
“Light the Beauty Around You”

The Art Collection of the Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs

by William M. Tsutsui and Marjorie Swann

Women’s clubs—the voluntary associations dedicated to self-improvement, social reform, and charitable work that sprouted throughout nineteenth-century America, gained national prominence during the Progressive era and have endured into the new millennium—have long been easy targets of ridicule. Even in the groups’ heyday, cynical observers such as Sinclair Lewis harshly caricatured their elitist pretensions, intellectual shallowness, and “do-gooding” zeal. In more recent years scholars, especially historians of women, have

William M. Tsutsui, 2003–2004 president of the Kansas State Historical Society, is an associate professor of history at the University of Kansas and director of the Kansas Consortium for Teaching about Asia. He holds degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and Princeton, and among his many books and articles are *Manufacturing Ideology: Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan* (1998) and *Banking Policy in Japan: American Efforts at Reform During the Occupation* (1988). Marjorie Swann, who earned her doctorate at Oxford University, is an associate professor of English at the University of Kansas where she teaches Renaissance literature, feminist criticism, and material culture studies. Her publications include *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (2001).

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A collection of fine art forms the backdrop for members of the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs gathered at the headquarters of the Kansas Traveling Art Gallery, 1906.



Under the energetic leadership of Kate Aplington, a traveling art gallery was circulated to clubs, schools, and the general public across Kansas. The touring exhibit became known simply as the "Aplington Art Gallery."

re-examined the clubs, seeking to find in their social activism an organizational ancestor of the late-twentieth-century feminist movement.¹ But while such revisionist historians have praised the contributions of women's clubs to political causes such as suffrage, children's welfare, and pacifism, they, like the critics of an earlier age, generally have been dismissive of the organizations' cultural activities. Fine art appreciation, the promotion of American art, and the encouragement of amateur artistic creation, all staples of clubs' cultural programs for the past century, have been derided by satirists and feminist scholars alike as narrow, trivial, "dilettantish," and "self-centered."²

This article examines the fine art programs of the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs (KFWC), and especially the federation's efforts from the 1920s to the 1960s to build a collection of original paintings and prints by Kansas artists. Questioning the assumption that club art activities were frivolous "passive recreation," this article

1. Standard sources on the history of American women's clubs include Ann Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980); Theodora Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs 1860–1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). See also Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

2. See Karen J. Blair, *The Torchbearers: Women and their Amateur Arts Associations in America, 1890–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 4; Scott, *Natural Allies*, 127; Christine Pawley, "'Not Wholly Self Culture': The Shakespearean Women's Club, Osage, Iowa, 1892–1920," *Annals of Iowa* 56 (Winter/Spring 1997): 32.

explores the complex motivations, sophisticated methods, and tangible results of KFWC visual arts initiatives. This study also challenges the notion, now firmly entrenched in the historical literature on women's clubs, that the club movement lost its dynamism after 1920, as women, fortified with the vote and greater opportunity in the public sphere, increasingly looked beyond social clubs for stimulation, expression, and advancement. The KFWC experience suggests that, at least with regard to art programs, the work of women's clubs in the decades after 1920 was not "diminished in scope and reduced to . . . trivialities" but exhibited growth, dynamism, and significant achievement.³

The Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, a charter member of the national General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), was founded in 1895 "to bring together women's clubs of the state for mutual helpfulness, for social union, and for united action on measures conducive to public welfare."⁴ Although the KFWC membership generally was homogenous in terms of race, class, and gender—white, Protestant "wives and daughters of middling businessmen, professionals, landowning farmers"—the federation encompassed a variety of local groups, both rural and urban, small and large, with a wide range of interests, goals, and abilities. Reflecting this organizational diversity, the KFWC pursued numerous cultural, educational, and social reform programs, gaining recognition in the early twentieth century for its work to establish local libraries and a state Traveling Libraries Commission, to encourage manual training in public schools and reformatories, to further children's welfare and the provision of kindergartens, and to promote public health and improve municipal sanitation.⁵

3. June O. Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas: Women's Organizations, 1880–1920," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 7 (Winter 1984/85): 305–6; Scott, *Natural Allies*, 172–74; Blair, *The Torchbearers*, 200–3.

4. Mrs. P. A. Pettitt, "Fifty Years with the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs," in Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, *Yearbook, 1945–1947, Fiftieth Anniversary* (N.p.: n.d.), 4–5. The KFWC grew out of an earlier federation, the Social Science Club of Kansas and Western Missouri (founded 1881), and was originally chartered as the Kansas State Social Science Federation in 1895, only officially becoming the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs in 1904.

5. Pettitt, "Fifty Years with the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs"; Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas"; Scott, *Natural Allies*, 4; see also Janice C. Steinschneider, *An Improved Woman: The Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs, 1895–1920* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1994), for a detailed demographic study of midwestern clubwomen. On African American women's clubs in Kansas, see Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900–1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Spring 1986): 19–30.

Attention to the fine arts was of central concern to the KFWC from the very start. As early as 1895 the chair of the federation's Art and Archaeology Committee took her "especial aim" to be "the further extension of art knowledge and art appreciation among the people," so as "to awaken the slumbering genius of [Kansas] women, to discover and make use of their talents for the good of society at large."⁶ In 1903 the KFWC executive board resolved that the federation should create a traveling art gallery, analogous in basic form (as well as civilizing function) to the traveling libraries already established by Kansas clubwomen. Under the energetic leadership of Kate Aplington of Council Grove, a book of quotations was assembled and published, and the profits (some \$316.85) were used to purchase several dozen large-format photographic reproductions of European old master paintings. Later supplemented with additional reproductions and organized into five "collections"—Italian, Dutch, French, German, and American—the traveling gallery was circulated to local clubs that held exhibitions for their members, school groups, and the general public.⁷ As Aplington explained, the art gallery was intended "to diffuse throughout our state a knowledge and love of what is best in art." She continued:

The study of art is one of the higher educational influences. It is a means of bringing happier, better thoughts into the lives of our people; it helps to widen our ideas and sympathies. This Art Gallery which travels through every section of our state . . . should prove an inspiration to many who have a dim and indefinite longing after art expression. . . . Art appreciation is the first step toward true art growth in a community.⁸

6. "Contest of Kansas Clubs" (1895), in Kansas State Social Science Federation, "Notes in Regard to Art Gallery," 1, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society. As Marilyn Brady documents, art was also an important concern of the Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. In comparison with the KFWC, however, the African American clubwomen appeared less interested in fine arts than domestic arts and crafts (such as needlework) and initially placed more emphasis on participation and creation than on art appreciation.

