

The Women's League That Time Forgot

At the Ruskin Art Club in Hancock Park, they don't pine for a simpler time—they live in one.

By Brendan Bernhard

Quaint relic of an imported Victorian past, it would make a good setting for a murder. A geriatric *Basic Instinct*: landmark bungalow on quiet street [bird-song, occasional car] in which old women hold monthly meetings. Discuss art. Gossip about the past, dead husbands, and that professor who called everyone Frieda. The corpse, of course, would be a man's; the murder weapon, a knitting needle.

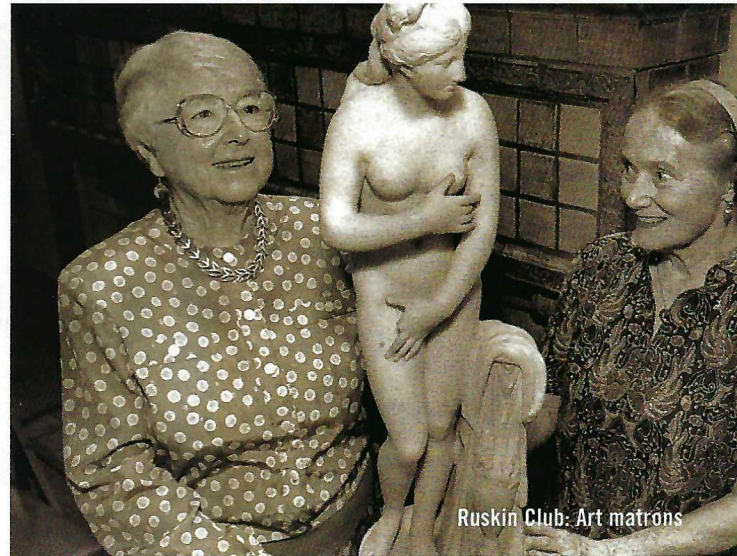
Now in its 110th year of existence, the Ruskin Art Club is so strange, so unexpected an institution to stumble across in late-20th-century Los Angeles that one's inner screenwriter may perhaps be forgiven his lurid imaginings. We don't see older women much in L.A.—everything in our youth-crazed society militates against them—but here at the Ruskin Art Club's monthly meeting on South Plymouth Boulevard, their chatter fills the room. One club member, Jeannette Reisbord, 92, a trimly energetic woman in black slacks and boldly patterned blouse, regales her interlocutor with stories of Morocco and Mallorca in the 1930s, nude modeling in Paris in the 1930s, and her days as a European correspondent for *The New York Times*, also in the 1930s. In fact, so brilliant with incident were the 1930s for Ms. Reisbord that we never get on to what happened to her in the 1940s, let alone the second half of the 20th century, though I'm sure it was a lot. Lucile Kuns, the club's president, calls the meeting to order. "We will begin with the Pledge of Allegiance," she says.

Founded in 1888, the Ruskin Art Club was the first art club in Southern California. Its mission? The "study and promotion of cultural art, history, literature, and contemporary affairs, non-partisan and related to civic interest and matters beneficial to community welfare." Not only did the Ruskin Art Club mount the first art exhibition ever held in Los Angeles (in 1890), but one of its members, Dora Haynes (of John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation fame), helped secure women's suffrage in California in 1911, and went on to found the League of Women Voters.

The club took its name from John Ruskin (1819–1900), the art critic and father of the Arts and Crafts movement. Ruskin had been a fierce pamphleteer against the Industrial Revolution ("Life without labor is guilt, labor without art is brutality"), but, ironically, the fruits of that revolution eventually allowed the women of the Ruskin Art Club to enter the working world. The club's traditional meeting time (the third Wednesday of every month, at noon) now made it impossible for some women to attend, and in the face of

glamorous roadsters, automatic washing machines, and atom bombs, Ruskin's Arts and Crafts ideals came to seem antique. Membership, which had once been limited to 100, sank below 50. [Dim lights, cue funereal music.]

At this point, its glory days over, one would have expected the Ruskin Art Club to quietly fold its hand. Instead it hung on, going coed in the 1960s but otherwise drifting further and further into



Ruskin Club: Art matrons

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irrelevance—where, indisputably, it remains today. Still, there are signs of life. Two men in their 40s (spring chickens by Ruskin Art Club standards) have recently joined the club and see Ruskin as newly relevant. The Industrial Revolution may have come and gone, but, as new face Gordon Fuglie (curator of the Laband Art Gallery) pointed out in a talk before the club, its ravages are still upon us. In any case, there are new foes to grapple with, such as some of the more dismaying aspects of technology. "I encourage you to make a date with John Ruskin," Fuglie exhorted the 25 or so people in the room. This sounded odd, given that the club has been on a date with Ruskin for over a century, but in fact only a handful of its current members have read much Ruskin. Even its president admits to having read "very little" of the great man's writing.

Ruskin would probably not have minded. His complete works run 39 volumes, but when it came to reading, he was not a snob. "You might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough) and remain an utterly 'illiterate' person," he once wrote, "but if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are for evermore in some measure an educated person."

There's hope for all of us yet. ☺

what's the BUZZ