

CHOUINARD: A LIVING LEGACY



THE EARLY YEARS (1921-1945) – Robert Perine

Once, long ago, even before she left New York's Pratt Institute, Nelbert Murphy had a series of vivid dreams. In these dreams she was keeper of a large barn crammed with students struggling with their drawing. She realized she was their teacher and so began helping each student get a handle on the process. These dreams were so vivid, in fact, that she took them to heart, knowing that a persistent message called for resolve.

Being a woman of action and responding to the untimely death of her husband – Horace “Bert” Chouinard – she moved to southern California in 1919 for a fresh start, taking a job as an art teacher at Polytechnic School in Pasadena and then at Hollywood High School. Later she was hired by the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, and by 1921 had a following of eager students, most of whom were unhappy with the shortage of classroom space at Otis. Many of these were G.I.s from World War I and they, being assertive, eventually convinced her to open her own school and take them with her. With two fellow instructors, F. Tolles Chamberlin and Patti Patterson, she found an old house on West Eight Street that would do. With \$250 in cash and a war widow's pension of \$75 a month, she took a deep breath and mustered confidence in her dream. And all of this three years before American women first voted for a president.

In short order students poured in, including young hopefuls like Don Graham, Millard Sheets, Phil Dike, and Herb Jepson, who she put on scholarships in exchange for keeping the old house shipshape. Sheets built the first Chouinard drawing benches. Graham, an architecture major from Stanford, built lockers, and within a couple of years was teaching drawing, along with Jepson. By 1927 there were close to a hundred students, and two years later she was forced to seek larger quarters. Urged by enthusiastic painters like Barse Miller, Arthur Beaumont, Sam Hyde Harris, and Clarence Hinkle, she decided to expand her dream by hiring an architect.

The L.A. Times art critic, Arthur Miller, a teacher at Chouinard from 1925-1929, wrote in an article called “Chouinard Name is an Art Byword.”

She needed all her powers in mid-depression. While conducting courses in an old frame house on West Eighth



Girl Reading by Lorser Feitelson, 1938



Still life with Mirror by Robert Chuey, 1952

Street in the late 20s, the far-seeing educator was impatiently awaiting the day when the school could move into the building it now occupies. The writer well remembers the excited anticipation because he was teaching in the school at the time. The move was duly made and new students poured in. Soon, a new art school opened nearby [Art Center] and cut into the revenue needed to make the heavy payments on the building. This hazard was scarcely surmounted when a much bigger one broke like a thunder clap. Full depression arrived, paying students thinned out, and building payments could not be met.



Portrait of Phil Paradise by Watson Cross, 1940



Downtown L.A. by Edward Reep, 1955

The students, who had carried every stick of furniture on foot to the new location, pitched in and faculty members agreed to endure a temporary cut in pay, a condition that was repeated again in the mid-1930s when the faculty willingly bought shares in the school to tide her over. Later she bought these back and became solvent again. When she heard that New York illustrator Pruett Carter had moved to L.A. she invited him in to teach. “Only if I can have studio space,” he bargained, and she gave him an upstairs classroom where he and students could work together. By then Graham, Sheets, Dike, and Jepson were going strong, the first evidence of her policy to put talented and energetic students into the teacher’s harness. This automatically expanded her circle of contacts, for soon these young men – joined by newcomers Phil Paradise, Paul Lauritz, and Carl Beetz – were searching out established

artists, a few from Europe who had arrived in Los Angeles looking for jobs. Mrs. Chouinard was delighted when Sheets suggested that Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros be invited to teach. Others arrived serendipitously, as if fated to enrich activities at Chouinard: Alexandr Archipenko, Hans Hofmann, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Morgan Russell, Lorser Feitelson, and Leo Katz. Sculptors Giovanni Napolitano, Eugene Maier-Kreig, and Merrell Gage also established workshops in the early 1930s.

As if sensing inevitable accreditation, she hired a French and German teacher named Kitty Phelan who taught languages for two years (1926-1928) and an art historian, Dr. Ernest L. Tross, to do a semester of lectures in 1931. Though it is not relevant to this exhibition, it is noteworthy that other departments at Chouinard were under way: fashion design and illustration, magazine illustration, industrial design, set design, graphic design, and lettering. For these teaching spots, she called in the best she could find – Edith Head, for example, a former student who came back from Paramount Studios to lecture in 1939. A roster of Chouinard students who segued into the local entertainment industry reads like a Hollywood who’s who.

If there was a common thread running through Mrs. Chouinard’s school it began with her idea that if a student worked hard, he/she would succeed, both through group and individual effort. By 1941 and World War II the school had become so successful that every high school art teacher in Los Angeles was recommending their best seniors for enrollment. Mrs. Chouinard quickly learned how to help this along: each year at the Los Angeles Unified School District Art Exhibition she took pad and pencil and jotted down the names of talented kids. She would then phone their parents and give her recruiting speech, a persuasive monologue not to be ignored. Usually, and much too often, a scholarship offer followed. Good at chumming, Nelbert caught many a new student this way, steadily building her school’s reputation.

