



DO YOU REMEMBER that old mansion on Michigan avenue in the 3800 block, east side of the street—squeezed between a nursing home and a huge six-flat building? The address is 3831.

It was a kitchenette until July of this past summer. I'm telling you, that old house was really beat but you should see it now.

If old Charles Comiskey could see the place —bcy, would he be surprised! You know he owed it way back when South Michigan avenue was a gold-plated thoroughfare lined with dignified town-houses and hitching-posts and "automobile row" was unheard of.

The Comiskys threw some elegant balls in the old place and lots of people crowded into them. Well, in that same house, rejuvenated now, there are such activities as old Comiskey never dreamed, for this once staid old mansion is Chicago's South Side Community Art Center.

You bet he'd be surprised! More people cross the threshold of 3831 in one week than in the entire period of Comiskey occupancy.

Of course they aren't ritzy people. Not one mink coat or lorgnette has been seen there yet. Nobody drives up in limousines with liveried chauffeurs, but they get there.

They come in droves, little kids with their noses running and their sox drooping over their shoe-tops, high school students with their too bright nail polish and their beach-comber hats. Old women carrying armloads of groceries, teachers, lawyers, preachers, doctors—all people who work for a living or who would like to work for a living.

They come from schools, from offices, from kitchenettes, from the housing project, from the playgrounds. Give them a minute of spare time and they make a bee-line for the place. Take this case, for instance:

It was a dreary day, a mushy, slushy, nasty, wet day. A soft snow had been falling since early morning and the sky was leaden. The Art Center was warm and quiet. The morning classes were over and the staff didn't expect that the afternoon classes would come out in such weary weather.

The staff, teachers, gallery attendants, director, and stenographer had just settled down to catch up on loose ends in their work when the front door opened and in tumbled four little boys. They were wet and a bit muddy but their spirits were gay and their smiles were as bright as the Arctic "long day."

"We came down here to get in the art classes. Our teacher, Mrs. Morgan, told us about them."

And having dispatched that enlightening bit of information, the naive little spokesman subsided into a death-like silence. The other three stood shifting their weight from left foot to right foot and back to left like cranes. They twisted their caps and the water that fell ran in little rivulets along the floor.

An attendant gave them registration forms to fill out and as they scrawled the desired information, she talked to them.

"It's pretty nasty out today, isn't it?"

"Yes'm."

"What school are you from?"

"Colman."

"Are there any more children coming from Colman today?"

"Yes'm, but they won't be here until after school."

"Did you ditch class to come down here?"

"No'm."

The gallery attendant didn't know what to say and her face showed her perplexity. Then one of the little boys who had said nothing at all before spoke up and told the whole story.

"Mrs. Morgan told us this morning that you had free classes in art down here. Are they free?"

Assured that all classes at the Art Center are free, he continued. "She said that the



Above are three interior views of the South Side Community Art Center, and three of the scores of charming Chicago girls whose performances at the annual Artists and Models balls helped make it possible. The center, housed in the old Comiskey mansion is one of the best equipped and furnished of its type in the country.

classes started on Wednesday. Well, we didn't want to be left out so we came down to sign up. Do you have classes in water color painting? I always did want a set of water colors and I thought I was going to get a set this Christmas but Mama said we needed clothes. —You do have classes in water color painting? I'm glad. I want to sign up for drawing and water color!"

It was a case of four minds with but a single thought. All four signed up for drawing and water color.

The first little boy spoke again. "Can my sister take classes here? She like to draw but she's not much good at it." And he laughed as though some one were tickling him with a broom-straw. The other three joined him. Their mirth was contagious and the gallery attendant stifled her laughter as she answered.

"Yes, your sister, your brother and all your family may take classes in the center. We have classes for high school and grammar

school students, for grown-ups and advanced students. There are classes in drawing, oil and water color painting, poster design and lettering, and composition. Later on there will be classes in weaving, clay modeling, sculpture,

photography, wood and linoleum block printing, etching and lithography. Some of these classes are limited to adults and advanced students. But who knows—you may be advanced students in almost no time."

"Yes'm" they chanted in unison as they handed her their pencils and registrations.

