culture."

It's difficult to measure how many thousands of people have seen CAC gallery shows, paint-outs, and museum exhibitions over the years, or how many artists have participated in the club's numerous workshops and mentoring programs. Today the club has reached into all corners of the Golden State and beyond.

"The California Art Club has played a pivotal role in promoting traditional realism, particularly in California during the past 20 years," says Michael Zakian, director of the Frederick R. Weisman Museum. "Although overlooked by many of the larger museums and art institutions, realism had many practitioners and a sizeable group of working artists as well as a large following in the public, who admired this type of art. By organizing exhibitions and by promoting the work in a highly professional manner, the club has helped create a new level of attention and respect for realist art today."

When Elaine Adams reflects back on the original club, one thing in particular stands out. The founders, she says, wanted to create an organization that provided camaraderie for artists, who work in a lonely profession. So it makes sense that today, if you ask Elaine to name the club's most significant accomplishment, she is quick to mention recapturing the spirit of the early club: "I'm so proud of creating a community of artists and collectors who share in an uplifting feeling of friendship—a real family feeling." ❖

Bonnie Gangelhoff is senior editor at *Southwest Art*.



Alson S. Clark (1876-1949), *Ruins of the Chapel San Juan Capistrano*, oil, 31 x 25, Courtesy Irvine Museum.



Mian Situ, *Waiting*, oil, 28 x 20, from the 2011 Gold Medal Show.