

HOUSTON WE HAVE HISTORY

The Houston LGBT Artists Before Stonewall Issue



L to R: Gene Charlton, Zoe Leger, Carden Bailey, Nione Carlson, Billy Hart (Photo c.1940).

June marks the 50th anniversary of the [Stonewall Riots in New York City](#). For those who may not be familiar with Stonewall, the resistance following a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, in late June, 1969, was, to quote Wikipedia, “widely considered to constitute the most important event leading to the [gay liberation](#) movement and the modern fight for [LGBT rights in the United States](#).”

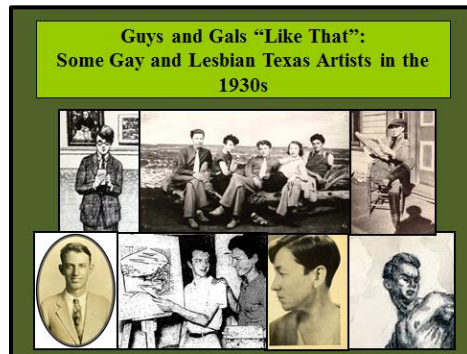
This year there will be exhibitions around the country commemorating Stonewall, including here in Houston, [Stonewall 50](#) at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and [Fifty Years since Stonewall](#) at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. These exhibitions are filled with paintings, sculptures, photographs and works in other media that address LGBT lives and culture, as well as the specific events and outcomes of Stonewall, though neither is specifically focused on Houston.



Mignon Weisinger and Pat Gustavson; Chester Snowden and Royal Dixon.

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Important as Stonewall was as a flashpoint for the gay lib movement, however, it certainly wasn't the beginning of gay culture, or of art made by gay artists. There is a pre-Stonewall LGBT History to be explored, even right here in Houston, and it includes Earlier Houston Artists and their art. And here in Houston, that art-inflected history is especially important, since it is providing the earliest glimpses that we have into the lives of LGBT Houstonians of the past.



“Guys and Gals ‘Like That’: Some Gay and Lesbian Texas Artists in the 1930s”
Presented at the 2015 Annual CASETA Symposium in Houston, April 25, 2015

Back in 2015, the board of CASETA: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art, took what some considered a bold step in inviting me to give a talk at the 13th Annual CASETA Symposium here in Houston, a talk that I titled [“Guys and Gals ‘Like That’: Some Gay and Lesbian Texas Artists in the 1930s.”](#) The response to the talk was gratifyingly positive, and it is available for viewing, along with other CASETA symposium talks, via YouTube.



“Houston We Have History” banners on display at the Hilton-Americas for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force “Creating Change Conference” in Houston, Jan. 29 – Feb. 2, 2014

At about the same time, it was a bit of a shock to learn, while working on the [“Houston We Have History” Banner Project](#), first created for display at the “Creating Change Conference” of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force here

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in Houston in 2014, that the history I'd uncovered about a group of Houston Gay/Lesbian artists was almost the earliest known Houston LGBT history, certainly as focused on specific individuals. Two [banners dedicated to these 1930s artists](#) were then, and still are today, the first historical banners in the project – the next one jumping forward to 1954.

Claiming history is a militant act, and once people get a taste for their own history, which has happened for us LGBT Houstonians, there's no stopping the hunt. Since 2015, a number of individuals and organizations have undertaken the hard work of digging out our Houston LGBT history and have taken the radical step of proclaiming it to the world.



University of Houston Libraries LGBT History Research Collection

Because so much effort has gone toward eradicating evidence of LGBT history for so long – documents have been burned, artworks have been destroyed or defaced, memories have been purged – the first hurdle is to find the sources that illuminate and prove the history. Though not alone in this regard, The University of Houston Libraries have made tremendously important strides in finding, preserving and making accessible LGBT archival resources, especially as related to Houston. Their [LGBT History Research Collection](#) has become the first stop for anyone interested in that history. Significant sub-collections focus specifically on Houston artists, including the long-term couples [Pat Gustavson, physician, and Mignon Weisinger, artist](#), who met at UofH in the 1940s; and [Royal Dixon, writer, and Chester Snowden, artist](#). The UofH LGBT History Research Collection is being actively expanded as relevant materials are found.