"Come on in the gallery and we'll look at the exhibition."

"We can't stay now or we'll be late. This is our lunch hour and we have to be back at 1 o'clock." The attendant looked at her watch. It showed 12 minutes to one. "You'd better catch the street car and hurry. It's nearly one o'clock now."

As they bolted for the door, the smallest art-student-to-be called back over his shoulder. "We'll hop a truck just like we did coming down here. We'll be back at school before you can say 'killer-diller!'"

With that he dashed through the door, bounded down the steps and shot across Michigan avenue like a bat out of you-know-where!

There are a lot of strange and interesting things about the new 3831. It has regained its dignity, its interior has been redesigned. No longer does it belong to one man or one family. Instead a whole community, the South side, owns it. Now, poor folks and good-livers, kids and octogenarians, the lame, halt and blind are trekking to 3831 South Michigan avenue.

How come all this? Who does own the building? How was it purchased?

The South Side Community Art Center committee owns the building which was purchased in July of 1940 to house a center where a free program of classes, exhibitions and lectures might be conducted for the benefit of everybody who wants to participate.

The idea came from the Work Projects administration through the Illinois Art Project some two years earlier. Under the WPA Federal Arts program, the Art Center division operates to aid communities all over the nation in setting up Community Art Centers where the people may come and learn about art through participation.

This program is an improvement over the branch-museum idea of a few years earlier which failed simply because it was a "come and see" program. The art center idea has caught on with the American people because the public has realized that community art centers bring art closer to the people than can art museums and local art projects.

The Art Center committee and Peter Pollack, director of Community Art Centers for the Illinois Art project, working together, have made this community art conscious as never

before. We know now that the idea of an art center for the South side was no wild dream. It has been realized.

Certainly, it entailed a lot of hard work! But through the cooperation of committee, community and the Illinois Art Project, the South Side Community Art Center is a reality, vitally important to the community which it serves. No longer is there excuse for the tremendous waste of talent which characterized the cultural life of this "city within a city."

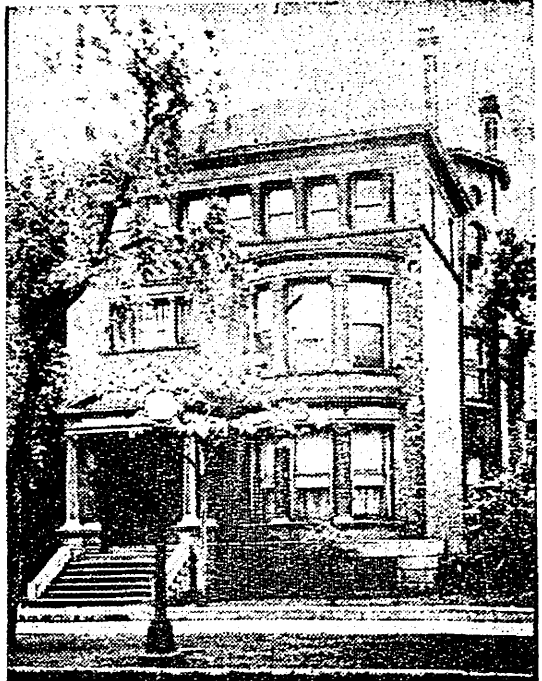
It is sadly true that a major portion of that small number of Negro artists about whom we know and whom we seek to encourage was discovered accidentally. Many fine talents go unrecognized and undeveloped simply for lack of opportunity.

Do you recall that several years ago, an aspiring sculptor worked outdoors in the lot on the corner of Forty-fifth and South Parkway using as materials the brownstone blocks left from the demolition of a building which once stood there? Who was that sculptor? Where is he now? Is he continuing his work? Who knows?

Perhaps he would not ever have been a fine sculptor but there is just as great a possibility that he had the makings of an artist. We don't know.

It is not to say that every Negro is potentially a fine artist but it is to say that we fail in our obligation to preserve and extend

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The old Comiskey mansion at 3831 Michigan avenue, Chicago, before it was transformed into an art center by a community anxious to learn more of art.

A COMMUNITY ADVENTURE

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the artistic heritage of the Negro if we do not make available to the greatest possible number, the opportunity to discover the extent of his ability.

