

# Agitate then Negotiate:

# Artifacts from the life of Helen Sargent Hitchcock

# Andrew Shurtz

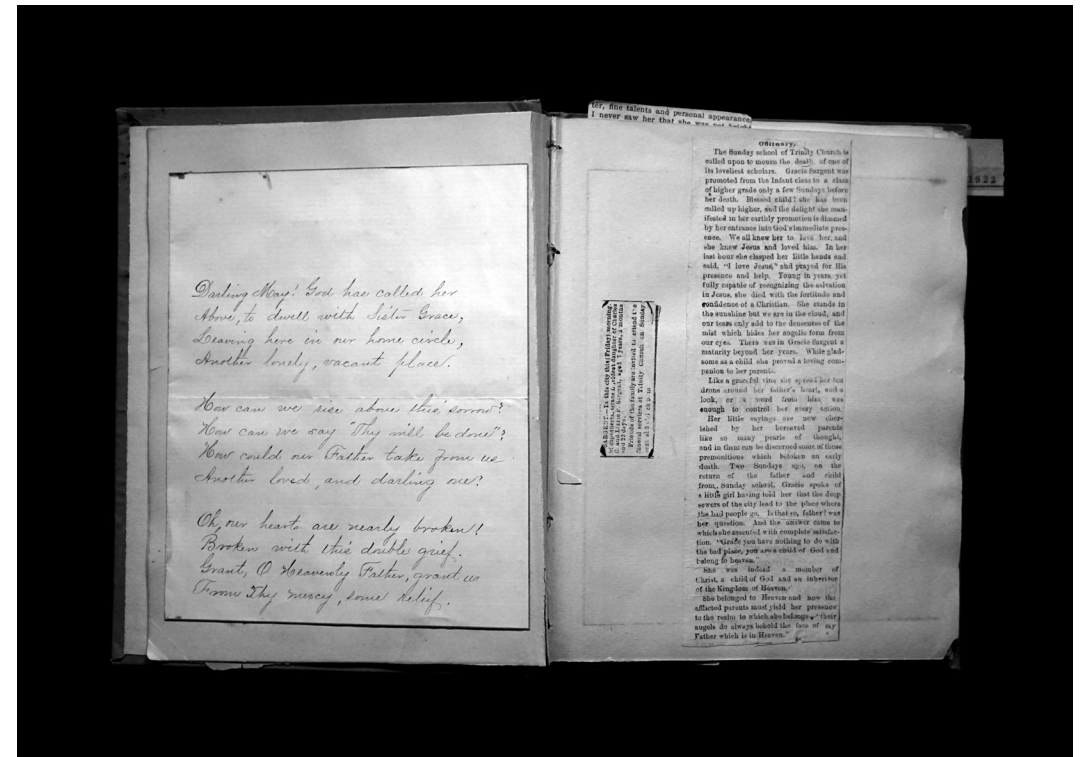


Mrs. Ripley Hitchcock, President and Founder of the Art Center

1 Helen Sargent Hitchcock. Photographer unknown, ca. mid-1920s. From the Bulletin of the Art Center, 1926.

2

I discovered this scrapbook at a Brooklyn flea market in 2012 and was instantly intrigued by its collection of handwritten condolence letters, obituaries and personal histories. Scrapbooks often commemorate happy events; this one focused solely on tragedy. I later learned it belonged to the Sargent family of New England and felt compelled to piece together their story. The father, Charles Chapin Sargent, was a prominent importer of druggists' sundries and the sole North American representative for the famed Parisian brand Roger & Gallet. The family was living comfortably in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1876 when they lost two of their three young daughters to illness. Grace, age 4, succumbed to diphtheria in May. Emily, age 7, died from "congestion of the brain" in October. Helen was only six years old at the time. It is possible this early introduction to unexpected loss and suffering inspired the great sense of urgency and compassion that would drive her later work. Helen lived to become an important advocate for women in the arts and helped to catalyze the modern design industry in New York, but her efforts remain largely unknown today.



2 Scrapbook belonging to the family of Charles Chapin Sargent. Collection of the author.



3 Archival box, Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

### 3

Helen donated this collection of personal papers to the Columbia University Library in 1947. Its main focus is on materials from her late husband, James Ripley Wellman Hitchcock. (Hitchcock was an influential literary editor famous for his extensive and successful re-workings of popular novels, namely Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Edward Noyes Westcott's *David Harum*.) Helen married Hitchcock in 1914; she was 43 years old at the time and had never been married.

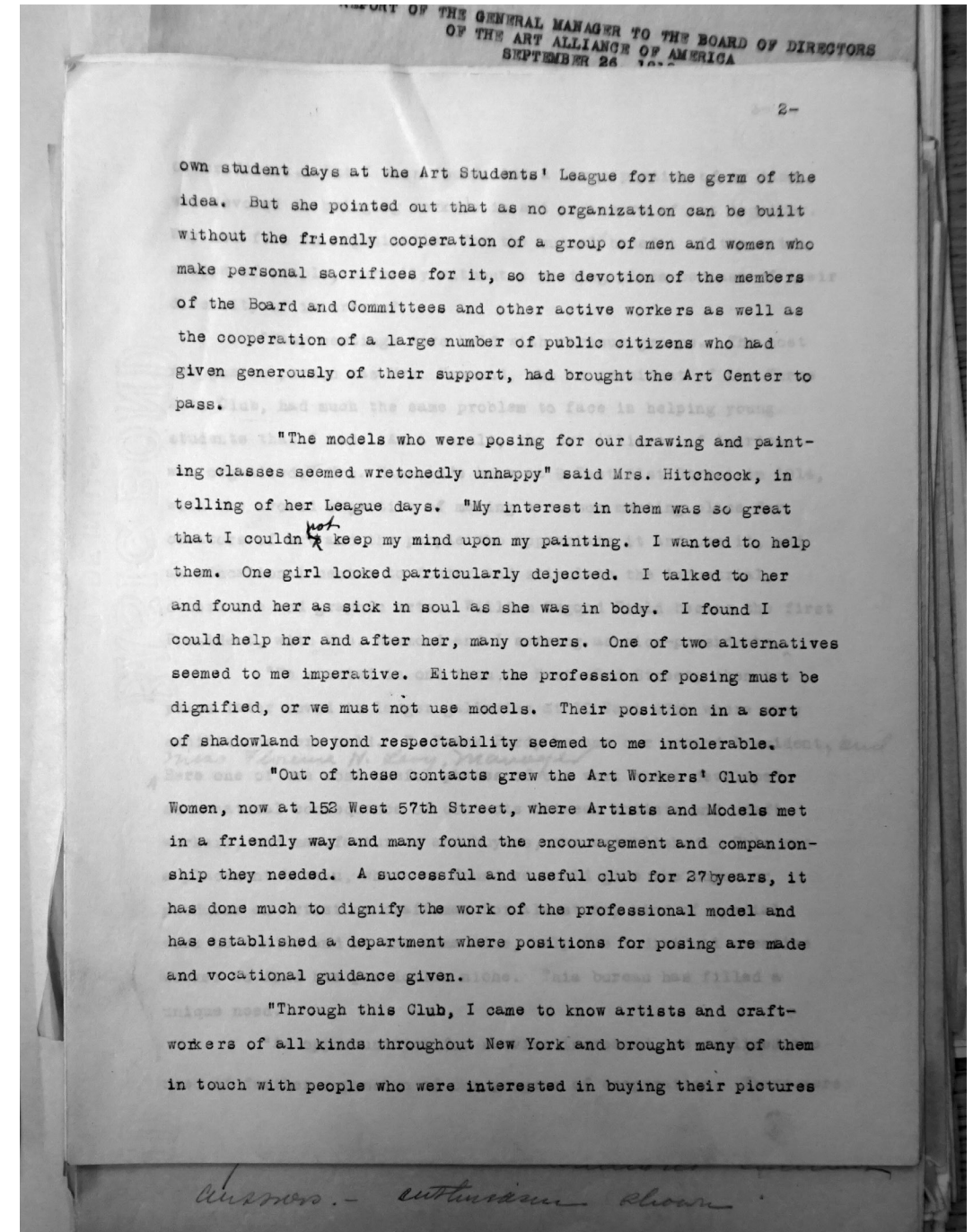
The collection consists of 26 boxes. Of these, only the first seven (selected correspondence) have been catalogued and filed. The remaining 19 boxes consist mostly of materials belonging to Helen's husband and brother. Helen's personal archive was squeezed in to just three boxes and left unsorted. These boxes include documents and ephemera relating to the various groups