7. "History of the Art Gallery Movement in Kansas" in *Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs Art Catalogue*, ed. Kate A. Aplington (Council Grove, Kans.: 1906), 17–18.

8. Kate A. Aplington, *Report of Traveling Art Gallery* (Council Grove, Kans.: 1905), 3. In the words of one GFWC leader, art-minded clubwomen

You are invited to visit the Kansas Headquarters, room 32, to view the State Federation Traveling Art Gallery, which will be hung upon the walls; new pictures each day.

The Superintendent of the Art Gallery, Mrs. Kate A. Aplington, will be in charge from 8:30 to 9:30 a. m. and from 4 to 5:30 p. m. each day.

Mrs. May Belleville Brown,
President Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs.

An invitation card welcomed visitation to the state federation traveling art gallery. The gallery was intended "to diffuse throughout our state a knowledge and love of what is best in art."

In its first three years on tour, the gallery (which came to be known simply as the "Aplington Art Gallery") was displayed in more than ninety towns, and the federation could claim that fifty-five thousand people had attended exhibitions of this "extensive and valuable collection."⁹ In 1907, at the strong urging of the KFWC, the Kansas legislature accepted the Aplington Art Gallery for the state, placing it under the supervision of the Kansas Traveling Libraries Commission. As one GFWC leader remarked of Aplington, "This little woman has done more for her state than any other woman or set of women have done for any state in the United States, and Kansas as a whole is better advanced along art lines than any other state in the union."¹⁰

Despite these early achievements, KFWC art programs appeared to languish in the two decades following the creation of the Aplington Art Gallery. Only in the mid-1920s did the federation again begin to show sustained interest in visual arts initiatives and embrace a renewed commitment to encourage art appreciation through traveling exhibitions. But the art-minded clubwomen of the 1920s did not look simply to creating an updated version of Aplington's "priceless treasures [from] the old-world art galleries."¹¹ Instead, the KFWC, like other women's clubs across the nation in the patriotic wake of World War I, increasingly came to stress the value of American art and, in particular, the work of regional artists. "The habit of thinking of art only

sought to "serve the people who do not know how badly they need service." Quotation in Blair, *The Torchbearers*, 76.

9. "The Traveling Art Gallery" in "Notes in Regard to Art Gallery," 3.

10. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1907, in "Notes in Regard to Art Gallery," 5.

11. Aplington, *Report of Traveling Art Gallery*, 3.



The impetus to purchase a new traveling exhibition for the Kansas federation largely came from Julia Parsons Lofgren, who served as chair of the KFWC Art Division from 1923 to 1925.

in relation to Europe must be changed," the federation's Art Division chair declared in 1927, "for the artistic activity of the Southwest, and in fact over all America, has proved this feeling to be unjustified. Such art communities as Lindsborg . . . leave their lasting impression on American art and speak for its supremacy."¹² Moreover, club leaders also began to emphasize the importance of displaying, studying, and possessing original works of art. Rather than encouraging only the admiration of photo-reproductions of unobtainable European masterpieces, the KFWC endorsed such slogans as "Know and own original works of Kansas artists."¹³

The impetus to purchase a new traveling exhibition for the Kansas federation largely came from Julia Parsons Lofgren, who served as chair of the KFWC's Art Division from 1923 to 1925. Lofgren was an enthusiastic and effective advocate for art appreciation, and in 1924, using funds raised from GWFC-sponsored pottery exhibits, she purchased a collection of thirty-three original blockprints, etchings, and lithographs by living Kansas artists. Prints, being relatively inexpensive and easily transported, were a natural choice and reflected artistic trends of the day. Many Kansas

12. Mrs. J.E. Johntz, "Division of Art," in *Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, Year Book 1925-1927* (N.p.: n.d.), 165.

13. "Three New Art Projects," *Kansas Federation Magazine* 8 (April 1930): 13.

artists were active participants in the flourishing "print culture" of 1920s and 1930s America, and vibrant communities of printmakers were emerging in Wichita, Topeka, and Lindsborg. The federation's artworks were obtained at a significant discount through the assistance of Birger Sandzen, a nationally recognized painter and printmaker who taught art at Bethany College in Lindsborg. Sandzen was an active promoter of Kansas art, and he may well have encouraged Lofgren in the acquisition of the collection for the KFWC. Perhaps not coincidentally, Lofgren was a resident of Lindsborg, and her husband was a dean at Bethany.¹⁴

The exhibit of prints by Kansas artists, like the Aplington Art Gallery twenty years earlier, was available for rental to local women's clubs for a small fee plus transportation costs. The collection, which was augmented as funding allowed and numbered more than fifty prints by 1930, was accompanied by biographies of the artists represented and a lecture on Kansas art written by Sandzen. Groups mounting the exhibition were encouraged to arrange three-day programs that included study of the works by club members as well as opportunities for viewing by schoolchildren and the general public. The prints on display were all for sale, and federation publications suggested that "they are lovely for homes and make splendid prizes for schools, clubs and other organizations." A small commission was paid to the sponsoring club for any works sold from the exhibit, and the remaining returns were used by the KFWC to purchase replacement prints for the collection. The exhibit proved popular with clubwomen and was well used, traveling to nineteen sites in 1930-1931 alone.¹⁵

