

An Interesting Experiment/ *A Curious Failure*

THE CENTURY LOBBY FRESCOES, 1922-1947



This exhibition was born from happenstance discovery of photographs among art conservation records in the Century archives. They depicted a series of mythological murals along the first floor of the clubhouse, including Pegasus flying above the member pegboard. An investigation into the Board of Management minutes outlined a tragicomic tale that is quintessentially Centurion, one of grandiose intentions, creative whimsy, prohibitive delays, and noble folly.

The wall decorations were the brainchild of active club man and landscape architect Charles Downing Lay. He recruited an esteemed roster of member-artists, many of whom had studied in Paris, the epicenter of art and culture during the 'Gay 90s'. Their mission was to adapt the 15th-century method of fresco, which applies color pigment to wet plaster, along the lobby walls as a gift to the club upon its 75th anniversary in 1922.

The first frescoes were announced with great fanfare in *The New York Times*, which cited them as an important and exciting revival of the “**dean of mediums,**” suggesting:

“EVEN IF MISFORTUNE SHOULD OVERTAKE THE PAINTINGS OF THE CENTURY, AND THEY SHOULD DISSOLVE INTO THIN AMERICAN AIR, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WORTHWHILE TO BRING THEM INTO A TEMPORARY EXISTENCE.”

These proved fateful words. What had been expected to take a weekend dragged on for nearly 8 years, plagued by escalating costs and technical difficulties, with some work being removed or repainted but no triage sufficient to curb the "curious" deterioration of the painted plaster. The frescoes ultimately did not survive for the Century's centennial celebration in 1947.

This exhibition synthesizes the results of broad and consuming research in art collections and manuscript repositories across the northeast, plus a blind call to a retired antiques dealer, to flesh out the narrative of the doomed frescoes. It presents a play-by-play of their ambitious rise and sad fall, introduces the cast of personalities involved in their creation – including the gentle dreamer Bryson Burroughs whom contributed the bulk of the work – and does its best to evoke the yesteryear experience of entering the Century greeted by a dreamy panorama of Orphic exploits.

All new documentation has been procured as research copies for the Century archives, so that these ephemeral works may still achieve some form of humble immortality through preservation and future access for interested members and historians alike.

Curated by Brynn White Archivist and Executive Director Century Association Archives Foundation
with invaluable advisory and research assistance by Tina Cuadrado, Curator, Century Association

Special thanks to Thayer Tolles, Linda Seckelson, Jim Moske (Metropolitan Museum of Art); Audrey Piehl; Sam Rohn; Bill Turner; Kathryn Fields (Childs Gallery); Grace Bichler (Cornell University); Stephen Fisher (Mead Museum of Art); Eric Baumgartner (Hirschl & Adler Galleries); Deirdre Donohue and Andy McCarthy (New York Public Library).

Any questions?
Contact archives@thecentury.org

THE DEPARTURE OF THE ARGO

BRYSON BURROUGHS

c. 1922-1923 | West corridor, north wall [men's bathroom] and part of west wall



ORPHEUS TAMING THE COUNTRYSIDE

BRYSON BURROUGHS

c. 1923-1928 | West corridor, south wall; across from men's bathroom

Antiques dealer Bill Turner traced the 14" by 44" watercolor below to the Century, bringing it to former curator Jonathan Harding in 1997. It perfectly aligned with the door frame and column, indicating that it must be a study for this heretofore mysterious wall originally assigned to Mahonri Young. Unfortunately the Century did not purchase the work, leaving only this snapshot Turner originally took, miraculously located, and generously shared this summer.



EURYDICE BITTEN BY THE SNAKE

BRYSON BURROUGHS

1928 | Main entrance hall, opposite the pegboard

CENTURY FIRST FLOOR LOBBY

ENTRANCE

"THE SUBJECT OF THE CENTURY DECORATIONS COMPORTS WITH THE ARTICLE OF THE CONSTITUTION DEFINING THE ASSOCIATION AS COMPOSED OF AUTHORS, ARTISTS AND AMATEURS OF LETTERS AND FINE ARTS. IT IS FOUND IN THE CLASSIC MYTH OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE – NO BETTER PAL THAN OVID FOR AUTHORS, ARTISTS, AND AMATEURS!"

- THE NEW YORK TIMES

In 1928, Burroughs wrote Lay that Gifford Beal had "generously" requested that his panel, "Orpheus Teaching the Arts," be taken down for reasons unknown, but presumed to be deterioration of the plaster. Burroughs repainted it that summer.

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE AT THE ENTRANCE TO HADES

KENNETH FRAZIER

1922 | West wall, by the elevator



LANDSCAPE AND STILL LIFE

[NO IMAGE EXTANT]

KENNETH FRAZIER

1928 | Northeast corner, along 3 doors

Frazier wrote Lay that he was "lame" and would require assistance completing a simplified scheme omitting the human figures and incorporating a formal arrangement of corn and fruits. At the time this corner was occupied by a telephone switchboard and the desk of the hallmen.



Pegasus by Bryson Burroughs. c. 1926. Pastel and watercolor. Courtesy Childs Gallery.

PEGASUS

BRYSON BURROUGHS

1922 | Surrounds the top and sides of the pegboard, east wall



Charles Downing Lay papers, #4477. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

THE EDUCATION OF ORPHEUS

BRYSON BURROUGHS

1922 | Surrounds the doorway to visitors room, east wall



Charles Downing Lay papers, #4477. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

On view in the American Wing open storage at the Met



Eurydice Bitten by the Snake by Bryson Burroughs. 1930. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Sketch for Century Club Fresco by Bryson Burroughs. Undated. Drawing: pastel on paper. Mead Art Museum at Amherst College.



Use this QR code to read first-person accounts of the frescoes in *The New York Times* and *New-York Tribune*

"METAPHORICALLY BURROUGHS'S FRESCOES MIGHT BE CALLED HEXAMETERS IN PAINT, THEY FLOW WITH SUCH AN EASY RHYTHM AND THEIR NARRATIVE STYLE IS SO CLEAR."

- HARRY B. WEHLE

The Rise of the Frescoes

MARCH 1921

Charles Downing Lay and Charles Ewing organize an exhibition by painter and architect members, each showing a furnished salon, one (the painters) hung with “modernistic” paintings and the other (architects) with a “conservative type,” for “conclusions to be drawn by comparison.”

