





Drawing on Tradition

The master-apprentice relationship, a 500-year-old tradition, continues to shape the next generation of classical artists at the Fine Arts League of the Carolinas

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In a squat brick building near the railroad tracks in Asheville's River District, art instructors carry on the traditions of the old masters. Student becomes apprentice, apprentice becomes artist, artist becomes teacher, and the progression continues as it did long ago in the world of classical realist art.

But what happens at the Fine Arts League of the Carolinas—the brainchild of Benjamin F. Long, IV, renowned fresco artist and painter—and what was for centuries the benchmark of an arts education, is unusual today in the sense of the rigorous formal training. Here, draftsmanship is stripped to its most elemental level in beginning and advanced anatomy classes. Before a student even picks up a paintbrush, he learns how to draw the human body with absolute precision. Color theory, stretching and prepping one's own canvas, mixing pigments to create paint, as well as making glues and gessos are all part of the learning process. When students finish the curriculum they are not only able to capture and share the human experience on canvas, but they are equipped to make walnut ink and fashion their own pens from bamboo, feather, and reed.

To outsiders, the curriculum may seem tedious, a point of old-fashioned academia taken to an extreme. But those who train by this method know it's a ritual that honed the skills of the great classical artists.

Natural Light

Summer rain patters on the roof as eight students sit at their easels, sketching the figure of a young woman. The model lies supine amid a bed of damask pillows, her skin is as pale as alabaster in the north light emanating from the barred windows of the studio. Classical strains coming from a laptop compete with the low hum of a heater keeping the model warm in the cool, stark building.

A timer rings, and the students stretch a moment—some shaking the cramps out of



Previous page: Ben Long (also seen here) and Christopher Holt confer over Long's latest fresco.

Below: Studio sketches



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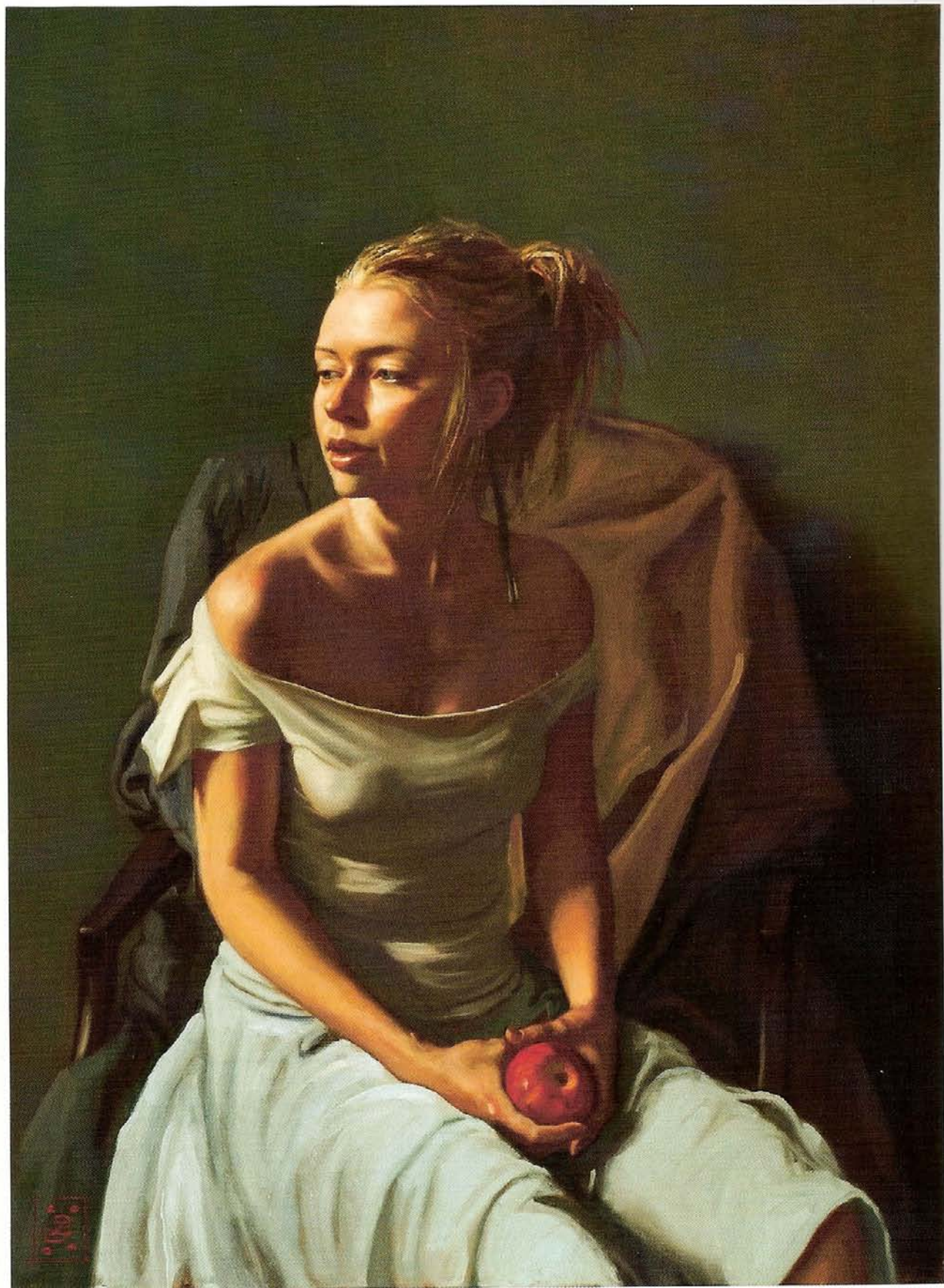
—Ben Long

