INSTITUTIONS AND THE ARTISTIC COMMUNITY:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LOS ANGELES URBAN ART HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

INSTITUTIONS AND THE ARTISTIC COMMUNITY: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LOS ANGELES URBAN ART HISTORY

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Master of Arts in History

Interest in Los Angeles cultural history has been revived in recent times in large part through efforts of major museums in the area. Prior to these efforts, the predominant narrative of the development of American modern art focused on the East Coast. However, from 1915 to 1960, although only a span of 45 years, Los Angeles underwent a significant increase in avant-garde institutions. At least four schools of visual and performance art and three, if not more, major galleries began to operate during these years in addition to changes in infrastructure, political swings, and artistic movements from within the city.

The institutions discussed include the Chouinard Art Institute, Otis School of Art and Design, The Art Center School, and Denishawn School of Dance among others. All establishments originated in Westlake/MacArthur Park, a fact few credit the area for. Later, these schools moved to other areas, among which Chouinard became the Disney-affiliate Cal Arts.

In this thesis, I recreate the art scene that existed within Westlake/MacArthur Park during the early to mid 20th century, and propose a shift in the focus of art history from individual creative artists to the institutions and societies who inspired these individuals.
Such an approach provides the student of modern art history with a better understanding of the influences of the artists that have founded the different fields of contemporary art visible today such as modern dance, animation, illustration, pop art, industrial design, and zone photography. The founders of Denishawn created the first school and community of modern dancers who would support each other at a time when their movement lacked respect among contemporary dancers. Ultimately, their students created their own styles of modern dance that is uniquely American. Chouinard Art Institute’s emphasis on technique mastery in illustration and painting inspired its artists to join new fields of animation, watercolor, and pop art among others. Art Center’s focus on employment for artists in industry inspired its leaders to create the first school on the West Coast to create a training program in industrial design as well as innovative training in supporting fields such as on advertising, and commercial photography.

To the current students of these schools, Westlake is but another urban location. However, there are a number of significant reasons why Westlake housed these fledgling art schools in the 20th century. With its galleries and supply shops, scenic park and proximity to downtown, nearby mansions and hotels, Westlake became a magnet for artists during the early to mid 1900s. The wealthy individuals who owned these mansions and hotels around the area provided galleries and capital that funded artists in the community.\(^1\)

This thesis traces the origins and later settlements of the schools and other art affiliates from the community with an emphasis on how the graduates and faculty of these institutions influenced West Coast American modern art. It is largely to the credit of these institutions that arenas of art like the California Watercolor Movement, Industrial

\(^1\) For example, The Earl Stendahl Art Gallery operated in the Ambassador Hotel in 1930 as well as the
Design, Zone photography, Modern Dance, as well as the more recent Pop Art and Light and Space mediums and methods hallmark the contributions of West Coast art as discussed in this work.
Introduction

Los Angeles is a suburban city. It is sprawled out among miles of mountains and valleys. However, the city’s design has developed into a unique urban blend of the rural with the metropolitan over time. This relatively new city, which reached over 100,000 residents only in 1900,\(^2\) is generally not acknowledged for its artistic contributions to the American modern art world, especially not in the years prior to World War Two.\(^3\) Current retrospectives of Los Angeles art\(^4\) focus on the postwar period and largely omit the contributions of those artists that came beginning in the early 1900s.\(^5\) Additionally, an institutional history is lacking in the larger literature of art history, a status quo this thesis tries to change.

Indeed there is more to Los Angeles art than conventional wisdom suggests. In the first fifty years of the 20\(^{th}\) century, Los Angeles was host to important institutions that became the foundation of an artistic oasis in the American Southwest. As evidenced in archival holdings, journal articles and maps of the city, Los Angeles housed small but very important and productive communities of art before World War Two. Narrative texts such as those mentioned in footnote four all seem to neglect the role Los Angeles played in the development of American modern art in the 20\(^{th}\) century. Their approaches


\(^4\) See Pacific Standard Time narrative, Worlds of Art narrative, World of Art, History of Modern Art as well as other major art history publications.

\(^5\) See discussion on Pacific Standard Time below.
focus on individual creative genius rather than provide background to where and how the artist developed into a creative master. Many focus on individual movements within art such as abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, and others without explaining how artists involved in these movements chose their artistic direction in relation to the communities they were part of.

This work is a history of one such community near downtown Los Angeles that has gone unrecognized in the existing literature. Pacific Standard Time, a regional art exhibition funded by the J. Paul Getty Foundation describes the importance of community in their publication *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*,

“To make a lasting, cultural contribution in Los Angeles, being an “artist” (required) an all consuming vocation; it did not start when a class was in session nor stop when it was time for dinner. This distinctive approach shaped the sense of self, the nature of intellectual exchange, and the space for meaningful expression in Southern California.”

In other words, to understand the ingenuity of artists such as Millard Sheets, Ed Ruscha, and many others that will be discussed, it is imperative to study their community because the subject and inquiry of their art is heavily influenced by their training and in some cases a rebellion against their training. However, *Pacific Standard Time* fails to emphasize this point.

Most Los Angeles art history begins with the postwar period, as is evident in the recent efforts of the Pacific Standard Time exhibits. However, with research found from various sources in and around Los Angeles, one community in particular housed a thriving artistic community in the form of visual and performing art schools, theaters and galleries, as early as 1915. This neighborhood, once called Westlake, is now called
MacArthur Park in honor of World War Two General Douglas MacArthur.\(^6\) Just like its overlooked former name, the community is not recognized for its role as an incubator for art during the city’s early development.\(^7\)

Once known as the “Champs Elysees” of Los Angeles\(^8\), the neighborhood of Westlake/Macarthur Park was alive with art and culture throughout the early to late-1900s. Today, the community no longer serves as a functional center for avant-garde art since most of the art schools, galleries, and theaters have closed or relocated. The neighborhood has changed for the most part since 1960 from an art-oriented leisure getaway, to an urban extension of the businesses and traffic of Wilshire Boulevard. This was largely due to the Wilshire Viaduct built through Westlake Park in 1934.\(^9\)

This work will enrich the narrative of this community’s past by discussing the creative history of MacArthur Park: the schools of art, dance, and photography that enabled the community to serve as an artistic incubator throughout the early to mid 20\(^{th}\) century. It is largely to the credit of these institutions that arenas of art such as the California Watercolor Movement, Industrial Design, Zone photography, Modern Dance, as well as the more recent Pop Art and Light and Space mediums and methods hallmark the contributions of West Coast art. The institutions discussed in relation to these arenas include the Denishawn School of Dance and Related Arts, Otis College of Art and


\(^{7}\) Even in a chapter titled “Site Specific Art,” Thomas Crow, author of \textit{Modern Art in the Common Culture} (New Haven: Yale University Press,1996),131-150 mentions the Chicago Art Institute, New York public art, (such as that of the Federal Plaza) and Claremont College in Southern California. Los Angeles is completely overlooked.

\(^{8}\) See http://westlaketheatre.com/history.html.

Design, Chouinard Art Institute, Art Center, Westlake Theater, Stendahl, Ferus and Dalzell-Hatfield Art galleries.

This institutional approach to the study of art development in Los Angeles gives the student of modern art history a better understanding of the influences of the artists that founded the different fields of contemporary art visible today such as animation, pop art, industrial design, zone photography, and modern dance. Additionally, through the details of this discussion, Los Angeles urban history is enriched in scope and depth.

For instance, through a better understanding of Chouinard’s emphasis on mastering technique, one understands how Disney’s animations, and the artists who produced them, improved over time from stick figures to three-dimensional animators because of Chouinard’s influence. Through the Art Center’s focus on artistic contribution to industry, the field of industrial design was first studied on the West Coast at the school. As Art Center developed, it became a training ground for advertising design and other related fields in industry. Through a better understanding of when and where these schools originated, we can credit those communities that allowed them to operate and train generations of artists that conquered new horizons of art on the West Coast.

The structure of this work includes an initial overview of Westlake’s original artistic institutions in the visual and performing arts in Chapter one. Visual arts are better documented in the research given the nature of the art; therefore more attention is given to that sphere. Chapter two continues with an in-depth analysis of Chouinard Art Institute in relation to Walt Disney and its departure from the community. Chapter three focuses on the California Watercolor Movement and the artists and galleries who contributed to
it, particularly those with connections to Chouinard.\textsuperscript{10} Chapter four continues with a further explanation of Art Center’s unique contributions. The case studies of Chouinard and Art Center provide rare glimpses into policies and practices of some of the city’s early art schools, the approaches that ultimately succeeded and those that failed. It should be noted that with the focus on MacArthur Park, information from Art Center’s time in the community is limited from Art Center’s institutional archives than that of Chouinard’s. Therefore Chouinard’s narrative is more protracted in comparison. This work concludes with a summary of the relationship between the institutions and the community of Westlake/MacArthur Park, as well as a mention of this work’s addition to the general approach to the study of contemporary art history.

Research for this work was limited in sources regarding the community itself. As a result, a variety of eclectic sources needed to be found and analyzed. Primary and secondary sources included exhibition catalogs from galleries, university catalogs, interviews, museum publications, biographies, oral history programs, newspaper periodicals, and books about nuances and developments in the larger art scene in the United States. Places visited included the University of California Los Angeles Archive (UCLA), California Institute of the Arts Archive (Cal Arts), Otis College of Art and Design Archive (Otis), Art Center Archive, Los Angeles County Museum of Contemporary Art Archive (LACMA), Los Angeles Conservancy Archive, California State University Northridge Map Library, and the Pasadena Museum of Contemporary Art (PMCA).

\textsuperscript{10} The history of these institutions is accessible through archival material organized professionally in libraries throughout Los Angeles, while other institutions have been more difficult to document using archival sources.
Since the subject is not a previously attempted field of study, secondary literature and sources about the community of Westlake/MacArthur Park are limited. However, sources regarding the institutions and their students are available in museum archives and publications mentioned above. The institutions researched had limited collections from their early years since the focus of the schools was art production, rather than historical accuracy of its origins.

However, in recent years the Art Center has exerted a great effort to preserve its historical narrative for fundraising purposes. This commitment has greatly benefited the researcher. In contrast, the Otis collection, while in need of further organizing and finding aid production, contained useful university catalogs and special events tribute journals, which allowed the researcher to pinpoint influential alumni and school philosophy. The Cal Arts archive contains an extensive finding aid with professionally organized material including administrative records, special events posters, ephemera, financial reports and public relations records. However, most of these are dated from 1950, therefore Chouinard’s collection is lacking in primary sources related to its early history beginning in 1921. Additionally, Sanborne Fire Insurance Maps were a tremendous asset to the work since they gave visual confirmation to the proximity of the many schools researched. However, despite the lack of already assessed information, breaking new ground in research for this project proved liberating in that the researcher was allowed the freedom of original interpretation in piecing together a part of one community’s story.
Chapter 1

An Art Incubator

Throughout 2011 and 2012, the J. Paul Getty Foundation sponsored a region-wide event named Pacific Standard Time, celebrating the art that originated in the Southern California region, centered around Los Angeles, from 1945 until 1980. Those dates were chosen because “accounts of the region tend to date the birth of the Los Angeles art scene in the 1980s.” However, as this research proves, the Los Angeles art scene can be dated even earlier, to the pre-war era, with the founding of the Denishawn School of Dance and Related Arts in 1915. All of the institutions mentioned below established themselves in one community located in Los Angeles: Westlake.

