

A New Direction in Art Education

The Florence Academy of Art, Andy Warhol, and a New Aesthetic Movement

Although based in the heart of Renaissance Italy, The Florence Academy of Art was spawned in modernist America. The origins of The Academy go back to 1969, when an eccentric artist and educator named Richard Lack started a new kind of art school in Minneapolis. Much like The Florence Academy of Art, which was not founded until 1991, the Atelier Lack was a radically new art school that attempted to revitalize art education by reintroducing rigorous training in traditional drawing and painting techniques. In the 1970s, as Curator of Paintings at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, I had occasion to visit this atelier and to observe the students. Carefully drawing plaster casts and nude models, they appeared to be even more reactionary than the photo realists who were in vogue at the time. Back then, it seemed so ironic that this bustling atelier was taking root not far from the cutting-edge Walker Art Center and in the heart of perhaps the most avidly modernist city in America in terms of art and architecture. Donning my modernist hat, I naively suggested to some of these young artists that they might visit the Walker Art Center, whereupon they retorted that they had been weaned on the Walker! They had also experienced the leveling of almost the entire old part of their city to make way for dozens of new, avant-garde buildings. The more we spoke, the more my image of them as provincial reactionaries crumbled. It was one of those young students, Daniel Graves, who later founded The Florence Academy of Art.

Often the most radical ideas start in the provinces; indeed, it was not until 1982 that a new school with similar goals was begun in New York City. Founded by Stuart Pivar, an eccentric collector and inventor, in a Greenwich Village studio, The New York Academy of Art soon won the support of Andy Warhol, who was seriously interested in the revival of traditional academic training for artists. Warhol's support for this traditional type of academy resulted from the lack of such training in his own education and his prediction that *the course of art history would be changed if one thousand students could be taught Old Master drawing and painting techniques*. Warhol eventually became a member of the board of The New York Academy, and after his death the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts awarded its very first grant to the Academy, to which it eventually provided major funding.

The following year, a third traditional art school, the Cecil-Graves Studio, was founded in Florence. Created by Charles Cecil and Daniel Graves in Lorenzo Bartolini's nineteenth-century sculpture studio, the atelier was the precursor of The Florence Academy of Art, which was later started by Graves in the garden conservatory of the Palazzo Corsini in Florence. I visited this studio in 1985. With a small cadre of serious art students, most of them young and American, again drawing from plaster casts and painting from live models, the time-has-stood-still atmosphere of the atelier was unforgettable. In the early 1970s, both Cecil and Graves had studied extensively at the new Atelier Lack in Minneapolis before expatriating to Florence—a city as old and traditional as Minneapolis was new and modern.

At this time I was chief curator of the Wadsworth Atheneum and represented the museum on the board of the Hartford Art School. Returning from Florence, I asked the dean at Hartford if they offered any traditional painting or drawing courses. Informed that indeed there was a life-drawing class every Wednesday afternoon, I soon discovered that it consisted of a nude model that the students were allowed the freedom to draw, unencumbered by any instruction. This practice was typical of most art schools at the time and was akin to teaching music by allowing students to look at a piano once a week. Apparently, no one on the faculty of the art school had been thoroughly versed in traditional drawing skills; hence, no one was qualified to teach them. Like Warhol, I concluded that a serious problem with art education was simply not being addressed, and, in 1987 I left the museum field to become the first professional director of The New York Academy of Art.

Once immersed in the New York art world as head of "Warhol's Academy," I soon realized that there were two camps when it came to art education. The larger group hardly ever thought about it, and when they did, they assumed that young artists all over the country learned traditional painting and drawing skills, then rejected such training, moved to New York, and became "avant-garde." The second group was aware of the fact that such training no longer existed in art schools and considered it to be a good thing, as such training was possibly detrimental, and certainly passé.

In 1988, the fledgling New York Academy of Art applied to the National Endowment for the Arts for a grant, but was turned down. The rejection letter opined that "*such traditional education would stifle creativity in young artists.*" Of course, Picasso benefited from intense technical training in his youth at the Barcelona School of Fine Arts, including life drawing and the copying of plaster casts, without his creativity having been stifled—indeed, his early and complete mastery of traditional drawing skills is evident throughout his career—but a century later, official United States government policy dictated that such traditional education was in fact harmful.

