

A Short History of Art School

By Paul Zeichner

Introduction

In this article I have attempted to outline the evolution of institutional art education in the Western world, as well as the cultural and political factors that contributed to its development. This history begins at the end of the Renaissance period, when small academies dared to challenge the guild-based apprentice system. Literature on this topic is difficult to come by; the best books I have found are either out of print or prohibitively expensive. Thus, in spite of my occasional opinionated digressions, I hope this overview will be a useful source of information.

It should also be noted that the history of art education during the twentieth century—with the exceptions of the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College—seems to be particularly badly documented. Although many volumes have been written about the movements and leaders of modern art, there is little published material regarding the important changes in art schooling during that time. Information about European art academies after the modern era is scarce; the American art colleges that have steered the destinies of young artists over the last sixty years or so have also been strangely neglected by historians (although they have often been lampooned by the popular media and criticized by malcontents). I was unable to find any information regarding something as simple as the origin of the modern figure drawing class; all artists are familiar with the standard format of one-minute poses followed by five-minute poses and so forth, but nobody seems to know when or where this started! Partly because of this dearth of sources, my treatment of recent periods may seem sketchy and speculative. Any reader who finds factual errors is eagerly encouraged to contact me.

1. Early Italian Art Academies

Prior to the fifteenth century, the educational and professional institutions available to artists were limited to monasteries, guilds, and, in rare instances, small private schools (such as Bertoldo's School, where Michelangelo studied). Following the remarkable artistic achievements of the Italian Renaissance, however, the social status of artists and the manner in which they were educated began a centuries-long, perhaps still ongoing transformation in Western societies.

Art academies were first introduced in Italy during the late 1400's by informal groups who wished to elevate the visual arts from a common trade to a liberal art, comparable to mathematics or rhetoric. These were modeled after liberal arts academies, which had already existed as alternatives to the more regimented universities of the time—it had become quite fashionable to start up these schools, which ranged from small circles of intellectuals to more structured institutions.¹ The earliest academy for artists is believed to have been organized by Leonardo Da Vinci; it was probably a small group consisting of the master and his students. As a spokesman for his profession, Da Vinci argued:

If you say that sciences which are not mechanical are of the mind, I say that painting is of the mind, for, as music and geometry treat of the proportions of continuous quantities, while arithmetic treat of the discontinuous, painting treats of all continuous quantities, as well as the proportions of shadow and light, and the variation of distance in perspective.²

Later, in the sixteenth century, organizers of academies hoped to replace the guild system, which, in addition to tainting its members with a working-class stigma, enforced professional restrictions that made it difficult for painters to work outside of their localities. Giorgio Vasari, under the auspices of the Medici family, headed one of the first officially sponsored academies, the Accademia del Disegno, in 1563. Vasari was one of the first important academic theorists, and argued for the supremacy of drawing as “the mother of the arts”. Central to his philosophy was the concept of *Disegno*, an elevated view of design which was “the apparent expression and declaration of the... idea”.⁴ In his efforts to advance the position of artists, he floridly complained:

Oh Pictura, most noble and most enlightened art of all, mother of all adornment, and foster-mother of the most noble and honorable arts, not inferior to any of thy sisters, called the Liberal Arts. Thou wert appreciated so thoroughly by the noble Greeks and Romans who welcomed thine artists wholeheartedly wherever they came from, and whose rulers and magistrates made citizens of them. [*It should perhaps be pointed out that the inferior position of the visual artist had been recommended by none other than Plato.*] Oh, ungrateful centuries of our age, in which by the pressure of incapable daubers, such shameful laws and narrow rules have been introduced that in nearly all cities (with the exception of Rome) the noble art of painting has been turned into a guild...³

Despite their efforts, the early Italian academies merely augmented the guild system rather than replacing it, and were scarcely more than gentlemen’s clubs in which prestigious artists could network and exchange ideas.⁵ Most of the first Italian academies offered little instruction for young artists.

There were, however, at least two notable Italian academies which did make lasting contributions to the teaching of art. The first was run by the Carracci brothers in Bologna and emphasized educating artists by working from live models. Here we see the first use of the term “academy” to refer to a detailed drawing or painting of a single posed nude figure. Informal academies based on the Carraccis’ became common, sometimes consisting simply of a group of artists sharing the expense of hiring models.⁶

The second was opened in 1593 by Pope Sixtus V, and was the most ambitious effort yet—the Academia di San Luca in Rome. This school attempted to offer a comprehensive program for young artists, consisting of lectures on subjects such as perspective and anatomy and life-drawing classes. The institution was headed by Federico Zuccaro, who, although rather obscure today, was possibly the most well-known painter of his time. His vision of the artist-philosopher’s purpose was the most expansive to date, and became a powerful influence in future schools. Based on Neoplatonic theory, the concept of *Nous* (divine intelligence) was transferred to *Disegno*, which was now defined in three phases (as described by Carl Goldstein in *Teaching Art*): “*Disegno* is the original image present in the mind of God and in the heavenly bodies he created, the first of which is the sun; an internal principle, *Disegno Interno*, enters the mind of man as a spark of the divine mind, like the sun, illuminating his worldly activities of which

artistic representation is one, but as *Disegno Estero*, which is secondary and necessarily inferior.”⁷

It was Zuccaro’s plan for rhetorical exchange to be a major part of the academy’s activities, but he continually had difficulty finding artists willing to speak. One instructor stated that giving such a lecture would be more difficult than sculpting two entire figures⁸, perhaps alluding to a terror of public speaking as much as an aversion to art theory.