The establishment of other foundational institutions such as the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, Westlake Theater, Chouinard Art Institute, The Art Center School, and, finally, the Dalzell-Hatfield, Ferus and Stendahl art galleries help prove this point as well. Undoubtedly the presence of these institutions made the community of MacArthur Park, known then as Westlake, a haven for artists. Westlake became the center for culture and art of all kinds, including the emerging modern art movement in the city of Los Angeles. As Sarah Schrank, in her book *Art and the City* states, Los Angeles was a bohemian enclave for art, particularly of the avant-garde variety, before the first established studios of Hollywood, as early as 1910; Westlake

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Park remained an art incubator through the 1990s before its last school of art moved in 1997.\textsuperscript{13}

In other words, the arts were an early part of the community, with frequent exhibitions of visual and performing arts in Westlake Park.\textsuperscript{14} Such exhibitions included military bands, dance performances, and art shows by the nearby art students. One group had a stage erected in the park. That group was the first modern dance school in America: Denishawn School of Dance and Related Arts.

**Denishawn: Foundation of American Modern Dance**

During the turn of the century, the world of performance art was largely focused on ballet as the dominant form of expression through movement. Furthermore to the American spectator, “Dance in the public’s mind meant vaudeville, music hall, or social recreational dance.” However, with these expressive alternative dance movements at the forefront of the American stage, an increasing number of professionals became dissatisfied with the rigidness of ballet technique and the inability for meaningful self-expression through movement. With the work of pioneer Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), modern dance was introduced to the American public in an attempt to offer an alternative performing art form. However, Duncan did not establish a permanent school for her mode of dance, nor was her technique popular among contemporary professional dancers of her time.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Otis moved to El Segundo in that year. Course Catalogs, Otis Historical Materials Collection, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, California.


Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, the famous husband-wife dance team, succeeded in what Duncan had not. Together, they opened the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts in 1915 on Sixth and St. Paul Street, only a twenty minute walk and three minute drive from Westlake proper.\textsuperscript{16} Two years after opening, the school relocated to Westlake’s Alvarado Street for bigger and better accommodations.\textsuperscript{17} The existence of the Denishawn in the Westlake district in 1917 established the area as the origin of one of the first institutions devoted to modern or American dance.\textsuperscript{18} 1917 was also the year the school’s performance company was organized and began to travel. In other words, Denishawn began operating forty-two years before the famed Julliard School opened its dance program under the leadership of Martha Hill in 1951. Hill had studied under Denishawn dancer, Martha Graham.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1917, the school moved to the heart of the Westlake community, “fronting Westlake Park… into three buildings on Alvarado Street.”\textsuperscript{20} This was necessary because the school was growing, and like other art schools in Los Angeles at that time, it had outgrown its former residence. Its new residence was in the building that had previously housed the Westlake School for Girls, which gave Denishawn three times more floor space and twice the open-air area. In the outside area an outdoor stage was constructed equipped with a dancing floor.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} “New Home for Dancing School,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}.
\textsuperscript{21} Refer to image on page 12.
\end{flushleft}
The school had a successful run until the 1930s, branching out into areas in the East Coast. For over a decade the school’s dance company toured the country and the world. In 1929 the couple became estranged and went their separate ways, each still pursuing American modern dance. St. Denis went on to found the Ruth St. Denis School of Dancing and Related Arts while Shawn did the same with his Jacob’s Pillow School and Festival. Both individuals were considered the founders of the modern dance movement.

Denishawn is a name that has become iconic in the world of dance, particularly modern dance. Ruth St. Denis taught students like Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weldman. With the exception of Hanya Holm, a German-educated dancer, these were three of the “Big Four” American pioneers of modern dance. Since St. Denis and Shawn believed that all dance techniques were valid and instructive, the school offered classes in Oriental, Spanish, and primitive dance; the fundamentals of ballet; their own innovative techniques; and, later, the modern-dance techniques that had been developed in Europe by Rudolf Laban and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. However, to quite a few of their pupils, even the exotic flavor of Denishawn modern dance was too conservative.

Artists such as the three mentioned were all “originally students who came to resent Denishawn’s open commercialism, stylistic vagueness, and social conformance.”

Martha Graham in particular developed her codified technique in reaction to her training

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23 Biographical History, Ruth St. Denis Collection; Adelphi University Archives and Special Collections, Garden City, NY.
25 Ibid.
26 Isa Partsch-Berghson Modern Dance, 53.
at Denishawn. Graham’s technique was unique because it focused on opposites—contractions and stretches, tension and falling, for example. Her technique would be taught through “progressive daily exercises in the same way as classical ballet.” Her codified style developed from her reaction to the “simple interpretations of music they had been taught at Denishawn.”

Branches of the school were established in New York City and other American cities. The company’s repertoire, choreographed by St. Denis and Shawn, ranged from unadorned solos to magnificent productions with Japanese, Hindu, Middle Eastern, or American Indian themes. As said previously, the Denishawn dance company frequently toured the United States and performed in the Orient throughout the years 1925–26. Wherever St. Denis and Shawn traveled, they absorbed the movements and styles of those countries and brought them back to the States. Below, figure one shows the Indian theme of one of the many cultural dances that Denishawn performed in its outdoor stage in Westlake Park.

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Adelphi University in Garden City, New York housed St. Denis’ Dance program in 1938. It still bears her name today.
31 In Asia, they performed in India, China, Japan, and Siam (Thailand).
The impact of Denishawn on the community of MacArthur Park is quite puzzling. Although it was the foundation for American modern dance, there are few records of the relationship between the school and the larger avant-garde community in Los Angeles and the Westlake district itself. One answer to this quandary might be that the school focused inwardly on developing its dancers and dancing style, at the same time without investing in advertising for new students to join. Additionally, the school was immensely popular throughout the United States and abroad, so that the company was often away on tour. Unfortunately for the city, St. Denis and Shawn themselves were only in Los Angeles for brief periods of time. Their many tours might have also been the reason why the Westlake district is not known for housing Denishawn. Additionally, because the modern art movement, including modern dance, was not favored by or popular among

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city boosters and the like during the twenties and thirties,\textsuperscript{33} the influence of Denishawn was felt more on the East Coast in cities like New York and its famous Carnegie Hall, where most of their recorded performances were held.

**Otis College of Art and Design: The First of Its Kind**

Although the history of Denishawn does not indicate its relationship with the community of Westlake/Macarthur Park, the narrative of the Otis School of Art and Design does. From its early origins, with Harrison Gray Otis, city booster, and founder of the *Los Angeles Times* as its patron, the school was built as a publically-funded art institute dedicated to being the first public, independent, professional art school in California.\textsuperscript{34} H.G Otis left his Westlake property, the Bivouac Mansion\textsuperscript{35}, to the city for the purpose of building an art school. It was a magnificent building that overlooked Westlake Park and the glistening waters of its lake.\textsuperscript{36} He thus helped found the Otis College of Art and Design in 1918.

The Otis institution was created for the Los Angeles community, with hopes that Los Angeles would become the country’s second art center. In a letter to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, General Otis states specifically that he hoped, “to make the place (Los Angeles) ultimately a popular resort and center where art loan exhibits may be held and artists may freely congregate.”\textsuperscript{37} Indeed, Students frequently

\textsuperscript{33} See Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City* for her discussion on the state municipalities and public distrust of modern artists is a theme throughout her work.


\textsuperscript{37} Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City*, 20.
used Westlake Park for sketching, inspiration, and leisure activities that would inspire future art projects, as shown in the photograph below.

Figure 2. Painting in Westlake Park. Otis College of Art and Design Students. Los Angeles Public Library Collection

Figure 3. H. G. Otis's converted mansion during demolition in 1954. Otis Course Catalog Archive Collection 1954-1955.

Otis succeeded in creating a center for students wishing to learn or hone their artistic talents. However, the school did not become central to an artistic community right away. One reason might be that since the Los Angeles County publically funded the
school, Otis became known for establishment art, or art that caters to what public sentiment would approve of. That changed in the postwar era, as discussed below. Otis had a strong foundation with the Westlake community because of H. G Otis’s support, and perhaps that is one of the reasons the school remained in that area until 1997.

In the 1950s, due to the shocks of worldwide events during the wars, Otis changed its emphasis from establishment art to more innovative fields of art such as Light and Space, Chicano Art as well as ceramic art. These three fields and mediums of art can be seen in MacArthur Park itself today because of a community rehabilitation project the school initiated in the park beginning in 1980. Under the leadership of Peter Voulkos, between 1954 and 1959 abstract expressionist ceramic art became a specialty area that Otis had finally acquired. His work included large structures of ceramic pottery some of which he titled, “plates”, “ice buckets”, or “tea bowls.” In other words, he created art that was deconstructed from traditional forms of glazed pottery. Voulkos influenced artists Billy Al Bengston, John Mason and Kenneth Price, all Otis students.

In the 1970s, the mural group Los Four assembled within the Otis school. Their names were Frank Romero, Carlos Almaraz, Roberto De La Rocha and founder Gilbert Lujan. This group focused on Chicano art, a style of art that depicted Mexican and Central American values as well as socio-political challenges. As evident by the existence of their network, an increased willingness to accept diversity grew in the school.

38 Figure three labels the school with LA county’s endorsement. From 1978 to 1991 the school merged with New York’s Parsons School of Design and became a private institution. It remains privately funded today.
41 He attended Chouinard as well in 1954.
as time progressed and above all other institutions in the area, Otis served to reflect the changing cultures in its community.

Regarding Light and Space, the famed Robert Irwin, mentioned frequently in Pacific Standard Time, attended all three schools of Westlake: Otis from 1948 to 1950, Jepson Art\(^{42}\) in 1951, and Chouinard from 1957 to 1959.\(^{43}\) By the 1960s, he was producing and experimenting with light and its role in exhibiting artwork. Therefore, neon lights and disc paintings became part of his portfolio.\(^{44}\) Irwin became a leader and innovator within this field, and Pacific Standard Time lists him as the first artist to use this medium in art, neglecting to mention his educational background in MacArthur Park.

**Chouinard Art Institute: New Art with Old Blessings**

Interestingly, it was during this conservative period that the school flourished and became overcrowded with students. By the spring of 1920 Otis’s (compared to today’s standards) modest enrollment of one hundred students was too much for the Otis estate to bear.\(^{45}\) In that year Nelbert Chouinard, a teacher in the Otis school, was petitioned by her students to open up a school of her own and by so doing take about one third of Otis’s pupils. Chouinard was quite hesitant at first. With only 250 dollars in the bank and a 75-dollar monthly widow’s pension, Chouinard did not think it was feasible. But with the support of C.P Townsley, the director of Otis at the time, Chouinard gained the confidence she needed to turn an Eighth Street residence into an artistic haven for her pupils. Later on it moved to a magnificent building on Grand View Street, closer to Westlake Park. It is remarkable that Otis was supportive, but with its crowded conditions,

\(^{42}\) Discusses on page 32.
\(^{44}\) Rebecca Peabody et. al., *Pacific Standard Time*, 191.
\(^{45}\) Ibid, 16.
the school recognized that it needed help. Chouinard was the perfect institute to absorb its overflow.

The Chouinard Art Institute quickly became as influential, if not more so, than Otis when it came to channeling the energies of the artists in her care. “Between 1955 and 1957 Chouinard received accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. In less than a decade the Chouinard Art Institute was listed among the top five art schools in the nation, a position it occupied for the rest of its fifty-one-year history.”