14. See, for example, Elizabeth Broun, ed., *Kansas Printmakers* (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art, 1981); *The Prairie Print Makers* (Kansas City, Mo.: Exhibits USA, Mid-America Arts Alliance, 2001); "Exhibits of Kansas Artists," *The Federation News* 3 (May 1925): 2; Johntz, "Division of Art," 166. Lofgren also was a longtime member of the Smoky Hill Art Club, an art appreciation group organized by Sandzen. A number of prints by Sandzen, as well as works by his Bethany students, were included in the KFWC collection. Sandzen was deeply involved in the art activities of women's clubs from the 1920s until his death in 1954, traveling regularly around the state to deliver lectures and mount exhibitions for local groups, district meetings, or federation annual conventions. In a 1932 letter Sandzen's wife wrote a charming report of a 1932 lecture that Sandzen delivered to a Manhattan women's club: "We had just time to get ready when women of all ages and sizes and appearances came streaming in. Just think, one little lady, a charter member, was 87 years old! . . . And then there were a lot of antique looking ladies with all sorts of coiffures and dresses." Alfrida Sandzen to Margaret Sandzen, December 18, 1932, Sandzen Memorial Gallery Archives, Lindsborg, Kans.

15. "Department of Fine Arts," *Kansas Federation Magazine* 8 (August 1930): 12; "Reports of State Chairmen, Department of Fine Arts, Art Division," *Kansas Clubwoman* 8 (May 1931): 5-6.



The driving force behind the Penny Art Fund was Mary P. Butcher of Emporia, the energetic and ambitious chair of the KFWC Art Division from 1935 to 1937. Butcher set a high target—100 percent participation of all members and all clubs—which had yet to be achieved by any state federation.

The rising interest in visual arts among Kansas women's clubs also was demonstrated by the success of the "Penny Art Fund," a program initiated by the GFWC and vigorously pursued by the Kansas federation. The fund was the brainchild of Mrs. Alvoni R. Allen of Jersey City, New Jersey, who proposed that each clubwoman contribute a penny a year to a special account, the proceeds of which would be used by the state federations to support art programs and purchase works by American artists. As Mrs. Allen reasoned, "It would seem that one cent per capita would be a small amount to give but with approximately 2,500,000 members in the GFWC, it would mean that \$25,000.00 a year would be spent for American art."¹⁶ Kansas endorsed the program in 1929, but the initial response was tepid, as local clubs did not understand the fund's goals and the economic climate was not conducive to new fund-raising campaigns. Nevertheless, after only a few years the KFWC had become a national leader in the Penny Art Fund, receiving recognition from the GFWC (and personal praise from Mrs. Allen) on several occasions.¹⁷ The driving force behind these achievements was Mary P. Butcher of Emporia, the energetic and ambitious chair of the KFWC Art Division from 1935 to 1937. Butcher set a high target—100 percent participation of all members and all clubs—which had yet to be achieved by any state federation. In 1937, after much cajoling and arm-twisting by the Art Division chair, the goal was attained, with the 586 Kansas clubs and their 12,951 members contributing a total of \$206.03, every penny of which would "remain within the state and be used for the advancement of art exclusively."¹⁸ Over the next three decades the Penny Art Fund would be the primary means by which the KFWC financed its fine arts programs and expanded its art collections and traveling exhibits.

16. "Penny Art Fund Worthy of Effort," *Kansas Clubwoman* 14 (April 1937): 19.

17. In addition, a Coffeyville clubwoman, Mrs. T. J. Gilstrap, won a GFWC contest to write an official song for the Penny Art Fund. Her verse, sung to the tune of "Oh Susanna," read in part:

Now don't forget our slogan —
Come on, let's make it ring —
"Federated American Pennies
For American Art," let's sing.
May each one catch the vision
And work with heart and hand
To bring about a love of Art
In this our own dear land.

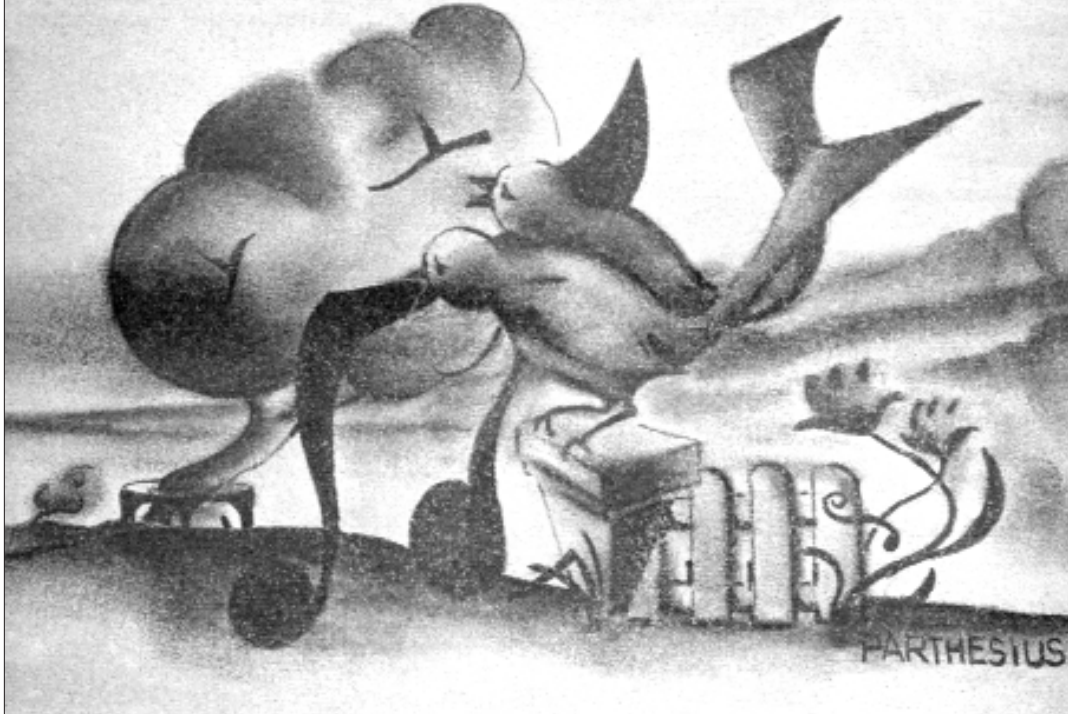
See Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, *Year Book, 1935–1937* (N.p.: n.d.), 64

