

# History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



by Michael E. Holland  
Acting City Archivist

## Beginnings of *A 'Beautiful City'*

The creation of the  
Cultural Affairs Dept.

**PART ONE**

### About Our New Author

Please welcome to *Alive!* Michael E. Holland, the City's current Acting Archivist. He will write this column periodically, and he fills the shoes of our former regular history columnist, Hynda Rudd, who recommended him for the job. Welcome, Michael! You can contact him at: [Michael.Holland@lacity.org](mailto:Michael.Holland@lacity.org)



Michael Holland,  
acting Archivist, new columnist

Find it endlessly fascinating that, in almost every community, there were some people who were visionaries. I mean people who could see far enough ahead of themselves to a future horizon and could express desires or concerns that reveal themselves years or decades later. This is one of the great treats of being a historian and an archivist. Contrary to the public perception of our City as being shallow or vapid, we have had our share of citizens who believed in a greater Los Angeles, and many of their ideas continue to resonate in our own time.

Let's take the issue of billboards as one example. The concern of oversized signage, whether traditional or digital, is expressed as a quality of life issue as they affect people who live nearby and are exposed to them every day. There is also a public safety component, as these displays may lead to greater risk of distracted drivers and the attendant damages to life and property. The billboard problem in 2013 is not going away anytime soon, with or without the digital signage that seems to be discussed most frequently at present.

Would you be surprised to learn that a citizens' group formed in 1903 expressed concerns about a variety of issues that are not out of place in today's debate over aesthetics? You shouldn't be, since our Archive has many commission records for some of the most influential people living in Los Angeles. Our article subjects not only considered what could be done, they also found ways to make them happen.

What began as the Public Arts Commission was established by the Los Angeles City Council on Nov. 2, 1903 with the following duties as reprinted in the City's annual report for 1904: "[The commission will] work for the gradual elimination of ugliness from conspicuous parts of the city."

What did they consider ugly? "Any form of public vandalism that would tend to destroy the beauty of a neighborhood." How about "use every possible method

to reduce the pole menace in residence districts" and "study methods used elsewhere to reduce the bill-board nuisance." The commission also considered actions to transform the community with ideas including "encourage the planting of shade trees along the residence streets" and "pass upon plans for public buildings and other public undertakings from the point of view of art." The final duty of the commission was probably the hardest: "To help arouse public sentiment in favor of a beautiful city."

City Hall on Broadway every first Tuesday of the month. They were semi-official, meaning they had an advisory role but no real power until they proved their usefulness and could be incorporated into the City Charter and become a real force for change. The commission recognized that its only real ability was to "extend its moral influence in furtherance thereof, looking principally to the various legislative and executive bodies of the city government to have [recommendations] carried into effect." So while the commission was limited in actual power, they were free to express ideas for a better Los Angeles that sought to increase government efficiency and eliminate official corruption.

The Commission foresaw the need for an art gallery owned by the City and which would be home to paintings, sculptures and art objects donated by private citizens. A museum for "the great mass of archaeological specimens which could be collected in this Southwestern territory" was another goal. The public library was located on the third floor of

the very specific idea of having the walls of reservoirs, bridges and light poles to be stained or painted green.

The commission also urged the enforcement of pre-existing ordinances dealing with the height of billboards, placing signs on bridges, throwing of paper in the street and the smoke nuisance – the smokestack variety as opposed to smoking tobacco (that is a whole story unto itself). While they had nothing to do with the passage of these ordinances, the commission lent its voice against the neglect, if not outright abuse, of the laws already on the books.

What made the Municipal Arts Commission so powerful when they did become a legitimate City department, after charter reform in 1911, was because there was always an architect among the leadership, going back to original founding member John Parkinson. His company, Parkinson and Associates, built the Memorial Coliseum as well as other buildings and landmarks. Other respected professionals in those early years included Fred W. Blanchard,

builder of the Hamburger Department store building – the largest steel frame construction of its day – before it was renamed the May Company building. Edwin Bergstrom was a partner at Parkinson and Associates and two of his legacy projects were the Pasadena Civic Auditorium and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. So the men involved in the commission had clout and clearly knew how to get a project done.

Once the commission became a required party in the design and review process, the city would never look the same again. The present day City Hall, the Central Public Library and Union Station would have been built eventually, but the impact of the Municipal Art Commission was a part of what those landmarks have become and why we remember them.

If you're wondering whatever became of this progressive department, it is known today as the Cultural Affairs Department and includes the Cultural Heritage Commission, which devotes much of its time to preserving much of what the founders inspired.

What became of some of the other great ideas from the 1904 commission? The art gallery that they suggested was based on the idea that the City would be an owner of art works. Los Angeles does have an extensive collection of art in government offices, the Central Public Library as well. But that's another story for another time.



The 1904 Municipal Arts Commission included (as identified in the photo), standing, from left: Fielding J. Stilson and John Parkinson. Seated: Mrs. Sumner P. Hunt; Maj. E.F.C. Klokke, commission president; and Mrs. W.J. Washburn.

The goals of the commission – the name was changed to the Municipal Arts Commission in January 1905 – were as lofty in nature as the resources extended to them by the City were sparse. They received no funding for time or materials spent in their meetings, but they did have access to a meeting room in the crowded

City Hall and overcrowded, so the commission urged the city to "do all in their power to build for Los Angeles a Public Library building worthy of the city and the fine library it would contain." Their ideas ranged all over the map from the generic request for a library building to