

'I WILL NEVER LOOK AT PAINTING THE SAME WAY AGAIN'

Whether gaining observation skills by watching spiders or acquiring expertise in making ink from toast crumbs, artists say their most influential and inspiring teachers were those whose lessons went far beyond traditional instruction

Sculptor Joel Shapiro has collaborated with hundreds of curators, worked with dozens of gallerists, and shaken hands with thousands of collectors in his 35-year career. But he cites Mr. Henriques of Bayside High School in Queens, New York, as one of his greatest influences.

In "my first high school art class, I got a D," confesses Shapiro, who now has works in over 80 public collections. "The next class I took, I got an A+." It was Mr. Henriques who awarded him that coveted grade and, more important, allowed him to make sculpture in what was officially a painting class.

BY GAIL GREGG

Mr. Henriques communicated to the young artist that it was his passion for what he was making that

counted, not satisfying the official curriculum. As with many talented teachers who have helped students find their vocations, Mr. Henriques taught Shapiro to see himself as an artist.

Though the teaching of art has changed dramatically over the centuries, relationships between young artists and their masters and mentors have retained their power to transform. The right guidance along the way—whether in grade school or graduate school—can make all the difference in an artist's self-confidence, his professional development, and in the contacts and opportunities that await him.

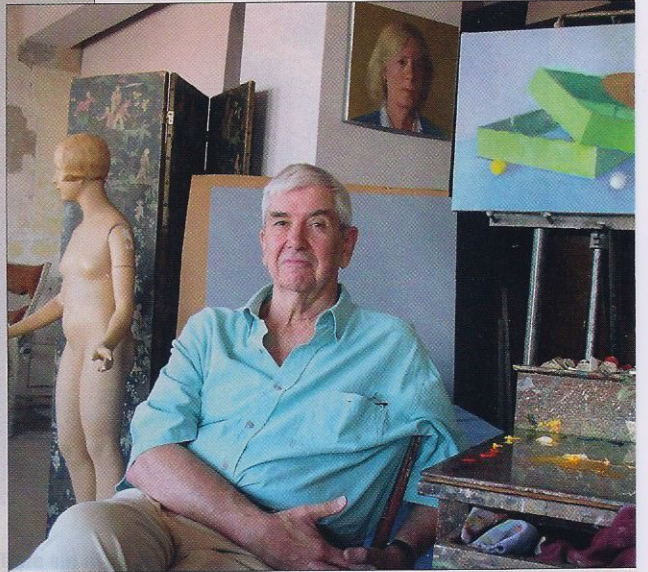
For centuries, novice artists worked alongside masters, learning such techniques as heating rabbit-skin glue, preparing painting supports, and mixing paint by hand from ingredients like colored clay or stones. By the 19th century, the art academy had supplanted the apprentice system with a formal cur-

riculum, and individual artists had begun capitalizing on their reputations to establish their own schools. Just as students today aspire to situate themselves in the orbits of renowned artist-professors, young 19th-century hopefuls like Mary Cassatt, who studied in Paris under Jean-Louis Gérôme, vied to secure spots in the ateliers of artists they admired.

This period also saw the birth of the art academy in the United States. At the Art Students League, founded in 1875, and, later, at the New York School of Art (founded as the Chase School in 1896; now Parsons The New School for Design), charismatic teachers like William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri trained a roster of students that included George Bellows, Edward Hopper, and Rockwell Kent.

But by the late 20th century, most American artists were studying within the university system. As art education was retrofitted onto an existing structure of course requirements, accredited liberal-arts programs, and rigid time schedules, the focus changed from teaching technical proficiency to creating professional artists who would understand the conceptual, the contextual, and the commercial aspects of a career in art. Under this new system, critiques—referred to as "crits"—have supplanted detailed technical instruction in many classrooms, and artist-teachers are encouraged to develop students' imaginations rather than their skills. "I'm here to teach you to think—and to see," explained Josef Albers to his Yale University pupils, including Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, Robert Man- gold, and Robert Rauschenberg, in the 1950s.

Frederick Horowitz, a student of Albers's and a longtime in-



ARTIST Ellen Phelan in her studio in the Adirondacks.

TEACHER Realist painter Robert Wilbert.