It is in the cultural field that the Negro has made his most outstanding contributions and in which his efforts have been accepted most freely on the basis of their worth notwithstanding the color of the artist.

It becomes the duty, then, of a sincere and intelligent people to make as many and as varied contributions in this field as possible and to use their successes as wedges in breaking down barriers in their social, political and economic environments.

The advantages which this community may gain through the growth and development of the South Side Community Art Center and its program are worth consideration.

Completely staffed with a director, competent artist-teachers, school-manager, gallery attendants, clerical, exhibition and promotion crews supplied by the Illinois Art Project at no expense to the community, the art center offers free instruction in the graphic and plastic arts, and the crafts, lectures on art and cultural subjects by authoritative speakers, exhibitions of local and national artists, a focal point for the art life of the community.

This many faceted program of classes, lectures and exhibitions can be of inestimable value in heightening and extending the cultural levels of the South side. I say this having in mind not the professional artist or the student with professional aspirations, but rather the lay-public, those of us who will never be artists but who want to know the how and the why of art.

To the professional artist and the student the advantages are obvious. Here is offered a basic program which can help them to discover and develop their abilities and which at the same time, builds and educates an audience for the artists' works.

Because they believe in the importance of the art center and in its community service-value the members and the board of directors of the Art Center committee have made untold sacrifices of time, energy and money. They have pared their other activities to a minimum so as to concentrate more fully on the work for the Art Center.

Housewives have left their beds unmade, fed the families from the delicatessen in order to attend committee meetings, to sell memberships and to solicit ads for the Artists' and Models' ball program book.

A coal merchant, Walter Abernathy, reluctantly accepted the treasurer's post after the death of Edgar Mitchem. Abernathy's life has not been the same since.

The telephones, at his home and office, are ringing constantly. " . . . SSCAC calling. Is it possible to . . . We need . . . Do you think . . . When can we . . . Board meeting tonight . . . The light bill is due . . . The furnace needs repairs . . . " ad infinitum.

But would he give it up? Not for love nor money!

The chairman of the board, Patrick B. Prescott, is an attorney. He is in conference with his partners on a big case. His telephone rings "Yes, I know. It's the Art Center . . . The constitution provides . . . That is included in the by-laws . . . Meeting tonight? Meet the photographer tomorrow? . . . " until everything is settled. Meanwhile his partners tear their hair in rage, knowing their pleas are unavailing.

Mrs. Frankye Raye Singleton is a public accountant and financial secretary for the organization. She hasn't seen the top of her dining table for months. The reason—it's covered with Art Center bills, Art Center vouchers, check stubs, memoranda, membership receipts, ledgers. She hasn't had time to see a movie since technicolor was invented and she wishes there were 30 hours in a day.

Mrs. Pauline Reed, the president of the Art Center committee, is a social worker. Her office reports that incoming calls have increased so much since she adopted the Art Center that it was necessary for them to hire another switchboard operator. You guessed it. The Art Center calls her more often than her clients. And so it goes.

Mrs. K. Marie Moore, past president of the Art Center committee and wife of Herman E. Moore, federal judge in the Virgin Islands when one would have expected her to be serving as a gracious hostess for her husband at his post, stayed on in Chicago up to her neck in work for the Center.

You remember the 1939 and 1940 Artists' and Models' ball which raised funds to finance the program. They were brilliant affairs but as presented to the public they

gave no idea of the production problems faced by Mrs. Frances Taylor Moseley, popular school teacher, who directed them.

Mrs. Julia Ferguson, registrar for the center, works 24 hours a day. Students ditch their classes. Workers take half-days from their jobs at the oddest times. Mrs. Pollack, wife of the director, plans to move next door to the Art Center so she can see her husband occasionally.

Margaret Goss is a student and a mother. She cuts classes at the Art Institute and brings the baby to the Art Center. Evidently little Gaye Goss believes in the Art Center too. She hasn't cried in a meeting yet.