their hands or wiggling their fingers—before instructor Roger Nelson looks over the sketches, announces the next drawing session will last 20 minutes, and explains a few details of the human body.

“You get the rhomboids next to the scapula in this type of movement,” he points out, drawing the students’ attention to a blackboard that is marked with a skeleton in white, and an overlay of musculature in pink chalk. “Follow it, then you’ll feel a bulge next to the trapezius. See?” he says, instructing the model to move her arm up and

forward. The students observe the muscles of her back as they move under the skin and the subtle shadows they cast.

Not only must students learn to replicate the body, but they are also required to memorize the names of every bone and muscle. It may seem like overkill, but the human form, with all its intricate shapes and planes that cast shadows and create depth, is one of the most complex forms for any artist to master. Imparting the need for a scientific-level of knowledge about anatomy means that all students and teachers will be speaking the same language.



Brooke's Apple by Ben Long



Students visited Long's Asheville studio to observe his techniques while he was working on this sketch of a fresco. He drew inspiration for this piece, which he later painted in the chapel of a Charleston hospice, from the 23rd Psalm.

"This class is open to any student as long as they are caught up on their other work," says Nelson, who resembles a character from Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, with flowing hair and a goatee. One of Long's long-time associates and a member of the fresco team on many works, Nelson signed on as an instructor when the school was first conceived. Students in this room have already mastered beginning anatomy and the cast class, where they learn to draw the human form and portraits from plaster casts.

Germination

Modeled after the atelier method of instruction practiced in artists' studios since the 15th century, the school charges its instructors—all professional artists themselves—with closely leading small groups of students, progressively training them from the very basic command of materials and

drawing, to mastery of portraiture, landscape, still life, and etching.

It was in such an atmosphere in Italy that Ben Long flourished. Grandson of noted artist McKendree Long of Morganton, Long studied the art of fresco under Pietro Annigoni in Florence. Building upon Long's education from the Art Students League of New York, the atelier's teaching became the basis for the next decades of his work in Europe and the United States. Long settled in Asheville eight years ago, and, thus began the slow process of amassing support and interest for a classical realist school by taking on apprentices to work with him on fresco commissions.

This, Long contends, is simply what an artist is supposed to do. "Teaching is the idea of passing it on. You have the information—what makes you so privileged to take it to your grave? What kind of arrogance is that?" he says, blue eyes wide behind small spectacles.