Wilbert, who taught Phelan at Wayne State University in the late 1960s, talked “about paintings as paintings, rather than in an art-historical way,” she recalls.

structor himself, remembers how the legendary German Bauhaus painter would troll his Yale classroom—always in jacket and tie—“pocketing all the erasers he could find.” Albers urged students to capitalize on their mistakes, reworking them and coming up with new—if imperfect—solutions to visual problems. Horowitz, whose book with Brenda Danilowitz, *Joseph Albers: To Open Eyes: At the Bauhaus, Black Mountain, and Yale* comes out this month from Phaidon, still recalls—with pride and wonder—the day his professor snatched up a torn-paper creation of his. “I thought he’d be upset, but he pinned it to the bulletin board. ‘This boy’s really getting into it,’” he remembers Albers saying.

And like many of Albers’s former students, Horowitz has used the fabled imagination-building Yale exercises—such as drawing the spaces between bottles in a still life or making a composition by arranging matchsticks on a sheet of paper—in his own classes at Washtenaw Community College and at the University of Michigan, both in Ann Arbor. In doing so, he had to warn students about the ambiguity of the assignments, the need to search for multiple answers. “In evaluations, my students would say, ‘He doesn’t tell us what to do.’ So I decided I needed to prepare them, to say that this is a class in which they need to think for themselves.” As in so many art curriculums today, the central part of this approach is the crit—in which the students’ exercises are posted and discussed by the class as a whole—a technique Albers used to convey the notion that “there could be many answers to any one question.”

Many artists adopt their favorite instructor’s concepts or teaching techniques when they later lead their own classes. At age 14, sculptor Jessica Stockholder took drawing lessons from Mowry Baden, a family friend who taught at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. During her college years, she transferred there to study painting with Baden; now she classifies him as “one of the great teachers. He had a great way of articulating how things visual functioned,” she says, noting that he could describe precisely what he responded to in a painting. Today, as head of Yale’s sculpture department, Stockholder attempts to do the same with her own pupils: “What I try to do for students is to find words for what they’re doing.”

As an undergraduate at Wayne State University in Detroit in the late 1960s, Ellen Phelan studied with realist painter Robert Wilbert, who, like Albers, roamed the studio, often stopping behind her to observe what she was making. He helped her “figure out how the spatial relationships worked, why one painting was better than others,” she says. Phelan also remembers him showing slides and talking “about paintings as paintings, rather than in an art-historical way.” This practice of “opening kids up to learning from physical objects” is one she introduced into her own classrooms at Harvard University, where she chaired the visual and environmental studies department from 1995 to 2001. She encouraged students to analyze what pigments an artist might have used, or how a certain color was mixed. “I had

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ARTIST James Siena, right, in his studio.

TEACHER Chuck Close, at work on a portrait of Siena in 2002.

When he was starting out in New York, Siena went to Close for practical guidance on issues such as how to deal with galleries and make ends meet.



a student of art history who was working at the university's Fogg Art Museum, who thanked me," she says. "He told me, 'I will never look at painting the same way again.'"

