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FINE ART CONNOISSEUR

OCTOBER 2022

 **STREAMLINE**
PUBLISHING, INC.

A NEW DAY AT OLD LYME



Co-artistic directors Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide; photo: Amaya Gurpide

There's something fresh in the air in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and it isn't just the approach of cooler autumn weather. Rather, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts has opened a new chapter in its teaching of time-tested skills that will inspire and equip the next generation of artists — an exciting prospect for *Fine Art Connoisseur* and our entire field. I personally am gratified by this development because I have been visiting and observing the Lyme Academy regularly since 2004.

Today its Core Program serves students aged 18 and older; admission is highly competitive because each year's cohort is small and the full-time curriculum is rigorous, requiring a commitment of two years, with an option to stay on one or two more. Year 1 concentrates on drawing and Year 2 on painting; starting in September 2023, sculpture will be the focus of a separate full-time program.



JORDAN SOKOL (b. 1979), *Portrait of Edmond Rochat*, 2016, oil on panel, 13 x 12 in., collection of the New Salem Museum and Academy of Fine Art, Massachusetts

The entire program is essentially a progression of skill-building assignments, with each exercise designed to introduce new concepts and complexities. Among the many challenges to be mastered are proportions,



AMAYA GURPIDE (b. 1974), *Black Sea*, 2018, drawing in mixed media, 20 x 17 2/5 in., private collection

interaction between light and form, value relationships, structure, color theory, color mixing, and anatomy. The curriculum emphasizes the figure, though there are also units on portraiture, landscape, and still life. Over time, each student develops not only technical facility and the confidence that comes with it, but also a keener sense of visual literacy and skills in observation, critical thinking, and problem solving.

All of this mirrors the foundational practices that were learned and executed by the Renaissance and 19th-century masters we admire today in museums and art history lectures throughout the Western world. Their European academies (most famously Paris's École des Beaux-Arts) looked back to principles exemplified in the art of classical Greece and Rome, yet inevitably they infused their teaching with “modern” ideas (for example,

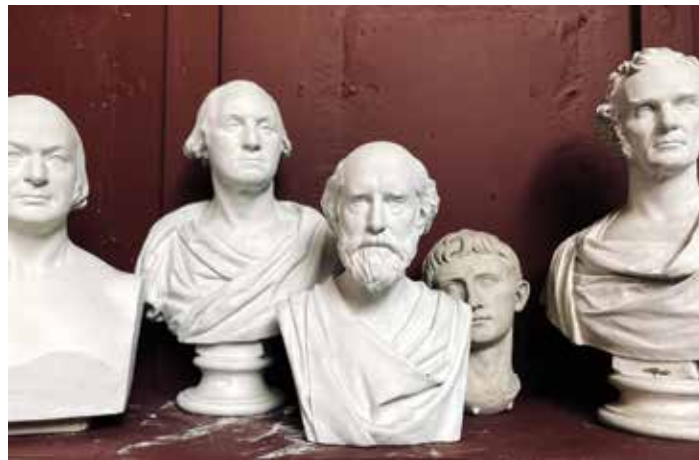


The centerpiece of the main entrance is a large original drawing by George B. Bridgman (1864–1943), who taught anatomy at the Art Students League of New York for decades; photo: Jordan Sokol

mid-19th-century naturalism). Today, therefore, we would never confuse a study drawn at the École in 1800 with one from 1900; artists always absorb something of their own times, and that is just as our Renaissance fore-runners would have wanted it.

At Old Lyme, a turning point came in 2020 when the board of trustees hired co-artistic directors Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gurpide, who happen to be married but have successfully conducted separate careers as exhibiting artists. Both are also experienced instructors who together headed the New Jersey branch of the Florence Academy of Art from 2014 through 2020, and they still serve on the adjunct faculty at the New York Academy of Art. This month they are busy welcoming Lyme's new cohort of first-year Core Program students and welcoming back the second-year students. They are aided in this effort by a talented faculty including Edmond Rochat (Sokol's portrait of him appears on the cover of this magazine and also on page 107), Hollis Dunlap, Rick Lacey, the student instructors AnneMarie Johnson, Thomas LaPine, and Mina Mohtasham, and a range of guest instructors and lecturers.

There is another dimension to Lyme's approach that powerfully distinguishes it from comparable institutions around the country. Sokol explains, "When Amaya and I reimaged Lyme's program, we did not want to create just another atelier. Rather, we sought a unique path that embraces the past while acknowledging the present and looking to the future. This challenge raised important questions in terms of what we are appropriating in the education we provide, and how we guide the conversation around what we're doing."



