

WIDEWALLS

Imagists - Chicago Artists That Put the City on the Art Map

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There are so many brilliant Chicago artists whose work is internationally renowned through history and today. But, it wasn't the case 50+ years ago. The group of artists formed the acclaimed and relevant Imagist movement and put Chicago on the art map during the 1960s. Back in the seventh decade of the 20th century, it was all about New York. The Big Apple was the center of contemporary art of that time, and everything important in the world of art was taking place there. Other cities, including Chicago, were marginalized, while the local artists had to move to New York in order to boost their careers. But, not so small group of Chicago artists refused to be connected with the New York City art trends and mainstream art. They became known as Chicago Imagists – a heterogeneous group of artists coming from different backgrounds.

Chicago Imagists emerged as a group of artists who were associated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They used to exhibit at the Hyde Park Art Center in the 1960s. However, the Imagists Movement was rather diverse, despite the fact these Chicago artists shared similar artistic approach and ideas. Their works were characterized by the grotesque, and influenced by Art Brut and Surrealism. All the Chicago Imagists were representational artists, without any exception, even though some of them played with abstract elements at times.

Imagist Movement is a broader term from Chicago Imagists; it also includes groups that were formed before the movement was recognized. In addition, there were many artists of this movement who were not based in Chicago at all. The first group that emerged was The Monster Roster, comprised of creators from Chicago, and whose work is characterized by semi-mystical figuration. Some of the members of this group were: Don Baum, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero. The second group, the part of the Imagist movement, is The Hairy Who. This group was led by one of the most prominent figures of the Imagist movement – Ray Yoshida. Six artists were part of this group: Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Jim Falconer, Suellen Rocca, Karl Wirsum. Finally, The Chicago Imagists weren't a formal group, but a group of artists who participated in exhibitions curated by Baum and that took place in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Some of the most prominent Chicago Imagists were: Irving Petlin, Christina Ramberg, Ed Paschke, Barbara Rossi.

Chicago Artists – Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists

In the 1960s, the biggest city in the United States was New York. The second largest city was Chicago. Political and social unrests in the US, and particularly in Chicago played a significant role in the rise of the Chicago Imagists – a group of young artists who drew inspiration from the everyday world, comic books, popular culture, pornography, erotica, Surrealism, and non-western art. The book that is titled “Chicago Imagists” includes six essays and an extensive chronology and provides critical analysis of the arresting, but sometimes overlooked, work of Roger Brown, Sarah Canright, James Falconer, Ed Flood, Art Green, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum.

Ray Yoshida

Ray Yoshida was the mentor of Chicago Imagists and one of the most prominent figures of the Imagist movement. Yoshida’s work was heavily influenced by comics and folk art, and he also used found objects in his process. Among many paintings this great artist created, Yoshida will always remain remembered for his “comic collages”.

Jim Nutt

Jim Nutt was one of the founding members of the Chicago Imagists and The Hairy Who. He opposed to the New York abstraction which dominated the scene during the 1960s and 1970s and developed a unique visual language inspired by African and American Indian art and Surrealism. He is married to Gladys Nilsson who is also a prominent figure of the Imagist movement.

Art Green

One of the best-known artists of the Imagists movement is Arthur Green, better known as Art Green. Green was part of the The Hairy Who in the 1960s. His rich and prolific career spans over 40 years, and today he is praised as one of the most productive and influential individuals from the Imagist Movement.

Irving Petlin

Irving Petlin is Chicago-born artist who attended the Art Institute of Chicago during the height of the Chicago Imagist movement. Petlin is renowned for his mastery of the pastel medium. This great creative was also socially and politically active – he was a principal organizer of the “Artist’s Protest movement against the war in Vietnam“. The social and political unrests in the US in the end of the 1960s are also reflected in the practice of many other Chicago art-makers.

Leon Golub

Leon Golub was a renowned figurative artist, a member of The Monster Roster group. As other members of this group, Golub believed that the purpose of an artwork was to represent a direct connection to the external world and to actual events. In Golub’s opinion, that is the only way for an artwork to be relevant to any viewer. As Petlin, he also dedicated many of his works to the Vietnam War.

Ed Paschke

Ed Paschke was the only member of the Chicago Imagists whose work was so abstract, and whose art is often labeled as an expressionist. Like many other Imagists, Paschke had a fondness for Outsider Art and Tattoo Art. A huge number of Paschke's paintings are depicting celebrities and famous people by transforming them into the cadavre exquis.

Gladys Nilsson

Many female artists were part of the Imagists Movement. One of them is Gladys Nilsson, famous Chicago artist and one of the founders of Chicago Imagists Group. She is best-known for her vivid watercolor paintings. As one of the most active members of The Hairy Who, her works were exhibited in all important shows of this group.

Karl Wirsum

Karl Wirsum is one of the main artists whose activities transformed Chicago scene in the end of the 1960s. As a member of the Imagist Movement, Wirsum was one of the earliest members of The Hairy Who, and he participated in the famous exhibition of the same name, which was co-curated by Don Baum at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1966. It was the year when this group, and the whole Imagist Movement received national attention.

Robert Lostutter

Robert Lostutter is a Chicago-based artist who was a member of the Chicago Imagists Group. This artist is best-known for his watercolors depicting human-bird hybrids. The work by Lostutter is part of many collections across the country, including Brooklyn Museum, Smithsonian Institution and Art Institute of Chicago.

Christina Ramberg

Christina Ramberg was a prominent member of the Chicago Imagists, despite the fact she was younger than her colleagues. Like many other Imagists, Ramberg was also inspired by comics, surrealism and pop culture. In her art, she particularly focused on female body, and she is certainly best-known for her depictions of female torsos.