



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer
Portrait artist Nelson Shanks paints Robin Frey in front of students at his Studio Incamminati north of Center City. "What we really teach is how to see the world," one instructor said.



Phila. art studio teaches Old World technique

By Art Carey
Inquirer Staff Writer

The assignment was to render on paper a still-life assemblage, but what Alisyn Kuntz had drawn just didn't match what was before her eyes.

Especially challenging was the lip of the overturned jar, which was tilted in such a way that the angled light was amplifying the usual distortions of perspective.

"This is very humiliating because I thought I knew how to draw before I came here," said Kuntz, 46, a graphic designer and freelance artist from Plymouth Meeting. Instructor Kerry Dunn, a lanky lad with a diplomatic manner, complimented her progress, then offered a suggestion. "Why don't you first create the proportions of the rim," he said, "then map out how the light falls?"

The lesson was not lost on Kuntz.

"This place is all about competence," she said. "In order to be competent, observation is key, and to observe properly you have to step back."

Kuntz is one of a dozen first-year students at Studio Incamminati, an old-fashioned art school that teaches people how to really draw and paint so they can really earn a living as artists. The school was founded in 2002 by renowned realist painter Nelson Shanks and his wife, Leona.

Shanks, 70, who lives and paints on an estate overlooking the Delaware River in Bucks County, has earned international acclaim for his sublime ability to capture the likeness and soul of his subjects in portraits that are penetrating, vivid and luminous.

Among his notable commissions: former President Bill Clinton; Diana, princess of Wales; and Pope John Paul II.

"This is one of the best places you can learn to draw and paint with color," said Jay Pennie, the school's director.

"We respect Nelson's color palette, and it's reflected in what we do here. While we certainly teach technique, what we really teach is how to see the world."

Incamminati means "those who are progressing." The school, which occupies parts of two floors in an old factory at 12th and Cal-lowhill Streets in Philadelphia, is modeled after a classical realist atelier, a workshop where young artists, through close collaboration and diligent application, learn skills from a master and his trained disciples.

“This is a very Old World way of studying,” instructor Natalie Italiano said. “Everybody here works all day long from models. It’s the best training for this you can find. People come here who have studied art in college for four years and can’t paint. This is like studying classical music. We’re doing the equivalent in painting.”

The studio program is four years. The school year begins in September and ends in June. The demands are high, and students work hard, drawing and painting still lifes and figures from live models from 9 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. five days a week. Many students toil into the night and on weekends.



KEVIN COOK / Staff Photographer)

Mary Lou Claire paints a lemon at Studio Incamminati. Students in the four-year program work 9 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. five days a week.

“It’s just like building a house,” said Italiano. “There’s a real logic to it. You put up the studs first before you put up the shutters.” Level 4 students work closely with a faculty member they choose as a mentor and are awarded studio space (the studios, on the building’s north side, are bathed in the cool, constant light artists prefer).

By design, Studio Incamminati is small. There are 38 full-time students, ages 17 to 70, and a faculty of six fellows and three guest instructors, all of whom have studied under Shanks and are steeped in his methods and approach.

Though Shanks doesn’t teach at the studio, he sets policy and curriculum and chooses and evaluates the teachers, who are appointed annually. He also critiques work by the students, gives demonstrations, and once a month invites them to Chelwood, his estate and studio, to view his work and talk about art.

Fund-raising is a constant obligation. The school has no endowment and depends on contributions. The \$8,000 annual tuition covers only a quarter of Studio Incamminati’s expenses, school administrators said.

Leona Shanks, who teaches at the school, is an accomplished artist herself. Said director of education Andy Yannelli: “She’s the heart and soul of the school.”

Though Nelson Shanks is not a daily presence, his spirit is pervasive. “We feel him here every day in what’s on the walls, and it comes through in the instructors who have been taught by him,” Rappisi said. “It’s something you can’t get anyplace else.”

Shanks has been teaching at various places for nearly as long as he has been an artist.

“The vast majority of art schools are turning out taxi drivers and waiters, would-be artists who make an unsellable product because it’s mundane, not terribly competent, and does little to excite the public,” Shanks said.

Studio Incamminati’s purpose is to “produce great competence and the great painters of the next generation,” he declared, by “bringing back the skill of seeing and the skill of craftsmanship.”

The school’s dedication to promoting artistic competence is not limited to its full-time students. It also offers workshops and programs to about 250 part-time students, including art educators in city public and parochial schools. Through its emerging-artists program, the studio helps high school students build their portfolios, enhancing their chances of admission to art school and college.

Espey, who attended an art academy in San Francisco where he spent no more than 40 minutes a week drawing, said he was pleased with his experience at Studio Incamminati. The training, he said, is substantial, “a filet mignon instead of cotton candy.” He knows that when he completes the program in four years he, like all the other students, will receive no diploma or degree. Instead, he’ll have gained something more valuable: skill and competence.

“I’ll have something I can draw on,” he said. “It’s the difference between throwing paint on canvas without thought and having a trained eye and hand so I can perceive and translate beauty.”

To learn more about Studio Incamminati, visit www.studioincamminati.org or call 215-592-7910. Contact staff writer Art Carey at 610-696-3249 or acarey@phillynews.com.