The intention was to show that “modern pictures could be hung in an ancient interior.” Joked George W. Martin in Ewing’s Century memorial, **“Whether or not this contributed importantly to the sum of human knowledge, it was a lot of fun.”**

However, it does seem to have broken the architects out of the notion that rooms must remain consistent within a given period. Instead, interiors could contain the wealth of the past *and* the present.

Members also began to think more critically about ornamenting the “austere dignity” of the front hall past the solemn drabness that was said to characterize the entrances to most private clubs at the time.

This Memorial Exhibition of Sculpture by Daniel Chester French in 1932 shows the art gallery as it appeared at the time, likely influenced by the new interest in furnishings inspired by the 1922 exhibition.



Century Association Archives

MARCH 1922

Bryson Burroughs is invited to join the fresco project alongside Gifford Beal, Kenneth Frazier, Mahonri M. Young, Augustus Vincent Tack, and Allen Tucker. The others have already begun experimenting with the fresco method in Lay’s Brooklyn home. Burroughs enthusiastically agrees to participate:

“FOR MANY YEARS FRESCO HAS SEEMED TO ME THE MOST DELIGHTFUL OF MEDIUMS. TO PAINT IN FRESCO WOULD BE THE REALIZATION OF ONE OF MY BEST HOPES.”

FEBRUARY 1922

Lay and Ewing, following discussions with members and the House Committee, present a plan to the Board of Management to decorate the entrance hall of the clubhouse with frescoes by artist members working in “the bold manner of the 15th century.”

The club offers \$500 (around \$9,000 adjusted for 2023) and rearranges the entrance to facilitate the work. Lay and Ewing anticipate the enterprise to take only one week for pre-production, and “one or at most two days” for painting, to be done in celebration of the Century’s 75th anniversary.

January 10th, 1922.
To the Board of Governors of the Century Association:
Gentlemen: We regret to state that as intimated in our last communication, the cost of hall decorations will greatly exceed the amount of appropriation for which we applied at the beginning of the work. This is due to several unforeseen causes, the principle one being that plaster was found to be in such bad condition, that instead of simply removing the outer coat as we expected to do, it was necessary to take down all of the plaster to the brickwork and put in a solid ground coat.
The amount of space which the artist finds it possible to paint in a day is comparatively small and as the painting must be done on wet plaster, it has resulted in more visits than we anticipated on the part of the plasterer. The carrying on of the work over Sundays and holidays has also added to the expense.
In order to make a finish in one part of the hall we had to restore a portion of the marble wainscot cap and there has been included in our bill certain electrical repairs which the electrician was directed to make by the house management.
We trust that in view of the expenses of the work so far you will feel inclined to grant an additional appropriation of \$700.00.
We are naturally embarrassed and greatly regret the necessity of asking for this sum, but if it is felt by you that the finances of the Club will not permit this additional appropriation, we request that we be authorized to ask for contributions from some of the members who, we feel sure, will be willing to contribute.
Respectfully yours,
Charles Downing Lay
Charles Ewing.
Signed

