

Where Have All the Artists Gone?

Last spring I learned that Mark Schlachter, one of our newer members, is a practicing sculptor, and that led me to wonder why we don't have more artists in our midst. By artists, I mean those who paint, draw, etch, sculpt, or in some way create visual works. The Literary Club has had a long tradition of artist members, going back to its founding, but I believe Mark is the first in seventy years. So, this evening I want to look at fourteen Literarians who were considered artists in their day.

The tradition started early. Among our Founders we find the name of **Peyton C. Wyeth**. Although little is known about Wyeth, the city directory for 1849 describes him as a portrait painter with a studio in the Art Union Building, northwest corner of Sycamore and Fourth Streets, now the site of a Skyline Chili establishment. The Art Union referred to was the Western Art Union, an important regional art institution in the late 1840s, and an organization to which most of the city's artists belonged. The only other piece of information about Wyeth I was able to gather is that in the 1830s, while living in London as an art student, he became involved with the Disciples of Christ. Since Wyeth's name does not appear in city directories after 1851, we can assume he moved elsewhere, a not uncommon situation for young men who carried the tools of their trade with them.

Wyeth may still have been a member when **Edward P. Cranch** joined in 1851. Cranch was born in 1809 in Washington, D.C. and arrived in Cincinnati about twenty-two years later. Like so many young men at that time, he aspired to be an attorney, reading law in Salmon P. Chase's office. He went on to practice law and was serving as clerk of the Commercial Court when he joined the Literary Club in 1851, but he was often observed walking around the city making pencil sketches of people and buildings. Although a borderline eccentric, that categorized him as an artist in the mid-nineteenth century. He did belong to the Semi-Colon Club, a literary forerunner to our own organization. Cranch is mentioned only twice in the club minutes, both coming some years after he resigned. In December, 1881, he is listed as a visitor,

and six years later the club secretary recorded that Cranch had published “in lasting form and exquisite taste the traditional and highly entertaining ballad—famously known as The Dreadful Tale of Isaac Abbott—embellished with fitting illustrations by Mr. Cranch himself and that he has formally dedicated the same to the Literary Club.” The club purchased a copy. Our librarian, Dale Flick, has uncovered this rare tome, which is available for perusing after the dinner. Unfortunately, club minutes didn’t always record when a member resigned, and annual membership rosters in the early years are sporadic, so we have no idea when Cranch actually left the club.

Almost certainly, however, he was a member in 1852 when, miraculously, three more artists signed the constitution. **Benjamin McConkey**, a native of Maryland, moved to the city in 1844, at the age of twenty-three. Already recognized as an artist, he moved temporarily to Catskill, New York, in 1845 where he, along with a young Frederick Church, trained under the eyes of Thomas Cole, the nation’s premier landscape painter and “father” of the Hudson River School. Church, of course, went on to become one of the country’s most successful artists. Unfortunately, McConkey, never attained great mastery of the brush, although several of his works were exhibited at the Western Art Union in the late 1840s. At some point in the early 1850s, he turned to wine production, undoubtedly a more profitable line of work, and this no doubt enhanced his popularity within the Literary Club. Indeed, grateful, or perhaps thirsty, club members elected him club steward in March, 1855, a position similar to our current steward. Unlike the faint footprints left by Wyeth and Cranch, McConkey attended meetings regularly, on several occasions served as president *pro tem.*, and actively participated in the formal debates that made up so much of the early club’s evenings. Sadly, on November 3, 1855, the secretary recorded his “sudden and recent death.” Charles P. James, future U. S. District Court Judge, suggested that a portrait of McConkey be obtained for the club rooms and others proposed that “a sketch of his life and character” be prepared. The sketch, if written, has disappeared. The self-portrait, apparently

completed by **James H. Beard**, was given to the club by his widow and now gazes upon us from the back corner above the piano. Please join me in a toast to Benjamin McConkey.

James H. Beard also joined in 1852. Born in Buffalo in 1811, he arrived in the Queen City in 1836 where he earned a buck fifty a day as a chair painter. After he established himself as an artist, he lived on Third Street in what was known as Foote's Row. In 1839, he exhibited at the short-lived Academy of Fine Arts, and Salmon P. Chase, much impressed, purchased two of his works. Although Nicholas Longworth described Beard as "lazy and given to fine living," that doesn't seem to have been held against him, and it probably made him more popular among fellow Literarians. Perhaps he was our first truly "clubable" member. Robert Ralston Jones, a former club historian, noted that entertainment at the conclusion of meetings sometimes included Beard singing a favorite song. This is a tradition probably best not resurrected. By the 1850s, Beard had become the city's leading artist, with his best known local work being *The Long Bill*, now hanging in the Cincinnati Wing of the art museum. During the turbulent 1860s he divided his time between Cincinnati and New York City, and in 1870 he moved permanently to New York where he enjoyed a successful career as a painter of humorous animal portraits and moralistic genre scenes. Success led to membership in the National Academy of Design. His place in the art world is revealed by the names of honorary pallbearers at his funeral: Albert Bierstadt, Eastman Johnson, Thomas Worthington Whittredge, and the sculptor, John Quincy Adams Ward.

