

FANNING THE FLAMES IN THE WINDY CITY

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Chicago is a city of geographic contradictions: a town with a navy tradition that lies nearly one thousand miles from the ocean. It is a dense, urban environment that rises from the agrarian plains of the Midwest. Differing sensibilities also can be detected in the artistic directions that captivated Chicago soon after World War II. On one front, there was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who had moved to Chicago and served as the head of the architecture school at the Illinois Institute of Technology (formerly Chicago's Armour Institute of Technology). There he developed a master plan for the campus and built many of its structures, including his renowned S. R. Crown Hall. From this post, he continued to spearhead the development of a new architecture that was lean, simple, and rational. His highly visible Lake Shore Drive apartments of 1949 and 1951 and other major projects still dot the Chicago landscape. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy also was a midcentury force for pragmatic design in Chicago. He had emigrated from Europe in 1937 to become the director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago. Although this American experiment was short-lived, his impact on making Chicago a center for the thoughtful design of utilitarian products was long lasting.

In contrast, Chicago simultaneously was nurturing a very different, less rational artistic tradition. There was considerable interest by early collectors in European Modernism. Although the Art Institute of Chicago eschewed early involvement in twentieth-century collecting, they were encouraged by the activities of the Arts Club of Chicago and individuals such as Joseph Winterbotham, who provided the museum with a dedicated fund to acquire contemporary works.¹ Over time, this led to the museum's acquisition of important canvases by Giorgio de Chirico, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, among many others.

Chicago's passion for Surrealism also is exemplified by the collecting practices of Ed and Lindy Bergman, who by the late 1950s had established what was to become a pre-eminent collection of Surrealist works. Eventually, the Art Institute of Chicago became the beneficiary of these early dedicated collectors and patrons.

Perhaps because of its sprawling geography, artists in Chicago lived, worked, and exchanged ideas in a different fashion than artists in New York. There was a well-established tradition of New York artists living, working, and socializing in close proximity to one another. Many of the members of the so-called Ashcan School at the turn of the twentieth century kept studios in Washington Square. The Abstract Expressionists of midcentury fame gathered nightly at the Cedar Street Tavern, and in the late 1960s SoHo underwent serious redevelopment. This neighborhood's old manufacturing buildings were valued by artists for their vast spaces, natural light, and inexpensive rents. In more recent years, Brooklyn has become the draw for a new generation of young artists, once again lured by cheap rents and a lively artistic scene. In discussing

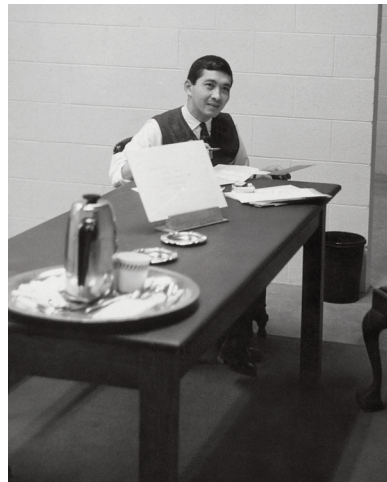


Hedrich Blessing
Illinois Bell Telephone Company, 1967
Collection Chicago History Museum
Courtesy of Getty Images

Chicago, the art critic and collector Dennis Adrian phrased it this way: “There was no district where artists lived. There were spaces available all over the city and that’s where they lived. It wasn’t geographically compressed the way New York is. The need for classification, assortment and rounding up the wagons to be in your group just didn’t make any sense in Chicago.”²

Despite the physical and cultural sprawl of Chicago, two organizations emerged as energetic centers of the local art scene in the 1960s. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and the Hyde Park Art Center were both central to the development of Chicago Imagism. SAIC traces its roots back to 1866 and throughout the twentieth century its students benefited from the encyclopedic collections housed next door at the Art Institute of Chicago. The young Imagist students regularly took the opportunity to access works by Max Beckmann, Francis Bacon, and Jean Dubuffet, among many others. There were a number of influential instructors at the well-established SAIC, but none were more important to the student artists who comprised the Imagists-to-be than Whitney Halstead and Ray Yoshida.³ Halstead, an artist in his own right, was an assistant in the Field Museum’s anthropology department and also taught art history classes at SAIC. He introduced his students, including Roger Brown, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Karl Wirsum, to the considerable sway of what then was described as “primitive art.”⁴ Halstead had wide-ranging interests in non-Western art, which encompassed African art, Native American pottery, and kachinas,⁵ as well as work by self-taught individuals such as the locally based artist, Joseph Yoakum.⁶

