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Celebrating 175: Mel Casas, Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1971-1974

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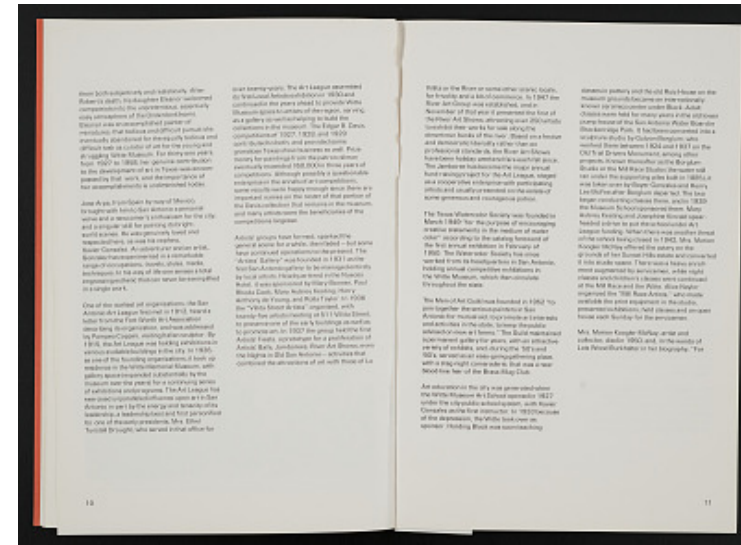
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them both subjectively and realistically. After Robert's death, his daughter Eleanor welcomed compatriots into the unpretentious, essentially easy atmosphere of the Onderdonk home. Eleanor was an accomplished painter of miniatures, that tedious and difficult pursuit she eventually abandoned for the equally tedious and difficult task as curator of art for the young and struggling Witte Museum. For thirty-one years, from 1927 to 1958, her genuine contribution to the development of art in Texas was encompassed by that work, and the importance of her accomplishments is undiminished today.

Jose Arpa, from Spain by way of Mexico, brought with him to San Antonio a personal verve and a newcomer's enthusiasm for the city, and a singular skill for painting its bright, sunlit scenes. He was genuinely loved and respected here, as was his nephew, Xavier Gonzalez. An adventurer and an artist, Gonzalez has experimented in a remarkable range of occupations, travels, styles, media, techniques. In his way of life on senses a total engrossing esthetic that can never be exemplified in a single work.

One of the earliest art organizations, the San Antonio Art League first met in 1912, heard a letter from the Fort Worth Art Association describing its organization, and was addressed by Pompeo Coppini, a visiting Italian sculptor. By 1915, the Art League was holding exhibitions in various available buildings in the city. In 1926, as one of the founding organizations, it took up residence in the Witte Memorial Museum, with gallery space (expanded substantially by the museum over the years) for a continuing series of exhibitions and programs. The Art League has exercised unparalleled influence upon art in San Antonio in part by the energy and tenacity of its leadership, a leadership best and first personified by one of the early presidents, Mrs. Ethel Tunstall Drought, who served in that office over twenty years. The Art League assembled its first Local Artists exhibition in 1930 and continued in the years ahead to provide Witte Museum space to artists of the region, serving as a gallery as well as helping to build the collections in the museum. The Edgar B. Davis competitions of 1927, 1928, and 1929 contributed to both, and provided some grandiose Texas show business as well. Prize money for paintings from the patron oilman eventually exceeded \$50,000 in three years of competitions. Although possibly a questionable enterprise in the annals of art competitions, some results were happy enough since there are important names on the roster of that portion of the Davis collection that remains in the museum, and many artists were the beneficiaries of the competition largesse.

Artists' groups have formed, sparked the general scene for a while, then faded – but some have continued operations to the present. The "Artists' Gallery" was founded in 1931 as the first San Antonio gallery to be managed entirely by local artists. Headquarters in the Nueces Hotel, it was sponsored by Mary Bonner, Paul Rhonda Cook, Mary Aubrey Keating, Harry Anthony de Young, and Rolla Taylor. In 1936 the "Villita Street Artists" organized, with twenty-five artists meeting at 511 Villita Street, to preserve one of the early buildings as well as to promote art. In 1937, the group held the first Artists' Fiesta, a prototype for a proliferation of Artists' Balls, Jamborees, River Art Shows, even the Nights in Old San Antonio – activities that combined the attractions of art with those of La



Villita or the River or some other scenic locale, for frivolity and a bit of commerce. In 1947 the River Art Group was established, and in November of that year it presented the first of the River Art Shows, attracting over 250 artists to exhibit their works for sale along the downtown banks of the river. Based on a festive and democratic liberality rather than on professional standards, the River Art Shows have been holiday weekend fare each fall since. The Jamboree has become the major annual fund-raising project for the Art League, staged as a cooperative enterprise with participating artists and usually presented on the estate of some generous and courageous patron.

The Texas Watercolor Society was founded in March 1949 "for the purpose of encouraging creative statements in the medium of water color" according to the catalog foreword of the first annual exhibition in February of 1950. The Watercolor Society has since worked from its headquarters in San Antonio, holding annual competitive exhibitions in the Witte Museum, which then circulate throughout the state.

The Men of Art Guild was founded in 1952 "to join together the serious painters in San Antonio for mutual aid, to promote art interests and activities in the state, to keep the public advised on new art forms." The Guild maintained a permanent gallery for years, with an attractive variety of exhibits, and, during the '50's and '60's, served as an easy-going gathering place, with a stag-night camaraderie, that was near a blood-line heir of the Brass Mug Club.

Art education in the city was generated when the Witte Museum Art School opened in 1927 under the city public school system, with Xavier Gonzalez as the first instructor. In 1933 because of the depression, the Witte took over as a sponsor. Harding Black was soon teaching classes in pottery and the old Ruiz House on the museum grounds became an internationally known ceramics center under Black. Adult classes were held for many years in the old lower pump house of the San Antonio Water Board in Brackenridge Park. It had been converted into a sculpture studio by Gutzon Borglum, who worked there between 1924 and 1937 on the Old Trail Drivers Monument, among other projects. Known thereafter as the Borglum Studio or the Mill Race Studio (the water still ran under the supporting piles built in 1885), it was taken over by Boyer Gonzales and Henry Lee McFee after Borglum departed. The two began conducting classes there, and in 1939 the Museum School sponsored them. Mary Aubrey Keating and Josephine Kincaid spearheaded a drive to put the school under Art League funding. When there was another threat of the school being closed in 1942, Mrs. Marion Koogler McNay offered the aviary on the grounds of her Sunset Hills estate and converted it into studio space. There was a heavy enrollment augmented by servicemen, while night classes and children's classes were continued at the Mill Race and the Witte. Alice Naylor organized the "Mill Race Artists," who made available the print equipment in the studio, presented exhibitions, held classes and an open house each Sunday for the servicemen.

Mrs. Marion Koogler McNay, artist and collector, died in 1950, and, in the words of Lois Wood Burkhalter in her biography, "For

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