

**Process & Promise:
Art, Education & Community
at the 92nd Street Y**

by Margaret Mathews-Berenson



A.

Originally named the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the institution known today as the 92nd Street Y is the oldest and largest Jewish community center in the United States. Its reputation for wide-ranging programming, particularly in the arts, established the YMHA as one of New York's preeminent cultural institutions. In 1900, following a progression of moves from downtown locations, the Y settled into a new building on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The original building was demolished in 1928 and in July of 1930 a new building opened on the same site, providing for the first time classrooms designated for art courses. By October of that year, the 92nd Y's Art Department was established under the auspices of the Educational Department. It offered two classes: one in drawing and painting, taught by Saul Raskin, and another, known as the Arts and Crafts Group, taught by Reuben Leaf.

A Philosophy That Has Endured

The artist must express himself in terms of his own inner plan and design. ...For the artist it is essential that he become attuned to the inter-section of his personal mood and his environment.

– Saul Raskin, *YMHA Bulletin*, October 5, 1934

“Noted Instructor and Painter Chosen to Conduct New Art Classes Here,” proclaimed the *YMHA Bulletin* for September 19, 1930, announcing the selection of Saul Raskin to head the newly formed Art Department. A former instructor at the Art School of the Educational Alliance, Raskin was well qualified for the job. The article in the *Bulletin* praised Raskin as a respected artist, author and lecturer, whose paintings, watercolors and lithographs had been exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum, Brooklyn Museum and Art Institute of Chicago.

For Raskin, artistic ability was not a prerequisite for entrance to a class. Rather, he encouraged students to find their own voices. The fee for the Y's first art class was fifteen dollars for fifteen sessions. It included instruction in drawing and painting from cast, still life and model for elementary and advanced students, combined with art appreciation lectures and an exhibition program that featured the work of students, the instructor, and artists of note. This broad-based program with talented professional artist/instructors became the model for future classes at the Y.

Shortly after Raskin's arrival, Reuben Leaf was named instructor of the Arts and Crafts Group, which met for the first time on October 21, 1930. Admission was free—participants paid only for materials. Classes were offered in a variety of subjects, among them metalwork, woodwork, poster design, lettering, appliqué and interior decoration. Although the teachers were there to guide, students were meant to discover their own artistic voices.

Lectures, exhibitions, gallery talks and off-site field trips have enriched the Y's offerings since the early years. In 1932, Raskin introduced the first gallery walks, establishing a precedent for what remains a vital complement of the curriculum to this day. By 1933, art appreciation was well established with programs featuring such prominent art historians as Meyer Schapiro and Jerome Klein, who were both associated with Columbia University.



A.
Aaron Berkman with 92nd
Street Y students on top of the
Flat Iron Building, c. 1936

B.
92nd Street Y Art Center
Painting Class, 2005

B.

1934-1969: The Visionary Years, William Kolodney: 1934-1969

It is precisely at this point—the search of man for his lost soul—that adult education should come in.

– William Kolodney, “History of the Educational Department of the YM-YWHA,” 1950

Progressive, imaginative William Kolodney became the 92nd Street Y’s Educational and Club Director in 1934. Kolodney’s vision would expand the program and improve the quality of instruction while opening the Y to greater involvement from the non-Jewish community—a move that broadened the audience base and established the Y as a major force in adult education.

Kolodney embraced modern ideas and eschewed what he considered to be backward thinking. Under his tenure, life-drawing classes were added despite a directive from the Y’s Board of Directors forbidding nude models. By 1949, the program had grown to 25 classes; pottery courses had been introduced and there were additional art appreciation lectures, exhibitions and tours of museums, galleries and artists’ studios. Claude Marks, Leo Steinberg and A.L. Chanin, all noted critics and educators, introduced the Y’s audience to such topics as “Art in a Changing World,” “The Sources of Contemporary Art” and “Masters and Meanings in Modern Art.”

Beginning in 1966, *Red, Yellow, Blue & Glue* introduced legions of young children to the joys and pleasures of art making at the 92nd Street Y. The inspired invention of Susan Wilmarth-Rabineau, *Red, Yellow, Blue & Glue* combined teaching in the visual arts with music and movement to provide developmentally appropriate instruction for children.

1968 was a milestone year in the history of the Y: The Art Center moved from cramped quarters in the 92nd Street building to the new 12,000-square-foot complex on the third floor of the Henry Kaufmann Building on 91st Street. This new facility—the Jeane H. Gottesman Art Center, offered expanded studio space and modern equipment including studios dedicated to jewelry-making and ceramics.

