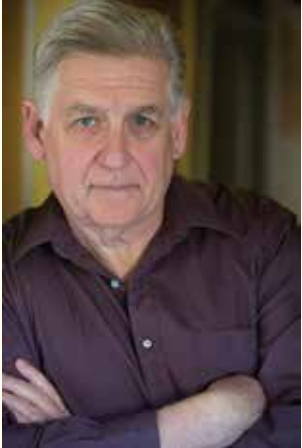


# Chuck Kovacic: THE MAN FOR THE JOB

by Molly Siple



Chuck Kovacic

**C**AC SIGNATURE ARTIST **CHUCK KOVACIC**, A MAN OF MANY TALENTS, is the new Chairman of the Los Angeles/Pasadena Chapter of the **California Art Club**. At first meeting, his warm, rich voice and engaging presence make him easy to like. He's full of lively conversation and eager to hear what you have to say. But there is much more to Kovacic than just this. In fact, he's a man of intellect and considerable complexity, having pursued many and disparate careers. Kovacic has worked in advertising, and urban design, as well as an antique dealer and professional actor, to name just a few of the fields he's tackled. It is this wealth of professional experience that Kovacic now draws on in his new role with the Club. "What I find most gratifying about working with the CAC," says Kovacic, "is that at last, thanks to **Peter and Elaine Adams** offering me so many ways to contribute, I can finally bring all my experience to bear in one spot."

The twists and turns in Kovacic's long career path reveal the story of how he became the substantial person he is today, with painful setbacks providing lessons, and good fortune helping out, all coupled with lots of hard work. As a young man, Kovacic set out to have a career in the visual arts and, in the late sixties, enrolled in the prestigious **Cleveland Institute of Art**. The atmosphere at the Institute was, as he describes it, "intense and the studies consuming, a place for a serious education. Most students came from families who worked in the steel mills, and the kids had a fiery independence and respect for hard work. The student culture was monastic; no socializing in the hallways and no loafing."

The five-year curriculum included two years each of life drawing, painting, and design; the final year was devoted to academics. Kovacic graduated with a BFA in graphic design with a minor in painting; this early training is very much present in his works of art today. "The only complaint I still have," he says, "is that by the final year, conceptual art became the focus of our studies. We spent endless hours writing about our art rather than just making it." This aside, what was really beginning to intrigue Kovacic was a newly emerging specialty within design, that is, environmental and architectural graphics.

With the confidence and energy of youth, Kovacic set his sights on **Harvard University** to further his studies and made the thirteen-hour drive from

Cleveland to Cambridge with no appointment, to present himself to Admissions. Curious about this eager young man, the Admissions director asked Kovacic into his office to hear his plan, which was to study signage design—and offered him entrance to Harvard on the spot! Kovacic was to study in a special program under **Ivan Chermayeff (1932–2017)**, the



*Autumn Reveal*

Oil on canvas 24" × 24"

eminent graphic designer, then head of the Art Department, with the possibility of teaching design at Harvard after graduation. Kovacic left elated, application form in hand, returned home, filled it out, and mailed it. Then, no answer. He again drove to Harvard only to learn the director had never received his application. The position was now filled and not due to open anytime soon. What had gone wrong became clear when the director's assistant found Kovacic's application behind her filing cabinet, where it had fallen.

Whatever might have been, the quirky tragedy fortuitously led Kovacic to develop a special talent for changing direction to face a new day. In Cleveland, he found work as an advertising art director in charge of print and media campaigns. Apart from collaborating on the text for ads, he also oversaw subject matter, and made sure the visuals were precise and had a clear focus. His *Memories of an Earned Past* translates these particular aptitudes to canvas.

Kovacic spent the 1970s in advertising but, as he says, "My heart wasn't in it. This was the Mad Men world of advertising and clients always wanted "new" talent. I was laid off five times in nine-and-a-half years." Then the U.S. economy slumped and as Kovacic recalls, "I had my last regular pay check in May 1980. I needed work and spotted an article in a Cleveland paper about a theatre in Columbus that was hiring actors for an upcoming show. I had done some acting in high school and decided to give it a try." It must have been obvious to the producers that Kovacic was a natural. The company hired him and Kovacic joined the cast of *Captains Courageous*, starring **Forrest Tucker**, with Kovacic the second-lead playing Tucker's son.

The show toured the states for a year and, typical of Kovacic, during the tour he managed to tack on more opportunities

en route. Making the most of performing in smaller cities, he says, "I would call ahead to the radio stations in the towns we were heading to and tell them I was available to do voice-over commercials for local advertisers on their radio shows. They were always ready for a fresh voice and would hire me."

When the tour ended, and with his role in *Captains Courageous* to his credit, Kovacic then qualified for and received the hard-to-get Actor's Equity card, which opened the door to more professional acting work. A move to Los Angeles came next, where he won small roles on television sitcoms and series. With memories of his successful acting with Tucker, Kovacic also found the daring to step onto a much more challenging stage, that of improv clubs and comedy. "This was in the late eighties and early nineties, and after working in those, there is nothing I can encounter that will intimidate me. The club world is cutthroat and I've developed a thick skin," he says. "I earned a black belt in verbal karate and can deliver a very quick comeback when required!"

About this time and throughout the 1990s, Kovacic began working as a motivational speaker, drawing on his ample acting experience as well as his years in advertising. At large corporate events designed to rally workers and introduce product, Kovacic acted as an emcee and presenter. He came up with the idea of portraying **General George S. Patton, Jr.**, in character and in full historically accurate costume, developing an "attack the competition" routine. As he says, "I knew the advertising language and I'd deliver five-minute strategies for success." Other characters he transformed himself into for these events were **Mark Twain**, **Will Rogers**, **Ebenezer Scrooge**, and **Sherlock Holmes**, always in authentic dress.