This was not the case, however, in Eastern Europe. Although dismantled in the west, academic training for artists remained strong in the east, in all the countries in the former Soviet bloc, and in communist China as well. Thus the contemporary German artist Gerhard Richter, recently honored by a large retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, received five years of strictly traditional academic training as a young man at the Dresden School of Visual Arts in what was then East Germany. The NEA's pronouncement notwithstanding, as Richter alternated throughout his career between abstract and realistic paintings, the traditional Old Master training he received as a youth allowed him the freedom to competently execute a representational painting if he so desired. Similarly, the rapidly rising German artist Neo Rauch, whose work is prized for its technical virtuosity, received similar academic training in the former East Germany. It is therefore not surprising that the Panorama Museum, which, as we shall soon see, precipitated this exhibition, is also located in the eastern part of Germany.

When I left The New York Academy of Art in 1992 to join Hirsch & Adler Galleries, there was not a lot of great work coming out of the young graduates. Frankly, for a time I thought the NEA might be right, but in retrospect it was just too early to tell. Mastering Old Master painting skills is like mastering classical ballet or learning a difficult foreign language; it takes a lot of time, and early attempts can be stiff and awkward. Eight years later, however, while organizing an exhibition to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Art Students League of New York, I did an extensive survey of young New York artists who trained at the League and the Academy. Happily, at this time I found a number of traditionally trained artists who, a dozen years out of school, now not only really knew how to paint, but also had something new and interesting to say. I now sensed that the experiment of a new direction in art education was working! Over the past two years, a similar survey by Gerd Lindner, Director of the Panorama Museum in Germany, of several dozen artists who over the past decade have trained at The Florence Academy—perhaps the most rigorous of the traditional art schools—

showed similar results. Lindner's survey, with some additions and omissions, forms the basis of the current exhibition.¹

A New Aesthetic Movement

In a broader context, both of these recent surveys show evidence of a very interesting mind shift among a number of young American painters living here or abroad. In general, a broad spectrum of older artists seem almost inevitably to include shock, angst, or politics in their works—an impulse to disturb articulated in *The Shock of the New* by Robert Hughes. On the other hand, a growing majority of American artists who today are under 40 years old seem more intent on creating paintings that are visually beautiful, rather than emotionally disturbing. For example, when the young Patricia Watwood submitted her diploma painting to the faculty of The New York Academy of Art, the faculty elders praised its technical skill, but criticized it for being "merely" beautiful. Rather than needing time to mature and "develop an edge," these young artists are in fact very conscious of what they are doing. I recall another young painter actually poking fun at the realists of my generation for always painting the trashcan behind the building and not the beautiful façade.

In this exhibition, works by the older realists Anthony Ackrill, Simone Dolci, and Daniel Graves can be seen to have more of an edge and a concern for meaningful subject matter. Paintings by younger artists, on the other hand, such as David Larned's *Jacopo: A Study in Red, White, and Grey*; Adrian Gottlieb's *Requies Librorum*; Paula Rubino's *Mannequin, Size 46*; Paul Brown's *Self-Portrait*; Urban Larsson's *Still Life with Blue and Green Vases and China*; or Kamille Corry's *Winter*, all reflect a similar, very sophisticated and self-conscious determination to paint beautiful works that are artistic, and not ideological, statements. This impulse is also fundamental to this younger generation's strong desire to master traditional painting skills.

Ironically, modernism in part began with a similar "back-to-beauty" generational shift that occurred around 1870 in England with the Aesthetic Movement. The older generation at this time was the political and moralizing Pre-Raphaelites, such as William Holman Hunt, who carefully chose subject matter, some quite shocking, that was meant to move, inspire, or disturb the viewer into action. In contrast, the younger generation, consisting of artists like James McNeill Whistler and Albert Joseph Moore, were less interested in subject matter. They extolled "art for art's sake," believing that art was like music and the "merely" beautiful was the highest purpose of art. Whistler may simply have wanted to please his viewers visually with his painted harmonies, but he initially shocked them with his fundamental shift in aesthetics and intent. Similarly, many of the artists here may also only intend to please their viewers visually with their quiet still lifes

or nudes, but, again, they may initially disturb, as they too reflect a fundamental shift in aesthetics. Adding intellectual gravity to this new outlook is Professor Wendy Steiner's recent book, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th Century Art*, which calls into question the current deep suspicion by an older generation of the "merely" beautiful.

