

Artl@s Bulletin

Volume 8

Issue 1 *Women Artists Shows.Salons.Societies*
(1870s-1970s)

Article 12

Women Artists' Salon of Chicago (1937-1953): Cultivating Careers and Art Collectors

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Recommended Citation

Gardner-Huggett, Joanna P. "Women Artists' Salon of Chicago (1937-1953): Cultivating Careers and Art Collectors." *Artl@s Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (2019): Article 12.

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Cover Page Footnote

The article would not be possible without the generous support of several DePaul University Research Council grants. I extend my sincere thanks to the outside readers of this article who offered many insightful comments that greatly improved this essay. I also would like to thank to Wendy Greenhouse for her assistance in researching the histories of the Palette Club, Tree Studios, and the Town and Country Arts Club, as well as sharing her extensive knowledge of Chicago's art history. I am very grateful to Catherine Dossin, Meg Duguid, and Georgina Gluzman for many conversations regarding women artists' organizations that inform this article. Lastly, I thank the many librarians and archivists at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution and the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago who have helped me navigate each institution's extensive resources.

Women Artists' Salon of Chicago (1937-1953): Cultivating Careers and Art Collectors

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the history of the Women Artists' Salon of Chicago, which was founded as an exhibition society in Chicago in 1937, and argues that the Board of Directors turned to the 19th-century precedents of the Palette Club and the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition as models for their organization. The essay also traces how members of the Women Artists' Salon deliberately exhibited traditional artworks associated with the feminine and domestic and coordinated social events in order to cultivate greater sales and a new generation of female art collectors.

Résumé

Cet article reconstitue l'histoire du Women Artists' Salon of Chicago, fondé en 1937 en tant que société d'expositions dans cette ville, et soutient que le conseil d'administration a pris pour modèle des organisations développées au XIX^e siècle : le Palette Club et le Woman's Building lors de l'Exposition universelle (World's Columbian Exposition) de Chicago en 1893. Cet essai retrace également comment des membres du Women Artists' Salon ont délibérément exposé des œuvres associées traditionnellement au féminin et à la sphère domestique, et ont organisé des événements destinés à en stimuler les ventes et susciter une nouvelle génération de collectionneuses d'art.

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Introduction

The Women Artists' Salon of Chicago was founded as an annual exhibition society in 1937 by two distinct generations of white female artists. Among the first were members of Chicago's social elite who trained at the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 19th century, studied in Paris, and exhibited with groups, such as Chicago's Palette Club or the Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. The second were younger and less affluent women, who took courses at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, while they held a full-time job, and started their careers by exhibiting with a variety of independent arts organizations within Chicago. What united these two very different groups of women, however, was a shared commitment to promoting the sales of women's artwork and cultivating prosperous white female collectors in a city that often valued outsiders more than homegrown artists.

This article reconstructs the little-known history of the Women Artists' Salon and argues that the Board of Directors turned to the fairly recent and significant precedents of the Palette Club and the Woman's Building as models for their innovative strategies to promote and sell their artwork.¹ Further, the essay traces the group's willingness to exhibit artwork associated with the feminine and domestic over more avant-garde and experimental imagery exhibited in other spaces, as well as to exclude the presence of artists of color at their events, in order to secure financial support from the wealthy white female clientele in Chicago and neighboring suburbs. The essay concludes that the founders of the Women Artists' Salon created a genealogical bond with their 19th-century predecessors, by embracing the female separatist exhibition model as a way to put women at the center of Chicago's contemporary art market and establishing a precedent for women artists'

¹ Much of the history of the Palette Club has been lost. For a general overview of its history, however, see Joanne Wiemers Bowie, entry for "Alice De Wolf Kellogg Tyler," in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990, A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 468-469. For a comprehensive history of the Woman's Building, see Wanda Corn, *Women Building History, Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

cooperatives, such as Artemisia and ARC galleries, which opened within one week of each other in September 1973.²

Historical Precedents: The Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition (1893) and the Palette Club (1880-1895)

Unlike the Woman Artists' Salon, the Woman's Building (1893) did not function as a commercial enterprise, rather it aimed to convey the history of womankind through women's hardships of the distant past and the triumphs of the modern present, fostering recognition and respect for women's work inside and outside the home.³ The Board of Lady Managers led by Bertha Honoré Palmer (1849-1918), well-known for her important donations of Impressionist art to the Art Institute of Chicago, were responsible for the building's conception, exhibits, and programming. The structure designed by Sophia Hayden (1868-1953), the first female graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's architecture program, featured works by women artists and cultural displays from countries, such as Austria, Belgium, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, and Spain. A library promoted books by women writers and galleries highlighted African-American and Japanese art, as well as displays of Indian and African works from the Smithsonian Institution. Additional rooms introduced scientific inventions made by women. Statistics regarding women's salaries and representation in the United States work force also were on view.⁴ Throughout the building visitors encountered a substantial public art program comprised of reliefs, sculptures, and painted murals, including major commissions executed by Mary Cassatt and Mary MacMonnies.⁵

² Here I borrow from Wanda Corn, who describes the founding of the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1973 as creating a "genealogical bond" with the Woman's Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Corn, *Women Building History*, 9-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 22, 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-77.

⁵ See *Ibid.*, 65-166 for a detailed analysis of the commissioned public artworks for the Woman's Building.

Now a canonical moment in art history of the United States, the development of the Woman's Building was a fairly contentious process. Congress sanctioned the Board of Lady Managers to determine women's roles in the World's Columbian Exposition, but many members, particularly those from the Queen Isabella Society who supported women's suffrage, opposed a separate building as they believed it merely reinforced their marginalized status in the art world.⁶ Eventually, Palmer got her building, but this difficult win reflects what will become a common problem for women artists' organizations, which is a tension between women who seek to promote a feminist agenda, while others simply want to find a safe and supportive space to show and sell their artwork.