2. The French Academy

In France, the development of academies was more politically and culturally far-reaching. As in Italy, it began amidst disputes with local guilds, which had demanded increasingly inflexible restrictions on the activities of foreign-born artists brought in by the nobility. The Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, opened in 1648, was originally created to give the state final authority in cultural matters, in keeping with Louis XIV’s policies of mercantilism. It gradually became part of a greater effort by the court minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, to consolidate the monarchy’s power over all aspects of French culture.⁹ Although based on the Roman San Luca model (which France eventually annexed into its own school in Rome), the French Academie was a more thorough and formally structured educational institution. It consisted of elected academicians—artists who were free from guild restrictions and given Royal protection and patronage in return for service to the state—and a school in which future artists were trained according to academic principles. Charles Le Brun, a disciple of the venerated Nicolas Poussin, was appointed director. There was an initial power struggle between the Academie and the guilds, even some violent skirmishes, but the government eventually asserted its absolute authority. It even enforced a monopoly on the use of models; students and artists who weren’t appointed academicians were fined for hiring models independently, and female models were prohibited outright.

Although strongly influenced by Zuccaro, the French Academic philosophy was more rational than mystical; it was built on the premise that great art could be created according to clearly definable principles. Debates were required by Colbert to ensure an ongoing dialectic on the definition of these principles, similar to those involving language and science in other French academies. Le Brun dominated these debates; his most influential contribution was an elaborate treatise entitled *The Expression of the Passions*.¹⁰ Consisting of an analysis of the language of art as well as the elements of human expression and physiognomy, it was an impressive encyclopedic undertaking that foreshadowed the modern disciplines of semiotics and behavioral psychology. The Academie also developed a ranking for artistic subject matter, according to merit. At the top was historical painting, which included classical, allegorical and religious subjects; below this was genre painting, consisting of scenes of daily life, usually with some kind of moral commentary; then followed portraiture; and ranked at the bottom were landscape and still life painting.

The curriculum for students at the Academie was grueling—it began with copying master drawings and engravings, then drawing individual body parts from casts, followed by entire figures from casts, and finally working from live models. Beginners were restricted to copying for several years with the expectation that the formal elegance of the ancient and Renaissance masters would be internalized by the time they began to work from life themselves. Advanced students were instructed to work closely from life, but selectively—the academic education

cultivated an ability to distill the beautiful qualities of nature. This was not just an aesthetic preference; the role of the artist was to identify and extract the “true” transcendent beauty embedded in our vulgar earthly realm. Instruction in geometry, proportion, perspective, anatomy and composition were also part of the academic training.

Once admitted into the life drawing class, students competed to advance through three levels. The final goal of every student was the *Prix de Rome*, a four-year residency at the Academie’s school in Rome. Entrance into each stage was determined by the completion of an exercise—the first was an *academie*, or highly finished nude drawing; the second was a compositional drawing of a mythological or historical subject determined by the Academie; and the final test was a finished painting of a similar predetermined subject, which was completed in a locked room at the school. When presenting their compositions, students were challenged by instructors and compelled to defend their artistic choices¹¹ in a process that foreshadowed the critiques in art schools of the modern era.

Line and drawing were considered to be the most important elements of art by the original academicians; color was almost incidental. Actual painting and all technical “mysteries of the craft” were taught not in the Academie, but in the studio of an approved master who supervised his students’ education. Later on, the “Rubenistes” who stressed color and form also exerted their influence, laying the way for later tensions between Romanticism and Neoclassicism. When comparing the paintings of the early French academicians with their contemporaries though, one does not see the stark stylistic contrast that is evident between, say, Ingres and Delacroix. In fact, the work of Le Brun is quite similar to other Baroque masters in its use of dramatic light and elaborate form.

One should not assume that, because of the Sun King’s patronage, Academie students lived as pampered royal protégés and worked in luxurious facilities. Despite its grand purpose and rigorous program, the original Academie was a stingily financed operation—barely able to pay its models and instructors—when compared to even the most modest art colleges of today.¹²

3. Non-Academic Painting in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

From a modern perspective, it is difficult to assign a place for the first academies in the history of European painting. When we list the giants of the Baroque period—such as Caravaggio, Velasquez, Rubens, Rembrandt and Vermeer—we find artists who were all educated in masters’ workshops as apprentices, similarly to painters of the Renaissance. With the possible exception of Poussin (who, although a hero of academic classicism, was only casually connected to the Academie), the art of the original academicians has become quite obscure; the first generations of artists trained in the academies have not been widely remembered either. However, the institutions and paradigms that were developed by these almost forgotten artists dominated Western culture for centuries, continuing in various incarnations to this day.

In Flanders and Holland, the social position of the artist had risen free of any conflict with the guild system. In these countries, artists’ guilds had relaxed rules and were considered to be more prestigious than other guilds—thus, an artist like Rubens could rise to a position of near-royalty, and his “workshop” consisted of some of the leading artists of Europe working in a palatial studio.¹³ Rembrandt’s workshop grew into a very large school, and has occasionally been referred to as an “academy”; however the methods employed there bore scant resemblance to any

formal academies. Teaching seems to have been a practical affair, with little esoteric theorizing—few morsels of the master’s wisdom have survived, compared to the volumes left behind by Vasari and Le Brun. Although he possessed a huge collection of prints, there is little evidence of copying; students worked directly from the model.¹⁴

Partly because of problems of oversupply in the art market, Dutch and Flemish painting declined around the end of the seventeenth century (along with the entire institution of guilds). During the 1700’s the French Academie model was adopted in schools that mushroomed throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

4. Academies vs. Workshops: the Decline of Craftsmanship?

After examining the regional differences between artists of the Baroque period, we can see how the dismissive attitude held by the original academicians toward the “mysteries of the craft” may have been regretted by artists in later centuries. The Flemish and Dutch artists, educated entirely in workshops, spent years as apprentices preparing pigments, oils and resins. Artists were traditionally secretive about their use of materials, and this knowledge was usually only handed down verbally—the unmatched luminosity, tonality and textural qualities so treasured in the paintings by masters such as Rubens and Rembrandt resulted from many generations of tinkering and experimenting in studios.