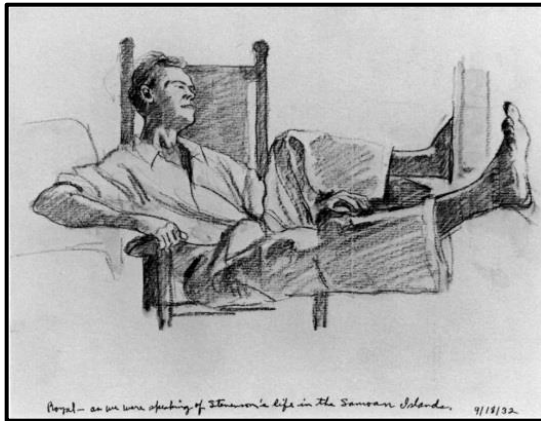
Painting by Chester Snowden, and Royal Dixon book, illustrated by Snowden.

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Mignon Weisinger in her studio, flanked by an early painting and a later sculpture.

Outsmart, Houston's LGBTQ monthly magazine, is also spreading the word about Houston's LGBTQ art history, particularly through articles written by Brandon Wolf, a regular contributor. Brandon has done outstanding pieces on the [UofH archival holdings](#) in general, and on [Royal Dixon and Chester Snowden](#), and [Pat Gustavson and Mignon Weisinger](#). That one has had thousands of online views and has broadcast Houston's LGBT history around the world.



“Royal – As we were speaking of Stevenson’s life in the Samoan Islands, 9/18/32” and “Royal Dixon Resting, 4/24/62” both pencil drawings by Chester Snowden.

J.D. Doyle, by general agreement the indispensable lynchpin in the study of Houston LGBT history, has created a mind boggling resource with his online [JD Doyle Archives](#), a website that includes scans and recordings of vast amounts of material relating to LGBT history and music around the nation and world, but with particular strength concerning Texas and Houston.

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JD has not forgotten Earlier Houston Artists. He has created pages devoted to [Royal Dixon and Chester Snowden](#), [Gene Charlton and Carden Bailey](#) and [Dr. Pat Gustavson and Mignon Weisinger](#). There's even one for [me](#). All these pages are filled with scans of photos and documents and links to other resources, now readily available for researchers and everyone else, anywhere in the world.



Paintings by Carden Bailey (l) and Gene Charlton (r).

A book from 1990, with the title *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, explores aspects of LGBT history from the ancient world to the mid-20th Century. Houston isn't mentioned in the book. Our LGBT history can't be "reclaimed" because it has never been claimed before. But thanks to the hard work of many present-day Houstonians, who are creating archives, writing articles, making videos and art, the LGBT history of Houston is being claimed and proclaimed for the first time, and Earlier Houston LGBT Artists and their Art are in the forefront of that history.

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CASETA website includes Earlier Houston Art Exhibition catalogs:

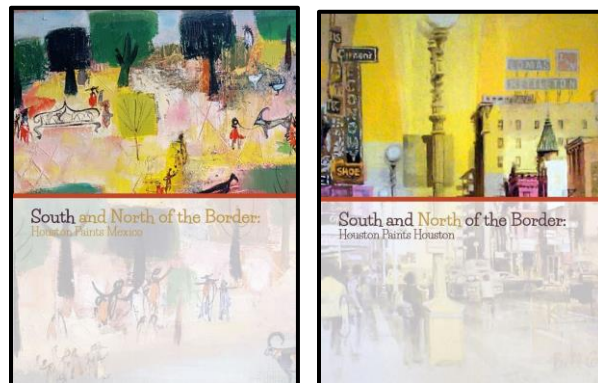
You saw the exhibitions, now read the books. Or even if you didn't see the exhibitions (because exhibitions come and go in what seems like the blink of an eye), you can still read the books – that is to say, the catalogs), because CASETA: Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art has mounted pdf versions of some recent Earlier Houston Art catalogs on their website. Have a look! Thanks CASETA for making these widely available.

[South and North of the Border: Houston Paints Mexico](#)

**The Ideson Gallery, Houston Public Library
August 25 – November 10, 2018**

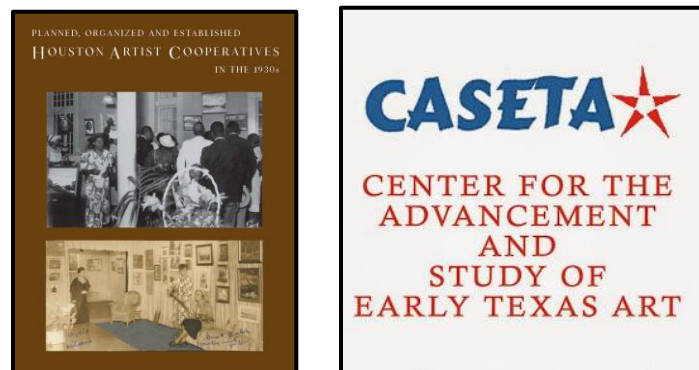
[South and North of the Border: Houston Paints Houston](#)