The all-female Palette Club (1880-1895) began holding annual exhibitions with artworks for sale at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1882.⁷ Founded in 1880 by Alice DeWolff Kellogg (1862-1900) and Marie Koupal (1862-1929) with the name the Bohemian Art Club, the club later changed its title to the Palette Club in 1888 and filed for incorporation in 1892. By 1893 the group grew to more than 70 members, meeting on Saturdays to critique each others' artwork, discussing common professional concerns, and taking two-week camping trips each summer. Palette Club members were invited to decorate the Women's Department of the Illinois Building at the World's Columbian Exposition and completed a five-panel frieze representing women's accomplishments. In addition, 125 artworks created by Palette members also were shown in the Illinois Building. In the Exposition's Palace of Fine Arts, eight Palette Club artists were among the 104 women artists selected by the all-male jury.⁸

Although the Women Artists' Salon was established more than forty years after the Woman's Building

and the Palette Club, board members Pauline Palmer (1867-1938) (no relation to Bertha Honoré Potter Palmer) and Lucy Hartrath (1868-1962) provided links to all three organizations. Having trained at the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as in Paris, Palmer exhibited in the Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition. Palmer became a highly recognized artist during this period, for example, holding an exhibition of paintings alongside the Armory Show at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913. Although the museum's director William M.R. French discouraged Palmer from going ahead with her exhibit due to the anticipated popularity and spectacle of the Armory Show, Palmer could not be dissuaded and even earned \$2,500 in sales and two portrait commissions, attesting to the warm reception of her Impressionist works during this period.⁹ In addition, Palmer gained significant experience in leading arts organizations; holding a three-year term as President of the Chicago Society of Artists from 1918-1921 as just one example.¹⁰ David Sokol argues that Palmer nurtured a younger generation of women artists and "...served as a forward-looking role model for professional women who followed her in establishing full-fledged artistic careers."¹¹

Hartrath exhibited four paintings with the Palette Club in 1895 and became an important figure within Chicago artists' community. She trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and in 1898 studied in Paris like Palmer. By 1901 Hartrath exhibited at the Paris Salon, as well as contributed to exhibitions held in Berlin, Cologne, and Düsseldorf. In addition, she started to exhibit in spaces appealing to middle class audiences, such as department stores, women's clubs, and the Chicago Galleries Association. Outside of Chicago, Hartrath became a leader in the Brown County artists' colony in Indiana, a founder of the Brown County Art

⁶ Ibid., 66-74. For a history of Bertha Honoré Palmer's cultural leadership in Chicago, see: Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, "Bertha Honoré Palmer," in *Junctures in Women's Leadership: The Arts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 1-21.

⁷ The Palette Club is not to be confused with the all-male organization Palette and Chisel Club founded in Chicago in 1895. The group met on Sundays to draw from a live nude model. See Wendy Greenhouse, "Chicago Rising, 1855-1912," in *Art in Chicago, A History from the Fire to Now*, eds. Maggie Taft and Robert Cozzolino (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7-55 for more background on this organization and time period in Chicago's art history.

⁸ Joanne Wiemers Bowie, entry for "Alice De Wolf Kellogg Tyler," in *Women Building Chicago*, 468-469. Unfortunately, the records of the Palette Club were destroyed in a

fire in 1892. Annette Blaugrund, Joanne W. Bowie, and Alice D. Kellogg, "Alice D. Kellogg: Letters from Paris, 1887-1889," *Archives of American Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (1988): 18-19.

⁹ Andrew Martinez, "A Mixed Reception for Modernism: The 1913 Armory Show at the Art Institute of Chicago," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 19, no. 1 (1993): 47, 52.

¹⁰ For more on the history of the Chicago Society of Artists, see Louise Dunn Yochim, *Role and Impact, the Chicago Society of Artists* (Chicago: The Society, 1979).

¹¹ David M. Sokol, "Pauline Lennards Palmer," *Women Building Chicago*, 664-665.

Association in 1926, and regularly served as an exhibition jurist and lecturer.¹²

Given Palmer and Hartrath's histories, it is fair to conclude that both women served as important mentors for the younger Executive Officers of the Women Artists' Salon. From Palmer and Hartrath, they likely learned key tactics to promote themselves as professional artists, gain critical attention in Chicago's cultural community, cultivate collectors, and find support among their peers.

The Founding of the Women Artists' Salon

When the Chicago Women Artists' Salon was founded in 1937, its executive officers and exhibitors already enjoyed critical recognition and were active contributors to Chicago's arts communities. Noted critic C.J. Bulliet who wrote for the *Chicago Daily News*, for instance, already highlighted 14 of the 36 artists exhibiting in the first Women Artists' Salon in his profile series *Artists of Chicago Past and Present*.¹³ (Fig. 1) Seven of the exhibitors were included in J.Z. Jacobson's groundbreaking book exploring contemporary art in Chicago *Art of Today 1933*.¹⁴ Independent and alternative arts groups, for example the No-Jury Society, Neoterics, and The Ten, welcomed women where they also held leadership positions.¹⁵ Given these advantageous conditions for Chicago's women artists, it is worth exploring the history and reasons for the founding of the Women Artists' Salon of Chicago at a time when female separatism was considered in some

circles as isolating women artists from the larger art market that just started to accept them.¹⁶