Beard's painting and fine living did not deter him from family obligations. He married in Cincinnati and fathered several children, most of whom worked in some artistic field during their lives, including Daniel C. Beard, who eventually went on to become one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America. James Beard, however, recognizing the financial difficulties faced by most artists, pushed his oldest son, **James Carter Beard**, into a law career. Following his graduation from Miami University, James Carter Beard studied law in the office of Rutherford B. Hayes, and he practiced law until 1860 when he turned to art,

a more honorable profession in the eyes of many. He became a member of the Literary Club in 1864 and was known in local circles as “Beard the younger.” For a while he operated an art school in the city, but when his father left for New York City, the younger Beard went with him and earned a reputation for illustration, first on the staff of Charles Scribner and Sons publishing house and then as art manager for *The Century* magazine. Club minutes remain silent about him.

Along with McConkey and Beard the Elder, **Thomas Buchanan Read** joined our club in 1852. Born in Chester County, Pennsylvania, Read came to Cincinnati in 1838, eking out a living as a cigar maker, sign painter, tombstone inscriber, and player of female roles in several stage productions. This latter was a common practice at the time and he should not be considered an early Caitlyn Jenner. At the age of eighteen, Read painted a much admired portrait of presidential candidate William Henry Harrison. Later portraits included Abraham Lincoln, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and both Robert and Elizabeth Browning. In 1845, he wrote a novel, *Paul Redding, A Tale of the Brandywine*, which earned him considerable attention as a writer. Nicholas Longworth strongly advised him to concentrate solely on painting. He did no such thing. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, he spent considerable time in Italy, where he wrote much of his poetry, including “The New Pastoral,” a romantic view of the Pennsylvania countryside, and “The Pilgrims of the Great Saint Bernard.” Although he left for New York in 1859, he returned frequently. In 1861, apparently no longer a member of the club—for he is not listed among members who entered the military that year—he joined the Union army as a major, serving on the staff of General Lew Wallace, and during the war he produced a number of patriotic poems and paintings. Today, he is best known for “Sheridan’s Ride,” a poem written immediately following the news that General Phillip Sheridan had rallied his troops to victory at the battle of Winchester, Virginia, in 1864. The evening after the poem’s completion, fellow club member James Murdoch presented a dramatic reading of it to an emotionally-charged audience at Pike’s Opera

House. Despite Longworth's grumbling, Read achieved greater recognition as a poet, and five of his poems were excerpted in the first edition of *Bartlett's Quotations*. None are remembered today.

As I'm sure you know, the Literary Club went into hibernation during the first years of the Civil War. Shortly after the club re-formed in 1864, **Nathan F. Baker** became one of a new crop of members. A native Cincinnati, as a teenager he had gone to Florence, Italy, to hone his skills under the watchful eyes of sculptor Hiram Powers. Early on, Baker showed great promise with a bust of "Egeria," a water nymph who supposedly counseled King Numa Pompilius of Rome. His later full length version can be found on Strauch Island in Spring Grove Cemetery. So, when he joined the club, he was an accomplished artist. How long he remained a member and how active he may have been awaits a more thorough examination of the club minutes. However, his house on Madison Road in East Walnut Hills, built in 1883 and designed by Charles Crapsey, remains as a testament to his success.

For an artist whose reputation has entirely disappeared, **John R. Tait** was surprisingly active in local art matters. He attended Woodward High School and while a teenager studied painting under William Louis Sonntag. In the mid-1850s he joined Sonntag and Robert Duncanson, already known for his murals in the now Taft Museum of Art, on an extended tour of Europe. Upon his return to Cincinnati, Tait contributed illustrations to a short-lived weekly journal, *The Pen and Pencil*. While he showed his work at various venues in the city, he is best known as the organizer of the art exhibits at the city's post-Civil War industrial exhibitions. Despite his importance to the local art community, no doubt the Literary Club found his writing more appealing. He joined the club in 1858 and in the following year published *European Life, Legend and Landscape*, along with a selection of poems titled, *Dolce far Niente*. However, there is no record that he ever contributed a club paper, and in 1872 he moved to Baltimore without leaving his name in the minutes.