Many Otis faculty members taught at Chouinard as well, recognizing the school as a legitimate art institution. This included F. Tolles Chamberlin, an Otis faculty member who helped Nelbert Chouinard start the school. Chouinard grew quickly from thirty-five students the first year, to 150 the next, and 180 after that. This growth was amazing for a school of art for that time. Indeed, many of these students later became teachers at the school as well. After the post-World War I veteran enrollment declined, Chouinard started a scholarship that attracted would-be famous, yet undiscovered artists discussed in the next chapter, almost all of whom taught at Chouinard and went on to start their own institutions.

Although at its start Chouinard was closely tied to Otis, like Denishawn, the institute was not entwined with the community of Westlake itself. In 1969, a controversial move merged Chouinard with the Music Conservatory to create the California Institute of the Arts, housed in the Disney estate in Valencia. Fierce opposition from students and faculty created a “save Nelbert’s baby” movement; it protested the

48 Ibid, 19.
move from the community and the shift from a personalized to a commercial focus in the art education.\textsuperscript{49} But Disney’s contributions to the capital investment of the school since the 1950s defeated the protest movement. Therefore, a few months after Nelbert Chouinard’s death in 1969, Walt Disney laid claims to the school because he had funded it through tough financial times. Walt Disney had also sent pupils for years to Chouinard to obtain a solid foundation in the creative arts and techniques for their work as animators. Interestingly he chose Chouinard, not Otis, to do so.

Disney had approached Otis in 1929, and requested that they take his “boys” to be trained, but because he could not pay the tuition, he was rejected. Nelbert Chouinard however, said, “Mr. Disney, I admire very much what you’re doing; just send your boys down and we’ll worry about the price later.”\textsuperscript{50} In that stroke of genius, Chouinard created a friendship that would take her school through hard times, and transform it into something larger than she ever dreamed of—a school that became one of the best art schools in the country.

Although the war was raging on in Europe and the Pacific, returning G.I’s flocked to art schools, The G.I Bill, formally known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, had just passed under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on June 22 1944.\textsuperscript{51} Many felt that this was the perfect time to pursue self-expression through art and to digest the events of the war on paper. Therefore, enrollment in Otis and Chouinard swelled to capacity. By

\textsuperscript{50} Perine, Chouinard 25.
the time the war ended in 1945, veteran enrollment ranged anywhere from forty to eighty percent of the student body. 52

This was part of a larger worldwide shift from art in Europe’s now decimated cities to the American cities of New York, Chicago and then later Los Angeles. It was at this time (1940-1945) that American art came to the foreground of avant-garde art, and the field of modern art was greatly enriched by American artists in addition to the work produced by European modern artists such as post-impressionists Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) and Cubist artist Pablo Picasso (1881-1973).

Art Center College of Design: The Problem Child

Another institution that made the Westlake area into an artistic community, furthering American contribution to modern art, was the Art Center School. Currently it is located in Pasadena, California. However, from May of 1930 until 1945 it was located within a six-block radius of both Otis and Chouinard. 53 This was no coincidence.

Chouinard had started as a splinter group from Otis due to overcrowding. In turn, the Art Center began as a splinter group from Chouinard. This was indeed a “kind of replay of Nelbert’s break from Otis in 1921.” 54 However, this replay did not have the cordial qualities of the previous one.

Edward A. “Tink” Adams, a Chouinard instructor, founded this school. Having taught in Chouinard as well as other cities including New York and Chicago, Adams felt that the school was not serving and preparing its students for “real world” applications of

52 Sarah Schrank, Art and the City 66-67.
53 See Sanborne Map, Los Angeles Volume 1, Area 40 and Robert Perine, Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed pg. 63.
54 Perine, Chouinard 59.
their art. He dreamed of an institution where students would learn marketing and advertising strategies. With these skills, his students would use their talents to work for companies trying to inform the public of their innovations through advertising campaigns. He wanted to focus on design, photography, and advertising design because Adams felt that well trained artists had a crucial role to play in the new sphere of marketing.55

It was in 1930, a financially difficult year for Chouinard, that Adams tried to buy Nelbert Chouinard out of her position as director. When this did not work, he tried personally to “woo” out advertising students in their second year. This proved to be successful since he convinced some Chouinard instructors to join him for promise of a better salary. Nelbert Chouinard was extremely perturbed at this “false way to start a school”56 This new school would focus on the commercial arts and advertising and not mastery of artistic technique. Once World War Two began, Adams envisioned his school as a vocational training ground for returning G.Is to work in the commercial art fields.57 Companies such as Nike, Disney, NASA, and BMW have all sponsored class projects for the school from the years after the war to the present.58

Furthermore, the Art Center was the starting place for the Fred Archer School of Photography, in which the famed Ansel Adams regularly made an appearance as a guest lecturer during the years 1940-1943. Fred R. Archer founded the photography department at the school, and Adams lectured in the late 1930s. Together they collaborated to develop “Zone System” photography, which revolutionized the development of

55 Virginia Adams. Reminiscences, [ca. 1988-1989]. President’s Office collection (RG 2.03), Art Center College of Design Archives, Pasadena, California.
56 Perine, Chouinard 59.
57 Virginia Adams. Reminiscences, Art Center College of Design Archives.
58 Art Center College of Design Archives, Admissions Collection RG 10.04 Box 1, Pasadena California.
photography, enabling artists with the ability for optimal exposure and development of
their work. It is a system that necessitates the analysis of different shading areas in a
particular scene as well as preplanning on the part of the photographer: the outcome of
which yields a picture with optimal shading and light in each part of the photograph.59

Similar to Chouinard and Otis’s swelling enrollment, the years after the war
caused an increased student body of veterans. The school moved to Hancock Park in
1947, and later to Pasadena in 1976, in search of larger quarters and for reasons discussed
in Chapter 5. The school of photography remained in Westlake for five years after the
move since their studios, laboratories and equipment needed more time to be reassembled
with proper positioning and lighting in Art Center’s new home. Therefore, like Otis and
Chouinard, the roots and origins of the Art Center School began in Westlake, and yet the
area is not given credit for fostering the multitude of artistic institutions that it once did.

**Westlake: A Loci of Art Activity**

Between Chouinard, Otis, and the Art Center, art in the Westlake area became a
prominent feature of the growing community of Los Angeles artists. Daniel Hurwitz’s
_Bohemian Los Angeles_ goes so far as to call it “a loci of art activity…(with) a steadier
stream of artistic activity emanating from Westlake Park”60 Hurwitz explains that
Westlake served the larger Edendale community, one that was becoming increasingly
bohemian, avant-garde and artistic throughout the 1930s and 40s.

Edendale today is a part of the larger Silver Lake district. Westlake was the area
artists went to for work, school, supply shops, and exhibitions of contemporary art.

59 Details discussed in Chapter 5, Art Center College of Design Archives, Admissions Collection RG 12.01
Box 1, Pasadena California.
For further description of technique and importance see Chapter five.
60 Daniel Hurwitz. _Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics_. (Los Angeles: University of
California Press, 2007), 84.
Furthermore, Hurwitz describes the government’s involvement in providing for these artists during the 1930s. With the help of New Deal funding, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and the Federal Art Project (FAP) enabled struggling artists to find jobs decorating government spaces. PWAP, established in 1933, awarded assignments based on anonymous competitions, while the FAP, organized two years later, devoted its energies to hiring needy artists.

Both programs aimed to “generate the best art for public consumption.” Murals, easel paintings, and traveling exhibitions were funded by these projects. The PWAP alone employed 125 artists from all over the city. The local offices of both the FAP and PWAP were a few blocks from the park and the Chouinard School, on Sixth and Seventh streets, respectively. Nelbert Chouinard was on the advisory board for the FAP as well. Robert Perine, a graduate and historian of Chouinard concludes, “Though skeletal, a six or seven block area of town was becoming a downtown art community…the Art center was close by and Otis was barely four blocks from Chouinard…and art galleries and photographer’s studios dotted the streets.”

One such gallery was called Dalzhell Hatfield Gallery. It was housed in the Ambassador Hotel beginning in 1925. According to Hurewitz, it was one of Los Angeles’s major art galleries during that time. The Los Angeles Times has a wealth of information about this unique gallery. It seems that this gallery was the first of its kind in showcasing artistic work from the modern era in Los Angeles, and various famous

62 Ibid.
64 Discussed further in Chapter 4.
French art from the 19th century.\textsuperscript{65} It operated for 47 years until the death of Hatfield’s wife in 1984. This gallery is notable, in part, as the first local showcase of artists such as the impressionists Renoir, Gauguin, and Raul Dufy and, in part, for giving emerging artists a place to showcase their work in an area with a high reputation. Among this gallery’s clientele were individuals from Hollywood’s elite who often spent tens of thousands of dollars on a high quality painting.

The operator of the gallery, Dalzell Hatfield, discovered a local artist among his customers. That young man was Millard Sheets. Sheets’s experience as a student and teacher at Chouinard made him one of the leading artists formally educated by a Los Angeles art school, a phenomenon rare for those early days of avant-garde art in the American Southwest. Sheet’s work has been exhibited in cities such as Paris, New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Houston, St. Louis, San Antonio, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and Baltimore. Sheets’s local work includes murals and mosaics on banks, schools, libraries, and city halls.\textsuperscript{66} His national and international fame brought the Westlake art community to the forefront of the larger art movement in the United States. Furthermore, Sheets served as director at Otis in 1954. He put together the funds for the library at Otis, today it is named after him, among other accomplishments for the school. The Dalzell-Hatfield galleries published books about Sheets’s work in watercolors and his influence on the Los Angeles art movement.\textsuperscript{67}


\textsuperscript{66} His work is further discussed in chapter four.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. See Millard Sheets: Exhibition 1975: Watercolors and Oil Paintings of Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. (Dalzell-Hatfield Galleries: 1957).
Millard Sheets trained in Chouinard starting in 1925 and was offered a job as a teacher in the school by his third year of college. He energized the California Style Watercolor movement with other Chouinard alumni as discussed in Chapter 4. With the New Deal’s funding for public art projects, Sheets also created captivating murals and mosaics throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area. His murals often had cultural themes portraying the integration of diverse cultures into the American lifestyle. One such mural was created for Los Angeles City Hall, shown below.

Sheets lived in Edendale, like many artists of his day and yet made Westlake his educational home. As Hurewitz explains, “Westlake Park sat beyond the southern edge of Edendale, and there was no clear line of distinction between areas. As a result, there was…a push and pull between the educational resources of the Westlake area and the greater independence and freedom of Edendale.” Sheets felt the pull of Edendale and settled there, but made his “day haven” in Westlake.

Figure 4. *Family of Man*, 1971. Representations of world cultures that have interfaced with American life: Courtesy of the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles.

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68 More discussion of the significance of the techniques of mural and watercolor artistry is forthcoming in chapter three.


70 Ibid.
Today, the Westlake/MacArthur Park community and park still has its beautiful lake and surrounding grounds, and is used for families to escape the confines of apartments and daily grind. However, if one digs into the history of the area, one discovers that a hub of artistic activity once existed in and around the park. Through the Otis Institute, Denishawn, Chouinard, the Art Center and the surrounding galleries and shops, the area was once home to creative outlets for dance, art, and photography. Although few left physical remnants of their artistic contributions in the community, their creative contributions left their mark on Los Angeles’s present art schools and institutions.
Chapter 2
The Chouinard Experience: A Case Study

The Westlake Theater building\(^{71}\) still stands in MacArthur Park. Otis and Art Center still operate in new locations. Denishawn is recognized as the forerunner of modern dance schools today. The grand building that once housed Chouinard is a church today with little reference to the building’s artistic past. Despite the fact that its memory is not well known among those living in Los Angeles, Chouinard’s ghost reminds the discerning reader of the alumni who re-energized, and often revolutionized West Coast art in areas of watercolor painting, light and space art, pop art, and animation. Furthermore, the fact that Chouinard operated beginning in 1921 helps support the argument of the pre-war narrative of the emergence of the Los Angeles art community.