Chicago artists navigated a dour economic climate during the Great Depression, which resulted in factory closings, plummeting farm prices, and high rates of unemployment. With many artists left jobless, the Federal Art Project (FAP), established in 1935 under the umbrella of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, provided important financial relief. Chicago served as the administrative center of the Illinois Art Project (IAP) and employed many of the most recognized artists of the 1930s, including women.¹⁷ 15 out of 36 contributors to the first Women Artists' Salon in 1937 were hired by the Federal Art Project in the Easel, Mural, and Sculpture Divisions, ensuring a monthly income and possibly reducing the need to work a second job that detracted from a professional art practice.¹⁸ WPA work relief, however, was only a temporary remedy for a longstanding problem facing Chicago's art market since the 19th century. As Wendy Greenhouse explains, "Chicagoans developed an exaggerated taste for art sanctioned from away;" arguing further that "hometown loyalty meant bringing good art to their city; it did not necessarily mean buying there."¹⁹ Chicago artists fortunate enough to have gallery representation in the 1930s faced rising commission rates from art dealers who were struggling to survive. By 1937, some argued that the Depression was over, but in fact, that year signaled another economic lapse, providing even more incentive for women to work collectively to sell their own artwork.²⁰

¹² Wendy Greenhouse, "Lucy Hartrath (1867-1962)," *M. Christine Schwartz Collection*. Accessed November 1, 2018, <https://schwartzcollection.com/artist/lucie-hartrath/>

¹³ The following artists were featured in this series prior to the formation of the Women Artists' Salon: Anita Venier Alexander, Macena Barton, Marie Blanke, Fritz Brod, Helga Haugen Dean, Frances Foy, Eugenie Glaman, Lucie Hartrath, Beatrice S. Levy, Pauline Palmer, Ethel Spears, Sister Stanisla, Frances Strain, and Julia Thecla. The Illinois Art Project website archived C.J. Bulliet's articles here: <http://www.illinoisart.org/clarence-j-bulliet>. Five additional artists in the first Women Artists' Salon are featured in Bulliet's articles by 1939: Frances Badger, Edithe Jane Cassaday, Pauline Graf Little, Winnifred Pleimling, and Flora Schofield.

¹⁴ Jean Crawford Adams, Macena Barton, Francis Foy, Beatrice S. Levy, Flora Schofield, Frances Strain, and Laura van Pappelendam are included in J.Z. Jacobson, *Art of Today 1933* (Chicago: L.M. Stein, 1932). The Illinois Art Project posted all of the artists' entries online: <http://www.illinoisart.org/j-z-jacobson-art-of-today>

¹⁵ The No-Jury Society was founded in 1922 and held annual exhibitions through 1958. See: <http://www.illinoisart.org/chicago-no-jury-society-of-artists/>; The Neoterics existed for one year from 1935-1936, holding two exhibitions. See: <http://www.illinoisart.org/neoterics>. Less is known about the group "The Ten" (or 10

Artists, Chicago). See one exhibition review: Eleanor Jewett, "The 10 Meet Expectations in Annual Exhibit," *Chicago Tribune*, January 19, 1937. For a broader overview of Chicago's alternative organizations see Paul Kruty, "Declarations of Independents: Chicago's Alternative Art Groups of the 1920s," in *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde, Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940*, ed. Sue Prince (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 77-93 and Paul Durica, "Little Rooms: Chicago's Creative Communities, 1889-1939," in *Support Networks*, ed. Abigail Satinsky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 15-23.

¹⁶ Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio, the Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 149.

¹⁷ Greg Gilbert, *A New Deal for Illinois, the Federal Art Project Collection of Western Illinois University* (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 2013), 11-12.

¹⁸ See Appendix A, "List of Illinois Art Project Artists and Administrators," in George J. Mavigliano and Richard A. Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943* (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 109-139.

¹⁹ Greenhouse, "Chicago Rising 1855-1912," 10, 16.

²⁰ Mavigliano and Lawson, *Federal Art Project*, 3, 9.



Figure 1. Exhibition checklist for Women Artists' Salon Exhibition, Findlay Galleries, October 10-November 11, 1937. Macena Barton Papers, 1839-1985, 1914-1985, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Unfortunately, much of the historical documentation of the Women Artists' Salon of Chicago is lost, but turning to individual artists' archives, articles in newspapers and periodicals, and academic studies

of modernism in Chicago begins to illuminate the group's founding, mission, and annual exhibitions.²¹ Winnifred Pleimling (1899-1966), Macena Barton (1901-1986), and Julia Thecla (1896-1973) were the founding President, Treasurer, and Secretary of the Women Artists' Salon respectively. They

²¹ The Women Artists' Salon first held exhibitions at Findlay Galleries and then the Art Gallery at Marshall Field's. The last exhibition was held at Mandel Brothers Department store. See Eleanor Jewett, "Area Women Display Art in Their Salon," *Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 1953, 19. It came to my attention that the exhibition documentation for the Women Artists' Salon held in the Marshall Field Gallery Archives was thrown out just prior to starting this research in the early 2000s. Findlay

Galleries has not responded to requests for accessing their archives. The Chicago History Museum owns the Mandel Brothers Department store photographic archive, but it focuses on documentation of the store's interior and its merchandising. The Macena Barton and C.J. Bulliet papers at the Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. offer the most illuminating documentation of the group.

were joined by fellow board members Anita Venier Alexander (1898-1984) and Eugenie Glaman (1873-1956), as well as Hartrath and Palmer introduced earlier. This group of women did not share a specific artistic philosophy, but were connected primarily through the Tree Studios, which was established in 1894 by the philanthropists Judge Lambert Tree and his wife Anna Magie Tree. The Trees believed that the visual arts served a moral purpose and enhanced the lives of Chicago's citizens, but recognized that the city did not provide adequate housing and work space for artists, which resulted in many practitioners leaving for other locales. The major influx of artists who traveled to Chicago to exhibit and design for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 prompted the Trees to commission the New York architectural firm Parfitt Brothers to design housing for artists right behind their own mansion at 600 North Wabash. At the base of the Tree Studios building on State Street were store rentals intended to offset the modest rents for artists' apartments and studios above.²²