Ray Yoshida began his legendary teaching career at SAIC in 1959 and served on the faculty for forty-five years. In addition to his own artistic endeavors, Yoshida was an avid collector of things that often were outside the boundaries of traditional art objects. He compulsively gathered vintage toys, lawn ornaments, and other materials that resonated with him. These objects found their way into his work and also were of considerable interest to his young students. Barbara Rossi stated, “Both Ray and Whitney Halstead encouraged me to investigate my own attractions to visual phenomena, as well as develop my own interpretations of works of art. Collecting was part of this research process.”⁷ Yoshida’s influence as a painting instructor was unparalleled, but the ideas of his students also permeated his work. This complex dialogue was a hallmark of the relationships he forged with his students. Recounting Yoshida’s influence Jim Nutt wrote, “He had a special knack for getting students to think about the possibilities of their work, encouraging them to experiment from within, and, as such, take chances. But in both his teaching as well as his practice, Ray was not doctrinaire. Rather he allowed all sorts of things to enter his mind and, as a result, he was constantly having discoveries—some of which he pursued and others he let go of.”⁸ Yoshida’s artistic sensibilities were in harmony with the Chicago Imagists, as evidenced by their shared exhibition histories in later decades. As former curator and museum director Russell Bowman wrote in regard to Yoshida, “His painting style developed in similar directions and at roughly the same time as that of his students, making him simultaneously an important influence and a full-fledged member of the Imagist movement.”⁹



Ray Yoshida
Courtesy of the Raymond K. Yoshida Living Trust and Kohler Foundation, Inc.



Ray Yoshida
Comic Book Specimen #2, Right Profile, 1968
Collage on paper
19 x 24 inches
The Bill McClain Collection of Chicago Imagism,
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art



Don Baum at the opening for *Made in Chicago: Some Resources*, 1975 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

The first meeting to form the Hyde Park Art Center was held in June 1939. First dubbed the Fifth Ward Art Guild, the name was changed to Hyde Park Art Center in February 1940. Although this early alternative space occupied a number of different facilities, all of the Imagist exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s took place at the 5236 S. Blackstone Avenue location. The Hyde Park Art Center offered classes and a lively exhibition program featuring local artists, which was overseen by an exhibition chairman. Don Baum served in this capacity from 1956 to 1973. Baum was an admired artist in his own right, whose assemblages of cast-off materials attracted considerable attention. He was also a strong promoter of young artists, and he often would show their work side by side with more established figures. His willingness to take chances was instrumental in the development of the Chicago Imagists. The artist Roger Brown wrote, “From 1966 to 1970, the Art Center was about the only place around where unseen artists could exhibit.”¹⁰ All three of the *Hairy Who* exhibitions at the Art Center, the two *Nonplussed Some* shows, the two *False Image* exhibitions, as well as *Marriage Chicago Style* and *Chicago Antigua* took place under Don Baum’s watch.

Don Baum was a driving force for innovation at the Hyde Park Art Center. He was an astute observer of young talent, open to new ideas, and made good use of his many connections in the Chicago art scene. In speaking about the artists’ orchestration of their first *Hairy Who* exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center, Jim Nutt recalls, “Gladys [Nilsson] and I took the proposal to Don who by that time had become a good friend as well as our employer (we taught a children’s class on Saturday at the Hyde Park Art Center) and he liked it. He suggested we add Karl Wirsum to the group we were in, which all of us were happy to do, though none of us knew him personally at all.”¹¹ In the ensuing years, Baum continued to advocate for these artists. Two exhibitions curated by Baum for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, which was established on East Ontario Street in 1967, included work by the Imagists: *Don Baum Says: “Chicago Needs Famous Artists”* (1969) and *Made in Chicago* (1975),¹² which was accompanied by a corollary exhibition that examined the artists’ source material such as comic books, toys, and folk art.