New "Old Medium" Art Schools

Since that traditional atelier was started in Minneapolis in 1969, over a dozen new art academies have been created, and the two surviving nineteenth-century sources of traditional training, the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design, both in New York, are now reinvigorated and once again packed with students. Reflecting an ever-growing demand on the part of young artists to learn traditional techniques, the other newly formed academies (in order of their founding) are the Lyme Academy College of Fine Art in Connecticut (1976); the New Orleans Academy of Fine Art (1978); The New York Academy of Art (1982); Charles H. Cecil Studios, Florence (1983); The Bougie Studio in Minneapolis (1988); the Seattle Academy of Fine Art (1989); The Florence Academy of Art (1991); the School of Representational Art, Chicago (1992); the Art Academy of Los Angeles (1994); the Angel Academy of Fine Art in Florence (1997); the Michael John Angel Studios in Toronto (1997); the Bridgeview School of Fine Art in New York City (2001); the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art (2002); the Harlem Studio of Art (2002); and, most recently, the Accademia degli Incamminati, which was begun by Nelson Shanks in Philadelphia late last year. During this same period, dozens of small realist artist's ateliers were opened, such as those started by Ted Seth Jacobs, Michael Aviano, and Jacob Collins. None of these new schools or ateliers has the rigorous four-year curriculum found at The Florence Academy, or the large faculty of The New York Academy, but they all document a new direction in art education. Although recently more and more young Europeans have been seeking such training, most of the students at these new academies are still young Americans who were initially educated in the modernist idiom. Florence Academy founder Daniel Graves' hero in college was Arshile Gorky.

Meanwhile, it is possible, and, indeed, most rewarding to appreciate the type of art coming out of an old "new medium" art school such as the University of California in Los Angeles, as well as the kind of art coming out of a new "old medium" art school such as The Florence Academy of Art, although today the latter may be more unexpected. Appreciation of one kind of art does not exclude appreciation of the other. While many of my generation still feel there is a battle being fought between modernism and post-modernism, the majority of artists under 40, working in either artistic camp, do not sense this conflict. Readily open to both kinds

of expression, they make art, not war. In his painting *Portrait of Donald Sutphin and His Studio* (see cover illustration), the young realist Jimmy Sanders reverently depicts a modernist printmaker of a much older generation whose expressionist work he deeply admires.

"Old Master" Realism

While some of these academically trained artists have gone on to produce modernist or abstract work, the focus of our exhibition is the work of the best artists who have studied at The Florence Academy of Art who chose to continue their exploration of the traditional language of painting and drawing. Perhaps the best term to describe the dominant style of this exhibition is "Old Master" realism. Unlike photo realism, which is based on the language of photography, the visual expression of these works comes from the appreciation, the long study, and, indeed, the language of Old Master painting.

The fact that this exhibition and *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York appear in the same year is not mere coincidence. There is an historical analogy. Born into the flat and precise style of photo realism, the younger generation of realists shown here responded by striving to be more painterly, and thus turned to the Old Masters, which for perhaps most of The Florence Academy students meant especially Velázquez and the Baroque. A very similar shift occurred around 1850 in France with Manet and many of his contemporaries. Born into the flat surfaces of Neo-Classicism—a tight and precisely drawn style akin to photo realism—Manet wanted to be richer and more painterly in his work, and thus he also turned to the Old Masters, again especially Velázquez, for inspiration. As demonstrated by the Manet/Velázquez exhibition, the periodic need for artists to look back, to relearn lost skills from artists who lived centuries before, is becoming more fully understood and appreciated. Heretofore, Manet has always been treated, however wrongly, as an artist who totally broke with the past. Now, for the first time, a major scholarly exhibition treats Manet as an "Old Master" realist—an artist who revived and reinterpreted the Old Master style of his seventeenth-century hero, Velázquez—and a modernist. Like many of the artists shown here, Manet also preferred a dark palette, like his hero Velázquez, while contemporary taste, then, as now, preferred bright colors.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to the appreciation of "Old Master" realism is the false notion that contemporary art must only use the latest language. While today we all live in a modern world, armed with the cell phones and computers that enable us to communicate instantly, the language we use to communicate—the language used in this article—was developed centuries ago. Technical and scientific developments are impor-

tant, but they pale in comparison to the development of that language; and no one seriously objects to the use of our “Old Master” English language by contemporary poets and writers.