Little by little, the focus on theory and drawing led academically schooled artists away from taking an active interest in their painting materials. They left the grinding of colors to professional colormen; later they bought prepared paints in bladders, and eventually in tubes. By the late eighteenth century, this began to be a source of anxiety for many artists. The search for a medium (a mixture of oils, resins, waxes and driers that is mixed with pigments) similar to those used by the “old masters” became a kind of quest for the Holy Grail. A substance called Megilp was believed to be the answer for awhile, and was used effectively by artists such as Turner—however, the results were unpredictable, often leading to severe cracking.

Throughout the nineteenth century, academicians such as Sir Charles Eastlake and Charles Vibert wrote lengthy reference books discussing techniques and materials. This continued into the modern era—the still-popular book by Max Doerner, *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting*, was written under the auspices of the Nazi regime¹⁵ as part of the fascist state’s promotion of Neoclassicism and traditional art.

In the early twentieth century, Jacques Maroger, technical director of the Louvre, developed a medium with cooked lead and copal varnish; he proclaimed it to be the key to the greatness of the Baroque masters and promoted its use with near-religious fervor for the rest of his life. In his book, *The Secret Formulas and Techniques of the Masters*, he photographed paintings in “raking light”, attempting to illustrate the greater fluidity in the brushstrokes of masters who used this “lost” medium, compared with later painters of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ [To this day, users of the Maroger medium have a cult-like loyalty to the gel, which they add to their tubed paints in the hope of painting like the “old masters”. This is rather quixotic: modern paints are manufactured to have a homogeneous, short consistency, whereas much of the beauty of older paintings comes from the varied inherent textural properties of pigments—particularly the liquid, gooey consistency of flake white. This fundamental problem of manufacturing is not addressed by the post-hoc addition of a gel.]

It seems likely that there was in fact no single “lost medium”, and that artists improvised quite a bit at different stages when developing their paintings. Much like the best chefs, they probably worked intuitively, employing an intimate familiarity with their materials, rather than following some “great master recipe”.

At any rate, by the time of the French Revolution profound changes in the education of artists had, for better or worse, taken effect throughout Western societies. If some treasures had been lost along the way, much interesting and remarkable work was still to follow.

5. The Rococo and the Expansion of Academies

During the eighteenth century, art academies based on the French model propagated rapidly and became the norm for artistic schooling throughout the Western world. An impressive number of these institutions were founded during a brief period; in 1720, there were only nineteen academies to be found throughout Europe, and all but four of them were in a state of considerable deterioration. By 1790, that number increased to over one hundred.¹⁷

The state of academies at the beginning of the century would hardly have predicted this expansion. The French Academie itself had temporarily gone into a kind of limbo; although it was still the central arts establishment in France, its funding had been decreased and its stylistic doctrines were more relaxed. The “Rubenistes” had evolved into the painters of the Rococo, whose style and subject matter took a dramatic detour from the intellectualized history painting of the seventeenth century. Watteau was highly influential amongst these artists, and the Academie went so far as to invent a new category—“peintre de fêtes galantes”—to accommodate him when they elected him to their ranks.¹⁸ Various forms of genre painting prevailed during this period—even the moralistic Greuze, who was celebrated in his time, chose sentimental domestic scenes rather than grand allegories to illustrate his themes.

Academic schooling at this time seems to have become somewhat less restrictive as well. Although the traditional methods were still employed at the Academie, artists were able to move up the ranks and compete in the Prix de Rome after apprenticing with an odd assortment of masters such as printers and set designers. It seems apparent too, judging from drawings, that female models were frequently used during this period (although one suspects that they had always been discreetly employed).¹⁹

During the mid-eighteenth century, however, there was a sudden growth in governmental support for the arts and public education, much to the benefit of academies and other institutions. Many academies, all closely based on the French model, were established throughout the German states, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and Scandinavian nations. In Russia, the Imperial Academy at St. Petersburg was a dormitory-style institution that offered a comprehensive education to students who were admitted at a comparatively young age. The British Royal Academy remained a private institution for 100 years, but was given a Royal Charter and studio space. Sir Joshua Reynolds, who promoted a more eclectic classicism that also embraced artists such as Rembrandt, served as the resident visionary of this institution, much as Vasari, Zuccio and Le Brun before him. Academies were also established in the Americas—Buenas Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Philadelphia all opened theirs before 1800.²⁴

Another important development in the state promotion of art during this period was the French sponsorship of large annual public exhibitions beginning in 1737 (similar exhibitions had existed, but only erratically, since 1673). These events, later called Salons (after being moved to

the Salon Carre at the Louvre), generated great public interest in art and, beginning with Denis Diderot, spawned a genre of art criticism that continues to this day.²⁰

This rejuvenation of interest in the visual arts can be connected to broader cultural events. First, there arose during the mid-century an almost faddish preoccupation with classicism. This was partly a reaction to the perceived decadence of the Rococo; but it was also inspired by the excavations at Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748, which provided the public imagination with a vast new supply of well-preserved classical artwork and artifacts from ancient daily life.²¹ A number of influential writers promoted the virtues of the classical style, such as Johan Joachim Winckelmann, who declared, “the only way for us to become great, nay inimitable, if that be possible, is to imitate antiquity”.²² This trend was ubiquitous throughout Europe, the British Isles, and the Americas, and was a culture-wide phenomenon that permeated into architecture, philosophy, politics, and even the evolution of language (many Greek-rooted words were adapted into the English language during this period).

Although we may doubt the value of an artistic movement based entirely on imitation, Neoclassicism (as the revived style was called) gave the visual arts a tremendous shot in the arm; it also offered a worthy foil for future movements to rail against, catalyzing dissenters to construct alternative philosophies. In 1747, the Academie went through the first of many overhauls in its desire to push history painting to the forefront once again—funding and awards were increased and training tightened. The new Ecole des Eleves Protoges provided studio space for the most advanced students and, amidst great protests, included instruction in painting.