Working alongside Don Baum at the Hyde Park Art Center was Ruth Horwich. She and her husband, Leonard, had moved from Philadelphia to be closer to his family in Hyde Park. Ruth and Leonard settled into a welcoming brick home on South Woodlawn Avenue. Ruth was asked by Eleanor Peterson to become involved in the Hyde Park Art Center, and she almost immediately became its cochairman together with her good friend Lillian Braude. Together they served in this capacity from 1962 until 1974.

Despite the dispersion of artists across Chicago, the Hyde Park Art Center exhibition openings quickly became the gathering place for the cultural community. “Suddenly in the mid 60s the Center became fashionable and it was ‘in’ to be seen at the Friday night parties. By the second *Hairy Who* in 1967 there were wall-to-wall people who came from all parts of the city.”¹³ The *Hairy Who* and, later, the other exhibitions of Imagist work were announced with lively posters created by the artists. The exhibitions often were accompanied by artist-made comic books and other ephemera such as decals, which in part took the place of exhibition catalogs. In addition to the lively

installations of artwork, the exhibition openings offered remarkable people watching with individuals sporting vivid costumes. And attendees always could rely on the infamous Hyde Park Art Center punch. This liquid refreshment was comprised of a fifth of Wolfschmidt Vodka, a quart of club soda, and six ounces of Rose’s Lime Juice.

After parties at the Horwich home were a regular part of the Hyde Park Art Center scene. A small group of artists, critics, curators, and close friends would assemble on Woodlawn Avenue for conversation, food, and libations. Naturally, guests had the opportunity to view the impressive Horwich collection and to meet many of the artists responsible for creating these works. Often, a few of the artists would sleep over at the Horwich home and go to an open-air flea market the next morning, to expand further their collections of inspirational objects. As Ruth Horwich recalls, “We would go have breakfast . . . we wanted to get there early to see what was going on, what we could find to buy.”¹⁴

In addition to Ruth and Leonard Horwich, there were a number of early collectors who helped provide important support for these emerging artists by regularly purchasing works from the Hyde Park Art Center exhibitions. Ed and Lindy Bergman quickly were drawn to the Imagist sensibility and collected it from the beginning, as did Dennis Adrian, Peter Dallos and Jim Faulkner, and John Jones, among others. Within a brief time, this initial group of committed collectors expanded to include other serious individuals such as Gilda and Hank Buchbinder and Peter and Eileen Broido. During the 1970s, several noteworthy collections of Chicago Imagism were developed. Larry and Evelyn Aronson and Bill McClain passionately pursued Imagist works. This latter group of individuals each assembled focused, in-depth collections of objects by the Imagists as opposed to collectors such as Lew and Susan Manilow, Ann and Walter Nathan, and Stephen Prokopoff, who acquired Imagist works as one facet of a broader collecting mission. Fortunately, many of these private collectors understood the importance of making the works publicly accessible, loaning them for exhibition, or in the case of Bill McClain making his entire collection, built over three decades, to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. In describing his motivation, McClain stated, “I knew that I was the temporary caretaker of these works, and that ultimately they would go to a permanent home where they could be viewed by the entire public.”¹⁵

Although early purchases of Imagist works transpired directly from the Hyde Park Art Center exhibitions, these young artists were in need of professional gallery representation throughout the year. The Chicago gallery scene was quite modest in scale during the 1960s and early 1970s. There were two galleries of particular interest to the young Imagists: Richard Feigen’s space and the gallery operated by Allan Frumkin. This latter gallery represented many earlier generation Chicago artists, for whom the Imagists had substantial respect, including Robert Barnes, Leon Golub, June Leaf, Peter Saul, and H. C. Westermann. Ultimately, it would be the Phyllis Kind Gallery that took up the banner of the Chicago Imagists. Born Phyllis Cobin in New York, she started selling old master prints beginning in Chicago in 1967. A decision to show the work of the Chicago painter Miyoko Ito—and later other contemporary artists—caught