Barton, Glaman, Hartrath, and Palmer all lived, or at least maintained a working space, at the Tree Studios and Thecla lived close by at 67 East Oak Street. Further, the executive officers and board members all studied and/or exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago. Alexander and Thecla also served as Executive Officers of the Neoterics, a group formed in 1935 to emphasize individualism and resist elevating one kind of "ism" over another.²³ In terms of artistic interests, Pleimling and Barton were recognized portrait painters and Thecla known for her Surrealist paintings. Alexander employed a Symbolist style, while Hartrath and Palmer were affiliated with Impressionism, and Glaman acclaimed for her realist agrarian and animal paintings. (Figs. 2-4)



Figure 2. Winnifred Pleimling, *Portrait of the Artist's Young Daughter*, ca. 1939, medium and dimensions unknown. Photograph of painting, Clarence J. Bulliet Papers, circa 1888-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Woman Artists' Salon officers and board members operated within the same artistic networks in Chicago, but there was a split between more financially privileged women and individuals who could not afford to maintain an artistic practice full-time without employment. Born to the same generation and class as Hartrath and Palmer, Glaman was raised in Kansas and moved to Chicago after visiting the Fine Arts Building at the World's Columbian Exposition. She then studied painting at the Art Institute and in Paris.²⁴ Alexander was much younger and came from an aristocratic family in Italy where she studied art with nuns as a child. Alexander first exhibited in Berlin and then moved to Chicago in 1920 with her husband Dr. Franz Alexander, who studied with Freud.²⁵

²² Annie Morse, "Capturing Sunlight: The Art of the Tree Studios," in *Capturing Sunlight: the Art of Tree Studios*, eds. Barton Faist, Barbara Koenen, Tim Samuelson, Nicole Cioper, and Carrie Golus (Chicago: Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, 1999), 13-14. Also see *Tree Studios: 4 E. Ohio, 5 E. Ontario, 603-621 State Street: Submitted to the Committee on Chicago Landmarks in the June 1980*, recommended to the City Council on November 21, 1982.

²³ C.J. Bulliet, "Around the Galleries: Neoterics on their Way," *Chicago Daily News*, November 2, 1935.

²⁴ C.J. Bulliet, "Artists of Chicago, Past and Present, No. 3 Eugenie Fish Glaman," *Chicago Daily News*, October 5, 1935.

²⁵ C.J. Bulliet, "Artists of Chicago, Past and Present, No. 49 Anita Venier Alexander," *Chicago Daily News*, January 25, 1936.



Figure 3. Julia Thecla, *Self-Portrait*, 1936, opaque watercolor, charcoal, metallic paint on board. Illinois Legacy Collection, Museum Purchase, 1984.106. Photo credit: Illinois State Museum.

Barton, Pleimling, and Thecla were the same age as Alexander, but all three grew up in the Midwest and came from modest backgrounds. They also embody the emergence of the “New Woman” in the late 19th century, flaunting convention by pursuing an artistic career, demanding access to higher education and a viable income.²⁶ Barton grew up in Union City, Michigan and moved to Chicago where she worked as a clerk in the Continental Commercial Bank and helped pay her way through the Art Institute of Chicago.²⁷ Pleimling originally aspired to a career on the stage and at the age of 12 she moved to Chicago from Michigan with her mother. However, she soon turned to visual art and studied stenography at night while enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago by day.²⁸ Born in the rural farming community of Delavan, Illinois in 1896,

Thecla moved to Chicago by 1920 where she supported herself by restoring art and antiques and took classes part-time at the Art Institute of Chicago.²⁹ Despite a generational and economic divide, these women shared a commitment to making art their primary profession, which required patrons and sales.

The Board of Directors drafted a constitution for the Women Artists' Salon in 1939, which states, “The Object of this Society shall be to hold exhibitions of original works of Art by women artists;” and an earlier newspaper article additionally stressed the group’s desire to form an alliance among female artists.³⁰ The Board of Directors sponsored annual exhibitions through 1953, first at Findlay Galleries starting in November 1937 and in 1952 at the Gallery of

²⁶ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, Society*, fifth edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 250-251.

²⁷ C.J. Bulliet, “Artists of Chicago, No. 12 Macena Barton,” *Chicago Daily News*, May 11, 1935.

²⁸ C.J. Bulliet, “Artists of Chicago, No. 99 Winnifred Pleimling,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 12, 1939.

²⁹ Marin Sarvé-Tarr, “Artist Biographies,” in *A Home for Surrealism, Fantastic Painting in Midcentury Chicago*, eds. Janine Mileaf and Susan F. Rossen (Chicago: Arts Club of Chicago, 2018), 129.

³⁰ “Constitution of the Women Artists' Salon of Chicago, Inc.” Macena Barton Papers (AAA). See for example, Eleanor Jewett, “Praises First Salon of City’s Women Artists,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1937.

Marshall Field's Department Store, with the exception of the years 1946-1951.³¹ The last Women's Artists' Salon exhibit took place at Mandel Brothers department store in 1953.³² Instead of advertising for individual artist submissions, the Women Artists' Salon officers and board members invited women whom they believed to be creating works of "quality and accomplishment."³³ After the initial exhibition, the original exhibitors were given first right of refusal the following year. If an artist decided not to show, then a new artist would be sought for the upcoming exhibition. Each artist could exhibit one work of art, with a total of 35 to 50 artists showing each year.³⁴ As a result of this recruitment model, contributors remained fairly consistent over time and reflect the range of connections and networks that the executive officers, board and exhibitors shared. In addition to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Tree Studios, exhibitors belonged to the Chicago Society of Artists and took courses and exhibited at Hull House in Chicago, but four exhibitors also were affiliated with the Provincetown Art Colony and four others trained with the French Cubist André Lhote.³⁵ With the exception of exhibitor Flora Schofield, who became a member of the New York Society of Women Artists, it is unclear if other contributors to the Women Artists' Salon were featured in exhibitions sponsored by other women artists' organizations in Europe and the United States. Given these potential connections, however, it is a strong possibility that there are yet undiscovered networks.³⁶ Like the Board of Directors, members' art practices ranged from abstraction, expressionism, fauvism, impressionism, still life, urban realism and even religious paintings by the nationally recognized Catholic artist nun Sister Mary Stanisia.³⁷



Figure 4. Pauline Palmer, *Woman Sewing*, ca. 1920s, oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in. Courtesy of M. Christine Schwartz Collection, Chicago, Illinois.

