

CREATIVE MINDS and social mavericks find inspiration in their environment and often migrate to warmer climates and picturesque locations to stimulate the mind and soothe the soul. During southern California's early beginnings, Pasadena's Arroyo Seco attracted visitors from around the nation and the world. By 1910, the area was settled by original thinkers—architects, writers, scientists, musicians, and more than 200 artists.

The subject appeal of the Arroyo Seco reached artists across the nation and was a pivotal force behind attracting them to the picturesque environs and sunnier climes of the San Gabriels. At the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, the meandering Arroyo Seco could be considered the American version of the forests of Fontainebleau, and Pasadena the counterpart to the town of Barbizon—and like the *Barbizon School of Landscape Painting*, artists found their inspiration in their rural surroundings. The sudden influx of academically-trained artists living along the banks of the Arroyo ultimately developed into an art movement known today as *California Impressionism* or *California Plein Air*.

For more than a century, California's premier fine artists have been drawn to the Arroyo Seco; historically, among them were **Benjamin C. Brown** (1865–1942), **Alson S. Clark** (1876–1949), **William Lees Judson** (1842–1928), **Hanson D. Puthuff** (1875–1972), **Guy Rose** (1867–1925), **Elmer Wachtel** (1864–1929), **Marion Kavanagh Wachtel** (1870–1954) and **William Wendt** (1865–1946); and today, the California Art Club continues this tradition. Every third Thursday of each month, artists gather on their own to “Paint the Lower Arroyo Seco” and capture on canvas the spectacular views and stunning natural environment, thus, documenting why this historic area has earned the title, “Most Celebrated Canyon in Southern California.”

When the **California Art Club** held its first meeting in 1909 at the Arroyo Seco home and studio of **Franz A. Bischoff** (1864–1929), one of the first orders of business was to purchase permanent headquarters. Through organized art exhibitions and sales, the group began raising funds for a building, but, for various reasons, could not decide on the right location to make their

California Art Club Looks to the Past for a Future Home

by Elaine Adams



Panoramic view of Pasadena's historic Colorado Street Bridge through the Desiderio Drill Hall

investment.

Then, in 1927, oil heiress, socialite and arts patron, **Aline Barnsdall** offered the California Art Club her newly built home, the **Hollyhock House** designed by **Frank Lloyd Wright**. Perched on top an eight-acre hill overlooking Hollywood, the inspirational setting became Los Angeles' premier cultural hub, as the California Art Club organized thought-provoking arts programs, exhibitions and even a public art library. Unfortunately, after fifteen years of maintaining the clubhouse, the CAC was forced to give up their home for unclear reasons, and it was transferred to the City of Los Angeles in 1942. From that time,

the California Art Club operated from their presidents' private residences.

Then, in April of 2006 the CAC signed a lease to move into a non-profit centre located in one of four 1920s Italianate bungalows that once accommodated guests of the grand **Vista Del Arroyo Hotel** overlooking the Arroyo Seco. Although the Club's present accommodations are ideal as a work environment, there are limitations. For instance, the facility does not have space to store the Club's 100 years of documents, library and growing art collection, nor can it provide on-site programs for membership.

In September 2006, the California Art Club was presented with an attractive, once-in-a-life-time opportunity to develop a permanent educational centre in the location where the Club was originally founded—on the banks of the Arroyo Seco. Naturally, when the Club was contacted with a special proposition introduced by good friend, **Robert Oltman**, founder of the **Pasadena Museum of California Art** where the CAC holds its annual *Gold Medal Juried Exhibitions*, Club President, **Peter Adams**, and I agreed to meet the following day.

At the meeting Mr. Oltman introduced us to **Tim Brick**, Managing Director of the **Arroyo Seco Foundation** (ASF), a local non-profit organization established to protect the precious environment of the Arroyo Seco. The ASF was founded in 1905 by the noted journalist, historian, photographer and librarian, **Charles Fletcher Lummis** (1859–1928). The discussion quickly loomed into the possibility of bringing the two 100-year old



organizations, the CAC and the ASF, together for the purpose of adaptively reusing the 51-year old **Desiderio Army Reserve Base** as a public learning center.

The base was built during the **Cold War** era and possesses the classic features of military architecture of the time. British cultural historian and Chief Executive of **English Heritage**, **Dr. Simon Thurley**, conducted a five-year research on the significance of Cold War military architecture, culminating in a book published in 2004, entitled *The Cold War: Building for Nuclear Confrontation 1946–1989* by **Wayne D. Cocroft, Roger J. C. Thomas, and P. S. Barnwell**. Dr. Thurley comments, “Many of these facilities were world-class research centers and are recognized for their severe concrete architecture....an eloquent testimony to the constant fear of a pre-emptive attack using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, and the determination to continue operating even in the most extreme horrors of a possible nuclear holocaust. It also reflects the importance of the wider global theme of constant vigilance, monitoring the numbers and state of readiness of opposing forces.”

THE PASADENA BASE was named in honour of Army Reserve Unit Advisor, **Captain Reginald B. Desiderio**. He was a commanding officer in the United States Regular Army, Company E, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. He was also a highly-decorated **World War II** combat veteran. Captain Desiderio further distinguished himself in the **Korean War** where he gallantly defended his command post against an enemy breakthrough near the village of Ipsok until reinforcements arrived.