Century Association Archives

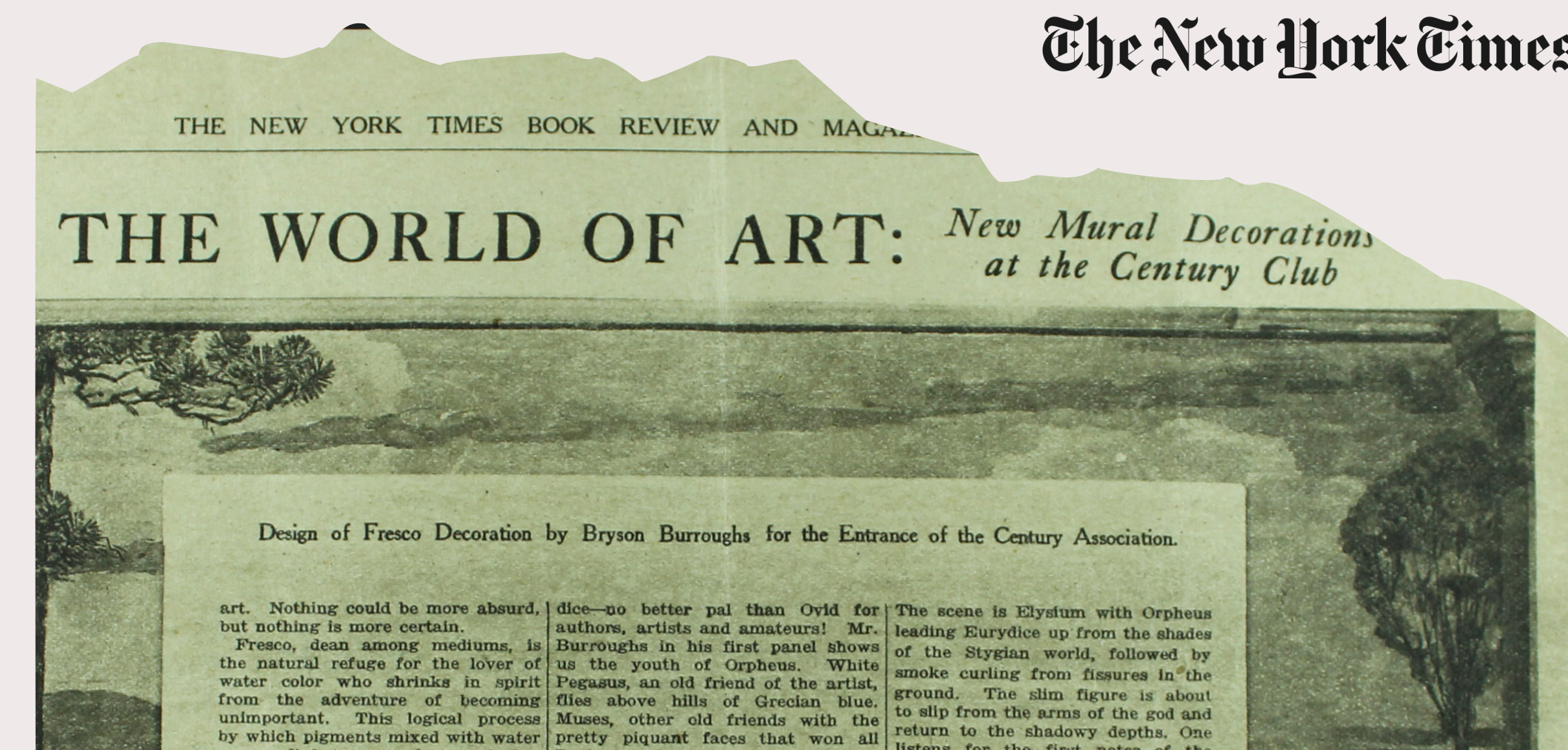
JANUARY 1923

Lay and Ewing report with embarrassment and regret to the Board of Management that the Century’s original plaster has deteriorated, requiring more removal effort than anticipated. The artists have also been stymied by the awkward space and challenges of painting on wet plaster, necessitating prolonged work over Sundays and holidays. Burroughs had warned, **“without the strictest cooperation the attempt would be hazardous. Six men in a small room!”** and indeed Tack, Tucker, and Young – whom was included in early diagrams – all disappear from the project.

SEPTEMBER 1922

The *New York Times* announces the new mural decorations at the Century with grand fanfare:

“ENOUGH OF THE WORK IS FINISHED TO AFFIRM THE PLEASANTNESS OF THE GENERAL EFFECT AND ITS BENEFICENT INFLUENCE UPON THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ROOM. A SILVERY TONALITY ADDS TO THE SENSE OF SPACIOUSNESS, AND THE COLOR OF THE MARBLE COLUMNS IS SUPPORTED HARMONIOUSLY.”



The New York Times

OCTOBER 1922

Guy Pène du Bois reports in his *International Studio* column that while only two fresco panels have been executed, their effect is immediately palpable:

“MEMBERS LINGER IN THE HALL WHO HAD ALWAYS RUSHED THROUGH IT. THE PLACE IS LIGHTER, MORE FREE, GAYER. IT HAS BECOME AN ENTRANCE INSTEAD OF A PASSAGE WAY.”

JULY 1923

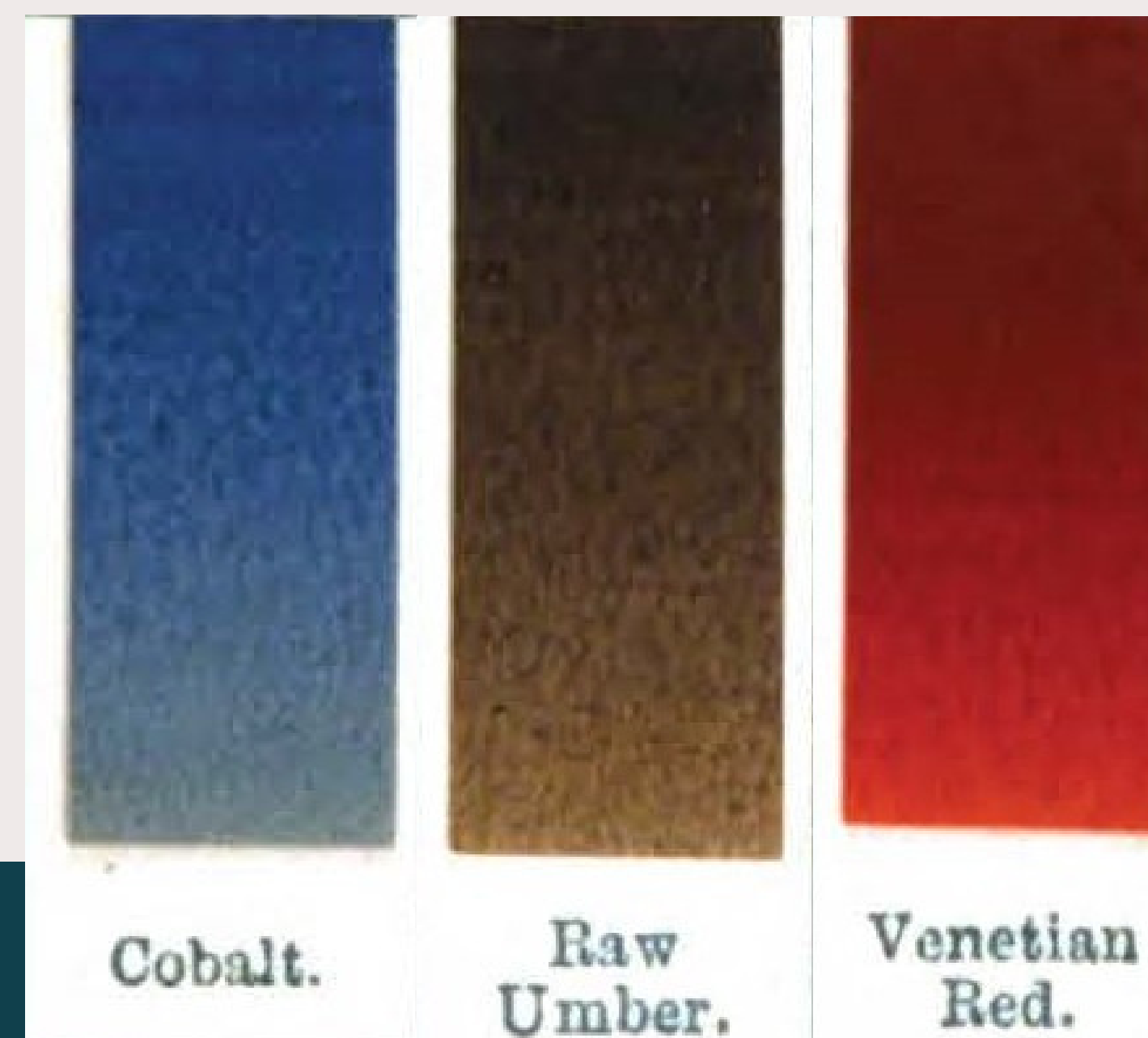
The *New-York Tribune* announces “An Interesting Experiment in Fresco at the Century Club” hailing the use of the ancient art form as a new precedent in America, where few if any important examples exist. It describes the artists’ method of “first making the drawing on paper and of transferring the outline to the freshly plastered wall by means of perforations and the use of charcoal is employed exactly as originally practiced.”

