

A Brief History of the Cosmopolitan Club

More than a century ago, in 1907, a young mother named Ethel Hoyt realized that her children's governess had no place to go during her few precious leisure hours. Mrs. Hoyt enlisted the aid of two friends, commandeered a room in a kindergarten, furnished it with a couple of wicker chairs and a tea set, and The Club for Governesses was born.

These are the roots of today's Cosmopolitan Club, a warm and welcoming gathering place for the accomplished and intellectually curious.

In 1909, the governesses and other "self-supporting professional women," their club now called the Cosmos, left the kindergarten for rooms on 33rd Street that overlooked a stable. This proximity to horses became a running theme in Cos Club history--our current home is on the site of a former stable--and the inspiration for Pegasus, the Club mascot.

By 1910 the Club found itself in a "situation"--a difficulty paying the rent--but turned this problem into an opportunity by welcoming a wider array of accomplished women, including non-professionals. One of the founders of this new Women's Cosmopolitan Club (soon shortened to The Cosmopolitan Club and, today, affectionately nicknamed the "Cos") was Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who went on to play a key role in the founding of the Museum of Modern Art. Members in these early days included educator Maria Bowen Chapin, sculptor Mary Lawrence Tonetti, ballerina Adeline Genee and authors Willa Cather, Ida Tarbell and Elizabeth Bacon Custer, whose memoirs centered on life on the frontier with her late husband, General George Armstrong Custer.

The Club's popularity grew and soon its 33rd Street location, beloved in spite of its creaky floors and cast-off furnishings, was bursting at the seams. So, in 1914, the Club moved to a renovated church at Lexington Avenue and 40th Street, ultimately expanding into two adjoining buildings, where the wisteria-covered space resembled a Sicilian courtyard. There was, of course, a stable on the property.

When World War I intruded upon this idyll, Cos members tackled projects like knitting thousands of socks for the troops. In fact, the now traditional Tuesday Member Lunch began in 1918 with members giving accounts of their war work. Today Cos members speak on subjects in which they have particular expertise--topics range from ornithology, immunology and archaeology to cider making, competitive ballroom dancing, the art of John Singer Sargent and feminist interpretations of the Adam and Eve origin story.

By the late 1920s, the Club was again outgrowing its home. It made sense financially to build rather than rent, and three properties, at 122-24 East 66th Street and 129 East 65th Street, seemed perfect. The problem? The world was in the midst of the Great Depression, and funds were tight. Club member Laura Lee, who became known as "the fairy godmother of the Cos" for her generosity, bought the properties and held them for the Club until, in 1930, the membership rallied to raise the astonishing sum of \$885,000 to secure the property and begin construction.

The new clubhouse was deliberately different from the elaborate Beaux Arts or Italianate Renaissance styles of many social clubs. In 1933, its design, by architect Thomas Harlan Ellett--who was the husband of a Cos Club member--won a gold medal from the Architectural League of New York, calling it "a fresh and personal interpretation, beautiful in its simplicity of form and material."

An eclectic range of programs resumed in the new ten-story brick building with its white marble trim and wrought-iron balconies. Speakers and performers during the thirties and forties included Salvador Dali, Sergei Prokofiev, Count Basie, Lotte Lenya, the Trapp Family Choir and journalists Dorothy Thompson and Edward R. Murrow. Bridge and folk dancing were popular classes; of the two, bridge has stood the test of time.

During the Second World War, Cos members once again answered the call to service. Among other projects, they assembled some 1400 emergency kits for women displaced by the bombing in Europe and gave Monday night dances in the Ballroom for men serving in the military.

The postwar years found the Cos embracing internationalism. Four Club members participated in the formation of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. One of them, Eleanor Roosevelt, was named

a delegate to the General Assembly--and chaired the committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Club members helped delegates from other nations adjust to New York by providing tours, home visits and inviting them to Club events. Delegates reciprocated with invitations to UN receptions. Strong friendships--and a new category of membership, the International Visitor--grew from this exchange and continue to this day.

The sixties and seventies brought political and cultural shifts to the world, including the Vietnam War, Watergate and the emancipation of women. Many members faced the challenge of juggling home and career. The Club adapted by offering more evening programs and including newly-relevant classes like its "Fix-It" course ("Bring your own screwdriver and pliers") and auto repair lessons held at a nearby garage.

The eighties saw the crash on Wall Street and a rising interest in workshops on financial planning and in seminars on stocks and bonds. Members like Patricia Neal, Kitty Carlisle Hart and Jill Ker Conway gave Member Lunch talks. The beauty salon gave way to office space--the computer triumphing over the hair dryer. The nineties saw the restoration of the Ballroom and guests like Billy Collins, Judy Collins and Gail Collins.

The new century began with lectures, book talks, festivals, musical performances, and classes in technology, languages, exercise and drawing as well as tai chi, watercolor painting, opera and the ever-popular bridge. But perhaps the most exciting millennial development was the debut of The Cosmopolitan Club website in 2004--the first website designed for a social club in New York City. What began as a convenient tool for booking reservations, signing up for classes and registering for events became an essential component of Club life. Today's members can, with a few clicks on the website, propose candidates for membership, plan parties, find rooms for overnight guests and enjoy "Cos Channel" videos of lectures, cooking classes and Member News talks.

In 2009, the Club celebrated its centennial by saluting scores of distinguished members of the past--Helen Hayes, Pearl S. Buck, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Marian Anderson, Margaret Mead, Martha Graham and Katharine Graham to name a few.

A profound challenge arose in 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic struck. The Cos responded not only with safety procedures but with creative solutions to a world in lockdown. Virtual programs were quickly implemented so that members could participate in Club activities from home. Classes, lectures, games and even cocktail parties all went on--perhaps not "as usual," but they went on. And Club members stayed connected. Many of these online offerings were so popular they became permanent, giving today's members--even those who live far from New York City--new flexibility in how they engage with the Club and with each other.

Much has changed since the governesses met in a kindergarten. Yet, throughout its history, the Cos has been able to maintain its traditions while showing the flexibility and creativity it takes to adapt to each challenge and meet the ever-changing expectations of its membership. The Club has indeed put into practice its motto, *Vivida vis Animi*--"the lively force of the mind."

Best of all, The Cosmopolitan Club remains a congenial place where members can gather outside the routines of home and work to nourish their intellects, exercise their artistic impulses, cultivate friends and exchange ideas.