Paralleling the ideas of Joseph Campbell, the comparative mythologist, one can also conclude that living today with all the latest high-tech conveniences does not alter the fact that these things are merely benign details compared to the most important things in one’s life, especially one’s spiritual life. If we could somehow revive a man who lived in the year 1600, we could still relate to him on a very deep level, as we would both have experienced pleasure and pain, the yearly cycle of the seasons, love and fear, birth and death, the beauty of nature—all of the truly important fundamentals of life. This is the reason modern man can understand and appreciate the art made in the year 1600, or even 600, and why, in the end, there is no reason contemporary art cannot echo or use the vocabulary of the art of the distant, as well as the recent, past. If contemporary critics want to deny artists the right to use the visual vocabulary that evolved in the Renaissance, they should try writing their criticism without the traditional language that evolved around the same time.

The other roadblock to an appreciation of “Old Master” realism is the fact that we have all come to expect the rapid changes and quick execution that are endemic to contemporary art. Starting with the years it takes to learn the language and ending with the time it takes to execute a painting, “Old Master” realism is a very time-consuming art form. Most of the artists in this exhibition produce only six to eight paintings a year! Again, there is an apt art-historical precedent for an alternating period of rapid and then slow change. The Renaissance, a time of extremely fast evolution with major technological and artistic developments, such as the printing press, oil medium, and landscape painting, was followed after 1600 by the Baroque, a period of great art but only slow evolution as artists took time to digest, refine, and build upon the discoveries of the Renaissance. In general, Baroque artists such as Velázquez and Zurbarán were more concerned with correct anatomy, realistic colors, and light sources, and took much longer to execute a painting than the very facile Mannerist painters, such as El Greco or Tintoretto, of the preceding generation. Similarly, the twentieth century, another period of rapid and major technological and artistic developments as in the Renaissance, may well be followed by a “Baroque” century of much slower evolution and more carefully rendered works of art. In effect, art and architecture may slow down as artists digest and develop further the tremendous number of new art forms and techniques evolved in the last century, including, the nascent, slow-moving, idiom here termed “Old Master” realism.

Because they are a new genre, the works in the current exhibition also call upon us to slow down and look hard at what these artists are doing. When I first saw Anthony

Ackrill’s painting, *Dialogue*, I loved the sophistication of the image and how the snake’s head comes out of one of the tree’s branches, while, at the other end, its tail can be seen at the lower right emerging from a tree root. Only much later did I notice that the river behind also has a serpentine shape, indicating that the vast power of the devil is everywhere. Also, upon first glance, the fact that in parts of the work one could see the canvas texture disturbed me. Underestimating the sophistication of the artist, I thought Ackrill had just had not prepared his canvas properly or had bought cheap materials. Slowly, however, it became clear that this particular aspect of his work was very consciously done to emphasize the true nature of the materials, and to underscore that this physical object is indeed made up of oil and canvas. I then also came to notice that Ackrill was in good company, and that Velázquez, Poussin, Degas, and numerous other great artists of the past had done the same.

While technical training has never in itself made great art, equally important, technical training has also never precluded creativity. All of the works in this exhibition reflect talent and exceptional competence in execution, while many also show the spark of genius and are quite extraordinary. Surely the truly remarkable works will increase in number over time, as more and more academically trained artists succeed in their struggle to master the difficult but also rewarding language of the Old Masters and to make it their own. Meanwhile, considering that The Florence Academy is merely a decade old and the course of study is of considerable duration, many of the artists in this show are but in their mid-thirties, with only a few years of independent work. At that age, neither Gauguin nor van Gogh (or Warhol or Pollock, for that matter) had yet shown their full promise. As The Florence Academy and other new schools continue to educate more young artists, the next decade may reveal that Andy Warhol was right, and one thousand students learning traditional skills may indeed change the course of art history—at least by broadening its horizons. In the meantime, this exhibition presents an exciting sampling of a new direction in art resulting from a new direction in art education.

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1. *Realism Revisited: The Florence Academy of Art*, exhib. cat. (Bad Frankenhausen, Germany: Panorama Museum, 2003). This 223-page, fully illustrated catalogue, with essays in German and English on contemporary realism and the history of art academies by Rudolf Kober, Gerd Lindner, Gerald M. Ackerman, and Daniel Graves, is available through Hirschl & Adler Galleries. For an earlier survey, done by Gregory Hedberg with Barbara Bloemink, see *New York—Classicism—Now*, exhib. cat. (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 2000).