The New York Tribune

“IN MR. BURROUGHS’S PAINTING THE COLOR IS OF A MOST DELICATE AND SOFT-TEXTURED QUALITY. THE SAME HARMONY OF TONE AND COMPOSITION IS TO BE CARRIED THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE SERIES, MAKING AN EVEN, HARMONIOUS PANORAMA.”

SUMMER 1928

Burroughs and Frazier resume work. The former writes Lay that he is ready to continue once Gifford Beal’s painting is taken down at the artist’s request. He also lists the paints he is assembling, providing a glimpse into the color pigments applied to the Century walls.



Samples from *Paint & Colour Mixing: A Practical Handbook for Painters, Decorators, and All Who Have to Mix Colours*. 1926. Trade Papers Publishing Co, (London).

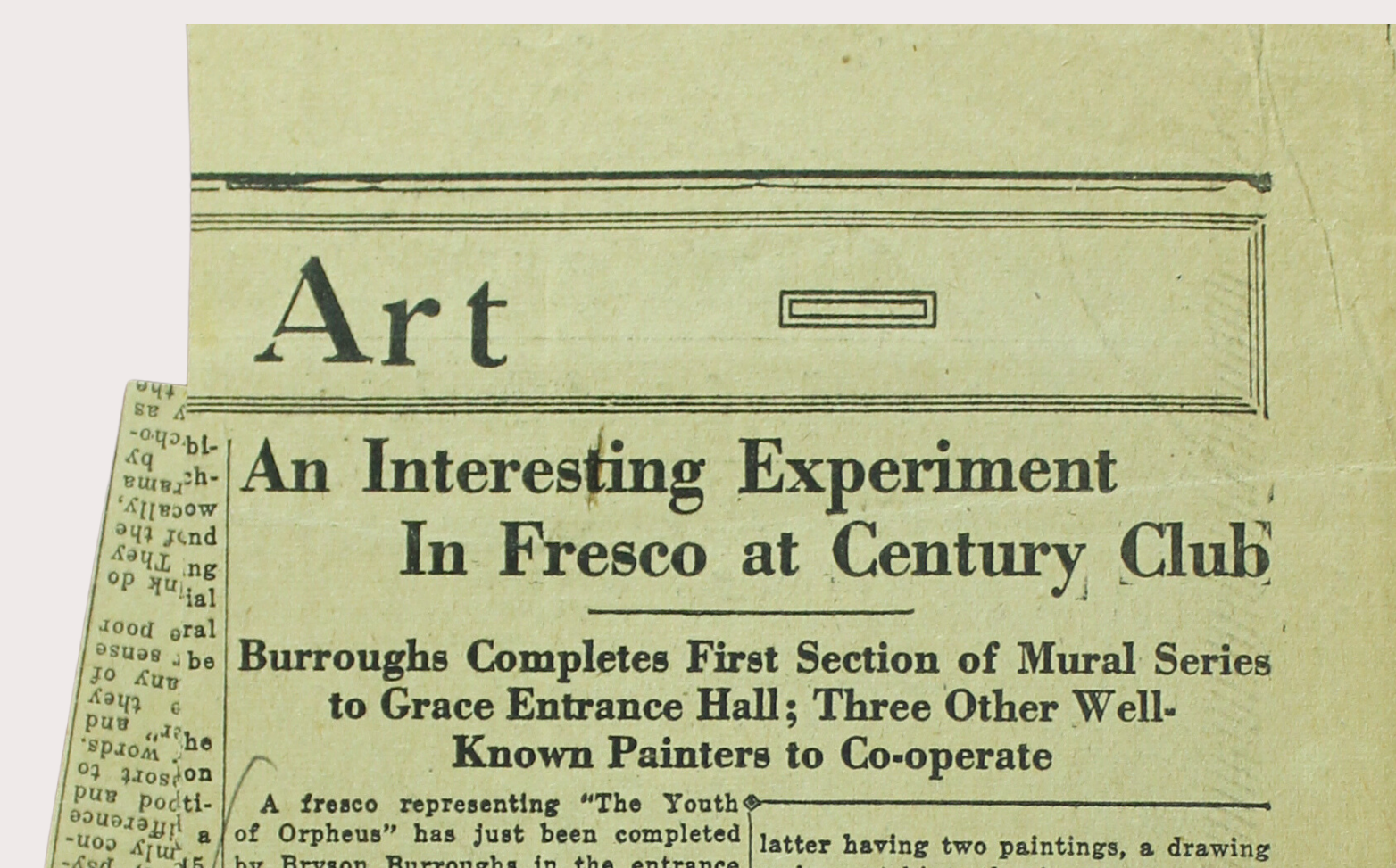
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
Department of Paintings
June 28 - 28

Dear Charles - Have
Yellow ochre
burnt umber
burnt sienna
light red
tobacco verte
Cerulean oxide

We therefore need a lot of white
some Raw Umber
- Sanguine red
- Venetian red
- Cobalt
- Black

Will I get brushes which I will need?
and other materials that occur to me?
My time for work will have to
finish on Friday the 13th as I have an
engagement to go away Sat. 14th 30
it will be necessary to start Monday
morning the 9th early - Will you be
able to arrange that the pla painting
of Gifford's be taken down some day
this next week and to see about the
plasterer? Will you be able to start
your work this?
I should love to spend with you
the week end July 20th if convenient.
Yours
Bryson

Charles Downing Lay papers, #4477. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.



AN INTERESTING EXPERIMENT / A CURIOUS FAILURE

THE CENTURY LOBBY FRESCOES, 1922-1947

The Fall of the Frescoes

FEBRUARY 1942

Century president Royal Cortissoz, Austin Strong, head hallman William Daniel, and several members unveil a poetic inscription, designed by Eric Mugler, atop the pegboard:

**WHEN WE'RE PEGGED OUT FOR GOOD UPON OUR BOARD,
AND PEGS OF RED AND WHITE NO MORE RECORD
OUR COMINGS AND OUR GOINGS HERE BELOW,
MAY PEGASUS WHO BEARS ALOFT OUR FAMES
THEN PEG US IN WITH STARS AGAINST OUR NAMES
WHERE ALL THE CENTURY'S IMMORTALS GO.**

The poem, "Envoi," was immodestly penned by *New York Times* editor and City College president **Dr. John H. Finley** (1864-1940), whom was known to occasionally pause in the lobby and break into recitation. Few members realize its attribution to Finley, and even fewer that he was directly addressing a literal Pegasus that graced the wall.



