

Offering Aid to Fellow Artists

BY PATRICIA PAULL NEWSOM

IN THIS SEASON of gifts and giving, *American Artist* celebrates an arts organization whose members demonstrate the art of giving 365 days a year. That organization is Artists' Fellowship.

Finding oneself in severe financial need due to physical and/or mental disability diminishes one's world and weakens one's will, especially when one's disability is accompanied by old age. Should such a fate befall a professional fine artist there does exist a community of fellow artists who want to help.

For the past 121 years, a group of caring and compassionate artists and non-artists alike have come together with one purpose in mind: to help artists in times of emergency and financial need who have been hit with severe physical and/or mental disabilities and whose monies have been drained. That help, which is given in the form of financial aid and emotional support, is directed to maintaining the artist's dignity and pride in the face of such hardship.

Despite the tendency of artists to be individualists and mavericks of sorts, they—like other members of the human race—are not without need of community—particularly a community of peers. It was such a community of like-minded artists, sharing a studio building in the mid-1800s on West 10th Street in New York City, that was made aware of the degree of human suffering and financial devastation existing among their own. Sharing a sense of responsibility to be of aid in such uncompromising circumstances, these artists formed the "Helpful Society" in 1859 to respond to those very real and immediate needs.

Their original intent was to provide assistance to artists and their families in cases of "sickness, bereavement, or financial distress." Fund-raising efforts included teas and receptions where artist members donated paintings. As the Society's usefulness grew more apparent, the group organized itself more formally under the name of "Artists' Mutual Aid Society." That usefulness reached far beyond financial aid alone. It continued to epitomize the founders' quality of caring and respect for human dignity.

They incorporated and changed their name to Artists' Fellowship, Inc.,



Seated on the porch are (bottom row): R. F. Bloodgood, W. B. Faxon, W. H. Lippincott, Barse, A. E. Blackmore, F. E. Church, J. F. O'Sullivan, and G. W. Maynard; (middle row): Mielatz, (unknown), Kinsella, and J. G. Brown; and (top row): Ebert, Olinsky, Volk, and Bittinger.

in 1925. Incorporation made them eligible to receive bequests. Prudently invested over the years, these restricted funds have remained as principal while their income has provided the lifeline to many a destitute artist. With the onset of inflation, however, not only has the value of the income been devalued, but also the amount of aid required has greatly increased. These hard realities are faced continually by the Fellowship's hard-working, all-volunteer Board of Trustees.

What the Fellowship is not is a scholarship fund or grant-giving foundation to aid promising young artists. Although this need is very real and often urgent, Artists' Fellowship is not constitutionally empowered to respond to such requests. The professional artist whose efforts to cope with day-to-day living expenses, while concentrating full-time on art, all but defy him/her, or the artist unable to find employment to support his/her creative efforts may well wonder and hold out hope that the name "Fellowship" might, in this instance, connote scholarship aid. It does not. Scholarship aid is beyond the scope of the Fellowship's purposes and limited resources. Aid is intended only for the professional painter, graphic artist, or sculptor who is in financial distress

because of disability or age, which has interrupted or ended a self-supporting income.

From its inception this aid has been given freely with no strings attached. There are no restrictions as to how the money is to be spent and there is no expectation of repayment. When a bequest is received from an artist whom the Fellowship had helped get back on his/her feet, there is joy for everyone concerned. One of the largest such gifts came from a painter, then in his 80s, who had received aid from the Fellowship some 40 years earlier. In an accompanying letter expressing his gratitude, the painter recalled that dark period of his life, saying he could not possibly have survived had it not been for the assistance and support of the Fellowship. His life had virtually been saved, and he had never forgotten it.

Because of limited funds, the Fellowship is often prevented from offering the amount of aid circumstances require. Rather than not respond, the Board will often make a one-time financial gesture with the hope of encouraging the artist to make that one extra effort. The Fellowship's dependency on new bequests has never been so real.

In addition to its financial dependency on gifts and bequests, the Fel-

lowship is equally dependent on the dedicated spirit and attitude of its membership. The Fellowship's specialness lies in its cognizance of two important needs in times of severe hardship—money and caring. Singly, they are essential; together, they are life-giving. The Fellowship is not merely a dispenser of monies. Money alone does not heal. Knowing there exists a group of one's fellow artists who care and who will see to it that one is not abandoned revives the will to live.

