

The Art That Speaks to Us

We connect with art that speaks to us and despite the economy, thoughtful, well-executed art still appeals to our souls and our pocket books. In a recent editorial in *The New York Times*, Denis Dutton, author of *The Art Instinct*, asked, "Has conceptual art jumped the Shark Tank?" He used this play on the phrase commonly used to describe a declining cultural phenomenon to write about how people are more inclined to viscerally respond to craftsmanship than concept. He explained, "The appreciation of contemporary conceptual art... depends not on immediately recognizable skill, but on how the work is situated in today's intellectual zeitgeist." When "shocking" artwork loses the ability to toy with emotions and lacks the craftsmanship to hold its own, what is left to appeal to us?

That's one of the many reasons the Portrait Society is proud to announce Eric Widing as our keynote speaker at The Art of the Portrait Conference 2010. For over a decade, Eric has served as the Head of Christie's American Art Department. During his tenure, Christie's auction results have increased by an average of 25% a year. Before joining Christie's staff, Mr. Widing was a fine art dealer, most recently as co-owner of Widing & Peck Fine Art, Inc., an American Art gallery in New York City.

Under Eric Widing's direction, Christie's facilitated the sale of *The Gross Clinic*, a Thomas Eakins' masterpiece, to new joint-owners, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphians rallied to keep the American masterwork in the city of its origin, raising \$68 million within one month, giving *The Gross Clinic* the distinction of bringing the highest price ever achieved for an American work of art created prior to World War II.

American Realism has a legacy of raising public awareness, reflecting social issues and political movements, holding a mirror to eyes of the national public, celebrating the successes and revealing plights of the American people. Certainly, American Realists' closeness to their subject matter brings out an indefinable emotional quality in their work, but it is technical proficiency that allowed artists to execute works that cause us to stop and stare in wonder even today.

Portraits by John Singleton Copley, Gilbert Stuart and the Peales in the Eastern part of the country and the native American and cowboy portraits of Catlin, Remington, Russel and Bingham

in the West captured the diversity of the early United States. The austere work of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins laid foundations for later movements and offered new perspectives on evolving American post-Civil War society, as did the Tonalists, James McNeill Whistler and George Inness. The cosmopolitan, globe-trotting *joie de vivre* of many American artists, including Frank W. Benson, Childe Hassam, William Merritt Chase, Mary Cassatt, Lila Cabbott Perry, Cecilia Beaux and John Singer Sargent created a distinctive American Impressionism.

Following WWI, many American artists reacted to European abstraction and cubist influences in the Armory Show, inciting a major shift toward a distinctly American flavor of Realism embodied most conspicuously in the art of the Ashcan School. Robert Henri and his student, George Bellows, celebrated the brutality of urban life in vibrant scenes, while another student, Edward Hopper chose to portray urbanity with solitary figures in austere, pensive environments. Thomas Hart Benton, an American Scene Painter, brought life to rural, Depression Era culture in a way technically similar to, but more fanciful than the Ashcan school's.

As public perception shifted in the early twentieth century, constantly seeking the newest thing, emphasis on concept began to supercede emphasis on craft. Duchamp's *Fountain* broke tradition by poking fun at the art establishment and challenged viewers to question the importance of craft versus concept. For several decades, concept won.

People are beginning to ask again, "What is 'good' art?" and "Why does art speak to us?" Morley Safer, CBS correspondent and dedicated artist, who gave the keynote speech to Portrait Society members in 2001, called out conceptual art with a 60 minute segment entitled "Yes, But is it Art?"

Craftsmanship requires a commitment to quality instruction and a great deal of practice. Conceptual artist, Damien Hirst, who until now has received unprecedented wealth and acclaim is taking from art critics who have been his cheerleaders in the past. They are complaining about his *No Love Lost* collection currently exhibiting at the Wallace in London. Interestingly, *No Love Lost* is billed as one of the first collections Hirst has painted entirely himself by hand. From critics who half-heartedly claim that Hirst "shows potential" to those decrying



Ann Manry Kenyon captivated the audience with her *alla prima* technique.



On Saturday students filled two studios to study with Ann Manry Kenyon and Edward Jonas.



Michael Shane Neal demonstrates his painting technique.



Dawn Whitelaw and Michael Shane Neal provided individual instruction at the Saturday workshop at Lipscomb University.