A display of plaster casts from the Slater Memorial Museum's recent donation; photo: Jordan Sokol



Co-artistic director Amaya Gurpide discusses portrait drawing with Core students; photo: Andrew Paez

He continues, "Hiring the art historian Emily M. Weeks has been integral to our goal of providing students with a broad context around the often fraught tradition that they are a part of, and helping them think critically about what they're doing. We believe that her curriculum sets us apart from other ateliers and helps us fulfill our mission of providing traditional skill with contemporary discourse."

I have known Emily Weeks since 2003, when she was earning her Ph.D. at Yale, and, like Sokol, I am impressed by her seminar-style curriculum for *Thinking Critically about Art*. Weeks describes it as "both a deep dive into, and a wide-ranging mapping of, historical and contemporary theories, philosophies, critical discourses, and debates." Her topics include aesthetics and the history of art history (which has been, like anything else, shaped by who holds the microphone), with appropriate emphasis on the 19th century — the academies' "golden age." Yet Weeks knows that students must also be prepared to talk about their own art in the context of their times; thus she is addressing "political, economic, and ethical issues that art has encountered through time," as well as interdisciplinary approaches touching upon post-colonialism and racial diversity.

Let's be frank. Cutting-edge art schools raise these matters all the time (often at the expense of technical competence), but most ateliers



A selection of the Karlheinz Kronberger sculpture collection, photo: Patrick Derosier

ignore them and look back toward the glory days of academic art. That won't work any longer, so I myself would love to visit Lyme next spring when Weeks addresses such up-to-the-minute topics as "Money, Audience, and Free Will" or "Can Art Truly 'Mean' Globally?" Her talks are bolstered by a substantial art reference library on the academy's campus, as well as by group visits to museums and galleries located in easy striking distance.

QUITE A HISTORY

All of this should be considered in the context of Lyme's institutional history. It was founded in 1976 — a moment when academic principles had fallen out of favor — by the sculptor Elisabeth Gordon Chandler (1913–2006), who lived in the area. Her creation became remarkably successful in the 1980s because it was one of very few such institutions in the U.S. In the early 1990s, the board's decision to seek accreditation as a college seemed a natural evolution, and in 1995 they began granting Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees. Alas, the state-imposed requirements of this change in academic status, and the extra infrastructure it necessarily demanded, impeded the academy's previous focus on fostering skills. The dream of running an art college proved unsustainable, so, in 2018, 12 years after Chandler passed away, Lyme became an academy again. Sokol and Gulpide were hired in 2020, and



Core student Thomas LaPine develops his Long Pose drawing; photo: Amaya Gulpide

Lyme's multi-year pause ended in autumn 2021 when the first cohort of Core Program students arrived, masked and socially distanced.

This institutional story reveals something profound about art in America today. Despite our society's "anything can be art"



Main entrance to the studio buildings; photo: Kayla Lilli



The quintessentially New England-style Sill House (1817), now used for administration and exhibiting, is the first building arriving visitors see; photo: Kayla Lilli

zeitgeist, there are thousands of young people out there hungering for rigorous training, who know they cannot express all they have to “say” without the tools needed to do so. From a distance, nothing could be drearier than a room crowded with students’ plaster sculptures depicting the same model — until we look closely at how each artist has gone about solving the problems of making that figure come alive. With the right academic training, each individual is equipped not to join a herd, but to run alone. Once gained, these baseline skills

can be applied in almost any area of artmaking, and indeed not every Lyme student will necessarily pursue a career in “fine” art. Many other fields (gaming, animation, Hollywood) crave graduates possessing skills like these.

Lyme’s recent pivot also reflects its ideal mix of volunteer and professional leadership. Old Lyme resident Michael Duffy chairs the board of trustees, which in 2019 hired executive director Mora Rowe. The board and senior staff collaborate closely on fundraising, and this spring they celebrated a transformative \$1 million donation from a longstanding benefactor (and trustee emerita), Charlotte Colby Danly. Her generous gift has endowed the academy’s chair in sculpture and re-established the program in figurative sculpture — highly appropriate because she herself studied under Elisabeth Chandler and her husband, the sculptor Laci de Gerenday.



Natural north light illuminates the sculpture studio named for founder Elisabeth Gordon Chandler; photo: Jordan Sokol

“The time I spent with the founders in the sculpture program was transformative for me, personally and creatively,” Danly recalls. Jordan Sokol is particularly pleased by this development, noting that “Sculpture is a part of Lyme Academy’s DNA; our campus was literally built by and for it.” He adds that it was Danly, back in 2001, who established the academy’s first endowed post, the Deane G. Keller chair in classical drawing and figurative art, which currently supports Sokol and Gurpide.

I smiled when Sokol told me this, as I met Deane G. Keller (1940–2005) in 2004 as he entered his 25th year teaching life drawing and anatomy at Lyme. I still treasure his 2004 letter to me, noting that his father and teacher (the Yale professor Prof. Deane Keller Sr.) had kept in their family home an anatomical sketch made in 1922 by the great instructor George B. Bridgman, and that his maternal grandmother had studied with the even greater educator Howard Pyle in the 1890s. (On December 2, Deane’s son, Bill, will visit Lyme to discuss his father’s art and life.)

