

THE WINCHESTER ART ASSOCIATION AND THE WINCHESTER PUBLIC LIBRARY ART GALLERY

By Ellen Knight¹

During the early 1930s the time came to form an art association in Winchester. For one reason, according to artist Gerrit Beneker, the environment seemed to be right: "Of all the suburbs about Boston, why did we prefer Winchester to other places in which to live? Aside from the friendships we made, the comfortable homes we lived in, the good schools which were the privilege for our children to attend, we felt that Winchester is a town where Civic Pride is evident at every turn. There were no 'movies,' no bill-boards to influence the emotions of the young. The streets, the parks, the homes were well cared for. The Community, realizing the necessities of change due to growth was not satisfied with old wine in new bottles nor with new wine in old bottles but built up new churches, new schools, and, not the least, a new library.. . The powers that be in Winchester realized that education is not something confined to school-rooms; that environment has as much, if not more, to do with motivating life.... there is no excuse for anyone living in Winchester to occupy their leisure time in ways not beneficial to their well being."²



An important part of this environment was the new public library, built in 1931. Envisioning the building as an art center for the town, the library trustees included an art gallery in the plans for the building and formed an Art Advisory Committee during construction. Originally created to show the library's own art collection, the gallery was a long narrow room which focused the viewer's gaze down its length to three Tiffany windows at the rear.

Two murals were added to the library walls. In the main lobby is a depiction of the "Purchase of Land from the Indians," commissioned, through Hermann Dudley Murphy's efforts, by the Works Project Administration from Lexington artist Aiden LaSalle Ripley. A second mural, located above the Smith Room fireplace, was painted by Murphy's protégé, Ettore Caser, and shows a "Bible Reading in a Puritan Home."



The Art Advisory Committee made an effort to collect works by local artists. Thus, paintings by local artists, including Murphy, J. Foxcroft Cole, Edmund Garrett, Otis Philbrick, Esther Baldwin, and Elizabeth Lobingier, drawings by Ernest Dudley Chase and Francis Getty, and other artworks are included in the library collection.³

There being an active group of living artists in town, under Murphy's leadership the library trustees and art committee organized the Winchester Art Association in May 1932. The association, formed by fifty people "willing to pay \$2 per year to bring culture in the form of art to Winchester,"⁴ took over sponsorship of art in the library and organized exhibits, shows, and art classes. The library's own collection was placed throughout the building to free the gallery space for changing exhibits. In the gallery, the Art Association held monthly meetings, each of which featured an artist or craftsman whose works would be on exhibit that month and who would give a demonstration or lecture.



The first to exhibit was Beneker. He left Winchester shortly thereafter, but following a return visit the next winter, he wrote a plea to the town to foster the new association: "To my joy I found ... that your citizens had brought out your community artists and not only displayed their work but actually brought them out to meet the people.... All this is most encouraging and it is a matter of regret that I and my family are not living in Winchester this winter to keep these fires



burning. You still have many in your community who are students in various fields of art, painting, poetry, music, drama, and it is up to you to encourage these people that they, too, may soon fill your places in the leadership of your community. The era of materialism, of technocracy, of getting and spending has broken and people are searching earnestly for those expressions of the spirit of man ... We support our churches, our hospitals, our schools, our unemployed, but art is as necessary to the soul of man as are hospitals and soup kitchens and clothes to man's body. So, I hope the people of Winchester will take care of this new child, the Winchester Art Association, keep it out of the hospital, and, while it is well housed, it needs food--not only the dollar or two per year which will supply the food, but the active presence and co-operation of all in the community.⁵

The original membership of 48 increased within a year to 117. By its tenth anniversary, the Association's membership had passed 300. Many members were not artists themselves but community members interested in promoting, enjoying, and learning about art. The association's first presidents, for example, included a lawyer, a minister, and the author of Winchester's first history book, Henry S. Chapman.



*Ettore Caser Self Portrait,
part of the library's
permanent collection*

The Art Association continued offering monthly exhibits at the gallery. In 1950, the year of Winchester's centennial, a special exhibit was sponsored which included, in addition to many photographs and several artifacts, works by Winchester artists, including an oil by Cole, etchings by Bicknell, two small oils by Murphy, and paintings by Charles Pressey, Helen Pressey, and Gustave Bélíchon.

In 1958, after renovations to the library eliminated the gallery (its space is now part of the reference room), the Art Association took its first move to a succession of new homes, including its own small gallery at 485A Main Street, where it continued monthly exhibits. "The Winchester Art Association has always believed there is a need for the opportunity of individual self-expression and enjoyment through the arts. It is the purpose of this Association to help fulfill this need and to allow the achievements of its members to be shared by all, with the entire community the ultimate beneficiary."⁶



*Portrait of David Nelson Skillings
by Esther Mabel Baldwin
Williams, part of the library's
permanent collection*

During the mid-1980s the library freed a small room next to its main entrance for exhibitions, and in the summer of 1990 the association recommenced exhibiting at the library for several years. Unfortunately, the Art Association did not survive into the 21st century.



The Tiffany Windows

¹ This article © 2018 is based on the author's *Artists of Winchester Massachusetts 1850-1950*, Winchester Historical Society, 1992.

² Letter, *The Winchester Star*, December 23, 1932.

³ Some, such as a painting of a girl reading by Eva D. Cowdery and two bust by Edward Brackett, donated when the library was part of the Town Hall building, were later de-accessioned or lost.

⁴ Beneker letter.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Winchester Art Association brochure.