The Battle of the Early Moderns:
The Kokoon Club and the Cleveland Society of Artists

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When I first considered the topic of the "battle" between Cleveland's two major artist fraternities during the early decades of this century, I felt it would give me a good opportunity to compare artist to artist to support a simple thesis: Kokoon Club members were the young buck vanguard trying to establish a foothold for modern art in Cleveland, while the membership of the Cleveland Society of Artists reflected the older, more gentlemanly and conservative opposition.

I now present this thesis somewhat differently—not because my original instinct wasn't accurate, but because upon further reflection I believe that my original methodology was wrong. To study the impact of the Kokoon Club and the Cleveland Society of Artists on Cleveland's art and social history, one must study the group behavior of the artist-members.

An exploration of the written and oral histories of the two groups, rather than the study of individual artists, yields the information about group behavior critical to our understanding of the art community in Cleveland in the first half of the century. These two institutions came into existence, developed, and changed in self-conscious response to significant changes in the nature of the art community in Cleveland in the 1910s and '20s, and I have limited my discussion to these two groups as they existed and functioned from 1911 to 1930.

In the history ("mythology") of Cleveland's art community, the Kokoon Club and the Cleveland Society of Artists (henceforth C.S.A.) are generally regarded as the major participants in reenacting an age-old conflict: partisans for innovation and new ideas versus the partisans for academic art and the status quo. In the history of western civilization this theme has been played in almost every century [e.g. Titian and Bronzino—the Venetian colorists vs. the Florentine linear artists; the Rubenistes vs. the Poussinistes; students of the Neo-classical David vs. romantic individualists like Delacroix; the overly saccharine Bougereau vs. the artists of the Impressionist movement.]

For C.S.A. members the battle being waged was that of temperate, mature artists against upstart modernists whose reputations were made via shocking displays like the infamous Bal Masques. Kokoon Club members were seen to be too avant-garde; their works were intended to evoke response rather than serious reflection. For Kokoon members the C.S.A. was just another in an entire history of established academic institutions that tried to hold the up and coming generation of artists down. The C.S.A. mem-
bers' approach to art was both old-fashioned and intransigent; they seemed unwilling to accept new ideas, much less incorporate them into their own work.

No matter what antagonism existed between the two groups, the real battle of the early moderns in Cleveland was not between the Kokoon Club and the Cleveland Society of Artists, but was a battle fought by both groups for recognition within the general community of Cleveland: a community that was actively involved in grand plans which impacted on the artistic community without actively involving them. The animosity between the two groups was occasioned as much by the anxiety of competing for the all too little recognition in the community as by the ideological differences between the two groups.

Let me also add at this point that this phenomena is not unique to Cleveland; other large cities in the United States (Chicago, Cincinnati, Boston, Philadelphia, etc.) experienced similar competing artists' societies during the same time period. What set Cleveland apart was the intensity of the controversy and the amount of written records that still survive and testify to the vitality of the artistic climate.

It is necessary to begin this discussion with some historical background because the first of these two clubs, the Kokoon Arts Club, was not formed until 1911. The first decade of the twentieth century was a decade of great change in Cleveland. On August 17, 1903 Daniel Burnham and his minions had presented to the City The Group Plan of the Public Buildings of the City of Cleveland. Like the Great White Way of Burnham's Colombian Exposition, downtown Cleveland was to be transformed into a Neo-Classical monument to the progressive vision of Cleveland's movers and shakers. Progressive as it may have been to most citizens in 1903, to a new generation of young architects and artists The Group Plan must have seemed regrettably old-fashioned. Little did they know that Cleveland would be committed to doggedly pursuing that Neo-Classical vision for the coming three decades.

In 1905 Cleveland's Otis Lithograph Company hired Carl Moellman, a young artist who had studied in New York under "Ash Can School" painter Robert Henri. Moellman, a nationally-renowned poster artist, was hired to jazz up movie theater posters with something of Henri's style. Moellman had exhibited his works in New York with other painters of the Ash Can School; as a group they were popularly called "The Eight." The Eight rejected the standards for style and subject matter established for painters by the French Academy of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Typically works by The Eight were painted in darker palettes and featured American themes, scenes of daily life from the streets and boroughs of New York. Many of The Eight made their living as newspaper artists prior to the advent of the use of photography in journalism, and were highly attuned to the visual qualities of daily life in the United States.