Cultivating Collectors and Its Consequences

Although female artists in Chicago were highly visible and received regular acclaim by local critics, certain subject matter remained taboo, particularly the female nude. Even Bulliet, a major supporter of the Women Artists' Salon, states in his 1930 book *The Courtesan [sic] Olympia*, for example, that women "have accomplished nothing first-rate in the art of the nude—and congenitally, never can accomplish such."³⁸ Barton, often described as a feminist, took Bulliet's words as a challenge, producing *Salome* (1936) as one of many painted responses that garnered critical acclaim.³⁹ (Fig. 5)

³¹ Eleanor Jewett, "Painter Hails Tribune's Art Center Idea," *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1952.

³² Jewett, "Area Women Display Art."

³³ Eleanor Jewett, "Appealing Exhibitions on Art Calendar," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1952.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ This information is gleaned from the Pamphlet files of the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, which contain CVs and pamphlets and are very helpful in reconstructing histories of little known artists. The artists who were affiliated with Provincetown were: Helga Haugen Dean, Beatrice S. Levy, Pauline

Palmer, and Flora Schofield. Elise Donaldson, Andreine Kauffmann, Pauline Graf Little, and Flora Schofield studied with André Lhote.

³⁶ Flora Schofield Pamphlet File, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

³⁷ For additional background on Sister Mary Stanisia see C.J. Bulliet, "Artists of Chicago Past & Present: No. 56 Sister Mary Stanisia," *Chicago Daily News*, March 14, 1936.

³⁸ Quoted in Susan Weininger, "Macena Barton," in *Chicago Modern, 1893-1945, Pursuit of the New*, ed. Elizabeth Kennedy (Chicago: Terra Foundation for the Arts, 2004), 90.

³⁹ Weininger, "Macena Barton."



Figure 5. Macena Barton, *Salome*, 1936, oil on canvas, 76 × 50 in. Courtesy of Rick Strilky Collection, Chicago, Illinois. Photograph of painting, Clarence J. Bulliet Papers, circa 1888-1959, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Edithe Jane Cassaday's female nude featured in an exhibition accompanying the annual meeting of women's clubs of Illinois at the Hotel Sherman in 1932 also generated unexpected and considerable media attention.⁴⁰ In addition, Fritzi Brod (1900-1952) faced controversy and threat of censure due to the nudes included in her solo exhibition held at the Milwaukee Art Institute in 1935.⁴¹ These events betray well-known gendered attitudes toward female artists, exposing what male critics and audiences found acceptable for women artists to paint or sculpt, namely the feminine and domestic. However, the Women Artists' Salon was not designed to tackle these biases, rather it was carefully crafted to cultivate female art collectors and increase sales for contributing artists. Reviewing exhibition checklists reveals that the paintings and sculptures shown were landscapes, portraits and still-lives, all readily accepted artistic genres and typically expected of women. Although it was not explicitly stated, the Board of Directors appeared to be curating a roster of works that would appeal to conservative female audiences. Barton, for instance omitted her traditional nude paintings from the salon, but also her equally radical and surreal paintings of women communing in alien spaces.⁴² Exhibiting more conventional canvases was a sensible strategy during a period of economic struggle and paralleled the Palette Club's commitment to offering reasonably priced small pictures during Chicago's financial downturn in 1892.⁴³

Consideration of the Women Artists' Salon's promotional material suggests that the group targeted women of means in Chicago and neighboring suburbs. Palmer was particularly helpful in the group's first year by providing a

model of an accomplished artist who navigated both the art world and the social elite of Chicago. Married to the prosperous Dr. Albert Palmer, Pauline's connections to Chicago's upper class communities of women probably proved extremely important to the group. For example, Mrs. William Whitcomb, one of the founders of the Town and Country Arts Club owned one of Palmer's Impressionist landscapes.⁴⁴ Established in 1935 "to study the great world arts that have gone before, to assist in their preservation for future generations, and to encourage the arts of the present day," the Club also set aside funds each year to award a prize for an artist's best depiction of the Midwest annually.⁴⁵ For the fifth iteration of the Women Artists' Salon in 1942, the Town and Country Arts Club donated two prizes awarded to the best exhibiting artists. Barton won a prize for her portrait of General MacArthur and Laura van Pappelendam (1883-1974) for her painting *Blue Flower Pots*.⁴⁶ During the opening of the sixth annual Salon Peggy Palmer Burrows (1905-1979) and Ethel Spears (1903-1974) sketched in the galleries for the benefit of the Servicemen's Center and over the next two weeks of the exhibition *Chicago Tribune* critic Eleanor Jewett gave visitors an introduction to the works of art on view, and Schofield performed a silkscreen demonstration.⁴⁷ The seventh annual Salon added the role of Social Chairman, undertaken by the painter Ethel Crouch Brown (1890-1963), to the Board of Directors' roster, suggesting these collaborations were bringing greater visibility, increased sales, and expanded professional networks for the salon's exhibitors.⁴⁸

However, aligning with privileged white women of the North Shore of Chicago had its consequences and exposed racism within the ranks of the group.

⁴⁰ C.J. Bulliet, "Artists of Chicago, Past and Present, No. 102 Edithe Jane Cassaday" *Chicago Daily News*, September 2, 1939.