Cultivation

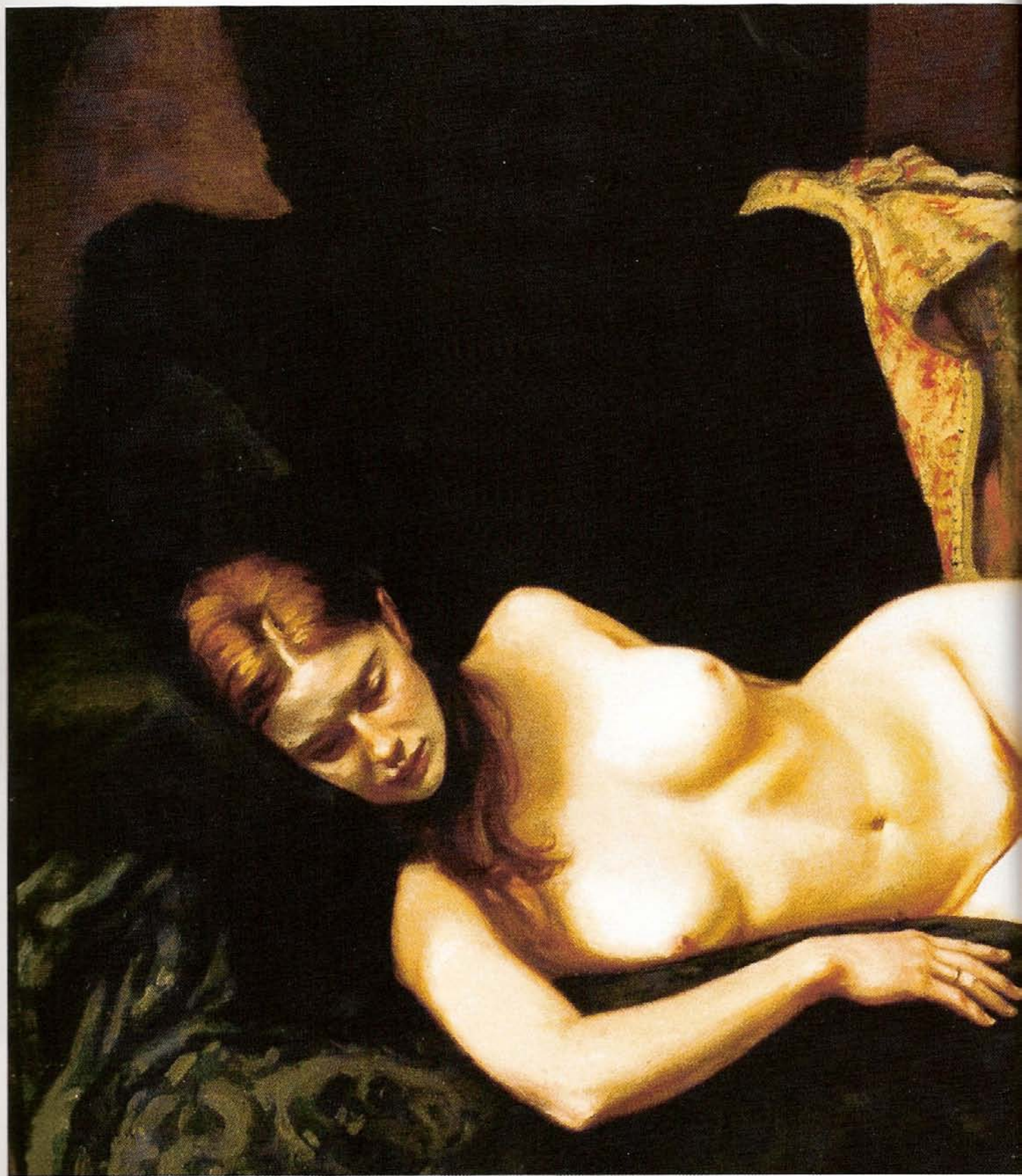
Long holds court before an assembly of well-wishers and patrons at the school's annual fundraiser, Feast for the Senses. Lofty dreams can die a quick death without adequate support. Early on, the founder knew that becoming a nonprofit organization, governed by a board, would give the school a better chance of survival.

For this evening, the artists and their work take center stage. Neatly dressed in summer-white linen suits, the students and instructors of the Fine Arts League mingle with the aficionados that have come to pay homage to the craft. Freshly painted walls in ocher and olive are covered with nude studies in charcoal or pencil, while delicate pen and ink landscapes beg closer inspection. Oil portraits, rich with saturated hues, celebrate the bone structure of pale maidens with high cheekbones and pouting lips, echoing eras past no matter how contemporary the model. Landscapes reflect