Aaron Berkman: 1937-1967

One of the most influential figures in the 92nd Street Y’s history, Aaron Berkman began his association with the institution in 1935 when he joined the Art Department faculty as artist/instructor for the Works Progress Administration’s YMHA branch of the New York School of Fine and Industrial Arts. Berkman was an accomplished painter with many exhibitions to his credit and co-founder of ACA Galleries, New York’s first artists’ cooperative gallery.

Berkman’s vision of an ambitious and diverse arts offering laid the foundation for many of the Y’s programs today. In 1936, over 1,000 students were enrolled in WPA classes which included drawing, painting, sculpture, etching, cartooning, jewelry-making and working in clay, metal and leather. Students of every level of experience were welcome and individualized instruction was offered in an intimate and informal studio setting. Instructors were accomplished artists, among them sculptors Ibram Lassaw and Louise Nevelson. By the time government subsidies ended in 1939, the 92nd Street Y’s WPA art education program had become the largest in the country.

After WPA classes ended an art center was formed within the Educational Department. Discussions about abstract and modern art took place in lectures and studio classes, where students were encouraged to veer from traditional approaches, using abstraction as a “springboard” to creativity.

The war impacted activities at the Y as it did every aspect of American life. Throughout, Berkman continued to organize stimulating studio courses, lectures and exhibitions, some of them war-related. The Post War period saw rapid growth in the Y’s art programming. Under the GI Bill, returning veterans could choose from a part to full time curriculum of free classes including courses in painting, sculpture, woodworking, leather craft, metalwork, pottery, jewelry making and jewelry repair.

Berkman believed passionately that art classes at the Y should be accessible to everyone, regardless of ability. He described his philosophy in the *YMHA Bulletin* for February 15, 1956: “Over and above everything else, we respect the individual characteristics of each student, and try to develop his creative capacities to the utmost.”



C.



D.

C.
Arts and Crafts Group
with Reuben Leaf
92nd Street Y, c. 1930

D.
Children's Arts
and Crafts Class
92nd Street Y, c. 1936

E.
92nd Street Y Art Center
Jewelry Class, 2005

F.
92nd Street Y Art Center
Ceramics Class, 2005



E.



F.

Decades of Growth

The Art Center's programming during the 1950s and 1960s reflected Berkman's approach to balancing studio painting and drawing courses with art appreciation. Thelma Bradford and Patricia Clark Stetson established a new pottery program and a variety of crafts-related courses were offered, including weaving with Lili Blumenau, leatherwork and woodcarving.

During the 1970s and 1980s, divisions within the Art Center were formalized as separate entities: Fine Arts, which included painting, drawing, and sculpture; Photography; Jewelry and Metalsmithing; and Pottery. Elaine Breiger, a member of the children's art faculty, served as Director of the Art Center from 1972 to 1977. Following her departure, Janet Bryant, former chair of the pottery division from 1965 to 1977, took over as director, remaining in this position until 1987.

During the 1974-75 season, Bryant instituted the *Art of the Craftsman*, a ceramics program with an artist-in-residence component that exposed Art Center students to the insights and expertise of noteworthy artists and craftsmen, among them Cynthia Bringel, Val Cushing, Warren MacKenzie, Jeff Oestreich, Mary Roehm, Akio Takamori and Betty Woodman.

Thomas Gentile joined the Art Center faculty in 1972 and revamped the Jewelry and Metalworking program. Jewelry became a separate division in 1980, and the Jewelry Center greatly expanded throughout the decade. Three fully equipped studios made it possible to offer a more comprehensive course of study. Important faculty joined the roster during those years including Robert Ebendorf, Lisa Galnick, Enid Kaplan, Kurt Matzdorf, and Rebecca Laskin. John Cogswell, Gentile's successor as director of the Jewelry Center, incorporated the Judaica silversmithing program, formerly Tobe Pascher Workshop of the Jewish Museum in New York, into the curriculum in 1988 taught by master silversmiths Bernard Bernstein and Harold Rabinowitz, who remain instructors to this day.

Art Center lecture series, workshops and art appreciation courses attracted new audiences during these years. The popular *Artists' Visions* lectures, introduced in 1985, featured panel discussions with some of the foremost names in contemporary art, including Chuck Close, Helen Frankenthaler, Clement Greenberg, Isamu Noguchi, Philip Pearlstein and Frank Stella. Moderators during this time included such major curators and critics as Patterson Sims, Jack Flam and Nan Rosenthal.

The Art Center Today

The Art Center administrators and teachers today embrace a vision that is strikingly similar to that of their predecessors. In 2001 Rachel Selekman was promoted to the position of Director of the Art Center. Working closely with Jonathan Wahl, director of the Jewelry Center and Chikako Morioka, director of the Ceramics Studio, Selekman has used her exceptional organizational skills and her connections to the arts community to further expand and professionalize the Art Center's offerings. Selekman, Wahl and Morioka's keen understanding of the arts and the art-making process, combined with their ability to relate to a broad-based constituency, has helped them to bring the Art Center's programs to a level unparalleled in community arts education. New courses and workshops have been developed for children and adults, enrollment has grown and art studios have been added. Along with staff and faculty, Selekman, Wahl and Morioka ensure the welcoming atmosphere that is the hallmark of the Art Center's programs.

