

The Explorers Club

by Robert McCracken Peck

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The year 2004 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Explorers Club, whose New York City membership, reflects a wide-ranging fascination for the world's wilder places and how to reach them. The organization is known for its illustrious membership and its elaborate black-tie dinners with live animal displays and exotic menus featuring snakes and other rarities. However, the club's collections of paintings, sculptures, and artifacts are also worthy of

Since 1965 the club has occupied the former residence of Stephen Carlton Clark (1882-1960), a businessman and Machine Company heir. The club provides a suitably grand setting for the heroic portraits and memorabilia that it has assembled over a century of global adventuring. The six-story Tudor revival building at 46 East Seventieth Street was designed to Clark's specifications by Frederick Junius Sterner. Its cornerstone was laid in 1910, nearly three decades before it established the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. When Clark and his family called the building it housed one of the finest private art collections in New York City, which included paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn, Greco, Henri Matisse, Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne, Jea Corot, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat. Some were given to Yale University, Clark's alma mater; and the rest to the Art in Washington, D.C., but most ended up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, whose boards Clark served.

Today, the building's wood-paneled walls are adorned with paintings, photographs, and memorabilia focused on exploration and discovery. Some of the club's most illustrious members (among them Robert E. Peary, Roald Amundsen, Sir Ernest Shackleton, Theodore Roosevelt, Roy Chapman Andrews, Eric Shipton, Lowell Thomas, Charles A. Lindbergh, Richard Evelyn Byrd, Neil Armstrong, Sally Ride, Sylvia Earle, Robert D. Ballard, and Sir Ranulph Fiennes) are represented in a gallery at the top of the open stairwell. The club's art collection and an eclectic assemblage of artifacts, including historical climbing equipment, and elaborate trophies from the golden age of aviation are distributed throughout the building.

One of the most powerful and compelling paintings in the club is *Rescue at Camp Clay* by the Arctic artist Albert Bierstadt. It depicts that once hunt in the United States Capitol, it depicts in exquisite detail the dramatic 1884 rescue at Cape Sabine, Canada, of a scientific expedition led by Adolphus W. Greely (1844-1935), who, in 1905, became the first president of the Explorers Club. Greely was a decorated Civil War veteran who also fought in the Indian campaigns of the 1860s and the construction of more than two thousand miles of telegraph lines in Texas, Montana, and the Dakota Territory in the 1870s. In 1881 he accompanied by twenty-four colleagues, many from the United States Army, including another future club president. As the United States government's representatives to the first International Polar Year, Greely's Lady Franklin Bay Expedition explored the northern part of Ellesmere Island. Its geographical discoveries and observations were made at a latitude higher than anyone had reached up to that time¹ and earned Greely gold medals from the Royal Geographical Society of London and the Société de Géographie of Paris. Years later he was awarded the Royal Geographic Society's Charles P. Daly Medal and a Congressional Medal of Honor. Despite its achievements, the expedition was fraught with difficulties. When heavy ice repeatedly prevented relief vessels from reaching the explorers, they were stranded outside the world for three years. Starvation, exposure, scurvy, drowning, suicide and even execution ultimately led to the death of more than two-thirds of the expedition.

The rescue of the survivors, as depicted by Operti in what can arguably be claimed his greatest Arctic painting, *Rescue at Camp Clay*, 1884, within days – some say hours – of the certain death of Greely and the remaining six members of the expedition. The painting shows life portraits and interviews with the survivors, interviews with the rescuers, and pre-expedition photographs of the dead. The details of the tent and expedition detritus were accurately based on artifacts collected at the scene of the rescue. The painting, by the survivors and members of the rescue party. Some of this material Operti turned into a souvenir collage, which was eventually donated to the club.

The Italian-born Operti had been a student at the Glasgow Institute of Fine Art and the Art Students League in New York City. He began his professional career as a painter of theatrical backdrops for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. He is known himself as a historical artist specializing in Arctic scenes after accompanying Peary to Cape York, Greenland, in 1897. The Explorers Club has a particularly strong collection of Operti's work, including dozens of paintings and a series of sketches of the artist. His memorial portrait of Peary now hangs in the office of the club's president, and his painting of Peary's ship, the SS *Roosevelt*, hangs in a hallway nearby.

