



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909

Gifted:

COLLECTING THE ART OF CALIFORNIA AT GARDENA HIGH SCHOOL, 1919–1956

by Susan M. Anderson

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO WHEN the **Gardena High School Art Collection (GHSAC)** was founded, Gardena was a small farming community located in the southwest corner of Los Angeles County with a low population density, a diverse populace, and a smaller wealth base than other parts of the county. Yet, from 1919 to 1956, students in the senior class selected, purchased, and donated seventy-two works of art by some of the foremost artists of the day to the high school as class gifts. Artists gave the students price breaks, the students raised funds by holding class plays, teas, and a banquet dinner, and the entire Gardena community joined in support of the program. **Gardena High School (GHS)** even designed a new auditorium to properly house the permanent collection in 1923, establishing the first public gallery in Southern California to showcase regional art. Over the years, artists, the federal art projects, and other individuals and organizations throughout Southern California made gifts of art to the collection. The **California Art Club**, acting as a sort of unofficial sponsor of the program, made major contributions to the development of the GHS collection as well, especially during the early years of the collection's establishment.

Most works selected by the students prior to the mid-1930s were California Impressionist landscapes. Works collected later reflect the influence of the American Scene movement popular during the Depression era as well as the dramatic shifts in style characteristic of the art of the post



Jessie Arms Botke (1883–1971)
Cranes under a Giant Fern (c. 1943)
Oil and gold leaf on canvas 40" × 32"
Class of Summer 1943



Gardena Art Association Banquet, 1935. Photo by Churchill Gardiner Studios

World War II period. When the high school moved to a new campus in 1956, the collection largely went into storage and became unavailable for viewing by the public. The exhibition *GIFTED: Collecting the Art of California at Gardena High School, 1919–1956*, on view at the **Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University** through October 19, provides the first opportunity to see the collection in its entirety since the mid-1950s and marks the hundredth anniversary of the collection's founding.

Establishment of the Collection, 1919–1927

In 1919, Gardena High School Principal **John H. Whitely** embarked on a program for senior students devised to lend crucial support to their cultural foundation. He encouraged the students to acquire works of art for the walls of the high school as their senior gifts, describing the paintings as “silent teachers.” For the first nine years of the collection, the senior students visited artists’ studios in small groups, accompanied by a teacher. These field trips enabled the students to learn about art from the artists themselves and enlivened the lessons in art appreciation. They visited artists in the Arroyo Seco area of Pasadena, the vast wooded canyon and dry wash where, beginning in the 1890s, artists, writers,

and craftspeople had settled.

The Arroyo was the cultural heart of Los Angeles and of the regional **Arts and Crafts Movement**, which developed in mid-nineteenth-century England and was adopted in the United States at the turn of the century. Responding to the negative aspects of urbanization and industrialization, the

movement sought to reinvigorate daily life with traditional craftsmanship and a back-to-nature philosophy.

Principal Whitely's vision for the art program embodied the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement, with its holistic approach to education using hands-on teaching methods. Along with the teaching of English, Latin, mathematics, and science, GHS offered a balanced education that included instruction in woodturning and carving, cooking and sewing, carpentry, forging, printing, and pattern making. The teaching of handcrafts was thought to build character while encouraging moral behaviour, intelligence, and industriousness. It was also a practical approach for a high school with a sizable population of farming families.

California Impressionism

As part of their education in art appreciation, in addition to visiting artist studios, the students also went to museum exhibitions of Southern California art. In October 1921, the art classes took a field trip to the **Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art** in Exposition Park (now, the **Natural History Museum of Los Angeles**), where the *Twelfth Annual*



Gardena High School library with Purchase Prize Exhibit on display, 1933. GHS Scrapbook, 1929–1933.



Maynard Dixon (1875–1946)
Men of the Red Earth, 1931–1935
 Oil on canvas 36" × 41"
 Class of Summer 1944

Exhibition of the California Art Club was on display. A notation of the trip appears on the school calendar published in the 1921 yearbook, evidence that it was considered an important component of the students' education.

