



NATIONAL ARTS CLUB  
NEW YORK'S FINEST

The interior of the National Arts Club at Gramercy Park in New York City. The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the Club an important architectural landmark in 1966.

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Above: the dining hall of the National Arts Club. Right-hand page: Linda Zagaria, the president of the National Arts Club and member since 1990. She is the Executive Director of the Beaux Arts Alliance. She also was Vice President of the Art Deco Society of New York for over a decade. Additionally, Mrs. Zagaria is on the Board of Directors of the Omega Ensemble and she has been a long-time supporter of the New York Youth Symphony, the esteemed orchestra comprised of young virtuosi aged 12 to 22. Mrs. Zagaria has been responsible for curriculum development and implementation, grant writing, and organizing and conducting professional development workshops and conferences. An ardent Francophile, she came out of retirement to accept a temporary position teaching French at the Professional Children's School. Mrs. Zagaria has served as co-chair of the National Arts Club Roundtable and the Music Committee. She was also a founding co-chair of Le Cocktail Français. A native New Yorker, she resides in New York City with her husband Ralph. Mrs. Zagaria has twice been the recipient of the National Arts Club President's Medal.

When the opportunity came to join the Newswomen's Club of New York a few years ago, I jumped at the opportunity. It wasn't so much that it was an important historical institution that had seen Eleanor Roosevelt and ace investigative reporter Nelly Bly as members, or that many of the city's top female reporters are among its illustrious rank and file. It had everything to do with the bar at the National Arts Club.

I had only been to the bar, which is the exclusive watering hole of the Club's members, a few times for a drink. The truth is that as soon as I walked in I lost almost complete interest in the men who escorted me, and fell in love with the domed, multi-colored stained glass ceiling and the cozy chintz-covered club chairs in the adjoining salon. I took in the well-dressed lawyers and industrialists sipping their martinis and a petite woman wearing Chanel-style pearls, red lipstick and a beret. By the second glass of my pink vodka, everything sparkled, and I was escorted to one of the Tiffany blue chairs in the dining room and seated for dinner. I was smitten, and felt that I had entered either an Edith Wharton novel or Gertrude Stein's Paris apartment. For the \$75 a year membership fee to the Newswomen's Club, which has offices in the Club on Gramercy Park South, I could establish a tab and impress my friends and meet my sources over Whiskey Sours or Manhattans overlooking Gramercy Park.

The National Arts Club, whose members include everyone from artists to musicians, writers and lawyers, is housed in a double Victorian Gothic townhouse at 14 and 15 Gramercy Park South. The townhouses were remodeled by architect Calvert Vaux for New York politician Samuel Tilden, a short-lived governor of New York State, who ran for president in 1876. Although Tilden, a lawyer, lost that election to Rutherford Hayes, he is probably best remembered in New York as a fierce opponent of Tammany Hall, the city's notoriously corrupt Democratic party machine.

Vaux, who is best remembered for his design work on Central Park, joined the two townhouses into an ornate 40-room mansion. Tilden spared no expense. The residence's facade was adorned with the carved heads of Goethe, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Benjamin Franklin. "The house represents the remodeling of the facades of two Brownstones, and the design is a display of Italian Renaissance elements applied to the New York town house of the period," gushed the bureaucrats at New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission, which designated the Club an important architectural landmark in 1966.





Inside the lavish townhouses at Gramercy Park, the owner New York politician Samuel Tilden spent an enormous amount of money remodeling the interiors of the two New York City mansions with stained glass ceilings created by John Lafarge and Donald MacDonald. Architect Calvert Vaux did the restoration of the mansion at the end of the 19th century.

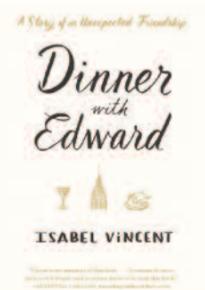
The National Arts Club was founded in 1898 by author and poet Charles De Kay, the literary and art critic for The New York Times. He together with a group of distinguished artists and patrons conceived of a gathering place to welcome artists of all genres as well as art lovers and patrons. At the turn of the 20th century American artists began to look to our own country rather than to Europe for inspiration, and the American art world was alive with energy. The newly-formed National Arts Club took residence in a mansion on 34th Street. American art had a new home. In 1906, when the Club outgrew that location, Spencer Trask, a financier, philanthropist and NAC Governor, helped the Club acquire the historic Samuel Tilden Mansion as its new home. John LaFarge created stained glass panels and sculptors from the firm of Ellin and Kitson created elaborate fireplace surrounds, bookcases and doors. Right-hand page: Glass master Donald MacDonald fashioned a unique stained glass dome for Tilden's library where the bar is now located.



Inside the lavish townhouses, Tilden spent \$40,000 on the dining room alone, with stained glass ceilings created by John LaFarge and Donald MacDonald. Tilden remained a lifelong bachelor, but at one point must have decided that he needed a massive residence, with two entrances. These were for "political contingencies," according to an article in the New York Tribune. One entrance was for everyday use, while the other was useful for political gatherings, as were the tunnels that are rumored to exist under the townhouses. A network of tunnels and secret stairways came to light after the National Arts Club acquired the property in 1905 and set about renovating the buildings. Tilden is said to have used the tunnels to escape his political enemies in Tammany Hall, although a close friend refuted this notion in a letter to the editor of The New York Times in August 1905. George Smith noted that the tunnels were dug in order "to provide accommodations for a yearly supply of fuel and a wine cellar of suitable size, a vault connected with the main cellar was constructed under the garden. To supply the furnace arrangement with fresh air, a tunnel four feet in diameter was built along the easterly wall of the house. This was all done seven years before the troubles appeared." A few years after the work was completed on the townhouses, Tilden died and left \$2 million to the New York Public Library along with thousands of volumes from his own personal library.

And after the Tilden mansion was taken over by the National Arts Club it further cemented its place in New York City's intellectual history; its mission, after all, is to "stimulate, foster and promote public interest in the arts and educate American people in the fine arts." To this end, artists were offered "life memberships" in exchange for donating a work of art, and some were housed in the 35 apartments in the Club's annex. Early members included President Teddy Roosevelt, Mark Twain and W.H. Auden. In more recent years, the Club has fallen on hard times under the stewardship of a former president who ruled for a quarter century. Today's board of directors has done much to get the Club back into sound financial shape and restore it to its old glory as a meeting place of culture and art. And now that I have managed my own little foothold at the bar of the National Arts Club (the dirty martinis are divine!), I am working on the other perk associated with being on the premises -- the key to Gramercy Park. The two-acre park, across the street from the Tilden mansion is an enclosed oasis of green and Manhattan's only private park. It is governed by a handful of trustees who are elected for life terms. There are some 380 keys granted for park side residents, and one of them is the property of the Newswomen's Club. The problem is that in the last few years that I have been a member, I have yet to see that coveted key.

But this is a new year, and opportunities abound. Perhaps I just might invite the president of the National Arts Club - the impossibly elegant woman in the jaunty beret - for a drink at the bar. It will be on my tab.



Isabel Vincent is an award-winning investigative reporter for the New York Post and the author of five books, including the recently released *Dinner with Edward: A Story of an Unexpected Friendship*, which has been optioned for a major motion picture.

