

GREAT LAKES ACADEMY OF FINE ART

I intend to open a small, fine arts academy of the highest caliber, along with my son Brock. Its focus will be on the classical training of extremely talented and motivated young artists; individuals whose goal is to become full-time, professional oil painters. The school would eventually offer to the community at large, the opportunity to attend classes in the evenings and weekends, as well as summer sessions. These would present the same classical training as taught in the full-time program, but in a less intensive format.

Today a classical education is considered a necessity in most all of the artistic disciplines, except for the visual arts. To play the violin you learn the scales and study Mozart. Serious dancers train their bodies and study classical ballet, and writers learn the rules of grammar and study Shakespeare. Irregardless, if a young musician wants to perform Bach or Stravinsky, or a dancer wants to dance Swan Lake or a modern interpretive piece, serious students imbed themselves in the best training possible, with the very best competing to attend schools such as Juilliard. Yet, in the visual arts alone, the modernist establishment claims that following a time-tested classical education will thereafter adversely stifle ones creativity. This is, of course, utter nonsense, whether one is drawn to representational work or not. The sad result of this modernist philosophy is that by the middle of the twentieth century, five hundred years of accumulated knowledge in the “craft” of painting and sculpture was almost lost. To this day, there are almost no fine arts programs in major Universities in America or Europe that even come close to providing an adequate course of studies to those interested in representational painting. There are a few that make a fairly good attempt, but sadly, many others are downright hostile to any student whose desire is to draw or paint in a realistic, classical manner; their focus is on being creative and innovative. I believe that creativity is a gift that cannot be taught, but craftsmanship must be learned. Imagine what the most creative violinist in the world, who had never learned to play their instrument, would sound like. I believe that when the voice of creativity meets the language of craftsmanship, then and only then, can certain unique and individual voices be best expressed fully and clearly. To write well is a craft, and through craftsmanship an author is able to give voice to his thoughts and ideas clearly, succinctly and even poetically. It is the same in painting.

I believe it is important to lay out a brief history of western art in order to appreciate what was almost lost. As in all the other arts, there is a time tested tradition of training that goes back centuries, which has been passed on from master to student. It provides the best methods to teach someone in each respective field. These methods have produced most of the great artists in history, including many of the early modernists. In ancient Greece, sculptors took on paying students as apprentices. Medieval Europe formulated the guild system, basically a systematic apprenticeship where a small group of students would live, study, and work for an acknowledged master. Upon meeting the standards of the guild, they would become masters in there own right and take on apprentices of their own, each adding to the accumulating bank of knowledge. By the mid-seventeenth century, in response to the then “over regulated and restrictive guild system”, the French government created the Academie Royale de Painture et de

GREAT LAKES ACADEMY OF FINE ART

Sculpture. This lasted until Napoleon came along, dissolved it and then established the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This was unique in the fact that the student was given the choice to choose which teacher they wished to study with. Paris soon became the center of the art world and students from around the globe flocked there to study. This was primarily state sponsored, with the school year culminating in the official Salon, where a successful showing all but guaranteed a successful career, and rejection or lack of notice often led to obscurity and a life of poverty. Most patronage at this time still came from the state, the church, or the aristocracy, which led to most young artists desperately trying to win the notice of the Salon jurors, who were very academic and often tended to be somewhat narrow in their outlook. Individual creativity began to be somewhat stifled at the expense of beautiful craftsmanship. Eventually, this led to offshoots developing in both training options, often called Ateliers, along with multiple venues for showing work. This corresponded with the growing industrial revolution which eventually created an affluent middle class. America's fortunes were also on the rise with many wealthy Americans wanting to live like the European upper class, which included collecting fine art. With the grip of the Salon loosened and a growing and varied patronage, Paris, at the end of the nineteenth century became in many ways a pinnacle in the history of the visual arts. The Atelier model continued to spread with a number of very good studio schools also forming in America. Then came WW1, the collapse of many world governments, a move away from a ruling aristocracy, a horrendous flu outbreak, communism, Darwinism, a rising secularism... and the world shifted. This was followed by a world-wide depression and another horrendous world war, capped off by a nuclear policy of mutual assured destruction. Modernism entered all of the arts as a very legitimate reaction to all the upheaval and turmoil, but as I mentioned earlier, it was only in the visual arts that they permanently jettisoned the idea of a classical education. The result of this shift in taste and philosophy is that with many of the young students embracing the new modernism and most of the older, well trained traditional artists falling out of favor and into obscurity, by the 1950s much of the accumulated knowledge on the craft of painting resided in a relatively small handful of artists, very few of whom took on students.

