

THE NETTIE J. MCKINNON COLLECTION: A BRIEF HISTORY

Nettie J. McKinnon was a District 102 principal from the fall of 1929 until the spring of 1960. During that time she served both Ogden Avenue School (grades K – 6) and Oak Avenue School (grades 7-8). In 1930, seventh and eighth grade students sold magazines to the community at large, and used the profits from those sales to purchase artwork for Oak Avenue School. Occurring during the Great Depression, this “campaign” is a testament to McKinnon’s perseverance and dedication to the arts. She championed the cause of making art available to students on a daily basis. More than one hundred and twenty-five pieces of art were collected by the time of her retirement.

In 1975, the District sold the Oak Avenue School and Park Junior High opened in its place. The collection [then known as the “Oak Collection”] was rendered homeless and moved to Ogden Avenue Elementary School for storage. In 1978, an arts study group of women from LaGrange organized forces. Calling themselves, “The Friends of Nettie J. McKinnon,” the group researched the artists in the collection and assisted in opening the gallery at the Ogden School. The collection was renamed the “Nettie J. McKinnon Collection,” and it was housed at the school until the spring of 2002.

New construction necessitated using a portion of the gallery space for heating and cooling equipment, so the district had the collection appraised and moved it into storage. During the winter of 2003, the District 102 School Board created a task force to make specific recommendations about the collection. In March, the District contracted with an outside art consultant to work with the task force, composed of staff and parents, and made recommendations for the care of the collection. In addition, a vision and mission statement were written and presented to the Board in May. An expanded committee, along with consultant, Jane C.H. Jacob, met for the following two years. Finally, a separate foundation was incorporated to oversee the management, exhibition, care and education endeavors of this collection, and a 25 year agreement between District 102 and the newly formed foundation, SaltCreek American Art Foundation, was signed. The District also agreed to set up a permanent home for the collection – McKinnon Gallery, located at Park Junior High.

Currently the collection is comprised of more than 125 works of art, including paintings, sculptures, works on paper and decorative art objects. Many of the artists featured in the McKinnon collection are also exhibited in major museums across the United States. All of the artists in the collection are American, many of them exhibited at the 1893 and 1933 Chicago World’s Expositions. Among the artists included in the collection are Hudson River School painters such as John Frederick Kensett, Impressionist painters Edward Henry Potthast, John Henry Twachtman and John Singer Sargent and sculpture by Frederick MacMonnies. Artworks by Brown County regional artists Wilson Henry Irvine, Luci Harthath, Oliver Dennet Grover, Frank Dudley and Karl Buehr are also included.

The Nettie J. McKinnon American Art Collection is the culminated vision of one woman in education who understood the importance of art and how it influenced the lives of children. The collection provides many ways to view some of America’s best artists in context of Chicago and demonstrates its impact on the arts over the last 150 years. Now, almost half a century later, this art collection will not only influence school-age children but the public at large.