The Golden Age of Cleveland Art: 1900–1945

by Henry Adams

In the period between 1900 and 1945 Cleveland was a powerhouse of painting, sculpture, ceramics, poster design, fashion design, and industrial design. The city established a major art school and art museum; held an annual May Show of regional art; held a free-spirited annual arts festival, the Kokoon Club ball; and was the home base of Henry Luce’s publishing empire, as the home of Fortune, Life, and Time magazines.

The background of this artistic flowering was Cleveland’s tremendous growth as a city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Located between the iron ore deposits of Minnesota and the coalfields of Pennsylvania, as well as near the oil region of Pennsylvania, and with a shipping port,
and nexus of three railroads, it is not surprising the city became a major center for the refining of oil. It was also a center for the production of steel, and for the development of many industries associated with these two, such as the production of automobiles, trucks, airplanes, printing presses.

In 1900 the population of Cleveland was 380,000; it was the seventh largest American city. By 1930 it more than doubled once again, reaching over 900,000. When it was completed in 1930, the Terminal Tower in Cleveland was the tallest building in America outside of New York. The population remained fairly stable until 1950, at which point it began to decline, and today Cleveland has shrunk back to roughly its size in 1900.

At its peak Cleveland supported a community of some 6,000 artists, many of whom produced work of national significance, such as Margaret Bourke-White, the famed journalist-photographer, and Viktor Schreckengost, creator of the Jazz Bowl—widely regarded as the single greatest masterwork of American Art Deco. Three organizations played a key role in this artistic flowering: the Kokoon Club, the Cleveland School of Art, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Kokoon Club, the most colorful of these establishments, came into being as a direct consequence of Cleveland’s preeminence in producing large lithographic posters. In 1908 the Otis Lithograph Company, which had specialized up until that time in producing theatrical posters, landed a gigantic contract to produce posters for the movies. Consequently, they launched a corporate raid on New York and lured two of the most skilled artistic draftsmen in the country, Carl Moellmann and William Sommer, to come to Cleveland.

Moellmann and Sommer were the key figures in founding the Kokoon Club, which held its first meeting in the summer of 1911. The Kokoon was initially created...
as a place for artists to socialize and draw from the nude model. In the years before the creation of the Cleveland Museum of Art, it also provided an exhibition space for its members. But in 1913 it took on a new life, when it staged an artist’s ball featuring extravagant costumes and a near-naked dancer with butterfly wings who emerged from a cocoon and danced around the room. Cleveland had never seen anything like it, and in subsequent years the ball grew more and more ambitious and densely thronged. The posters produced by the Kokoon Club are surely some of the most remarkable Art Deco graphics ever produced in America, and interestingly many of them are by artists who are thoroughly obscure, and who worked mainly in the commercial field, such as Joseph Jicha and James Harley Minter.

Providing a complement to the Kokoon Club was the Cleveland School of Art. In 1882, while on an American lecture tour, Oscar Wilde stopped off in Cleveland and declared that the city needed to establish an art school. As if on command, an art school sprang into being the following year. The creation of a wealthy woman, Sarah Kimball, the Western Reserve School of Design for Women was geared very specifically towards women. The initial goal of the school was to provide women with a form of employment and financial support.
Men initially gained entrée to classes by working as janitors and entering classes informally. In time the word “Women” was taken out of the name of the organization. By 1892 it co-educational and rename the Cleveland School of Art.

A distinctive feature of the school, which has characterized its identity to this day, was its emphasis on industrial design. Learning to be an artist or illustrator required rigorous study in fields such as perspective, anatomy, color theory, and the rendering of the human figure. Watercolorist Frank Wilcox, who went through this sort of training at the Cleveland School of Art, spent some forty years at the school as a teacher, and exhibited regularly in Cleveland's May Show.

Finally, the flowering of Cleveland art was promoted by the Cleveland Museum...
of Art, which was founded in 1913 and opened to the public in 1916. At the instigation of its first director, the museum inaugurated an annual exhibition of Cleveland Art, which ran from 1919 to 1995, but achieved its greatest distinction under the guidance of William Milliken, who first took on the exhibition in 1919, when he was the museum’s chief curator, and continued his supervision after he became the museum’s director until his retirement in 1958. Milliken bought in nationally famous artists to serve as jurors, and the exhibition stirred up enormous interest and patronage for local artists. During its early years it was the museum’s best attended exhibition every year. Many of the artists honored with awards, such as William Zorach, Hugo Robus, Charles Burchfield, Margaret Bourke-White, and Viktor Schreckengost, are now recognized as nationally significant figures.

The sheer wealth of Cleveland’s artistic production in this period makes it difficult to reduce its history to a clear linear narrative, but it’s helpful to group what was produced into three categories: modernism, social realism, and industrial design.

Cleveland’s remarkable production of modernist work was spurred largely by the commercial artists. Before they came to Cleveland to work at Otis Lithography, Sommer and Moellmann were closely associated with the Ash Can School, who had staged America’s first scandalous modern-art exhibition in New York, at the Macbeth Gallery, in 1908. They returned to Cleveland with new ideas, and as a consequence, in the years from 1910 to 1914, even before the Armory Show, Cleveland artists were exposed to a variety of modern styles.

Cubist paintings, which attracted hundreds of curious onlookers, and whose catalogue included an enthusiastic defense of Cubism written by Henry Keller, who had worked at Otis Lithography and moved on to become an influential teacher at the Cleveland School of Art.

Sometimes blending, sometimes contrasting with this modernist impulse, was a strong strain of social realism—a natural response to the industrial character of Cleveland in this period. Sommer, Biehle, and Charles Burchfield all produced work documenting the bleak industrial landscape of the region. This direction of Cleveland art probably achieved its peak in the 1930s and early 1940s, in the work of Clarence Carter, Raphael Gleitsman, and Carl Frederick Gaertner.

An interesting undercurrent of this period of flowering in Cleveland art is the emergence of under-represented groups,
specifically women artists and African American artists. Perhaps the first nationally important artist to emerge from Cleveland was Clara Driscoll, who designed lamps for Tiffany. In addition, two teachers at the Cleveland School of Art, Paul Travis and Viktor Schreckengost, helped open up a pathway for African American artists. The two served as mentors to the first African-American students of the Cleveland School of Art, including Charles Sallee and Huey Lee Smith, who both went on to distinguished careers.

Outside of New York it’s hard to think of an American city that was so artistically productive during the first half of the twentieth century. But sadly, this artistic flowering was hard-hit by the Depression, the white flight of the 1950s, the “rustbelt” industrial decay of the 1950s and 1960s, the race riots of the 1960s, and the challenges of industrial pollution. While Cleveland still struggles with poverty and urban blight, it has taken steps to reverse this decline. It has recently been ranked as “one of the most livable” of American cities, and University Circle has been singled out as the best arts district in the United States. That said, surely the period from 1900 to 1940 can be described as “The Golden Age” of Cleveland, and of Cleveland art. Who knows what the future will bring.