

# a closer look

by Jeff Helgeson

The Cliff Dwellers—On the 22nd floor of the Borg-Warner Building, directly opposite The Art Institute of Chicago, the tradition of support for the arts that was begun atop Orchestra Hall is now continued in the new, spacious home of The Cliff Dwellers Club. Recently, A Closer Look met with Melvyn Skvarla, program committee chair; Jean Tideman, art committee chair; and exhibiting artist Grace Cole. We met in the dining room, overlooking the broad sweep of Chicago's Grant Park and expansive lakefront, to talk about the history of this institution, its continuing support for the arts and Ms. Cole's exhibition, which will be on display in The Cliff Dwellers Club from Nov. 18 to Dec. 11.

**The Cliff Dwellers Club**, 200 S. Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, 60604-2487. Phone: 312-922-8080. Hours open to the public: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Staff: Melvyn Skvarla, program committee chair and Jean Tideman, art committee chair. Club founded: 1907. Area of Specialty: Chicago area painting, sculpture, graphic design and photography. Artists recently exhibited: Sally Alatelo, Curtus Bartone, Grace Cole, Alain Gavin, Nancy Gorman, Seymor Homer, Terry Karpowicz, Franklin Mc Mahon, Mark Mc Mahon, Edgar Miller, Ragdale Foundation Artists and Jack Simmerling.

**Can you tell me a little about the history of The Cliff Dwellers Club?** *Melvyn Skvarla*—The Cliff Dwellers was established in 1907, in The Fine Arts Building, largely due to the efforts of The Pulitzer Prize winning writer Hamlin Garland. [It was created] to promote literature and the arts in Chicago by creating a place

where people who were seriously interested in the arts, both professionally and as committed observers, could come together in a congenial atmosphere to share their expertise and enthusiasms. Over time, the club has been a gathering place for such people as architect Louis Sullivan writer Theodore Dreiser,



was not a member, his book is often associated with the club. Actually, the name seems to have been selected as a reference to the cliff dwelling people of New Mexico, because many of our artist members spent their winters there painting.

**Jean, could you tell me about the exhibitions which are being presented here at The Cliff Dwellers Club?** *Jean Tideman*—Sure. Beginning this past January we've undertaken a new program devoted to the work of Chicago area artists and architects, as well as that of our members. This was in line with the focus on area artists that was begun by John Neff at The Terra Museum of American Art and may continue with the reinstatement of The Chicago and Vicinity Show across the street from us at The Art Institute. We feel that this is work which should be shown.

**How many exhibits have you presented in this series?** *Tideman*—Grace Cole's show will be the eleventh in the series.

**How have the displays of regional artists such as Grace been organized?** *Tideman*—We've been holding the openings for the exhibits on the middle Wednesday of each month between 5:30 and 7:30 a.p.m. and we've included a short presentation by the artists, about a 15-minute talk between 6:15 and 6:30 p.m., to help develop an understanding of their work on a more intimate level.

**I see.** *Tideman*—Artists have also been invited to select the type of music that they would like to have performed to accompany the display of their work during the opening. Grace, for example, will be having a group of Renaissance musicians perform at her opening . . . a recorder with viola da gamba and accompaniment by other early instruments.

**And when will that be?** *Tideman*—Nov. 18, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. The reception will be open to the public here in the club, and then the works will be displayed for



public viewing between 2 and 5 in the afternoon, Monday through Friday, until Dec. 11.

**Could you tell me a little about the work that will be included in the exhibit?**

*Tideman*—Grace, would you like to?  
*Grace Cole*—Certainly. In addition to recent oil paintings

