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by Emily M. Weeks

*S*ecreted away in the picturesque town of Old Lyme, Connecticut, a small group of acclaimed artists and Ivy-league scholars have gathered. They have been hand-selected from across the globe, their credentials among the most impressive in their respective fields. Their students have been carefully chosen; the rigor of the studio curriculum this esteemed group of instructors has designed requires a level of dedication that only the most serious applicants possess. Upon arrival, the students work tirelessly, driven by passion and an awareness that the quality and comprehensiveness of the education they receive can-

not be repeated or matched. Twelve hours a day in the studio is not enough; they stay longer, honing their craft. Their teachers, in drawing, painting, sculpture, anatomy, and art history, fill their heads and guide their hands with everything they know. They impart to them the knowledge they have accumulated over decades, gathered from experience and from revered instructors whose lineage can be traced back to the hallowed halls of the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, and who have allowed them to achieve their own success. And now their measure of success is to ensure that this next generation thrives. In this, they are a continuation of the art colony that has been active at this site for over a

hundred years, fostering an environment of camaraderie and creativity along its storied river shores. But they are also something new. They are the leaders of a Renaissance in Old Lyme. They are, with their students, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts.

Founded by the sculptor Elisabeth Gordon Chandler in 1976, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts began with a single, bold idea—to offer a traditional education in figurative and representational art at a time when academic principles had fallen out of favor. Intense observation and a structured, sequential approach to drawing, painting, and sculpture would provide the foundation on which confidence, creativity, and self-expression were built. Classes would be



Lyme Academy of Fine Arts is located at 84 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, Connecticut, 06371, 860-434-5232, www.lymeacademy.edu. For more information see also, [Facebook.com/LymeAcademyFineArts](https://www.facebook.com/LymeAcademyFineArts) and Instagram @lymeacademy.

LEFT: *Sill House*: Designed by Samuel Belcher, the John Sill House's (1817) Federalist-style facade, with its symmetry, classical detail, and center hall plan, reflects the prevailing trends in American architecture of this period.

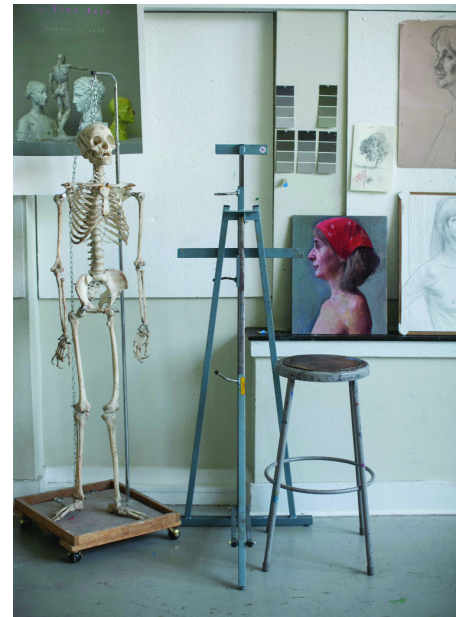
taught in the picturesque coastal town of Old Lyme, Connecticut, a site of great art historical significance, and Elisabeth's beloved home.

A faculty of recognized artists worked to execute Elisabeth's plan, including, after 1979, Elisabeth's husband and fellow sculptor Laci de Gerenday. Robert Brackman, newly retired from teaching at the Art Students League in New York and a giant in his field, was among the Academy's earliest and most revered teachers; he was followed by Deane G. Keller, whose lessons in drawing and painting had a profound impact on the Academy's students for more



than twenty-five years.

As the quality of the Academy's curriculum became more widely known, enrollment began to climb. By the 1980s, students were applying to study at the Academy from across the United States. The single sky-lit studio rented from the neighboring Lyme Art Association soon be-



came too small; this led to the purchase and renovation of the historic John Sill House in 1986, which stands at the center of the Academy's campus to this day. As the Academy continued to grow—north-lit studios, an art gallery, and a substantial student library were added on four acres of land in the town's historic district—Elisabeth's vi-



ABOVE AND LEFT: *Stobart Studio*: A row of north-light windows and barn doors in this studio's design make clear the matchless beauty of the working environment.

sion seemed a model of grass-roots success.

