

1-1-1949

The Des Moines Art Center

Jean B. Kern

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kern, Jean B. "The Des Moines Art Center." *The Palimpsest* 30 (1949), 23-32.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol30/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Des Moines Art Center

The largest and newest art center in Iowa is the Des Moines Art Center which was officially opened to the residents of the State on June 2-4, 1948. Designed by the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen, founder of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, the new building is a warm stone structure fitted to the contour of the rolling lawns of Greenwood Park. Architecturally it is something of which the State can be proud. The classrooms are new, light, modern, and airy. There is a large lobby, comfortably furnished and filled with reflected light from a pool just outside. It has galleries for both small and large exhibitions, with movable partitions. It has an auditorium which will seat 250 for concerts and lectures, rooms for club meetings, three kitchenettes with facilities for teas, a library, and meeting space for art forums and art clinics.

How does Des Moines happen to have one of the best modern museums in the Midwest? The credit goes originally to James Depew Edmundson who when he died in 1933 provided in his will for the construction of a municipal museum as a gift to the city of Des Moines and to the people of Iowa. When construction of the proposed art

center was delayed by the war, Edmundson's bequest was wisely invested by the trustees of the estate so that at the time the building was finished in 1948 at a cost of \$700,000 there was still \$100,000 left over to be used for purchases for the permanent collection of the Center. Thus an Iowa pioneer boy born in a log cabin but destined to rise in almost Horatio Alger fashion to an eminent position as a banker, financier, and patron of culture is responsible for Iowa's having one of the handsomest buildings of its kind in the country.

While it is perhaps significant that Edmundson, who commissioned the Sherry Edmundson Fry Statue of Chief Mahaska for Oskaloosa, is the man responsible for the present art center building, it is clear that the Center was not built in a cultural vacuum. The Des Moines Association of Fine Arts was organized back in 1916. In its articles of incorporation drawn up a few months later (in 1917), it was stated that the general purpose of the Association was to be "the founding and maintenance of an institution of art" at Des Moines. It had become a matter of public pride with these founders of the Association that Des Moines should not fall behind Kansas City, Omaha, or Minneapolis in its appreciation of the fine arts.

For more than twenty years after the founding of this Association, its activities were limited to

the gradual accumulation of paintings. It was not until 1938 (five years before the Edmundson fund was available for use) that it was decided to find temporary housing for art activities. It was then that the second floor at 610 $\frac{1}{2}$ Walnut Street was decided upon as a centrally located headquarters. After remodeling was completed, the center was opened November 14 with a one-man show by Russell Cowles, a former Des Moines artist. There was also a WPA collection of 50 prints (etchings, lithographs, linoleum, and wood-blocks) direct from a first showing in Washington, D. C., the week before.

For ten years the Walnut Street Center continued as the focus of art interest in the community. Augmented at first by WPA funds, given consistent support by articles in the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, it was a successful stop-gap until the recent opening of the new Center in Greenwood Park. During the years of World War II it enjoyed unusual success as a service center and recreation outlet particularly for the many WAC's in training at Fort Des Moines.

The provisions of Edmundson's will set three chief restrictions on the use of the money for the new Art Center: (1) The money could not be touched for ten years. (2) If no provision was made for the prospective building by this date (1943), the sum was to go to Penn College at

Oskaloosa. (3) The building was not to be closer to the city center than west of West 14th Street to avoid the smoke of downtown Des Moines which would be too serious a hazard to the storage of valuable paintings. Thus with a time-limit and a place-limit, the Association had its problems. An earlier site along the Des Moines River had to be abandoned because of the will's stipulation about the location of the Center. Greenwood Park was finally chosen as the best area, because while not central, it presented appropriately attractive and spacious environs for the proposed building.

Construction, because of war restrictions on building materials, was not possible in 1943 when the money became available. Finally in May, 1946, it was possible to begin on the elaborate plans drawn up by Eliel Saarinen to be executed by a Des Moines firm, Brooks and Borg. The plan for the building of dolomite stone from Lannon, Wisconsin, involved many modern features such as ceiling-high northern windows for the studios, radiant heating from pipes in the floor, aluminum casements for the windows, sound-proofing for the classrooms, air conditioning units concealed under paneling on the ceilings, and gallery walls of double thickness in the two main galleries — the walls to be covered with burlap.

Building was of course hindered by postwar

shortages of materials and by increased costs which went far over the original estimate. Despite all these difficulties, the building was completed in a little less than two years and the official opening was scheduled early in June, 1948, with a special reception for the Association members and guests on the evening of June 2. The reception was opened with a short program in the Center's auditorium during which Forest Huttenlocher, president of the Edmundson Art Foundation, and chairman of the museum building committee, formally presented the Des Moines Art Center to Mayor Heck Ross. In the presentation the words of J. D. Edmundson's will were used: "I give this museum to the city of Des Moines and to the people of my native state."