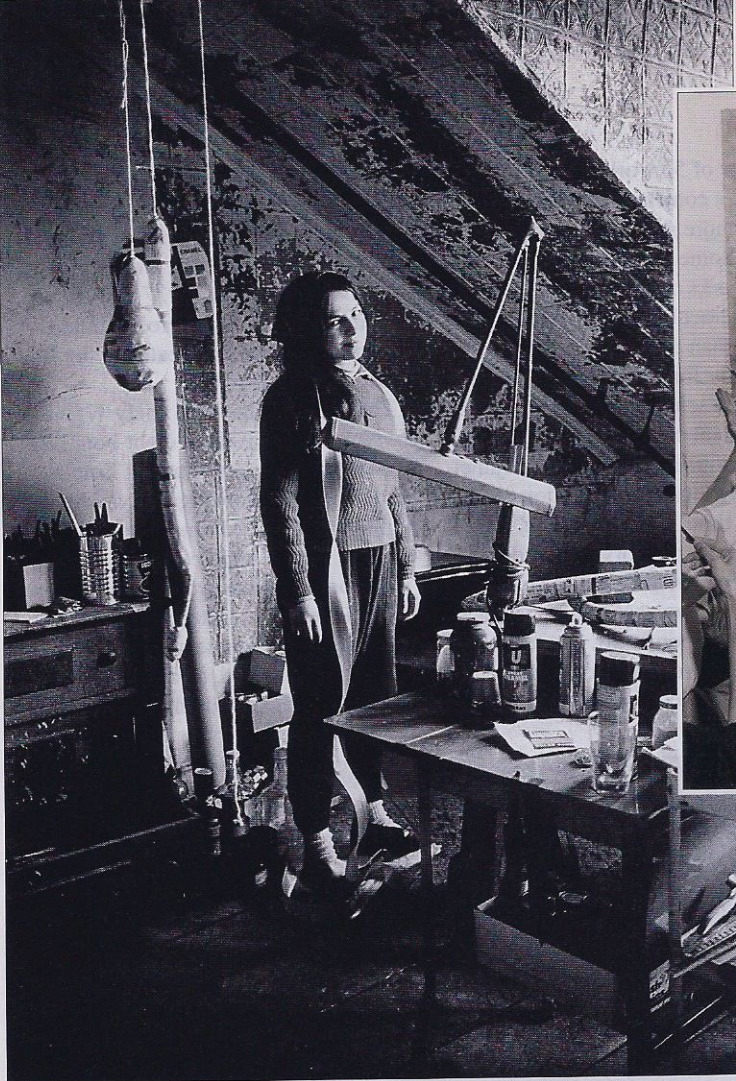
Especially appreciated by many artists is a teacher's ability to see students as individuals and to tailor their teaching to different needs. As James Elkins, chair of the art history, theory, and criticism department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has observed, "In art instruction, no two people need the same thing." Painter Will Barnet has taught at Yale and in New York at the Birch Wathen School, the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and the Art Students League. He sees personalized instruction as his central challenge in teaching students ranging from children to "highly developed" artists like Robert Motherwell, who studied with him at the League. At Cooper Union in the 1950s, Barnet recalls being impressed by a young student who was "very modest and had her own ideas. She was a very devoted student." For her, Barnet explained, "My teaching was more about respecting those ideas." Her name? Eva Hesse.

Many artists insist that a teacher's modeling of a life in art was as important to their development as formal instruction. Legendary anatomy instructor Robert Beverly Hale explained the principles of chiaroscuro, preached observation, and taught his students at the League to reduce forms in nature to cylinders, cubes, or spheres—but he also loved to recount his experiences as a practicing artist. "Coming from a prominent Boston family, and with a mother who was very into art,

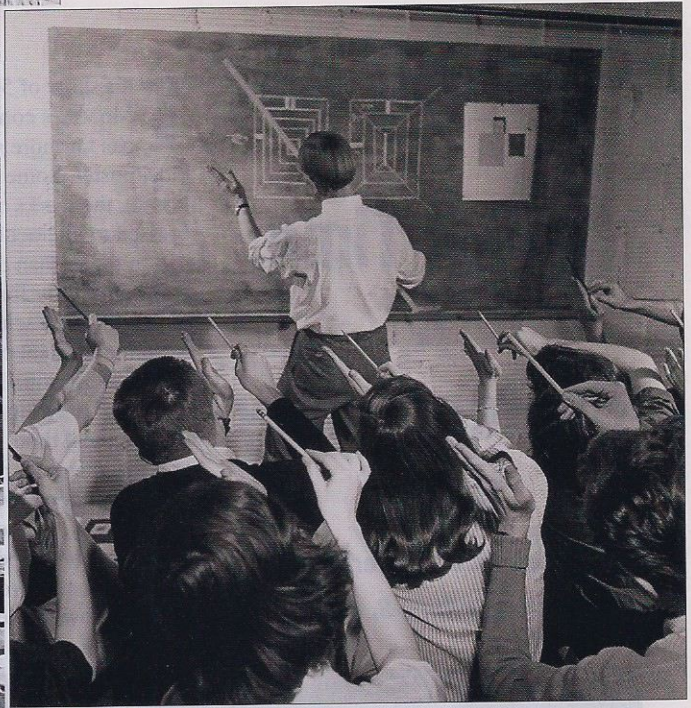
he always had very interesting stories about his early years in Europe," recalls Richard Tsao, who was a student of his in the late 1970s. "He would recall fondly that he played chess with Duchamp or met Matisse, or that he was a neighbor of Pollock's out in the Springs" in East Hampton, New York. Students likened this storytelling time from the gracious older man to a fireside chat.