The most recognized artist in Cincinnati's rich cultural past, **Frank Duveneck**, also found his way onto the club roster. Born Frank Decker in Covington, Duveneck returned in 1873 from his training in Munich. His slashing brushwork, known as "Munich Realism," challenged the traditional teaching at the McMicken School of Design, and the city's younger artists flocked to his palette. Long before he became known for his "Duveneck Boys" in Europe, he developed his own local following. Henry Farny, John Twachtman, Edward Potthast, and a dozen other young men followed along his path. No doubt Farny, a club member since 1872, introduced him to the Literary Club in 1874. Within months Duveneck had returned to Europe and he probably resigned before his departure. When he returned to the city in 1890, following the death of his wife, he apparently had lost interest in literary associations. Club records do not indicate that he ever presented a paper or took an active role in our organization. Indeed, except for the meeting immediately following his election, his name does not appear on the secretary's annual record of attendance. Our one Duveneck, an etching of "*Riva degli Schiaoni*" in Venice, hangs on the wall in the Reception Room.

Five years after Duveneck's departure for Europe, **Preston Powers** became a member. The third son of the now famous sculptor, Hiram Powers, and a native of Florence, Italy, Preston came to Cincinnati in 1879 to teach classes under the auspices of the Women's Art Museum Association. Although he sculpted "The Closing of an Era" for the state capitol in Denver, his most singular local work is the bust of Reuben Springer in Music Hall. After joining the Literary Club in 1879, he presented one paper, "Differences of Expression in Man and Woman," but he resigned the following year and returned to Italy.

I have intentionally skipped Henry Farny whose rich involvement in the club merits a separate paper in the future. Thus, between 1849 and 1889, the club roster included eleven artists. With the great exception of Henry Farny, and possibly Benjamin McConkey, these men contributed little to the club's

activities. McConkey, of course, left us two paintings but died young. Duveneck, both Beards, Powers, Read and Tait all left the city, and Wyant, Cranch and Baker never seem to have really embraced our literary exercises. While there are no records to show when these men severed their relationships with the club, all seem to have resigned years before their respective deaths. Although Farny became a member in 1872, he resigned in 1889. Thus, by 1890 we no longer had an artist in the club. This changed in the post-First World War I era.

In 1921, John D. Wareham, vice-president of Rookwood Pottery and a ceramic decorator of considerable skill, became a member. The following year he presented his first paper, an affectionate tribute to Frank Duveneck. Over the next thirteen years, Wareham, known as "Dee" to his friends, read a total of seven papers, including two budget contributions, but his last paper was in 1935. Since he became president of Rookwood in 1934, we may assume that the demands of the position limited his involvement, and he finally resigned in 1942. His major contribution to the club was in assisting in the design and decoration of this clubhouse in 1930. Outside of our rooms, he had the reputation of being the unofficial art director of the city, lending his decorating talents to the Queen City Club, Music Hall, Central Trust Bank and the Commercial Club. He also played a major role in designing the Ida Street Bridge in Mt. Adams. More of a showman than a businessman, his flamboyant character was reflected in his sixteen-cylinder Cadillac equipped with a special radiator cap decorated with three flying horses made by Rookwood. Unfortunately for Wareham, he had the painful experience of presiding over Rookwood's gradual slide to bankruptcy.

John Weis joined us in 1930. One of Duveneck's late students, the gifted Weis joined the faculty at the Cincinnati Art Academy at age twenty-two. But the Literary Club seems not to have been attractive to him, and, like so many of the early artists, he left but a faint footprint: two papers and two paintings. The papers are undistinguished. The painting of Cincinnati's riverfront is a handsome addition to the

club's gallery of art; but the portrait of Charles Wilby, hanging at the back of this room, was actually acquired by the club almost a decade before Weis became a member. Weis resigned in 1940.

So, where have all the artists gone? One might easily say, "gone to graveyards, everyone," but I have a theory. Of course, I have no supporting facts for this theory, a situation that never bothers an academician. Paul Briol, an artistic photographer, became a club member in 1927. He also managed The Book Shelf on Garfield Place for a number of years and that may have enhanced his appeal to club members. But more to the point, Briol lived a rather bohemian lifestyle. Although married with children, he had numerous affairs, of which his wife was mostly aware, had a cabin along the banks of the Little Miami River where he hosted parties, usually without his wife, and in general behaved like an artist with a French background. That, and the fact that he was asked to resign in 1934 for non-payment of dues, may have clouded the reputations of any future artists interested in joining the Literary Club . . . at least until 2012 when we threw caution to the wind and Mark became a member.

Thank You

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