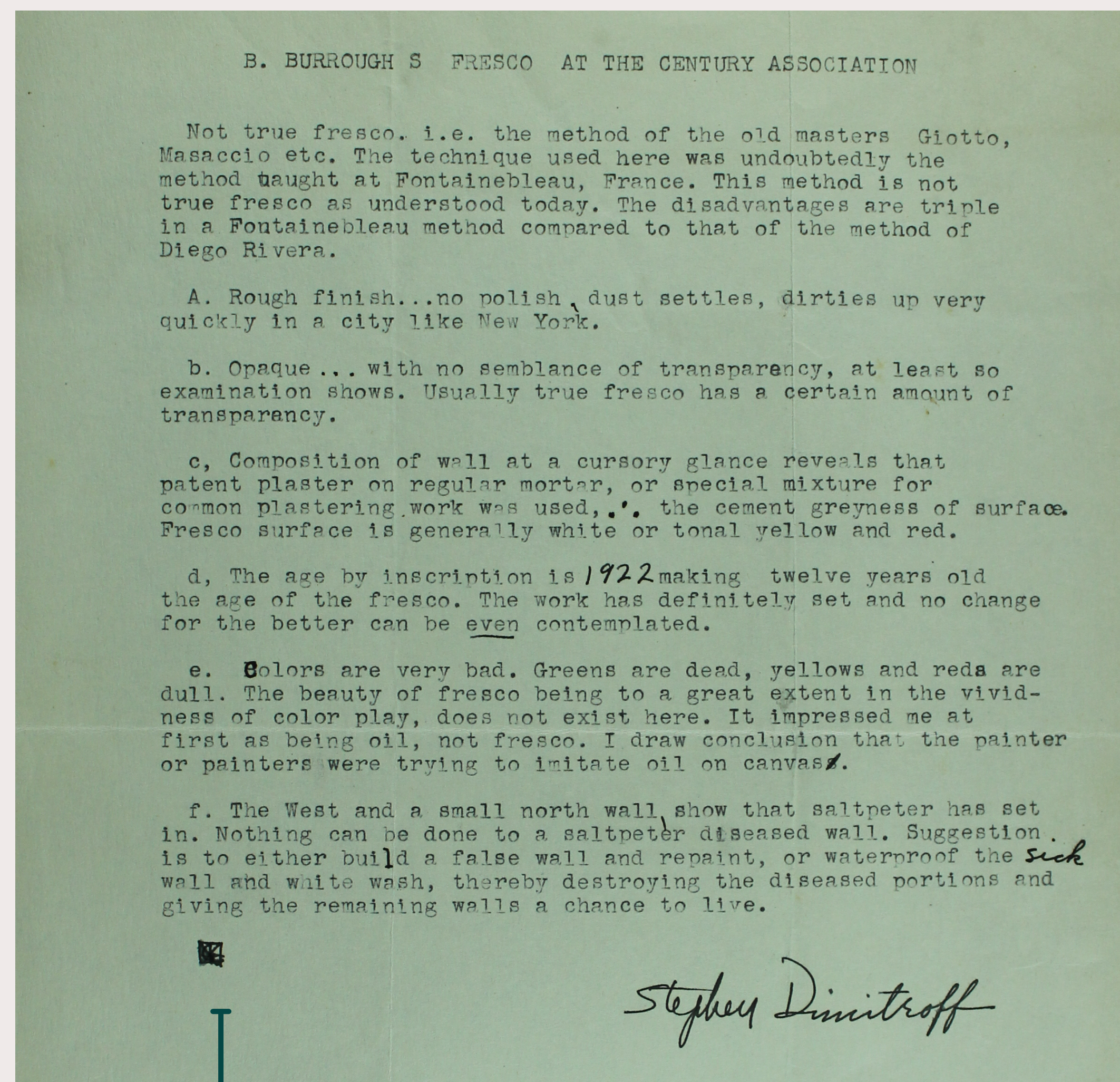
John H. Finley
in costume
for the
Century's 1917
celebration of
Twelfth Night.



Originally built by premiere Gilded Age architect and Centurion Richard Morris Hunt, this 37 Park Avenue townhouse was remodeled by Anne and Harry Harkness Flagler, 1905-07. Bryson Burroughs painted classical motifs along the doors and mantel in the drawing room heavily inspired by the Italian Renaissance. In 1949 Flagler donated what *Arts and Decoration* (1919) called "one of the most beautiful modern rooms in America" to the Museum of the City of New York, where it was formerly on view.



Use this QR code for a full-color, 360-degree view of the Burroughs decorative work. Select "Flagler Alcove."

