



# Building on a Legacy

*A look at the  
California Art Club*

*By Steve Simmons*

Members of the California Art Club are carrying on a legacy. They are descendants of the California Impressionist movement and are working to promote and expand their heritage.

The California Art Club (CAC) operates from a historic bungalow near the Western Justice Center in Pasadena and near the site of the club's founding. "To us this is sacred ground," says Executive Director Elaine Adams. The club's first meeting was held in 1909 in artist Franz Bischoff's studio in the Arroyo Seco.

Drawn to California's beauty and climate, the founding "plein air" (in the open air) artist members promoted the merits of traditional fine arts of painting, sculpture and drawing.

And the work continues today. "We celebrate traditional techniques, harmonies, color values, composition and realistic work of art. We celebrate the joy of painting," Adams says. The movement is characterized by landscapes, seascapes, portraits and still life. The member artists (there are more than 500 in various categories) "are not just replicating a scene, but recreating its atmospheric effect; there's atmosphere oozing out of the scene," Adams says.

Adams works with a staff of seven to carry out the club's mission to promote "contemporary traditional" art.

To serve both its members and the public, CAC "promotes art exhibits that foster understanding of traditional art heritage and California history."



These have included the "On Location in Malibu" show at the Frederick R. Wiseman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University and "Spiritual Spectrum: Paintings and Sculptures by the California Art Club" at Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. "Artists could submit any work that spiritually moved them," Adams said.

"The pieces our members created are pieces that need to be seen," Adams says. And to appreciate them viewers have to do the "plein air dance." "You have to step forward to examine the brush work and step back to see the colors coalesce and the painting come alive, you have to move."

The local chapter has three permanent exhibition sites:

- An ongoing exhibition, "Celebrating the Golden State," at the club's gallery at the Old Mill in San Marino.

- An ongoing series of "Rising Young Star" solo exhibitions at Marston's Restaurant in Pasadena. Participants are under 30 and members of the club's Mentor Program "They work with an artist member and learn how to put an exhibition together," Adams says.

- Shows at Blinn House in Pasadena, the home of Pasadena Women's City Club, curated by committee.

Adams also works with museums such as the Huntington Library, the Norton Simon Museum and the Pacific Asia Museum to elevate awareness of traditional contemporary art.

The club also provides training by sponsoring the Master Artist Workshops. Well-known artists teach and demonstrate traditional fine art skills of painting, sculpture and drawing.

To reach children, the club hosted an event with leading paleontological artist William Stout who showed them how to draw a dinosaur. "Children want realistic art," Adams said. (Stout is also managing editor of the club's popular newsletter, which Adams edits).

The California Art Club has a rich history. "The club set the cultural make-up of Los Angeles. The club built the collection of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County," Adams says.

CAC artists held the Gold Medal Juried Exhibition from 1913 until 1942, when the Depression, World War II, shifting tastes and Modernism brought about a decline in membership and status. Also in 1942, Hollyhock House, which was a gift to the club by Aline Barnsdall, reverted back to the city of Los Angeles in a tenure agreement.

"There were no documents, the collections started to disappear. It was a sad time in the club's history," Adams said.

Left: The Edgar Payne Award for Best Landscape Painting, a new award in the Gold Medal Juried Exhibition was awarded to Richard Humphrey for his painting, *The Cliffs and Sea at Point Vicente*.

## Gold Medal Show

California fine artists Peter Adams and Béla Bácsi received "Best of Show" honors at the California Art Club's 96th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

Adams, a nationally known painter from Pasadena and Bácsi, a Hungarian-born sculptor from Santa Barbara, were selected for the honor by their peers.

Bácsi's winning sculpture, entitled *Octopus* is carved from marble (see page 26). Adams took the Gold Medal for his still-life painting of Asian objets d'art, *Prajnaparamit, perfection of Wisdom* (see page 27).

