

The Explorers Club

by Robert McCracken Peck

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

Since 1965 the club has occupied the former residence of Stephen Carlton Clark (1882-1960), a businessman and Singer Sewing Machine Company heir. The club provides a suitably grand setting for the heroic portraits and memorabilia that its members have 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 Clark helped to establish the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. When Clark and his family called the elegant building home, it housed one of the finest private art collections in New York City, which included paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn, Frans Hals, El Greco, Henri Matisse, Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne, Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat. Some were given to Yale University, Clark's alma mater; and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., but most ended up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, on 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 Tomas, Charles A. Lindbergh, Richard Evelyn Byrd, Chuck Yeager, Neil Armstrong, Sally Ride, Sylvia Earle, Robert D. Ballard, and Sir Ranulph Fiennes) are represented in a photographic gallery at the top of the open stairwell. The club's art collection and an eclectic assemblage of artifacts, including ships' bells, 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 Operti. A painting that once hung in the United States Capitol, it depicts in exquisite detail the dramatic 1884 rescue at Cape Sabine, Ellesmere Island, Canada, of a scientific expedition led by Adolphus W. Greely (1844-1935), who, in

1905, became the first president of the club. A major general, Greely was a decorated Civil War veteran who also fought in the Indian campaigns of the 1860s and supervised the construction of more than two thousand miles of telegraph lines in Texas, Montana, and the Dakota Territory in the 1870s. He set off for northern Canada in 1881 accompanied by twenty-four colleagues, many from the United States Army, including David L. Brainard, another future club president. As the United States government's representatives to the first International Polar Year (1882-1883), Greely's Lady Franklin Bay Expedition explored the northern part of Ellesmere Island. Its geographical discoveries and scientific observations were made at a latitude higher than anyone had reached up to that time¹ and earned Greely gold medals from both the Royal Geographical Society of London and the Société de Géographie of Paris. Years later he was awarded the American 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 lost contact with the outside world for three years. Starvation, exposure, scurvy, drowning, suicide and even execution ultimately led to the deaths 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, occurred on June 22, 1884, within days – some say hours – of the certain death of Greely and the remaining six members of the expedition. Operti based his painting on 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, Camp Clay, by the survivors and members of the rescue party. Some of this material Operti turned into a souvenir collage, which he 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 before he began his professional career as a painter of theatrical backdrops for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. He established himself as a historical artist specializing in Arctic scenes after accompanying Peary to Cape York, Greenland, in 1896 and 1897. The Explorers Club has a particularly strong collection of Operti's work, including dozens of paintings and a series of scrapbooks kept by the artist. His memorial portrait of Peary now hangs in the office of the club's president, and his painting of Peary's expedition vessel, the *SS Roosevelt*, hangs in a hallway nearby.

Since a large percentage of the founding members of the Explorers Club were also

¹ Albert Operti recorded Greely's exploratory achievement with a painting entitled *Farthest North* (1886) now in the Shelburne Museum in Shelburne, Vermont. A preliminary study for the painting is at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska. Both *Farthest North* and *Rescue at Camp Clay* were commissioned by the United States government and hung for a considerable time in the offices of the War Department and also in the Capitol. When Congress failed to appropriate the \$20,000 that Operti had asked for the paintings, they were returned to the artist.

members of the Arctic Club (a smaller organization founded in 1894 by the survivors of another ill-fated Arctic expedition and later absorbed by the Explorers Club), it is not 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 or early members of both the Arctic and Explorers Clubs. Stokes traveled to the Arctic and Antarctic in the company of fellow club members Peary, Amundsen, and Lincoln Ellsworth (1880-1951), while Adney earned his explorer's stripes in Alaska and British Columbia reporting on the Klondike gold rush in the Yukon as a special correspondent and artist for *Harper's Weekly*, *Collier's Weekly*, and the *London Chronicle*.

As the Explorers Club moved its headquarters from place to place during its hundred-year history, the records of many of its members' donations have been lost. Various small collections of Eskimo tools and carvings, probably from Greenland, are among the artifacts whose provenance is unknown. Although difficult to date with certainty, most of them were probably made in the late 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 made during Admiral Byrd's second Antarctic expedition in 1933. Still stored in the biscuit tin in which they were transported from the field, the papier-mâché 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's nomadic Inuit; and Ellsworth, a pioneer in the aerial exploration of the Arctic and Antarctic and the first person (with Amundsen and others) 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 by Robert Brackman, a Russian-born painter who also made portraits of Charles A. (1902-1974) and Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1906 - 2001), John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), and other society figures. Freuchen, who lost his toes to frostbite and his leg to frostbite and gangrene while on a mapping expedition to Hudson Bay in 1923, is shown standing in a confident pose reminiscent of portraits by the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), or his American counterpart Thomas Eakins (1844-1916).² The painting was exhibited in the annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1958, where

² For a full account of Peter Freuchen's harrowing experience, during which he was forced to amputate his own toes and almost lost his life, see *Adventures in the Arctic*, ed. Dagmar Freuche, (Julien Messner, New York, 1960).

it won the Carol Beck Gold Medal as the best portrait of the year - an honor previously bestowed upon Brackman's teachers George Bellows (1882-1925) 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 friend and colleague, James Carroll Beckwith. Du Chaillu was a popular but controversial explorer, writer, and lecturer, who first attracted the world's attention by reporting his observations of live gorillas (the first by a Westerner) following his return in 1859 from a four-year 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* (1861), sold more than ten thousand copies in its first two years, earning the French-born naturalist enough royalties to return to Africa and further his lifelong career as an explorer.³ Beckwith, who studied in Paris and painted in New York City, must have befriended the explorer, to whom he inscribed the portrait in 1898.

