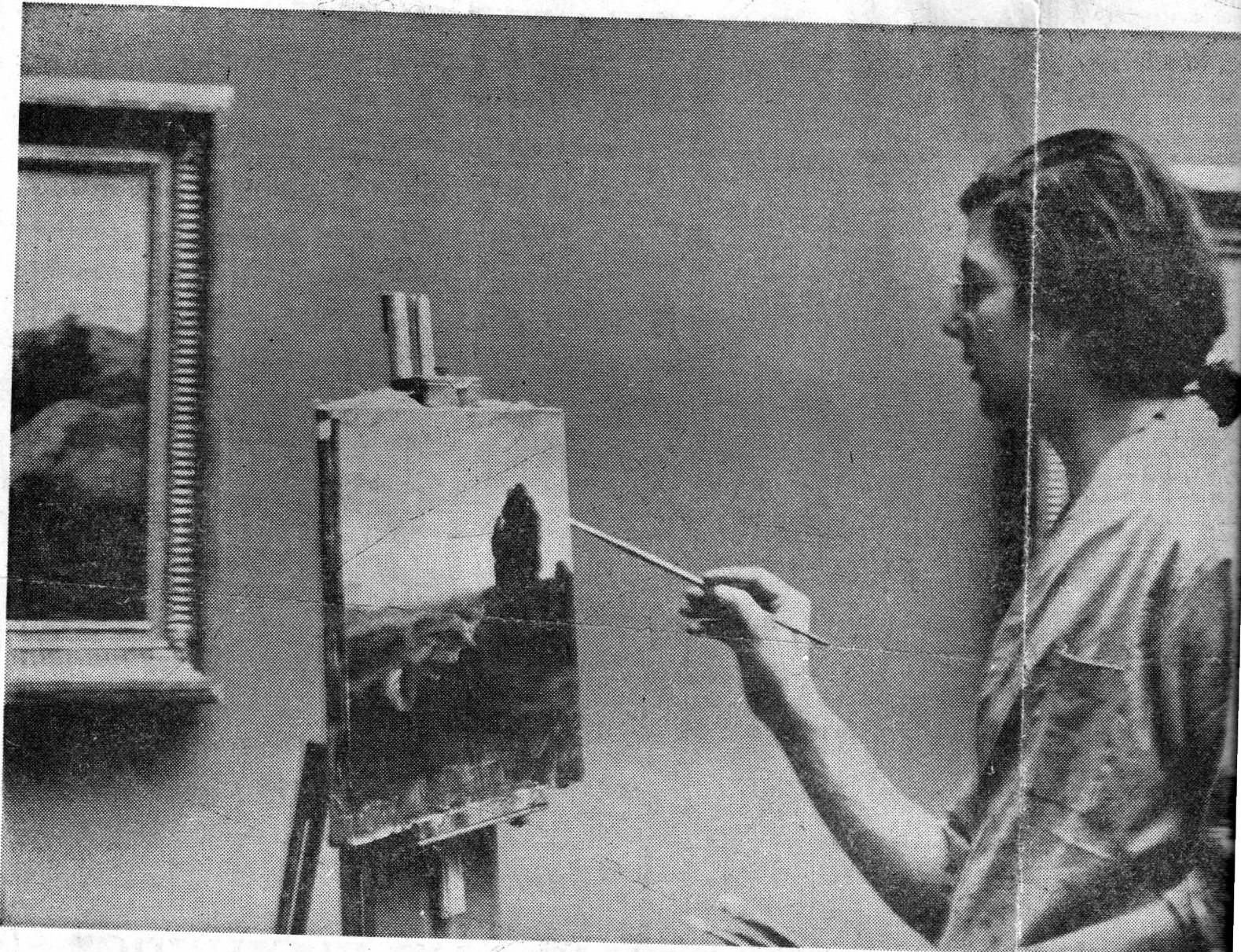


# Arts

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Rob Seyffert copies a master in the National Gallery.

# Institute 'rebels' are going back to old fundamentals

By GABRIELLE WISE

"Painting From the Masters" is probably the most revolutionary course being taught at the Maryland Institute. When its president, Eugene Leake, was asked if that was his consideration, he said, "In a way, it might be—sure."

The upheaval is a quiet one, led by a painter in his first year as an institute faculty member, Israel Hershberg. He proposed the course in a memorandum in December:

"Great artists of the past were never vain about copying the masters before them. It was the accepted way of doing things, the way to learn. We all as children learned by imitation. Art students must become students of art—that is they must rid themselves of their peculiar notions of originality, and open themselves to the wisdom of the masters. By copying the artist can extend both his visual and technical vocabulary and thereby enrich his own work.

"The copyist is in the act of questioning, examining, accepting and discovering the thought of his predecessor. To compare a great copy with a great original is to attend a conversation between great artists." The student need not be afraid of becoming a mere copyist—we are Twentieth Century painters and cannot avoid bringing our own sense of time and place to our work. I therefore propose the setting up of a course which will enable students to work directly from the Masters.