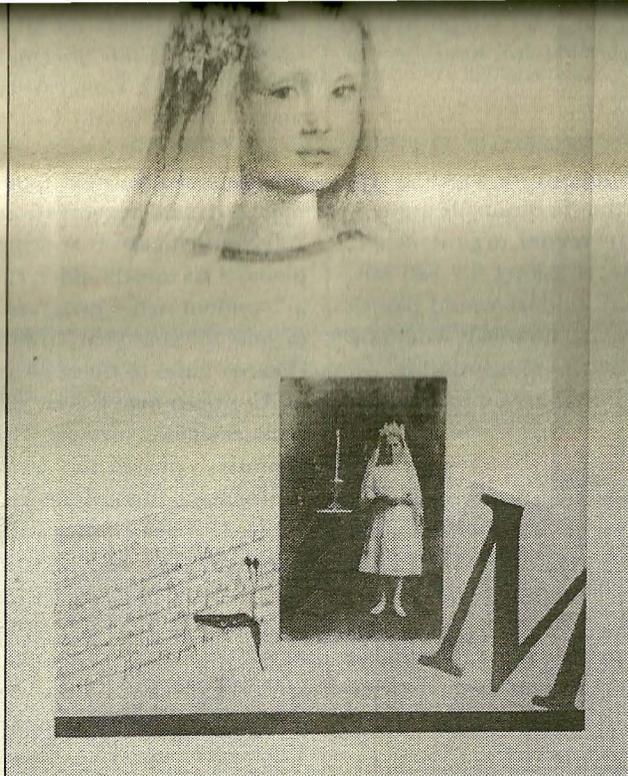
genial atmosphere to share their expertise and enthusiasms. Over time, the club has been a gathering place for such people as architect Louis Sullivan, writer Theodore Dreiser, sculptor Lorado Taft, composer Leo Sowerly, Chicago Symphony conductor Frederick Stock, Harriet Monroe and at one notable event in this city's literary history in 1914, poet William Butler Yeats.

**When did the club move from its original location on the top floor of Orchestra Hall to here, at the top of the Borg-Warner Building?** *Skvarla* —

The rooms on top of Orchestra Hall, now Symphony Center, were expressly created for The Cliff Dwellers Club and were its home from 1909 until 1996. Then, due to the renovation of Orchestra Hall, the club was relocated here, just down the street from where it had been for almost 90 years, on the 22nd floor.

**One can't help but notice the combination of architectural styles throughout the club. Can you tell me how extensively the space had to be renovated?** *Skvarla* — Well, we moved the fireplace, bookcases and paneling in order to combine some elements of the original club with its new architectural setting. Larry Booth, of Booth-Hansen, was the renovation architect. He added the barrel vault here in the main dining room. Previously, this had been the reception space and corporate board room for the Borg-Warner Corporation. Our principle renovations, aside from the vaulting of the ceiling, were the installations of the former location's paneling and Sullivan's Trading Room stencil off of the elevators, as well as the water buffalo head (Gaur) and other artifacts from the space on top of Orchestra Hall, of course. And then we largely redid the Louis Sullivan private dining room and the McDermott Smoking Lounge where the fireplace was installed. John A. McDermott was the club's president at the time of our relocation.

**One more question about the club itself: the name—Is it after the early Chicago novel, *The Cliff Dwellers*?** *Skvarla* — Henry Blake Fuller. Although he



"After Velazquez' 'Las Meninas (Infanta),' " by Grace V. Cole.



"After Velazquez' 'Self Portrait,' " by Grace V. Cole.

**little about the work that will be included in the exhibit?** *Tideman*—*Grace*, would you like to? *Grace Cole*—Certainly. In addition to recent oil paintings there will be approximately nine works from a series of drawings.

**Is there a title for the exhibit?** *Cole*—"Old Masters—New Visions."

**Can you describe the work a little?** *Cole*—To a major extent it consists of excerpts from old masters' drawings and portraits—carbon drawings, of segments of the original pieces, done large and then combined with contemporary materials, such as letters and photographs.

**So there is an element of collage within the work—the "new visions" component.** *Cole*—Exactly. I'm seeking to create a contrast of past and present that illustrates a continuum of influence.

**A juxtaposition of the old masters with a modern artifact that refers to or comments on the original?** *Cole*—Yes, "Old Masters—New Visions." The other works will be a series of oil paintings on linen, including still life, landscape, and figurative works that I have titled "Graven Images."

**And how would you describe them?** *Cole*—I suppose I might call them: statements reflecting the peril of the present, of the world today. I hope to present beautiful paintings that, on closer examination and reflection, reveal more about what is happening in contemporary society.

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