**The Heritage Society Museum, Houston
August 16, 2018 – January 12, 2019**



[Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives in the 1930s](#)

**The Ideson Gallery, Houston Public Library
August 12 – November 9, 2017**

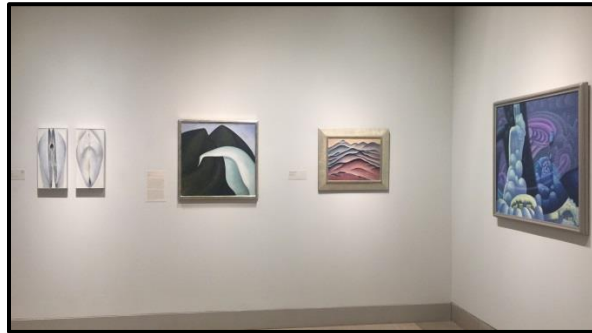


And while you're at the [CASETA website](#), have a look at some of the many exciting symposium presentations from years past. The 2019 presentation videos will be on the website soon.

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Ruth Pershing Uhler hanging at the Dallas Museum of Art:

Look at that - Houston artist Ruth Pershing Uhler (1895-1967) is currently on view at the Dallas Museum of Art, along with Georgia O'Keeffe, Raymond Jonson and Henrietta Shore.



Installation shot at Dallas Museum of Art, showing Ruth Pershing Uhler (third from left).

Wish the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, would hang Uhler's fabulous "Earth Rhythm No 3", from the MFAH permanent collection, here in Houston. If there's room for Uhler at DMA, surely there is room for her at MFAH!



Ruth Pershing Uhler *Earth Rhythm No3* 1935, MFAH Purchase Prize winner in 1936.

Both Uhlers are from the series she did in 1935, which we brought back together for the first time in 60 years at Houston Public Library in 2017. What a sight that was. That's Ruth Uhler in the old newspaper photo with her prize winning painting, of course.



Ruth Pershing Uhler's *Earth Rhythm Series* (selection) on view in the exhibition *Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives in the 1930s*, the Ideson Gallery, Houston Public Library, August 9 – November 12, 2017.

Thanks to DMA and Sue Canterbury, The Pauline Gill Sullivan Associate Curator of American Art at Dallas Museum of Art, for showing Uhler to our neighbors to the north.

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Lost and Lamented – a new occasional series focusing on Earlier Houston Art that is now nowhere to be found – except in old photographs and newspapers.

Number 1 in the series is *Restaurant Gaudeamus, Paris*, by Gene Charlton.



In the fall of 1937, Charlton went to Europe, along with his partner, Carden Bailey, his teacher Ola McNeill Davidson, and Davidson's son. It was the first trip abroad for all of them, and they away for almost four months, touring France and Italy, with particular attention to Paris, Florence and Venice.



Here is the travel crew, waiting to get on their cargo steamer in Corpus Christi: Ola McNeill Davidson, Gene Charlton and Carden Bailey (with only half a head). Davidson's son Randolph was probably the photographer.

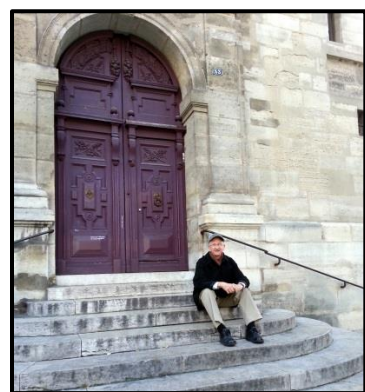
Over the two or three years after they returned to Houston, in December 1937, Charlton produced a number of paintings in oil and watercolor, as well as a few prints. Almost all of them are now lost. His *Restaurant Gaudeamus, Paris* is one of the lost ones, now known only from a listing in the Houston Annual Exhibition for 1940, in which he entered it, and from a photo in the *Houston Post* for November 3, 1940.

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When Charlton went to Gaudeamus in 1937 he had a bowl of borscht, which was still on the menu the last time I went by. It's in the 5th, just steps from Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, with its famous rood screen. This was Emma Richardson Cherry's favorite Paris church, which may be why Charlton was in the neighborhood.



Saint-Étienne-du-Mont is also the location, of course, of the "Midnight in Paris" steps and street. We'll be visiting all these on our HETAG tour of Paris next year. What a thrilling tour it will be!