The 92nd Street Y Art Center's paramount concern is the students it serves. The Y has a long-held policy of not turning away anyone because of financial need, and the Art Center frequently makes scholarships available to those who require assistance. In addition, the Recanati-Kaplan Program for Excellence in the Arts was established in 2004 by Daphne Recanati Kaplan and Thomas S. Kaplan. The program awards scholarships to gifted and talented children ages five to seventeen based on merit rather than financial need. Visual arts students from colleges and graduate programs around the country participate in "New York City Arts," an intensive summer program in collaboration with Empire State College of the State University of New York that grants college credit for study at the Y.

Today, the Art Center boasts five fine art studios, four fully equipped jewelry studios and two clay studios with 24 potters' wheels and a 30 foot gas reduction kiln. The fall 2005 catalog listed 72 different courses and workshops in art appreciation, fine art, ceramics, jewelry and photography with a total of 213 course options, including five sessions with three major visiting artists: painter Eric Fischl; ceramist Chris Gustin and enamellist Maria Philips. This spring, Robert Storr, a former senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art and the curator of the 2007 Venice Biennale, interviewed the photographer Gregory Crewdson, who has taught photography at the Y, the painter Chuck Close, and the critic and philosopher Arthur Danto as part of the Artists' Visions series. Some 5,000 students annually are enrolled in the Art Center classes and workshops.

1987: A New Vision Emerges

We have a very educated and sophisticated constituency that expects a high quality learning experience. Today when someone chooses to study at the Art Center, he can count on receiving instruction that not only supports technical development, but which provides a solid intellectual and historical foundation as well.

– Robert Gilson, 2005

In 1987 Robert Gilson succeeded Janet Bryant as Director of the Art Center. Gilson, formally trained as a photographer, came to the Y after serving as Director of Special Programs in Art at Skidmore College. He ushered in a new era in which he professionalized instructional practice and improved the quality of the classroom offerings by formalizing the curriculum.

Under Gilson's direction, demand for studio and art appreciation classes increased, doubling from 1987 to 1990 alone. Students thrived on the creative energy of the studios while expanding their understanding of contemporary art through gallery tours and studio visits. Well-known artists such as Chris Gustin, William Harper, Wayne Higby, Elizabeth Murray, Philip Pearlstein, and Heikki Seppa shared their gifts with students in the Y's studios through Visiting Artists workshops.

In 1993 Gilson was named Director of the 92nd Street Y School of the Arts, the Y's arts education division. In this position, which he holds to this day, he oversees the Art Center, 92nd Street Y Harkness Dance Center, the 92nd Street Y Music School and the Educational Outreach Program. For the next six years Gilson continued to direct the Art Center, managing the School of the Arts simultaneously. In 1999 Rachel Selekman, a sculptor whose work is exhibited nationally and internationally became Director of Fine and Children's Art; and Jonathan Wahl, a jeweler and sculptor who had been Director of the Jewelry Program at the Crafts Students League, joined the staff as Director of the Jewelry Center. Since assuming their positions, Selekman and Wahl's unflagging energy has propelled the Art Center's program to new heights, aided by Chikako Morioka who became Director of the Ceramics Studio in 2001.

In keeping with long standing tradition, art instruction at the Y continues to be based on satisfying the needs of the individual student. While dedicated to honing technical skills, teachers also encourage the development of each student's personal art-making vocabulary and stimulate informal discussions about art history and current trends. The students themselves are remarkably similar to those who preceded them for the last 75 years. Amateurs with little or no previous experience mix with intermediate and advanced students in an atmosphere that is charged with energy. Exhibitions and lectures expose students to leading experts in every field of art, broaden awareness of artistic trends past and present and inspire creative thinking in all aspects of their lives. The result is one of the most exhilarating community-based visual arts education programs in the nation.

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H.

G.
Rachel Selekman
White Spray, 2005
Painted watering can spout,
fabric, thread, wire and cord
42.5 x 22 x 58
Private Collection, Germany
Courtesy of Galerie Aurel
Scheibler, Cologne and
Priska C. Juschka
Fine Art, NYC

H.
Chikako Morioka
Untitled, 2003
Earthenware
6 x 15 x 15
Collection of the Artist

I.
Jonathan Wahl
Singing Lark, 2005
14k gold, enamel
1.75 x .5
Collection of the Artist



G.



I.