We can imagine that Moellman and his contemporaries at Otis Lithograph felt frustrated at the city's commitment in The Group Plan to an old-fashioned style of public architecture at the beginning of a new century. Far worse, however, must have been the realization that these grand public buildings were to be decorated by old-school artists as well; artists who did not even hail from Cleveland.
The first universal—if unspoken—truth held by most of Cleveland’s moneyed population at the
turn of the century: fine artists from any city larger and to the east of Cleveland were invariably better
than native fine artists.⁴

Much of the push to build the city’s great institutions [the Music School Settlement (1912), the
Cleveland Museum of Art (inc. 1913, open to the public 1916), the Cleveland Play House (1915), the
Cleveland Orchestra (1918) and the Cleveland School of Music (1920 etc.)] was to establish Cleveland as a
great art center and to train future generations. However, at the turn of the century—and until the close
of World War I—Cleveland’s art patrons were still suffering the after-effects of nineteenth century
provincialism and promoting all things European, or importing trends and fashions from the East Coast,
even as they supported fledgling arts-oriented institutions.

This attitude toward Cleveland’s native artists had a long tradition in Cleveland. Harriet Kester,
Principal of the Western Reserve School of Design for Women, says in her prospectus for the 1883 school
year:

> While we may be glad to foster and develope [sic] the fine arts, our first care is
for the art industries....America should soon be able to compete with Europe in
its industries—such as glass painting, china decorating, pottery and the like—all
of which greatly tends to increase the wealth and importance of a country.

Her message was the message of John Ruskin, William Morris, and the decorative arts movement:
Cleveland was an industrial society and its artists should be first and foremost “commercial” artists,
rather than fine artists.

In 1910 the first building of the Cleveland Group Plan, The Federal Building —originally known
as the United States Post Office, Custom House, and Court House —opened to great fanfare. Visitors
streamed through the doors of the new building admiring sculptures by Daniel Chester French and
paintings by nationally- and internationally-known mural artists, such as Francis D. Millet, Kenyon Cox,
and Edwin H. Blashfield. Typical of the types of work to be seen in the new building was an oil painting
by William H. Low, which depicts The City of Cleveland, Supported by Federal Power, Welcomes the Arts
Bearing the Plans for the New Civic Center. It is a charming allegory, traditionally painted in a grand
manner, but hardly a painting to impress a new generation of artists in 1910. Thus, by 1910, the time was
ripe to organize Cleveland artists who considered themselves forward-thinking.

On August 26, 1911 Carl Moellman and William Sommer, also a poster artist, organized the
Kokoon Arts Club with the overarching goal of bringing modernism to Cleveland. Moellman had been a
member of the Kit Kat Club in New York City, and wanted to introduce Cleveland artists to the type of
cubl life he had enjoyed there.⁵ The Kit Kat club, organized as an artist society in 1881 and itself modeled
along the lines of Parisian bohemian clubs, offered artists opportunities to attend weekly drawing and
painting classes, annual exhibitions, and instructional and humorous lectures and discussion (later, of
course, the Kit Kat Club became more socially and less arts-oriented). The 13 original members of the Kokoon Arts Club in Cleveland envisioned a similar format for their own club.

The term Kokoon was intended to inspire the emergence of the individual artist as well as the city of Cleveland to a greater awareness of art. Moellman and other club members had rather specific principles for the club which reflected their dissatisfaction with the art community in 1911. Their stated goals were: “1) to provide facilities and working classes; 2) to encourage individual art development and expression; 3) to offer advice and criticism on request; 4) to discourage any dominating personality; 5) to encourage and improve the art life of Cleveland.”

Three important problems (or perceived problems) that club members had with the art community in Cleveland became immediately apparent. First, artists felt that individual development was not encouraged by the local arts community. Second, club members were sensitive (perhaps overly so) to uninvited criticism of their work. Third, members believed that politics and personalities were playing rather more of a role in the art community than they thought necessary.