Over 3,500 attended the opening that Wednesday evening last June and stayed to look at the largest exhibition of paintings which had ever appeared in Des Moines. Paul Parker who served as director from 1945 until his resignation in the summer of 1948, had gathered together 200 pictures representative of the last 100 to 150 years of European and American art. The show also included the ceramics of Daniel Rhodes, a former Iowan, four paintings by the late Grant Wood, paintings by Marvin Cone of Cedar Rapids, by William Palmer, and Russell Cowles, former Iowans, and from the State University of Iowa,

sculpture by Humbert Albrizio, prints by Mauricio Lasansky, and paintings by Stuart Edie and James Lechay. Thus Iowans had for the first time an opportunity to view the work of their own contemporaries against that of such artists as Renoir, Matisse, Manet, or Picasso.

During the following two days, there were lawn luncheons at the Center for out-of-town guests, several parties, and a dinner at the Hotel Fort Des Moines where Daniel S. Defenbacher, director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, gave the principal address on "Sanity in Art." Visitors were startled by the modern beauty of the Center itself, and the *Des Moines Register* predicted it would "become the center of Art and related cultural activities in Iowa."

The Center has been open now for six months and already it has a sizeable program in operation. A monthly bulletin keeps the 2,550 members informed of the schedule of lectures, classes, exhibitions, and other activities. There is a children's art program under the direction of Mrs. Elizabeth B. Raseman, classes in ceramics under William E. Ross, painting, drawing, and sculpture taught by Edgar Britton, and Art Forum Clinics once a month conducted by James Hunt, primarily for practicing artists but open to the public. Two evenings a week classes are offered in ceramics, life, drawing, painting, sculpture, weaving, and

design to any interested persons. Memberships in the Art Center Association do not include admission to these classes, but the class fees are the same for non-members as for members. While fees are charged for classes, the galleries are free at all times, and are open Tuesday through Saturday from 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M., and on Sundays and holidays from 1:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. The museum is closed to the public each Monday.

Exhibitions have been planned at the rate of one a month and include pottery, one-man shows of paintings, and an Art Fair held October 11-17 for Des Moines artists. This last event, planned by the Art Forum, gives an opportunity to local practicing artists both to exhibit and sell their work. During the month of November a show by Des Moines artists was scheduled. Limited to 80 entries, this show was judged by Dwight Kirsch of the University of Nebraska and offered \$100 in prizes. In December a one-man show was held of the painting of Karl Mattern, professor of art at Drake University. Every Tuesday and Thursday at 3 P.M. there is a lecture on the current exhibitions by members of the staff.

Richard F. Howard, appointed as the new Director of the Center in November, 1948, assumed his duties early in 1949. Formerly the Director of the Dallas, Texas, Art Museum, the new Di-

rector has been recently in Berlin in charge of the art restitution activities of the military government in Germany.

The Des Moines Art Center is not municipally supported by the city council as Davenport is or as Sioux City is in part. Instead it is dependent on memberships which range from \$5 for an active membership to \$1000 for a patron membership. An adequate staff and a comprehensive program must be maintained entirely from these memberships and contributions. However there are separate funds available for the purchase of works for the Center's permanent collection. Even after spending \$700,000 for the Art Center building the Edmundson foundation will have about \$100,000 left for a purchase fund. Added to the income from this is \$20,000 a year income from the Coffin trust which can be used exclusively for the purchase of art works. Mrs. Winnie Ewing Coffin who died in 1937 is responsible for the additional bequest. While not too large a sum, this total is enough to make possible gradual additions to the permanent collection.

In the present permanent collection are some fifty paintings of the old Fine Arts Association collection, ownership of which was transferred to the new Center. Except for a painting by George Bellows called "Aunt Fanny," purchased several years ago, most of the collection is built around

such American painters as E. W. Redfield, Gardner Simons, and Elmer Schofield. However, there are a few paintings of real value in the Center's collection. Of these, "Saint Francis with Brother Rufus" by the sixteenth-century Spanish painter, El Greco, is the most famous and the most valuable. It was a gift to the Center last year. Two other gifts, a water color by the French impressionist, Paul Signac, and a study of an old man by John Singer Sargent are worth mentioning. In sculpture, a bronze head by Rodin is probably the most important piece in the permanent collection. It is evident from this very brief catalog that the Center has a very modest collection of valuable works of art, so that one of its foremost problems in the years ahead will be its acquisition policy.

The extent of the Des Moines Art Center program will finally be determined by the interest and support of its members. At present it is able to boast one of the largest participating memberships of any museum in the country, totaling 2,550 in 1948, when the Center opened. Whether the membership can be maintained at this high level, now that the initial excitement of the opening has passed, will depend on the combined efforts of the Director, the staff, and the trustees of the endowment funds who must produce an art program which can catch, hold, and develop the public's

interest. As George Shane, the art critic of the *Des Moines Register*, has said: "The Art understanding of the community is accelerated as those living within the community are exposed to good painting and sculpture." Iowa has an Art Center of which to be proud, one which can compare favorably with all those in the cities of the Midwest. The question now is all in the future: How much can Iowa make of this advantage? The aim of the Art Center is "to provide the maximum facilities for the broadest possible public participation in the enjoyment of all the visual arts." The extent to which this aim will be accomplished will be determined by the residents of Des Moines and the people of Iowa.

JEAN B. KERN