she founded: the Art Workers' Club for Women, the Art Alliance of America, the Art Center of New York, and the National Alliance of Art and Industry. The library identifies them simply as "a group of materials relating to the American Art Alliance in which Mrs. Hitchcock was interested," belying the breadth and importance of their contents.

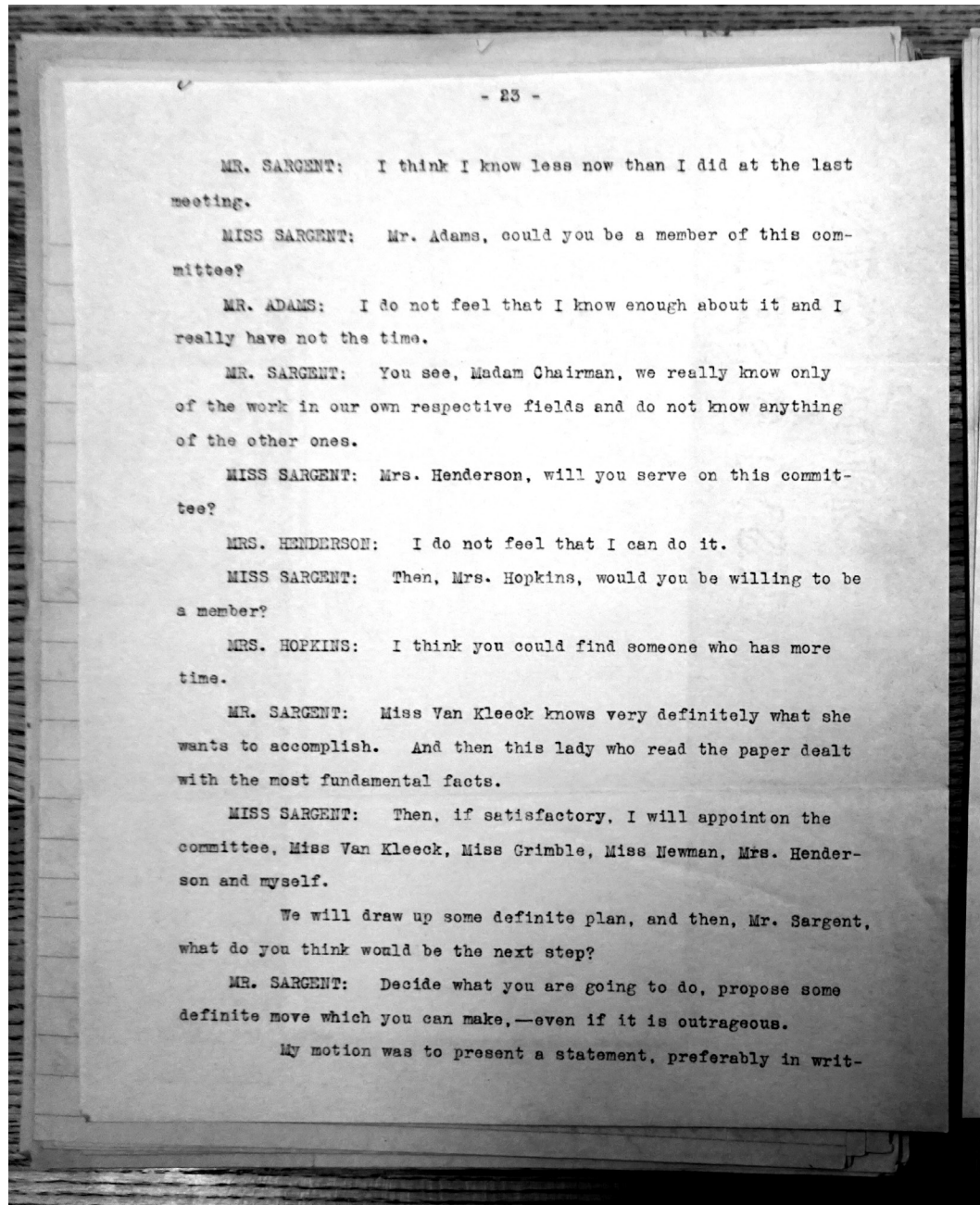
Note: The New York Historical Society has a small collection of Art Center ephemera and a few handwritten drafts of Helen's speeches, but the Hitchcock archive is far more broad and comprehensive of all of Helen's activities.

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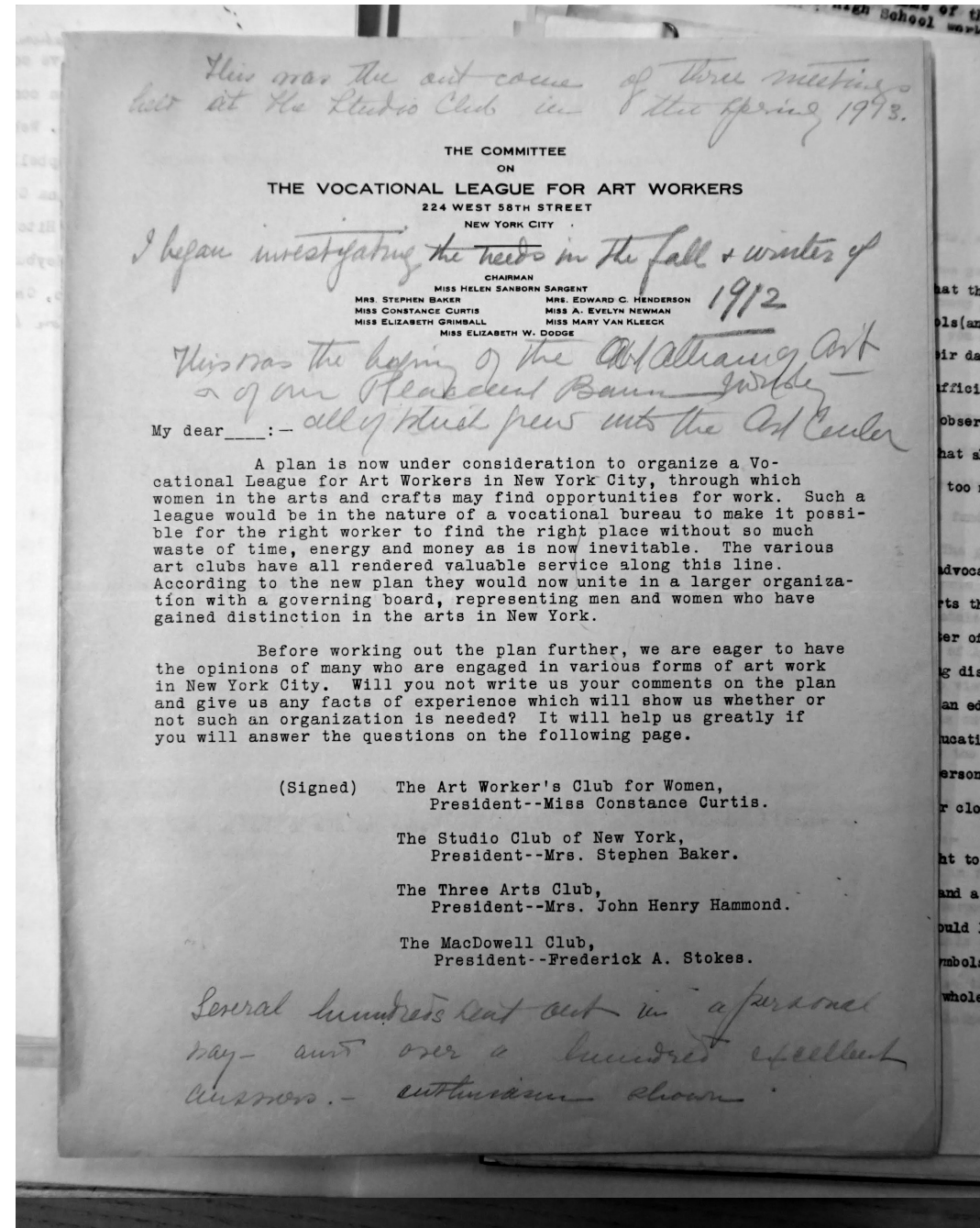
This article was prepared in 1925 during the Art Center's fundraising drive for a planned expansion. In it, Helen outlines her history of founding art societies, beginning with the Art Workers Club for Women in 1898. The club served to