In 1911 the major art institution in Cleveland was The Cleveland Institute of Art. Much of the dissatisfaction of the Kokoon Club members stems from the fact that the Cleveland School of the Arts seems to have had a near monopoly on who was or was not displayed in local exhibitions until 1919 (when the First Annual Exposition of Cleveland Artists & Craftsmen was held at the new Cleveland Museum of Art). In 1911 local artists who were not professors, students or alumni of the school perceived themselves as out of the loop as far as the art community was considered. Moellman and Sommer gathered their small band of young, mostly commercial artists (lithographers, engravers, decorators, designers) to combat this sense of disenfranchisement and to encourage modern art. Later in the Club’s history many of its members hailed from the Institute’s hallowed halls—including Henry G. Keller, Charles Burchfield, and Abel and Alexander Warshawsky to name a few.

The years 1911 and 1912 saw the Club’s numbers slowly growing but keeping a low profile; though membership was limited to 30 males in the early years, at its peak in the twenties, the Kokoon Club had some 60 active members. The Kokoon Arts Club really came to the notice of Clevelanders in 1913. In early 1913, taking their cue from the Kit Kat Club’s “Brimstone Festival,” the Kokoon Club threw the first of its infamous Bal Masques to raise money for a clubhouse. In 1930, Carle Robbins provided a description of Cleveland’s response to the first Bal Masque,

Immediately a furious buzz arose from groups of buttoned up Victorians. Insignificant little gentlemen in white ties and verjuice in their veins licked thin lips and emitted little squeaks of protest. Fat lipped reformers made nervous motions with their hands and sniffed the air. Policemen spat on their palms and took a firmer grip on their billys. The artists walked softly and expressed themselves by sly winks that hinted much, but promised nothing. Things were working out nicely.
Though Robbins' description was tongue-in-cheek, his comments were not far off the mark. The public's imagination ran wild, envisioning in Cleveland the wild immorality of the artist's quarter in Paris—orgies on a scale rivaled only by ancient Rome.

Later that year, a second event occurred which caused yet another shiver of uneasiness among the general public and the more traditional art cognoscenti. In June, while New York City was still responding to the strange works at the 1913 Armory Show, Henry Keller, a member of the Kokoon Club and a teacher at the Art School, arranged for an exhibition of ten 'Cubist' and 'Futurist' pictures from Paris to be shown in the Taylor Department Store Gallery. An editorial about the show stated, "To the average mind cubism is tomfoolery, and the defenses and explanations and songs of praise offered by its devotees seem only to strengthen the popular impression."

The battle lines were beginning to be drawn in Cleveland and it was in 1913 that the Cleveland Society of Artists was founded by George Adomeit and Charles Shackelton. The Cleveland Society of Artists was founded to continue the tradition of academic painting and sculpture in Cleveland. Like the Kokoon Arts Club, the Society of Artists met to draw, paint, hear relevant lectures, and to hold annual exhibitions.

I have not located the original articles of incorporation for the Cleveland Society of Artists, but the constitution and by-laws of the society as published in 1928 state their objective as "...the advancement of art and knowledge thereof and its dissemination, providing instruction and education in and maintaining courses of lectures on art, conducting exhibitions and other activities which may stimulate artistic production and to do any and all things incident to the foregoing." This statement is not particularly revealing but was rather standard boilerplate language for artist groups in the late twenties.

In reviewing other C.S.A. documents from the twenties, however, a researcher may get the distinct impression that history was being revised somewhat. In a March 1928 issue of Silhouette, the organ of the Cleveland Society of Artists, under the heading "Historical Stuff" the editor quotes a paper by H. Turner Bailey, dean of the Cleveland Institute of Art,

In 1875 a few progressive citizens of Cleveland, interested in art, organized The Arts Club of Cleveland. After a checkered existence of thirty years or more, this Club expired. The good seed it had sown was not lost; for in 1913 some of its members, reinforced by others, inspired by the enthusiasm of George Adomeit and Charles Shackelton organized a new Arts Club which in course of time became The Cleveland Society of Artists.

The gentlemen who founded the Cleveland Society of Artists in 1913 are here characterized as torchbearers for the earliest of Cleveland's art societies. Furthermore, after quoting Bailey's article the editor suggests (to a sympathetic audience of his own members) a little revisionist history with his textual exegesis, "Then as late as 1913 there seems to have been no art organization until our club was started. If we are wrong we would like details." (Not only was the Kokoon Arts Club founded before the C.S.A. in 1911, but the Women's Art Club was organized in 1912.)