18. Mrs. Thomas W. Butcher, "Penny Art Fund," *Kansas Clubwoman* 14 (December 1936): 3; Butcher, "Penny Art Fund Report, 1937," in Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, *Year Book, 1937–1939* (N.p.: n.d.), 218–19.

Under a series of very capable Art Division chairs, KFWC art activities remained vigorous through the 1930s, despite the pressures that the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl placed on cultural programming and, even more broadly, on the women's club movement itself. "Doesn't it seem absurd," one Kansas clubwoman asked in 1936, "to offer a group of progressive women a program on 'The History of Art Thru the Ages,' when the most pressing community problem is keeping the schools open or preventing the padding of relief rolls?"¹⁹ Sensitive to such criticism and to declining membership in the Kansas federation, KFWC leaders did attempt to give more attention to immediate social concerns: "We want the general public to feel that in these times of stress, that we are useful. Thru our many lines of work . . . we are endeavoring to do very practical things. . . . we are changing our activities somewhat from the cultural side to meet the pressing needs of our fellow citizens and communities at large."²⁰ Yet federation art programs, and even the acquisition of new exhibits for the KFWC art collection, were not severely constrained by the economic climate or worries about the presumed impracti-

19. Quotation in "Program Building Now at Hand," *Kansas Clubwoman* 13 (March 1936): 14.

20. Mrs. Beryl G. Proffitt, "Seventh District," Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, *Year Book, 1933–1935* (N.p.: n.d.), 129.



This watercolor, which appeared on the cover of the July–August 1945 *Kansas Clubwoman*, was painted by Sergeant Charles E. Parthesius during his stay at the Smoky Hill Army Air Field. According to Mrs. Albert Kushner, this “singing, joyous picture . . . symbolizes the work of the Hobby Hut: a place where the soldier who is artistic may go and work.”

quality of anything cultural. Efforts continued apace to encourage appreciation of American art, promote ownership of original artworks, and increase visual arts education in the public schools. Using proceeds from the Penny Art Fund, two additional traveling exhibits were purchased for the KFWC: in 1933, once again with the assistance of Birger Sandzen, a collection of eighteen watercolors by Kansas artists was procured, and in 1937 Mrs. Butcher assembled a series of color reproductions of old master paintings of the life of Christ. Both of the new exhibits were well received and were used regularly by clubs through the decade.²¹

With the coming of World War II, however, change in the KFWC’s fine arts programming was inevitable. As Sandzen reflected in 1942, “The general atmosphere is just now very unfavorable for us artists. Very few people have time to think of art.”²² Yet art-minded clubwomen struggled

21. On Sandzen’s role, see “Proposal for Art Center Made in Resolution,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 30 (October 1953): 9. At least one Kansas club felt that a “traveling goat,” rather than additional traveling art exhibits, was the most appropriate response to the times: “Mankato club women own a goat, and it has been loaned to a deserving family facing food shortage. If the time comes when this family has no further need for the goat, it may be returned to the club women for re-allotment elsewhere. ‘It was discovered that the Poor Commissioner would order milk for families in need but could not do the economical thing—namely, supply a milk factory to meet the need. The situation so touched the combined humanitarianism and economic good sense of the club women that the goat project was selected and approved,’ is the way Mrs. Lucy Hoff explains the reasons for the purchase of the goat.” See “Club Women Buy a Goat,” *ibid.* 14 (July 1937): 4.

22. Birger Sandzen to Charles Marshall, October 3, 1942, Charles L. Marshall Sr. Papers, University Archives, Kansas State University, Manhattan.

earnestly through the war’s early years to determine a relevant and constructive role for the fine arts in a time of national crisis. Some saw art as a release from the intense pressures of war, “To turn our thoughts away from conflict, frustration, and decay; and for refreshment, encourage concentration upon beauty, love, and true spirituality through the enjoyment of pictures.”²³

Others regarded art as a tangible national asset that had to be mobilized: “We are a people at war and art, if it is to be kept alive must

be made to serve; therefore art must go to war.”²⁴ In the end, the KFWC pursued a course somewhere between the extremes of art as spiritual balm and art as secret weapon, embracing the “countless practical uses of the arts in maintaining military and civilian morale.”²⁵ The federation’s most celebrated wartime innovation was the “Hobby Huts,” fully equipped art studios established at military camps for the recreational use of artistically inclined servicemen. Financed by the Penny Art Fund (which asked a nickel a year of club members during the war) and overseen by two dynamic KFWC leaders, Mrs. Fred Stevenson and Mrs. Albert Kushner, Hobby Huts were established at Camp Phillips and the Smoky Hill Army Air Field, both southwest of Salina, and even at Dodge City’s Ritz Ballroom. The Hobby Huts attracted national attention, and the Kansas federation received a commendation from the GFWC for its pioneering work in promoting the visual arts on military bases.²⁶

23. Mrs. W. W. Brown, “Art Projects,” *Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs, Year Book, 1941–1943* (N.p.: n.d.), 41.