In its 2012 article, *Blue Canvas Magazine* dubbed the Chouinard Art Institute a “friendly, yet restless ghost.”\(^{72}\) As alluded to earlier, The Chouinard Art Institute, which operated from 1921 to 1969 in historic Westlake/MacArthur Park,\(^{73}\) influenced generations of artists who had a profound impact on the cultural and artistic development of Los Angeles. What follows in this section is a case study of Chouinard’s origins and influence on its artists. This chapter will also discuss their respective impact on the artistic landscape of Los Angeles in particular. Its story is unique and worthwhile highlighting because of its humble beginnings and immense productivity of alumni and faculty.

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\(^{71}\) Theater’s significance discussed on page 33.
\(^{73}\) The name of the park was changed on May 7\(^{th}\) 1942 to honor General Douglas MacArthur.
Chouinard’s narrative is an example of a larger trend of influential art schools that originated in Los Angeles’s Westlake district. Art institutes such as the Otis College of Art and Design and the Art Center College of Design, are similarly not remembered for their Westlake origin since both schools moved. Chouinard originated within the artistic oasis that was the Westlake community.

The word oasis invites imagery of a water haven in the midst of a great and arid desert. At a time when visual and performing art in Los Angeles was not prominently produced or showcased before the early nineteen hundreds, city booster Harrison Gray Otis, owner-editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, stepped in to fill that void.

By 1921, Los Angeles’s first school for visual arts was filled to capacity. A deluge of students began to apply to Otis after the Great War ended. Renewed interest in the arts on the part of these veterans propelled many returning soldiers to follow their dreams to achieve self-actualization through artistic self-expression. This influx of students pushed many Otis pupils to beseech their teacher, Nelbert Chouinard, an art history faculty member at the time, to help them create another art institution. The school the students envisioned would have the space necessary to challenge their ever-expanding techniques and talents.

Nelbert Chouinard was understandably taken aback by such a proposal. She had been living on a widow’s pension and a salary from her work at Otis. As a woman in an age when few women held administrative positions, Chouinard also had no experience in administrating a school. She could not afford to start a school from scratch. Given these issues, Chouinard surprised her pupils by not refusing them. Instead, she sought the advice of the dean of Otis at the time. His response was astonishing. Instead of showing
anger towards the thought of Chouinard opening a competing school, he gave his blessing. Chouinard had just offered him a solution to Otis’s space dilemma. A new school would take students whom Otis could not accommodate.

Nelbert Chouinard then needed to tackle the issue of funding for the school. How would she, a widowed woman in the early part of the 20th Century, be able to collect the funds needed for building and operating a school? She found her answer in her students. They committed to paying the same rate for her instruction as they were paying to Otis. Chouinard was lucky to get F. Tolles Chamberlain, a fellow of the American Academy in Rome, as one of the first members of her faculty. He taught classical art and was compensated with her instructor’s salary from Otis. In the early days of the school, Nelbert Chouinard kept her job at Otis for its reliable income. With twenty-five paying students, Chouinard, the institution of the same name, was off to a solid start.

In 1921 the school headquarters functioned in an old school house at 2606 W. 8th Street. The 8th Street building is considered a Los Angeles historical monument today. A short five years later the student enrollment in Chouinard Institute had increased to three hundred. Overcrowding did not seem to bother the school’s students, perhaps because the schedule allowed for a rotation of classes. However, overcrowding became a problem that Chouinard solved when, eight years after the school’s opening, the school relocated to 743 Grandview Street to a custom designed two-story building. With a 75

76 Department of City Planning, Historic-Cultural Monument Report. Monument Number LA-454.
77 “Chouinard Has 300 Pupils.”
78 Kendall. "Mrs. Chouinard, Founder of Famed Art School, Dies."
percent increase in students admitted, Chouinard became the art byword of the day.\(^{79}\) Hence, in a “three room frame house”\(^{80}\) Chouinard, the person and the school began its legacy.

Initially Chouinard differentiated itself from Otis with its small class sizes and emphasis on painting and drawing. Since it lacked booster and public funding, the Chouinard Institute had the freedom to pursue art that did not involve the “establishment,” or what was socially accepted. This continued to pervade the school’s philosophy up until the 1950s when Walt Disney began to fund the school. Pre-war focus on animation in the 1920s and 30s gave Chouinard’s students the opportunity to create Walt Disney’s (who was then a fledgling entrepreneur) early but revolutionary films.\(^{81}\) Postwar acceptance a politically incorrect affiliation with communist artists allowed Chouinard’s students to revisit the ancient art form of fresco mural painting.\(^{82}\) In other words, the institute’s uniqueness lay in its ability as a school to disregard public pressure to conform to society’s conventional standards. That is how its students surfaced at the forefront of industries such as animation, fresco painting and watercolor among others, even at a time when those mediums were not lucrative, practical, or politically correct.

To understand the school’s uniqueness, one must understand its leader and caretaker. Nelbert Chouinard was an extraordinary individual living in challenging times for most women. To begin a school when men led all other art schools was a daunting task. When the school was in its infancy on 8\(^{th}\) Street, Chouinard once recalled, “those

\(^{79}\) Arthur Millier, “Chouinard Name is an Art Byword.” Los Angeles Times, Dec 18, 1955.  
\(^{80}\) Ibid, “Chouinard Has 300 Pupils.”  
\(^{81}\) Discussed on page 43.  
\(^{82}\) See page 43 for a discussion of David Siqueiros’ communist leaning artwork produced in fresco mural medium during his visit to the US as Chouinard staff member.
interested in the art school insisted on talking to her husband because women simply did not head such enterprises.” Her husband, Reverend Horace A. Chouinard, would be “unavailable” every time since he had passed away during the Great War. The couple had married in 1916; with his death Nelbert Chouinard lost a husband and dear friend. But she kept his surname. It was his name that was adopted for the school as well. However, the school embodied Nelbert Chouinard’s unconquerable spirit. In hard times she was relentless; in times of triumph she relished every moment. The Depression years before World War II were quite difficult for Chouinard, but with Nelbert Chouinard’s leadership the school persevered. The school had to relocate from its brick and mortar edifice into a department store building because the costs related to the new building became unaffordable.

After the Second World War, Chouinard bounced back rapidly thanks to the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act. The act had an unexpected effect on the city’s art schools; returning veterans started to flock to art institutions in great numbers. Chouinard Institute benefited greatly in postwar years since all of its incoming students paid full tuition funded by the act. Increasing enrollment gave Chouinard an opportunity to expand as well. The school could finally afford to move out of its meager venue and return to its magnificent brick building on Grandview Street.

With funds coming in from returning G.I.s, in 1949, the school made its triumphant and permanent return. The new building was fully paid for. With 20,000 square feet, the school could accept everyone on its waiting list and welcome new applicants. With an increased capacity for enrollment, Chouinard Institute continued to

remain the training and instructional ground for avant-garde artists to work and develop. Specifically, Chouinard’s niche focus by 1949 changed from mural and large-scale urban artistry\textsuperscript{85} to drawing, painting, and design.\textsuperscript{86} This small and privately funded art school became the alma mater of some of the biggest names in West coast art.

**Chouinard Alumni: Fruits of Her Labor**

Consequently, one of the most remarkable things about the Chouinard Institute is the alumni and faculty it produced and invited. These artists linked themselves and the larger Westlake and Edendale communities to a network of artistic expression. Chouinard was a very strong link in that chain. For example, Edward Adams, Chouinard’s design director, began his own school in 1930 that would become the Art Center School of Design. Adams established the school around the corner from Chouinard, at 2744 West 7\textsuperscript{th} Street.\textsuperscript{87} He lured students and faculty away with the promise of a more practical training, and higher pay.\textsuperscript{88} Its emphasis on commercial art differentiated Adams’s philosophy from Chouinard’s.\textsuperscript{89}

Another faculty member, Arthur Millier taught etching at Chouinard (and at Otis as well) in 1922 and became the famed art critic of the Los Angeles times in 1926.\textsuperscript{90} Herb Jepson was a Chouinard alumnus and later teacher at the school. He taught at USC,

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\textsuperscript{85} This early emphasis benefited Heinsbergen and Sheets, discussed below.

\textsuperscript{86} Dave Tourje, phone interview with Chouinard Foundation executive, August 20\textsuperscript{th} 2013. He explained that this is most likely due to Disney’s increased involvement and focus on animation in the school starting in the fifties.

\textsuperscript{87} Sanborne Map, Los Angeles Volume 1, Area 40.


UCLA, as well as at Otis. He was a man of many trades (logging, mining, furniture manufacturing); primarily, he described himself as an artist and art educator. Jepson started his own art institute, perhaps inspired by Chouinard’s entrepreneurial spirit. From 1947 to 1953 he directed the Jepson Art Institute located in the Westlake neighborhood as well on 2861 West 7th Street. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, it was an important center for experimental drawing and art theory.

Yet another early prominent student and artist that attended the Chouinard School was Anthony B. Heinsbergen. His field of expertise became mural and building design, which have been recognized as historical landmarks throughout the city of Los Angeles. Mural design was one area of expertise Chouinard excelled in instruction. Out of all the notable students Chouinard produced, it seems that Heinsbergen was the most involved in his community.

Among his many architectural projects and architectural ornaments, his work with the Elks Club and Westlake Theater gave the community two of its major historical landmarks due to their intricate design. The Elks club, a local Westlake lodge and lounge for seniors commissioned him to embellish the property. Today it is the Park Plaza hotel. More notably, Heinsbergen designed Westlake Theater’s grand proscenium murals and its arches as well. Heinsbergen’s work, which still decorates the theater today, is one of the reasons the theater is considered a historical monument by the Los Angeles

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92 Ibid.
94 Later artist Millard Sheets would produced his own city murals inspired by the instruction of Siqueros.
95 Proscenium refers to the part of a stage or theater that is in front of the curtain.
municipality. Additionally, Heinsbergen’s art motivated future owner Mayer Separzadeh\(^{96}\) to turn the property into a swap meet rather than tear it down.

The Westlake Theater itself was a cultural attraction that benefited the community of Westlake in various ways. Today, it is a historical landmark that has been used and misused to fit community needs. Between the years 1926 and 1991, the theater was one of a kind in Los Angeles. If nothing else, the immense, neon sign above the theater once lit up the park that it was located near. It was an icon of the community, so much so that efforts have been made to rehabilitate the sign alone throughout the years. Its architectural design was skillfully planned by Richard M. Bates Jr., a New York architect and theater design specialist\(^{97}\). In building the theater, Bates constructed a Spanish-Moorish movie house that had a magnificent stage and the capability of showing motion pictures. It would seat close to two thousand people at a time.

The West Coast-Langley Theater Circuit built this grand theater in 1926. The theater cost nearly a million dollars and attracted much press and media exposure. On October 30\(^{th}\) 1926 for example, the theater was portrayed among four other theaters under the title, “Better Theaters Pictorial.”\(^{98}\) Indeed there is no doubt that the theater became a landmark of the Westlake community, and contributed to the artistic scene of the area.

Additionally, the "Los Angeles Times" has a wealth of information about the anticipation of the theater’s opening night, which included celebrity attendance and civic dignitaries. The first motion picture run was titled “Other Women’s Husbands,” a racy satire, involving controversial subjects such as adultery, and espionage. The theater became a haven for vaudeville performances, a very popular entertainment of the early

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\(^{96}\) He purchased the property in 1991.