"My feeling is that perception must precede theory. It will be required that the student have a prior knowledge of his tools. Students' work will be screened and only those who display a readiness for this course will be accepted."

"There is no art school that works like a ballet school—the training. Nureyev doesn't have to worry about technique. He puts himself into it. He excites you, he teases you. Because he's got the technique, he's learned it. He's making art out of his dance. He's not just showing you what he can do.

"Ballet," he declared, "is the one great art form that hasn't been corrupted. You can't be a cripple and dance. You can't be a cripple and paint, and there are many cripples painting." (He hastened to explain he was using the word 'cripples' figuratively for the painter.)

"The only way anybody's really going to understand painting is to connect with the masters. In the Twentieth Century a lot of painters came and went quickly—they were born and died. But Titian; Rembrandt, Corot, Velasquez, Chardin and Piero—they'll live forever. They'll always be considered great painters."

"People here say it's a copout, why not be original? They say that all the time. The art world is making us feel self-conscious."

But, continues Mr. Hershberg, "I feel that I'm defending art by going back to copy Corot or Rembrandt. Rembrandt went to Titian for inspiration. Corot loved Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Rubens copied Titian. It was not only the accepted way of learning to paint but of understanding art up until the Nineteenth Century.

"I don't claim painting should look like what's been done before. But there should be three things," Mr. Hershberg claimed. "A spiritual quality, a sense of rhythm, and a sense of proportion."



readiness for this sort of undertaking will be admitted."

\*From Art Themes and Variations by K. E. Maison.

Mr. Hershberg's students have picked up his message. Said Susan Abbott, "A writer's not going to learn to write by going to a creative writing course," claiming that an understanding of the craft requires lift as well as literature.

"Art in my opinion," said her teacher, "is 50-50. Art comes out of art, and out of the experience of the individual. You've got to have both.

"The spirit part nobody can teach you," Susan insisted. "It's a question of self-education—the risks you're willing to take in life.

"I was 17 in my first painting course at the Institute. I was in a state of continual nervous agitation. It was a self-perpetuating tradition of ignorance. I was expected to sit there and paint.

"What was missing? A premise to start working from, a feeling of having a foundation to go from," she asked and answered.

"Teachers are afraid to tell students anything—they don't want to inhibit them and their creativity. Most painters today are not interested in perception. They're interested in styles, in some philosophic notion or quote, self knowledge, end quote."

Mr. Hershberg's class has 11 other students in it. "I only wanted 12," he says. "I felt I had to select those who were ready for this sort of experience, who understood their basic tools and knew how to put down, how to mix colors. It would be a waste of time for anyone who didn't know how to hold a brush."

The students in the course are Miss Abbott, Robin, Chadwick, Chris Feild, David Harrison, Martin Kotler, Anthony Martino, Emily Pessoa, Robert Seyffert, Lorena Starnes, Don Stokes, Paul Vicino and Patrick Webb.

"We really are a minority," they agree. "The tradition of copying has been lost. Very few people are doing it now."

"If I wanted to be a gourmet cook, I would go to Julia Child," said Mr. Hershberg. And if he wanted to be a ballet dancer, he continued, he would go to the masters in that field.

knowledge, and wisdom—that's practically unattainable today."

The class sometimes feels it's in the dark ages of painting. "No bricklayers today can put up buildings like the ones being torn down," remarked Susan, and Israel put in, "Something's missing."

Israel Hershberg is so sure of the masters informing his class that he can say, "Nothing else matters," when the names of contemporary painters are recited, and again names the masters, "Rembrandt, Corot and Titian. I have this feeling that I know. It gives me a sense of security. I don't care about anybody else—I get angry.

"I went to this party once and mentioned Corot. I had just come back from the Metropolitan where I was looking at some Corots. And somebody said, 'Corot? — he's an old painter. Isn't he dead?'"

And he didn't take it lightly, either, when one day in a museum after he had walked out of the Rembrandts, he saw somebody copying Dali's "Last Supper." "I almost choked. I had to walk out. He was working on Jesus. I wanted to tell him he was all wrong. Dali's the wrong person to copy."

Perhaps the experience for his class could more aptly be called an encounter than a conversation with the masters. As Israel Hershberg goes from one gallery to another, observing his students before the great works of the past, his rapport with the masters is not imperceptible.

Looking at the Corot being copied by Susan Abbott in the National Gallery of Art, he wondered aloud, "How did he do it so beautifully?" and later let go with, "I could kiss her—one way to tell if it's beautiful is if you see a nude (and L'Agostina was fully clothed) you want to make love to her. Or you see a landscape and you want to walk into it."

And on to the others, to Rob Seyffert painting the sky from Innes's "View of the Tiber near Perugia." Mr. Hershberg had told him, "He got that sky by a lot of work—you don't have that much time . . . the glaze just melts one into the other. It's really mist."

And Rob looked again at the master's sky. "I can never do it the way he did it. It takes a lon gtime."