In addition to the Neoclassical movement, there were also significant economic reasons for this remarkable expansion. As guilds were phased out and eventually banned, it grew increasingly apparent that some supervision of competency in the arts throughout the general workforce was necessary in order to maintain a high quality of craftsmanship for exported goods. As stated in a memorandum issued by the Dresden Academy, “while it redounds to the honor of a nation to produce excellent artists, it is no less useful to raise the demand abroad for one’s industrial products”.²⁵ Therefore, it became the duty of academies to provide art education for the larger population as well as their elite students. France established numerous branch academies throughout the country that offered drawing instruction, as well as drawing programs in grammar schools.²³ Consisting of the same copying as the elementary-level academic curriculum, public art education also served the purpose of giving preliminary instruction to potential career artists—this enabled schools like the Royal Academie to focus entirely on advanced students.²⁶ Thus, for example, by the time Jean Leon Gerome had enrolled in Paul Delaroche’s atelier he had already received several years of drawing instruction at his grammar school and was able to dispense with the early stages of training.²⁷

The art that resulted from this massive institutionalization was self-consciously stylized according to antique examples—far more so than the work of the original academicians of the seventeenth century. Paintings resembled colored friezes, with figures that seemed to be lifted directly from Greek sculpture. During a time of increasing European expansion, an inherent ethnocentrism seems to lurk behind the obsession with the classical ideal; perhaps a nascent fear of contamination from non-western peoples was at the root of this. Later, supported by a warped interpretation of Darwinism, this aesthetic would be absorbed into the culture of racial supremacism. In Arthur Thomson’s *A Handbook of Anatomy for Art Students*, a book published through Oxford University as late as 1929 (and still in print), photographs were bizarrely doctored to resemble Greek profiles, and physiognomies of Africans and Asians were compared against the classical ideal with convoluted measurements. The author speculates: “In the more

highly civilized races, as we have seen, the face is much straighter, and this may account for the ideal forms represented in the antique, in which no doubt a sense of dignity is imparted to the features by the undue emphasis of this condition. In some of these the facial angle exceeds a right angle, a condition not met with a man under normal circumstances. Subjected to these tests many of the types represented in the antique are impossible, yet in spite of all such criticism they still remain the embodiment of all that is great and noble in art.”²⁸ Such pseudo-scientific aesthetics were, of course, taken to their extreme during the fascist period.

Academies had always had their critics, and there were those who now scoffed at the Neoclassical doctrine of imitating the ancients. Rousseau, Goethe, and the *Sturm und Drang* movement declared the supremacy of individual expression and believed that the artist should answer to no authority other than his own soul. They also dismissed the elaborate teaching methods of the time, declaring that true art could not be taught.²⁹ Artists of the Romantic Movement continued to explore expressive painterly techniques and more personal themes during this period.

6. David, the French Revolution and the Institut de France

The potential socio-political influence of Neoclassicism—and art in general—was realized during the French Revolution through the work of Jacques Louis David. Using unapologetically propagandistic allegories, he became a champion of the Revolution; his much-celebrated Oath of the Horatii was reproduced in theatrical productions of the time to cheering crowds. He later became court painter to Napoleon, creating wildly glamorized depictions of the emperor and his exploits. The role David played in the revolution strengthened the ties between government and the arts, as well as providing an example which was eagerly followed by future political and commercial interests.

David was the founder of what was to become, in a much less politicized form, the dominant style in nineteenth-century academic art—a tightly rendered, melodramatically allegorical approach, which often included painstakingly researched archeological details.³⁰

Ironically, it was this hero of academicism who brought about the end of the Academie Royale. Condemning the establishment for cronyism and decadence, he and his fellow members of the Commune des Arts constructed the Institut de France in its place. Under the Institut, there were now two distinct entities—the Academie des Beaux-Arts and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The Ecole was responsible for training artists; the Academy recruited professors and supervised competitions (control of The Salon and its jury appointments often changed hands later on but was under the Academie’s domain at this point³¹). The primary relationship of a student to his master’s studio or atelier was also reinstated for instruction in painting and preparation for entrance into the Ecole. There were now entrance examinations, which consisted of a completed figure study in addition to questions on anatomy, perspective, and world history. If these were passed, a student was allowed to work in the life drawing class, attend lectures, and could eventually enter minor competitions (such as the half-length figure, or the “expressive head” competition, based on Le Brun’s studies of human expression). If the student won a minor competition prize, he was eligible to enter the Prix de Rome competition.³² Although these changes represented an organizational restructuring more than a significant philosophical shift, the new breakdown of authority, particularly in the ateliers, was to have long-reaching consequences.

The atmosphere in the nineteenth-century Ecole was fiercely competitive and centered around the acquisition of medals, with all eyes on that coveted trip to Rome. Gone was the spirit of robust discourse of the early academies—those who were admitted to the Ecole and similar schools were single-mindedly determined (the entire course of study could be as long as ten years), with an unquestioning, spartan devotion to hard work. William Bouguereau, one of the most maligned of the late academicians, displayed this withdrawal from intellectualism in favor of hard work when he wrote:

Theory has no place... in an artist's basic education. It is the eye and the hand that should be exercised during the impressionable years of youth... it is always possible to later acquire the accessory knowledge involved in the production of a work of art, but never – and I want to stress that point – never can the will, perseverance, and tenacity of a mature man make up for insufficient practice. And can there be such anguish compared to that felt by the artist who sees the realization of his dream compromised by weak execution?³³

This intensity created a rough environment in some studios. There were severe hazing rituals—Delaroche's popular atelier closed when a depressed student fell ill and died after being humiliated by his classmates in a mock duel.³⁴ In one student's description, even the setting of a pose was a rowdy affair, rather like a bachelor party: "Each [model] mounted the throne, one after the other, amid cries of approval or dissent. I felt sorry for the poor women who were too unattractive to please."³⁵

As mentioned, David's "division of power" in the French academy provided some relief from this, and also contributed to the incubation of pluralistic styles. Some of the ateliers became semi-autonomous (Henri Gleyre actually discouraged his students from attending Ecole classes³⁶), and many young artists studied there simply to take advantage of the model, with no ambition to win the Prix de Rome.