the attention of the Chicago Imagist artists. On a return trip from California, where they had been living for several years, Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt visited Kind's gallery and asked her in a direct fashion whether or not she was interested in having their work.¹⁶ The other Imagist artists followed Nilsson and Nutt's lead and soon Kind represented Roger Brown, Ed Flood, Art Green, Philip Hanson, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum.¹⁷ In the fall of 1971, Karen Lennox began to work for Kind and would manage the Chicago gallery until 1981. This was significant because Kind decided to open a second gallery in New York in 1975 and spent increasingly longer periods away from Chicago. The New York gallery focused on some of her Chicago roster as well as a broader grouping of artists from across the United States, with an emphasis on outsider stylistic tendencies. It was unusual for a gallery in Manhattan to have such a preponderance of Chicago artists and it certainly can be questioned whether or not this helped or deterred the Imagists' assimilation into New York. In speaking about this dilemma Lennox stated, "These artists should never have been lumped together with one Chicago gallery . . . It doesn't spread the word, and that is the tragedy."¹⁸ Both Nilsson and Nutt had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the early seventies, but most of the Imagists had limited exposure in New York, and these opportunities had resulted in mixed critical reviews.

The first critic to write significantly about the new developments transpiring at the Hyde Park Art Center in the mid-1960s was Franz Schulze. He was an art critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, and a professor of art at Lake Forest College. Schulze's November 1966 article published in *Art in America* brought significant exposure to the young artists participating in the first *Hairy Who* exhibition. Entitled "Chicago Popcycle," the headline stated, "It's mad, it's monstrous, it's how a group of Midwestern individualists rejected the Paris, New York or West Coast mold to form a school that is distinctly its own."¹⁹ Some Chicago critics, such as Alan Artner, were less enamored with the Chicago Imagists and expressed their reservations.²⁰ In New York, the work of the Chicago Imagists often was met with chilly reviews. In 1982, John Russell wrote for the *New York Times* about the Pace Gallery's exhibition, *From Chicago*. He stated, "Anatomical allusions abound. Jokes come straight from the garbage heap. Nothing is said once that can be said a dozen times." Russell closes the article with a direct summation: "Maybe this is just a way of saying that the paintings I like best in the show are the ones that owe least to the 'Hairy Who.'"²¹

Although the early Hyde Park Art Center exhibitions were not accompanied by catalogs, later publications did contain scholarly essays. A key example was the 1980 book *Who Chicago?* produced to accompany an exhibition organized by the Ceolfrith Gallery, Sunderland Arts Centre in Great Britain. It included an essay by Dennis Adrian, who wrote frequently about the Chicago Imagists. Russell Bowman's essay helped bring perspective to the Chicago scene. Entitled "Chicago Imagism: The Movement and the Style," it provided a strong argument for why this group of artists constituted a movement. Bowman went on to organize important museum presentations, including Jim Nutt, a traveling exhibition that premiered at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1994.



Saul Steinberg
View of the World from 9th Avenue, 1976
© The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In addition to Don Baum and Russell Bowman, many other individuals helped advance the Chicago Imagists by organizing museum exhibitions that included their work. In 1961, A. James Speyer became the curator of Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. In this capacity, he included many works by the Imagist artists in the regularly scheduled *American Exhibition* and *Artists of Chicago and Vicinity* shows. In particular, the *American Exhibition* presentations proved to be important to the Imagists, as they placed the work of Chicago artists in a national context.

Not all of the curators who championed these artists lived in the Chicago area. The legendary curator Walter Hopps had become a fan of the Imagists and even attended festivities at the home of Ruth and Leonard Horwich. Hopps helped to ensure that the 1973–75 exhibition *Made in Chicago* traveled to the XII Bienal de São Paulo and to the Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., where he then served as curator of twentieth-century American art. In 1974, Thomas Armstrong, the newly appointed director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and himself an Imagist collector, worked with then Whitney curator Marcia Tucker to bring Nutt’s first major solo exhibition to New York.²² Tony Knipe of Great Britain organized the exhibition *Who Chicago?* Other museum directors and curators such as James Demettrion and Robert Storr were responsible for bringing Imagist works into important American museum collections.