The club presented a new award this year — the Edgar Payne Award for Best Landscape Painting, in honor of the famed landscape artist who served as the ninth president of the historic organization. The award was presented to Richard Humphrey, for his painting, *The Cliffs and Sea at Point Vicente*.

Each year, the show features 300 never-before seen works of art, including plein air paintings, portraits, still life and sculpture. This year's show also featured a collection of nearly 100 original miniature paintings — each no larger than 9" by 12."

The 2007 Gold Medal Show ended May 20, but the 2008 show will open in late April at the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

A few professional artists remained and in 1993, Peter Adams (Elaine's husband) was asked to serve as president. He was an established artist, yet he knew few in his tradition, so he accepted the position.

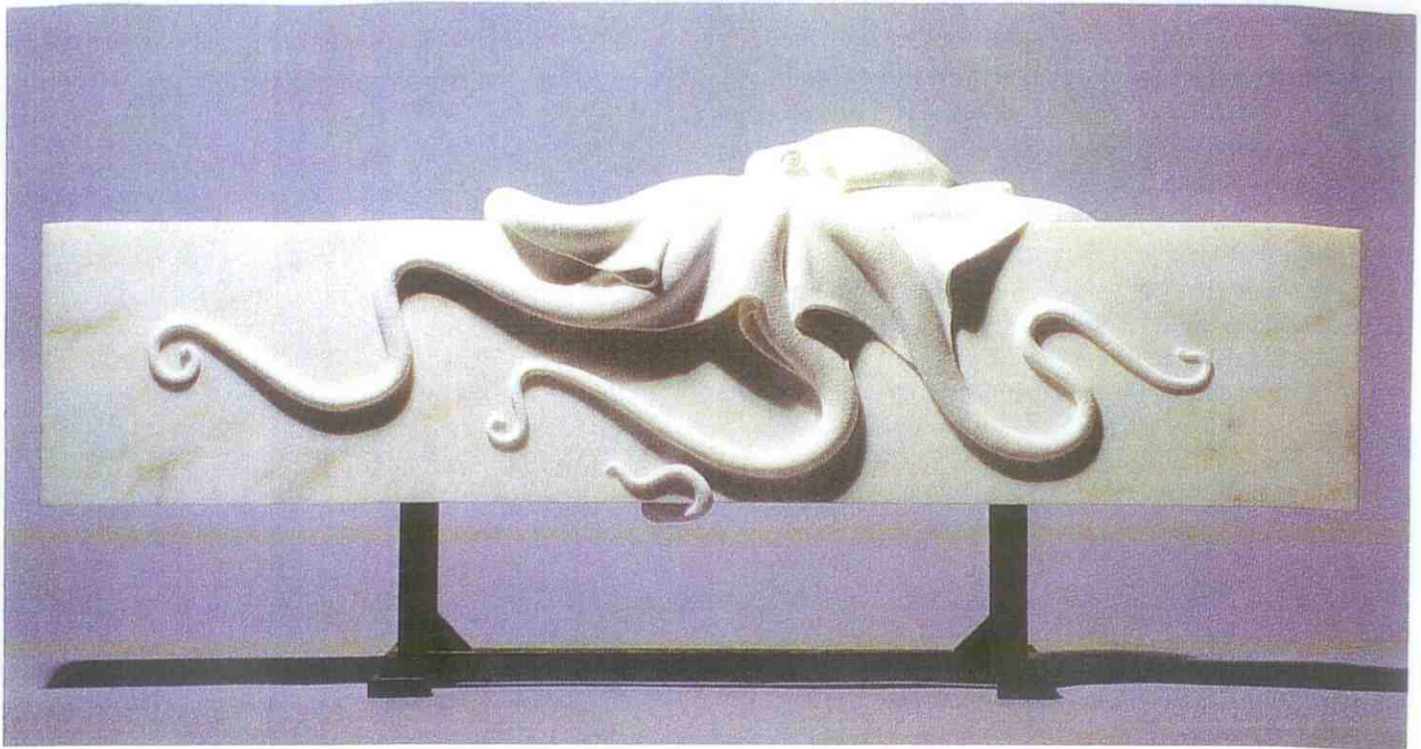
"I said we can make a difference," Elaine Adams says. "We can fix it."