The opening of public museums at the end of the eighteenth century was another significant factor in the democratization of the arts—in addition to providing students with original paintings to copy (examples had previously been restricted to engraved prints—perhaps another reason for the diminished importance of painting in the academic curriculum³⁷), there was now a place to view an array of masters, such as the Spanish painters who would be so influential.

7. Artistic Conflicts during the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented activity in the visual arts, with a staggering increase in the number of young painters, and a whirlwind of competing, sometimes overlapping ideas. By this period the academies had developed a course of training that turned out scores of highly skilled artists, flooding the market with works that were purchased mostly by the growing bourgeoisie. The Salon-style exhibitions were extremely popular, attended by hundreds of thousands in a week.

Many artists were critical of the absolutism of Neoclassical academic training—nevertheless, public institutions, as evidenced by elections to academies and inclusion in exhibitions, actually promoted a fairly broad range of styles. Artists such as William Turner, Eugene Delacroix, and Francisco Goya certainly worked well outside of the Neoclassical style (some of Turner's works seem to foreshadow the most abstract painting of the twentieth century); however, all these

artists created work that was, at least broadly defined, in keeping with the philosophical aims of academic painting. They generally dealt with themes that were allegorical or heroic, often presented in a way that was grandly poetic, and were therefore seen as fulfilling the role of artist-philosopher. Thus, in France for example, although only Neoclassicists could win the Prix de Rome, Romantic painters such as Decamps could develop a significant reputation through the Salons (to give a later example of institutional open-mindedness, Auguste Rodin, who wasn't even admitted to the Ecole, was greatly honored by the state during his lifetime).³⁸ It was not until later in the century that an avant-garde emerged with an artistic vision that was truly incompatible with the norms of the time.

It has been suggested by Albert Boime that what set aside the modern schools was the “sketchiness” of their technique.³⁹ I believe this is an oversimplification of the conflict and a misreading of nineteenth-century taste, which was quite comfortable with loosely painted work. Although there was debate over appropriate “fini” amongst academic painters, the conflicts that arose with groups such as the French Impressionists and the English Pre-Raphaelites were deeply philosophical and had more to do with attitudes about subject matter and the broader purpose of art. The Realist approach of the Impressionists seemed to be perversely unsentimental to the viewers of their time—there was no recognizable moral statement in their depiction of modern life and occasionally they went as far as to ridicule contemporary values. Their handling of color and light seemed like a vulgar novelty, and their deliberate flattening of form a coy affectation. Bouguereau articulated this general sentiment:

Yes! Women perspiring in prismatic colors! There are color blind people; that's not my fault... We have a few masters in the nineteenth century... Ingres and Delacroix; water and fire, don't you think? And still very clever people, who made no blue shadows and who knew how to draw... In painting I'm an idealist. I see only the beautiful in art and, for me, art is the beautiful. Why reproduce what is ugly in nature? Painting what one sees just as it is, no—or at least not unless one is immensely gifted. Talent is all-redeeming and can excuse anything. Nowadays painters go too far, just as writers and novelists do. There is no way of telling where they'll draw the line...⁴⁰

The Pre-Raphaelites painted in a tightly realistic manner, but they challenged the imitation of antiquity, arguing for the development of a style that was indigenous to Anglo-Saxon culture. They stressed an absolute devotion to nature, and their canvases frequently were crowded with natural detail. The critical response to John Everett Millais' “Christ in the House of His Parents”—a meticulous painting that is not at all “sketchy”, but is an uncompromisingly non-idealized portrayal—underscores the public discomfort with realism. A critic with *Blackwood's Magazine* wrote, “We can hardly imagine anything more ugly, graceless and unpleasant... such a collection of splay feet, puffed joints and misshapen limbs was assuredly never before made...”⁴¹ Charles Dickens described it as “mean, revolting and repulsive.”⁴² Today, accustomed as we are to Realism, this painting seems quite sympathetic, even a bit sweet; it is difficult to imagine the controversy it sparked.

In England, the Royal Academy was eventually able to integrate the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites; artists such as Millais and William Holman Hunt actually became elected members—even presidents. In France, there was more tension, but the influences of new styles of art could not be contained. Gerome, one of the most formidable members of the Academy, was a stalwart opponent of the Impressionists—particularly Edouard Manet, who seemed to be a constant thorn in his side. As a pioneer of Orientalist and Neo-Grec painting which combined

genre painting with exotic and historical themes, Gerome was considered somewhat controversial himself; however he adhered inflexibly to academic principles of technique. He flew into a rage one day when he saw that all the students in his class were imitating Manet's flattened manner of painting as a practical joke. When a posthumous exhibition of Manet's work was organized at the Ecole de Beaux-Arts in 1884, Gerome commented:

I am certain that Manet was capable of painting good pictures. He has chosen to be the apostle of decadent fashion, the art of the fragment. I, for my part, was chosen by the state to teach the grammar of art to young students. And after that I will tell them to look around themselves, to study nature, to be sincere, to be naive, and to work.

Consequently, I do not think it right to offer them as a model the extremely arbitrary and sensational work of a man, who, although gifted with rare qualities, did not develop them.⁴³

In 1863, the Ecole was significantly restructured in an attempt at liberalization. Painting and sculpting instruction were integrated into the program, and studios were constructed on the school's premises. More students were allowed in, and entrance exams were discontinued—students could be accepted based on the recommendation of the chief of a workshop.⁴⁴ Gerome was one of the instructors, and at the time this was considered a progressive appointment.⁴⁵ This was only one of numerous transformations over the years; although they are remembered as being stodgy and unyielding, the Academie and the Ecole were organizations that did attempt to evolve and address changing philosophies. [The histories I've seen refer to these transformations rather sporadically and, quite frankly, I have not been able to find a clear chronology of precisely how and when they occurred.]