The decision to seek accreditation as a college in the early 1990s was felt a natural evolution, and in 1995 the Academy began granting Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees. But the requirements of this new role, and the infrastructure that it demanded, impeded

the Academy's historic focus on the fostering of students' skills. This proved unsustainable, and the sacrifice too great. In 2018, twelve years after Elisabeth had passed, the Academy returned to her original mission, reclaiming its status as an Academy rather than a college, and operat-

ing better for the pause. No longer constrained by the requirements that came with a change in academic status, the Academy was free to return its focus to its program and to the students that it served. In 2021, with fresh leadership at its helm, including Michael Duffy as Board Chair, Mora Rowe as Executive Director, and, as Co-Artistic Directors, the internationally-acclaimed artists Jordan Sokol and Amaya Gulpide, the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts reopened its doors and began welcoming a new generation of students committed to the figurative and representational arts.

Today, the Lyme Academy is again the site of a thriving school, continuing the tradition of artistic camaraderie, creativity, and innovation that has been integral to the site for more than one hundred years. Miss Florence Griswold's famous boarding house for artists, called the "home of American Impressionism" since Childe Hassam's ar-



rival there in 1904, is located just a few steps down the street. It shares, in fact, a builder and a date with the Academy's John Sill House—Samuel Belcher and 1817. The natural and architectural beauty of the Academy's campus reflects an appreciation of its history, but the needs of the modern working artist are met as well: 10,000 square feet of north-light studios, individually designed for drawing, painting, sculpture, casting, and print-making, a designated museum-quality art gallery with a soaring ceiling and over 1000 square feet of exhibition space, a curated 15,000-volume fine arts library, a café, and an art store inspired by the legendary purveyors of supplies in France and England (and fittingly called *de Gerenday's*), are today among its notable features, with additional student and public resources in the planning.

For the artist, this is a haven. The 1150-square-foot north-light printmaking studio is equipped with four presses, including a Charles Brand etching press. Relief printing (woodcut and linocut), drypoint, collograph, monotype/monoprint, and intaglio are all possible in the state-of-the-art space. The drawing, paint-



ing, and sculpting studios are among the most exceptional working spaces of their kind, in part, no doubt, because they were built by artists for the artists they would teach. Elisabeth Chandler's belief that "painters need to take sculpture and sculptors need to paint," drives the cross-disciplinary nature of the campus, with each

medium's unique practical and theoretical contributions to a well-rounded education in the arts being recognized and accommodated. The soaring skylit ceiling of the Southwick-Keller Studio, one of several communal studios on the campus, brings abundant light into an expansive room filled with imported plaster casts and



ABOVE: *Chandler Studio*. The dramatic skylights, north-light windows, and 18-foot ceilings of the Academy's principal art studios were the vision of Elisabeth Gordon Chandler, the founder of the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts and the artist for whom this studio was named. The Chandler Studio is the largest single studio on the campus, and, with its 1600-square-foot skylit interior, among the most impressive.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Stobart Studio*.



friezes—a gallery of evocatively-lit life-size casts in fact precedes its entrance, along with original drawings by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Academy artists from around the world. The Academy's weekly Histories of Art class and the Friday night

lecture series also take place in this spacious yet welcoming locale.

Southwick-Keller sits just above the Kriebler Fine Arts Library, named for the same philanthropic family that supported the addition of the Kriebler Gallery to the

nearby Florence Griswold Museum. Over 15,000 curated volumes of fine arts books offer students the opportunity to learn about the history and techniques of their craft, as well as to find inspiration or a new muse in an artist's monograph. The garden patio and many-windowed walls of the Library bring the natural beauty of the campus in, allowing students to experience the same sense of immateriality that they do in the studios, which are also awash in Old Lyme's special light.

The largest communal studio is Chandler, named, of course, for Elisabeth and in



honor of her vision. An eighteen-foot skylit ceiling covers a 1600-square-foot interior, which is bathed in that precious northern light that has attracted a steady stream of artists for a century and more.