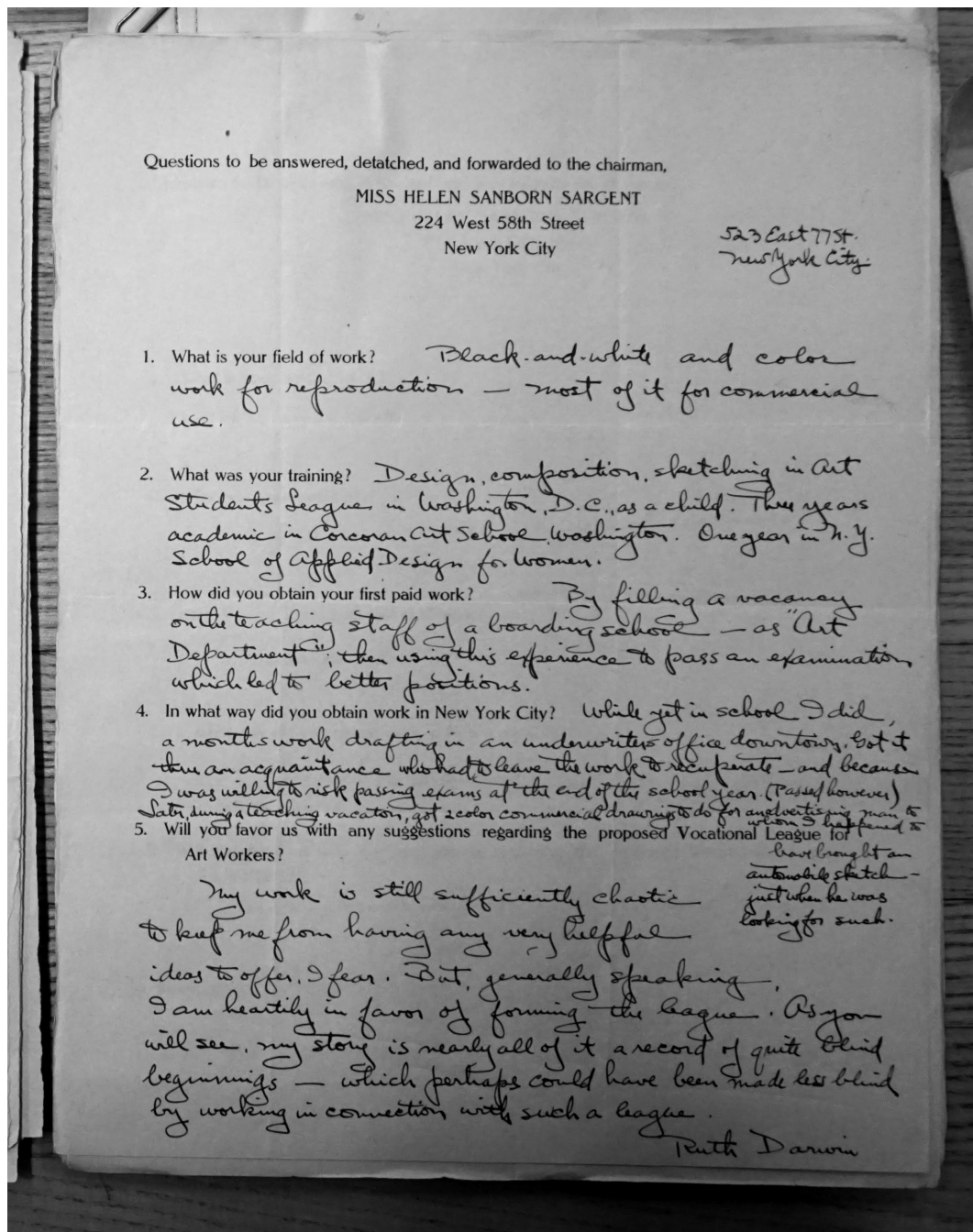
4 "The Art Center", ca. 1925-26. Author unknown. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



5 Minutes from a meeting concerning the creation of the Vocational League for Art Workers, 1913. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



6 Questionnaire and sample response, The Committee on The Vocational League for Art Workers, 1913. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



6 Questionnaire and sample response, The Committee on The Vocational League for Art Workers, 1913. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

1 Author unknown, "The Art Center", ca. 1925-26. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

legitimize and elevate the work of female artists' models, to help further the careers of female artists, and to help bridge connections between both groups. It provided temporary residences, hot meals and tea, meeting rooms where female artists and models could socialize, and a placement bureau to help members find work.

As Helen outlines in this document, she was greatly disturbed by the condition of the artists' models while attending the Art Students' League in New York. "One girl looked particularly dejected. I talked to her and found her as sick in soul as she was in body. I found I could help her and after her, many others." Helen's desire to ease the suffering of the artists' models set her forth on a path to aid arts workers of all types and unify workers in the creative industries in pursuit of their common goals.

5  
Two typewritten pages are all that remain of the minutes from a meeting Helen led in 1913. After the success of the Art Workers' Club, Helen set out to create an organization that would provide employment for female art workers of all kinds. The man referred to in this transcript as "Mr. Sargent" is Helen's father, Charles. The woman referred to as "Ms. Sargent" is Helen herself. Helen is commonly identified by her father's surname (Sargent) or her husband's (Ripley Hitchcock). It is rare to see the name of Helen in print. Charles' influence as both a benefactor and guide is made very clear here; Helen's persistence and ability to unite a team is even more clear.