In spite of conflicts, the academic atelier continued to be the central educational institution in France throughout the nineteenth century. Even maverick artists such as Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec could attend less regimented studios such as the Academie Suisse. It should, however, be noted that there continued to be alternative routes in artistic schooling. Charles Bargue, who was one of the most gifted of the academic genre painters and actually provided the illustrations for the Ecole's widely-used *Drawing Course* manual, was educated outside of academic institutions, perhaps as a journeyman with a local artist.⁴⁶

By the turn of the century the art world had become remarkably eclectic; eventually, diverse styles leaked into even the most conservative academies. Academically trained artists such as the American John Singer Sargent, and the Spanish Joaquin Sorolla interacted with and borrowed from Impressionists such as Claude Monet. Even Prix de Rome winners showed some influence from impressionist coloring and brushwork. The fanciful approach of the Symbolists, such as Gustave Moreau (who taught at the Ecole) also became quite influential. The Munich Academy was particularly modern, with a painting program that favored loose, expressive brushwork; it was a strong influence on The Art Students' League in New York.⁴⁷ A somewhat sentimental, politicized form of Realism, Social Realism, became fashionable with the works of artists such as the French Leon L'Hermitte, and the Russian Ilya Repin. Aesthetic philosophies ranged from Tolstoy's puritanical insistence on the spiritual and humanistic purpose of art, as argued in *What is Art?*⁴⁸, to the socialist/decadent theories of Oscar Wilde.

During this lively period there were developments in art education outside of the academies and the avant-garde that were also of great significance. The establishment of public art education and vocational design schools became a major concern for many who saw the

deterioration of applied arts and crafts due to industrialized production. As previously discussed, some groundwork had already been laid in the eighteenth century, but after the disappointing international Great Exhibition of industrial arts in 1851, the situation was seen as a crisis. Henry Cole, the General Superintendent of England's Department of Practical Art, led a crusade to open schools for design throughout Great Britain, and later, in the United States. His program focused on the copying of ornamental designs rather than the figure, as in French schools; today it seems like a tedious curriculum, but his efforts helped to highlight the importance of design in industry and led to the foundation of many long-lasting institutions.⁴⁹ Later, the Arts and Crafts Movement, led by John Ruskin and William Morris, promoted the merging of fine art with practical design and architecture; this evolved into Art Nouveau, and later, Art Deco. Their work was highly influential, especially in Germany, which followed England in the establishment of increasingly sophisticated design schools—eventually leading to the famous Bauhaus school.⁵⁰

8. Modernism and Teaching

Despite their efforts to stay relevant, the artistic concessions of the academies were apparently too little too late—in the early twentieth century, there was a wholesale reaction against the entire academic establishment. Postimpressionist and Modernist movements were evolving rapidly, with ideas that were too radical for these inherently conservative institutions to absorb. The Modernists' appropriation of "primitive" tribal art was particularly baffling for the beleaguered academicians who had struggled to accept Impressionism (in his still-popular 1924 book, *The Science and Practice of Oil Painting*, the relatively progressive academician Harold Speed ridicules Roger Fry's admiration of African sculpture).

A generation of young artists and intellectuals cultivated a savage contempt towards academicism and what was derisively referred to as “pompier” painting. Most of the Modernist innovators had some experience with academic training, but ultimately rejected it. Pablo Picasso had been a prodigy and was a star pupil at the Royal Academy of San Fernando, but quit at age sixteen.⁵¹ Henri Matisse had suffered a cutting slight when he studied with Bouguereau (“you will never be able to draw”, he was told when improperly using an eraser⁵²), although he had a somewhat better experience with Moreau. Matisse declared, “There is no such thing as teaching painting at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts. One learns what not to do. [It is] a machine for making Prix de Rome scholars”.⁵³

It was not only the inflexibility of the late academicians that caused this reaction—their pandering to popular taste also incited the scorn of Modernists. Although there had always been an uneasy relationship between art and business, it is hard to deny that artists such as Bouguereau, Gerome and Alma-Tadema were painting with a commercial pragmatism that was unprecedented. The socioeconomic revolutions of the nineteenth century were at the root of this; in a situation foreshadowed by the late Dutch period, artists were now compelled to produce work speculatively for a bourgeois market rather than for sophisticated, elite patrons. When contrasting his early, sometimes grim paintings with his later saccharine work, Bouguereau defensively confessed his own artistic compromises: “If I had continued to paint similar works, it is probable that, like these, I would still own them. What do you expect, you have to follow public taste, and the public only buys what it likes. That’s why, with time, I changed my way of painting...”⁵⁴ In addition, the development in the 1860’s of photogravure prints made directly from paintings created a new, lucrative commercial outlet; unholy alliances were formed

between artists and businessmen, such as in the case of Gerome and Goupil. As Zola observed, the Salon had now become a showcase to advertise paintings that were immediately available as prints for public consumption.⁵⁵

Perhaps in reaction to this, one of the characteristics of Modernism—in spite of a declared intent to unify the industrial and fine arts—was a stern distinction between commercial and high visual art. To this day, art schools enforce that separation with a peculiar ghettoization of illustrative or representational art. In most college programs of the United States for example, there is a separate curriculum for illustration, which employs some methods inherited from academies, and another for painting, which squeamishly warns students to avoid any contamination from “academic” or “illustrative” influences (these vague terms are used almost interchangeably, and are the most pejorative in the modern teacher’s vocabulary). Thus, during the modern era commercial illustrators became the last visible progeny of the late academicians, employing their use of storytelling, melodrama and exoticism for pulp magazines, paperback books and posters.

This absolute division was quite different from other cultural spheres, such as cinema and popular music, in which commercial and artistic objectives were frequently blurred. There have of course been some Modernists, such as the Pop artists, who—with self-conscious irony—explored the gulf between commercial and fine art. In other cases, successful modern artists such as Picasso and Dali found themselves producing cynically for a ravenous market, perhaps haunted by the scorn they once felt for the commercial vulgarity of academic painters.