When painter James Siena opted to move to New York rather than attend graduate school after finishing his B.F.A. at Cornell University, he found plenty of mentors in the local art community. He was impressed by the "very independent, visionary spirit" of Alan Saret, who took him to the scrap yard and taught him about working with metal. Chuck Close helped him understand "very obvious stuff" like how to approach a relationship with a gallery (Close likened it to a "conversation") and how to maximize earnings from day jobs to spend more time painting.

The legendary Yale graduate classes of 1963 and 1964, which included Close, Rackstraw Downes, Janet Fish, Nancy Graves, and Richard Serra, were not only influenced by full-time faculty like Bernard Chaet, Louis Finkelstein, and Neil Welliver, but also by visiting professors, says Irving Sandler, author of the recently published *From Avant Garde to Pluralism: An On-The-Spot History* (Hard Press Editions). Fairfield Porter, for example, had an enormous impact on the work of Downes, who in 1993 published a collection of his former professor's critical reviews and art writings. Such visiting teachers as Al Held and Philip Pearlstein "brought news of New York,



ARTIST Eva Hesse in her New York studio in 1965.



TEACHER Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in 1946.

"I'm here to teach you to think—and to see," Albers told his Yale students.

news of the profession," says Sandler. "They became role models because they were successful artists."

New York-based painter Kathryn McAuliffe, who grew up in Seattle and attended the University of Washington in the early 1970s, says that studying with the late Jacob Lawrence "was an epiphany for me." Lawrence, the first African American artist to be shown at a major commercial gallery, "was a dignified and authentic messenger from the larger world. He painted not out of choice, but because he had to." She still remembers his directive to his students: "You must never pick up your paintbrush unless your heart is fully attached to it."

Asked to name the teacher who most influenced him, Siena quickly cites Mary Croston, an after-school art instructor who taught him as a teenager. Croston treated her young students as "real" artists, says Siena, introducing them to such tools as charcoal and graphite and coaching them in figure drawing. "She just taught the basics; that was very influential," he says of those classes in the "art hut" behind Croston's house in Stanford, California. Siena also remembers being "very moved" by the late Peter Kahn, who taught the history of techniques at Cornell. According to Siena, "He was a marvelous Renaissance man" who taught his students such skills as determining whether paper is archival quality and making ink out of toast crumbs and saliva.

Whether the artist-mentor relationship is formed in the backyard, scrap yard, or schoolyard, very often it can turn into a lifelong friendship. To Barnett, Stuart Davis—his instructor at

the Art Students League in the early 1930s—was "more a philosopher than a teacher; he became a close friend." So did many of Barnett's own students: James Rosenquist "just sent me flowers for my birthday," says the 95-year-old artist, and "students I had 50 years ago still write to me."

Sometimes it is not years but a mere moment that can make all the difference. Portland, Oregon-based printmaker and painter Martha Pfanschmidt's life in art was launched by a junior high school teacher whose name she can't remember—a "laid-back, quiet man," she says. She vividly recalls the day he showed her a tiny red spider climbing a wall in drawing class. "I had never stopped long enough to observe such tiny things, and I saw the benefit of that," says Pfanschmidt. "At that moment I understood that to be an artist involved looking closely and spending time observing. He inspired me to slow down."

Growing up in Manhattan, conceptual artist, designer, and author Edwin Schlossberg was lucky enough to have Barnett as a junior high school teacher. "One day the assignment was to draw the schoolyard," Schlossberg remembers. At that time Birch Wathen School was housed in "five brownstones on the Upper West Side, so I drew them, and I mixed up all the locations of things to make an image that I liked. He came over to my table and looked at it for a long time and then said, 'How did you decide to mix up the parts and put them back together?' I said that I had not decided—that was how they looked to me. This huge smile crawled across his face, and he said, 'Don't ever stop looking your way.'" ■