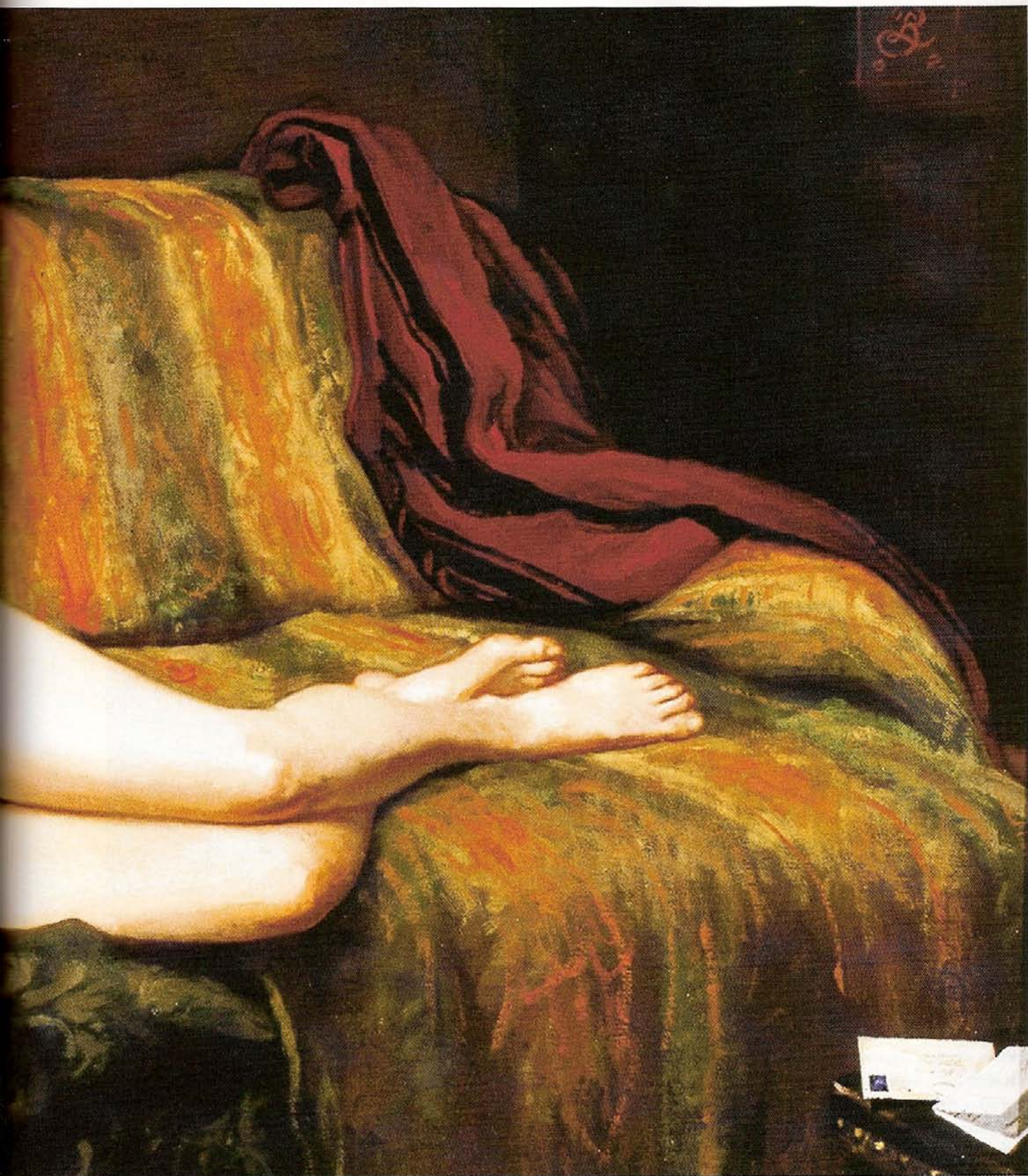


Students Noah Parke, Judith Stancil, Cheryl Ann Lipstreu, and Caleb Clark work on a nude study during anatomy class. A portrait of teacher Roger Nelson watches over the studio.

“Teaching is a good way to make life happen as an artist.”



For me, it's almost a necessity. —John Dempsey



The Letter by Ben Long

the devotion of plein-air painting, capturing the natural light, with riveting sunsets and golden fields.

Guests nibble hors d'oeuvres set out on platters that resemble the still lifes that hang on the walls. The well-heeled crowd slowly drains a chorus of bottles of red wine as they bid on works by instructors and students. The usually quiet classrooms have come to life for both long-time and new patrons—giving a munificent peek into the inner sanctum of classical arts. “This gives people a good understanding of what they do here,” says board member Lynn Karegeannes. “I really respect the rigor of their work.”

By morning, much of the 6,400-square-foot space must be cleared for classes as the summer session continues, the elegant displays and exhibition replaced by paint-smudged easels and high-backed studio chairs.

Apprentice Teachers

When launching the school (first in his own College Street studio, then relocating to a downtown building on Rankin Avenue before moving to the River District), Long made use of his professional partnerships and friendships with artists Roger Nelson, John Mac Kah, Michael Smith, and Mark Henry, as well as a number of apprentices, who now work on the fresco team.