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It is also interesting to note that the ubiquitous William Ganson Rose, who furnishes the revised history version of the C.S.A. story in *The Making of Cleveland*, makes no mention of the Kokoon Arts Club in his chronicles of the city.

Returning to 1913, in less than one year the Kokoon club had achieved a certain notoriety with its support of Cubist and Futurist Art, the introduction of a scandalous note in the night life of the city with the Bal Masque and had shaken up the traditional art community enough for some of those artists to found or, if you will, re-establish the Cleveland Society of Artists.

In early 1914 events came to a head when Alexander and Abel Warshawsky, alumni of the Cleveland Art School, organized a second exhibition: this one featuring the work of Post-Impressionist artists from New York, but including the work of local artists including William Sommer and Frank Wilcox. This second exhibition prompted the series of oft-quoted newspaper headlines, "BIGGEST LAUGH IN TOWN THIS WEEK, NOT IN THE THEATER BUT ART GALLERY: Exhibition of Cubists and Post-Impressionists at Taylor Store Expected to Prove a Scream" (*Plain Dealer*) and "NEW ART? ALL ROT! GOTTWALD DECLARES" (*Leader*).

From 1914 on, there was no going back for artists. Whatever artistic battles were fought among artists in the community in the early years of this century, by late 1914 the rivalry between the two leading artists' societies had become dogma, a point of pride, another universal truth not to be disputed—like the rivalry between the University of Michigan and Ohio State University. Because of *Silhouette*, more of the vitriolic comments directed at the Kokoon Arts Club have survived. For example, this notice appeared in a December issue:

In the Cleveland Times the day after Thanksgiving there appeared an article about the projected auction to be held by the Kokoon Club. It was auctions, or the aftermath thereof, that lost us some members. Can it be possible that the Reds have someone in their midst of who they want to be rid? If so, we seem to see a new, one-man art club organized in Cleveland to the glory of Windsor Newton. We can recommend auctions heartily as the Great Leveler. Two days after an auction some of the more rabid members bite each other. We wish the Kokoon Club (what a quaint way to spell cocaine) all felicity. They are to be congratulated on their originality at least.17

Notice the next to the last comment; though it was commonly known that Clevelanders referred to the Kokoon Club as the Cocaine Club, this was one of the very few occasions where the nickname appeared in print.

Kokoon Club members got their digs in too. When the dean of Cleveland artists, Frederick Gottwald denounced the 1914 show organized by the Warshawsky brothers, Alexander Warshawsky countered with a few comments of his own. "Mr. Gottwald makes the interesting statement that there is no such thing as 'academic art dying.' With this we agree. It is quite impossible for anything to die that has never lived."18
The rancor between the two groups was exacerbated by the feeling on both sides that their position was simply not understood, nor was their art appreciated by the general public. There seems to have been an undercurrent of suspicion that “the other group” was doing better in the community, when the truth was—as it is in any art community—a few individuals were extremely successful and the vast majority of artists felt themselves underappreciated if not completely ignored by the hoi polloi.

Dissatisfaction came to a head just before and after annual auctions. At C.S.A. headquarters the artists’ very real concerns are satirically recorded in Silhouette. Here are just a few examples:

The Auction is upon us with its clatter and its fuss, and soon the cognoscenti will arrive by car and bus. They’ll stroll in nonchalantly, there to sit upon their hands; On their one-way pockets they will carry iron bands.

From our point of view the auctions have always been successful. The prime motive was to obtain additional funds toward the purchase or erection of Club Rooms. What tho a picture went at a low price as to cause strong men to shudder and accomplish our purpose, and in return our dear Public (applause) has been able to obtain representative pictures of men of known worth at virtual the price our Public sets upon that work!19

Excerpt from Mr. Bailey’s letter to Club Members: “They want pictures they can live with happily. Contribute this year comparatively small pictures—not larger than 25 x 30, and other objects for home use.”20

And my personal favorite,

Twinkle, twinkle, little Sketch, How I wonder what you’ll fetch! Do you think some august dame Will kick in your cost of frame?