On the Chouinard premises, Nelbert was a formidable presence. Her word was law, the school’s future set in stone. Whenever she visited classes, students slipped into their best behavior. Although by 1938 her own teaching became too heavy a burden, she never questioned other teachers’ methods or curricula. Unless, of course, they had proven to be “a bad teacher.”

“I like your work but if you are a bad teacher,” she would warn, “I will not hesitate to put you out.” The idea of tenure didn’t cut it at Chouinard. If she saw no results, thought students were being educationally cheated, there was a second warning to the teacher, and occasionally expulsion.



On the Beach by Palmer Schoppe, 1941



Woman of Sorrows by Rico Lebrun, 1952

By the end of the Depression and the onset of World War II, Chouinard had become a haven of professionalism, a place to study with the best artists in town, men and women working in the real world. Quality was standard number one, providing talent for design-aware industries, number two. Students passionate about the “fine arts” were encouraged to go to New York and sweat it out in a city replete with galleries and museums.

Some teachers became dependent or partially dependent on Chouinard for their livelihoods: Lawrence Murphy, Phil Paradise, Don Graham, Herb Jepson, Watson Cross, and Bill Moore, for example. Others came and went: Rico Lebrun (1 year), Henry Lee McFee (2), Ejnar Hansen (4), Dan Lutz (7), Ben Messick (8), and Richard Haines (9). Others, comfortable in such a hospitable environment, welcomed the habit of hanging around: Millard Sheets (13 years), Harold Kramer (14), Ed Reep (20), and Cross with the longevity record of 27 without a break. A few devoted students hung around as well, like Elin Waite, who claimed to be the student with the longest run (10 years).

Nelbert liked the idea of a core faculty group of seven or eight regulars plus a variety of temporary influences. This system, in place for more than fifty years, gave Chouinard an accumulated faculty of over 400 artists by 1972, a broad spectrum of influence for the West Coast. It seems that almost everyone in the visual arts in Los Angeles touched base at Chouinard at one time or another, some briefly, but not without leaving their mark.



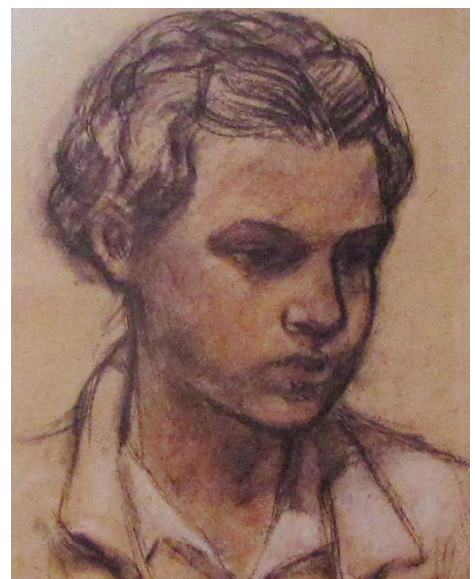
Bouquet from the Desert by Henry Lee McFee, 1944



The Islands by Lee Blair, 1939



Bathers of Miramar by Millard Sheets, 1933



Ludmila by Alex Ignatiev, 1930s

By 1943, mid-war, enrollment and tuition money dropped dramatically and Mrs. Chouinard was forced to move to smaller, cheaper quarters on Sixth Street in an old Chinese Laundry and auto garage at Benton Way. She was devastated, chagrined, but held onto her older draft-exempt core of regulars. Women students were in the majority then, but within three years returning G.I.s were lining up for their G.I. Bill privileges. At one point there were a thousand male students on a waiting list, and Mrs. Chouinard asked female students to step aside for these “boys who saved our democracy.” The war changed everything for everybody, and the money began

flowing into Chouinard again, making it possible for Nelbert to buy back the Grand View building in 1949. “It was the greatest moment of my life,” she would say proudly as students and faculty filed back into the refurbished headquarters and began again. Many of us G.I.s hadn’t known about the Grand View facility and so were pleasantly impressed by its superiority over the makeshift, Sixth Street school. Mrs. Chouinard was 70 by then and overjoyed to be sitting in her corner office again, the one designed to her specifications, cleverly adjacent to the lobby where she could keep an eye on activities.

Perhaps she would again have time to speculate on the art scene, where it was headed. She had personally rejected the “Eucalyptus School” (1920s) for European “Modernism” (1930s), had watched “Abstract Expressionism” and “Bauhaus design” infiltrate Chouinard (1940s), and was soon to be tested by the freewheeling experimentation of the 1950s and 60s.

“Oh well,” she could have been thinking. “The applied arts have always gotten us through.”