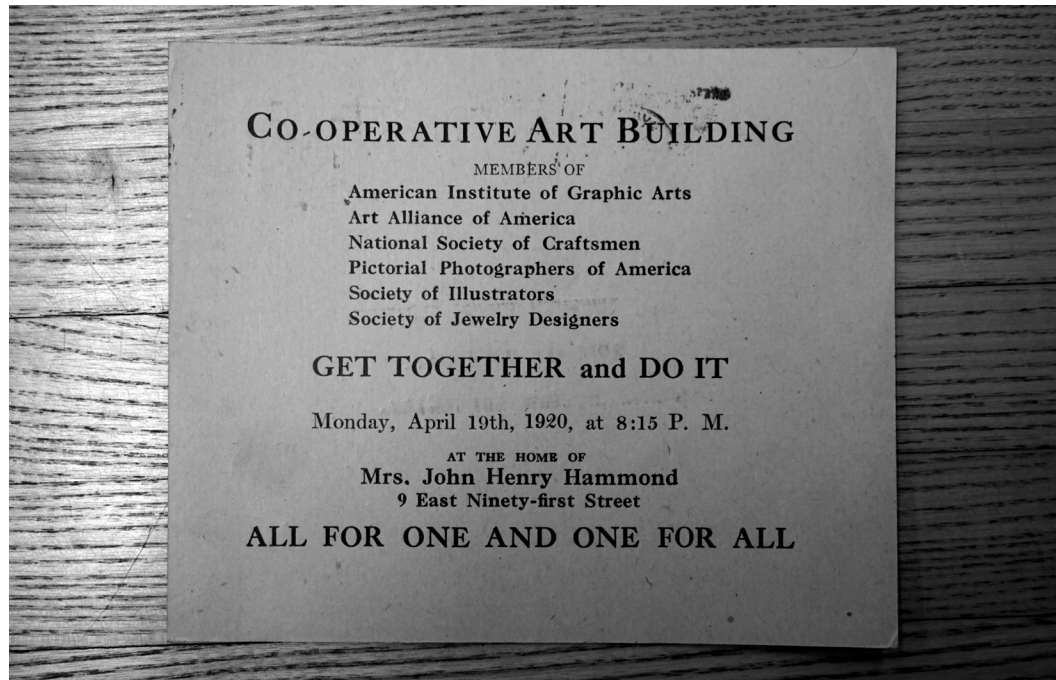
6  
The Vocational League's first act was to survey female art workers and determine if and how the league could benefit them. They sent questionnaires to hundreds

of women employed in the applied arts and received hundreds of interesting responses, a handful of which survive in Helen's archive. The women outlined how they received their education in the arts and how they found work in their chosen fields. Their comments about the struggle to find steady, well-paying work after an arts education would be familiar to any contemporary worker in the creative industries. The league used this information to enlist a number of prominent New York art schools and artists in the creation of the Art Alliance of America. While the Vocational League was created specifically to help women artists, its mandate was expanded to aid artists of both genders. The Art Alliance sought to connect working artists and art students with manufacturers, publishers, and other possible employers, all with the goal of ultimately raising the quality of American applied art.

The Art Alliance's New York office expanded to a number of different states across the country. Notably, their Chicago office became (after a series of name changes) the Association of Arts and Industries, the group responsible for bringing László Moholy-Nagy to the United States to direct the New Bauhaus.

7a-b  
As the influence of the Art Alliance grew, it quickly developed a need for a permanent headquarters. Helen was also driven by what she saw as wasted energy from the duplicated efforts of New York's innumerable art societies. "Why not bring together all these various associations, where they could share expenses, experience and resources and combine energies to create in America a background of decorative art reflective of its own mode of life, and to form an art spirit and an art appreciation which should extend to all the people?"<sup>1</sup>

A committee was formed in 1920



7a Get Together and DO IT, Reverse of postcard, 1920. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

to find interested societies. The postcard shown (6a) is an invitation to the first major meeting. It was held at the house of Mrs. John Henry Hammond, an influential art patron, member of the Vanderbilt family, president of the Three Arts Club, and mother of the legendary record producer John Hammond. The postcard shows the spirit of cooperation and group effort that Helen hoped to encourage: "Get together and DO IT!"

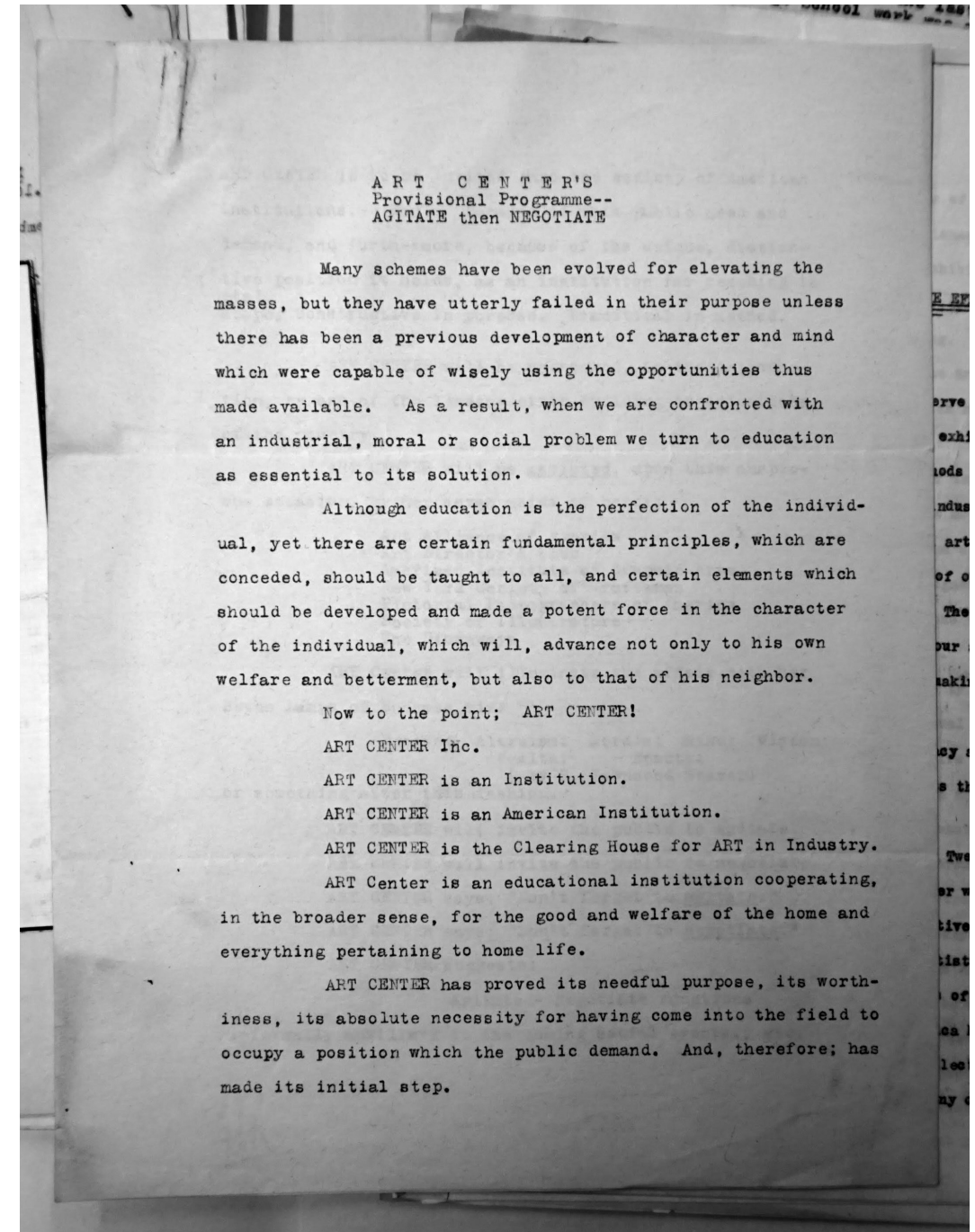
The list of interested societies formed rapidly: the Art Alliance, the Pictorial Photographers of America, the Society of Illustrators, the New York Society of Craftsmen, and the newly-formed Art Directors Club. (During early planning stages, both the Tiffany Foundation and the Society of Jewelry Designers considered membership.) With the addition of the American Institute of Graphic Arts and the Stowaways, the final roster was set. Two adjoining buildings were purchased on 56th street and renovated to provide permanent meeting spaces for each society, along with shared exhibition space that would be open

to the public. The Art Center Inc. was incorporated to run the whole enterprise, and Helen was named president.

