

Chicago's Union League Club

Committed to Country, Community, and Art

By THOMAS CONNORS



THE UNION LEAGUE CLUB OF CHICAGO'S
CURRENT HOME OPENED IN 1926.

From the potentate-packed Chicago Club to the aesthetically minded Cliff Dwellers, Chicago has never been short of private membership clubs. As in other American metropolises, these retreats have played a crucial role in shaping the civic sensibility of the city. An outgrowth of the Union League of America — founded in Illinois in 1862 to support the Northern cause during the Civil War — the Union League Club of Chicago came to life in 1879, espousing “commitment to country and community.” It has done just that for 131 years, from advocating reform of the city’s sewage system in the 1880s to, more recently, supporting a death penalty moratorium.

Located in the heart of the financial district, the Club’s 23-story building opened in 1926 on the site of its previous clubhouse (1886). Built of Indiana limestone and brick, and graced with classically proportioned interiors featuring pilasters and broken pediments, the present structure was designed by the Chicago firm of Mundie and Jensen, whose partner, William Mundie, chaired the Club’s Art Committee for several years. Mundie recommended that Edwin Howland Blashfield, then the dean of American muralists, create *Patria*, a 144 x 94-inch oil on canvas for the Main Lounge’s fireplace. Its central figure, Columbia, holds the U.S. Constitution as she stands between the allegorical figures of Fortitude and Justice.

A LEGACY OF COLLECTING

While the cigar-and-a-swim character once shared by all urban clubs still lingers at the Union League, its ambiance today is most forcefully defined by the art that adorns its walls. Along with good leather sofas, burnished millwork, and well-tended fires, art has always been key to the richly residential atmosphere of the best private clubs. Some, such as New York’s literary-minded Century Association, went beyond the few obligatory landscapes and sober portraits to amass a considerable collection. Although the Union League Club was, from its beginning, more concerned with commerce and politics than aesthetics, it nonetheless took more than a passing interest in art. In the late 1880s its Art Association was formed to acquire works, “but also to promote art culture and especially to encourage artists by establishing prizes and otherwise fostering emulation; as well as to invite... art loving citizens to favor the Association with the loan of paintings, statuary, bronzes and other works of art for exhibition.”

This mandate was enhanced in 1891 with an amendment establishing a three-man Art Committee and an appropriation for art amounting to two percent of members’ annual dues. The first triumvirate to steer the Club in matters artistic were Charles L. Hutchinson, who had helped establish the Art Institute of Chicago nine years earlier and would serve



CLAUDE MONET (1840-1926)
POMMIERS EN FLEURS (APPLE TREES IN BLOSSOM)
 1872, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 28 1/2 IN.

as its president for 42 years; his good friend, Martin A. Ryerson, the Institute's vice president and one of its greatest benefactors; and William M.R. French, who directed the Institute's museum division.

In 1895, this distinguished committee purchased one of the Club's most important works, Claude Monet's *Pommiers en fleurs*. Although Impressionism was hardly new at this point (Monet created the canvas in 1872), it was still radical stuff to many sensible Midwestern clubmen. Union League president John Hamline was reportedly incensed at this \$500 expenditure, sputtering, "Who would pay five dollars for that blob of paint?" But, as the committee had explained at the Club's annual meeting the year before, "it is of course impossible to secure paintings or sculpture that are satisfactory to 1400 members."

PRIORITIZING AMERICAN, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL ARTISTS

Although the Club acquired other European works in its early years (none equal to the Monet), finances and philosophy gave a distinctly American cast to the collection. Acquisitions included Eastman Johnson's posthumous portrait of Alexander Hamilton, a Hiram Powers bust of Daniel Webster, and *Picnic in the Woods, Montclair, New Jersey*, by George Inness, a haunting, late work in which white-clad revelers inhabit the shadowy landscape like ghosts. By 1907, the Art Committee, then



GEORGE INNESS (1825-1894)
PICNIC IN THE WOODS, MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY
 1894, OIL ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON FIBERBOARD,
 30 1/4 X 45 1/4 IN.



CHARLES WEBSTER HAWTHORNE (1872-1930)
THE SHAD FISHERMAN
 c. 1915-16, OIL ON FIBERBOARD, 39 ³/₄ X 39 ⁷/₈ IN.

customarily be rendered as pure documentary, or suffused with a suffocating air of the exotic. Despite its increasing adventurousness, the Club never presumed to compete with the more daring Art Institute nearby. Then, as now, it made special efforts to find works compatible with some of its earliest, more conventional, purchases. In 1945, Thomas Hill's *Crescent Lake (Yosemite Valley)* of 1892 entered the collection. George Bellows's *Girl with Flowers* came along in 1962.