\(^{97}\) “Theater to Cost A Million” (June 11\(^{th}\) 1925) *Los Angeles Times*, (1886 to current file) pg. A1

\(^{98}\) Los Angeles Conservancy Archives, “Westlake Theater” folder. Los Angeles, California.
years of the theater. In fact, vaudeville was a major part of the opening night’s program. A unique feature of the theater that enabled such performances was the one of a kind Wurlitzer pipe organ that stood at the entrance to greet visitors.

In the 1960s the theater was sold to the Metropolitan Theaters Corporation and was remodeled at that time. Towards the later years, as the demographic of the community changed, the theater showed Spanish language films, and when that did not bring in enough customers, it had to close its doors. Mayer Separzadeh, a shopping mall developer based in Northridge, bought the site and turned the building into a swap meet for local vendors. According to one article, Separzadeh “had no intentions of tearing down the sixty-five year old structure, distinguished by its sculptured terra cotta façade, gigantic Heinsbergen mural and steel and neon roof sign.”

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid

The Los Angeles Conservancy has succeeded in labeling the theater a historical landmark, and a rehabilitation project of the theater through the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles (CRA/LA) looked promising before 2012. The groups organizing the rehabilitation wished to bring in artists and performers of Hispanic origin, to inspire youth in the area to pursue positive artistic goals as well as invest 10,700,000 dollars into the project. (See Veronica Villafane, “How Shutting Down the CRA will impact South LA CRA/LA” Intersections: South LA, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism http://intersectionssouthla.org/story/how_shutting_down_the_cra_will_impact_south_la/#sthash.ryo1UFMk.dpuf, Feb 1 2012.) CRA/LA outlined its former aims as follows, “To rehabilitate the theater as a multi-use venue for theater, film, music, community and social events (and) be home to local theater group Culture Clash, as well as have 50 affordable housing units and a parking garage behind the theater.” (See “Westlake Theater Rehabilitation Project Brochure” Published in 2008, Publisher Unknown http://westlaketheatre.com/pdf/wlt_broch.pdf.) The agency purchased the property in 2008 since it was categorized by the municipality as “blighted,” a term used to refer to recognized, neglected areas in Los Angeles. According to the CRA/LA website, “Redevelopment law of the State contained in California Health and Safety Code, Division 24, Part 1 (Section 33000 et seq.) defines blight and sets forth the procedures for developing and implementing the redevelopment process.” However, the agency has since lost funding for most of its projects so the theater and its affordable housing units remain in neglected conditions. With more awareness of the significance of this theater to Los Angeles urban history, perhaps the project can be reinstated with investment from elsewhere.
Millard Sheets, like Heinsbergen, another student and later faculty member at Chouinard, started as a student at the school under F. Tolles Chamberlain and Clarence Hinkle. Both individuals were talented and early instructors in Chouinard’s institutional history. Sheets’ success in watercolor painting\textsuperscript{101} was so potent that he was hired at twenty to teach in Chouinard before he finished his studies.\textsuperscript{102} Sheets became the assistant head of the art department at Scripps College in Claremont, California in 1932

\textsuperscript{101} Explored on more detail in chapter four.
\textsuperscript{102} Chouinard Brochure, \textit{Fred S. Lang Company Archive}. 
and, in 1953, the director of Otis.\textsuperscript{103} As Sheets grew as an artist, he was influenced to shift his focus on larger projects,\textsuperscript{104} away from watercolor to architectural design. Sheets’s public buildings and their architectural murals, reliefs, and sculptures still stand throughout Los Angeles as indicated by the Los Angeles Conservancy booklet on the artist.\textsuperscript{105} His work includes designs on Chase Bank branches throughout Southern California,\textsuperscript{106} Los Angeles’ Scottish Rite Masonic Temple (1961) on Wilshire Boulevard, the former Pomona Mall, and the Garrison Theater built for the Claremont Colleges.

Sheets’s artistic themes combined architectural design with vibrant color, producing mosaics and sculptural figures of stunning quality. This reputation and the magnitude and size of his work allowed him to be noticed by government agencies. During the years of the Great Depression, Sheets served on the local board of the Public Works Administration where he commissioned out-of-work artists to create artwork for public buildings. With his emphasis on the fusion of art and architecture, his designs and projects are both vibrant and versatile. “Sheets strongly believed in the idea of architects and artists working together…which included planning for art during the design process rather than placing artwork on the building as an afterthought.”\textsuperscript{107} Chouinard was where his passion for art was ignited.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Formerly Home Savings and Loan.
Among Chouinard’s ten thousand alumni, many more stand out. Volumes can be filled with descriptions of their work and legacy. For brevity, a quote from John Kendall’s obituary of Nelbert Chouinard puts it best. In addition to Sheets and Heinsbergen, “Mary Best, fashion designer; Charles Frazier, sculptor; Edith Head, Hollywood costume designer; Charles Jones, director-producer; and Virgil Parch, cartoonist” were some of Chouinard’s most illustrious alumni at the time of Nelbert Chouinard’s death in 1969. In addition to the memory of her largely successful school, Chouinard herself was remembered as Los Angeles Times Woman of the Year in 1955.
Since her passing in July of 1969 her younger alumni and faculty still keep surfacing in articles, exhibitions, and galleries throughout Los Angeles and national publications. Edward Ruscha (pronounced Ru-SHAY) is one such dynamic artist who is still working and producing avant-garde art in the city. Ruscha graduated Chouinard in 1960. His ties to the Ferus Gallery enabled him to become one of the forerunners of the West Coast Pop art movement.\textsuperscript{108} His work attracted the attention of \textit{The New Yorker} and a July 2013 issue describes his work and passion. The artist’s most recent work was exhibited in that month at the Museum of Modern Art. Ruscha’s memory of Chouinard is an intriguing one. He is one of the few researchable alumni who consciously disagreed with Chouinard’s teaching philosophy. “He had vetoed the spontaneous… abstract expressionist style that still prevailed at the Chouinard Institute… shortly before it became the California Institute of the Arts… He decided that whatever he was going to do in art would be completely premeditated.”\textsuperscript{109}

Ruscha’s comment needs explanation. Had not Chouinard been the school for technical mastery \textit{combined} with freethinking? That is certainly part of the argument in this work. By the late 1950s, with Nelbert Chouinard in retirement, and with Disney involved and invested in the school, technical mastery slowly began to be deemphasized by the Disney board, as it would be in Disney’s California Institute for the Arts. However, despite the philosophical pressure on the institution, the Chouinard Institute still gave Ruscha the freedom to choose his style even if it meant rejecting their prevailing teaching philosophy at the time. As a result, Ruscha thrived despite his artistic

\textsuperscript{108} Alexandra Schwartz. \textit{Ed Ruscha’s Los Angeles} (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), Abstract.
differences. The major theme and hallmark of his work is the combination of text and imagery. One painting exhibited in the Museum Of Modern Art in New York, titled “Oof,” reflects his blend of textual and emotional imagery in its simplicity. It consists of yellow letters set against a violet background; it is a simple expression of a word that describes the feeling of adversity.

Another Chouinard alumnus, Sandra Fisher, who passed away in 1994, made an appearance in quite a few publications including The New Yorker, The Jewish Quarterly, The London and New York Times magazines\textsuperscript{110} for her avant-garde art. Sandra Fisher graduated the Chouinard Art Institute in 1969, the very last year it trained students. Her name appears in the last issue of the commencement exercises playbill.\textsuperscript{111} She was most famous for her depiction of male and female nudes. Sandra’s realistic, and yet relaxed style of drawing attracted her audience to her work. She reveled in the artistic freedom of the eighties and nineties. Her avant-garde training at Chouinard served her well, and she established a niche for herself in drawings that made her internationally famous in both London and the United States.\textsuperscript{112}

In hindsight, Chouinard’s presence (both the person and the school) in Westlake attracted both an avant-garde and controversial following in its students and faculty. Chouinard Institute was a place where artists had the freedom of self-expression without political repercussion. However, the city of Los Angeles that often commissioned Chouinard’s artists for public projects did not afford the same freedom to its employees.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] Sandra Fisher Papers. Collection Number 1870, Box 16, Folder 8, Cambridge Alumni Magazine [Date of Issue Unavailable]. UCLA, Charles E. Young Library, Special Collections.
\item[111] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Especially during the Red-Scare era, communist influences among artists were apparent and no secret at Chouinard.

One such example can be given of David Alfaro Siqueiros, a Mexican communist who came to Los Angeles in the spring of 1932 after experiencing what some historians describe as a backlash over his supporting role in Leon Trotsky’s assassination in his homeland. Whether he was a political refugee or invited to the city, his arrival was heralded in Los Angeles. Diego Rivera’s work in San Francisco paralleled Siqueiros’s arrival in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{113} Perhaps larger public interest in Mexican art increased in the 1930s and caused these major cities to become so welcoming to these famed artists.

Once Siqueiros arrived in the city, he was invited to become a guest faculty member at the school for the duration of his stay. Millard Sheets was a close friend of Siqueiros and he made the connection between the school and the artist. It is unclear which came first, the invitation, or Siqueiros’s arrival in Los Angeles. It is possible Chouinard had contacted the artist or vice versa in Mexico. Either way, Siqueiros was commissioned to paint three murals by influential Los Angeles patrons upon his arrival: \textit{America Tropical} seen from the historic Olvera Street, \textit{Portrait of Mexico Today} painted at the home of filmmaker Dudley Murphy, and \textit{Worker’s Meeting}, painted on one of the Chouinard building walls overlooking its courtyard in Westlake.

All three were received with critical acclaim by the Los Angeles art world and particularly by \textit{Los Angeles Times} art critic Arthur Millier. In her work \textit{Art and the City}, historian Sarah Schrank quotes Millier’s description of the artist’s work as “massive, dark, and tragic…a complete absence of any charm – that pleasing manipulation of

\textsuperscript{113} Sarah Schrank, \textit{Art and the City}, 46.
pigment which means so much to the English and Americans.”¹¹⁴ Robert Perine, Chouinard graduate and historian, described Siqueiros’s work as “political dynamite” due to the uproar it caused led to the artist’s deportation six months after his arrival.¹¹⁵

The Chouinard Institute approved Siqueiros’s work from the start. Nelbert Chouinard was thrilled to have a mural as groundbreaking as this one was on the school’s property. Perine describes her as “oblivious to any or all political implications in anything. She was happy to disregard political affiliation to emphasize talent. Therefore, her remembrance of Siqueiros was simply ‘He was such a great worker!’”¹¹⁶ Under Chouinard’s guidance, a slew of fortunate students worked alongside the artist painting a groundbreaking fresco mural, an ancient art form not practiced in four hundred years.¹¹⁷ The following where among the fortunate students that worked with Siqueiros: Merrell Gage, Henri De Kruif, Millard Sheets, Elmer Plummer, Jim Patrick, Kim Clark, Pedro Pinson, Phil Paradise, Don Graham, Tom Beggs, Barse Miller, Scollard Mass, Bruce Bushman, and Lee Blair.¹¹⁸ Sheets, Sample, De Kruif, and Gage became known as the ‘Fresco Block’ and the LA Times spelled out a dynamic future for fresco in Los Angeles where this group “hopes to decorate many local walls typifying American and Californian life ideals.”¹¹⁹ Furthermore, Siqueiros’ group of mural painters learned from him the significance of mural painting. Michael Archer describes this significance well, “The task of the mural was twofold: to depict events that celebrated the political power of

¹¹⁴ Ibid.
¹¹⁵ Perine, Chouinard 69.
¹¹⁶ Ibid.
¹¹⁷ According to Millard Sheets, a participant, referenced in the LA Times article below.
¹¹⁸ Ibid.
the working class, and to…reject the gallery system on account of its inherent elitism.”

