



EQUIPPING THE NEXT GENERATION

BY PETER TRIPPI

During their professional training, many American K-12 classroom teachers are led to believe that excellence in visual art comes entirely from within their students — that it is solely instinctual and cannot be taught. In fact, youngsters can be taught the technical aspects of art-making through “skill-based learning.” In music, for example, educators agree that students must learn the skills of notation, scales, and rhythm before they can create original



Sixteen-year-old Katie Li's drawing of a young man's head



Mandy Theis Hallenius sharing information about the Da Vinci Initiative with educators and artists in Ventura, California

music. So why shouldn't they also learn draftsmanship, color theory, and perspective in order to paint something original?

Making a technically sound drawing or painting is laudable, but there is even more at stake here. After all, a key objective of pre-university education is equipping students for real life. Ideally, everyone should graduate from high school able to produce an image — be it a

painting, a map, or a topographical sketch. Why? Because today, more than ever before, a picture is worth a thousand words; making pictures is a crucial way of communicating your ideas to other people. The most creative youngsters — the ones who will have the most options in life — are those with the most skills in their “toolkits” from which to pick and choose. Importantly, acquiring these techniques does not rob them



(TOP LEFT) A classroom teacher draws a still life set-up.
 ■ (ABOVE) A youngster draws basic geometric shapes.
 ■ (LEFT) Artist Kamille Corry (Utah) corrects a classroom teacher's drawing.



of their unique emotional expressiveness or of their innate ability. Put simply, students should never have to compromise their creativity because they don't have the technical skills to execute the ideas they envision.

Although passing visual literacy from generation to generation is not a new idea, in some ways it has become art education's countercultural movement. At its forefront is the Da Vinci Initiative (DVI), a non-profit organization working with classroom teachers nationwide. Its president is Mandy Theis Hallenius, a Seattle-based atelier-trained artist and certified art teacher who co-founded DVI in 2014 with its CEO, Kara Lysandra Ross, an expert in 19th-century art, chief operating officer of the Art Renewal Center (ARC), and occasional contributor to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Inspired by the virtuosity and ingenuity of Leonardo da Vinci, their primary goal is to train classroom teachers in technical skills they can pass to their students. To achieve this, DVI hosts district-wide workshops for teachers and sends trainers to teacher conferences and retreats. Its scholarship program helps underfunded teachers participate in these activities, many of which are eligible for college credit through a partnership with Seattle's Antioch University. Not every teacher can make it to one of these events, of course, so DVI has created video classes that can be downloaded and used in the classroom as teaching aids.

In addition, DVI develops free, downloadable lesson plans that meet the National and Common Core Standards against which most teachers and students are now measured.

Visual art is particularly relevant to Common Core's guidelines for "Mathematical Understanding of Geometry and Ratios" and "English Language Arts Standards and Understanding Art as a Visual Language." Hallenius notes that, when clear technical objectives are presented for what a student should learn from a day's lesson, teachers can readily measure how and what that student is actually learning. Needless to say, this fact makes principals and school boards very happy.

Most often, DVI aims to help students translate three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional drawings and paintings. For a portrait or self-portrait, for example, this entails finding accurate angles of lines in the face, combining those lines to describe the mass of the head, then combining the proportion, shading, and planes of the face. Sometimes moist clay is also molded by students so that they can better understand the construction of the head. All of this fosters their visual intelligence: it is one thing to recognize objects, and quite another to break them down into abstracted shapes, lines, and values, then reconstruct them in a different dimension. Students ultimately learn to "read" the world around them, to analyze what they see, and to appreciate the skills evident in others' creations. A corollary benefit is better hand-eye coordination and finer motor skills; on their first try, students' drawings are often wildly inaccurate, but then they are amazed to discover that — with regular practice — they soon become more proficient because the eye has learned to absorb and organize a higher level of



Artist Jordan Sokol (New Jersey) shows classroom teachers how to draw a portrait.

visual information. Inevitably this builds self-confidence and gives them a sense that they have control over their own development, even in other subject areas or parts of their lives.

Anyone familiar with art history will recognize that there is nothing new in most of this: it is how art was taught almost everywhere in the West right up through the mid-20th century, when “do what you feel” modernist art education took hold. Technical skills that

had accrued over 1,500 years were approaching extinction by the 1980s, when only a few practitioners still understood them. The atelier movement appeared in the nick of time, and now DVT’s approach to integrating these skills into K-12 curricula is increasing students’ visual literacy. It also increases students’ respect for, and curiosity about, the masterworks they see in museums, spurring them to ask how and why those pieces were created — and maybe

even why they still matter.

In her presentations around the U.S., Halenius highlights artworks created by students who recently claimed they were “not good at art.” Illustrated on page 92, for example, is the drawing of a young man’s head made by Katie Li, who was just 16 years old at the time. To encourage such promise, the Art Renewal Center has put its money where its mouth is. Every autumn, readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* enjoy learning which artists won ARC’s annual “Salon” competition for realist artists. Freshly added to its award categories is one reserved for high school students, accompanied by a \$2,500 cash scholarship that the winner can use for further training.

A FORERUNNER, STILL TEACHING

A superb example of a dynamic art teacher who has changed students’ lives is the painter-illustrator Max Ginsburg (b. 1931), who taught at New York City’s High School of Art and Design from 1960 through 1982. (He shifted



(BELOW) All of the paintings (4 x 4 ft. each) made by Max Ginsburg’s seniors at the High School of Art and Design in 1979 ■ (ABOVE) The painting created by student Darryl Zudeck (b. 1961)



to the School of Visual Arts in 1984, and has been at the Art Students League since 2008.) While teaching this high school's exceptionally talented youngsters in ways very similar to DVI's, and, very unlike other faculty members', Ginsburg enabled eight of his seniors to create a series of large oils reflecting student life in 1979; among them were Garin Baker, Ricky Mujica, Mark Teixeira, and Darryl Zudeck. (Older Ginsburg "alumni" include Steven Assael and Costa Vavagiakis.) Today the pictures (illustrated on page 94) can be visited by appointment with the school's principal. Far more accessible are Ginsburg's latest paintings, on view in his exhibition *The Realities of Our Times* at Manhattan's Highline Loft from September 24 through October 12. On September 25, the artist will present an illustrated talk and demo there. The demo will reveal how deliberately he develops his compositions, first designing them, then blocking them in, and finally painting them to completion.

Few K-12 students are lucky enough to have a modern master like Max Ginsburg teaching them, yet the Da Vinci Initiative is working to ensure that all have the opportunity to experience at least some rigorous atelier training before they graduate. Anyone wanting to learn more, or to support DVI's work, should visit davinciinitiative.org.

Information: *Highline Loft*, 508 West 26th Street, Suite 5G, New York, NY 10001, thehighlineloft.com, maxginsburg.com

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MAX GINSBURG (b. 1931), *Foreclosure*, 2011, oil on canvas, 40 x 65 in., on view at the Highline Loft



Earlier this year, Max Ginsburg showed a live audience how to paint a male model dressed in a Civil War uniform within a three-hour period.
