

# CHOUINARD: A LIVING LEGACY



*“...the measure of an art school is its faculty and students, by the very nature of art it is inherent that art school facilities cannot be static. It is to Chouinard’s credit that a succession of distinguished art teachers have taught there for certain periods and have then moved on.*

*“The highest achievement of student and faculty has come from the independent art school. Long before I was born, Chouinard instituted programs that, at their best, have not yet been excelled.”*

- Walter Hopps

As early as the 1920s, the Chouinard Art School was building this attitude. By World War II, its founder Nelbert Chouinard had become a permanent fixture in L.A. Then, after fifty-one years of nourishing superior artists, both students and teachers, the school suddenly disappeared, much to the puzzlement of many southern Californians who had considered Chouinard a household word.

Mrs. Chouinard had a hideaway cabin at Running Springs. On his trips to the west coast, Alfred Barr occasionally slept there. Royal Bailey Farnum, then head of RISD, exchanged visits every other winter for several years. Fred Cole, the bathing suit magnate, had been Mrs. Chouinard’s pupil at Hollywood High, and J.C. Hall, founder of Hallmark Cards, was a close friend who monitored intriguing Chouinard students. Hans Hofmann came by in 1932 and taught for the summer. As did Alexandr Archipenko and Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros on other summers. Rico Lebrun found refuge at Chouinard and wielded a strong influence just before World War II. So did Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Morgan Russell and Lorser Feitelson. New York illustrators and art directors, even architects like Richard Neutra and R.M. Schindler, took their turn at enlivening Mrs. Chouinard’s outwardly eclectic sensibilities that some saw as a weakness, a penchant for hiring just any art celeb that happened to pass through.

As a Pratt graduate, she was developing her own astute formula for bringing West Coast art up to speed. Fortunately for future students, she stuck with it. Her idea, according to drawing teacher Don Graham, was to give the kids a break by putting well-known professional artists in the classroom with ambitious students where the sparks could fly. The school was originally not about administration, curricula, grades, degrees or even money. It was a diverse workshop watched over by a headmistress whose soft heart offered too many scholarships. Thus, the spawning of future names, students with the freedom/discipline to find themselves, transferees from Yale, Dartmouth, and Stanford, implants from New York, Texas, and Oklahoma, foreigners from Japan, India, and Germany. Near the end when she was in her eighties, Mrs. Chouinard kept an eye out. 1960s students today recall her patio talks, the respectful hush she elicited. Sometimes she would recount Walt Disney’s 1929 plea to teach a handful of his animators to draw better, how she agreed to train them for free until he had the money to pay the tuition, how years later, when the school was in financial trouble, he opened his checkbook and kept her afloat.

This exhibition is an assembly of the work of Chouinard artists, the first visual celebration encompassing three generations of them, the first pow-wow since the Grand View school’s lobby shows of student and faculty work, often sequential roles at Chouinard. The madame’s experiment became a model of art education elsewhere and for years the Chouinard Art Institute was listed in the top five art schools in the country. Her ideas and ideals persist, having affected other arts institutions, inculcated by enthusiastic graduates high on professionalism. The Chouinard Foundation organizers of this exhibition are dedicated to forging a lasting legacy for a great woman. Her oar was a strong one in the water of West Coast art. - Robert Perine