The slogans used in the company's Provisional Programme (6b) illustrate the spirit and enthusiasm that drove their early efforts: "Don't forget to agitate. Don't forget to negotiate."

8

Each organization was greatly advanced by the shared energies of the Art Center, and each came to national prominence more swiftly as a result. The AIGA, in particular, was able to fund touring exhibitions like the Fifty Books of the Year and an annual medal of achievement thanks to support from the Art Center. These groups not only supported one other but also influenced each other in both direct and indirect ways. The Center's galleries and meeting rooms were spaces where a designer like Frederic Goudy (one-time president of the AIGA) could be exposed to the work of Man Ray (member of the Pictorial Photographers) and encounter the personal work of Grace Drayton (creator of the Campbell's



7b Art Center provisional programme, ca. early 1920s. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



8 Art Center main gallery. Photographer unknown, ca. mid-late-1920s. From an Art Center Brochure. (Title TK)

Soup Kids and member of the Society of Illustrators).

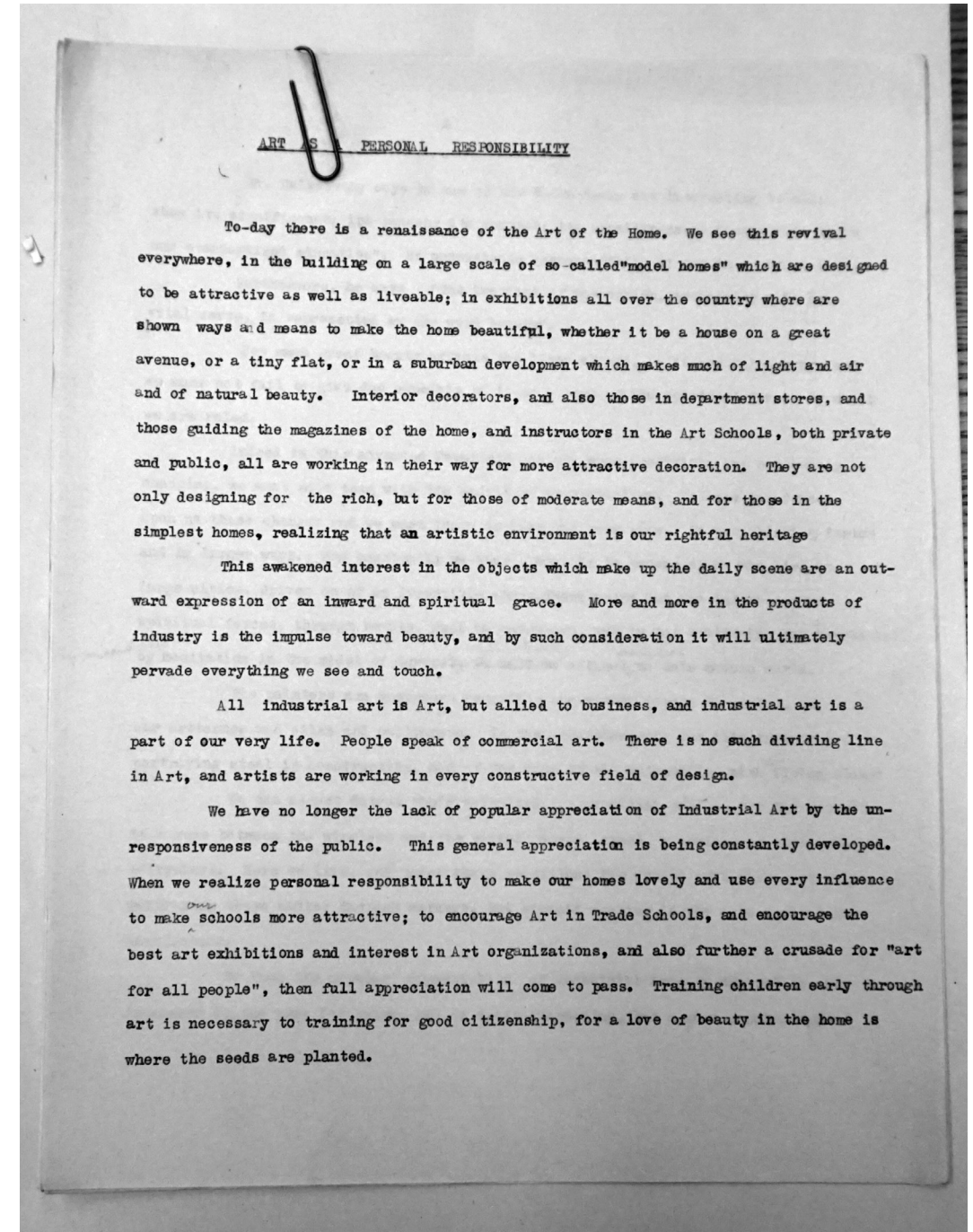
9

In 1922, the Art Center and its seven societies were all invited to participate in the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Washington, DC. There, an audience of over 1200 assembled to hear speeches from the most prominent museums, art organizations, and educational institutions in the country. One of the esteemed speeches given was written by Helen Sargent Hitchcock. This document is an early draft of that speech (later titled "Industrial Art as a Personal Responsibility"). The speech was delivered in Helen's absence by Mrs. John Henry Hammond. In the speech, Helen outlines her view of art and design as a moral force, able to beautify not just the home but also the spirit of every American. "The effect of such environment of the industrial arts, upon our character, will indicate definitely, as it has in previous chapters of the history of the race, that the fate of the nation lies not in the hands of

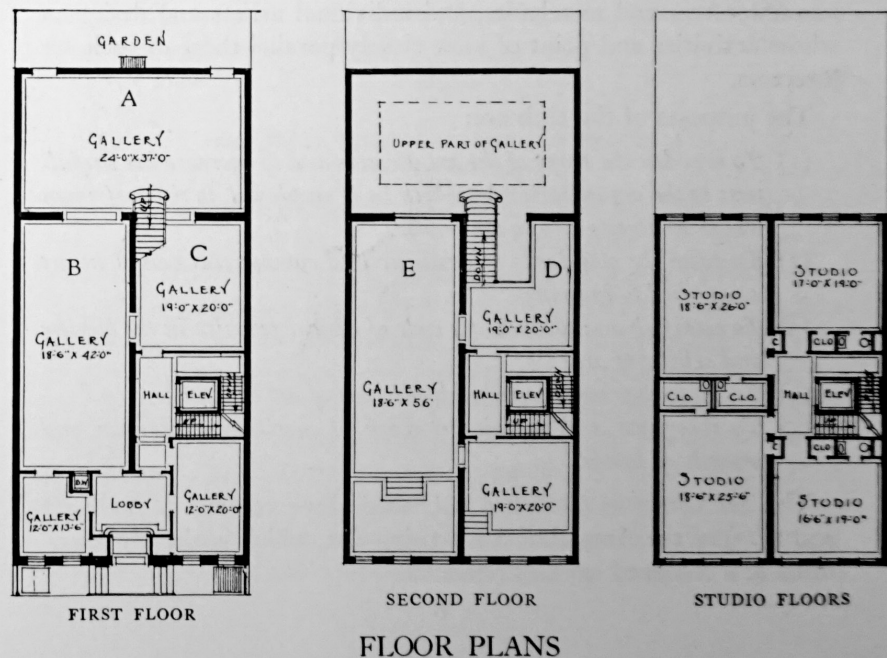
the warriors and statesmen, but in those of our designers and workmen, and in those who guide our industries, and in those who purchase them.