The GHSAC is renowned primarily for its wealth of paintings by prominent California Impressionists, many of whom were members of the California Art Club. As newcomers to the state from other parts of the nation and the world—bringing diverse artistic backgrounds and stylistic approaches from study in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and European centres of art—they especially cherished the region's unparalleled beauty. Because the mild climate enabled artists to paint outdoors year-round, the plein air process itself became emblematic of California.

Although they are now often referred to as California Impressionists, few of the artists employed the methods of Impressionism in the manner of the French Impressionists: capturing ephemeral

phenomena or focusing on developing modern culture. Instead, they set out to capture the vivid colours and intense natural light of Southern California. While adopting the loose brushwork and some of the bold colour harmonies of Impressionism, they created a regional variant wholly their own, introducing the design sensibility, craftsman ethos, and cultural values emblematic of the Arts and Crafts Movement. California Impressionist painters depicted specific, recognizable places such as Laguna Canyon, the High Sierra, the Mojave Desert, and the Arroyo Seco, but they simplified the landscape features to create compositions that were coherent, rhythmic, and decorative, creating an aesthetic suited to the climate, landscape, and emerging culture of the region.

The Purchase Prize Exhibition

Hanson Puthuff (1875–1972), a mover and shaker in the plein air community, was responsible in part for the formation of some of the most important arts



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Franz A. Bischoff (1864–1929)

A Cool Fog Drifting (1924)

Oil on canvas 30" × 40"

Class of Winter 1925

organizations of the period, including the California Art Club. He was also the originator of the GHSAC's regionally important annual *Purchase Prize Exhibit*. In 1928, upon his suggestion to Principal Whitely, the high school began to invite eighty to one-hundred regional artists to submit paintings to an invitational *Purchase Prize Exhibit*, installed each spring for three weeks in the school's library and study hall. All senior students participated in the organization of the exhibition and acted as hosts at afternoon teas and other special events for community organizations during the run of the show, creating a tradition of public service. The exhibition and programs were open to the public and students from other regional high schools. The *Purchase Prize Exhibits* were impressive and closely watched, and invariably covered by the chief art critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and national publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor*. The annual was a primary venue for Southern California artists until the 1950s.

A critical component of the *Purchase Prize Exhibit* was the annual banquet, served by the seniors in the school cafeteria to some 500 guests on opening

night, and accompanied by a yearly "artist roast" by the president of the California Art Club. For several years,

CAC presidents served either as master of ceremonies at the dinner, introducing the numerous artists present, or as principal speakers, underlining the close relationship of the school with the organization and its artists. Some of the documented CAC toastmasters were artists **Edwin Roscoe Shrader** (1878–1960), **Frank Tenney Johnson** (1874–1939), **Paul Lauritz** (1889–1975), and **Ralph Holmes** (1876–1963).

The CAC office also acted as a drop-off location in Los Angeles for any artist, member or not, who wanted to enter the *Purchase Prize Exhibit*. The close connection between GHS and the CAC naturally led to a continuing propensity to collect the members' California Impressionist landscapes. Principal Whitely and his wife, **Alberta Munro Whitely**, developed relationships with many of the artists over the years. In 1932, the principal joined the CAC, making official a relationship that was already well established.

The students themselves were often responsible for picking up the works of art for the annual exhibition, accompanied by the principal. In 1936, for example, one group went to Pasadena to collect works at the **Vista**



Ralph Davison Miller (1858–1945)

Valley of the Santa Clara (1918)

Oil on canvas 30" × 40"

Class of 1919

del Arroyo Hotel Gallery, the Carl F. Smith Gallery, and the homes of Marion Kavanagh Wachtel (1876–1954) and Jean Mannheim (1862–1945). The students' last stop was the CAC headquarters at the **Hollyhock House** designed by **Frank Lloyd Wright** (1867–1959), located at Vermont and Hollywood boulevards in Los Angeles, where they were treated to lunch. Another group of students took the school truck the following day to make pick-ups at **Royars Art Center**, **Barker Brothers**, the **Biltmore Hotel**, and **Stendahl Art Gallery**.

