

100 years of promoting the art of printmaking



Bertha von Moschzisker, Print Center director, in 1944.



[GALLERY: Print Center is still in the Latimer...](#)

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POSTED: September 20, 2015

One hot summer night in 1915, a group of wealthy Philadelphians was smoking and chatting on a fire escape at the Art Club of Philadelphia, a now-demolished Frank Miles Day-designed building on South Broad Street.

Why did the city have no venue for discussion and exhibition of prints and printmaking?, they wondered. What an outrage! What a loss!

The Philadelphia Museum of Art had no print collection. In fact, the museum didn't exist yet - its forerunner occupied Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts had a spectacular collection of Old Master prints but kept them in storage, hidden from the public.

"These people decided they'd start this print club, and they started it in people's houses," the club's longtime director Bertha von Moschzisker recalled in a 1990 interview with Anne Schuster Hunter, herself a former Print Club director. "They would invite, say, Mr. Pennell - Joe Pennell - to come with

some prints and . . . ladies and gentlemen would come for tea and see the prints, and he'd talk about them."

This fall, that genteel club, now called the Print Center, is celebrating its 100th anniversary with a series of exhibitions and programs that highlight its own history as a place where printmakers, aficionados, collectors, and curators have gathered to exhibit, instruct, and advocate for their favorite medium.

Von Moschzisker's parents were among those long-ago cofounders and hosted many of the early gatherings.

"The organization started because print was a marginalized medium. It was not recognized among the top tiers of painting and sculpture, so the people who made it and collected it needed that support system," said Elizabeth F. Spungen, current executive director.

"The Print Club was a mecca not just in Philadelphia. It was a mecca to the entire country, and Bertha was well known to audiences across the U.S. and in Europe. There's a record of international exhibitions all over the world. So even from the earliest days, they had a sense of how important it was. For 20 years, we had a relationship with the Brooklyn Museum in the '20s and '30s, where they would take our exhibitions."

Today, the situation is different. Over the years, the Print Club - still located in the building it acquired in 1927, at 1614 Latimer St. - has given about 1,600 prints directly to the Art Museum, providing substantial support for that institution's now-robust print collection. The winner of an annual Print Center purchase prize still goes to the Art Museum.

"Print does not need the bolstering anymore," Spungen continued. "Museums are showing prints and photography - that marginalization is erased. So we're in a place where we can celebrate our medium."

But the Print Club was never simply a gathering place for the refined connoisseur; it was an early venue for African American artists. Allan Randall Freelon became the first exhibiting African American member in 1921. Dox Thrash and others were among exhibitors and teachers at Print Club classes.

Von Moschzisker initiated workshops and artist residencies. In the 1960s, the club launched Prints in Progress, embodied by the Printmobile, which carried a printing press all over Philadelphia and delivered printmakers to inner-city schools and communities for workshops.

That's where a young Allan L. Edmunds, fresh out of Temple's Tyler School of Art, got his start - in an unused Prints in Progress satellite site on Brandywine Street. In 1972, he founded the culturally diverse Brandywine Workshop, now on the Avenue of the Arts. It's also where a young Marion B. "Kippy" Stroud got her start in education and printmaking. She went on to found the Fabric Workshop.

"The Print Club annual was the best show you could get into," Edmunds recalled. "And my concept of what we could be began in the Print Club."

Edmunds says the ramifications of Prints in Progress and its Printmobile and programs - taking art into neighborhoods and schools and prisons - are at work today with different organizations.

"In different times, it's done in different ways," he said. "In communities of color, they were vital. They were essential."

John Caperton, Print Center curator, noted that the center has focused on artists and art-making and providing a place where artists and prospective collectors could talk.

"The resources we provide are varied," he said. "In the fall exhibitions, artists will be paid, several new works commissioned, [there is] commissioned critical writing on this work. . . . Those kinds of critical resources are for the artists, and also resources for us, pretty new, within the last 15 years."

The center's centennial exhibitions will be at a multitude of institutions and galleries, but the anchor shows will be at the Print Center, including "The Print Center 100: Highlights in History," which traces the center's evolution via art, artifacts, and documents; "Gabriel Martinez: Bayside Revisited," a multimedia exhibition with several new commissions; and "Recollection," which brings together artists - from Walker Evans and Rockwell Kent to Rochelle Toner, Kara Walker, and Bill Walton - who use printmaking and photography to document history in personal ways.

The Art Museum will present prints from its Print Center collection, "Print Love: Celebrating the Print Center at 100," from Oct. 2 to Jan. 3.

Dozens of other institutions will also be highlighting the Print Center. (See the Print Center's website for a complete listing, printcenter.org/100.)

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