***The Art Canon: The Vital Role of Visual Art in the University Curriculum***

**By David Harmon**

**School of Visual Arts Sponsored,**

**National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists**

**October 2015, NY, NY**

Liberal arts universities, art schools and state universities all provide art and humanities studies mandated by outside accrediting agencies. There is an art canon of study comprised of two, three and four dimensional art forms. Here, the first year art major or non art major encounters the historical humanities continuum.

I will reflect on 33 years of visual art instruction in liberal arts universities, private art schools and state universities .I posit that art has a special, yet largely misunderstood role in Higher Education curriculum. The humanities have always been the great equalizer of study. It is here students learn about the achievements and mistakes of humankind which have formed the basis for civilized civilization. Art and art history serves a vital place within the university canon of required general education courses. Students (non art majors) learn in art history classes about humankind via art and artifacts they produced as a testament to human creativity. This may lead them to experiential studio art such as drawing which embodies seeing and thinking. The integration of technology has become a mandate from administrations and accrediting agencies. It is not always applicable to all studio art areas. Much knowledge is mined from the traditional art canon comprised of two, three and four dimensional art forms. Visceral experiences come only from mind, eye, hand and time. This is true for art majors experiencing the foundational first year. This curriculum which may be tweaked by individual faculty should follow the time honored canon of material applied to surface .Slides will be shown revealing student work exemplifying this aspect.

The word canon may be derived from the Greek word *Kanon* meaning model. Other definitions include the following:

* An authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture
* the authentic works of a writer
* a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works<the *canon* of great art or literature
* an accepted principle or rule
* a criterion or standard of judgment
* a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms
* [**Images 001,002**]the canon of Ancient Egyptian and Greek proportion

My first idea had been to show just foundational student work to convey how important sight and observational drawing and painting is for an art student. These I have included and I have expanded this to include the work of a select group of great artists who had received minimal to heavy educations in the humanities and how this affected their work.

[**SHOW 23 STUDENT IMAGES**]The studio art university professor should teach, at least in the beginning, foundational aspects to their teaching. These principles at base level allow students to learn how to design and see and create effectively. It is well known all great artists have been schooled in the foundational art canon no matter what artistic career path they have chosen. Foundational art training helps young art students to formulate original thought utilizing the process of ideation. Creative solutions come more quickly through the well spring of youth. At one time you could find your way into art with a cursory or minimal education .Not today. Everyone needs a degree to be taken seriously. Personal drive to excel and to be at the right place at the right time helped some of the greats to achieve success. Yet they still worked hard creating in their studios, reading on their own and studying great works of art .Intelligence can surface anywhere from anyone. However, in university, young artists are exposed to a welter of history and information which is codified and convenient for study. It is the professor’s task to make the subject interesting and inspiring! The student’s job is to assimilate this experience welding it into their life and existence. The humanities teach us what it is to be truly human and humane.

 I had taught at the Savannah College of Art and design for 3 years. I was, you might say, in a sort of art boot camp whipping these students into shape to tackle future careers as animator’s illustrators and painters. All were accepted without a portfolio review! I was quite taken aback, when In the course of teaching life drawing (I quoted some of the best artists and gave lectures on their life and work) many students had expressed their ignorance of the necessity for this information. *In short, they were thinking skip this, its boring; shut up and just teach us how to draw well*. One student studying sound design questioned the necessity of taking the core curriculum of two d design, drawing 1, 2 color theory, life drawing 1 and even art history survey. Another student expressed what had been on my mind which I could not verbally say: what *did you come to art school for idiot?* What would the Renaissance fathers of the humanities think of this anti intellectualism?

I received my MFA in painting from Penn State University. About 10 years ago a former grad school class mate who had taught at a PSU branch campus, had informed me that the School of Fine art at the University park campus decided to scale down and almost did away with its time honored foundations program, a key element in the art major ‘s education. The justification for this action seemed to stem from the new directors progressive educational methodology which called for this extreme approach. Students seemed puzzled and complained that they were learning very little. Some had even attended a branch campus to get the skills they could not at the flagship campus and then they transferred back in. The details of this situation I do not have. However, the foundation study program was eventually reinstituted in the curriculum. Innovation is fine and we are free to do this provided that we do not weaken the *first things* students must learn to obtain a quality education in the arts.

Other more positive experiences have come from the liberal arts colleges and university which used to espouse the life of the mind(some still do).Yet an underlying disturbing trend seems to be to pass students in humanities courses and just fast track them into their careers. This, of course subverts the intention of the humanities, i.e., to ponder.