⁴¹ See "Censured if you do, Blamed if you don't give space to nudes," *Milwaukee Art Journal*, January 27, 1935. Newspaper clipping discovered in Fritzi Brod's scrapbook, Fritzi Brod Papers (AAA).

⁴² See Robert Cozzolino, "Far Out Females: Mid-Century Chicago Surrealism Parallel Worlds," in *Far Out Females, Mid-Century Chicago Surrealism* (Chicago: Mongerson Gallery, 2015), 5-20.

⁴³ Kellogg, "Alice D. Kellogg," 18.

⁴⁴ The Town and Country Arts Club archives only refer to Mrs. William Whitcomb and Mrs. H. Carl Mulch by their married names. It requires verification, but Mrs. Whitcomb may be Julia C. Whitcomb, according to a passport application from 1925. Ancestry.com. *U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007. Mrs. H. Carl Mulch, "An Early History of the Town

and Country Arts Club Chicago," 5. Town and Country Arts Club Records, The Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois. Mrs. H. Carl Mulch is likely Madge H. Mulch according to the 1940 Annual Census. Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

⁴⁵ Mulch, "An Early History of the Town and Arts Club Chicago," 26-27: "History of the Town and Country Arts Club Records" Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois, Accessed November 27, 2017,

<http://explore.chicagocollections.org/ead/newberry/72/zg6gc2n/>

⁴⁶ Eleanor Jewett, "Women Artists' Salon Gay and Colorful Exhibition," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 3, 1942.

⁴⁷ Invitation to Women Artists' Salon, 1943 found in C.J. Bulliet Papers (AAA).

⁴⁸ 7th Women Artists' Salon of Chicago Inc., June 17-July 1, 1944. Findlay Galleries, Chicago, exhibition checklist, C.J. Bulliet Papers (AAA).

In January 1940, the artist Bernece Berkman (1911-1979), who had not exhibited with the Women Artists' Salon previously, removed her painting from the fourth annual salon after Thecla, the group's secretary, asked Berkman to un-invite her black guests, writer and critic Oscar Hunter (whom Berkman married in 1946) and artists Bernard Goss and Charles White, to the opening reception. Berkman explained to the black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* that Thecla told her that "there would be some North Shore people present and it might save me embarrassment not to have Negro guests." Berkman promptly responded by withdrawing her work from the exhibit and organizing a boycott by the United American Artists for Chicago, where she was employed as the education director.⁴⁹ As the article explains, Chicago's art circles were considered progressive and liberal with few instances of discrimination, making the incident even more serious. Berkman and the United American Artists also called for Pleimling to be removed from the Board of Directors of the mayor's committee of the annual Navy Pier exhibit.⁵⁰ Racism within white women artists' groups was not new. Corn observes that African American women were excluded from the Board of Lady Managers and only given a very small segregated space to exhibit in the Woman's Building after protesting their exclusion.⁵¹

It is useful to consider here Laura Prieto's concept of the "white female gaze," which forms "a perspective that constructs racial 'others' as its object, and the spectator as white," making clear here that the Woman Artists' Salon was willing to sacrifice an individual artist's alliances with black communities

in favor of privileging and maintaining the support of an upper class white female patronage.⁵² This incident additionally illustrates that there were no penalties for Thecla and Pleimling excluding black people from their events. The white mainstream press did not pick up the story and it does not appear that Pleimling was removed from the Navy Pier exhibit Board of Directors. Only months later Thecla contributed a painting to the exhibit "We Too Look at America," held in honor of the opening of the South Side Community Arts Center, along with Charles White and other highly regarded black artists. Funded by the Works Progress Administration, the center located in a black neighborhood was established to serve "culturally deprived" communities.⁵³ Non-white women artists in a similar situation would not have the freedom to oscillate between different gendered, racial, and socio-economic spheres without tremendous risk and harm to their reputations.⁵⁴

The End of the Women Artists' Salon

During World War II the Woman Artists' Salon continued to garner praise from local critics and benefited from their lack of interest in not promoting one particular style of art over another. As Bulliet observes in 1944, "The 'isms' are dead, and war art has not yet blazed new trail."⁵⁵ By 1952 when the Women Artists' Salon resumed after a five-year hiatus, however, the landscape of the art world changed radically and members found themselves relegated to the margins. Copeland C. Burg comments on that year's salon, "This exhibit indicates Chicago women painters are less

⁴⁹ United American Artists, Chicago is the Chicago branch of the union United American Artists whose first iteration was the Artists Union formed to contest budget cuts in the WPA. It became United American Artists in January 1938 after joining the United Office and Professional Workers of America. In addition to protecting artists' employment, the group sponsored lectures, symposia, and exhibitions as a way to relieve the isolation of the artist's studio. Patricia Hills and Gerald M. Monroe, "Art and Politics in the Archives of American Art Journal: Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 49, no. 1/2 (Spring 2010): 51-53. In Chicago, United American Artists ran an art gallery. Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 130. According to a letter from Cliffla Corson of the Artists Union to C.J. Bulliet, July 12, 1938, the gallery was located at 205 E. Superior Street, Chicago. C.J. Bulliet Papers (AAA). As the Education Director, Berkman may have coordinated arts programming for Chicago based members. For additional history on the Artists' Union, see Mavigliano and Lawson, 30-35.

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Melanie Herzog who brought this article to my attention in fall 2014. "White Artist Withdraws Her Exhibit as Salon Draws Color-Line on Guests," *Chicago Defender*, January 13, 1940, 2.

⁵¹ Corn, *Women Building History*, 70, 216, n.7.

⁵² Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 138. In note 89, 253 Prieto acknowledges her indebtedness to Laura Mulvey's concept of the female gaze in developing this argument. From a black feminist perspective see George Yancy, "Afterword, Philosophy and the Other of the Second Sex," in Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, Donna-Dale I. Marciano, *Convergences, Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 243.