24. Mrs. Albert Kushner, “Art Department,” *ibid.*, *Yearbook, 1943–1944* (N.p.: n.d.), 17.

25. Mrs. J. Warren Burgess, “The Fine Arts in Service to the Nations at War,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 20 (October 1942): 13.

26. On the Hobby Huts, see “Mrs. Kushner Gives Federation Broadcast,” *ibid.* 21 (February 1944): 2–4; Mrs. Fred Stevenson, “Penny Art Fund Renders Valuable Assistance,” *ibid.*: 7, 10; Mrs. Albert Kushner, “Art and Life,” *ibid.* 22 (July–August 1945): 6. Mrs. Stevenson, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago and a former instructor at the State Teachers College in Pittsburg, wrote, “I find there is nothing sadder than a man with an artistic talent who does nothing but train in military prowess. . . . [T]he boy with a deep longing for art work has been pretty much ne-



The establishment of Hobby Huts at Camp Phillips and the Smoky Hill Army Air Field was overseen by two dynamic KFWC leaders, Mrs. Albert Kushner (left) and Mrs. Fred Stevenson (right).



The decades following World War II witnessed a renewed surge of interest in art among Kansas clubwomen. But even though many themes and activities from the pre-war years—the traveling exhibits, the Penny Art Fund, the promotion of regional art—endured, the priorities of KFWC fine arts programs evolved in new directions after 1945. Making art initiatives more “practical,” a concern of many clubwomen since the 1930s, was one ongoing post-war project: the instrumental use of art was affirmed as a way of combating juvenile delinquency, as an inoculant against the spread of Communism, and as a touchstone for humanity in a technological “age of easy living.”²⁷ The impact of the Cold War was strongly felt during the 1950s and 1960s, when federation publications regularly proclaimed the value of art as a barometer of democracy and a resource in America’s cultural arsenal. Thus, a 1963 display of the KFWC watercolor collection by the Marquette Women’s Literary Club became the occasion not just for a delicious covered-dish luncheon, but also for a spirited discussion of the theme “Art is a weapon that keeps Liberty’s flame aglow.”²⁸

Perhaps the most striking postwar development in KFWC art programs, however, was the increased emphasis placed on individual participation in art. “Be In,” one federation slogan encouraged, “Individually, Informed, In-

glected until recently. His sensitive nature demands a release and some times his stability depends upon such an outlet. A ray of beauty, light, and hope may well keep him fit for the business of his military training.” See Stevenson, “Penny Art Fund Renders Valuable Assistance,” 7.

27. Mrs. W. R. Masters, “Youth and Art,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 25 (November–December 1948): 15; Mrs. Everett Lindenmuth, “Report of Art Exhibits,” *ibid.* 39 (May 1963): 11; “President’s Acceptance Address,” *ibid.* 43 (May–June 1967): 2.

28. “Kansagrams,” *ibid.* 40 (November 1963): 7.

involved”: “Be involved in Creativity—the glorious adventure that lets man approach the image of God—the exhilarating experience that raises man above the animals.”²⁹ While a variety of art appreciation programs continued, the promotion of the visual arts (especially painting) as a meaningful hobby for Kansans clubwomen gradually came to dominate KFWC programming. Art talent contests for high school students were started in 1948, and a separate division for the members of women’s clubs was instituted in 1954. An annual Kansas Federation Art Tour, which provided clubwomen and contest winners a day-long program of demonstrations, displays, and lectures, was first staged in 1948 in Lindsborg and was later held in Manhattan, Lawrence, and Wichita. Intensive workshops in watercolor painting for KFWC members were offered beginning in 1973 and proved consistently popular.³⁰

Even as interest in amateur art boomed, the federation continued to add to its art collection. In 1951–1952 a new group of eighteen watercolors by Kansas artists, with a special emphasis on art faculty at Kansas colleges and universities, was purchased. A decade later a large Centennial Art Exhibit featuring works depicting “scenes of importance in the 100 years of Kansas history or incidents of historical interest” was organized and included in the federation’s collection.³¹ Yet the Centennial Art Exhibit would be the last major purchase of original artworks by the KFWC. For a number of reasons, interest in the federation’s traveling ex-

29. Mrs. Carl Riggs, “Fine Arts Department,” *ibid.* 45 (May–June 1969): 8.

30. See, for example, Mrs. R. W. Gallion, “Light the Beauty Around You,” *ibid.* 31 (December 1954): 8; “Large Group Attend First Kansas Federation Art Tour,” *ibid.* 24 (May–June 1948): 5; Centennial History, *GFWC Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs* (Powhattan, Kans., 1988): 42–4.

31. “Centennial Art Exhibit,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 38 (April 1960): 6.

hibits seems to have passed by the 1970s: falling demand for traditional programming such as lectures and exhibitions, a growing perception of art as an individual pursuit rather than a club activity, a tendency to regard art as a decorative accent rather than a central cultural concern, and the fact of declining memberships in women's clubs in general, all contributed to the demise of the KFWC's collecting program.³² To a significant extent, the traveling exhibits may also have been the victims of their own success. By the latter decades of the twentieth century, thanks in no small part to the years of promotion, patronage, and education undertaken by clubwomen, the importance of the fine arts and the reputations of regional artists were firmly established in Kansas. As the Wichita artist David Bernard observed in 1966, "Now that the frontier spirit and atmosphere have disappeared, art has been closely integrated with education at all levels [in Kansas]. Art is not as rare or as unavailable as it has been in the past."³³

By the early 1980s the art collections of the KFWC were worn and increasingly disused. Arranging transportation of the traveling exhibits proved ever more difficult and expensive, and a large number of the artworks had been damaged or lost. In 1983, almost sixty years after the first exhibit of original prints had been purchased (for the princely sum of \$150), the federation resolved to deposit its entire collection with the Kansas State Historical Society for permanent preservation.³⁴

32. See, for example, Mrs. Bert Rebenstorf to J. Cranston Heintzelman, September 2, 1960, folder 21, box 4, Kansas State Federation of Art files, Marshall Papers. According to Mrs. Rebenstorf, "The clubwomen are becoming more and more interested in art and they are furnishing their homes in better style and taste. Therefore, we are encouraging them to purchase the works of present day Kansas painters."

