

# Ateliers Today: A New Renaissance?

BY PETER TRIPPI



“Great artists are not born — they are educated.” It’s been said, in different ways and many times before, yet this recent pronouncement by the painter-teacher Anthony Waichulis (b. 1972) remains surprisingly controversial today. For at least half a century, the university system of art education in North America and Europe has, more often than not, employed a “do what you feel” approach; though talented themselves, the teachers are essentially there to help students find their inner voices, with the refinement of technical skills not necessarily seen as central to the effort.

As a result, most assemblages of “cutting-edge” contemporary art — especially recent graduates’ shows — reveal a plethora of often-important ideas, but few successes in communicating them in compelling visual terms. The band-aid, therefore, is either shock (to unsettle us) or spectacle (to overwhelm us). Neither effect can be sustained over time; eventually we are no longer appalled or dazzled. Setting aside the discredited complaint of “my child could make that” (no, actually, he couldn’t), we must ask — coldly and fairly — if the artist’s idea is strong enough to compensate for his work’s aesthetic deficiencies. Though there certainly are exciting exceptions, it’s generally thin ice out there, and most purveyors and critics of contemporary art know it.

Fortunately, at the very same time, we are in the midst of a thrilling revival of tradition-based realist art, one rarely seen at biennials or fashionable galleries because their proprietors don’t quite understand it, or know what to do with it. Nonetheless, year by year, it is increasingly visible, in sporadic bursts. Because this evolution necessarily stems from the attainment of technical skills, anyone really paying attention will find, in almost every medium-sized North American settlement, an atelier buzzing with students of all ages, but often in their late teens or early 20s.

The word “atelier” is French for “workshop,” and in 19th-century art education it usually meant a place where apprentices studied under a master in anticipation of applying for a place in the academy, and sometimes even while they were already registered at that academy. At the core is — and was — a mastery of drawing, followed by a mastery of painting or sculpture. The academies and the ateliers that revolved around them focused on humanistic precepts handed down from classical antiquity — especially reverence for the perfection of the human body — onward to the Renaissance (think Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael), and then to the most prestigious of the 19th-century institutions, Paris’s *École des Beaux-Arts* (think Ingres, Gérôme, and Sargent).

Discredited in the mid-20th century, this notion was slowly rekindled from the 1970s onward. Among its focal points were Minneapolis (Richard Lack), Florence (led not by native Italians but by the expatriates Daniel Graves, Charles Cecil, and John Michael Angel), and — amazingly — New



Judith Pond Kudlow teaching at NYK Atelier in New York City



Alexandra Svab, general administrator at the Ani Art Academy Waichulis in Pennsylvania



Visiting artist Michael Grimaldi reviews a drawing with Linda Dulaney, founder of the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier

York City (where Andy Warhol, of all people, co-founded the New York Academy of Art in 1982). Eager for skills they could not obtain in mainstream universities, students came to these places from all around the world, and indeed the atelier movement is still notably international. Traveling abroad to see masterworks and ruins is a crucial aspect of training the eye, so these are young people already wired to go far from home when necessary.

#### CURRICULA TESTED BY TIME

The starting point is to draw well, not only because a poorly drawn composition undermines the entire painting, but also because drawing teaches the student to see and understand what is before him. Many atelier directors have adopted the drawing course developed by the now-forgotten artist Charles Bargue for the academician Jean-Léon Gérôme in the 1870s. This program and others require the student to copy its lithographic plates, which themselves were copied from master drawings and plaster casts, before they tackle live models.

Plaster casts replicating famous classical and Renaissance sculptures were, and are again, crucial learning aids. The world's museums once displayed them alongside original masterworks so that students — and the public — could admire them, but that ended in the mid-20th century, when the casts were destroyed, stored, or given away. Now those that survive are carefully positioned under lights to achieve specific effects that are drawn, and hopefully captured, by the students. Founded in 2006

by the artist Jacob Collins on the strength of his earlier Water Street Atelier, Manhattan's Grand Central Academy of Art requires its students to sketch from casts of Michelangelo, working their way up to more complicated ones, such as the writhing Hellenistic sculpture of Laocoön and his sons being attacked by snakes.

Woven into the atelier curriculum are lessons in human anatomy, perspective, geometric forms, values, and manual mastery of such materials as oils, watercolors, pastels, clay, bronze, and varnish. (Some even show their students how to grind pigments and stretch canvases.) More and more are also moving beyond the figure and still life to address the landscape and its recurring forms.

