

Providence Art Club

11 Thomas St Providence Rhode Island 02903, phone: 401.331.1114, www.providenceartclub.org

Press Release

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Maxwell Mays Gallery:

Making Her Mark: The Women Artists of the Providence Art Club 1880

Dodge House Gallery:

The Archives: the Founding Story and Highlights of the Providence Art Club

Beginning in February 2017, the Providence Art Club will host a series of exciting exhibitions celebrating women's important roles in the visual arts. The programs are in recognition of the 30th anniversary of Women's History Month in March 2017, as well as the early advocacy of women artists at the Providence Art Club, which was the first art club in America to admit men and women at its 1880 founding. A Providence Art Club Members Show of contemporary works, *Making Our Mark*, inaugurates the series in February. In March, *Making Her Mark* will highlight these women founders in a retrospective detailing the rich story of the founding of the Club through historic paintings, archival materials and early records. Finally, in April the series will culminate in a dynamic National Open Juried Show, *Making Your Mark*, which will feature contemporary women artists from across the United States.

Making Her Mark: The Women of the Providence Art Club, 1880, in the Club's Maxwell Mays Gallery, will trace the role of women artists at the Providence Art Club in its early years. Providence, Rhode Island, was in the forefront among cities of art and culture in the late 19th century and the Providence Art Club, 136 years old, was a cultural force from its inception, bringing together Rhode Island artists and collectors through art and membership. Most significantly, the Providence Art Club was unique in that it was founded by both men and women, including six women among its sixteen founders and shortly thereafter encompassing 70 female members. *Making Her Mark* will feature work by these women as well as the several women artists who exhibited in the institution's first exhibition. There will be a focus on the emergence of women as professional artists as well as those who pursued careers as art educators and other art makers. Curators for the exhibition are Catherine Little Bert of Bert Gallery and Nancy Whipple Grinnell, Curator Emerita of the Newport Art Museum. Together

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they bring their combined 60 years of research and writing on regional American artists to the project.

In the wake of the Civil War, women's roles in America expanded to include professional aspirations. By the 1870s serious young women artists traveled to Paris to attain the study that would equip them for professional careers. One of these was Rosa Peckham, from Providence, who studied at the Academie Julian under the renowned Jules Lefebvre, and became one of only twelve American women to have her work exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1878. Peckham returned to Providence and became a founding member of the Providence Art Club, as well as its secretary and later, vice-president. Along side Peckham were professional portraitists Etta Belcher and Mary Louise Chapin; still life painters Emily McGary Selinger and Emma Swan; prominent sculptors Sarah J. Eddy and Jane Nye Hammond; and painter Helen Watson Phelps, who had a successful New York career.

Several of the Providence Art Club's early women artists found teaching to be a suitable outlet for their professional training. Mary C. Wheeler, founder of the Wheeler School, studied art extensively in Europe, before returning to Providence to teach. Sophia Pitman participated in the summer art colonies of such important American artists as William Merritt Chase and Charles Woodbury, while attending to a thirty-year teaching career at the Moses Brown School in Providence. The student-teacher relationship in the art world was one of honor, and the Providence Art Club and the community at large supported women in their endeavors as art educators.

The work of these women artists exhibited together provides a thought-provoking historical context for regional American art. It also exposes the significance of 19th century art clubs in fostering domestic art and culture. In her dissertation *Américaines in Paris; The Role of Women Artists in the Formation of American Cultural Identity, 1865-1880*, scholar Amanda C. Burdan writes, "Small-scale mixed-sex endeavors like the Providence Art Club expanded the scope of American women in the arts, gradually leading towards professionalism." Burdan and other preeminent scholars of American women's art history will present their ideas in a symposium in conjunction with *Making Her Mark*, on March 25. Free to the public and taking place at the First Baptist Church from 9:30 am to 5:00 pm, the symposium is organized by Anna Dempsey, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Art History at UMass Dartmouth.

Simultaneously in March, three other exhibitions complement *Making Her Mark*. The Dodge House Gallery of the Providence Art Club will be the site of an archival exhibit compiled from the treasure trove of the Club's scrapbooks, photographs and inventory. The Chazan Gallery at the Wheeler School will present *An American in Paris Drawings by Mary Colman Wheeler*, from March 13-April 7. And beginning in February 2017, Women and Infants Hospital's South Pavilion Gallery will host "Women Artists and Educators of the Providence Art Club, 2017."

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About the Providence Art Club



Founded in 1880 to stimulate the appreciation of art in the community, the Club has long been a place for artists and art patrons to congregate, create, display and circulate works of art. Located along Thomas Street, in the shadow of the First Baptist Church, the Providence Art Club is a picturesque procession of historic houses, home to studios, galleries and the clubhouse. Through its public programs, its art instruction classes for members and its active exhibition schedule, the Providence Art Club continues a tradition of sponsoring and supporting the visual arts in Providence and throughout Rhode Island. All of the Club's exhibitions are free and open to the public.