Edward Hopper (1882-1967, American), *Pennsylvania Coal Town, 1947*, oil on canvas, 28 x 40" (71 x 101cm)



Winslow Homer (1836-1910, American) *Snap the Whip, 1872*, oil on canvas, 22 x 36" (56 x 92cm)



In 2002, Nelson Shanks opened the doors of Studio Incamminati, his atelier in Philadelphia, PA, USA., providing quality, traditional instruction in 2D and 3D Realist art.



Stephen Early *Sliver of Hope*, oil on linen, 27 x 11" (68 x 28cm)

Artwork by Studio Incamminati Teaching Fellow Stephen Early.

Steve has served as principal instructor in Nelson Shanks' Intensive and Advanced Painting Workshops at Studio Incamminati; Armory Arts Center Workshops in West Palm Beach, FL; the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Workshop, and the New York Academy of Fine Arts Workshop.



Thomas Eakins, American, 1844 - 1916 *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic), 1875*, oil on canvas, 8 x 6' (243 x 198cm)

his art for being amateurish and derivative, countless reviewers have expressed their disappointment in the technical weakness of the collection. It seemed that the already-been-done subject matter failed to ply viewers' emotions, and the craftsmanship left many wanting.

It seems that Dutton may be correct in his assertion that technical aptitude does count for something, and the winds are changing. He joked, "Somewhere out there in collectorland is the unlucky guy who will be the last one holding the vacuum cleaner, and wondering why."

Many of today's artists have sought intensive classical art training and are creating exquisite Realist works with a contemporary flair. To insure that their practices and techniques will not be lost, they are opening ateliers and teaching in small, traditional, workshop-style settings. Atelier-style instruction had all but died out in America in the mid-twentieth century. University art departments eclipsed ateliers and formal academies as centers of art instruction, but, now, dozens of ateliers have begun to spring up across the USA and in Europe. Richard Lack's Atelier Lack was an early influence. Jacob Collins's Water Street Atelier and Nelson Shanks's Studio Incamminati are exceptional examples among a number of excellent academies which have been instrumental in training the growing population of young artists who are now teaching and opening ateliers of their own.

Other educational organizations and programs have emerged, encouraging the revival of well-rounded, in-depth, quality instruction. The Portrait Society hosts *The Art of the Portrait Conference* annually, among many other programs. Registration is still open for *The Art of the Portrait Conference 2010* this coming spring in Washington, D.C. We offer attendees ample opportunities to attend

demonstrations, lectures, workshops and portfolio critiques; discuss art materials with the manufacturers in person; visit area museums and share their love of art with a faculty comprised of top names in the field today. You can find out more and register online at www.portraitsociety.com.

The Portrait Society is dedicated to hands-on instruction and hosts annual Portrait Academies each fall. Last month I drove up to Nashville to attend what turned out to be the Portrait Society's 25th regional Portrait Academy. It was conducted by Michael Shane Neal and Dawn Whitelaw. And it had been sold out for two months. Artists drove and flew in from all over the country.

On Friday evening Shane painted an extraordinary demonstration portrait of David Ewing, a distinguished lawyer whose family has lived in Nashville for nine generations. Ewing's wife, Alice Randall, wrote the famous parody of *Gone with the Wind* entitled *Wind Done Gone*.

The workshop on Saturday displayed the outstanding professionalism of both Neal and Whitelaw when the University's power failed in the early afternoon. Shane and Dawn effortlessly transferred the workshop outside and improvised an amazing program. Dawn painted a delightful quick demonstration with an impromptu lesson about color mixing. Shane painted super-sized demonstrations of facial features which are very helpful to portrait artists. The revised program yielded a bonanza of additional information for everyone there, including me.

The Portrait Society also held an Academy in Jacksonville, Florida with Ann Manry Kenyon and Edward Jonas. Over 100 artists gathered together at the University of North Florida to watch Ann demonstrate her approach to the portrait. An integral part of these programs is the scholarships that are provided to area high school and university students. Over 50 students attended on Friday evening. Then, on Saturday Edward Jonas joined Ann for a day of individual instruction.

Artists working today can achieve great heights by honing their skills and minds, by creating artworks of technical virtuosity, and by sharing that knowledge with other artists. I hope you and the many other artists practicing today will continue striving to produce art that speaks to our minds and our souls.

Gordon Wetmore
Chairman,
Portrait Society of America