Landscapes, portraits, and genre scenes dominate the collection, but not all is sweetness and light. William Samuel Schwartz, one of Chicago's best-known artists in the 1930s, is represented by *Earn Your Bread by the Sweat of Your Brow*. Presenting two miners before a backdrop of belching smokestacks, this painting combines blunt social commentary with a sophisticated formal flair that includes vaguely cubistic modeling. Another work from the 1930s, *Our Daily Bread*, by the little-known Midwesterner Anna Lou Matthews, shows a couple and their infant sitting down to a meal of

under the chairmanship of James Spencer Dickerson, not only determined that the collection ought to focus on American artists, but suggested that the Club should demonstrate "a particularly friendly attitude to artists in Chicago." (Local artists whose work came into the collection early on included Alson Skinner Clark, Walter Marshall Clute, and John Christen Johansen.)

Not surprisingly, much of the work that entered the Club in the early 20th century was safe, pretty, and perfectly suited to ornament its handsome interiors. After all, the Club was (and remains) the refuge of lawyers, businessmen, and the like, and the Art Committee was not out to shock anyone. Nonetheless, even some of its more conventional canvases are delights of high quality. For example, Charles Webster Hawthorne's *The Shad Fisherman* possesses a compelling, unromantic directness. A realist who studied with William Merritt Chase and fell under the spell of the 17th-century master Frans Hals during a stay in Holland, Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art in 1899; there he urged his students to "Approach your subject in all humility and reverence — make yourself highly sensitive to its beauty."

Once the focus had shifted to American work with an emphasis on the Midwest, the Club's holdings began to manifest a deeper appreciation of art's formal aspects. In *Jacinto and the Suspicious Cat*, for example, Indiana-born Victor Higgins brings a modernist sensibility to a Southwestern episode that would

bread and soup. Like a Norman Rockwell scene drained of optimism, this brown and gray composition echoes the repose of earlier religious masterpieces while projecting an utterly secular universality. Finally, Ivan Albright's *Knees of Cypress (Reflections of a Cypress Swamp)* is no bucolic



VICTOR HIGGINS (1884-1949)
JACINTO AND THE SUSPICIOUS CAT
 1916, OIL ON CANVAS, 39 ¹/₃ X 43 ¹/₄ IN.

WILLIAM SAMUEL SCHWARTZ (1896-1977)
EARN YOUR BREAD BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW
 1935, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 30 IN.

scene, but a dank, watery world rendered from multiple viewpoints to create an almost dizzying sense of motion and depth.

In the mid-1980s, thanks to a series of shrewd curators, the Club became more aggressive in acquiring works by contemporary Chicago artists. Among them was *Eagle City* by William Conger, one of the city's leading abstract painters. By 2000, works by Hollis Sigler, Richard Howard Hunt, Vera Klement, and the Chicago Imagists Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Karl Wirsum, and Ed Paschke had all found a home here.

MORE ART-MINDED THAN EVER

Throughout its history, the Club has presented its own juried exhibitions and partnered with other organizations to mount shows around the city. While some efforts have been disparaged (in 1965 the *Chicago Tribune* opined: "the Union League's biennial art shows go their serene way... unconcerned with the vogues and rages of the day"), the Club has always explored a range of material, exposing its members to such artists as John Himmelfarb, Angel Otero, and Pamela Johnson. In 1997, president Phil Wicklander upped the Club's commitment to contemporary art by creating the Distinguished Artists Program, which has honored many local talents: Among them are Don Baum, Barbara Crane, Ruth Duckworth, Michiko Itatani, Robert Lostutter, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Kerry James Marshall, John David Mooney, and James Valerio. This month, the Club inducts William Conger and the renowned photographer Dawoud Bey.

The role art plays in the Club is evident the minute one arrives. Displayed in nearly every public space, from the lobby and corridors to the dining rooms and library, the collection — now numbering more than 750 pieces — endows the Union League with an identity unique among Chicago's clubs. There's Leon Golub's crusty-looking *Le Combat IV* by the elevator on the sixth floor. Just outside the Main Lounge hangs an untitled 1913 oil by Chicagoan Manierre Dawson, whom some experts suggest created the first truly non-objective painting. In the Main Dining Room, with its dozens of landscapes, glows James Valerio's mammoth *Night Fires*, a disquieting *vanitas* carried out with photo-realistic perfection. And in the bar there's the requisite female nude, painted by Charles Frederick Naegle in 1898. As they cleaned this picture in 1995, conservators discovered that the veil across the figure's



RICHARD HOWARD HUNT (B. 1935)
PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN
 1998, BRONZE AND BRASS, 22 X 15 X 11 ³/₄ IN.

ample posterior was not original to the canvas, and so they removed it.

Unusually, the club today employs both a curator (Elizabeth K. Whiting) and a conservator (Elizabeth Wigfield), who works in a studio on site. "Members may not like everything," Whiting notes, "but I think they take prideful ownership of the collection and recognize that they have something bigger than the Club itself. They realize the collection has come to be not just something that beautifies the walls, but also enhances the reputation of the Club and also that of Chicago." ■

THOMAS CONNORS is a freelance art journalist based in Chicago. His articles and reviews have appeared in such publications as *Art & Antiques*, *Art+Auction*, *Town & Country*, and *The International Herald Tribune*.

Information: Union League Club of Chicago, 65 West Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60604, 312.435.4825, ulcc.org. The Club offers a public tour of its building once per month; please telephone for details.

All artworks illustrated here are in the collection of the Union League Club of Chicago.