33. "Minutes of the Thirty-First Annual Meeting of the Kansas State Federation of Art," May 12, 1966, folder 33, box 1, *ibid.*

34. "Latest News Concerning Traveling Art Exhibits," *Kansas Clubwoman* 59 (September–October 1983): 7. The KFWC collection contains works by most of the major (and many of the minor) artists working in Kansas in the mid-twentieth century. Unfortunately, about thirty works from the collection were lost prior to its donation to the Kansas State Historical Society, including all the prints by Birger Sandzen and works by other important artists such as Henry Varnum Poor, Lester Raymer, and C. A. Seward. Women artists are very well represented in the collection: almost half of the eighty-three works currently held by the Historical Society are by women. Interestingly, however, the federation never explicitly declared the promotion of women artists as one of the goals of the collection.

The paintings and prints in the KFWC collection generally are conservative in subject matter and style. Virtually all are representational rather than abstract; they are largely of midwestern/Great Plains scenes and fall within the broad category of regionalism, the mid-twentieth-century art movement that promoted the realistic depiction of American rural life. A number of the prints and paintings in the KFWC collection are sentimental, romanticized in their presentation, and highly decorative—in short, what many observers might well expect to find in a women's club

It is all too easy, especially when reading some of the flowery pronouncements of women's club art advocates, to presume that the KFWC art collection and art appreciation programs were frivolous, condescending, essentially passive, and inconsequential historically. "We remember," Mrs. C. E. Feeley, art division chair wrote in her 1937–1939 report,

that we are still pioneers and pathfinders to the remote and lonely places where Art has not penetrated, and with renewed consecration we dedicate ourselves to the purpose of our beloved Federation, to bring the spiritualizing force of Art to the inner life of our nation. May its inspiring vision rise above the din of the market place and lead us to meditate upon beauty and the eternal realities of life.³⁵

Even generally sympathetic observers such as Karen Blair have looked with cynicism upon such sentiments and minimized the impact of clubwomen: "The clubs' efforts . . . brought only limited success, insofar as most Americans remained skeptical about the utility of absorbing the accomplishments of the Old Masters, or even of local painters and sculptors."³⁶ Yet such slighting judgments fail to consider the complex motivations behind projects such as the KFWC traveling art exhibits, the substantial achievements of clubwomen's art programs, and the insights that can be gained on the regional development of the visual arts and the social history of mid-twentieth-century Kansas from the story of the KFWC art collection.

Although often pursued under trite slogans—"The Fine Art of Living," "Light the Beauty Around You," "Art Adds Luster to Life"—KFWC art activities were seldom passive, shallow, or detached from pragmatic, worldly concerns. For clubwomen, art appreciation was as much a proselytizing mission as a requisite of genteel self-improvement. Art was to be taken out of museums and front parlors, and dispersed into schools, libraries, county fairs, and even the shopfronts of main street: "Get merchants to furnish space

art collection. But not all of the works in the KFWC collection are "safe" images, lacking in social commentary or stylistic innovation. Several of the works compel viewers to consider issues of race and class, and a number portray "un-pretty" (but unavoidable) aspects of Kansas life like rural poverty and smokestack industries. Just as the KFWC's art programs were more complicated than most observers have assumed, so its art collection is deeper, more varied, and less conventional than one might easily imagine.

35. Mrs. C. E. Feeley, "Chairman of Art," *Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, Year Book, 1935–1937* (N.p.: n.d.), 49.

36. Blair, *The Torchbearers*, 105–6.

for the exhibits in store windows. . . . Adapt the exhibition artistically to their stock, when possible. . . . Out of doors pictures—fishing, hunting, animal, birds or still-life—would be appropriate in sporting goods or sport clothing stores.” By thus bringing art directly to youth and the general public—“by making new votaries for it”—KFWC leaders aspired to “raise the standards of beauty and thereby spread the knowledge of Art in their communities.”³⁷

Gradually, clubwomen came to reconceive “art appreciation,” understanding it less as a dry, academic training in history, technique and a hallowed western tradition, and more as a meaningful individual connection with the process of artistic creation. That connection, club members recognized, could take many forms, from the purchase and display of art to the promotion of art education in the schools and personal involvement in amateur painting, drawing, or printmaking.³⁸ The KFWC used a variety of means, from good old exhortation to more innovative strategies, to inject the visual arts into everyday life, to emphasize the value of original works of art, and to encourage creative pursuits throughout society. In one ingenious plan the federation proposed that artworks—“statuettes, pieces of pottery, pictures”—be awarded to the winners of school contests and sporting events in place of the traditional loving cups. The idea was adopted in various parts of the state, although it seems unlikely that too many communities saw fit to present victorious high school basketball teams with Sandzen lithographs or Roseville vases.³⁹

Significantly, most Kansas clubwomen did not seem to consider the fine arts a frill, an extravagance, or a triviality. Although consistently concerned that the KFWC’s art activities would be perceived in this way by the general public, especially in times of economic distress or war, clubwomen appeared convinced of the real societal need for and practical benefits of visual arts programs. The provision of art was seen as a community service, inalienable from the other projects of humanitarianism, social reform, and “municipal housekeeping” pursued by women’s clubs. This was made

apparent not only in the consistent prominence of art in the state federation’s endeavors, but also in the grassroots work of small local groups. As the Hope [Kansas] Study Club proudly reported in a 1929 history:

