

“We point with pride to industrial and commercial prosperity of Chicago, but this alone will not be sufficient to give it a great name in the world’s history....Chicago’s crowning glory should be in art, to become the art center of the New World as Paris is of the old.”

Chicago Tribune, 1889

On a sultry, summer afternoon in August of 1967 between twenty-five and fifty thousand people crowded the recently constructed Civic Center Plaza to witness one of the most exciting events in the history of Chicago’s arts: the unveiling of a statue by the world’s most eminent artist: Pablo Picasso. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra played *An American in Paris*, Mayor Richard J. Daley orated about “vitality of the city” and then, the blue percale veil was dropped from the fifty foot high statue. Chicago became at that moment the only city in the world to possess a Picasso statue as a public monument. Some viewers were clearly awestruck while others were obviously befuddled. What was it? Picasso had neither named nor interpreted the statue. To some, it was the head of a woman. To others, it was an Afghan dog. Or was the European artist playing a cruel joke on benighted hog-butcher Chicago? One unimpressed alderman famously suggested that the Picasso statue should be replace with one of a local Major League baseball hero.

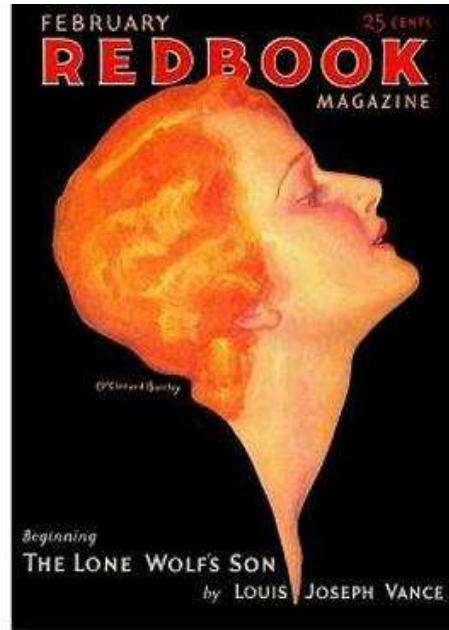
Within a decade, the Picasso statue was followed by a Chagall mosaic and a Calder stabile causing Mayor Daley to proclaim the Loop “one of the world’s largest outdoor museums for contemporary sculpture.” But the acquisition of public art from the masters of Europe spawned as much controversy as approbation among many Chicagoans especially within the local art community. The European artists being commissioned by Chicago’s art benefactors were elderly and their art was anything but contemporary. The Art Institute first added a Picasso painting to their collection in 1915. These were controversial artists when Grandma was young. While European artists with name recognition received patronage from Chicago’s wealthy benefactors, the City’s own artists never seemed as fortunate. This controversy would follow Mayor Daley to his grave.

Following the death of Mayor Richard J. Daley late in 1976, the City fathers decided to honor the late Mayor with a memorial placed in the Civic Center Plaza, recently renamed Daley Plaza. Yet the initiative soon bogged down when the artist selection committee went to Europe to interview European artists. Defenders of the

selection committee countered that artist ability, not residency, should be the selection touchstone but skeptics noted that the selection committee was interviewing only internationally known artists, most of whom worked in a style that Chicagoans would find unbecoming the late Mayor's persona. The controversy and grousing seemed to have transcended the purpose of the memorial, so it was never built.

It is in the visual arts that Chicago has experienced the least success. Chicago has never produced an artist tantamount in recognition and influence with its great architects or novelists. There is no Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Sullivan equivalent in the realm of art. There is no "Chicago School of Art" that is recognized as a unique and important movement as there was a "Chicago School of Literature" that many scholars aver as the first uniquely American literature responsible for liberating America from European literary colonialism. There have always been artists resident in the City with a national or even international reputation who have been collected and exhibited in distant galleries and museums but none have had the influence tantamount to the greatest of the City's architects, writers or musicians. Chicago's greatest success in the visual arts has been in the collection of great art not in its creation. It is in the visual arts that the conflict between personal preference and parochial responsibilities has been most obvious. Any event of an artistic nature from an art exhibition to the commission of a memorial will generate a dispute about art and the support of art in Chicago. The most enduring tradition in Chicago toward the visual arts is a schism between resident artists and the benefactors of art.

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McClelland Barclay in the 1920s became one of the most frequently commissioned portraiture artists in America for cover art on magazines. His art was often on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, This Week, Collier's and RedBook.

Rich, handsome and charming, a description not often attached to working artists, applied to McClelland Barclay. He married a beautiful nineteen year old woman from a rich and influential family in Washington D.C. with social ties to Chicago's blueblood high society and who also happened to be his first cousin. He used her as his model in a series of paintings used as advertisements by the Fisher Body Division of General Motors which had a huge metal stamping facility just outside Chicago and whose executives apparently believed people would more likely be persuaded to buy a car by seeing the body of a beautiful young woman than the body of a Buick. The Fisher Body ads were ubiquitous in national magazines and gave Nan Barclay one of the most recognizable female faces in Chicago during the 1920's. The Barclays bought an apartment on Chicago's Gold Coast and built a summer home on the Jersey Shore. They were embraced by Chicago's upper-wealth society and were often invited to parties at the Potter Palmer's mansion or on Commander Eugene McDonald's (head of Zenith Radio) yacht which was usually docked off Grant Park in the summer. McClelland Barclay was one of Chicago's most skilled and influential artists of the 1920's and the only one whose activities were to be listed in the Society section of Chicago's newspapers.

Lessons Learned from History

“When the interest did come ...(in art in Chicago), people distrusted home products, and were inclined to go straight to New York or to Europe where others had already laid the stamp of approval.”

And so lamented Lorado Taft on the status of Chicago’s indigenous artists in their own city. It would be an abiding complaint: “Chicago does not support its artists.” The Chicago Art Institute is Chicago’s cultural crown jewel but there is little art created by Chicago’s own artists on display in Chicago’s premier art museum. The Chicago Art Institute is a legacy not of Chicago’s artists but of Chicago’s art collectors. It was the very art collectors who Taft disparaged whose purchased paintings are now on the gallery walls in the Art Institute and much of it was art originally purchased before the artist had garnered the “stamp of approval.”

Chicago’s late 19th century nouveau riche were fairly adroit at recognizing meritorious art created by not yet famous artists. Sara Hallowell, the last art director for the Inter-State Art Exposition, served as an advisor to Chicago collectors, such as Mrs. Potter Palmer, after Hallowell moved permanently from Chicago to Paris, France. She was for a time the Art Institute’s agent for acquisitions in Paris. The boys at the Art Institute usually followed her advice when she recommended the purchase of an art work even if it was not highly valued and they came to regret it when they ignored her advice. On one occasion, Hallowell became enamored with a painting by an American ex-patriot artist. She vehemently importuned the Art Institute directors to buy the painting and even arranged to have it exhibited in Chicago but they just weren’t impressed with a portrait in profile of the artist’s own elderly mother so eventually the French Government purchased James McNeill Whistler’s *Whistler’s Mother* for the Louvre where it became one of the more popular paintings in their massive collection.

Yet rare was the misjudgment of Chicago’s serious art collectors in their discretionary purchases. Chauncey McCormick, a President of the Art Institute, acknowledged this tradition in his famous rejoinder to a French dignitary whom he was escorting through the Art Institute’s French Impressionist gallery. When the French official remarked “my, my an entire gallery of Renoirs! That must have cost you a pretty penny,” McCormick retorted “Not at all, in Chicago we don’t buy Renoirs. We inherit them from our grandmothers” which succinctly described one of Chicago’s greatest accomplishments in the realm of fine arts.

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