Conversely, commercial artists playfully bastardized elements from Modernism without shame. Today, Postmodern thought has examined this dichotomy and attempted to reappraise much of the work that was previously dismissed; this has led to an increasingly anarchistic art world that integrates commercial and illustrative approaches with a fine art sensibility. Unfortunately, most schools are a bit behind the times and still cling to their separatist approach to instruction.

The teaching of Modernism—really a diverse collection of movements, led by charismatic rebels who were either self-taught or eschewed their education—was, and continues to be problematic. The absence of clearly definable goals has made the modern art class susceptible to a cult-like tyranny of instructors’ personal whims. Furthermore, confusion between principles based on nature and mathematics and those that were adopted from current artistic trends has plagued modern classrooms. This led to muddled compromises; for example, Cubism was presented as an alternative system of perspective rather than an idiosyncratic compositional style, leading to generations of poorly-informed student work that was just as derivative as that of the academies. On the other hand, concepts such as color theory—as taught by the Bauhaus school and, later, Josef Albers⁵⁶—were more objectively useful (although Bauhaus instructor Johannes Itten’s theory connecting hair and eye pigmentation with personal color preferences was disturbingly Third Reichian).

The practice of drawing from a model continued as a staple in art schools; however, perhaps influenced by the methods of teachers such as Kimon Nicolaidis (of the Art Students League) and Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran (the nineteenth century teacher of Degas and Rodin who stressed drawing from memory⁵⁷), the modern figure drawing class was structured very differently from the academies. The poses were quick, usually ranging from one to twenty minutes, and calligraphic, gestural drawings were favored over careful studies. Matisse, who opened his own atelier in 1908, attempted to teach figure drawing in a manner completely removed from the academic approach. He instructed, “The model must not be made to agree

with a preconceived theory or effect. It must impress you, awaken in you an emotion, which in turn you must seek to express.” [He did eventually make concessions—after seeing his students’ initial results he walked out of the classroom, later returning with a plaster cast.]⁵⁸

The Staatliches Bauhaus, founded in Germany by architect Walter Gropius in 1919, was the most philosophically cohesive of the modern schools; it was a keystone in the history of modern art education and its influence continues to this day. Gropius envisioned a school that would integrate the domains of art, architecture and design with an approach that combined the practices of the medieval guild with contemporary industrial methods of production. Its aesthetic consisted of an austere, Marxist-influenced ideal in which form followed function—quite different from the fanciful eclecticism of the then-ubiquitous Art Deco movement, which combined futuristic, classical and tribal elements with childlike abandon. An emphasis was put on the innate qualities of materials and an almost scientific study of the effects of color and form. The school was funded by the Weimar republic, and attracted some of the leading artists of the day—Paul Klee, Vassily Kandinsky, and Hans Hoffman were members of its faculty.

The Bauhaus rhetoric was quite ambitious; in some ways it constituted a return to the original academic ideals as much as a reaction against the decadence of the late academies. Itten’s preliminary course outline described the essence of creation in a manner that suggests the concept of *Disegno*; the teaching of Klee and Kandinsky, with their focus on symbols and expressive language, intriguingly recalls Le Brun.⁵⁹ The school was disbanded by the Nazis in 1933, but many of its faculty members continued to teach elsewhere, mostly in the United States.

In spite of such visionary efforts, the specter of the original eighteenth-century anti-academic argument, that true art cannot be taught, has always hovered over modern schools. Photography had presumably ended the practical necessity of close representation, and with Dadaism and conceptual art the artist became essentially free from public expectations of technical mastery. Nothing was left but the pure idea—in a sense, the first academies’ founding vision of promoting the role of *artist-philosopher* had come to its ultimate fruition. But if the traditional training of artists was now obsolete, what exactly *was* supposed to go on in a school? The Bauhaus claimed to embrace the methods of the guild; however, guilds were traditionalist institutions that carefully passed on skills and design motifs—this certainly had little to do with their approach, which emphasized an open-ended exploration of materials, offering only the most rudimentary training in how to competently manipulate them. Providing a creative “laboratory” and promoting a lively classroom dialectic emerged as the central functions of an art school—students and teachers were encouraged to experiment, then defend and challenge each other’s work during class critiques (now referred to as *crits*) with the objective of clarifying their ideas.

9. Totalitarian Academic Art

Ironically, during this period Fascist and Communist states embraced and promoted the very styles that were rejected as bourgeois by intellectuals in Western capitalist democracies.

When the Nazis came to power, along with their racist and totalitarian ideologies came an all-encompassing vision for a national culture. Modernism was seen as a corrupt Marxist/Jewish influence; schools were quickly restructured in the manner of the old academies and a fascistic form of Neoclassicism was instated. Hitler used art and architecture much as Napoleon had, to glorify himself and his regime. For the most part however, Nazi classicism was a bizarre

caricature of past schools—male figures in particular had a militarized, obsessively homoerotic quality.⁶⁰ A number of displaced, talented Realist and Nazarene painters from the academic era also seem to have been brought into the Nazi movement—it is strange to see their work mixed in with the rest.

In the Soviet Union, the state relationship with the arts was more complex. In the early years of the revolution, Modernist influences were tolerated by Lenin as long as they reflected Marxist principles. The Vkhutemas, a school with a Modernist philosophy similar to that of the Bauhaus, was opened in 1920, replacing the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov School of Applied Arts. This was a large institution, with 100 faculty members and 2500 students, and was a formidable player in the culture of the early Soviet Union. After Stalin took power, however, Modernism fell out of favor⁶¹; the influence of the Vkhutemas declined and it was closed in 1930. Social Realism became the endorsed style of art by the state, and the academy at St. Petersburg, renamed the U.S.S.R. Academy, instructed artists in the traditional manner, with Repin held as the ideal. Grandiose Neoclassicism, as in Nazi Germany, was also evident in public monuments and architecture.