Although Siqueiros embodied these goals through his work, many in his group of students benefited greatly from galleries throughout their careers.

This group was lucky to be present while Siqueiros worked since he was innovating as he painted. *Worker’s Meeting* was in essence a depiction of a labor union’s meeting. To create it, Siqueiros utilized projectors to create a massive stencil that allowed him to incorporate the wall’s characteristics into his art, meaning that windows and bends that were part of the existing wall were integrated into the art. Additionally, he was infusing the ancient art of fresco painting (painting watercolor into wet sand and lime) with contemporary technology. This had not been done since Renaissance times when Michelangelo and DaVinci employed fresco painting to create the historical landmarks of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and *The Last Supper*.

Nevertheless, the Chouinard mural did not survive intact to the present day. When unveiled in 1932, “local art critics and newspapers reported that the mural of a labor union was too political …within a year it was whitewashed.” However, as Schrank explains, conflicting explanations have arisen as to why. One theory is that the mural did not survive California’s rain. Another, according to Robert Merell Gage, was that the local police ordered the mural to be covered.

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121 Schrank, *Art and the City* 47.
123 Schrank, 48.
124 Gage was a Chouinard student who worked alongside Siqueiros on the mural.
125 Schrank, 48.
Chapter 3

The Disney Years: Chouinard’s Transformation

In 1929 Nelbert Chouinard did something that changed the course of the institution indefinitely. She aligned herself with a man that would shape the future of the animation industry. That man was Walt Disney, the cartoon visionary of his age.\(^\text{126}\) In 1929, Disney was not yet a common household name. He was a skilled animator and artist who wanted to train others to work for his dream of turning animation on paper to the big screen. However, Disney wanted formal training for his animators. One of his challenges in 1929 was a lack of funds to support this goal.\(^\text{127}\) When he tried to get them to attend Otis, he was rejected because he could not pay their tuition. Nelbert Chouinard, however, saw possibility and opportunity in Disney and his men. The animation industry looked very modern and promising, qualities that the Chouinard Institute exemplified. She was happy to lend her facilities and instructors to Disney for whatever tuition he could pay.\(^\text{128}\)

In the early years, when animation had few practitioners and believers, Disney’s artists did not look forward to their Chouinard classes.\(^\text{129}\) As Chouinard scholarship student, Jack Zander was in charge of attendance for the Disney group on Friday nights. “He had about twenty guys there…I’d go into class and there would be eight or ten guys standing around. I’d read off the list of twenty names and everyone would answer ‘here’.”\(^\text{130}\) Zander’s recollection remained true until 1932. At that point in

\(^{128}\) Perine, 25.
\(^{129}\) Ibid, 25.
\(^{130}\) Ibid, 92.
time, cartoons had changed from flat and simple “white masks on black bodies” to more lifelike animation. That change was due to Chouinard’s training and instruction. Disney’s characters could now move in what seemed to be three-dimensional space. Training in life images was crucial to that transformation and Chouinard’s expertise lay in life drawing. Although Disney’s students did not become formal students in the school, Disney hired Chouinard’s faculty member Donald W. Graham to teach life classes two nights a week. Graham had been a student of Chouinard in 1923. By 1932, he had become a member of its faculty, a pattern followed by many other Chouinard alumni. With Graham’s engineering background, his students were taught relevant attention to detail and how body and movement worked together to make an image. In 1932, Disney had a choice of three institutions in Westlake from which to pick his instructors: Art Center founded in 1930, Otis, and Chouinard. The fact that he chose Graham from Chouinard years after Nelbert Chouinard took a chance on Disney and his artists reflects an affinity that Disney maintained towards the school the rest of his life. Additionally, Disney kept up a working relationship with Nelbert Chouinard until her death and assisted her in times of financial trouble to repay the kindness offered to him in the early years. In the mid-fifties, at a time when the Chouinard Institute found itself lacking funds and approaching bankruptcy, Disney helped the school regain financial footing. Prudent financial management was never Chouinard’s strongpoint (both the school and the person). In contrast, Disney’s “Mickey Mouse” and other animations

131 Ibid, 93.
132 Dave Tourje, phone interview with Chouinard Foundation executive, August 20, 2013.
133 Page 62 of Pacific Standard Time explains the tendency of student artists to become faculty. They write, “Teaching provided more than a livelihood, it offered a primary affiliation and sense of community that remained strong… Midcentury artists shaped the values and ideas of younger generations in…the examples they set.”
134 Barrier, 93.
were bringing in revenue internationally by the fifties, and Disney had a team of financial managers that he employed.

Specifically in 1956, Nelbert Chouinard saw the writing on the wall about the school’s financial peril due to mismanagement of funds. She contacted Mark Davis, a faculty member of Chouinard since 1947 and a Disney artist since 1935. Davis happened to be one of the “Nine Old Men,”135 the artists who created the earliest Disney classics including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Bambi*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, to name a few. Davis promptly delivered the message and “as a result…Walt sent his financial staff…(which discovered that Chouinard) had been swindled out of tens of thousands of dollars by its bookkeeper.”136 Two members of his staff, Royal Clark and Chuck Romero, were the ones who found this bit of scandalous information.137 Since that fateful finding, Disney committed himself to assisting the school in financial matters. Walt Disney Productions subsidized the school and after ten years of funding the art school’s annual deficit, Disney cultivated a sense of ownership towards the school.138 By 1969 that amount had reached some 2.9 million dollars.139

Although Disney has never been quoted indicating his feelings about Chouinard as an institution, one thing remains clear is that he held the school in very high regard. Disney received an honorary degree from the institute in May of 1956.140

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135 Thomas, 9.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Barrier, 297.
140 Ibid, 297.
Understandably, since Disney had financed the school starting in 1956, he felt as though he had repaid his debt to Nelbert Chouinard and the school itself. Although his board was responsible for the school’s eventual move to the suburbs, in creating CalArts he began with a vision that did not include an independent Chouinard Institute. The question remains: What flaws did he see in the school that would make Disney envision uprooting it from its community and redirecting its name and legacy? After all, it was this move that almost erased Chouinard from the annals of Los Angeles’s developing art narrative.

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that Disney was a man with big dreams. Some of his dreams were too grand to consider the short-term consequences, when his long-term business decisions would revolutionize the art world. His vision was one of a school that would encompass all art forms under one roof, thus creating a community of artists who would complement and inspire each other. That founding vision remains the philosophy of CalArts today. Teacher-led learning would not be as essential as the student-led learning in Disney’s institution. That was the flaw Disney wanted to correct. Teachers would introduce students to new concepts, but students would choose their responsibilities. According to Disney’s plan, The Chouinard Art Institute would merge
with the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music, then located nearby to form a community of artists to attract students who would make CalArts their alma mater. CalArts, eventually became the Disney feeder school for the Walt Disney Production Company.

The merger did not come as a shock to the school. After Nelbert Chouinard retired in early 1961, the school grew increasingly unfocused without her leadership. A division among the students into “hippie type” and “rich kids” created a negative atmosphere. The school’s mounting financial difficulties forced the administration to change, and perhaps lower its standards for incoming students. The new pool of students ranged from dedicated artists to wealthy dilettantes.

In July of 1968, Nelbert Chouinard passed away at ninety years old. Disney had passed away two years before in December of 1966. With both visionaries’ guidance missing, the Disney board took over Disney’s interest in the Chouinard Art Institute. Most of Chouinard’s existing faculty members were not hired to the new campus, and CalArts was opened in the Los Angeles suburbs.

Nelbert Chouinard started her important institution with the philosophy that drawing was the foundation of art education. Her motto was “draw the idea.” In other words, she believed that technique needed to be learned and mastered before true creativity could break through onto a canvas. The Disney board held fast to Walt

142 “Chouinard: Final Years” Interview by Sheryl Bratman. David L. Clark Oral Histories Collection (Charles E. Young Special Collections UCLA) Box 1 Folder 23.
143 Ibid.
144 The thirty-seven faculty members who had remained with the school by 1969 felt a combination of betrayal and outrage since they would lose their jobs as part of a merger they helped initiate. Furthermore, the faculty members were astonished that the Disney board would deracinate a school that had educated 10,000 students in forty-eight years. Consequently, the angered staff began a “Save Nelbert’s Baby Movement” in addition to filing a lawsuit through attorney Godfrey Isaac in November 1969. Ultimately they were not successful.
Disney’s different vision for his pupils: Disney believed his students already had the tools to master anything that interested them. Instructors, according to Disney’s vision were only there to introduce students to new techniques and not to force mastery through responsibility.  

**Chouinard and CalArts**

When the time came for the Disney board to consider dismantling the school in the late sixties, one of the things the board disapproved of in Chouinard was its tolerance of political dissent. When students such as Patty Landres participated in Vietnam-era anti-war demonstrations without reproof from the faculty, the board was livid. Such activism convinced the board’s appointed administrators that the school must be moved from its urban location (near a park that was frequented by protestors of the war), to a peaceful, suburban area in Valencia, thirty-one miles away.

In January of 1970, the Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music formally merged into one institution in Valencia. Today, Chouinard is part of a single giant campus in the Santa Clarita Valley. Meanwhile, a Korean Church inhabits its former building in Westlake. The Disney influence is felt strongly at CalArts but Chouinard’s legacy lives on in the CalArts archives. In secondary literature about the merger of Chouinard with CalArts, this controversy is overlooked and brushed aside. All

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146 Robert W. Corrigan, played a large role in the decision to oust Chouinard’s faculty in the transition to CalArts. Corrigan came to Los Angeles from New York after Disney’s board hired him to be the dean of the CalArts School and the one in charge of the project of moving to the new campus. Corrigan was the dean of the school of arts at New York University. He envisioned a pan-arts community on one campus like Disney had, but Corrigan had not been able to make it work in New York. Corrigan had a very particular, yet unstructured vision for the school. His ideas included “no fixed curriculum, no grades, and a great deal of self-discipline on the part of the students.” Suffice it to say, Corrigan did not see qualities compatible with these ideas in most of the faculty then present at Chouinard. (Don Graham was the one exception.) Corrigan’s ideas aligned with Walt Disney’s very well.

147 “Chouinard: Final Years” Interview by Sheryl Bratman. David L. Clark Oral Histories Collection (Charles E. Young Special Collections UCLA) Box 1 Folder 23.

148 MacArthur Park.
is well that ends well, right? But what ended poorly was that a school crucial to the
cultural development of Los Angeles was ripped out of its roots.

Until the merger, Chouinard had produced artists of national and international acclaim for over forty-eight years. From a school that formed with no endowments, Chouinard produced some of the biggest names in West Coast art that are still around today. In contrast, while CalArts originated with the support of the entire Walt Disney Corporation, the school struggled to gain acclaim in its beginning years, partly due to its instructors’ inexperience in the CalArts philosophy of student-led learning. Without the Chouinard, vision, reputation and atmosphere, the school did not have an organized curriculum, the students needed to find the faculty, and faculty tenure was nonexistent.149 In other words, the new administration had a “flagrant disrespect for anything structured.”150 The second fact is most interesting. Students did not register for classes; rather, instructors were there to share their own art to any group of interested students daily. Self-discipline was a prerequisite, but few students actually benefited due to a lack of motivation in part due to the absence of assessment or teacher-led responsibility.