Membership in Artists' Fellowship is by no means a prerequisite to one's eligibility for financial aid in the future. The Fellowship is in no sense an insurance company for working artists. Artists and non-artists join in a spirit of compassion, knowing that the circumstances of the particular artist in need could just as easily be their own. After payment of the barest minimum of organizational expense, members' annual dues are added to invested funds. Upon joining, active (or artist) members agree to a modest additional assessment should the onset of an extreme, unforeseen emergency warrant it. The willingness to assume this additional financial responsibility is indicative of the sense of commitment these artist members share. It is the knowledge of this depth of caring that does more for the healing of the ailing artist than money alone could ever accomplish. That body of active (artist) members now numbers 180 strong.

Sharing the same dedication of purpose, while not assessed for additional funds, are the approximately 60 sustaining (or non-artist) members. Drawn from both art-related and unrelated fields, they share equal representation on the Board with artist members. Among the diversity of fields they represent are: publishing,

writing, law, corporate business, finance, artist supply manufacturers, framers, galleries, and museums, to name a few. To insure the utilization of all these various talents the Board is rotated regularly.

Through its collective membership, the Fellowship's members represent accompanying memberships in nearly every national arts organization and exhibiting society. The partial list of arts institutions represented includes: the National Academy of Design, the American Watercolor Society, Allied Artists, Audubon Artists, the Pastel Society, the Society of Illustrators, Knickerbocker Artists, Society of Painters in Casein and Acrylic, the National Arts Club, the Salmagundi Club, and nationally known art schools. It is through this network of professional artists that the Fellowship hears most directly of artists in need of assistance. It is often the case that the artist in need is too proud to ask the Fellowship for help.

Another source of requests comes through inquiries addressed to Artists' Fellowship, Inc., 47 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003.

Aid is allocated on the basis of need at the discretion of the Board. No one arts organization has favor over any other in that allocation; moreover, the Fellowship itself is not affiliated with any arts organization. Applicants' names and addresses are held in strict confidentiality, only members of the Board of Trustees and its Officers being privy to the particulars of each case. Protecting the artist's privacy and dignity is of the utmost concern. Cases are reviewed by the Board on a monthly basis, and Board members make a point of visiting cases under consideration before granting aid. Great care is taken to insure that no deserving artist is overlooked.

Gathering together at their annual



An outing in the late 1800s. From left to right: Hirschberg, A. E. Blackmore, W. H. Lippincott.

dinner, members share a commonality of spirit which, on this evening, extends beyond their mutual purposes of aid to honor two distinguished individuals in the field of art with memorial medals. Through these awards the Fellowship again concerns itself with honoring the pride and dignity of its fellow artists.

The Gari Melchers Memorial Medal is awarded to a person who has materially furthered the interests of the profession of the fine arts. Established in 1945 in memory of the late artist, Gari Melchers, a longtime member of the Fellowship, this award has been presented to such a variety of notable persons as: Thomas J. Watson, Huntington Hartford, Henry F. du Pont, Edward G. Robinson, Whitney North Seymour, Avery Fisher, Ada Louise Huxtable, and, in 1980, to W. McNeil Lowry.

The Benjamin West Clinedinst Memorial Medal, established in 1947, is awarded for the achievement of exceptional artistic merit. Among its recipients over the years have been noted painters, illustrators, and sculptors. A partial list of recipients includes: Norman Rockwell, Ivan G. Olinsky, John C. Johansen, Leon Kroll, Chen Chi, Will Barnet, Eric Sloane, and, in 1980, to Isabel Bishop.

In this increasingly impersonal world of self-service and fast-food chains, where our number identifications seem to matter more than our names, where money is now dispensed through the mouth of a bank's computer, respect for the dignity of man is being subtly eaten away. In such a world, it is reassuring to know that there exists a group of caring individuals who, bonded by their mutual love of art, are sensitive to the devastating circumstances that can so easily befall a fellow artist. They are prepared to go to the aid of that artist. What greater gift can people offer each other? ●



At the 1980 award presentation. From left to right: Susan E. Meyer, Michael Engel II, John R. McCarthy, Isabel Bishop, and Chen Chi.