Since starting instruction in 2002, the Fine Arts League has developed a following of students of all ages seeking to learn the fundamentals of form, taught with an intensity rarely found in many current art programs. The most recent session allowed students to learn about the process of fresco by watching Long create his preparatory drawings and oil sketches for a painting commissioned by a Charleston, South Carolina, hospice. And Long's apprentices taught the students how to grind color for the paint, as well as other aspects of the work.

Indeed, the instructor-apprentices fill many roles. In addition to teaching and working as part of the fresco team, painter John Dempsey interviews prospective students and reviews their portfolios. “You surround yourself with what you want to do,” says Dempsey, who spent a year at the Florence Academy of Art.



Inside the studio, a worktable and portrait of artist and Fine Arts League of the Carolinas teacher Michael Smith painted by Long

“Teaching is a good way to make life happen as an artist. For me, it’s almost a necessity.”

Fresco apprentice Christopher Holt agrees, “It’s really the way the school works. You are well-informed enough to pass along the information. Students, teachers, everyone’s helping out on multiple levels. You don’t come here and just go away,” he explains, noting that building community is part of the school’s strength.

Perception

There is a certain life-changing spirit in reverting to an old-world simplicity, where the strength and force of skill must come from within, coupled with honing that skill prodigiously. Some students consider it a reawakening.

Gully Clarke, a professional musician, first visited the school after students in the audience at one of his performances asked to

"I changed the direction of what I was doing in art. Now I want to bring my skill to the level of mastery."

—Gully Clarke

Becoming the Artist

Students who are accepted to the school must make a commitment that involves six hours of classes a day, and for first-year students that means completing 36 weeks of introduction to realism with emphasis on mastering drawing using pencil, charcoal, Conté crayons, pen and ink, and appropriate papers. They learn a thorough foundation in anatomy, cast, and figure drawing, with emphasis on use of line, value, and texture. In these courses, teachers stress accuracy in drawing, perspective, and use of value to delineate objects and figure.

Second-year students don't get to coast. They continue to refine drafting techniques, as well as using all knowledge of materials to make finished drawings and pictures. They move into more advanced drawing and beginning painting of portrait, still life, and landscape. At this point, they are encouraged to begin finding their own style. Artists will have a thorough understanding of the foundations of drawing as the basis for painting, an ability to render objects, figures, and portraits with accuracy. All students will have acquired skills in preparation of grounds, mediums, and paint making.

The spirit of the master-apprentice system is passed along through the work of the third-year artists. They exhibit the knowledge, work ethic, and skill of a professional artist. In the classroom, he or she is an aide to the instructor and able to help new students. The third-year artist is considered a leader at the league.

Summer Intensive Classes

These mini-sessions are open to anyone:

Youth Week: July 14-18, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Carving Bas Relief: July 14-18, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.

Etching 101: July 14-17, 9 a.m.-12 p.m.

Botanical Drawing: July 14-17, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Figure Drawing and Artistic Anatomy: July 21-25, 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
and 2-5:30 p.m.

Hand-Bound Sketch Books: July 21-25, 3-6 p.m.

Portrait Drawing: July 28-August 1, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.

Stone Carving: July 28-August 1, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.

Also: Life drawing classes every Tuesday and Thursday for a nominal fee.

More information is available at www.fineartsleague.org, or call (828) 252-5050.



Artists and teachers Nathan Bertling, Christopher Holt, and John Dempsey at the studio

paint his portrait. "I saw Ben's studio, and it blew my mind," says Clarke of the workspace rich with oil paintings, sketches, and large fresco cartoons (a full-scale drawing of a future fresco) covering the walls.

"I changed the direction of what I was doing in art. Now I want to bring my skill to the level of mastery," he says. These days, Clarke can often be found keeping time during the drawing sessions.

At 64, Judith Stancil is admittedly the oldest student this session. On a recent Friday she spent time with instructor Mark Henry, learning how to build an easel. Stancil has more work to do before she'll be recreating the meticulous still lifes—white onions next to a green bottle with a crumpled newspaper; a violin and sheet music with a vase of lavender and dried flowers—that sit completed next to the assorted tableaux in the studio. Yet the key is not emerging from this program painting like everyone else. It is using these acquired skills to find one's own voice as an artist.

Still, she is motivated by the instructors' skills and the works that they are creating. "Their art that hangs in the classroom and hallways is certainly an inspiration," says Stancil, who moved from Charlotte to attend the school. "It makes me think, maybe someday I'll be able to do this." ▲