Political unconventionality had been one characteristic of both Chouinard’s—the person and the school. Evident in Siqueiros’s affiliation with the school, neither the administration nor the students at Chouinard took issue with embracing controversial subjects whether through the art the school produced, or whether through the students’ political affiliations.151 According to the interviews of Chouinard’s alumni conducted by

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149 On the grounds that tenure is a “financial narcotic” for instructors. Robert Perine, Chouinard An Art Vision Betrayed, 227-232.
150 Ibid.
151 As mentioned previously, Nelbert Chouinard’s political naiveté allowed her to welcome talent of Siqueiros’ stature without questioning his communist leanings.
Sheryl Bratman, a facilitator of the University of California Los Angeles’s Oral History project, in 1974, Chouinard was a place for free thinkers.\(^{152}\)

Contemporarily, the Chouinard Art Institute is remembered by a group of artists who have created the Chouinard Foundation to remember the institute’s contributions to the Los Angeles art world. In 1999 Robert Perine partnered with Dave Tourje, a fellow artist, to produce this organization. Since Perine’s death in 2004, Dave Tourje remains an active executive director of the foundation. Tourje unwittingly purchased Nelbert Chouinard’s home in Pasadena in 1998. Upon discovering more about this former owner, Tourje committed himself to spearhead the school’s revival. The organization ran the Chouinard Foundation Art School from 2002 to 2006, before a lack of student interest and revenue forced the school to close.\(^{153}\) Despite the organization’s exhibitions, newspapers\(^{154}\) and documentaries, its website seems to be most successful in carrying Chouinard’s legacy. It is a beautifully designed web space that contains articles, recorded interviews and scheduled events related to Chouinard’s memory and influence. The Foundation is quite zealous in its focus on Chouinard’s contributions to Los Angeles through the work of its alumni. The Chouinard Foundation Online Library describes the reason for its existence: to inform the public of the influence Chouinard’s alumni had as leaders in their respective fields.\(^{155}\)

\(^{152}\) “Chouinard: Final Years” Interview by Sheryl Bratman. David L. Clark Oral Histories Collection (Charles E. Young Special Collections UCLA) Box 1 Folder 23.


\(^{154}\) The “Grandview” is still in print and is a newspaper devoted to Chouinard’s legacy and alumni.

\(^{155}\) The Chouinard Foundation library describes Chouinard’s impact on Los Angeles best in their description of their libraries’ content: The headers in the library’s finding list highlight the following artists:

- Disney’s Original Animators: Marc Davis, Chuck Jones, et.al.,
- The California Watercolor School: Millard Sheets, Phil Dike, Phil Paradise, et.al.,
- Synchronism: Stanton MacDonald Wright, West Coast Abstraction: Matsumi Kanemitsu, Hans Burkhardt, Emerson Woelffer, Richards Ruben, et.al.
- Architecture: Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, et. al.,
- Muralism: David Alfaro Siqueiros,
Today, when Peter Shire, another Chouinard alumnus and ceramic artist and owner of Echo Park Studios, tries to designate his alma mater on social networking sites like Facebook, his only option is CalArts in Facebook’s database of schools. He is a proud graduate, but unfortunately, the Chouinard name has been sidelined. However, the story behind Chouinard’s immense contribution to the Los Angeles cultural and artistic landscape, both in terms of the work of its individual alumni, as well of its influence on the Walt Disney Corporation, is one that needs to be recognized. The famed watercolors and frescos of Los Angeles—hallmarks of West Coast art—owe their existence to Chouinard artists trained by Chouinard to be innovators in their artistic fields of expertise. It is remarkable to research a school with incredibly humble origins and to recognize that the artists it produced touched almost everyone involved in art perhaps by one or two degrees of separation.

Chouinard remains a “friendly ghost.” The Chouinard Foundation, Blue Canvas Magazine, The New Yorker and countless art enthusiasts would agree. Ed Ruscha and Sandra Fisher are but two examples of how the Chouinard influence still appears in publications and galleries throughout the world. Despite Chouinard’s controversial departure, its influence should be recognized in Los Angeles, and particularly Westlake, a neighborhood it once called home.

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156 Peter Shire, in email discussion with author, August 2013.
As influential as Chouinard used to be before the merger, the Art Center and Otis were both institutions that also made an indelible mark on the development of art in Los Angeles. Both of these institutions outlasted Chouinard and withstood the test of time. The Art Center is located in Pasadena, and Otis in El Segundo. As noted previously, Chouinard ‘s narrative links both institutions historically.
Chapter 4

Chouinard and the California Watercolorists

“In the art world, as most everywhere else, change is the only constant.”\(^{157}\) Robert Perine penned this description in his catalog of the California Watercolor Society art exhibition in 1986. At that time, the watercolor medium of art was beginning to gain respect and popularity among exhibitions, museums, and specifically galleries. This change is one in which Chouinard played a tremendous role before it closed in Westlake permanently. Ultimately, the school supplied artists who would energize an art movement that was uniquely Californian. The new movement would come to be called the California Watercolor movement.

Watercolors are a distinctive art medium through which the artist needs to see his painting before he begins to paint since the colors cannot be blended or shaded once mixed with water and set on paper. Watercolor art is an art medium used as early as the Tang Dynasty in China (618-906 C.E).\(^{158}\) However, the colors and effects of light are brighter and more vivid on the watercolor medium. The possibilities are broadened for those artists who can sketch quickly and accurately. Since watercolors are drawn on paper and not canvas, the medium has been historically sidelined in museums and galleries, institutions that tended to prefer oil paintings for their large and durable canvases. Therefore, watercolor societies began to form first in nineteenth century England, where art connoisseurs first realized the issue. Through collective efforts of these early English societies, watercolor galleries were able to gain funding to showcase


watercolors alone. Additionally, these societies replaced schools that taught watercolor painting under the drawing and sketching title. Perine reminds the reader that watercolor painting can be mastered as a medium of its own, without it being a mere preliminary method of experimentation with design for future oil-on-canvas versions.

California remains the perfect setting for watercolorists since its natural topography and mild climate are remarkable. The state’s mountains and valleys contain rare scenic areas of forest, desert, and snow. Its urban cities are filled with light from the seemingly rain-free climate. Therefore, starting in 1921, the same year Chouinard began operating, the California Watercolor Society was formed under the leadership of relocated East Coasters. The East coast was where societies like the American Watercolor and the National Watercolor groups operated. P. Dana Bartlett, a native easterner, became the first president.\(^{159}\) The first dozen of these presidents were not natives to the West Coast, a situation that was most definitely a product of the void of art institutions established enough in the region to provide leaders in the art world. However, by 1986, Chouinard had supplied twenty of the fifty-three annually elected presidents.\(^{160}\)

Such productive alumni emerged in the 1930s when Chouinard taught and employed Millard Sheets, Rex Brandt, Phil Dike, Phil Paradise, Don Graham, and Herbert Jepson to name just a few.\(^{161}\) Under their tutelage in Chouinard, students were encouraged to compete in the Society’s annual competitions and become members as well. In other words, Perine puts it well, “Today it would be fair to say that if the

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\(^{159}\) Perine. *The California Romantics*, 16.
\(^{160}\) Ibid, 19.
\(^{161}\) Ibid. All graduates discussed below.
watercolor movement is to be called a ‘school’ a major factor…where yesterday’s classrooms at Chouinard under Sheets, Dike, Jepson, Graham, Brandt (and others).”162

Chouinard influenced all individuals mentioned above in the 1920s, albeit in different ways since some were students, some instructors, but many of those mentioned were both. Phil Paradise served as the director of the Fine Arts Department in the 1930s, according to Chouinard brochures.163 His classes inspired the likes of Phil Dike, Rex Brandt and Millard Sheets. After graduating in 1927, Phil Dike, like his instructor, developed a passion for teaching art to the next generation. He therefore made his own impact on the educational front of the growing art movement in Southern California. He and his contemporary Rex Brandt established the Brandt-Dike Summer School of Painting in Corona Del Mar, just south of Los Angeles. Brandt attended Chouinard from 1928 to 1931164 and served as faculty member from 1948-1964. Both instructed students at the School of Painting in the summer while working at Chouinard in the fall and spring. 165 Furthermore, Brandt authored a textbook titled Watercolor Techniques and Methods for artists attempting to master the medium in 1977.

Six of the thirteen original members of the California Watercolor Society (including Phil Dike) had taught and/or graduated from Chouinard.166 Phil Dike, Phil Paradise and Rex Brandt chaired the society as presidents in 1938, 1939 and 1948 respectively. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art enjoyed twenty-four years of affiliation with the society, showcasing their winning works of art. Recently, in the

162 Ibid.
164 He attended as part of his junior high school art program.
166 See faculty list in Robert Perine, Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed, 250-251.
Pasadena Museum of California Art exhibit titled, *California Scene Paintings From 1930 to 1960*, works of all three artists were prominently displayed, often side-by-side.¹⁶⁷ Numerous painting descriptions mentioned the friendship of these Chouinard affiliates.

**Dalzell-Hatfield: A Watercolorists’ Launch**

A gallery local to the Westlake district discovered one particular watercolorist, Millard Sheets (1906-1989). This was the Dalzell-Hatfield Gallery of Fine Arts. Galleries such as Dalzell- Hatfield were art institutions of Westlake that were not only educational in nature. As stated previously, galleries like the Stendahl and Dalzell-Hatfield brought artists and public from all over the world to Los Angeles to showcase and view works of art. These galleries became landmark institutions that influenced California’s cultural growth. Dalzell-Hatfield and Stendahl in particular developed an intimate association with the Westlake and downtown Los Angeles community: showcasing the work of urban artists and giving opportunities to struggling artists in Los Angeles.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, these galleries brought fledgling Southern California artists, many from Westlake’s institutions, to the public eye.

The Dalzell Hatfield gallery was one of Los Angeles’ oldest and most influential showcase venues in California. It had opened in 1893 in Chicago and remained opened for seventy years afterwards, changing locations. From Chicago, Hatfield moved to Westlake and reopened there, with Earl Stendahl as a partner for a short time.¹⁶⁹ The

¹⁶⁷ Pasadena Museum of Contemporary Art. (Hence forth referred to as PMCA.) *California Scene Paintings From 1930 to 1960*, Exhibit ran from March 10th to July 28th of 2013.

¹⁶⁸ See “Dalzell-Hatfield” Collection at LACMA. It is evident that this gallery tried to showcase both international and local artists through their exhibition catalogs, even when the caliber of the latter had yet to reach the fame of the former.

Evening Outlook, a local Los Angeles newspaper characterized the gallery as, “The first local gallery to exhibit the work of French impressionists, (Renoir) the German expressionists, the sculpture of Antoine Bourdelle and Sir Jacob Epstein, as well as many important American contemporary painters...” In other words Dalzell-Hatfield was synonymous with international art and the avant-garde. Nothing else needs to be said about its prestige in the art world. And yet, names like Rex Brandt, Millard Sheets, Phil DiKe all local and fledgling artists, appear in their exhibit brochures from the early 1900s.

More importantly, this gallery in particular helped launch the career of Millard Sheets, California’s “One Man Renaissance in visual art.” Furthermore, as of 1932, the gallery was located on 7th street, precisely the same avenue as Chouinard. Granted it relocated to the Ambassador Hotel in 1939. The move was not a tremendous change since the gallery remained close a twenty-minute walk from its former location in its new venue.