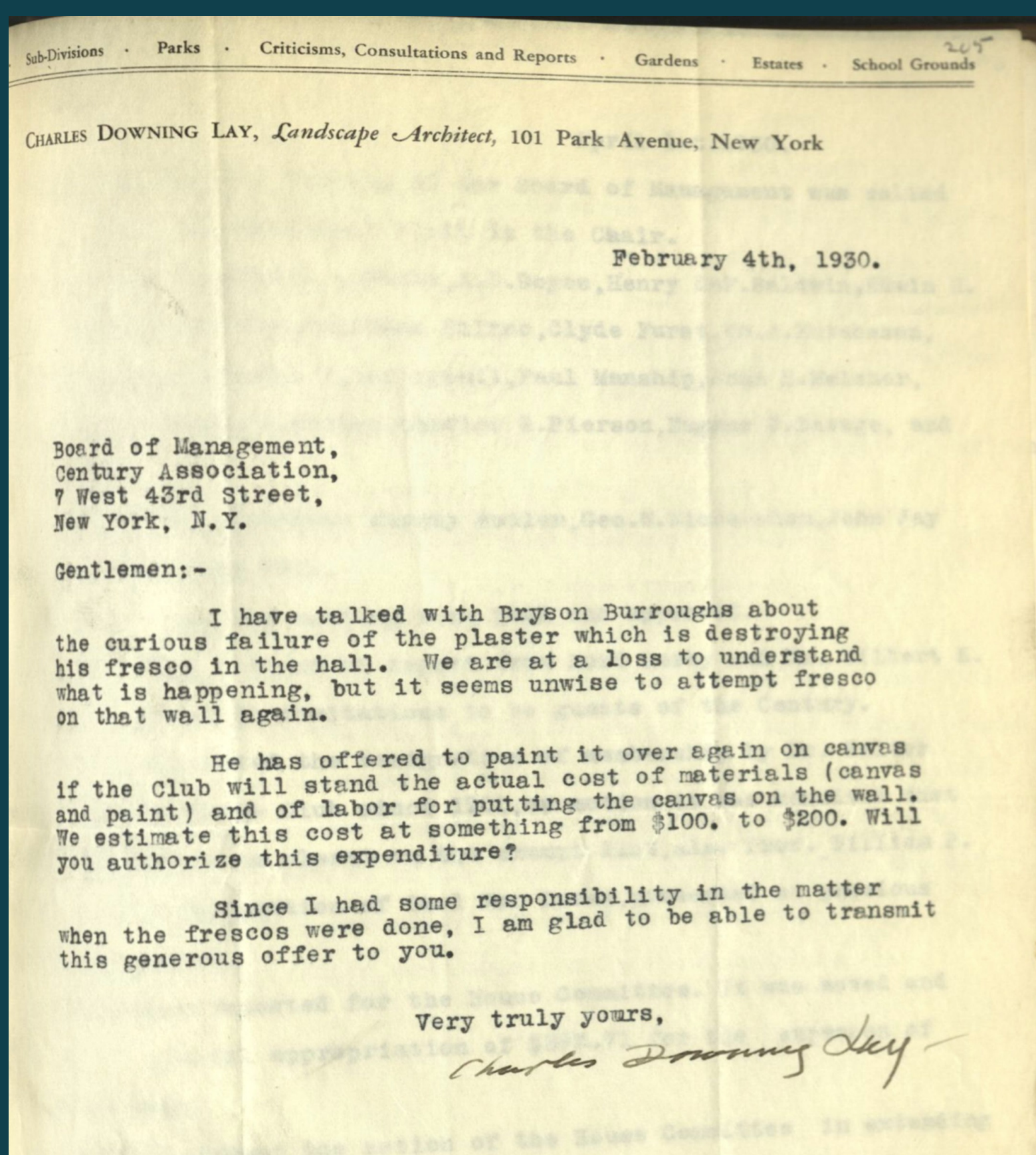


Charles Downing Lay papers, #4477. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

1934

Stephen Dimitroff (1910-1996), a prominent mural painter who apprenticed under Diego Rivera, reviews the frescoes and writes a report excoriating both their condition and technique. He pronounces that **"no change for the better can be even contemplated."**

"NOTHING IN HIS LIFE, PROBABLY, GAVE BRYSON BURROUGHS MORE SATISFACTION THAN PAINTING HIS TWO MAIN DECORATIVE SERIES [THE FLAGLER DRAWING ROOM AND THE ENTRANCE HALL OF THE CENTURY]. THE SPACES, WHETHER REGULAR OR IRREGULAR, WERE ALL LOGICALLY WORKED OUT BEFOREHAND AND RELATED TO ONE ANOTHER IN SMALL-SCALE DRAWINGS AND FULL-SIZED CARTOONS, AND WERE WROUGHT WITH A TECHNIQUE FOUNDED ON PAINSTAKING RESEARCH AND WITH ALL THE ART OF THE EASEL PICTURES PLUS THE ADDED FLUENCY OF RHYTHMS WHICH THE SPACES INVITED."
- HARRY B. WEHLE, MET CURATOR



Century Association Archives

MARCH 1935

The Board of Management authorizes the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** to distribute tickets to attendees of the 1935 **Bryson Burroughs Memorial Exhibit** from March 25 to May 5, which includes several fresco studies and a cartoon used in the actual transfer process. A maximum of 100 museum visitors per day could apply to visit the murals of the Century lobby, as well as of the Park Avenue drawing room of **Centurion Harry Harkness Flagler**.

Club members had long been able to request tickets for friends to visit the Art Gallery: 3,279 visitors were recorded in March for the blockbuster – by Century standards – Exhibition of Italian Paintings of the Renaissance, compared to 437 the month previous, and only 34 the same month of the year prior. However, female attendees were relegated to Sunday afternoons (when some discovered to their dismay that there were no restroom facilities to accommodate them!) Certainly opening the doors to the public through this collaboration with the Met broke new ground for the Century. The club did not maintain any records of public attendance or the impact of this unprecedented activity, though it could be surmised that the Renaissance exhibition was timed to coincide with reinvigorated attention to the frescoes.

JANUARY 1947

On behalf of the House Art Committee, Ernest Tyler reports that the decorations in the lower hall **"have deteriorated to the point that they are no longer things of beauty"** and cannot be restored.

After polling his committee and consulting with the only surviving artist, Kenneth Frazier, he concludes that they should be removed and the walls refurnished. The Board of Management unanimously approves his recommendation.

Twenty-five years after the frescoes were inaugurated to mark its 75th anniversary, the Century celebrates its centennial without them.

FEBRUARY 1930

Lay speaks with Burroughs regarding **"the curious failure of the plaster which is destroying his fresco in the hall."** Burroughs agrees to paint over the frescoes again and Lay requests another \$100 to \$200 for cost of materials and labor.

The Embarkation of Ursula by Bryson Burroughs. c. 1926.

While the painting at first glance appears classical, on closer inspection one can see the contemporary garb of St. Ursula and her handmaidens, a sly invasion of the modern into antiquity characteristic of Burroughs's work.



Featured in the 1935 Memorial Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

JANUARY 1929

York & Sawyer architects complete an inscription for the lobby crediting the contributions of the member artists in honor of the club's 25th anniversary, leaving out the seven long years it took from its 1922 inception to completion.