Since a large percentage of the founding members of the Explorers Club were also members of the Arctic Club (an organization founded in 1894 by the survivors of another ill-fated Arctic expedition and later absorbed by the Explorers Club), the club's collections are rich in Arctic-related artifacts.

surprising that a disproportionate number of paintings, sculptures, and artifacts in the club's collection relate to Arctic exploration. Among these are a number of paintings by Frank Wilbert Stokes (1858-1955) and Tappan Adney, founding members of the Arctic and Explorers Clubs. Stokes traveled to the Arctic and Antarctic in the company of fellow club members and Lincoln Ellsworth (1880-1951), while Adney earned his explorer's stripes in Alaska and British Columbia during the gold rush in the Yukon as a special correspondent and artist for Harper's Weekly, Collier's Weekly, and the London

As the Explorers Club moved its headquarters from place to place during its hundred-year history, the records of its members' donations have been lost. Various small collections of Eskimo tools and carvings, probably from Greenland artifacts whose provenance is unknown. Although difficult to date with certainty, most of them were probably made in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. A beautiful Chilkat blanket from south-east Alaska of this period was bequeathed to the club by the big-game hunter and explorer William J. Morden (1886-1958), but the circumstances of its acquisition are unknown.

Among the most appealing souvenirs of polar exploration in the collection are a charming set of sled dog models from the Byrd's second Antarctic expedition in 1933. Still stored in the biscuit tin in which they were transported from the field, the figures were given to the club by Byrd's friend and traveling companion, Edward L. Moody.

The club's sculpture collection includes life-sized busts of several Arctic explorers including Peary, the leader of the first expedition to successfully reach the North Pole, in 1909; Knud Rasmussen, the Danish explorer who pioneered the study of Greenland Inuit; and Ellsworth, a pioneer in the aerial exploration of the Arctic and Antarctic and the first person (with Amundsen) to reach the North Pole by aircraft. All were active members of the club.

The largest and most striking portrait in the club is a full-length oil painting of the Scandinavian explorer Peter Freuchen, a Russian-born painter who also made portraits of Charles A. (1902-1974) and Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1897-1955), John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), and other society figures. Freuchen, who lost his toes to frostbite and his leg to gangrene while on a mapping expedition to Hudson Bay in 1923, is shown standing in a confident pose reminiscent of the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), or his American counterpart Thomas Eakins (1844-1916).² The painting was shown in the annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1958, where it won the Copley Medal as the best portrait of the year - an honor previously bestowed upon Brackman's teachers George Bellows (1867-1925) and Robert Henri (1865-1929).

Another portrait worthy of note is that of the African explorer Paul B. Du Chaillu painted by John Singer Sargeant's colleague, James Carroll Beckwith. Du Chaillu was a popular but controversial explorer, writer, and lecturer, who drew the world's attention by reporting his observations of live gorillas (the first by a Westerner) following his return in 1859 from an expedition to Gabon in West Africa. In the same year Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published *On the Origin of Species*, which contained his earth-shaking theory on evolution, so Du Chaillu's accounts of manlike beasts captured the public's imagination and became the subject of international debate. Du Chaillu's first book, *Exploration and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*, sold more than ten thousand copies in its first two years, earning the French-born naturalist enough royalties to return to Africa to begin his lifelong career as an explorer.³ Beckwith, who studied in Paris and painted in New York City, must have befriended Du Chaillu, whom he inscribed the portrait in 1898.

If Du Chaillu's portrait represents the Explorers Club's link to nineteenth-century African exploration, Carl Akeley and Theodore Roosevelt represent the active role the club's members played in focusing the attention of the United States on the African continent in the twentieth century. Both men were professionally associated with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which helped to create its spectacular dioramas. Akeley was a talented naturalist, taxidermist, sculptor, and inventor who invented the picture camera that was used in filming wildlife by some of the world's leading cinematographers. His work is represented in the Explorers Club's art collection by several small bronzes including *The Wounded Comrade* and *At Bay*. Akeley and Roosevelt were President Theodore Roosevelt on his highly publicized safari in Africa in 1909. Akeley died in 1926 in Uganda while working for the American Museum of Natural History's mountain gorilla diorama.⁴ He is buried where he died on Mount Ruwenzori National Park (now Virunga National Park, Congo). Akeley's friend and colleague Clark shared many of Akeley's successes, even wider success with his sculpture. Clark's heroic rendering of a rhinoceros with tickbirds that greets visitors to the museum is the one presented to Theodore Roosevelt as a wedding present by his ushers. Mrs. Roosevelt (nee Edith Kerr, 1874-1948) is reported to have used her husband's cast as a hat rack and gathering place for outgoing mail in the front porch of the family's house in Oyster Bay, New York. The club's version of Clark's sculpture, conveniently near the front porch, has seen similar service through the years.

