

Ten years ago, a newspaper review of our *Centennial History Book* characterized the formation of the Island Arts Club in 1909 as “hobby for city’s elite.” Perhaps this title did less than justice to an organization which has outlasted all its competitors and is honoured as the oldest arts organization west of the Great Lakes.

It can be argued that the Club over the years has demonstrated considerable degrees of professionalism. Despite suggestions of cultural snobbery, there were indeed high standards of artistic talent amongst members right from the start, those who merited the classification of gifted amateurs, rather than simply genteel daubers. The likes of Josephine Crease, Emily Carr and Edith Hembroff-Schleicher had studied art in France, England and California, and many of the British immigrants, such as Mary Daniell, Margaret Kitto, Teresa Wilde and Tom Bamford received their early training in British art schools. Sophie Pemberton (*Little Boy Blue*, 1897 at right), an early member of Victoria’s local sketching clubs, had already received international recognition in Europe.



It would however be an exaggeration to associate Club with professionalism, if this is strictly defined as making a living mainly/entirely through selling artwork, and thus involving such considerations as contracts, pricing structure, deadlines and the use of high grade materials. The only original Club member who was able to survive on art alone was reputedly Thomas Fripp, who had established himself as a noted watercolourist following his arrival from England in 1893.

That said, it’s unlikely there were many club members who would have had the need or the wish to make a living from selling their art. For the likes of the affluent Crease or Pemberton families, who produced some of the best artists, any such revenue to be garnered would be small change. One-time President Tom Bamford, although of relatively modest means, showed similar indifference. A civil servant and neighbour of Carr, and a talented and prolific painter of Victoria



landscapes, he rarely sold any, preferring to give them away. A local journalist once claimed that “everybody has a Bamford (see image at left); they got them as wedding presents.”

However, putting to one side the notion of full-time professionalism, this is not to say that there have been many members, then and now, who reached professional standards through their specialized training, peer recognition, gallery showings and commitment of time and finance.

It’s interesting to recall that during their time with the Club, its three most distinguished members, Emily Carr, Jack Shadbolt (at right, *Mosaic for Autumn*) and Max Maynard, never derived much income from painting. Any big pay-days lay far in the future. In those days Carr was a landlady while the others were schoolteachers. Speaking of teaching, this does lead to the point that some members did make their living from art, if we include activities, other than selling, but nevertheless art-associated, such as book-illustration. This would apply to art teachers like Shadbolt, Maynard, and Menelaws, as well as Kitto who supplemented her teaching income from the sale of her postcards at her Art Deco studio; and



Will Menelaws and Ina Uhthoff who taught at Glenlyon-Norfolk School. Most notably Uhthoff, who ran the Victoria Art School, had the most all-round investment in art as teacher, administrator and writer of a newspaper column as well as being a gifted painter.

It's fair to conclude that the Club has always been -- as the politicians are wont to say -- a broad church, catering to a wide range of ambitions and interests. It has observed the philosophy that every member has something to offer. Its influential annual exhibitions have always provided a platform for anyone seeking to enhance their reputation in the art community and perhaps enjoy the satisfaction of making sales. Even Emily Carr, despite her waspish comments about the Club's conservatism, must have appreciated her indebtedness on this score to "the only game in town." In turn, the most talented members have invariably been generous in helping and encouraging by example those of more modest ambitions, painting for sheer enjoyment and the desire to raise their standards. Overall, the Club has remained true to one of its founding objectives in providing a focal point for artists in the region to share their talents.

This sense of camaraderie was well expressed by the late Ted Harrison who joined the Club with his national reputation already well-established. He gave his reason for joining as follows: "because I want to be able enjoy being with a group of like-minded people doing the same thing as I do."

*~ John Lover*