Then, after a long, good run in acting, that career too began to slow down. Enter a new line of work—assistant director on a holiday cruise ship, making the trip from Los Angeles to Ensenada twice a week. On day one of the job, as he recalls, "I was told that being on the job was like being at a party I hadn't been invited to. I was to be on duty both on ship and on shore. I was to answer all questions about the guests' tours and destination." He also had to check out the bars, restaurants, and tourist attractions the guests would encounter, and so had a good time. He also learned a lot about organizing and managing large groups, good skills to have as Chapter Chair of the California Art Club.

Overarching all these interests and callings was yet another, one that continues to today. Kovacic collected and sold vintage advertising art and merchandise such as you'd find in a old-fashioned general store. He still keeps a small collection of treasures, such as two original **Sarah Bernhardt** posters by **Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939)**. Most remarkably perhaps, one room in Kovacic's



*Manaratha Reach*  
Oil 20" × 24"





*Mrs. Brown's Cottage*

Oil 20" × 24"

house is devoted to a full-scale reproduction of Sherlock Holmes' sitting room at 221b Bakers Street, London, all deftly assembled by Kovacic. For a virtual visit, go to [chuckkovacicarts.com](http://chuckkovacicarts.com). No detail has been overlooked, there's even an attempt at historically correct street sounds, with the clip clop of horses hooves heard in the background.

At some point early on in his collecting, a dealer who knew that Kovacic had gone to art school asked him to restore some early advertising posters. As he recalls, "They were paper, and the images were of beautiful women selling various commodities, primarily brewery related." Taking this first step, Kovacic became a restorer and eventually a leading expert at recreating the look of stone lithography on paper and metal. Auction houses and collectors would send him antique metal trays, cigar boxes, or a cardboard sign, and Kovacic, referring to auction catalogues, would fill in rusted and flaked away lettering and imagery without resorting to airbrush. Although he is largely self-taught, Kovacic became a master of layering effects thanks to this experience, as areas of colour in a print are actually a mix of hues in the same value. Passages in certain of Kovacic's paintings, such as in *Autumn Reveal*, demonstrate his skill, which he

has easily transferred to his fine art.

Now Kovacic is pouring himself into being an artist. He joined the CAC in 2008 and has been applying himself with his usual gusto to developing himself as a painter. He buckled down to study technique at the **Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art** and attended workshops given by CAC Signature Artist **Eric Merrell**. Kovacic also studies the masters, currently **Gustav Klimt** (1862–1918) and **James Abbott McNeill Whistler** (1834–1903). "I'm trying to learn how to paint fabric and in a New York museum recently I saw those artists' work up close—little brushstrokes and stroke over stroke—something I'm now trying myself." However, Kovacic freely admits he'll never have the technical mastery of artists trained in the classical tradition. "I'm aiming at achieving something beyond this anyway. I want to make something other than just a picture. I did this with *Cucuron*, which I painted very quickly and in some sort of state of flow. I don't completely know how this occurs, when everything comes

together effortlessly, but I'm glad when it happens!" Kovacic is also exploring subject matter with a narrative theme, and a touch of mystery. It doesn't take long, whatever he's doing, for Kovacic the actor to come into the picture.

No surprise that Kovacic the plain air painter, and now CAC



*Spring Blush*

Oil on canvas 24" × 30"



Signature Artist member, turns up at painting events far and wide. And he is as involved as possible with the Club, always coming up with ideas. In fact, in 2016 he was awarded the **William and Julia Bracken Wendt Award** for his numerous

contributions. Kovacic revived the Club's Speakers Series, titled *Conversations in the Atelier*, modelling it after *Inside the Actor's Studio*, a long-running television show hosted by James Lipton. Lipton always researched in depth his famous guests before the interview and Kovacic similarly pre-interviews the speakers. The actual interviews with **Alexey Steele**, **Christopher Slatoff**, and **Peter Adams**, which took place during Club general luncheon meetings, were memorable and videotaped for CAC's audience and archives.

Kovacic has also arranged Collector's Circle events, including art tours at **Disney Studios** and the **Museum of Neon Art**. He also dreamed up and produced the Lavender Fields paint-out in Beaumont, so well-liked that it is now in its second year. And remember the wonderfully costumed live models at the **Autry Museum** during Gold Medal Exhibition events? Those too were thanks to Kovacic and his resourceful wife **Athene**, a member of the Board of Directors of the **Art Deco Society of Los Angeles**, and an historic costume expert. "I like to think that because of my wide range of work, and Athene's contacts, too, that I can help the Club draw on resources outside the familiar circle, and provide interchange with those in other areas of the arts."

Given Kovacic's remarkable resume, when it comes to imagining what's next for this ever inventive soul, and the possibilities for the CAC home chapter, there is likely only one good answer. The sky's the limit. ☐

#### Notes:

*Senior Editor Molly Siple studied painting and art history at the University of California at Berkeley and is an Artist member of the California Art Club. She has also taken formal training with master artists Shuqiao Zhou, Jove Wang, and Ian Roberts. In addition, Siple has contributed to numerous national art publications, and is co-author of Enchanted Isle, a History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island as well as California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club, and Painting California, Seascapes and Beach Towns: Paintings of the California Art Club. She also recently completed a biography of her father, Southern California architect Allen G. Siple.*



*The Culling*  
Oil on canvas 20" × 24"



*They That Tend*  
Oil on canvas panel 20" × 24"