Academicism was also adopted by the Chinese communist regime; in the midst of their xenophobic reforms, they oddly abandoned their own rich tradition of painting in favor of the Western Social Realism that was brought in by Soviet teachers. The Chinese state art was even more overtly propagandistic than the Soviet—strictly prescribed themes fell into strange categories, such as “barefoot doctors”, showing peasant women tending to the sick, and “chubby babies”, sentimental depictions of healthy cherubs that bear an odd resemblance to the rosy infants of Bouguereau. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960’s and 1970’s, government control of these images was even tighter; women were depicted as completely androgynous and political ideology had to be scrupulously represented. Artists who strayed were severely punished.⁶²

10. Old Academies vs. New, and the Future of Art Education

During the early to middle part of the twentieth century, most academic programs were dismantled in Western Europe and the United States. This change took place at different rates throughout the world, and charting it would be a project in itself. Germany and central Europe (prior to Nazism) were the quickest to convert their schools, while the British made somewhat moderate changes. By the mid-thirties, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was still teaching with casts, with the Prix de Rome program intact⁶³; however, a look at the Ecole website today will show a very modern program. In Italy, the Florence Academy of Fine Arts continued to teach traditionally well into the modern era.⁶⁴

In the United States, universities and design colleges started to eclipse academies and ateliers as the favored institutions for artistic training; their programs began as imitations of academic teaching but became increasingly Modernist as the century progressed. A radical shift occurred after World War II, when European émigrés such as Hans Hofmann, Josef Albers and Marcel Duchamp became powerful influences in universities and colleges. The short-lived Black Mountain College of Art, which opened in North Carolina in 1933, was one of the earlier Modernist art colleges in the United States; it was closely modeled after the Bauhaus, and its curriculum was later imitated in schools throughout the country. The ability of the American higher education system to absorb Modernist pedagogy enabled it to effectively reverse the

trend towards independent schools such as the Art Students League and the Grand Central School of Art. The growing importance of a college degree in modern bourgeois society was certainly another factor in this shift—there was a new wave of students who were attracted to the bohemian world of the artist, but also wanted the respectability of a legitimate education from an accredited institution. While the first generation of American abstract painters (including such figures as Pollock and Kline) tended to be independently educated, by the late 1950's universities became important players in an increasingly “academic” (the broader definition of the word) visual arts world.⁶⁵ The Yale School of Art, an exclusive postgraduate program, emerged as the most prestigious art school during the 1960's and continues to be highly influential (curiously, a number of its most famous graduates, such as John Currin and Chuck Close, have turned to representational painting, although the school itself does not stress realism). In an interesting twist, colleges that originated as working-class industrial design schools such as The Cooper Union and The Rhode Island School of Design adopted Bauhaus-style programs and emerged as elite centers of high art, whereas the older academic schools such as The National Academy of Design often served as training grounds for commercial illustrators.

By the mid-1950s, it had become difficult for a young student to learn what even informally educated artists commonly knew only a few decades prior. Despite its shortcomings, academic training provided an effective way to master skills; the modern university structure of fragmented four-month classes was far more cumbersome for this kind of development. Students were now encouraged to pick and choose eclectic classes in a buffet-style curriculum, rather than follow a unified course of study. Additionally, whereas promotion in the academic system depended on a clear demonstration of mastery (there was considerable variation in the speed at which students progressed—some would remain stuck at a particular level for years), attainment of a modern-day fine art degree merely depended on finishing course requirements, with more emphasis on theoretical discussion than building skills. Some atelier-style classes where students worked faithfully from the model remained, but the comprehensive instruction in all aspects of representation that was once commonplace now had to be gathered piecemeal by a motivated student. To this day, many artists with postgraduate degrees are oddly uncomfortable with the most elementary aspects of drawing and painting. Every cultural shift, however, has its losses and gains—perhaps it is that same dilettantish college training which has led to the multimedia experiments and diverse use of materials that have characterized some of the most interesting work of the last fifty years.

Artists who attempted to continue in the older traditions often took on the role of the “crank”, contemptuous of—and ridiculed by—their contemporaries. Critics such as Clement Greenberg infamously declared representational art obsolete, but the rhetoric from representational artists has been equally inflammatory. Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum contended that traditional painters such as himself were persecuted like Jews during the Holocaust; he devised a convoluted doctrine in which *Kitsch*, a category he had sometimes been assigned to by critics, was embraced as superior to *Art*, which had become hopelessly effete and arcane.⁶⁶ Such maudlin claims of victimization seem a bit overstated coming from an artist whose work hangs in the Metropolitan Museum and typically sells for six figures. A recent internet-based organization called the Art Renewal Center champions “Classical Realism” (one of the unfortunate consequences of this conflict has been the tangling of all threads of art history before the modern era) and posts volatile essays against modern art. Today, there are a number of independent ateliers that attempt to recreate the teaching methods of the academies; these

schools exist in a kind of anachronistic bubble, disregarding the last hundred-odd years of art history.

This modern polarization in the instruction of visual arts is striking. In other disciplines—such as music, dance, and theatre—there was a practice of cultural accrual, rather than displacement. Thus, a young musician who wanted to play the exact same repertoire as his nineteenth-century predecessors had a respected, well-preserved institution in which to learn, just as one who wanted to study the newest innovations of the avant-garde also had an excellent place to go—often under the same roof. Fortunately, there seems to some shifting of the winds in visual art schools. The New York Academy of Art, an MFA school that was founded in 1982, focuses on figurative art instruction and has an eclectic faculty that includes contemporary art world favorites such as Eric Fischl and traditional realists such as Steven Assael. Andy Warhol, who stated that he wished he had received better instruction as a student, was an early patron of the school. Additionally, recent developments in media technology have made it necessary for even the most elite fine art programs to require mundane technical training in their curriculums; as a result, some of the stark divisions between commercial and fine art of earlier modern teaching are blurring. Perhaps this, in addition to the rich diversity of the contemporary art scene and the new interest in previously denigrated artists, will lead to a more balanced approach to the education of artists in the years ahead.

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