10

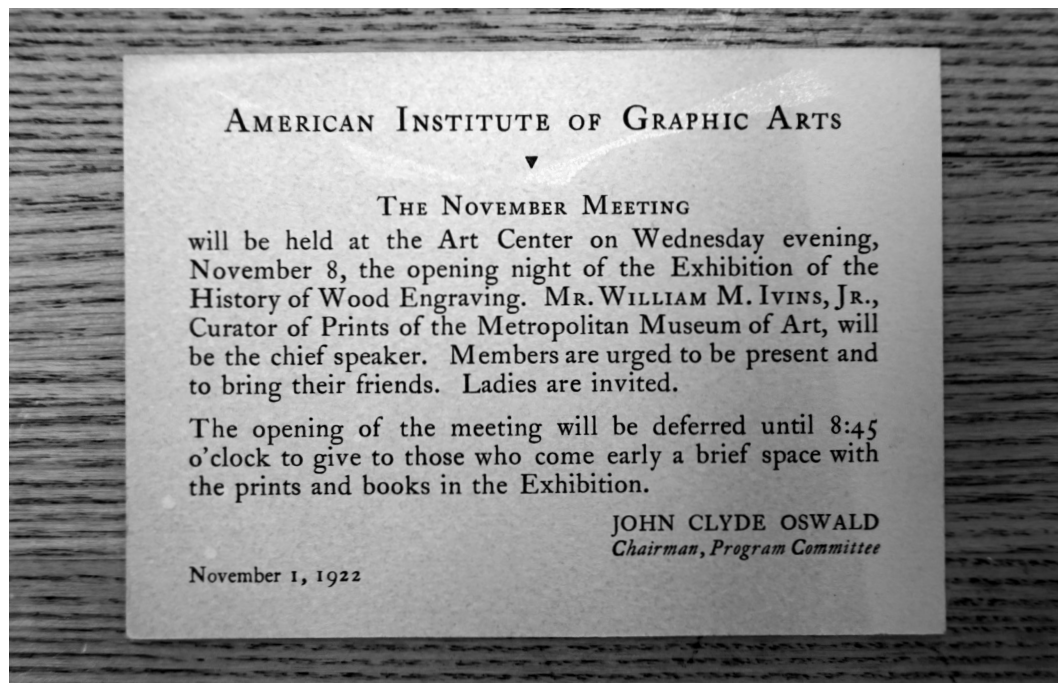
Each of the seven societies were united in their day-to-day activities by the Art Center building itself. They all, however, had their own individual agendas. The Art Alliance of America sought to help artists of all kinds find employment and navigate the commercial art industry, to help employers find talented art workers, and help art students find the proper course of study. The Society of Illustrators sought to advance what was then called "commercial art", namely illustration for books, advertisements or posters. The Art Directors Club intended, according to early member Earnest Calkins, "to dignify the field of business art in the eyes of artists, to encourage the best men to undertake it, and to regard it while undertaking it as the greatest job in the world."<sup>2</sup> The American Institute of Graphic Arts, at this point, chiefly concerned itself with the promotion



9 Art as a personal responsibility, draft of speech by Helen Sargent Hitchcock, ca. 1921-1922. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



10. Art Center floor plans. From an Art Center Brochure, 1922. (Title TK)



11 American Institute of Graphic Arts, November Meeting invitation, 1922. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

3 Albert Schiller, "American Institute of Graphic Arts", *Bulletin of the Art Center*, Vol. III No. 5, March 1925, p. 183

4 Author unknown, "The Art Center", ca. 1925-26. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

5 Michele H. Bogart, *Advertising, Artists, and the Borders of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

6 Albert Schiller, "American Institute of Graphic Arts", *Bulletin of the Art Center*, Vol. III No. 6, February 1925, p. 154

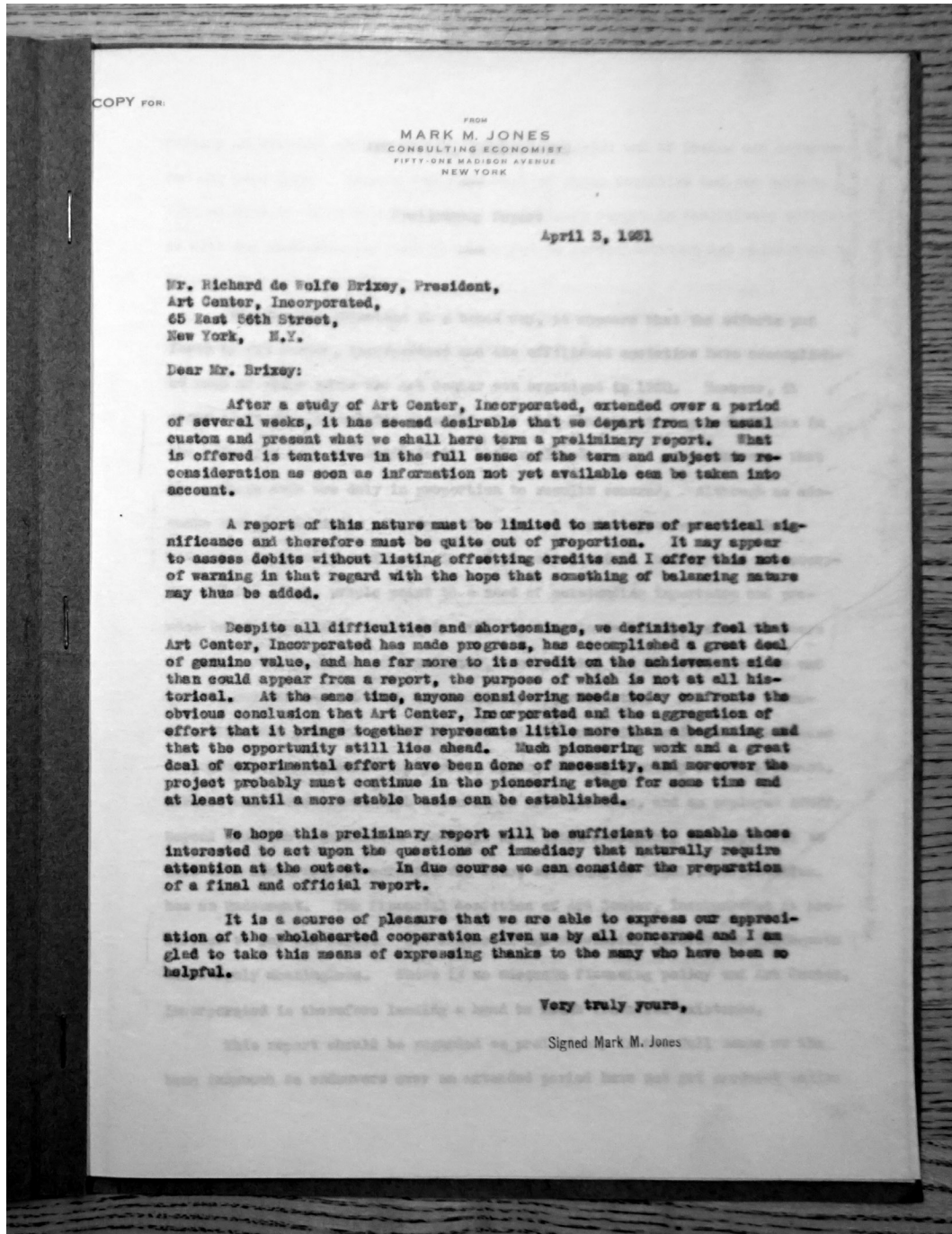
of fine book printing and typography. A characteristic lecture given by Carl Purington Rollins of the Yale University Press in 1925 was entitled "Is commercial printing worth doing well? No."<sup>3</sup> The New York Society of Craftsmen focused on hand-made domestic and industrial works but emphasized beauty over commercial aspirations. The Pictorial Photographers of America advocated for a modern approach to photography that could exist both in the gallery and in the commercial world of advertising. The Stowaways had no public agenda and seemed to do little more than serve as a semi-mysterious VIP club for prestigious male members of the other societies.