The Adams, along with fellow artists Dan Goozé, Steve Huston, Stephen Mirich, Daniel Pinkham, Tim Solliday and William Stout, recruited other top artists to bring prestige back to the club. They developed membership and jurying committees and adopted a board structure. Then came the mentor programs, workshops, lectures and now the Collectors' Circle. Collectors' Circle members pay \$1,000 a year and are invited to special programs. A gala kicked off the 95th annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition and Collectors' Circle members were treated to a dinner at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, surrounded by the artworks and hosting an artist at each table.

"Artists shape history and so do collectors," said Peter Adams. "Like the Medicis and the Catholic church. A great way to get to this art is through collecting."

An upcoming Collector's Circle event is a luncheon and tour at the 7,500-square-foot studio of artist Alexey Steele.





For any organization to thrive it has to change and the California Art Club is no exception. Peter Adams is seeing changes on three fronts:

- While the club is continuing its mission of advancing the plein-air painter, it is becoming part of the environmental movement. “We have to be concerned since much of our work is done outdoors, on location,” Adams says.

- Artists from the entertainment industry such as story board artists and animators are also joining the club. “They bring a lot of imagination to the organization,” Adams says. “They also have a lot of discipline, since they have deadlines to get the work done.”

- Many Chinese artists have joined the group. “They come to Southern California because there’s no free market for their art in China,” Adams says.

“They have a history of training in traditional techniques like drawing and apprenticeships so they fit in. They paint in our palette and the club is an asset to them. Many come from poverty and now they’re making good money ... Some are tremendously successful so they’re grateful for the club.”

The club now has five chapters, which are in Los Angeles, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, Santa Barbara and Orange County.

“We have members from all cultures, at all income levels and from all walks of life,” says Elaine Adams. “What they share is a passion for this art.”

And they share that passion with others.

To document and bring businesses, residents and tourists to Los Angeles’ Chinatown, 100 artists painted for two weeks to showcase the historic area. The effort ended with a celebration and procession through the historic area.

In 1997, club members painted scenes on the route of the proposed 710 Freeway extension to draw attention to the area.

“Paint Outs” at different locations throughout California allow art patrons to watch club artists at work.

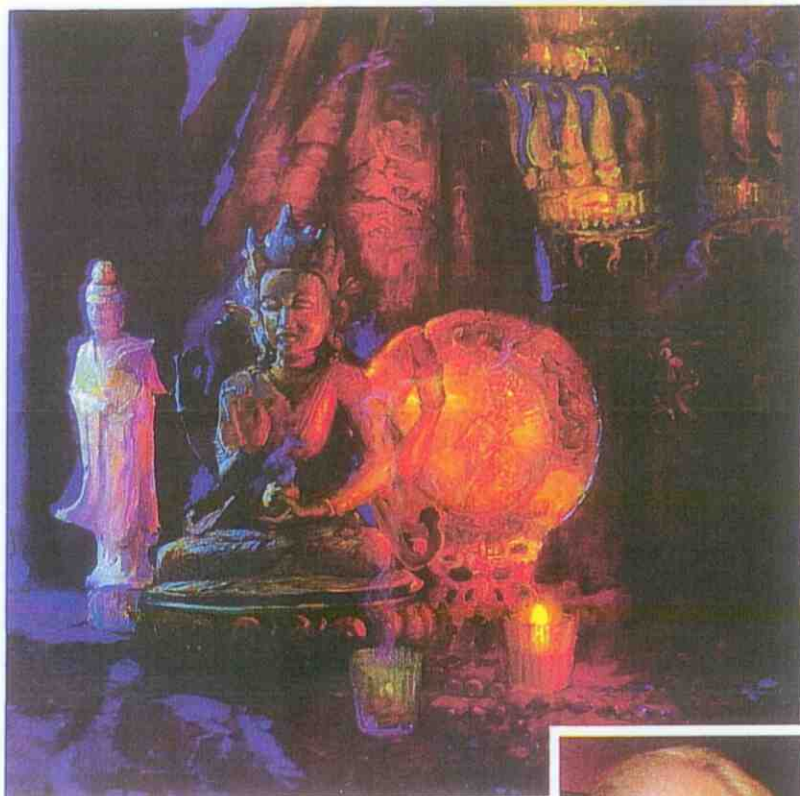
“I call it performance art,” Elaine Adams says. “And you appreciate the work even more if you have an idea of how it was created.”