Will the babbling auctioneer Gird his loins and sell you dear? Or, will some bejeweled hen Get you for a five or ten?21

The Kokoon Arts Club took a radical step to eliminate favoritism and “name” buying by its patrons which was much scoffed at by C.S.A. members. At Kokoon Club annual shows pictures were left unsigned until purchased. Realistically of course, artists and cognoscenti knew whose works were whose but the socialite buyer was forced, members believed, to choose a work based upon style rather than the name and fame of the artist. Kokoon Club members felt haunted by critical reviews, particularly abused by the press was artist William Sommer. An undated newspaper clipping from the Cleveland Leader (probably from the mid 1920s) bears the headline “Sommer Shows 7 of the Worst in Exhibition” and Kokoon artists are criticized for “mistaking distortions for discoveries.”22 Sommer draws a lot of criticism from the press, a 1922 Cleveland Leader critic wrote,
But the pictures that will probably cause some visitors the greatest astonishment are the work of William Sommer and Edwin G. Sommer. Both are weird and uncouth in their methods and subjects, but the older man is easily ahead in malodorous scenes grossly and clumsily done.

A review of the actual reviews of the 1924s reveals as many positive comments about the works of Kokoon Club artists as negative ones. The negative comments are just more lively and apt to be quoted by historians.

Cleveland artists from both clubs seemed to be most offended by the patrons desire to purchase works by "famous" Cleveland artists. The following excerpt from a 1925 ballad from Silhouette explores their dismay:

An artist and a Stylish Stout were talking at a Tea
The Conversation turned to Art. It would, infallibly.
The Lady said, in accents wild, "Come, help me out a bit,
I'm in an awful state of mind and can't get out of it.

But yester'en I saw a Show of pictures at the School,
Now here a barn; now there a brook, and eke a placid pool.
One picture in particular fair captured my young heart,
I yenned to purchase same," she wept, "But here's the doleful part.

My query for the Painter, brought a painful truth to light.
No one had ever heard of him. He was an unknown wight.
In agony of spirit, then, I shouted for my Pierce.
I couldn't buy an Unknown's work. Believe me I felt fierce."

The artist overturned a chair and struggled for control.
He fought against a made desire to knock her for a goal.
"Go buy that painting, Dame, at once! That's my advice," yelped he.
"And never more come moaning 'round of names, and such to me!" 23

In 1916 the nature of Cleveland's art community changed irrevocably with the opening of The Cleveland Museum of Art. Ten years earlier Frederick Gottwald had commented on Cleveland as a major city without a museum:

Other cities have been held up...as...much farther advanced in art because they are possessors of museums....Cleveland, on the other hand, began her art development with a school....Cleveland is unique in the history of this country in having kept alive an interest in art without a gallery. 24

In century prior to the opening of the museum, Cleveland had supported superlative craftsmen and a small number of artists, like Caroline Ransom and Archibald Willard who could support themselves with their work.

With the opening of the Cleveland School of Art (first in 1882 as the Western Reserve School of Design for Women), Cleveland began producing a more adept and academically trained community and attracting prominent artist-teachers. Still, unlike artists in European cities and those on the East Coast, the primary source of inspiration for Cleveland students of art was the life and the landscape around Northern Ohio. Their exposure to more traditional fine arts and collections was limited to their own
travels in the United States and Europe, the infrequent loan expositions, and other small traveling exhibitions, and annual exhibitions at the School of Art.

The opening of the museum proved to be a Pandora’s box for artists in the community. On one hand, Mr. Whiting, the director of the museum, was committed towards community outreach. He advocated collecting items of everyday use which would inspire Cleveland’s artisans and craftsmen (again encouraging the “commercial artist” in the broadest sense of the word, rather than the “fine artist”). He encouraged a healthy relationship between the art school and the museum and, in 1919, with the help of Decorative Arts Curator and later Director, William Milliken, supported local artists with an annual juried display of their work. Milliken described the early years in the following passage:

We had an out-of-town jury, and there was no fear of favor. The things were judged on the basis of their artistic quality—not because this man was important in the art association, or that man was an important person and must be represented. The result of that undertaking had been a clear-cut gain, and as the thing has gone on year after year, we see a growth that is extraordinary.

