

The Three Arts Club of Chicago

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Hundreds of young women from across the Midwest moved to Chicago in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to pursue educational and job opportunities unknown to their mothers, hoping to pursue careers beyond the roles of housewife, mother, nurse, or secretary. Despite the wide range of cultural experiences Chicago offered, it had a reputation as a wicked city. Residential institutions for self-supporting women enforced many restrictions and offered no sense of a home environment; cheap lodging houses tended to be dingy, cold, and cramped. Where could talented and ambitious Midwestern girls live respectably and safely?



Thirty of Chicago's elite philanthropists and social reformers addressed the question when they gathered at the Blackstone Hotel on October 31, 1911. Among them was Gwenthalyne Jones. They established the Three Arts Club, modeled after one founded in New York City in 1904, which was itself modeled after the American Girls' Club of Paris (founded 1893). It offered members the kind of educational and entertainment opportunities that were typical of clubs at that time, as well as rooms to rent at affordable rates. The club opened in September 1912 in an ivy-covered house in the 1500 block of N. LaSalle Street, very near the southwest corner of Lincoln Park and at the northwest edge of the "Gold Coast," one of the richest neighborhoods of the City. Fourteen young women moved into that first home of the club.

Jones, first president of the Three Arts Club and daughter of David B. Jones, a zinc magnate and one of the wealthiest men in Chicago, convinced her father to donate a vacant lot he owned at the northwest corner of Dearborn and Goethe streets to the club's trustees as a site for a permanent club house. Holabird and Roche



Three Arts Club, 1915



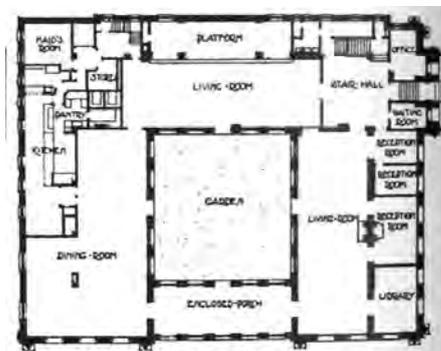
Mosaics above entrance

received the commission to design it; the project went to John A. Holabird, son of the firm's principal. Recently returned from study at the famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and travel throughout Europe, the 26-year old architect designed an understated yet handsome building combining elements of Byzantine, English, Italian, and French design. Completed at a cost of just under \$200,000, it opened in April 1914 and operated as a residence continuously until 2003, recording 13,279 women living there on a permanent or temporary basis.

The Three Arts Club was open to women aged 17 to 30 studying the three arts of music, painting, and drama; it also provided a support network as the young residents adjusted to life in the big city. The club soon

accepted women pursuing architecture, photography, and design training, too. Admittance required a reference from a teacher, clergyman, or community leader attesting the young woman came from a family "of good standing in the community," and a financial statement proving her parents could afford the monthly fee for accommodations plus breakfast and dinner each day. Not surprisingly, a nightly curfew was enforced, male visitors were restricted to public rooms on the first floor, and no liquor was allowed in the rooms.

The brick clubhouse building has 4-story sections to the east, west, and north, connected by a glazed single-story passageway to the south, all



Plan of first floor



Dining Room looking into Tea Room.

enclosing a paved courtyard with a central fountain. The first-floor public rooms included two living rooms, three small reception rooms, a library, a spacious dining room, and an enclosed porch later used as a tea room. The north living room included a platform or stage for theatrical or musical productions. The second and third floors offered 56 single bedrooms—50 of which shared baths; another 4 bedrooms, 20 studios, 11 rooms for servants and 3 communal bathrooms made up the fourth floor.

The Dearborn Street entrance, surmounted by three arches enclosing half-circle mosaics, announces that the arts bring truth and beauty to life. The left mosaic features two doves symbolizing purity and truth above the word “VERITAS;” two peacocks flanking a palm tree over the word “POCRATUDO” in the right one represent integrity and inner beauty; the middle mosaic features cartouches containing a lyre, mask, and painter’s palette encircled with the words “MUSICA,” “FABULA,” and “PICTURA.” The capitals of the two columns supporting these arches are carved with the same three symbols.

The large water nymphs separating the arched windows on the Dearborn Street façade were inspired by figures created by 16th century French scul-

tor Jean Goujon for the Fontaine des Innocents in Paris.

The Three Arts Club hosted a variety of art exhibits and fashion shows featuring works by residents, as well as lectures, recitations and concerts by such luminaries as Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Rudolph Ganz, and Harriet Moore, a former resident. Another former resident was *New Yorker* cartoonist Helen Hokinson, a native of Mendota, Illinois. Her city and suburban scenarios captured upper-middle class women, depicting them with gentle

humor and insight on the times.

The Chicago branch was the last survivor of the eight residential art clubs for young women around the world by the early 1950s. As local art schools began erecting their own dormitories, the club attracted fewer residents. At the same time that the building received Historic Landmark status in 1891, the Club operated at 40 percent capacity and there was talk of closing it. Residents and neighbors rallied. Programming was opened up to the public, bringing renewed attention to this community resource, and by 1991 the residence was again operating at full capacity. Monthly rental was \$445 to \$480, compared to twice as much for nearby studio apartments.

But the building was deteriorating and cash reserves depleted. The last residents moved out in 2003; in 2006 the Board of Directors decided to sell the property and focus on a new mission to connect equity and the arts by investing directly in Chicago’s women-identified artists, artists of color, and Deaf and disabled artists who work in the performing, teaching, and visual arts. Developers purchased the building in 2007. In 2015 it reopened as a showcase furniture store for Restoration Hardware, with a popular restaurant in the courtyard below a pyramid of glass and steel. 

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Four water nymphs from Dearborn Street façade.