While they believe traditional painting is often ignored and marginalized, the members of the California Art Club are doing all they can to keep their legacy alive.

“It’s like there are different kinds of music,” Peter Adams says. “Some people like country, some people like opera; there’s room for all. And that’s true with art.”

Above: Bella Bácsi won “Best of Show” honors for his sculpture *Octopus* at this year’s Gold Medal Juried Exhibition, sponsored by the California Art Club.





Peter Adams' painting *Prajnaparamita, Perfection of Wisdom* won the Best of Show honor for paintings at the California Art Club's Gold Medal Juried Exhibition.



### California Art Club Artist Spotlight

Dramatic, intense and ethereal are all words used to describe paintings by Pasadena's Peter Adams.

Adams, who has served as president of the California Art club since 1993, won the Best of Show award for paintings at the group's annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition this year for his *Prajnaparamita, Perfection of Wisdom*. The work reflects two of Adams' trademarks — a love of Asian art and his striking use of light.

Adams describes the piece in the show catalogue: "As an artist, Asian *objet d'art* have a personal fascination for me because they exude a hint of religious mystery and intrigue. In the picture is a *blanc de chine* statuette representing Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and a bronze statue of Prajnaparamita, the embodiment of wisdom believed to lead to supreme perfection, which is the primary way to nirvana. One candle is lighted and one candle has just gone out,

demonstrating that life is always in apparent change. Between the two candles is a string of amber beads that flow in a continuous sign of the infinite."

Adams draws his artistic inspiration from the Old Masters — "they did paintings that touched me on a spiritual standpoint" — from Greek and Roman myths, biblical stories and Shakespeare.

He studied at Art Center College of Design and Otis College of Art and Design "which were teaching modernism; I wanted to learn traditional techniques."

So he found Prix de Rome winner and Art Institute graduate Theodore Lukets and served as his personal apprentice for seven years. Lukets taught Adams about color and light, particularly the theatrical lighting he used in his portraits of Hollywood stars. Lukets also showed Adams that the Old Masters' legacy didn't stop with the Renaissance, Baroque or even early 20th century. Adams discovered that he was part of the impressionist lineage.

Showcasing the theatrical lighting effects learned from his mentor, Adams' exhibition-winning painting illustrates a dramatic blue light on the left side of the introspective still life and candle light on the other.

Adams is fascinated by stage lighting effects from opera and ballet. Reportedly, people who have bought his paintings think they've left a light on in a room, when the source is simply the glow from the painting.

Adams is also working to "get away from detail. There are (parts of the paintings) that when you view them, your imagination comes into play."

Whether working in oils or pastels — "When I get tired of one I try the other. Oil is more forgiving though" — Adams is known for color harmonies, design orientation and the use of negative space from the Asian and Chinese landscape painters he admires.

Adam's love of the East and the exotic started with a fascination for Tibet and has taken him to India, Bhutan and Nepal. In 1981, he received international acclaim as the first American artist to travel unescorted and paint in the People's Republic of China. On another six-month excursion to Asia in 1987, Adams disguised himself as an Afghan native and slipped into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. He is the only American artist to paint among the Mujahideen rebels.

But it's the work that he and his fellow contemporary traditionalist do that drives his passion. "We create a special world and make society better."