Despite these differences, Helen's ultimate goal for the Art Center was one of cooperation. "Of course we met with opposition, for artists are individualists. But there were a great number who felt that the big thing for which we were all working could be best accomplished by combining our interests. And this has proved true, even beyond our expectations. The fact that the Art Center brings together so many diversified lines gives it a sort of cumulative force. And as it has worked out, each society has kept its individuality, while our corporate interests have been greatly strengthened by combining."<sup>4</sup>

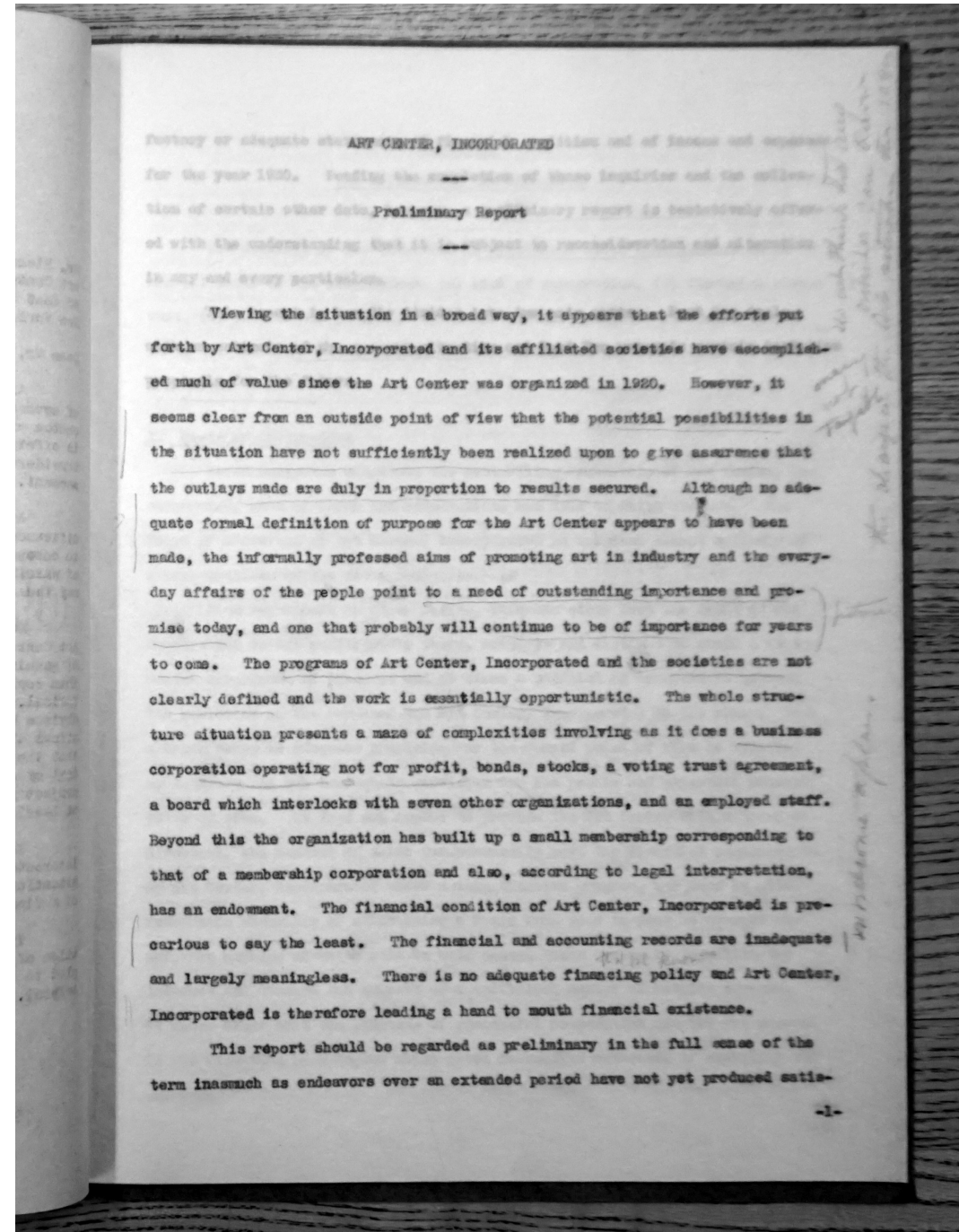
11 As this invitation illustrates, the inclusion of women was not a given at AIGA events in 1922. The Art Center was founded and led by women with a history of working to further the cause of women in the arts. The Art Alliance, Society of Illustrators, and Pictorial Photographers all allowed female members. The founder of the Pictorial Photographers, Clarence White, famously mentored a number of successful

female photographers including Margaret Bourke-White, Margaret Atkins, and Dorothea Lange. Not all of the Art Center's seven societies were that progressive, however. As Michele Bogart writes, "on a day-to-day basis the center appeared less like a placement bureau than like an elite men's club that melded business with social life. Women were behind the inception and operation of the center, but their actual power and presence, and to some extent their priorities, were eclipsed."<sup>5</sup> After five years of working with progressive societies that did include female members, the AIGA reluctantly allowed women to join in 1925. In the *Bulletin of the Art Center*, they made their announcement with the caveat: "But what will come of this chivalrous action it is hard to say."<sup>6</sup>

12 During the depression, the Art Center faced great financial difficulties. It supported itself only partially by dues and rent from the seven societies and otherwise relied on donations, some from its original founding and some from a large fundraising drive in 1925. By 1931, the Center was imperiled enough to commission an independent audit from the firm of Mark Jones. The preliminary report, shown here, exhaustively details the many problems of the Center's structure. Each society operated independently of the main organization and treated it largely as a source of office space. The Center's finances were complex and poorly documented, with a large amount of funds raised in the form of bonds. The report recognized the importance of the Art Center's mission but saw only one possible way to salvage it: the Art Center would have to dissolve to allow the seven societies to continue. The Art Center became an entity that controlled only the