Most of these ateliers are not formally accredited by their states' education agencies because they do not also offer the array of non-arts courses that universities can. This means that most ateliers grant certificates rather than B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees. Unfortunately, the latter is necessary to go on to teach at an accredited university, so studying at an atelier has generally been,

until recently, a commitment to work outside the "safer" system of universities, with their salaries and tenure tracks. Nonetheless, atelier enrollments have continued to soar nationwide, probably because students like what they see there and couldn't be bothered to teach nonsense at universities later in life anyway.

These enrollments have slowly been "stealing" business from mainstream university art departments, so some are now responding by creating their own programs in this vein. Having received 300 plaster casts



Students working at the Grand Central Academy of Art, New York City.

no longer wanted by the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco's Academy of Art University offers a graduate program in traditional painting patterned after the French and Russian academies. And students drawing from recently restored casts can now be spotted at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This fall the Academy launched two interdisciplinary specializations, one in Contemporary Realism (which offers extra instructed drawing sessions) and the other in Fine Arts Illustration (taught by professional illustrators and encompassing existing courses in book arts, narrative, and sequential imagery digital media).

Looking across the U.S., ateliers are absolutely everywhere. Thirty minutes south of San Francisco, Linda Dulaney founded the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier in 2001, and in nearby Oakland, David Hardy runs the Atelier School of Classical Realism. In Utah, Ryan S. Brown operates the Center for Academic Study and Naturalist Painting, while the Helper Workshops flourish in a historic mining town 120 miles southeast of Salt Lake City. In Manhattan, Judy Kudlow runs the NYK Atelier on one floor of a historic building, and up one flight of stairs you will find the Janus Collaborative School of Art. Seattle is home to both the Gage Academy of Art and the Georgetown Atelier.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, Anthony J. Waichulis runs the Ani Art Academies, the name of which is derived from a Swahili word meaning "on a path or great journey." Using Waichulis's curriculum, the Tim Reynolds Foundation is launching a network of Ani Art Academies in tourist destinations around the world. There, students will receive full scholarships while they master the curriculum, a broader goal being for them to remain *in situ* after graduation and sell better art to tourists. (First up is a facility in the Dominican Republic.)

#### WHAT'S NEXT

In 2009, Rob Zeller founded the Teaching Studios of Art, which now operates facilities in Brooklyn and Oyster Bay, Long Island. In addition to the standard atelier offerings, TSA has a course called "The Narrative Portrait: Storytelling," in which instructor Isaac Pelpekko helps students transform ideas into images, and also Martin Witfooth's "The Symbolic Image," which addresses more ethereal concepts. The resulting pictures are not "just" nude models and pots of flowers, and indeed a growing number of observers — both inside and outside the ateliers — are eager to see more ambitious figurative compositions that parallel what contemporary collectors admire in — just for example — the photographs of Jeff Wall or paintings of Neo Rauch.

Most ateliers don't offer formal teaching in art history, partly because hiring the requisite faculty is expensive, and partly because that might take time away from the technical studies to which they are devoted. That absence seems increasingly problematic, however. Students already know to revere historical masterworks through museum visits and websites, of course, but they also need to understand how those works reflected their eras' broader concerns (e.g., the Social Real-



Golden Gate Atelier instructor Sean Forester and director Andrew Ameral

ists of 1860s and 1870s Europe monumentalized peasants in distress because the political regime would not). In California, the co-founders of the new Golden Gate Atelier, Andrew Ameral and Sean Forester, are seeking to address this gap by offering courses not only in art history, but also in the humanities. Forester says that excerpted readings from Plato, Dante, and Shakespeare (among other great authors) help students see how their words have interrelated with visual art, and how they still have something to say about life now.

Forester observes correctly that much contemporary realism "is sometimes criticized for lacking ideas. Much of this may be misplaced, but something is missing if supporters such as *American Arts Quarterly* write about 'content-starved realist artists, who can draw beautiful figures but cannot incorporate the figure into a meaningful narrative.'" Students at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Forester writes, "could construct figures from their imagination, and they could narrate a story that was given to them. At Golden Gate, therefore, we have introduced a composition program, basing our methods on instructional manuals written around 1900 (and used in the academies). Our students are investigating multi-figure compositions and narrative, learning how artistic problems were solved by great illustrators such as Howard Pyle and film directors such as Cecil B. De Mille, not to mention classical painters."

This strategy makes a great deal of sense, and will hopefully be adopted more widely across the atelier scene in the years ahead. The skills are alive and well; now we want to see images more meaningful and compelling to viewers today. ■

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**Information:** For a list of some ateliers, though by no means all of them, see [artrenewal.org](http://artrenewal.org).