We have helped with the Scholarship Loan fund . . . , the Abbie Clark Hogan Music fund, Near East Relief, assisted our local band, took an active part in educational affairs of the community, helped put out the Rural High School bond election, purchased the drop curtain for the auditorium in the new High School, bought a dictionary and three pictures of Sandzen’s for the school auditorium. Sponsored an art exhibit of Sandzen’s pictures at the High School auditorium. Prof. Sandzen accompanied his exhibit and gave a short lecture. Helped to open and maintain a city rest room.⁴⁰

Although some clubwomen may have aspired to lift art above the “din of the market place,” monetary considerations were always thoroughly enmeshed in the KFWC’s art collecting projects. The Aplington Art Gallery was, from the start, conceived as a fund-raising device. Although the gallery’s primary aim was to “diffuse throughout our state a knowledge and love of what is best in art,” it also promised to “help clubs to put money in their treasuries by means of Art Exhibits.” As Aplington reasoned, “Though the financial success of an exhibit should be held as secondary to its esthetic and cultural value, yet who would say . . . it is not a valuable feature of the exhibit.” Informational flyers on the gallery invariably included hints on ways to make an exhibition profitable, from enlisting schoolchildren in the sale of tickets to persuading “society people” to help with arrangements. Aplington could legitimately boast that “it is proof of the good business sense of the women of Kansas that they have in almost every instance made the Art Exhibits financially profitable.”⁴¹

The monetary value of the KFWC’s art holdings was repeatedly stressed, often to the exclusion of the collection’s aesthetic or educational worth. Aplington’s descrip-

37. Mrs. T. W. Butcher, “National Art Week, Nov. 8–14,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 14 (October 1936): 16; Mrs. Jonathan B. Carter, “Message from State President and General Federation Director,” *Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs, Year Book, 1929–1931* (N.p.: n.d.), 23; Feeley, “Chairman of Art,” 50.

38. See, for example, Mrs. Harry Hatfield, “Fine Arts Department,” *Kansas Clubwoman* 35 (November 1958): 5.

39. “Art Trophies to Victors,” unidentified newspaper clipping, “Fifth District Press and Publicity Department Scrapbook,” 1926–1927, Ruth Gagliardo Collection, Archive of the Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

40. “History of the Hope Study Club,” in “Histories of Individual Clubs of Fifth District,” 1929, *ibid.*

41. Aplington, *Report of Traveling Art Gallery*, 3–4; *Catalogue of the Aplington Art Gallery*, Department of Traveling Libraries Bulletin 1 (Topeka: Kansas State Library, June 1925), 17–18. “The Traveling Art Gallery” in “Notes in Regard to Art Gallery,” 3. It was reported in 1925 that, in the course of a single year, the gallery was exhibited by thirty-two women’s clubs, with gross proceeds of more than \$1,000 and a net of \$780 (which was dedicated to the maintenance of local public libraries). See *Catalogue of the Aplington Art Gallery*, 18.

tion of her gallery began with the direct question, "What did this art collection cost?" and federation publications consistently made note of its great (and appreciating) value. In 1907, when the KFWC was lobbying the state legislature to accept the gift of the Aplington Art Gallery, each lawmaker was given a small card that prominently declared that "\$1,500 would be a low valuation for this collection."⁴² This fascination with the cost of artworks was also apparent in the 1920s and 1930s: descriptions of the federation's print and painting collections always included up-to-date estimates of their replacement values. The KFWC bragged in 1938 that "about \$2,500 worth of art was shown in the art exhibit at the state federation meeting," and in 1931 the Attica Study and Social Club reported an outing to Oklahoma "to see the million and a half dollar collection of original paintings owned by Mrs. Clubb of Kaw City." The collection, raved the Attica clubwomen, was both "beautiful and valuable."⁴³

Although the ethos of the KFWC was implicitly pro-capitalist, the organization seldom explicitly used so politically volatile a term as "capitalism" in its publications. From the 1920s, however, original art was clearly perceived by the federation as financial as well as cultural capital, and the purchase of artworks was promoted as a soundly capitalist way for clubwomen to support humane pursuits. "It is an established fact that just handling a fine painting creates a desire to own one," according to a KFWC Art Division chair. "Fine Art can become an inheritance like any other property. It is an investment, not an expenditure."⁴⁴ Federation publications regularly informed readers that original art made a better long-term investment than reproductions and that the purchase of works by a living artist held the possibility of significant appreciation after the artist's death. During the depression, art was portrayed as a particularly sound investment: "Never have artists sold their work at such reasonable prices."⁴⁵ Even the Penny Art Fund, structured as it was with individual contributions like an annuity or life insurance plan, subtly encouraged the viewing of the federation's art collection as a capital asset. The report of a talk by Birger Sandzen to a women's club in Herington suggests how curiously intertwined the spiritual and capitalist allures of art could become:

[Sandzen] also said that art is an important factor in the lives of our people and that when we have lost the appreciation of prose, art, music and literature we have lost what money cannot buy. He spoke of the value of pictures of Whistler. An Emporia man bought his pictures when they were six and eight dollars apiece. Upon his death, he left a fortune to his wife, the pictures being valued at six and eight thousand dollars.⁴⁶