To quote Bob Dylan, from his 2006 song *Ain’t Talkin:*

***The whole world is filled with speculation
The whole wide world which people say is round
They will tear your mind away from contemplation***

***They will step on your misfortune when you’re down***

 Camilla Paglia in her book *Glittering Images* from 2012 states:

***Colleges awarding liberal arts degrees might be expected to stress arts education, but that is not the case. The current cafeteria style curruculummakes art history course available but not required. With rare exception, colleges have abandoned any notion of a core body of learning. Humanities departments offer a hodge podge of courses tailored to professors’ research interests. There has been a gradual phasing out in the United States of the art history survey course, which moved magisterially over two semesters from cave art to modernism. Despite their popularity with students, who remember them as crowning college experiences, survey courses are increasingly regarded as too cumbersome, superficial, or Eurocentric-and there is no institutional will to extend them to world art. Junior faculty teethed on post –structuralism, with its mechanical suspicion of culture, regard themselves as specialists rather than generalists and have not been trained to think over vast trajectories .The end result is that many humanities majors graduate with little sense of chronology or the gorgeous recession of styles that constitute Western art. The most important question about art is: what lasts and why? Definitions of beauty and standards of taste are constantly changing, but persistent patterns obtain.***

Michelangelo was a product of their schooling and times. As a young boy **Michelangelo** was sent to [Florence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florence) to study [grammar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammar) under the [Humanist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism) Francesco da Urbino. The young artist, however, showed no interest in his schooling, preferring to copy paintings from churches and seek the company of painters. In 1488, at thirteen, Michelangelo was apprenticed to Ghirlandaio in his bottega.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo)When he was only fourteen, his father persuaded Ghirlandaio to pay his apprentice as an artist, which was highly unusual at the time.When in 1489, [Lorenzo de' Medici](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_de%27_Medici), de facto ruler of Florence, asked Ghirlandaio for his two best pupils, Ghirlandaio sent Michelangelo and [Francesco HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesco\_Granacci"Granacci](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesco_Granacci).**[image 25,The Young Archer sculpted by Michelangelo at15**} From 1490 to 1492, Michelangelo attended the Humanist academy which the Medici had founded along [Neo Platonic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platonism) lines. At the academy, both Michelangelo's outlook and his art were subject to the influence of many of the most prominent philosophers and writers of the day including [MarsilioHYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsilio\_Ficino" HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsilio\_Ficino"Ficino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marsilio_Ficino), [Pico HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pico\_della\_Mirandola"dellaHYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pico\_della\_Mirandola" HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pico\_della\_Mirandola"Mirandola](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pico_della_Mirandola) and [Poliziano](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poliziano).

In the 20th century ,artist-filmmaker **Stanley Kubrick** embraced the intelligentsia and the excitement of New York modernism in the 40’s and 50’s. His education consisted of a few semesters at the City University of New York. It was as though you could assimilate what you needed through experience/osmosis rather than formal education. He looked with distain on his early film productions as naïve or youthful efforts not worthy of review. *Fear and Desire* was one of these films made the year I was born in 1953.His photography as a Life magazine photographer had shown a cinema graphic quality as many have noticed especially in the use of one-point perspective such as a famous shot of Chicago streets photographed in 1948. [**Image: Chicago 1948**}It is fascinating how one can learn from one medium and transition into another. I find great technique utilized in Kubrick’s *Path’s of Glory* filmed in 1957 and starring Kirk Douglas. It was here that Kubrick utilized a reverse tracking camera technique as the WW1 officer walks toward the camera. [**Image: Paths of Glory, 1957**} Later works such as *The Shining* reveal the opposite effect, i.e., going with or following the action or movement as in the scene when Danny rides his tricycle [**Image: The Shining,1980**}. Thus, tradition linear perspective, a Renaissance invention, is used in another medium. Actor Jack Nicolson said in an interview:

***"This man, in spite of the widespread reputation he had for mastering his means of expression, was misunderstood and misinterpreted every time he made a film. I've often asked myself why. In fact, only once did he have unanimously positive reviews, and they were for ...Paths of Glory. I've never understood how people who are so attached to film never realized that he was number one."***

Another quote from his co producer Jan Harlan reveals his sense of what it means to be human

***While his films are all very different from each other ... there is something that connects them all, and that is a very serious look at human nature, at human frailty.***