⁵³ "Mapping the Stacks, A Guide to Black Chicago's Hidden Archives, the South Side Community Arts Center," accessed November 29, 2017, <http://mts.lib.uchicago.edu/collections/findingaids/index.php?eadid=MTS.sscac>. Also see Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach, *Along the Streets of Bronzeville Black Chicago's Literary Landscape* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 37.

⁵⁴ Prieto addresses the challenges facing women artists since the late 19th century. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 138-143.

⁵⁵ C.J. Bulliet, "Artless Comment on the Seven Arts, Seventh Salon of Women," *Chicago Daily News*, June 24, 1944.

progressive than their masculine rivals. Most of them ignore the new fields of painting and are content to turn out the flowers and landscapes some were doing 25 years ago.”⁵⁶ Indeed, a majority of the artists were painting these subjects and styles associated with the domestic and feminine for the last quarter of a century, and it became clear that recognizing quality of technique was no longer enough to promote their endeavor with the only one more Salon being held in 1953.

As the art world emerged from the post-World War II malaise, Salon members who became professionals in the 1930s were eclipsed by a new generation of artists. In 1947 the Women Artists' Salon, along with ten other arts organizations, signed a letter of protest to Daniel Catton Rich, Director of the Art Institute of Chicago, demanding greater representation of Chicago artists in museum exhibitions and its annual Chicago and Vicinity exhibitions.⁵⁷ Robert Cozzolino concludes that the representation of Chicago artists was not the actual problem facing the signatories, rather the Art Institute turned its focus to a younger group of artists. 14 of the 20 prizes and honorable mentions for the Artists of Chicago and Vicinity Exhibition that year, for example, were awarded to Chicago based artists under the age of 35. Five of the 14 were women: Eleanor Cohen (1916-2010), Miyoko Ito (1918-1983), Ellen Lanyon (1926-2013), Joan Mitchell (1925-1992), and Ruth Wallberg (1924- date unknown). Catton responded to the groups' grievances by limiting future Chicago and Vicinity exhibitions to professional artists, excluding students who already were finding success in the city. 813 disillusioned students sent their own petition demanding a reversal of the ban, but it became clear that Rich would not back down from his decision. The organizers formed Exhibition Momentum, a group

comprised of students from the School of the Art Institute (SAIC) and the Institute of Design (ID), who began staging their own exhibitions as an alternative to the Chicago and Vicinity shows.⁵⁸ While the SAIC and ID students were committed to divergent art practices, the former employed expressionist and surrealist styles, and the latter adhered to Bauhaus traditions, yet they agreed that Chicago's art community did not foster growth of its youngest artists. Schulze asserts that this cultural rupture signals “Chicago had not realized the commercial and cultural ambitions it set for itself at the time of the World's Columbian Exposition roughly a half-century earlier.”⁵⁹ Ito, Lanyon, and Mitchell, in particular, now garner national reputations and are not cast as “Chicago”-based artists, while the older female artists affiliated with the Salon become further marginalized in an already limited commercial art market.⁶⁰

The end of the Women Artists' Salon also coincided with the rise of the heroic masculine rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism and New York City becoming the center of the art market. Clement Greenberg's formalist art criticism played a central role in elevating Abstract Expressionist painters in New York above all other artistic practices. Women Artists' Salon members were not immediately affected by this cultural shift, however, when historians eventually returned to this historical moment in Chicago these women were frequently ignored. Cozzolino, for instance, asserts that Greenberg's theories of modern art became so entrenched in art criticism that any postwar art falling outside of Greenberg's criteria, such as the continued figurative work of many Chicago based artists, became cast as eccentric or retrograde.⁶¹ Concurrently, A.J. Liebling's three-part series published in the *New Yorker* in 1952

⁵⁶ Copeland C. Burg, “Women Exhibit Art at Field,” *Chicago Herald American*, September 12, 1952.

⁵⁷ Gustaf Dalstrom, an open letter to Mr. Daniel Catton Rich Director of Fine Arts, Art Institute of Chicago, June 20, 1947. Institutional Archives, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Although the letter is signed the “Women's Salon of Chicago, Inc.,” it is very likely “The Women Artists' Salon.” The other signatories to the letter were the All Illinois Society of Fine Arts, Artists' League of the Midwest, American Jewish Artists Club, Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists, Chicago Society of Artists, Chicago Society of Etchers, Association of Painters and Sculptors, South Side Community Arts Center, Swedish-American Art Association, and The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago.

⁵⁸ Robert Cozzolino, “Raw Nerves 1948-1973,” in *Art in Chicago, A History from the Fire to Now*, 136-138.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-140.

⁶⁰ For further history on these artists, see Susan Sensemann, “Miyoko Ito,” in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990*, 430-2; Joanna Gardner-Huggett, “Interview with Ellen Lanyon,” in *1968: Art and Politics in Chicago*. (Chicago: DePaul Art Museum, 2008), 40-44; Aliza Edelman, “Joan Mitchell,” in *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Joan Marter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 186.

⁶¹ Robert Cozzolino, “Chicago's Modernism,” in *Art in Chicago, Resisting Regionalism, Transforming Modernism*, exhibition catalog (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2007), 12.

categorized Chicago as culturally depleted and the “second city,” leading its artists from the inter-war years to be labeled local or regional.⁶² For the Women Artists' Salon, this hierarchy of American art history results in historical erasure of their efforts and most of its members with a few exceptions.