THE FRESCOES IN THIS ROOM WERE DONE IN COMMEMORATION OF OUR SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY 1922

Charles Downing Lay papers, #4477. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

AN INTERESTING EXPERIMENT / A CURIOUS FAILURE

THE CENTURY LOBBY FRESCOES, 1922-1947

The Players

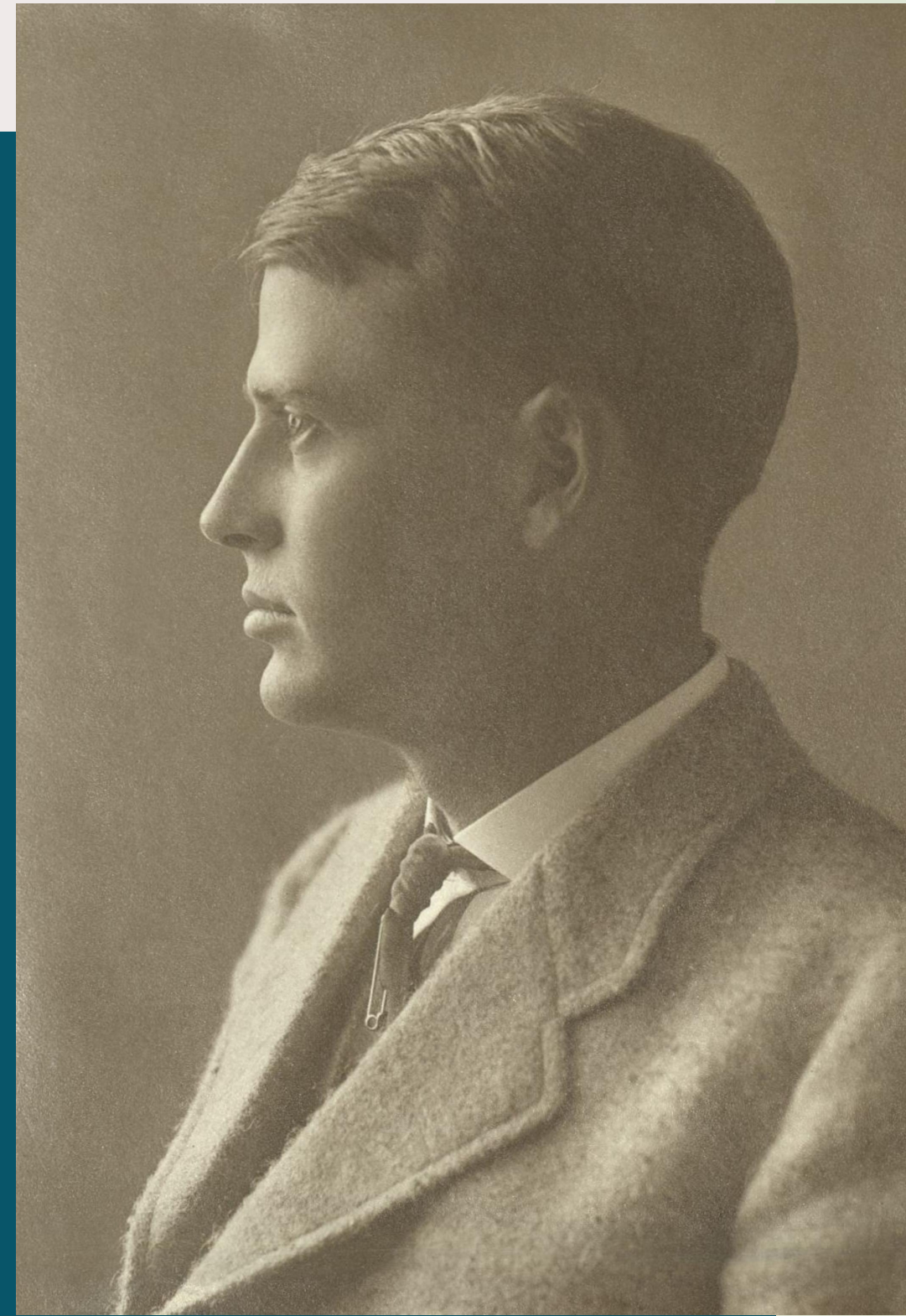
KENNETH FRAZIER (CEN. 1903-1929)

Artist Kenneth Frazier served on the Art Committee from 1921 to 1923, and contributed several scenes. Wrote Henry Allen Moe in his Century memorial, “**A member of the Century for forty-six years, he pulled his weight in all our boats** – as exhibitor in our Gallery, as a denizen of our lower regions, the Pool Room, as a member of the Board of Management, as a member of the Committee on Admissions. **Kenneth Frazier exemplified what Harry Baldwin wrote in our Centennial Book that our artists, materially no less than spiritually, have contributed more to the Century than any other group.**” Moe also paints a vivid portrait of his time studying alongside other Centurions at the Julien Academy in Paris, beginning in 1889, and its impact on his artistic life: “Their contemporary gods were Puvis de Chavannes and Monet and Whistler. Their companions were Bonnard and Zuloaga; Pissaro and Forain, Toulouse-Lautrec and Fantin-Latour. As part of their lives were Henry James and Oscar Wilde and Alfonse Daudet. Great days!, whose mark always thereafter was upon all the eager young men who painted at the closely-packed easels and tabourets of Julian’s, the walls thick with palette scrapings, noisy and rowdy—whose gastronomic exaltation quite equaled their aesthetic enthusiasm. They were young, and Paris was Paris; and they talked and walked and argued and admired; and they painted always as well as they could, for their gods also were dwellers there. Small wonder then that when Kenneth Frazier came back home, a recognized portrait painter, **he painted every day of his life and was painting the day he died – absorbed, full of talk, full of knowledge and enthusiasm. Quiet of manner, gentle of voice, he was also, always, a convivial spirit in the Century.**”

CHARLES DOWNING LAY

(CEN. 1912 - 1956)

“*I hear you are the great living master of fresco,*” fellow Centurion Fred DeWitt Wells wrote Lay, and indeed he spearheaded the project. His personal papers at Cornell University significantly informed this exhibition. He also served on the Board of Management, organized exhibitions at the club throughout his membership, and collaborated with librarian Theodore Bolton on an inventory of the Century’s art and furniture collections in 1943. Other exploits were more irreverent. In the early 1920s, he raised subscription funds from members to purchase a French chateau in a failed attempt at a European annex of the club. In the 1930s, he formed an unofficial early iteration of the Wine Committee, which self-sacrificingly assembled to sample vintage bottles for potential inclusion in the Century cellar. This was credited as contributing greatly “to the spiritual welfare of the members.” Lay founded and edited *Landscape Architecture* magazine, laid out parks and private estates, contributed plans to the United States Housing Authority and City of New York, and was an accomplished amateur in painting and etching. In his Century memorial, George W. Martin wrote: “He had an easy-going manner, but he had a good, hard head, and knew very well what he was doing... Charley was good company and very amusing – tolerant, bland, and entirely (and rather unexpectedly) aware of the ways of the world.”