Saint-Étienne-du-Mont and the Pantheon, by Eugene Atget, 1924.

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Women in the Arts Panel

Wednesday, May 1, 2019, 6 pm

Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston (MATCH) 3400 Main St.

Sarah Beth Wilson McKeel, HETAGer and Director of Exhibitions and Curatorial Projects at Art League Houston, will moderate a panel discussion about women in the arts in Houston. Panelists will be Houston artists Pat Colville, Terrell James and Rabea Ballin.

The program is organized by Visual Arts Alliance and will take place at MATCH.

(Latest info says that this event is sold out; waitlist may be possible.)



[The Witte Museum, San Antonio](#)

Opens May 4, 2019 San Antonio

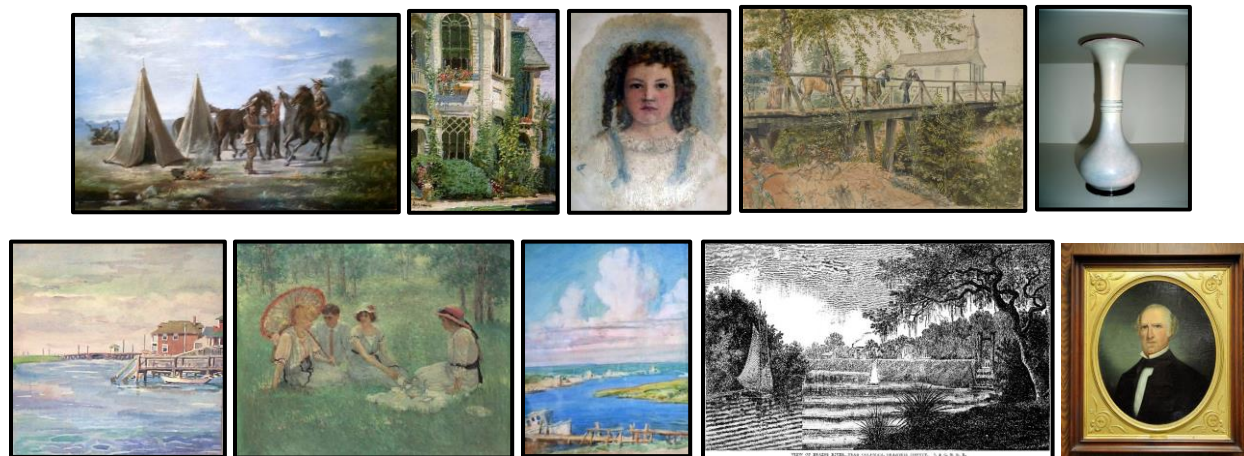
This May a major and massive exhibition will open at the Witte Museum – *The Art of Texas: 250 Years*. Artists range from 19th century Theodore Gentilz to 20th century Georgia O’Keeffe. The more than one hundred art pieces will include a mural by John Biggers, a sculpture by Jesus Morales, and a painting by Julian Onderdonk, “Chili Queens at the Alamo,” that once graced the Oval Office during President George W. Bush’s time in the White House. Art will travel to The Witte from museums and collectors from throughout the United States and in Texas, from El Paso to Houston and from Dallas to Corpus Christi.

In conjunction with the exhibition opening, there will be a [CONFERENCE ON TEXAS ART](#), May 3-4, 2019.

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Who made that – Before 1920 – The next in a series testing our Houston art eyes to see if we can spot which of these artists made these works, all from before 1920. Answers below.

The artists: Emma Richardson Cherry, James Chillman, Jr., Dawson Dawson-Watson, Thurston Donnellan, Louis Eyth, Thomas Flintoff, Grace Spaulding John, Penelope Lingan, Hattie V. Palmer, Carl Christian Zeus



The mission of HETAG is to illuminate Houston's art history by providing viewing opportunities for art, by supporting and doing research on the artists and art communities working in Houston through the years, and by spreading the word.

Back issues of the HETAG Newsletter are available via the
University of Houston Libraries Digital Library

Now including issues 1-31, March 2016 – March 2019

<https://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/hetag>

Randy Tibbits, coordinator
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Answers to WHO MADE THAT? – Before 1920

Top row: Louis Eyth, Grace Spaulding John, Penelope Lingan, Thomas Flintoff, Hattie V. Palmer

Second row: James Chillman, Jr., Dawson Dawson-Watson, Emma Richardson Cherry, Carl Christian Zeus, Thurston Donnellan