

## PROLOGUE

In the last half of 2021, I learned a secret.

Well, maybe it was not a secret to *everyone*, but it was one that I, as a longtime art historian, had never discovered in all my study of the history of art. This secret was about a place: a blink-and-you-miss-it, turn-of-the-century structure in Paris that, for two decades, successfully sheltered, supported, and spawned a generation of American women artists in a way that nothing else could—or, if truth be told, that perhaps no one else would. A place that gave them the opportunity to pursue paths that they had determined for themselves, without unwarranted judgment or obstacles. In news reports, published across the globe during its heyday from the final decade of the nineteenth century until the beginning of World War One, it was called by a number of similar names—“the American Art Students’ Club,” “the American Girls’ Club for Artists,” “the American Girls’ Art Club,” “the Ladies’ Club,” “The American Girls’ Club in Paris” (abbreviated here as AGCP), or just “the Girls’ Club.”

But for a considerable number of its residents, this structure—tucked into a quiet building at 4 rue de Chevreuse in the French capital’s sixth *arrondissement*—would simply, and forever, be known to them by the one word common to these variations: the Club.<sup>1</sup>

For the hundreds, perhaps thousands (there is no confirmed number), of intrepid women who crossed its threshold during the fabled Belle Époque—the “beautiful age” of Paris denoted as the years between 1870 and 1914—the Club provided a wealth of welcome services: a warm cup



Figure P.1. “Garden of the Art Club.” Scribner’s Magazine, November 1894.

of tea, an American newspaper, an inexpensive meal, a room to rent, an exhibition space, a familiar face, a common language.

Such amenities were vital to these artists—painters, sculptors, miniaturists, the occasional pianist or two—who hailed from all over the United States, including cities like Albany, Baltimore, Birmingham, Indianapolis, New York, Sacramento, St. Louis, and beyond. These were women who were searching for an artistic education akin to those offered to their male colleagues, but which was often limited, if not denied, to them on the basis of their gender. An unlikely hero came to the rescue, a woman of means and influence who built the Club as a comfortable and safe place for female artists (much to the relief of their worried parents). The Club also provided a designated space, acceptable to both the Parisian and American public, to corral these paintbrush-toting “girls” rather than allowing them to cavort carelessly throughout the City of Light. For artists, their families, and society at large, it was the right solution at the right time.

The Club’s lovely but unassuming building was adjacent to the city’s Latin Quarter, the Left Bank enclave encapsulated by the fifth and sixth *arrondissements*. Home to the famed Sorbonne University as well as the epicenter of numerous independent art schools and ateliers, the Quarter

has a long history of educational greatness, but like most student-heavy environments, it suffered from the vagaries of overuse and underappreciation during this era (think: odiferous street corners, cheap drink, and even cheaper food in less-than-appealing cafés). The Club at 4 rue de Chevreuse was the antidote to this environment, becoming a word-of-mouth sensation and the focal point for the lives of so many women, aged eighteen to forty-five, seeking comprehensive artistic training in hopes of becoming professional working artists.

The variety of American women who convened at the Club is fascinating. The most privileged arrived with bulging steamer trunks and pocketbooks, holding personal letters of introduction to the world's most prominent modernist sculptor or an acclaimed expatriate painter. Yet more than a few arrived with little else than a suitcase and the clothes on their backs. Several women gained the artistic fame that they sought, but many did not, falling into obscurity or never being recognized at all. Their lives often mirrored the trajectory of the Girls' Club itself: rising to prominence, only to disappear from the history books. But for all their differences, when these artists set foot inside the Club, they were *home*.

To claim I was intrigued by the tale would be to undersell my enthusiasm. Initially, I immersed myself in hundreds of books, newspaper articles, academic journals, and dusty archives, pursuing what details could be gleaned about this short-lived but influential artistic outpost. I read hundreds of letters—many of which you'll find included here, with their original language intact and with no corrections for misspellings or *[sic]*s included. Ultimately, though, nothing could be more meaningful to a historian than traveling to the source itself. So, in September 2022, I too set out for Paris. Upon landing, I headed directly to the rue de Chevreuse, echoing the movements of many of the American girls who came before me. What I discovered there began my journey in full to understand this place, its benefactor, its residents, and their art, and it resulted in what you are reading now.

Though the Club closed its doors for good at the onset of the First World War, its dignified location remains, still off the busy boulevard du Montparnasse. The four-story, white-walled *bâtiment* is nondescript

amid its more conspicuous neighbors. This plainness is, perhaps, one more reason why the building, bedecked by only a simple “4” to denote its address, is likely ignored by most passersby today and by history at large.

But it is time to bring this special place back into the spotlight. Together, in the pages that follow, we will attempt to correct this historical and artistic forgetting. We will finally swing open the sky-blue French doors of this once proud but little appreciated artistic sanctuary, this embassy of American women’s creativity on foreign soil, and trace the origins of the institution, the women who made it what it became, and the legacy it left behind in the history of art.

Welcome, one and all, to the Club.