One painter who did teach was R.H.Ives Gammell. Born in 1893, he was independently wealthy and had studied in both Paris and America under some of the finest painters of the day. One could trace his artistic lineage from student to teacher, back to the Jacques-Louis David, the famous painter of Napoleon. After WW1, Gammell returned to Boston, and in the following decades, alarmed by what he perceived to be the rapid disintegration of the western art world, fought back. With his wealth insulating him from having to earn a living, he wrote extensively against this trend and eventually began to take on students of his own. Richard Lack was one of his first and most successful students. Following his training and European travels, he moved back to his native Twin Cities and in 1969 opened Atelier Lack. I was fortunate to be accepted into Lack's full-time program in the fall of 1980. At that time, we knew of about a half dozen schools in the world still offering this unique training.

I write all of this believing its important to understand and highlight where we have come

GREAT LAKES ACADEMY OF FINE ART

from and the great need for this kind of school. I want to emphasize the unique situation and opportunity that this now offers. In the past 15-20 years, we have seen a desire by many artists to learn what they are not being taught in the institutions of art. They see the difference between what has been produced in the twentieth century compared to that of prior centuries. There is a definite pendulum swing back towards young artists desiring to acquire the skills and craftsmanship of the past. While it is still a somewhat relatively underground movement, there is a growing number of students who want to learn the skills that they see in the museums.

The classical Atelier system is basically an apprenticeship. The entire school might consist of only twenty to thirty full-time students. Traditionally, the costs to the full-time student are kept as low as possible so that finances won't hinder talent. Our goal is to accept only the most talented, serious and dedicated of students and to keep the student to teacher ratio extremely small. There are no classrooms, and drawing and painting are the only subjects. You start, on day one, with a pencil in hand and over the course of your education, you systematically work your way, at your own pace, eight hours a day, five days a week, through progressively more advanced and difficult assignments. This takes most students 4-5 years to complete the training. It is as much about training the eye to see correctly as it is about learning to paint. The Atelier instructors, highly trained working artists themselves, come in to teach three to four times a week, often working directly on the students' work, showing them their mistakes and demonstrating how to correct them and how to move on to the next level.

The part time program will be a direct extension of the full-time program in that the same knowledge is taught, just in a less intensive way. Part-time classes are open to everyone who has an interest, from beginners to serious artists. We hope to eventually offer evening classes, for example, in portrait drawing and painting, figure drawing and painting, still life, cast work, and landscape painting. We would also offer seminars featuring some of the best contemporary realist painters living in the world today. I would like to offer a program where we could go into the public and private schools and introduce this classical information to young art students, offering instruction tailored to them through their art teachers.

I myself was fortunate to discover Atelier Lack as a high school student and attended part-time night classes throughout my senior year. In 1980, I was one of five students accepted into the full-time program and completed my studies four years later. I taught evening classes as a student along with taking on my own private students. Upon graduation I was invited to help open a branch Atelier in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. I held the post of assistant director and head instructor for two years until I decided to focus on my studio work full-time. My wife, Heidi, and I moved up to the South Shore of Lake Superior in 1990, purchasing and renovating an old school into our studio/home. During this time I consulted for other new Ateliers and put on numerous seminars. Six years ago, my son Brock began his studies at The Atelier in Minneapolis and I started teaching part-time again (Richard Lack had retired in 1992 and entrusted his school to two of my colleagues). While I have now been painting professionally for

GREAT LAKES ACADEMY OF FINE ART

thirty five years and have the benefit of all that working knowledge, my memories of what it was like to struggle as a student, who knew nothing, is pretty vague. Brock, fresh from this very experience has the empathy and the understanding of what challenges and questions the new student faces when presented all these new concepts and skills. Together, I know that we will offer students a world class education. We are both very competitive and our only interest is to turn out the very best of students. We will expect much from those we select, but we will, at the same time, pour everything we know into them. As we succeed in this, I believe that in a short time we will have students from around the world applying to study at our school.

The Atelier academy will be located in the recently purchased St. Peter's Church, a hand-cut stone church built at the turn of the century by the Italian immigrants who also built Enger Tower. It sits on the top of a stone bluff over-looking the Duluth, Minnesota harbor, just a few blocks up from the Downtown and Canal Park areas. The teaching studio itself will be located in the forty-two by seventy-five foot sanctuary with its fourteen foot tall, north facing windows and a vaulted cathedral ceiling rising above. There is a growing excitement behind this project and through donations and our capital funding campaign, we hope to soon make this dream a reality.

For many reasons we believe that St. Peter's Church is a challenging but ideal choice to fulfill our vision. The craftsmanship, integrity and hard work that St. Peters exemplifies makes it the perfect dwelling for a school whose goals are exactly that. The early history of western art is so very much entwined with the history of the Roman Catholic Church that I think it is fair to say that one had a hand in shaping the other. For many centuries the scriptures came alive for a primarily illiterate population in the form of frescos, oil paintings, sculpture and stained glass windows. It feels right, in this secular age, to be able to offer the opportunity to help pass on to this generation of young artists, from within the walls of St. Peter's, the skills to someday become someone whose unique vision, combined with solid craftsmanship, will create images that resonate in the eyes of others in a manner that is both relevant and profound for today.

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