The art banquet was a popular annual tradition with the art and education community of Southern California. Profits from the banquet raised funds for the two purchase prizes, of 400 and 300 dollars each. After the banquet, the seniors voted on which of the assembled works of art in the current exhibit would receive the honour of becoming the Class Gifts for that year. Judging a selection of ten favourites took place over three weeks, giving students, teachers, and visiting artists sufficient time to discuss their essential qualities. Students were also aided in their selection by study and discussion in an academic seminar called Senior Problems that was a requirement of graduation. Heated debates about the merits of the paintings spilled into the hallways and the students' homes. Formal presentations of the Class Gifts occurred at the conclusion of graduation ceremonies, just before the recessionary, "God of Our Fathers."

The Depression Era, 1929–1940

The presentation of the 1929 Class Gifts at graduation was followed four months later by the Wall Street Crash, triggering the Great Depression. By June 1930, breadlines were forming in Los Angeles; in spite of this, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, the 1930 exhibition was "the cultural event of the year." Nevertheless, the GHS students were soon faced with the economic difficulties of the era. Now their determination to continue the project would require greater commitment from the Gardena community as it would take an organizational effort of between 500 and 800 people to pull off the annual banquet



Hanson Duvall Puthuff (1875–1972)
Morning at Montrose (c. 1922)
Oil on canvas 28" × 36"
Class of 1922

and *Purchase Prize Exhibit* each year. Consequently, in 1934, the **Gardena Art Association** formed, rallying students, teachers, parents, citizens, and businesses to support the annual tradition.

Throughout the Depression era, the *Purchase Prize Exhibit* endured as an essential venue for artists to gain recognition and sell their work. The increased prestige of the GHSAC during the 1930s prompted frequent requests for it to travel throughout California, including to the **University of Southern California** and **Stanford University**.

World War II, 1941–1946

The *Purchase Prize Exhibits* counted fewer participating artists during the war, their energy diverted to work for defense contractors in the aerospace industry, and the exhibitions were "streamlined for wartime efficiency." The 1943 exhibit, for example, was limited to the twelve artists whose work was not already represented in the school's gallery, and no opening dinner was held due to rationing and food shortages. However, some of the most cherished paintings entered the collection as Class

Gifts during the war years. *Men of Red Earth* by **Maynard Dixon** (1875–1946) was the Summer 1944 Class Gift; the Summer 1943 Class Gift was *Cranes under a Giant Fern* by **Jessie Arms Botke** (1883–1971). The latter, with its clear references to Japanese art, may have been a tribute to the large community of Japanese American students missing from the campus, due to their relocation to internment camps, thereby reducing the size of the GHS senior class by thirty percent.

Post-War, 1947–1956

With the formal end of World War II on August 14, 1945, Southern California entered an era marked by the post-war boom and a new aesthetic sensibility sweeping through the Southern California art world. During this era marked by change, GHS encouraged open dialogue, often inviting speakers for the annual dinners that supported modernist experimentation. The students demonstrated independent thinking, making increasingly adventuresome choices reflecting the many art influences gaining prominence in Los Angeles art,

including figurative abstraction, **Cubism**, **Surrealism**, and **Hard-Edge** painting.

In 1956, when GHS moved to its current campus to accommodate the growing post-war population, it included a much smaller art gallery with room for only fifteen paintings. The collection largely went into storage and became unavailable for viewing by the students and the public. At the end of the school year, the principal announced the culmination of the long tradition of student donations of paintings. Although the famed art education program at Gardena High School had finally run its course, it had inspired countless other high schools regionally and nationally to begin art collecting programs and had, in its own way, also inspired and supported the regional art community during its formative years. A study of the Gardena High School Art Collection reveals that a broader public than was previously known participated in the development of Southern California art—a development that was driven by educational rather than economic values. ■

Notes:

GIFTED: Collecting the Art of California at Gardena High School, 1919–1956 is on view at the Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University through October 19, 2019. The



Marion Kavanagh Wachtel (1876–1954)
Mt. Moran, Teton National Park (c. 1946)
 Oil on canvas 28" × 40"
 Class of Winter 1946

*exhibition was organized by the GHS Art Collection, Inc. in association with the Gardena High School Student Body and curated by Susan M. Anderson. The exhibition will travel to the **Fresno Art Museum** from January 24 to June 28, 2020, and the **Oceanside Museum of Art** from July 18 to November 29, 2020.*

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William Wendt (1865–1946), founding member of the California Art Club

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