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171 Dalzell Hatfield Brochure Collection. Artist and gallery ephemera, Los Angeles County Museum of Art Balch Art Research Library, LIB.001.002. Dates of exhibitions are unclear since the catalogs are not dated.


173 See Figure 12 for address of gallery at Westlake.

174 The hotel's address was 3400 Wilshire Boulevard, located near Lafayette Park. The Wilshire Viaduct had separated MacArthur Park from Lafayette Park when it was built.
Figure 10. Sheets Watercolor, Dalzell Hatfield Collection. Courtesy of LACMA Library Archives.

Figure 11. Dalzell Gallery exhibition catalogue cover. Year uncertain. Photo courtesy of LACMA. All three artists were Los Angeles painters and instructors. Sheets and Haines both taught at Chouinard. Serisawa taught at Otis.
Figure 12. Rare description of Dalzell-Hatfield’s address at the heart of Westlake on 2509 West Seventh Street. Photo Courtesy of LACMA.
Galleries Aplenty

In other words, Dalzell-Hatfield, among other galleries like Stendahl and Ferus, was instrumental in fostering a community of Los Angeles artists perhaps even more than the institutions of Westlake. The above-mentioned galleries located in or nearby Westlake allowed artists an outlet to both monetize their creativity in paintings sold as well as to publicize their work. The first two galleries, Hatfield (1893-1984) and Stendahl (1911-Present) were housed in the Ambassador Hotel for a large part of the late 1900s. These two galleries existed prior to World War Two as well, and support the argument of an existing incubator of art in Los Angeles in and around Westlake/MacArthur Park. The Ferus group, a later organization and gallery operated on La Cienega Boulevard from 1957 to 1966, just a twenty-minute drive from Westlake/MacArthur Park. Both Hatfield and Stendahl galleries were known for showcasing international painters as well as local artists.\(^{175}\) Ferus focused exclusively on local art.\(^{176}\)

As mentioned previously, Millard Sheets’s career is definitely one example of how these galleries paved the way for his career as an artist. Additionally, contemporary artist Ed Ruscha, another Chouinard alumnus began his career at the Ferus Gallery. His iconic Pop Art style, artist’s rendering of every-day objects, was first exhibited with the support of the Ferus group, one that originated as a sort of artists’ union.\(^{177}\) Wallace Berman, Robert Irwin (1928-present), John Mason (1927-present), Kenneth Price (1935-2012), and Llyn Foulkes (1934-present) were all solo exhibitionists at Ferus before their

\(^{175}\) Dalzell Hatfield and Stendahl Brochure Collection 1879-1960. Artist and gallery ephemera, Los Angeles County Museum of Art Balch Art Research Library, LIB.001.002. Stendahl frequently exhibited pre-Columbian art of South and Central America.


careers took off. Interestingly, all artists mentioned had ties to Otis, Jepson, Chouinard, or a combination of the three. Most were students; some were faculty as well. Indeed this gallery, more than any other focused on local avant-garde painters of the counterculture type.

In other words, Los Angeles was slowly coming into its own in the field of art and culture during the early 20th century. Westlake’s art galleries employed many of the artists that would form the core of a larger artistic community that formed in Westlake from 1921 to 1969. These artists patronized and contributed to other galleries and industries as evident with Sheets’s example.

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179 Robert Irwin taught at Chouinard from 1957-1958.
180 Billy Al Bengston portrayed the motorcycle subculture with his art. In 1957 the gallery was temporarily closed after LAPD officers arrested and charged Wallace Berman with obscenity in the art found in his exhibition. It was his first and last solo show. This is according to collection description cited above.
181 Among the Los Angeles galleries that exhibited the work of Chouinard’s students, the following stand out: Dalzell Hatfield, Gallery 66 (student operated) and Ferus Gallery.
Chapter 5
Art Center, Zone Photography, and Industrial Design

The Art Center’s beginning is one of conflict over philosophy, much like Chouinard’s merger narrative. As mentioned previously, Edward Adams believed strongly that professional training was essential to the developing artist. In its first catalog Adams clarified the school’s mission statement: “The principle upon which the school is built is to make art pay for those who choose to study…It takes as long to train a competent artist as it does to train an engineer, lawyer, or doctor.”182 As mentioned previously, this philosophy differed from Chouinard’s more purist approach to artistic training. “Her approach to art education seemed unprofessional and much like what he had had at the Chicago Art Institute. He wanted to make his class practical and professional.”183 Specifically, two areas of artistic development that the school facilitated are Ansel Adams’ zone photography and the more general industrial design field for artists.

The Art Center found its marketable niche in the field of industrial design. In fact, “Art Center was one of the first American colleges that offered training in this new field.”184 Specifically during the war years, its last set in Westlake, Art Center began to send artists to work in the military industry designing warehouses for aerial construction.185 Artistic contribution to construction provided the artist with an outlet to create structures for usability as well as aesthetic appeal and function. With the onset of

182 Virginia Adams, wife of Edward Adams remembers the conflict as such. From: Virginia Adams–Reminiscences, [ca. 1988-1989]. President’s Office collection (RG 2.03), Art Center College of Design Archives, Pasadena, California.
183 Ibid.
184 Email correspondence with Robert Derig, Art Center Archivist, September 16th 2013.
185 Ibid.
World War Two artists were in demand to design functional structures that would support war production lines and provide ease of use. This manifested in factory, utility, and later transportation design.  

In 1931, Kem Weber became the school’s first director of the program in Los Angeles and on the West Coast. The only other school offering industrial design training for artists at the time was the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pennsylvania. Gordon B. Kauffmann, and J.R. Davidson joined Weber as faculty when the school was in Westlake. When transportation design became part of industrial design in the forties, Joe Thompson (who worked on the Model A Ford), Strother MacMinn, and George Jergenson (both worked at General Motors) joined the ranks of the faculty.

Industrial design was a field that the school excelled in and its alumni took pride in providing that market with talented artists who could function as architects for industry as well. Records of early notable alumni from the period the school existed in Westlake are unorganized, but one name has come to surface- Robert Ham, a graduate from the year 1942. In line with Art Center’s emphasis on vocation and practical occupation for its artist Mr. Ham became an industrial filmmaker and documentarian. He might have not been producing the designs but he illustrated how industry and design work together through his films. Again records are scarce as to the names of the films he produced. However, Art Center’s industrial design program largely went unnoticed by those outside of the art world and even those within it nationwide.

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186 Transportation design was an emphasis of Art Center staring in 1948, according to archivist Robert Derig.
187 Email correspondence with Art Center Archivist, Robert Derig, September 17th 2013.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
The same can be said for the history of industrial design on the West Coast. Art Center archival records show that the program went largely unnoticed until recently, when Art Center began to piece together and archive its history and sources in 2005. It is indeed unfortunate that more information is not available on the people who kept Art Center relevant and productive from 1930 to 1945. Its alumni records of early years are inadequate. However, the archives will be working on organizing that information in the years to come.

Despite unorganized alumni lists, one faculty member will be remembered for his innovative production in the field of photography, despite the fact that he taught in the early years. That staff member was Ansel Adams. However, his association with Art Center and its relation to the Westlake community is still largely unrecognized in secondary literature. Under the leadership of Fred Archer, the photography department chair, Adams developed a new method of photography called the Zone System. He taught classes on lighting and developed his technique as a teaching tool.\textsuperscript{191} The system is based on a shade scale that is applied to a scene one actively photographs. The artist visualizes the image consisting of different zones of black, grey, and white. The variables (people and moveable objects) and subjects within the shot are then adjusted and moved based upon which shade fits the variable’s tone best. Portrait and landscape photography is where this technique shines. Digital and color photography are also fields where this system can be applied.

According to the Virginia Adams Memoirs, (Edward Adams’s wife) Edward Adams, the founder of the school was “informed emphatically Los Angeles was not large

\textsuperscript{191} Photography Brochures, Course Catalog Collection, 1940-1943 (RG 30, Box 1) Art Center College of Design Archives, Pasadena, California.
enough for 2 art schools.” Meaning, he did not want to compete with Chouinard. So the school moved. It is interesting that he does not consider Otis or the Jepson institute a serious threat, only Chouinard. In reality Westlake was home to four major art schools between the years 1930 and 1945, as mentioned previously. However, the proximity spurned animosity between the directors as evident in Adams’s quote. Surprisingly, Art Center students were invited to a Chouinard ball in 1953, after their move out of Westlake of course. It was an event called “Aqua Terpsa” at the Hollywood Paladium. With thousands of art students in attendance from schools such as Otis and Jepson, past resentments subsided.

Figure 13: Sample of Zone Photography. The picture is divided into shades based on a scale. A powerful and clean shot results. Photograph by Gavin Seim, American Pictorialist 2011.

192 Located on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. See Perine, Chouinard: An Art Vision Betrayed, 120.
Figure 14. Art Center School 7th Street campus, circa 1940 (RG.26 Folder 1)  
Photographer unknown. Art Center College of Design Archives, Pasadena, California.

Figure 15. Ansel Adams lecturing to a photography studio class at the Art Center School, circa 1943, Gift of Gerald P. B. Murison. (RG.44.37) Photography by Gerald Murison. Art Center College of Design Archives, Pasadena, California.
Conclusion

“The ability to form any lasting artistic community in Los Angeles was always hard fought…The centrifugal force of the region’s sprawl and the very real repression of artistic freedom drove groups of artists underground …making any promising movements to dissolve without a trace.”¹⁹³ This quote from Pacific Standard Time accurately describes some of the reasons why Westlake/MacArthur Park remains unacknowledged for its artistic past. Its institutions provided a rigorous education and community for artists, but went unrecognized in the larger narrative of cultural development in Los Angeles since the art community itself physically left the area over time. The MacArthur Park community is one where an artistic movement could not take root and become a permanent center since its institutions left to find larger tracts of land and less competition.

Secondly, the Watercolor Movement, Ceramics, Industrial Design and other avant-garde artists of these fields seem to disappear from the narrative of art history on the West Coast in relation to the institutions that nurtured these arenas because there never seemed to be enough dedicated pupils and institutions in proximity to one another to carry the mantle of these mediums to the next generation.

This is not saying that continuity did not exist; rather, it continually waxed and waned. That is perhaps why textbooks on modern art history¹⁹⁴ like one titled World of Art by Robert Bersson makes no mention of West Coast art contributions when discussing shifting foci in modern art. He writes,
“Following the Second World War, the destruction of Europe’s cities and the rise of the United States to the position of world leader, the center of modern art activity began to shift to North America...having risen to the forefront militarily, politically, and economically, the United States proceeded to do the same on the cultural front...For vanguard artists, New York City steadily took the role previously played by Paris.”

In other words, it is as if Paris had been the center for the international art world before the war and the United States existed as a cultural backwater. Moreover, no other American cities are mentioned despite the fact that the Chicago Art Institute trained many of the faculty discussed above prior to moving to Los Angeles. It is plausible to assume that since the institutions (in our case of MacArthur Park) were not recognized within America itself as cultural mainstays, the international world had no means with which to recognize broader communities of productive artists.

Additionally, art history tends to be written as a compilation of individual stories of artists as opposed to looking at the artist as a part of the efforts of institutions that struggled to educate generations of artists. Most art history is a record of individual genius rather than collective experience. Development of art in Los Angeles is no exception. With this approach it is easy to overlook the Westlake community in the early 20th century, a time when it served the city as an incubator of artists with a network of institutions that formed the content of exhibits like Pacific Standard Time in our contemporary world.

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196 Edward “Tink” Adams for example.
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