One also thinks of the films of **Alfred Hitchcock,** not realizing that he studied drawing /draftsmanship at the London County Council School of Engineering and Navigation. Later on he discovered photography and advertising design working in London. Film requires the direction of many talents .Hitchcock, an experienced illustrator and graphic designer, none-the-less hired several storyboard artists so the camera operators knew what to film [Image: Birds storyboard]. Hitchcock is quoted on the art of filmmaking:

***Once the screenplay is finished, I'd just as soon not make the film at all ... I have a strongly visual mind***

Recently, I had read The Birds,(1998) by art historian Camille Paglia .It was part of the British Film Industry classics series film synopses. Paglia notes some interesting modernist details of both *Psycho* and *The Birds* [Images from **Psycho** aerial shot of stabbing victim Martin Balsam; Norman **Bate’s madness** in sheriff’s office]Titles, including the opening innovative titles of both *Psycho* and *The Birds*, in those days, being non-digital were expensive and difficult to do:

***The title sequence of the Birds, designed by James S. Pollak ,is an avante guarde fantasy in and of itself. Against cold ,white ,abstract space, black crows flutter back and forth, out of focus as if seen alarmingly too close. There is an eerie continuity from the last shot of Hitchcock’s proper film Psycho, where Norman, sunk into psychosis, stares at us as he sits hunched against a blank wall. As the Bird’s begins, we seem to have penetrated into the madman’s voracious id, where a blur of animal impulses rave and snap…but the hanging words and names nervously overlap and disintegrate, as if bitten to pieces by invisible beaks. The titles show a war between nature and culture, with the irrational and the primitive vanquishing human illusions. (p.20)***

Film makers Ridley Scott (known for his creation and extensive use of storyboards [Image: Kingdom of God storyboard])

***Before film, when I did commercials, you have so much to do in a day that I had to order my thoughts, so I put things down on paper and that means drawings. I can draw really fast .I can do pages in an hour. Fairly good drawings, actually. What is interesting is that helps you to think.***

and James Cameron both espouse the art canon by their support of foundational drawing skills culled from their college art education. Cameron interviewed on NPR a few years ago said that he would not consider any young person entering the film industry without a portfolio full of traditional drawing .Scott attended the [West HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West\_Hartlepool\_College\_of\_Art"HartlepoolHYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West\_Hartlepool\_College\_of\_Art" College of Art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Hartlepool_College_of_Art) obtaining his BA in design and the Royal Academy of Art were he helped build the film department. In contrast, Cameron’s formal education is spotty at best.

Of all the New York school artists, two come to mind as having very good educational backgrounds, i.e., **Clifford Still** and **Robert Motherwell**.[**Images of Still and Motherwell’s work**] Citing these two well educated abstract expressionists does not in anyway diminish the veracity of the other painters and their great contributions to painting. It is just that the humanities educational background one has can only fully contribute to their work. Motherwell attended Stanford, where he had earned his BA in philosophy. He later one went to Harvard and Columbia University whereby, he encountered European artists and surrealism. His father had wanted him to get his PhD so he could earn a living by teaching. He later on had met several European artists and was thus exposed to Surrealism and the realm of unconscious free form imagery. His images of simple shapes on huge canvases bore intellectual titles such as *Personage with Yellow Ochre and White* and of course his *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series. Motherwell’s quote is revealing:

***Every man becomes to a certain degree what the people he generally converses with are.***

Clifford Still, the professor type as some regarded him as, received both his BA and equivalent MFA degrees .He had also taught in university as a professor of art at several colleges and universities. The distillation of all great themes of the human condition haunted him including universal themes about creation, life, struggle, and death very relevant after the devastating world war 2.His following quote reminds one of starting an art form on a clean slate, a new paradigm:

***We are now committed to an unqualified art, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis. One must accept total responsibility for what he executes. And the measure of his greatness will be in the depth of his insight and his courage in realizing his own vision.***

It is ironic that Painter Joan Mitchell, considered a second generation abstract expressionist having received both an BFA and an MFA from the art institute of Chicago decided on a painting career instead of teaching .[**Images: Mitchel and Grace Hartigan paintings**]Grace Hartigan ,in contrast had a minimal art education having studied at The Newark College of Engineering and studied painting independently. She would later on finish her life and career in academe, as the Chair of the Hoffberger School of painting within the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

In 1980 I had met west coast painter Wayne Thiebaud [**Image of Thiebaud wk.]**as a grad student at Penn State Universty. He visited my studio and had given a lecture to our group of young painters. Thiebaud received his BA and MA degrees at Cal State in Sacramento. Thiebaud encouraged us in the following quote:

***An artist needs the best studio instruction, the most rigorous demands, and the toughest criticism in order to tune up his sensibilities…an artist has to train his responses more than other people do. He has to be as disciplined as a mathematician. Discipline is not a restriction but an aid to freedom. It prepares an artist to choose his own limitations…I prefer to teach foundation courses so that my students get the essentials they need. My studio classroom is a strict environment. You come on time or you don’t come at all.***

Many artists’s teaching approaches are demonstrative oriented rather than verbal. One of my painting and teaching mentors Phil Sultz,at Webster university in St. Louis, MO. had had painter Charles Burchfield **[Images, Sultz and Burchfield**] as an instructor. Burchfield was more of an artist who did not like the confines of the classroom. Nature was his studio set. Sultz remarked :

***Burchfield invited you out to his farm near Buffalo, New York and you laid out your watercolors and painted what was before you. He would work along with you so you learned by following his lead through constant demonstrations and group critiques. I really do not think that he enjoyed teaching; he tolerated it, and yet I learned from him.***

My primary painting mentor at Penn State University was Richard Mayhew, from Amityville,Long island(now 94 years old) had earned his BA in art history from Columbia University and yet continued his ongoing studio education at the Pratt institute, arts student league, among others. His was an education of great rapport with teachers such as Hans Hoffmann, Edwin Dickinson and max Beckmann. He was a member of the African American Spiral group which advocated many avante guarde concepts and had anticipated multiculturalism.[**Image Mayhew]** He earned several prestigious awards and grants which allowed him an ongoing education. Color was what he had taught me. When I had visited Mayhew in 2007 in Santa Cruz has had said:

 ***My paintings are based on improvisational internalized creative experience: I paint the essence of nature, always seeking the unique spiritual mood of the landscape.***

There have been many great art teachers who have affected the lives of their students. I still think of *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri which was so influential as it was culled from notes taken by his students. Oh that we, as professors, should be so lucky! The humanities are well documented in the university art canon. This is so obvious to the thinking studio art professor who wants to expand the boundaries of art to their students to foster true creative approaches. Skill is skill, but it can only be deeply learned providing the canon is taught amidst the beloved humanities courses which truly make us human and consider the corpus of enriching courses in many realms of study. Ben Shahn’s words still ring true from *The Shape of Content* [**Image cover shot**] based on lectures he had given at Harvard in 1957:

***Attend a university if you possibly can. There is no content of knowledge that is not pertinent to the work you will want to do. But before you attend universities work at something for a while. Do anything. Get a job in a potato field; or work as a grease-monkey in an auto repair shop. But if you do work in a field do not fail to observe the look and the feel of earth and of all things that you handle — yes, even potatoes! Or, in the auto shop, the smell of oil and grease and burning rubber. Paint of course, but if you have to lay aside painting for a time, continue to draw. Listen well to all conversations and be instructed by them and take all seriousness seriously. Never look down upon anything or anyone as not worthy of notice. In college or out of college, read. And form opinions! Read Sophocles and Euripides and Dante and Proust. Read everything that you can find about art except the reviews. Read the Bible; read Hume; read Pogo. Read all kinds of poetry and know many poets and many artists. Go to an art school, or two, or three, or take art courses at night if necessary. And paint and paint and draw and draw. Know all that you can, both curricular and noncurricular — mathematics and physics and economics, logic and particularly history. Know at least two languages besides your own, but anyway, know French. Look at pictures and more pictures. Look at every kind of visual symbol, every kind of emblem; do not spurn signboards of furniture drawings of this style of art or that style of art. Do not be afraid to like paintings honestly or to dislike them honestly, but if you do dislike them retain an open mind. Do not dismiss any school of art, not the Pre-Raphaelites nor the Hudson River School nor the German Genre painters. Talk and talk and sit at cafés, and listen to everything, to Brahms, to Brubeck, to the Italian hour on the radio. Listen to preachers in small town churches and in big city churches. Listen to politicians in New England town meetings and to rabble-rousers in Alabama. Even draw them. And remember that you are trying to learn to think what you want to think, that you are trying to co-ordinate mind and hand and eye. Go to all sorts of museums and galleries and to the studios of artists. Go to Paris and Madrid and Rome and Ravenna and Padua. Stand alone in Sainte Chapelle, in the Sistine Chapel, in the Church of the Carmine in Florence. Draw and draw and paint and learn to work in many media; try lithography and aquatint and silk-screen. Know all that you can about art, and by all means have opinions. Never be afraid to become embroiled in art or life or politics; never be afraid to learn to draw or paint better than you already do; and never be afraid to undertake any kind of art at all, however exalted or however common, but do it with distinction.***