Despite all of these efforts, the Chicago Imagist phenomenon has remained largely sequestered in the Midwest. As other art-making centers in the United States, such as Los Angeles and Miami, have burgeoned with new museums and galleries, the art scene in Chicago always seems slightly removed from the national dialogue. Perhaps the notion of overlooked American geography was captured best by Saul Steinberg’s now-infamous 1976 cover for the *New Yorker*, “View of the World from 9th Avenue.” Chicago appears as a small blip on the map: clearly not a suitable fate for a city that has produced so many talented artists, including the Imagists who emerged on the scene beginning in 1966. Thank goodness for the visual arts organizations and a band of insightful curators, critics, art dealers, and collectors who blew on the embers of Chicago Imagism and kept the home fires burning.

¹ Joseph Winterbotham and his family held prominent positions in the Arts Club for generations. His daughter, Rue Winterbotham Carpenter, was elected club president in 1918, strengthening the organization by continuing to bring modernist art to Chicago. Rue Winterbotham Shaw—Rue Winterbotham Carpenter’s niece—was elected president of the Arts Club in the 1940s, a position she held for thirty-nine years.

² Author conversation with Dennis Adrian, January 7, 2011.

³ Kathleen Blackshear, an SAIC professor who retired in 1961, was an important influence on Ray Yoshida, Karl Wirsum, and Gladys Nilsson. Blackshear was a student of Helen Gardner, one of the first art historians to include non-Western art in an art history survey text. Blackshear’s connection with Gardner, and her personal interest in African and Asian cultures, informed her teaching. Dan Nadel, “Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” *Ganzfeld* 3 (2003): 123, 127.

⁴ Used to describe the traditional or indigenous arts of Africa, Oceania, and North America, the term “primitive art” is avoided in contemporary art historical discussions due to its colonial and racist implications.

⁵ Kachina dolls are Native American Indian carvings representing particular spirits.

⁶ Jean Dubuffet’s 1951 “Anticultural Postitions” lecture at the Arts Club of Chicago was also very influential with Chicago artists and art historians. Dubuffet discussed topics related to Art Brut.

⁷ Kate Zeller, ed., *Ray Yoshida*, exh. cat. (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2010), 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ Russell Bowman, “Chicago Imagism: The Movement and the Style,” in *Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists*, exh. cat. (Sunderland, UK: Ceolfrith Gallery, Sunderland Arts Centre, 1980), 22.

¹⁰ Roger Brown, “Rantings and Recollections,” in *Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists*, 30.

¹¹ Nadel, “Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” 121.

¹² This exhibition first was organized for the XII Bienal de São Paulo (1973), circulating throughout Mexico and South America the following year. Debuting in the United States at Smithsonian’s National Collection of Fine Arts at the end

of 1974, *Made in Chicago* then traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

¹³ Goldene Shaw, ed., *History of the Hyde Park Art Center: 1939–1976* (Chicago: Hyde Park Art Center, 1976), 13.

¹⁴ Author conversation with Ruth Horwich, January 29, 2011.

¹⁵ Author conversation with Bill McClain, November 2, 2010.

¹⁶ Author conversation with Jim Nutt and Gladys Nilsson, November 12, 2010.

¹⁷ Ed Paschke and Suellen Rocca joined the Phyllis Kind Gallery later.

¹⁸ Author conversation with Karen Lennox, November 12, 2010.

¹⁹ Franz Schulze, “Chicago Popcycle,” *Art in America* 54, no. 6 (November 1966): 102–4. Franz Schulze later coined the phrase “Chicago Imagists” to refer to a broad, multigenerational group of artists. Much to Schulze’s chagrin, this term has been used by many, including this author, to refer to a more specific grouping of artists who showed from 1966 to 1971 at the Hyde Park Art Center.

²⁰ Alan Artner, “Art: An Imagist’s Showing While the Battle Goes On,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1974.

²¹ John Russell, “‘The Hairy Who’ and Other Messages from Chicago,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1982.

²² Jim Nutt: *An Exhibition Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago* traveled from Chicago to the Walker Art Center and then to the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1974.