Historical Lessons

Corn asked an important question of the Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition, “did inclusion in segregated exhibitions help or hinder their efforts to become professionals with equal livelihoods and standing as white men,”⁶³ which also can be asked of the Women Artists' Salon or any other female separatist group. The majority of Salon participants exhibited regularly, garnered press, sold works, and are now found in museum collections, although they are rarely on display. What limits notoriety, more than being affiliated with an all-female exhibition society or organization, is a female artist's deliberate choice to work in more conservative styles or contrary to the modes of art production favored by art history, as well as living in a locale considered local or regional. A more productive historical conversation reclaims these groups, such as the Woman Artists' Salon, so that historians better understand the conditions facing women artists, especially in times of economic crisis like the 1930s. Further, if we dismiss today's market driven notion of artistic success that is required for inclusion in the art historical canon, we will find many more women artists and female separatist organizations enter art historical narratives.

By taking a long view of women artists' organizations and salons in this issue of *Artl@s* also exposes how these groups often emerge at moments of significant cultural and political change. Corn observes, for instance, that women

involved with the Woman's Building lived in a transitional moment between the Victorian era and that of the New Woman, which also applies to the Palette Club. Forming in 1937, the Women Artists' Salon represents the growing independence of women in the 1930s within a precarious economic climate but ends in the post-World War II era with what Susan Faludi coins the “backlash.” Faludi argues that during the war women landed a record number of high paying jobs in industry. After 1945, however, industry, government, and the media converged to force a female retreat from the workforce.⁶⁴ It is hard to believe that these biases did not impact aging women artists leading what many deemed unconventional lives. As successors to the Women Artists' Salon, the feminist art collectives ARC and Artemisia take shape in 1973 at the height of the feminist art movement in the United States, the Supreme Court's landmark decision *Roe v. Wade*, and one year after the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by the United States Congress.⁶⁵ Recognizing these repeated historical patterns offers additional insight as to why female separatist exhibitions and organizations continue to be reinvented over time despite the perception of increasing advances for women. These groups are united further by staging interventions into the commercial art market, finding new strategies for centering their work at the heart of artistic discourse, and experimenting in modes of art not necessarily in vogue with local critics.⁶⁶

Another argument for expanding the histories of women artists' organizations and salons is for subsequent generations of women who want to form collectives, but are not necessarily familiar with their historical precedents. For example, when the feminist collectives ARC and Artemisia were established in Chicago in 1973 they were unaware of the Women Artists' Salon history, yet they built on the group's strategies by opening their spaces in

⁶² See A.J. Liebling, “The Second City,” *The New Yorker*, January 12, 19, 26, 1952. (Published in three parts.)

⁶³ Corn, *Women Building History*, 66.

⁶⁴ Susan Faludi, *Backlash, the Undeclared War against American Women* (NY: Crown Publishers, 1991), 51.

⁶⁵ For an introduction to the history of women artists' cooperatives in the United States, see Judith Brodsky, “Exhibitions, Galleries, and Alternative Spaces,” in *The*

Power of Feminist, eds. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 104-119. Jenni Sorkin addresses the history of women artists' cooperatives in Chicago in “Alterity Rocks,” *Art in Chicago, A History from the Fire to Now*, 232-279 and Joanna Gardner-Huggett discusses the founding of ARC and Artemisia in “Women in Action! Feminist Art Networks in Chicago 1970-1980,” in *Support Networks*, 51-58.

⁶⁶ Corn, *Women Building History*, 9.

a neighborhood where leading commercial galleries, such as Phyllis Kind and Marianne Deson, as well as the Museum of Contemporary Art, were located, placing their members at the forefront of the contemporary art scene.⁶⁷

It must be acknowledged that this brief study of the Woman Artists' Salon also distills the limitations of the female separatist model. Although opportunities for black women have improved considerably since the late 19th century and the Woman's Building where non-white artists were categorized as primitive and entrenched in the past, all-female exhibitions and societies in the 20th century continued to privilege white female artists as evidenced by Berkman's experience, and ARC and Artemisia also struggled with diversifying its primarily white membership.⁶⁸ On a historical level, unveiling both the successes and the real problems found in women's and feminist exhibitions and organizations allows for renewed dialogues of how we move forward and develop more intersectional models of collective practice.

Acknowledgments

The article would not be possible without the generous support of several DePaul University Research Council grants. I extend my sincere thanks to the outside readers of this article who offered many insightful comments that greatly improved this essay. I also would like to thank Wendy Greenhouse for her assistance in researching the histories of the Palette Club, Tree Studios, and the Town and Country Arts Club, as well as sharing her extensive knowledge of Chicago's art history. I am very grateful to Catherine Dossin, Meg Duguid, and Georgina

Gluzman for many conversations regarding women artists' organizations that inform this article. Lastly, I thank the many librarians and archivists at the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution and the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago who have helped me navigate each institution's extensive resources.

⁶⁷ Interestingly, the art market in Chicago remained stronger for women than in other cities. For example, in 1973 when Artemisia and ARC galleries were founded, 29% of solo exhibitions at Chicago museums featured women artists in contrast to 9% in New York City. Ferris Olin and Catherine C. Brawer, "Career Markers," in *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 206. Meg Duguid, Director of Exhibitions, Columbia College, Chicago, recently curated the exhibition *Where the Future Came From* held at Glass Curtain Gallery at Columbia College, Chicago "as a collective research project on the integral role of feminism and women-run art activities throughout Chicago's history," from the

late-19th century to the present as a way to counter contemporary artists and historians lack of knowledge regarding feminist and separatist precedents. See: <https://www.artdesignchicago.org/programs/where-the-future-came-from>

⁶⁸ See Prieto, *At Home in the Studio*, 136-138 for a discussion of non-white women artists' representation in the Woman's Building and Joanna Gardner-Huggett, "Artemisia Challenges the Elders, How a Woman Artists' Cooperative Created a Community for Feminism and Art Made by Women," *Frontiers* 33, 2 (2012), esp. 65-70 for a discussion of why women artists' cooperatives in Chicago failed to diversify its membership.