Defunct L.A. art school on a quest for resurrection

A group of artists is raising money in hopes of reviving Chouinard Art Institute, which closed its doors in 1972.

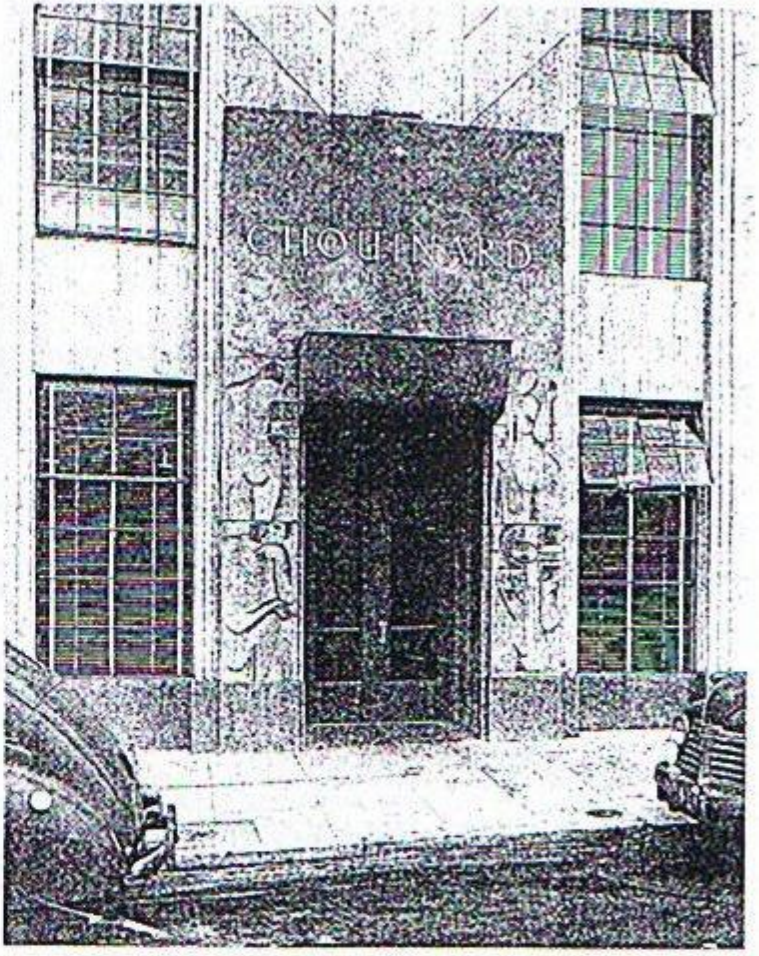
By SUZANNE MUCHNIC
Times Staff Writer

"There's no point in starting another art school — unless it's educationally unique, it's run by practicing artists, it's based on student needs, it re-focuses on fundamentals, it has community support, it has solid financial backing and it has a meaningful name."

That's the message on the cover of Grand View, the quarterly bulletin of the Chouinard Foundation, a nonprofit organization in South Pasadena. It's also the rallying cry of a group of artists who hope to create a new version of a long-gone, much-mourned Los Angeles art school, Chouinard Art Institute.

The school, founded in 1921 by artist and teacher Nelbert Murphy Chouinard, closed its doors on Grand View Street in 1972 and, with the help of Disney money, evolved into CalArts in Valencia. But Chouinard has a lively presence in L.A. art history because dozens of prominent artists worked or studied there. Remembered as a freewheeling environment that taught the basics and fostered creativity rather than promoting a particular style, the school inspired fierce loyalty.

FOUNDING MOTHER: *Nelbert Murphy Chouinard.*



MULTIPURPOSE: *The Chouinard Art Institute, shown here in 1949, trained everyone from painters to cartoon animators.*

Supporters of the Chouinard revival, who have already leased a building in South Pasadena's Mission Street corridor, are gearing up for their first major fund-raiser. It's an auction of artworks donated by former Chouinard students and teachers, to be held at 7 p.m. March 15 at the I.M. Chait Gallery in Beverly Hills. Works to be auctioned will go on view Monday in a preview exhibition that will run through March 15.

The exhibition and sale will celebrate the talents of a wide range of artists who were involved with Chouinard, says artist and contractor Dave Tourjé,

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Rallying for art school

[*Chouinard, from Page E28*]
who established the Chouinard Foundation in 1999 with Robert Perine, an artist and author of "Chouinard: A Vision Betrayed," a 1985 book that chronicles the school's history and bemoans the merger with Disney money and CalArts.

They hope the auction will raise $500,000 toward a goal of $2 million to renovate the building and establish the school. So far, the foundation has received more than $100,000 in cash, in addition to donated artworks, Tourjé says.

The auction will offer works by about 100 artists, including the late Emerson Woelffer, an abstract painter who taught at Chouinard from 1959 to 1970; Frederick Hammersley, a noted painter of hard-edge abstractions who was on the faculty from 1964 to 1968; and Ed Ruscha, the quintessential L.A. artist who studied at Chouinard from 1958 to 1962. Among other works that will go on the block are a painting by Disney animator Marc David, drawings by Playboy cartoonist John Dempsey and works by Guy Dill, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Phil Dike and Millard Sheets. There are also works by artists with no direct Chouinard experience: Gajin Fujita, in his 30s and a product of

ON THE BLOCK: *Gajin Fujita's 1993 "Human Animal."*

Otis College of Art and Design and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is represented with a work.

The foundation is also selling a commemorative print, featuring the image of Nelbert Chouinard's circa 1915 painting "Eucalypti." The hand-printed serigraph, published by Cirrus Editions as a limited edition of 375, is priced at $1,000.

The movement to re-create Chouinard began in 1998, when Tourjé bought a fixer-upper in South Pasadena and discovered it had been the home of Nelbert Chouinard. Although he had no connection to the school, he did some research, read Perine's book and looked up the author. They started talking about the possibility of reviving the vision of the school's founder, set up the foundation and began to use the house for reunions, seminars and small exhibitions.

The foundation made its first public splash in 2001 with a three-part exhibition of artworks by Chouinard affiliates at the Oceanside Museum of Art, Palomar College's Boehm Gallery in San Marco and Mira Costa College's Krugiak Gallery in Oceanside. That event dusted off the school's history, but the auction is intended to help bring it back to life.

Whether Chouinard can be revived remains to be seen. Some of the artists who have donated works to the auction privately question whether Southern California needs another art school, in addition to Otis College, Art Center College of Design, CalArts and a host of university art departments.

But the new school would be different, its advocates say.

The idea is to offer "a concentrated, professional, fundamentals-loaded approach taught by experienced artists using actual problems they have confronted," says painter Walter Gabrielson. "That's what Chouinard was about. They didn't teach dogma. Now art schools have reversed that; they teach dogma and hardly any fundamentals."

Chouinard auction

Where: I.M. Chait Gallery, 9330 Civic Center Drive, Beverly Hills

When: Exhibition runs Monday through March 15, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Auction, March 15, 7 p.m.

Price: Free

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