

California Art Club celebrates 100-year history with new book

By Janette Williams, Staff Writer

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PASADENA - When you've been around for 100 years, parts of the back story may be a little hazy, there are some gaps in the time-line, and your style has gone in and out of fashion a few times.

The California Art Club has survived it all.

Now, to celebrate its 1909 founding by *plein-air* artists in Pasadena's Arroyo Seco, the club is working on a book showing its role in pioneering and preserving a fine art style that's become an American classic.

The book, with about 300 photographs of historic and contemporary paintings and sculptures, will reflect the ups and downs of the group over the past century, Executive Director Elaine Adams said.

"A major mission for us is bringing history together, proving California Impressionism was born here in the Pasadena area," Adams said. "It's going to put Pasadena on the (art) map."

The as-yet untitled book will be published by Rizzoli in 2011, the 100th anniversary of the club's first Gold Medal Juried Exhibition, Adams said.

Eric Merrell, an Art Center College of Design graduate originally tapped for the club's mentor program, became its archivist almost by accident - he spent so much time tracking its history that that Adams decided to make it his full-time task.

The more he found out, the more he realized there is to know, Merrell said.

"There are some extremely gray areas, in the 1960s and 70s," he said. "We have no clear understanding of all the activities...It seems when I uncover the threads I go off on another trail."

After its start in artist Franz Bischoff's Arroyo Seco house and studio, the club was headquartered for 15 years - until 1942 - in Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House in Los Angeles, Merrell said.

After that, the headquarters depended on where the president lived, said club president and Pasadena artist Peter Adams, explaining how the club returned to its Arroyo Seco roots in 1993.



Historic photo at California Art Club Monday October 12, 2009, of Alson Clark, painting in the Sierra Nevada with the canvas fastened to the back of his car. The painting is in the collection of the Irvine Museum. The California Art Club is celebrating its 100 years, with a book telling the story of its century of history in the city and its place in American Art.

"In the 1940s the club was slowly going downhill with the advent of Modernism," Peter Adams said.

A "Look" magazine article they found dating from 1947 wrote of the "Art Battle" when tradition-minded members of the California Art Club and others "stormed" the Los Angeles County Museum, protesting the "radical and subversive" paintings chosen for the show.

The club had its own radical side, however. Merrell found it staged the first Los Angeles exhibit of African-American painters' work in 1929, including a lecture by Paul R. Williams, the noted black architect who built many houses in Pasadena.

Gradually, the club became the province of "Sunday painters," Peter Adams said.

Many archives somehow ended up in the Smithsonian, and the large collection of books and paintings housed in the Hollyhock House "all disappeared," he said.

"By 1993 there were only 80 members," Elaine Adams recalled.

But, she said, the club never really died out.

And as the environmental movement began and interest grew in landscape painting - and the Arts and Crafts movement - plein-air art "reignited" in the mid-1990s, Adams said.

The club now has 3,000 members with five chapters in California, including San Francisco and San Diego, and a traditional mix of professional artists, art-lovers and patrons, Elaine Adams said. It's open to everyone for a \$50 membership.

Research goes on in trying to piece together missing parts of the club's early history, and Merrell hopes to visit the Smithsonian to fill in some gaps. They are also looking for early paintings done in and around the Arroyo Seco for possible inclusion.

Merrell said his most unexpected discovery so far has been one member - Winston Churchill, a talented landscape artist, who joined in the 1950s.

For more information, visit californiaartclub.org, or call (626) 583-9009.

janette.williams@sgvn.com
626-578-6300, ext. 4482



The California Art Club, home of Pasadena's plein-air painting school of the Arroyo Seco, celebrating its 100 years with a book they are researching and will be published, telling the story of its century of history in the city and its place in American painting. Members of the California Art Club Barbara Chung, Exhibitions Coordinator, Eric Merrell, Archivist, Monika Ramnath, Membership and Development Coordinator, Lisa Cavelier, Managing Director, Elaine Adams, Executive Director and Editor-in-Chief, California Art Club Newsletter, Peter Adams, President of California Art Club in their library at Western Justice Center Foundation in Pasadena Monday October 12, 2009. Peter Adams holding a news story, published in Life Magazine June 16, 1947, on three art clubs including, California Art Club, that stormed the steps of the imposing Los Angeles County Museum and set up their own canvases on the steps and terrace and walls of the museum as examples of what should have been shown inside the museum. The museum protesters were a conservative group who were annoyed because the show favored what they call "radical" and "subversive art". (SGVN/Staff Photo by Walt Mancini/SXCity)