³ "The Circulation of Modern Literature," London Spectator, supplement, January 3, 1863, p. 16, cited in Richard Daniel Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass. Reading Public, 1800-1900* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957), p. 388.

If Du Chaillu's portrait represents the Explorers Club's link to nineteenth-century African exploration, Carl Ethan Akeley and James L. Clark 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 City and helped to create its spectacular dioramas. Akeley was a talented naturalist, taxidermist, sculptor, and inventor who created a motion-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 Clark accompanied President Theodore Roosevelt on his highly publicized safari in Africa in 1909. Akeley died in 1926 in Uganda while gathering material for the American Museum of Natural History's mountain gorilla diorama.⁴ He is buried where he died on Mount Mikeno in Albert National Park (now Virunga National Park, Congo). Akeley's friend and colleague Clark shared many of Akeley's skills but achieved even wider success with his sculpture. Clark's heroic rendering of a rhinoceros with tickbirds that greets visitors to the club is identical to the one presented to Theodore Roosevelt as a wedding present by his ushers. Mrs. Roosevelt (nee Edith Kermit Carow, 1861-1948) is reported to have used her husband's cast as a hat rack and gathering place for outgoing mail in the front hall at Sagamore Hill, the family's house in Oyster Bay, New York. The club's version of Clark's sculpture, conveniently near the front door, may have 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 William Robinson Leigh, a close friend of both Akeley and Clark. Leigh was traveling with Akeley in Africa at the time of the latter's death. Many of the field studies Leigh made during that expedition, some of which were later used as preliminary studies for the backgrounds in the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, are owned and prominently displayed by the Explorers Club. While Leigh is best known to collectors for his painting of the American Southwest, his African landscapes rank among his very finest work.

Akeley, Clark, and Leigh were exactly the kinds of explorers the club's founders hoped to attract to their fraternity. (Women were admitted to membership only in 1981.) They were not mere travelers or adventurers with time and money to spend, but people who 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-wide membership of nearly three thousand, criteria for membership have remained rigorously focused on serious exploration as opposed to international 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

⁴ For more on Carl Ethan Akeley's life of exploration, see Penelope Bodry-Sanders, *Carl Akeley: Africa's Collector, Africa's Savior* (Paragon House, New York, 1991).

Dellenbaugh, a club founder and veteran of the expedition led by John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) to the Colorado River in 1871 and 1872. Only a few hundred explorers have been granted this privilege during the club's hundred-year history. Various early and historically significant incarnations of the flag decorate the walls of the club's lecture hall. These have crossed every continent, flown from both poles, been carried to the world's highest peaks, and to the ocean's 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 this same flag on a research expedition to Siberia and Mongolia in 1994. There have been 202 flags in all. Some have been carried 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 individual histories of the distinctive red, white, and blue banner emblazoned with the club's initials and a stylized compass constitute a history of twentieth-century exploration. It accompanied Sir George Hubert Wilkins (1888-1958) on his flight over the North Pole from Point Barrow, Alaska, to the Arctic Ocean islands of Spitsbergen, Norway, in 1928; Richard Byrd, on his flight over the South Pole in 1929; the expedition led by Roy Chapman Andrews (1882-1960) in the Gobi Desert in the 1920's; the deep ocean explorations by William Beebe (1877-1962) in a bathysphere in the 1960's; and Robert Ballard on his *Titanic*, *Bismarck*, and *Lusitania* discovery diver over the past twenty years.

Other less colorful, but no less poignant, relics of exploration fill the closets, storerooms and public spaces of the clubhouse. A wooden sled used by Peary on his trip to the North Pole stands in the front hall, while the ship's bell from the Roosevelt decorates the boardroom. Among the displays in the trophy room are Victorian Arctic medal issued to one of the Americans who assisted in the search for Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) and in the 1850s, a wax cylinder recording of Amelia Earhart (1895-1937), ship models, 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 the second of these uses to which the club's officers are most actively dedicated, for despite its illustrious history, the Explorers Club's real focus has always been on the future. The club's current president, Richard C. Wiese, is fond of pointing out that up to 97 percent of our planet, especially the oceans, remains largely unexplored. "More than 100 years from the Explorers Club's beginnings," he writes in a brochure commemorating the club's centennial, "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 visual record of the next hundred years will be as rich and interesting as that represented by the current collections of this remarkable organization.

I would like to thank the officers and members of the Explorers Club, past and present, for allowing me to commemorate the club's centennial with this article. I would

especially like to thank Clare Flemming, the curator of research collections, and Ryan Haley, assistant curator; Janet Baldwin, a former librarian of the club; and Ross MacPhee, chairman of the library and archives committee, for generously providing information for my essay and picture captions.

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