Although the women's club movement fostered an image of sisterhood and harmonious cooperation, competition was a significant element in KFWC fine arts programs and even played a role in the formation of the federation's art collection. The Penny Art Fund, for example, was designed as a competitive endeavor both on the state and national levels. The GFWC, as well as Mrs. Alvoni Allen herself, offered awards to state federations with the most successful Penny Art Fund campaigns: Kansas Art Division chairs took these national competitions very seriously, and the KFWC was the recipient in the 1930s of several cash prizes and an original watercolor painting. A portion of the fund receipts in Kansas was used to award annual prizes (generally original works by local artists) to clubs that did the most to "raise the standard of beauty in their communities." Additional prizes were given to district officers who were most active in soliciting fund contributions from their members.⁴⁷ The KFWC also encouraged competition between clubs (and individual clubwomen) in building collections of original art and, especially after World War II, used statewide contests as the primary means of stimulating interest in amateur art among youth and club members.⁴⁸

Taken as a whole, the KFWC's wide variety of programs to encourage art appreciation, promote the ownership of original works, collect the paintings and prints of Kansas artists, diffuse art through communities, and spur individual artistic creation provided important impetus to the development of the visual arts in twen-

42. Aplington, *Report of Traveling Art Gallery*, 3; a copy of the card is in "Notes in Regard to Art Gallery," 4.

43. "Outstanding Art at State Meeting," *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 1, 1938; "Editorial," *Kansas Clubwoman* 9 (December 1931): 8.

44. Hatfield, "Fine Arts Department," 5.

45. "Facts to be Remembered about the Penny Art Fund," *Kansas Clubwoman* 15 (February 1938): 10.

46. "Sandzen Talks to Club," unidentified newspaper clipping, "Fifth District Press and Publicity Department Scrapbook."

47. "Penny Art," *Kansas Clubwoman* 11 (December 1933): 8.

48. "Facts to be Remembered about the Penny Art Fund," 10. Individual competition and personal ambition appeared to contribute to the making of the KFWC's successful art programs as well. Several very enterprising and determined Art Division chairs used the office as a springboard to higher positions both in the state federation and at the national level. Julia Lofgren, for instance, was elected KFWC president in the wake of her successful rejuvenation of the federation's art activities in the

tieth-century Kansas. Above all, perhaps, the federation's efforts seem to have been particularly beneficial to the reputations, careers, and pocketbooks of the professional artists of the state. The KFWC traveling exhibits provided local artists with statewide exposure and public recognition. The federation's programs spotlighted Kansas artists who, even in the heyday of American regionalist art, felt slighted by the metropolitan art centers on the East and West Coasts. Clubwomen, in recognition of the "close relationship that has existed for over fifty years between Dr. Sandzen and the women of the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, through lectures and exhibitions," contributed generously to the establishment of the Sandzen Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg.⁴⁹ Most importantly, the KFWC provided the often struggling artists of Kansas with something more concrete than legitimacy, immortality, or popular acclaim: actual monetary income. Federation lectures, publications, and exhortation helped convince Kansans of the potential spiritual and financial rewards of buying original works by living artists. Clubwomen gave artists substantive assistance in marketing, not only by mounting exhibitions but also by distributing lists of active local artists, substituting artworks for loving cups in school contests, and often even acting as unpaid sales staff. A Federation Art Division chair exulted in having been "instrumental in placing more than twenty original pictures"; one KFWC district chair was recognized for selling 113 prints to junior club members, "without one cent of profit to herself"; local clubs reported purchasing a dozen original paintings in 1950–1951 alone.⁵⁰ The significance of the KFWC art col-



Among the many significant artworks in the KFWC collection is this 1932 print entitled *Be it Ever So Humble* by Prairie Print Maker Charles M. Capps of Wichita.

lection clearly went far beyond the acquisition and display of some one hundred works by Kansas artists.

To dismiss the cultural activities of American women's clubs as dilettantish, passive, or narrowly self-centered requires a conscious disregard for the history of the determined, energetic clubwomen and their ingenious, effective fine arts program. Moreover, to suggest that after 1920 the clubs were "reduced to single, sometimes erratic issues such as flags in the schools and antibolshevism, or to Tuesday teas and bridge parties," grossly oversimplifies the motivations, underestimates the methods, and denigrates the achievements of groups such as the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs.⁵¹ Although one should not exaggerate the impact of clubwomen on the diverse cultural landscape of twentieth-century Kansas, the scale and scope of their art initiatives demand thoughtful historical consideration. As one federation leader concluded, with ample justification, "If art has made progress and is on the way to further progress, it is largely due to the influence and enthusiasm of women, and the great hope for the future lies in the interest and activities of American women. It has been my observation that a great deal of this interest and progress in art is due to the credit of the club women."⁵²



mid-1920s. The administrative careers of Mrs. J. E. Johntz, Mrs. Albert Kushner, and Mrs. P. A. Pettit traced this same trajectory, and Mrs. Pettit eventually rose to become chair of fine arts at the GFWC. Mary Butcher gained national recognition for her Penny Art Fund drive in Kansas and was personally chosen by Mrs. Alvoni Allen to succeed her as the chair of the national fund committee in 1937.

49. "Proposal for Art Center Made in Resolution," *Kansas Clubwoman* 30 (October 1953): 9; see also Mrs. Allan C. Felt, "A Kansas Artist's Dream Nears Reality," *ibid.* 32 (October 1955): 4–5; "Artist on the Prairie," *ibid.* 34 (February 1958): 1–2.

50. Mrs. C. F. Hough, "Department of Fine Arts—Art Division," *Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, Year Book, 1931–1933* (N.p.: n.d.), 235; Mrs. Geo. Philip Jr., "Art," *ibid.*, *Year Book, 1935–1937*, pt. 2, 36; Mrs. R. O. Bradshaw, "Art—An International Language," *Kansas Clubwoman* 28 (October 1951): 8.

51. Underwood, "Civilizing Kansas," 306.

52. Mrs. J. E. Johntz, unidentified newspaper clipping, 1931, Kansas State Federation of Women's Clubs, clippings, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.