Atelier folks love to trace such instructional genealogies, and Lyme’s is impeccable. Until this article began cooking, I did not realize that the legendary painter Robert Brackman (1898–1980), freshly retired from the Art Students League of New York, was Elisabeth Chandler’s pick to lead her new faculty. Nor had I focused on the fact that

patron Chauncey Stillman (1907–1989) — who commissioned the Florentine master Pietro Annigoni to decorate his garden room in Amenia, New York — endowed the 1,000-square-foot gallery where Lyme now presents its temporary exhibitions.

Fortunately, goodwill toward the Lyme Academy reverberates throughout its network of alumni and admirers nationwide. In 2019, thanks to an introduction from Emily Weeks, I visited the German-born, Philadelphia-based collector Karlheinz Kronberger and explored with him his extraordinary 19th- and early 20th-century French bronze sculptures. Sadly, he passed away within a year, but now more than 150 of his treasures have been gifted to the academy so that students can learn from them close-up, in perpetuity. Similarly, leaders of the Slater Memorial Museum (Norwich, Connecticut), a remarkable institution filled with casts of historical sculpture, think so highly of Lyme that they have donated an array of top examples for study purposes.

IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Today, America is fortunate to have an atelier of figurative art in almost every large town and city. The Lyme Academy is in an especially convenient location, 34 miles east of New Haven and 125 miles from both New York City and Boston. It is situated on four acres in the historic district of Old Lyme, a charming town of 7,500 residents where the Connecticut River flows into Long Island Sound.

Culturally speaking, this is no backwater; in 1903, the New York painter-teacher Frank DuMond praised the area’s topography, “which ranges from the low land of estuaries and salt-meadows to the rugged, romantic beauty



Inside de Gerenday's Fine Art Materials and Curiosities, photo: Caryn B. Davis

of rolling glacial hills." Four years earlier, the tonalist Henry Ward Ranger had sought to establish here the U.S. version of France's Barbizon art colony, but it was the arrival of Childe Hassam and other impressionists around 1903 that soon made it the "American Giverny."

Right into the Great Depression, Old Lyme's epicenter was the boardinghouse operated by Miss Florence Griswold (1850–1937), which has been restored as part of what is now the Florence Griswold Museum to better present the delightful decorations left by more than 200 grateful artist-lodgers. The museum's modern building nearby contains masterworks by such contemporaries as Ernest Lawson, Willard Metcalf, J.H. Twachtman, and both Robert and Bessie Potter Vonnob. Also within walking distance of the academy is the Lyme Art Association, founded by the colony's artists to display and sell their art. Today locals sustain this tradition through exhibitions and competitions in the association's handsome 1921 gallery.

This atmosphere of art appreciation has always encouraged the academy to connect with its neighbors up and down the Connecticut shore, and that community engagement remains strong. Any adult can register to take a studio class, and high school students can attend free open sessions in drawing or printmaking. The Studio Immersion Program is a one-year, full-time course with no competitive application requirement; participants who undertake all assigned exercises receive a certificate of completion at the conclusion, an outcome ideal for gap-year students intent on building their portfolios. Lyme's Young Masters After-school Program offers students aged 12–18 up to four hours per week of one-on-one instruction; the first year focuses on drawing and the second on painting or sculpture, all led by Rick Lacey, who graduated from the academy in 2011 and has spent most of his life in the Lyme area.

Workshops are another feature of the academy's life. In October comes *Painting Best Practices*, offered by George O'Hanlon and Tatiana

Zaytseva of Natural Pigments, and in November *Strategic Approaches to Figure Drawing* with the renowned artist Michael Grimaldi. (On October 11, he will be at Lyme to discuss the literary, cinematic, and historical influences that inspired his recent multimedia monochromes.)

One need not be an artist to visit the campus. Locals are already stopping by the academy's new shop, de Gerenday's Fine Art Materials and Curiosities, which is modeled after such charmingly photogenic forerunners as Sennelier in Paris. Executive director Mora Rowe has collaborated with the faculty and deployed her background in merchandising to curate the boutique's offerings, which include not only quality art supplies and books, but also giftable objects like taxidermy, architectural salvage, tapestries, and plaster casts.

Beyond contributing to the academy's bottom line, all these programs and services offer a bigger benefit. By fully engaging with its neighbors, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts intends to flourish in this new chapter of its life, to win over local people's minds and also their hearts. Everyone at *Fine Art Connoisseur* wishes the academy well and looks forward to seeing what happens there next. ●

Information: lymeacademy.edu

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.