Why do they do it? They aren't getting anything out of it for themselves except hard work and sleepless nights. Ask any one of them from the widow with four children and a WPA job to the attorney with the astronomical number of appointments. They won't use the same terms but their answers all mean, "I do it because I feel it will help keep children off the street, make some jobs for the community, help young artists discover unknown talent, be a credit to the Negro people, teach me some things about art that I didn't have the opportunity or money to learn." That's pretty easily understood, isn't it?

Even prior to the opening of the Art Center gallery in December of 1940, community interest in the project began increasing by leaps and bounds.

Passers-by stopped to ask the workmen, "What's going on here? When will it open? When do the classes start? What will be taught? Is it really free?"

The first day of the opening exhibition was a real surprise to the committee and the public alike. The committee had expected a small group of faithful members to come out. After all it was just before the holidays and it was raining. But the people came in droves.

They walked through the building goggle-eyed, exclaiming with pleasure at the beauty of the building, the scope of the exhibition, the tremendous amount of work which had been done. Registration began to pour in; they took out memberships, others renewed expired memberships. The idea caught on like wild-fire. It's still catching on.

Not only Chicago is enthusiastic about the Art Center. Harlem and Jacksonville, New Orleans and Sioux City, Washington and Los Angeles are focusing interested eyes on the South Side Community Art Center. Of course this is not the first Community Art Center.

There are more than 80 of them in various cities throughout the country but this is the first one established by Negroes in a predominantly Negro community. The committee has just cause to be proud.

Its work has been praised by many famous persons, among them, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Theodore Ward, Richmond Barthe. All have spoken in commendation of the movement to establish a Community Art Center on the South side.

More encouraging than the good wishes of the interested individuals, however, is the enthusiasm of the community in general. A nine-year-old girl comes to class on Monday and on Tuesday she returns bringing four of her friends. She "assists" in getting them registered for classes and with the pride of ownership in her voice she takes them into the gallery and points out her favorites in the exhibition.

Or take the case of the aged woman viewing the craft objects on display. She lingers over a hooked rug fingering it tenderly. Finally she says rather wistfully "That's pretty." Her face lights up when the attendant tells her that she can make such a rug in one of the classes. One feels an intense emotional surge within himself on seeing the eagerness with which young and old move into these new and interesting areas of enjoyment and education, hitherto inaccessible to them.

These are not isolated cases. They can be duplicated many times daily each duplication representing qualitative growth of the individual and of the community of which he is a member.

Because the Art Center is a community venture it must necessarily seek its support among the community. Various means are used to raise the funds without which this program could not be conducted.

Memberships ranging from one dollar to \$50 are sold to those who can afford them, although membership is not a requisite for full participation in Art Center classes and other activities. Parties of different kinds are arranged by the members to interest more people in the center and to bring in additional money.

Every year, in the fall, the Art Center committee sponsors the Artists' and Models' ball. And it is a ball!—Clever acts, beautiful girls, exotic costumes, good music and fun

for everybody. The balls in the past have discovered surprising talents for dancing, singing, costuming, scenario writing, production design, state management and lighting which most of the participants suspected they possessed but had no way of exhibiting.

The 1940 Artists' and Models' ball for instance, was really a professional show—varied, witty, clever, imaginative, colorful, glamorous, swiftly paced and polished. The community had never seen anything to equal it. And did they like it! Three thousand persons packed the Savoy ballroom to see it. Six hundred table reservation at \$1.50 per person were sold like hot-cakes. Guests came from Indianapolis, St. Louis, Cleveland, Harlem, Kansas City (both of them), the North Shore, the West suburbs and Gary to attend it.

Merchants and business men clamored for ad space in the program book. The net profits from the ball were 100 per cent greater than those of the preceding year. Of course there will be a 1941 Artists' and Models' ball.

Seldom does one have the opportunity which the Art Center affords to serve himself and his people so easily and with such effectiveness. The significance of this new institution cannot be minimized. Its influence as a cultural force can be made national.

It can stand as another affirmation of the artistic genius of the Negro and of his will to preserve and extend that portion of his heritage which constitutes a contribution to society. We who benefit by the existence of the South Side Community Art Center, directly through participation in its program and activities, or indirectly through membership in the community to which it gives direction, are under a moral and aesthetic compulsion to insure its continued existence by giving the support it so richly deserves.