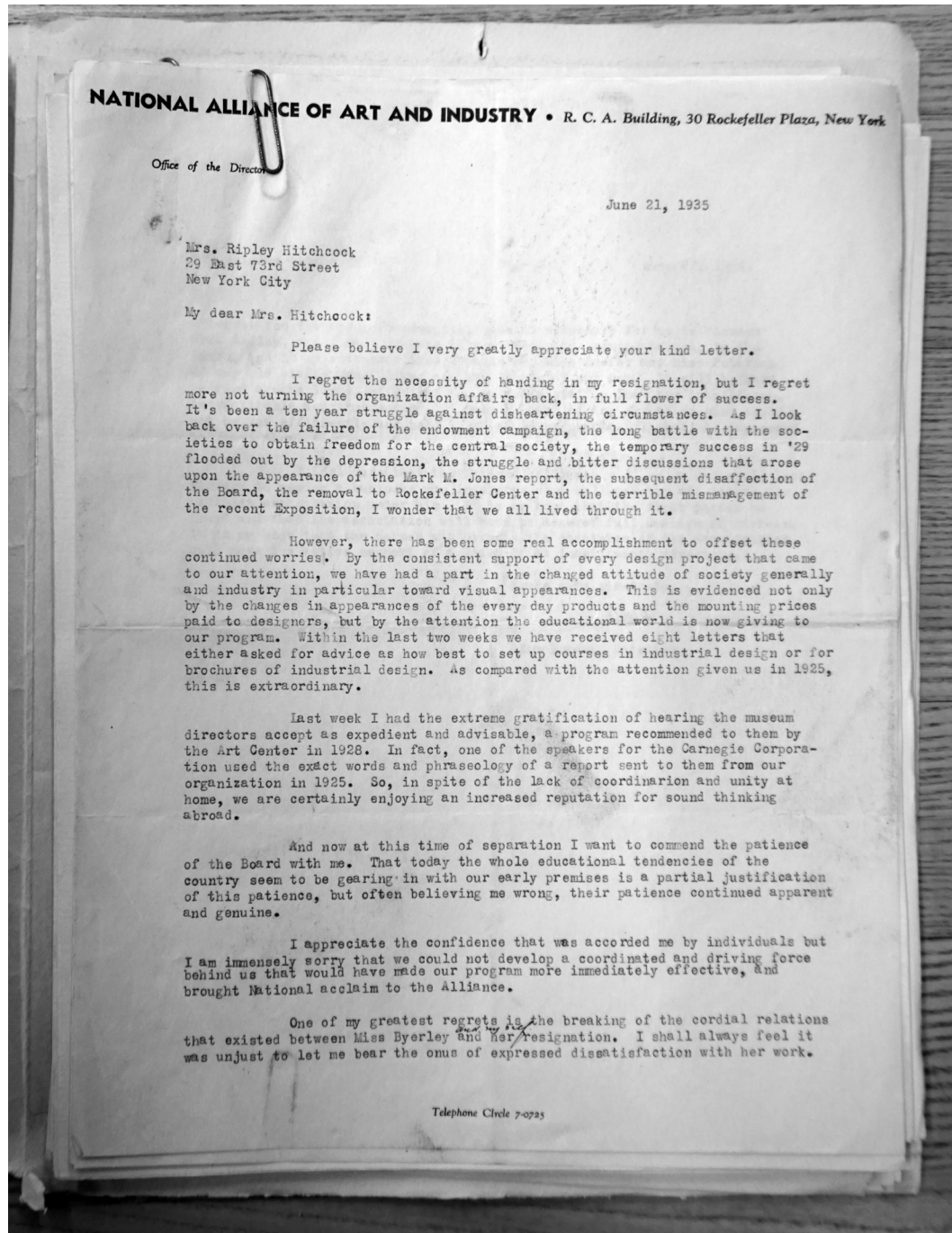


12 Art Center 1931 Economic Audit Preliminary Report. Prepared by Mark M. Jones, Consulting Economist. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

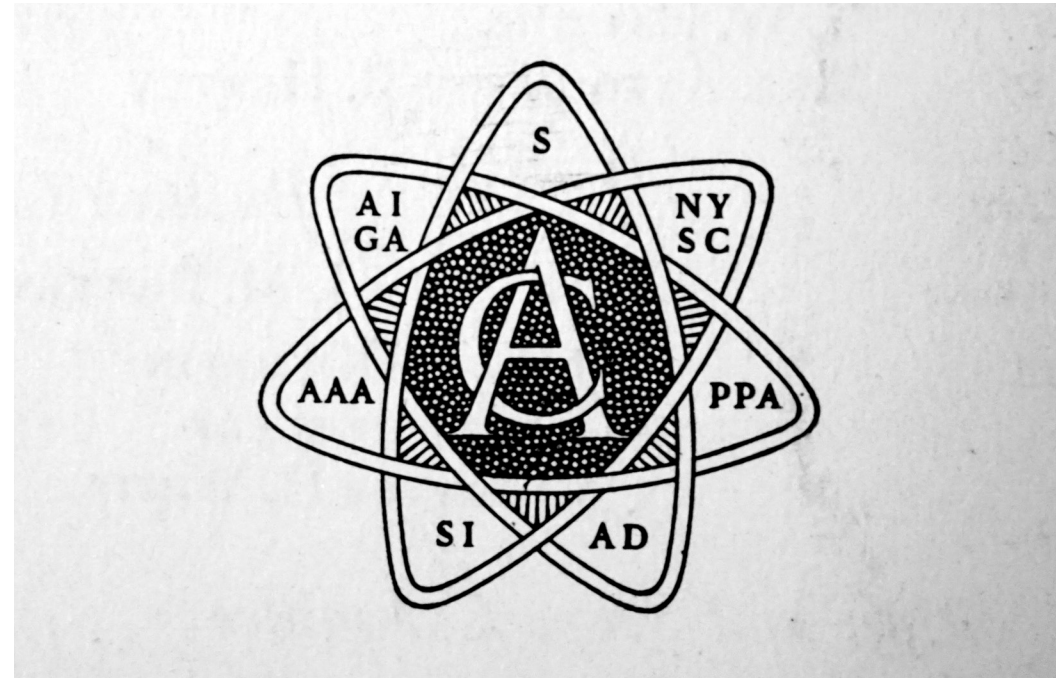


12 Art Center 1931 Economic Audit Preliminary Report. Prepared by Mark M. Jones, Consulting Economist. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.





13 Alon Bement, letter to Helen Sargent Hitchcock, 1935. Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.



14 The Art Center Seal, designed by Edward B. Edwards, 1923. From the Bulletin of the Art Center, Vol. 1, No. 11, June 1923.

building itself, while the Art Alliance was combined with the promotional efforts of the Center to become a new organization, the National Alliance of Art and Industry or NAAI. This move was drastic, but it allowed each of the organizations to survive. The societies continued to use the building until 1933, when the NAAI moved to its new headquarters in the R.C.A. building at Rockefeller Center. Though the Art Center itself was dissolved, its contributions were solvent enough to be noted by the auditor: "There is an outstanding need, nationwide in its proportions, for more art in industry in everyday affairs. No agency appears to be giving much attention to the satisfaction of this need and Art Center, Incorporated appears to have done more in this field than other agencies."

### 13

In 1935, Alon Bement resigned as president of the NAAI. He had been appointed director of the Art Center in 1926, after a grant from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. made funding such a position possible. Bement

had a varied and impressive career before helping the Art Center. He taught at Columbia University, designed ship camouflage for the US in WW1, served as director of the Maryland Institute, and even influenced a young Georgia O'Keefe while leading a summer course at the University of Virginia.

In this letter addressed to Helen, Alon outlines the many challenges that plagued them in their "ten year struggle against disheartening circumstances." He also recounts a number of the ways in which they had succeeded against the odds. The attitude of society and industry toward visual appearance had improved. The perceived value of designers had increased. The number of design educational institutions had grown. And, "Art workers" operating in disparate fields came to be known collectively as "designers."

### 14

"The seal of the Art Center is expressive of its unity and is in the form of a modified seven-pointed star, consisting of an endless

**line, so interlaced as to make seven units which form a center”**

**The Art Center was undermined by several contradictions at its core. It was an organization founded by women but controlled by men, motivated by progressive ideas about social reform but intent upon serving capitalist goals of industry. Seven societies came together to form this collective unit but still maintained their individual aims and identities. The Art Center was more than an alliance but less than a governing body. Some saw it as simply a building or a glorified landlord. As a result of these unresolved tensions, the Center’s mission is little known today. But, its opposing forces and motivations also contributed to its strength. Each member society benefitted from the influence of the others and the social, cultural, and artistic support that the Center provided. Helen succeeded in exposing these organizations to different philosophies, goals, and operations at a crucial time in the history of the design industry. A man may have been able to wield more influence, but it is clear that such an unlikely organization could never have existed without the specific vision and perseverance of Helen herself.**