

## **IN THE BEGINNING: WOMEN AT THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE**

The Art Students League was founded in 1875 by a group of disaffected students numbering around seventy, and Lemuel E. Wilmarth (1835-1918), who were separating themselves from the National Academy of Design (where Wilmarth was a professor). Like the National Academy, The League accepted women students—in fact, afternoon classes were reserved for women. The League's Constitution not only stipulated the acceptance of women pupils, but also guaranteed that the Board of Control be divided equally: "two vice-presidents (one lady and one gentleman) and four other members (two ladies and two gentlemen)." Despite this technical equality, The Art Students League did not have a woman president until Lisa M. Specht was elected in 1968, almost a century after the school's founding. Mary Lawrence Tonetti was the first woman art instructor, teaching from 1895 to 1899. While women formed a substantial portion of the student body, female instructors were far less common: Tonetti was the only woman to teach in the first quarter century of The League. In the first decade of the twentieth century, of forty-two artists on the roster, only four were women: Lucia Fairchild Fuller, Alice Beckington, Rhoda Holmes Nicholls and Hilda Belcher. The year of The League's founding, the National Academy had almost equal numbers of male and female students: 131 to 120, so the idea that there were far fewer potential women artists is completely erroneous. Similarly, in Paris, at the Académie Julian, there were five studios for men and four for women, again indicating close to equal numbers of male and female art students.

## THE ACADEMIE JULIAN AND WOMEN ARTISTS IN AMERICA

Just before the founding of The League, an establishment took shape in Paris that would transform French, European and American art; the Académie Julian opened its doors in 1868. Rodolphe Julian was an unsuccessful artist, but as an entrepreneur he created a lucrative educational market. He was the first to offer preparatory training for the difficult examinations that had to be passed in order to gain entry to the state sponsored Académies, and within five years he was accepting women students as well—first in mixed classes and then in women-only ateliers in order to avoid any accusations of impropriety.

The French state Académies did not accept women until 1897, and by that time Julian had already made a market for himself as the premier art school for women in the world. Julian combined an open-mindedness to educate women artists to the same exacting and punishing standards as the *École des Beaux-Arts*, with a capitalist's instinct to see that there was a fortune to be made in the untapped resource of middle and upper-middle class women's (previously unrealized) artistic aspirations. Specifically middle and upper class, because Julian did apply a substantial surcharge to his female student's tuition, under the assumption that a husband, male family member, or sponsor would cover the costs for her.

The Académie Julian hired some of the foremost practitioners of Academic French art: William Bouguereau, Jules Joseph LeFebvre, and Gustave Boulanger among many others. These well-connected and savvy veterans were able to offer their pupils advice, mentorship and contacts, especially the women who had no recourse to more traditional and ingrained avenues of career success. This did make it possible for talented women artists to exhibit at the mainstream Salons and to gain commissions and work professionally. Much like The League, the Académie Julian became a who's who of well-known women artists; Cecilia Beaux, Louise Bourgeois, May Stevens, Marguerite Louppe, and many of the artists in Postwar Women. There was a tremendous cross-fertilization between the French art schools (the Académie de la Grande Chaumière would open in 1902) and The Art Students League.

## THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION: STATE SPONSORED OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN ARTISTS

In 1933 the United States government under Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought to deal with the precipitous losses in industrial, manufacturing, and retail jobs that had resulted from the collapse of the stock market and the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929. His programs to alleviate the suffering of millions of unemployed Americans would have the unexpected side-effect of finally making it possible for women of all walks of life to gain access to art-making as a professional occupation. Within the first year, the WPA gave 4.5 million citizens jobs; 40,000 of these people were creatively employed, and of that number 3,000 were visual artists. There was a high concentration of women employed in leadership roles at the WPA, and in addition, the Secretary of Labor, the suffragette Frances Perkins, was the first woman to attain a cabinet position and wrote much of the New Deal policy. Within the WPA, Ellen Woodward was in charge of the umbrella office overseeing the arts divisions: the Division of Women's and Professional Projects (basically the WPA office of white collar and professional and academic work). Hallie Flanagan was director of the Federal Theater Project and Audrey McMahon was the Federal Art Project Director for the New York Region, while Art Students League alumna Margery Hoffman Smith was the FAP Director for Oregon. Most importantly, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt insisted that equity in employment be implemented in the New Deal. For the first time in professional fine art employment in America, and the Western world, there was a mandate that women be hired in significant numbers to work on art projects.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said: "If you prepare yourself at every point as well as you can, with whatever means you may have, however meager they may seem, you will be able to grasp opportunity for broader experience when it happens." The training that The League had been offering women since 1875 finally found a means of propelling those women into the actual artistic firmament. How did the activities of the WPA intersect with The Art Students League? For some at The League, the goals of the WPA were a welcome culmination of what The League had been striving for over its sixty years. "It was one of the greatest efforts in history to make a democracy a democracy," said long-serving League instructor Will Barnet. Many of the women featured in this exhibition, including Berenice Abbott, Lee Krasner, Mercedes Matter, Elizabeth Catlett, Gwendolyn Knight, and I. Rice Pereira among others, took classes at The League and then found paying work for their talents within the WPA.

**KNOW  
YOUR  
FORE  
MOTHERS**  
POSTWAR WOMEN

## NINTH STREET WOMEN

Mary Gabriel's book *Ninth Street Women* tells the story of five women who shaped the direction of art in America in the 1940's, 50's and 60's. On May 21st, 1951, the 9th Street exhibition opened and featured the work of Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, Perle Fine, and Helen Frankenthaler, all included in this exhibition. But there were many other women working in the village and nearby, and we celebrate their efforts, unrecognized at the time. Many have become well-known since then: Mercedes Matter, Carmen Herrera and Mary Abbott, for example. Others are beginning to be recognized: Judith Godwin, Edith Schloss, and Joyce Weinstein. Lenita Manry is exhibited here for the first time in at least 50 years: she was Hans Hofmann's assistant and helped him run his downtown school. (Hofmann also did teach at The League briefly in 1932). Lenore Jaffee was an artist and a poet who published with Robert Creeley and was friends with many of the Beat poets and writers.