Century Association Archives

CHARLES EWING (CEN. 1917 - 1957)

A member of the Art Committee from 1920 to 1922, Ewing served as its representative collaborator with Lay on the fresco project. Characterized as having “great interest” in the Century, he also sat on the Board of Management and the House Committee. After studying at the Beaux Arts in Paris, Ewing established a firm with George Chappell in New York City. Alongside Chappell and other architects, Ewing founded the Digressionists, a group who congregates – most often at the Century – to display their amateur talents, artistic and otherwise, at a dinner party. Ewing was said to have been keenly competitive for the medals awarded in various categories of Digression, a tradition that continues today.

GIFFORD R. BEAL (CEN. 1913 - 1956)

An Impressionist painter and long-time president of the Art Students League, Beal served on the Art Committee for 15 years, the longest stint by a Centurion at the time. “In the Century he was a tower of strength,” remarked George M. Martin. Though his fresco contributions were replastered in 1928, the club formally acknowledged his contributions and paid high tribute to his art: his one-man show in 1950 proved the largest opening yet in the history of the Century. Recounted Martin, “It was a love feast. Everyone was delighted, and Gifford had a perfectly wonderful time.” Beal’s work “Wingsheek Beach” hangs in the Skylight Room across the hall.

BRYSON BURROUGHS

(CEN. 1919 - 1934)

Though the last of the six artists invited to participate, Bryson Burroughs was perhaps the most in tune with the spirit and intent of the project, and ultimately its chief executor.

Born in the Hyde Park suburb of Boston in 1869, Burroughs took up painting after high school, studying at the Cincinnati Museum and working as a cartoonist at a local paper before joining the Art Students League in New York City. A Chanler scholarship sent him to Paris in December 1890 to study under Luc-Olivier Meerson. Mentorship under Puvis des Chavannes and studies in Florence in 1895 significantly informed his developing artistic style.



Portrait of Bryson Burroughs by Henri Caro-Delaville, 1917. Oil on canvas. Princeton University Art Museum.

Burroughs returned to New York and in 1906 the Metropolitan Museum of Art appointed him to Assistant Curator of Paintings under Curator Roger Fry, whom he succeeded in 1909 until his death in 1934. Burroughs was regarded as an adroit and prolific scholar and an influential early advocate for the work of Thomas Eakins. He made the first American museum acquisition of a Cézanne, as well as major works by Michelangelo, Renoir, Bruegel, and – in what he considered the culmination of his curatorial career – a diptych by Hubert van Eyck. Forbes Watson wrote that he was far ahead of his time in his judgements, “A curator equally knowing, experienced, industrious, sincere, and understanding.”

Burroughs negotiated the freedom to spend mornings in his studio, before attending to Museum duties in the afternoon. He seemed to paint primarily for his own pleasure without regard for the tastes of the buying public, even though his output is primarily decorative. Such seeming contradictions characterize his oeuvre, one of sardonic wit, playfulness, and fantasy, but rendered with a pleasant and sober restraint. Subject-wise Burroughs was deeply and almost exclusively invested in the universal truths of human nature contained in mythology, fairytale, and religion, subtly infusing them with anachronistic details and an irony described as “wholly delightful but in no way irreverent.” From Chavannes he adapted his own simplification of the painted surface and figural forms, emphasis on linear outline, and a light palette of limited tonality. He rendered his narratives of antiquity with both an engaging immediacy and a perspective described as aloof, yet deeply personal. As someone with an intimate understanding of the full sweep of art across eras, and the coming and going of trends, he carved out his own idiosyncratic and bemused niche.

Met curator Harry B. Wehle observed a shift in Burroughs work around 1910, as it became cooler in tone and more delicate in texture, achieving compositional fluency and harmony. “It was,” he wrote, “as though everything were leading up to the Century Association frescoes.” He lamented that Burroughs died just when the demand for murals was increasing, believing that “he had gained exceptional technical mastery” over the form, where “his lyrical quality found its completest expression.” The Century walls would remain the climax of his artistic career.

Among friends Burroughs was adoringly, and quite loquaciously, treasured. He was repeatedly – almost to the point of parody – characterized as “gentle,” but more complexly as a man emanating “an otherworldliness that made him at once delightfully disarming to cruder mortals” (Forbes Watson). His entire family was devoted to the arts: his second wife Edith Woodman a sculptor sharing his investment in simplicity of form, their daughter Betts also a sculptor married to the painter Reginald Marsh, and his son Alan a pioneer of X-radiography in art scholarship betrothed to painter Molly Luce.

Burroughs valued the time he was able to devote to his own work, and was said to have derived great satisfaction from the Century frescoes. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. in his essay on art in the Century’s centennial history, surmised that Burroughs, “the gentlest of spirits,” would have even gracefully resigned himself to their fate:



The Garden of Venus by Bryson Burroughs, 1914. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Childs Gallery.

“ONE VALUED BURROUGHS HIGHLY PARTLY BECAUSE HE SEEMED TO EXPECT NO CONSIDERATION AT ALL. ONE LOVED HIM FOR HIMSELF AND FOR HIS LOVE OF THE FINEST THINGS. SINCE HIS MURAL IN THE CENTURY LOWER HALL TELLS MUCH ABOUT THE NEVER-NEVER LAND IN WHICH HE LIVED WHEN OFF OFFICIAL DUTY, IT IS A PITY THAT IT IS ON A TRICKY WALL AND APPARENTLY WILL FADE OUT SOON. THIS IS A SITUATION TO WHICH BURROUGHS HIMSELF WOULD HAVE CONSENTED. BEING ABLE TO EVOKE A CHARMING IF INCREDIBLE PAST, BURROUGHS HAD HIS RETREAT, AND THE FUTURE WAS NO CONCERN OF THE MOST MODEST OF POET PAINTERS.”

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