Captain Reginald B. Desiderio
(1918–1950)

While under intense enemy fire and numerous wounds, Captain Desiderio continued to lead his company and place his men in defensive positions to repel an attack. He personally charged the enemy with carbine, rifle, and grenades, inflicting many casualties until he himself was mortally wounded on November 27, 1950. Captain Desiderio’s inspirational leadership encouraged his men to hold their position, which succeeded in repelling the final attack. For his heroic leadership, the U.S. Army posthumously awarded Captain Reginald Desiderio with the **Medal of Honor**, the nation’s highest decoration.

At the official ceremony on June 22, 1951 **General Omar N. Bradley** presented the Medal of Honor to the widow, **Patricia Jean Desiderio** and their two sons, **David** and **Timothy**. General Bradley commented that the inva-



Hanson D. Puthuff (1875–1972)
Young Sycamores and Old Arroyo Seco, Pasadena, circa 1920
Oil on canvas 24" × 30"
Private Collection

sion of South Korea by Communist forces had the “distinct possibility” of starting World War III. On January 1, 1952 the **Pasadena Tournament of Roses** honoured Captain Reginald B. Desiderio’s memory by naming him one of the Grand Marshals of the **Rose Parade**.

Pasadenan **John Benton** was a United States Army Captain in the 2nd Division and met Captain Desiderio in North Korea, just two days before he was killed. Captain Benton recalls, “It was 25 degrees below zero and we were trying to stay warm. We were also trying to stay awake to watch-out for enemies, so we were living on Dexedrine. The situation was rough. We were running out of supplies and the fighting was bad. We were all thinking how we can get out of there alive.” Coincidentally, today Captain Benton lives just two blocks from the Desiderio Base and says, “There was a good reason the building was built and named after Captain Desiderio.”

With the Desiderio Building’s northern view of the famous Colorado Street Bridge, one of the most painted structures in North America since its inception in 1913, and the eastern view of the Vista Del Arroyo Hotel, this location is indeed sacred to artists, art historians and to Pasadena’s heritage.

The joint proposal between the CAC and the ASF is a big-picture concept, one that is long-term and would finally create the permanent foundation to assure the continuation of traditional art aesthetics given to us by the founders of the California Art Club. But, the process

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Marion K. Wachtel (1870-1954)
Arroyo Sycamores
 Oil on canvas 17 1/2" × 13 1/2"
 Private Collection

ARROYO CENTER

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would not be an easy one. Ten other proposals were also being submitted to the City of Pasadena for consideration. Also, the federal government is involved with the final decision. Furthermore, the Department of Defense continues to use the base as training grounds for soldiers and medics, but plans to move to their new facility in the City of Bell once it is built, estimated in 2011.

WE DECIDED TO GIVE IT A TRY. WE WORKED round-the-clock with the Arroyo Seco Foundation designing our plan, working out details, then, submitting our proposal to the City of Pasadena under the name, “Arroyo Center for Art and the Environment.” The main premise of our joint proposal was to return the 5.1 acres back to its natural Arroyo Seco vegetation and adaptively reuse the existing army buildings, transforming them into “green” buildings that would be re-designed by the winners of a *charrette* (architectural competition). At the same time, we would preserve the military buildings in memory of Captain Desiderio and Pasadena’s role during World

War II and the Cold War.

The revitalized use of this facility would be for offices, research art and environment library, art storage and conservation studies, artists’ studios, instructive workshop classes, and studies in environmental and watershed management. Furthermore, a small museum would be situated in what is now the drill hall, an ideal museum exhibition space of 3,750 square feet and 18-foot-high ceiling with clerestory windows that frame the Colorado Street Bridge. The institution would be a low-impact learning center that would benefit the community and visitors as a place to study and appreciate traditional fine arts and our natural environment, as well as a place to celebrate the history and uniqueness of the Arroyo Seco culture. This would be the first of its kind—an institution dedicated to the marriage of art and the environment—a model learning center to inspire other similar endeavours on a global level.

The media quickly heralded the idea as both environmentally and fiscally sound, as well as a great tribute to Pasadena’s heritage and a gift to the public. Within a month the concept received 1,200 petitioners in its favour. Letters of support were written by nearly every cultural and environmental institution in southern California, as well as by several high-profile architects and art historians. In addition, a new community group formed, known as “Citizens for Public Use of the Arroyo” (CPA), to support the concept. After attending nine months of intense commission meetings and city council hearings, it was clear that the property would be shared with the city’s need to satisfy affordable housing, open space, and a cultural component.

We are delighted to say that the California Art Club and the Arroyo Seco Foundation under the title of “Arroyo Center for Art and the Environment” are included in the city’s final re-use plan, along with **Habitat for Humanity** with plans to build nine units of affordable housing, and city-operated parkland, submitted to the Department of Defense for their review. It is still not completely clear, however, what the Arroyo Center’s fate will be, and whether we and the historic Desiderio Building will be included in the final decision. But, we remain hopeful that the Arroyo Center for Art and the Environment will exist as a place to celebrate our fine art heritage and appreciation of nature for future generations. ■

Notes: For more information and to learn how you can get involved, please visit affiliate Web sites for: Arroyo Center for Art and the Environment at www.arroyocenter.org; Arroyo Seco Foundation at www.arroyoseco.org; and Citizens for Public Use of the Arroyo at www.publicarroyo.org. Also, make sure to save the date for October 14, from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., when La Casita Foundation will host a plein air art exhibition and sale featuring paintings of the Arroyo Seco by Signature and Artist Members of the California Art Club as a fundraiser to help maintain the Lower Arroyo Seco.