Legenda

THE RECOVERY OF CULTURE AND BEAUTY

Training of an Artist by Henry Wingate

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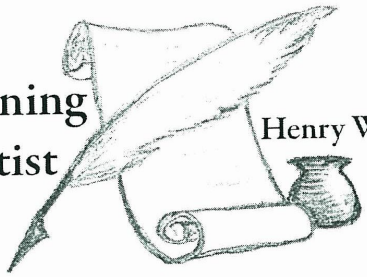
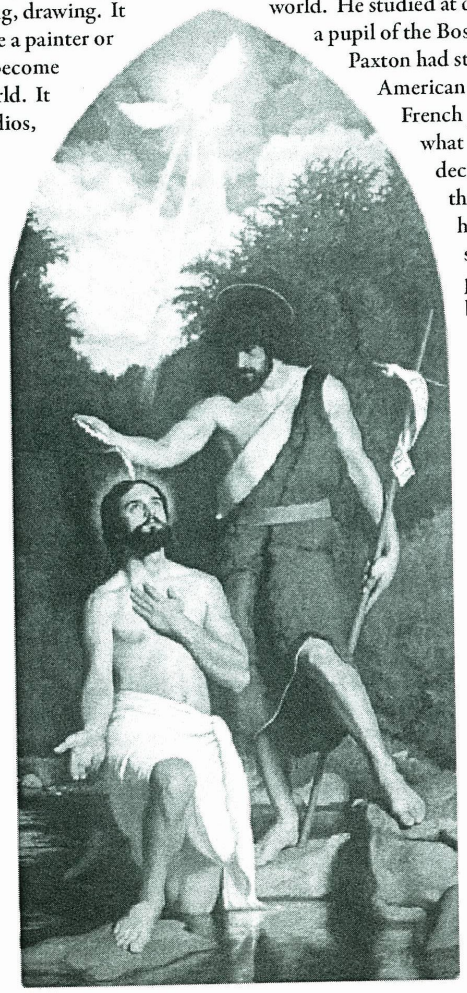
The Training of an Artist



Henry Wingate

The 20th century almost completely wiped out the type of art training that had been developed since the time of the Renaissance. A young person would spend most, if not all, of his teenage years in a master painter or sculptor's shop, learning the trade, and most of all drawing, drawing, drawing. It was a long and slow process, learning to be a painter or a sculptor. By the 19th century Paris had become the art training capital of the Western world. It was teeming with ateliers, or working studios, in which one master teacher would have a number of students, maybe 20 or 30, under his watchful eye. This was a slight change from the apprenticeship system of earlier centuries, but the number of years of learning the trade was still sizable, more than five usually, and sometimes as many as ten. The focus of the training was on the human figure. If one could master painting the human figure and face, in its complexity and beauty, one could paint anything.

There was a great flourishing of figurative painting at the end of the 19th century. Partly because of this flourishing, some artists started experimenting, trying new approaches. The Impressionists began the experimentation and it continued with the artists' getting further and further from "academic" figurative work. (Academic means the highly finished and accurate portrayal of the figure in drawing and painting that was practiced in the academies, or the ateliers.) By the early 20th century, these new approaches were beginning to be noticed. The year 1913 marks a turning point in this country. It was the year of the Armory Show in New York City in which many of the "modern" artists of Europe exhibited their work in the U.S. for the first time. The art training began to change also at this point. The atelier system was changed, and the emphasis was shifted from the human figure to the artist himself and the "expression" of the artist.



There were a few artists who tried to keep the old figurative training alive. One such man was Ives Gammell. Born in Rhode Island in 1893 and interested in art from a very early age, he witnessed first-hand the changes in the art world. He studied at different places but ended up as a pupil of the Boston painter, William Paxton. Paxton had studied in Paris, as most prominent American artists of the time had, under the French painter Gerome. Ives Gammell saw what was happening to art training and decided that he would try to keep alive the traditional atelier method that he had received. He did just what he set out to do. Primarily by teaching painters, but also by writing and by painting himself, he preserved a tradition that had been developing over the previous 450 years and that had its roots in Greek and Roman art, but that had been completely abolished in art departments of colleges and universities and in art schools. Gammell taught just a handful of students at a time, but he did so for decades, right up until his death in 1981. Several of his students have since opened ateliers of their own and have spread this nearly-lost wealth of knowledge to many aspiring painters. My teacher, Paul Ingbretson, studied with Gammell in the 1970s. I spent five years at Ingbretson's atelier and then another half-year with another Gammell-trained painter, Charles Cecil, in Florence, Italy. My generation of artists, two removed from Gammell, have now begun ateliers of their own. So the numbers of traditionally trained painters is increasing which bodes well for the future of art.

The training itself consists mostly of training one's eyes to see accurately. This takes much time trying to draw what is before you. Plaster casts are normally used for this first stage and are drawn with charcoal. A year of drawing casts is about

average. (By a year I mean a school-year, nine months of full-time work, five days a week, six or seven hours a day.) It takes many hours of looking, trying to draw accurately only to be told by the teacher every other day or so when he would give his critiques that the angle is wrong, or the form is not right, etc., etc. After cast drawing, the student will move into something more difficult, the live figure. The figure has been, except for the 20th century, the backbone of the training of western art.

The human figure is a beautiful subject for drawing and painting in the unlimited variations in gesture and pose and body type, yet similar in its basic form of torso, arms, legs and head. While continuing the figure drawing and eventually figure painting for half the day, still-life composition is begun in order to introduce color. Principles of creating interesting and balanced compositions are addressed from this stage on. There is very much that goes into a painting in the putting together of the composition before paint ever goes on the canvas. The character of oil paint, how it mixes together, how to hit accurate color notes and getting color relationships correct are all aspects of the training. Week after week, month after month, the instructor will critique, and slowly the student should begin to see more accurately. Sentences such as, "There is more color in that shadow" or "the color is off there" are repeated over and over again by the instructor. In the fourth and fifth years, if progress is being properly made, the student will begin working with portrait models. All along, a half day is dedicated to figure drawing and eventually, in the last years, to figure painting.

All of this training is designed to teach the student to be able to render in paint beautifully and accurately what is before him, whether it be a figure or a head or a still-life or a landscape. With this skill the artist can portray something, to say something to the viewer. What the modern artist does is to reach for the final goal without first learning the craft. They want to get to the "expression" aspect whereas the traditional painter learns to paint what they see and then uses that to express something. I believe if you are able to render the human figure and face well you will be much more successful at expressing something universal about the human condition than if you are not skilled enough to paint a figure or face.

The process of passing the craft of painting on from master to student takes time. A saying my teacher, Paul Ingbretson, used illustrates this. He would say to a student who was rushing ahead: "You've heard the saying, 'don't just stand there, do something.' Well, I say, don't just do something, stand there." He meant look longer. Study what you are trying to paint more, get to know it. He would also say, find something in your subject, be it a face or a vase, which you delight in, the color shift or gentle shadow or graceful curve, and then get that onto the canvas.

A wonderful by-product of this silent and slow study of nature (always working from life, copying from photographs is not even considered) is the ability to notice aspects of nature more readily, to appreciate the colors of the clouds or the shape of a tree. It is a joy to me to have received this training. I am forever grateful to my teachers, Paul Ingbretson and Charles Cecil and to Ives Gammell who kept the flame alive.

Henry Wingate lives in Madison, Virginia, with his wife, Mary, and three children, Agnes, Henry, and Cecilia. He is currently working on the third in a series of four large paintings of the life of Saint John the Baptist for the church of that name in Front Royal. You can see more of his work at www.henrywingate.com.