Another member of the Explorers Club with strong ties to Africa and the American Museum of Natural History was Leigh, a close friend of both Akeley and Clark. Leigh was traveling with Akeley in Africa at the time of the latter's field studies. Leigh made during that expedition, some of which were later used as preliminary studies for the back

dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, are owned and prominently displayed by the Explorers Club. The club is best known to collectors for his painting of the American Southwest, his African landscapes rank among his very f

Akeley, Clark, and Leigh were exactly the kinds of explorers the club's founders hoped to attract to their fraternity. (They were not mere travelers or adventurers with time and money to spend; they left the comfort and safety of home with a purpose and returned to make significant contributions to society based on their experiences in the field. From the club's first years, with a membership of fewer than one hundred, to today's world of nearly three thousand, criteria for membership have remained rigorously focused on serious exploration as opposed to travel.)

Except for its medals, the highest form of recognition granted to club members is the privilege of carrying the Explorers Club flag which was designated by Frederick Samuel Dellenbaugh, a club founder and veteran of the expedition led by John H. Plover (1834-1902) to the Colorado River in 1871 and 1872. Only a few hundred explorers have been granted this privilege in the club's hundred-year history. Various early and historically significant incarnations of the flag decorate the walls of the club. These have crossed every continent, flown from both poles, been carried to the world's highest peaks, and to the deepest trenches. Several have been to the moon and elsewhere in space. Flag number 123 traveled with Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002) on his famous expedition across the Pacific Ocean on the balsa raft Kon-Tiki in 1947. I had the privilege of carrying the same flag on a research expedition to Siberia and Mongolia in 1994. There have been 202 flags in all. Some have been used only once, but most have seen repeated service. Each is returned to the club with a full report of its travels for the archives. The flag is of distinctive red, white, and blue banner emblazoned with the club's initials and a stylized compass rose. It accompanied Sir George Hubert Wilkins (1888-1958) on his flight over the North Pole from Barrow, Alaska, to the Arctic Ocean islands of Spitsbergen, Norway, in 1928; Richard Byrd, on his flight over the North Pole; the expedition led by Roy Chapman Andrews (1882-1960) in the Gobi Desert in the 1920's; the deep ocean explorer William Beebe (1877-1962) in a bathysphere in the 1960's; and Robert Ballard on his Titanic, Bismarck, and Lusitania discoveries in the past twenty years.

Other less colorful, but no less poignant, relics of exploration fill the closets, storerooms and public spaces of the club. The wooden sled used by Peary on his trip to the North Pole stands in the front hall, while the ship's bell from the USS Albatross is in the boardroom. Among the displays in the trophy room are a Victorian Arctic medal issued to one of the Americans who participated in the search for Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) and in the 1850s, a wax cylinder recording of Amelia Earhart (1895-1935), mounted gazelle heads, tusks and other animal trophies, and artifacts from a century of far-flung expeditions.

Less visible are thousands of books, maps, and manuscripts relating to exploration. These are available by appointment to club members and to visiting scholars who are studying the history of exploration or planning expeditions of their own. It is for these uses to which the club's officers are most actively dedicated, for despite its illustrious history, the Explorers Club has always been on the future. The club's current president, Richard C. Wiese, is fond of pointing out that up to 90% of the planet, especially the oceans, remains largely unexplored. "More than 100 years from the Explorers Club's beginning, we find ourselves at the threshold of a new era of scientific and geographic discovery, equal to the heroic age of exploration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries." We can only hope that the next hundred years will be as rich and interesting as that represented by the current collections of this remarkable club.

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Robert McCracken Peck is the senior fellow, curator of art and artifacts, and librarian of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. He had been an active member of the Explorers Club since 1983.