Weir Studio, dedicated to the American Impressionist artist Julian Alden Weir and the Weir family, members of whom later lived in Old Lyme, impresses with its sloping window, a unique feature on the campus. The row of north-light windows and barn doors that feature in Stobart Studio's design are part of over 1000 square feet of illuminated space. Named for the artist and Academy patron John Stobart, it is another reminder of the lineage of the Lyme Academy, its supporters and its mentors, and the gratitude that it has for each of them.

But the Lyme Academy is more than a well-equipped site to come and draw and paint and sculpt. Its academics are impressive, too. Students at the Academy commit to a rigorous two-year foundational Core Program that is both grounded in tradition and progressive in its vision.



During their first year, and under the instruction of Co-Artistic Director and Director of Drawing Gurpide, students focus on historical approaches to the development of critical observational skills and technical facility. Inside custom open and

semi-private studios, Academy students work from direct observation of plaster casts and live models, utilizing a sequential, systematic progression, first taught in the Renaissance academies of Europe and, later, in the nineteenth century, at Paris's



ABOVE: *Griswold Printmaking Studio*. The 1150-square-foot, north-light printmaking studio is equipped with four presses, including a Charles Brand etching press.

FAR LEFT: *Kriebel Fine Arts Library*. The Library offers our students the opportunity to learn about the history and techniques of their craft.

munity support.

The curriculum in the Core Program is comprehensive and intense: Classes are conducted five days a week, from nine a.m. until nine p.m., with weekly supplementary instruction in anatomy, sculpture, and the histories of art. The storied geography of the Academy is not neglected in this program: landscape, still life, and dedicated explorations of the properties of natural light are part of every term, ensuring that each student understands the historical continuum of which they and the Lyme Academy are a part. In addition to these lectures, students at the Academy have the opportunity to visit regional museums and galleries, going behind the scenes of renowned collections and enjoying private tours. The faculty that drives this broad-minded edu-

École des Beaux-Arts. In year two, with Deane Keller Chair Jordan Sokol, these methodologies are applied to painting, through increasingly challenging studio work with the cast and in the model room.

Students who choose to pursue their studies at the Academy past the second year may stay for a third and fourth year of advanced study, honing their skills, devel-

oping a unique visual vocabulary that represents their own artistic intentions, and receiving the individualized support and education that will prepare them for the demands of today's art world. The intimate class sizes that the Academy has designed for each year of the program allow for in-studio demonstrations and individualized critiques, as well as a sense of com-



RIGHT: *Weir Studio*. Dedicated to the American Impressionist artist Julian Alden Weir and the Weir family, the studio provides students with a space as functional as it is inspiring.

cation is small in size but not ambition or repute: these are world-class professional artists and scholars, whose areas of expertise dovetail with the Academy's conviction in the relevance of representational art and the academy model today.

Integrated into this instructional framework is the progressive philosophy of the Lyme Academy and its commitment to the community that has supported it through its evolutions. The Academy offers a part-and full-time Continuing Education curriculum, Youth Programs and Workshops for pre-college (ages fourteen to eighteen) and middle school (ages eleven to thirteen) artists, as well as a one-year Requisite (Portfolio Prep) Program, to help artists prepare for the demands and expectations of the commercial art world. Open Figure Drawing classes are held three days a week, as well, for aspiring artists of all levels to work from a live model in a structured studio environment. The Academy's team of accomplished and dedicated instructors wants no one to feel as though the arts are out of reach.

In addition to these studio and student offerings, a dynamic series of public lectures



by leading artists, makers, scholars, and critics is in full swing, ranging from topics meant for a general audience (American art in the '60s and '70s) to those with more specialized interests (artist's materials and their history). Public art displays within its dedicated gallery space and outdoors on its grounds, including a regular and rotating exhibition schedule featuring both historic works and the best of contemporary figurative art, have already launched, with a critically-acclaimed retrospective exhibition featuring the American artist Lennart An-

derson (d. 2015) most recently on view in the Chauncey-Stillman Gallery. As are many of the events and programs at the Lyme Academy, admission is free—one more indication of the connection and commitment of the Academy to the community that has supported it since its founding nearly fifty years ago. It is this community, perhaps, resilient and enduring, that takes the most pride in the Lyme Academy's accomplishments and goals. In the quiet town of Old Lyme, Connecticut, they are watching nothing less than a Renaissance unfold.