Milliken seems to have looking at the history of the show through rose colored glasses; as the administration of the museum soon found out, juried shows of local work were a mixed blessing at best. Someone was always unhappy with the process and the results.

Issues of Silhouette throughout the ’20s are full of complaints about the “Spring Exhibition.”

‘OH WELL’ We find there’s to be a Spring Exhibition again at the Museum. Our guess is as good as yours: Saturday—take your pictures to the Museum; Monday—got and get ‘em; Tuesday—Exhibition opens. Good luck to you, old man, and may you bring your pictures up in the style to which the jury is accustomed. (March 1925)

Someone suggested a Salon Refusee [sic] to be held somewhere [for works rejected by the May Show jury], maybe in Public Hall or in the new Union Station. The question was voted dropped after some debate. Public Hall wouldn’t be large enough.” (May 1926)

A First View gives the hoi polloi a chance at Atmosphere and such. They shake the moth balls from the “Tucks” and all turn out to beat the Dutch. What price an evening’s culture spent by wriggling in a hard boiled shirt? What price a last year’s dinner frock with too high bodice—too long skirt? In Fords and Royces here they come a Night of Nights is theirs at last. Bourgeois, Intelligenzia and Diletante—what a caste! And then the Artists, washing and shaved with snowy shirt, their hair ashine accompanied by adoring wives who fairly shout, “This man is mine!”

The pictures are obscured from sight—who came to see them anyway? If Art is what you want to see you’ll have to come another day.

The final statement doesn’t sound much different from the complaints I overheard at May Shows during the ’80s.
There may well be no conclusion to this paper other than to say that the battle of the early moderns in Cleveland was really the ever-present battle of contemporary artists to find validation in the eyes of the general public. In every generation only a few artists are successful in their fight and for the rest, the battle itself proves a motivating force and rallying point. The Kokoon Arts Club and the Cleveland Society of Artists were active, lively, productive support groups. Wisdom and Destiny, Keller's contribution to the historic 1913 Armory show, offers a message for contemporary artists and art historians alike. Wisdom should tell us that it is the destiny of living artists and scholars to actively battle for their place in contemporary society. I conclude with Keller's own words from an article of 1913:

However unpictorial from our ordinary viewpoint the creations of some present-day artist may appear to be, there is nevertheless in many of them some newly discovered truth; they are the steps in an evolution, and we may hope that some day the evolution will be consummated and that from out of the apparent chaos which at present exists a really compelling picture will be created.25

Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge those people without whom this paper could not have been completed. First let me acknowledge Kokoon scholar James Shelley who shared views of the Kokoon Club as well as personal articles and notes. Secondly, Michael J. Morgenstern generously gave of his time—in the midst of preparing for thesis examinations—to do long distance research for me. I am indebted as well to Dr. David Van Tassel and John Grabowski of the Encyclopedia of Cleveland History. As always, I am grateful to the two men who have, more than anyone else, inspired and fostered my love for Cleveland history: Andrew Chakalis and Dr. Edward J. Olszewski.

2. I use the word fraternities with regard to these two clubs because both were originally open only to male artists and both groups were as much social organizations as art organizations.


4. This is not the time to get into a discussion of the entire 19th century concept of Highbrow versus lowbrow art—I refer you to Lawrence W. Levine’s Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America.


6. American Art Annual 1911, Vol. 9, Florence N. Levy, Editor (Annual of American Art, New York, 1911), p. 196. The Kit Kat Club was located at 13 East 14th Street in Manhattan. In 1911, it had 84 active members and an annual Brimstone Festival which, presumably, was the inspiration for the Kokoon Arts Club’s bal masques.

7. Shelley, (unpublished notes), p. 8. According to Shelley, the initial roster of the club were artists of primarily Germanic descent including: Moellman, Sommer, Mueller, Brubeck, Liebner, Humphreys, Earnshaw, Bloss, Haugger, Mayer, Carmone, Butler, and Stebner.


11. Robbins, p. 16. “Bringing it down to the practical, these balls have done much to further the cause of art in Cleveland. They have enabled the Kokoon Club to continue their programs of study and exhibitions. These have been of immeasurable value to so many young artists. They have encouraged the experimenting the freedom of thought and viewpoint, the radicalism which makes for progress in art.”


18. Wixom, p. 23.


24. Wixom, p. 22.
