

Chouinard, the influential L.A. art college, is revisited online

By: Mike Boehm



Chouinard Art Institute has come to life for the third time in 90 years -- this time on the Web, where the high overhead costs that eventually sank the original, highly influential school in 1972 and blunted an attempted revival during the 2000s no longer will be a factor.

The Chouinard Foundation website is devoted to telling the story and documenting the influence of the art college (pictured) that a war widow named Nelbert Murphy Chouinard (pronounced shuh-nard) launched near downtown L.A. in 1921, continuing for more than 50 years until it was contentiously consumed in the creation of CalArts.

The Chouinard alumni roster includes Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Allen Ruppersberg, Hollywood costume designer Edith Head, graphic artist John Van Hamersveld (designer of "The Endless Summer" film poster and the Beatles' "Magical Mystery Tour" and the Rolling Stones' "Exile on Main Street" album covers) and the "Nine Old Men," the crew of animators who played vital roles in the triumph of Walt Disney.

The site offers videos, news articles and historical background on Chouinard's initial run and the activities of the Chouinard Foundation, which began improbably in 1999 after Dave Tourjé, an artist, guitarist and construction company owner, bought Nelbert Chouinard's 1907 home in South Pasadena as a fixer-upper without knowing much about her, then became enthralled with the notion of restoring her legacy along with her former domicile.

Tourjé and the late Robert Perine, an Orange County designer and Chouinard alum who created advertising graphics that helped push Fender guitars to world dominance, started the foundation and in 2003 opened a new Chouinard in a restored, 1901-vintage brick building in South Pasadena. Money problems forced it to close in 2006, but the foundation remained active, running art courses through 2009 in partnership with L.A.'s Department of Recreation and Parks.

Tourjé says he began focusing on creating the website about 18 months ago. Its features include images from an archive of work by former Chouinard students, as well as places for Chouinard loyalists to share their recollections and photographs from student days.

One comment already posted is from Ruscha, who was at Chouinard during the late 1950s: "While another art school in the area had dress codes (i.e.: Art Center: no facial hair, no sandals, no bongo drums) Chouinard was free and easy. Shall I say more freedom for everyone? It was great and it worked."

Chouinard kept working while Ruscha was there because an admiring Walt Disney pumped large sums into the operation, which in 1957 nearly went bankrupt because of an embezzlement. Starting in 1929, Nelbert Chouinard had given Disney animators scholarships on a pay-it-back-later basis to help them hone their skills. Disney died in 1966 and Chouinard in 1969. With the 1950s Disney gift, Tourjé said, organizational control had passed to what eventually became California Institute of the Arts, a school pioneered by Disney. In 1972, when CalArts opened in Valencia, most of Chouinard's faculty was let go.



In hindsight, Tourjé said, it might have been smart to try to forge an official tie between the new web venture and the Getty's sweeping regional initiative, Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980. But he'll settle for what he hopes will be a symbiotic buzz from all the attention now going to L.A.'s contemporary art history. "Pacific Standard Time is so pervasive, it almost doesn't matter" that there's no formal link, he said.

Other Chouinard Foundation activities include completing an hour-long documentary film about a teenager whose life took a turn for the better thanks to his studies in the late-2000s Chouinard- sponsored art classes at rec and parks centers, with the story widening to incorporate Chouinard's institutional legacy. Another big dream, Tourjé says, is raising an estimated \$3 million to \$5 million to buy back 743 Grand View St., the building near MacArthur Park that Nelbert Chouinard built to house her school starting in 1929. It's now the home of New Times Presbyterian Church. Acquisition – which would require the help of major donors currently nowhere in sight – would make possible an attempt to restore “Street Meeting,” a proletarian political mural that David Alfaro Siqueiros created in 1932 on the wall of an inner courtyard while guest-teaching at Chouinard. It had long been painted and plastered over until being rediscovered in the mid-2000s.

Tourjé says he's also interested in getting the Chouinard Foundation back into the art-education game, via online courses offered through the website. “The web allows us to be very economical and still be a very viable information platform,” he said. ■