

American Arts

QUARTERLY

Spring 2012



ICAA's Beaux-Arts Atelier

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Traditionalism Comes of Age

Beaux-Arts Atelier: Education for the Contemporary Classicist

by David Masello

The study of beauty is hard work. Although New York's Institute of Classical Architecture & Art's Beaux-Arts Atelier is a rigorous academic program of architectural study, theory cedes wholly to practice. Nina Roefaro, a 25-year-old student at the Atelier, one of eight who are enrolled full-time, describes one of her school's chief tenets:

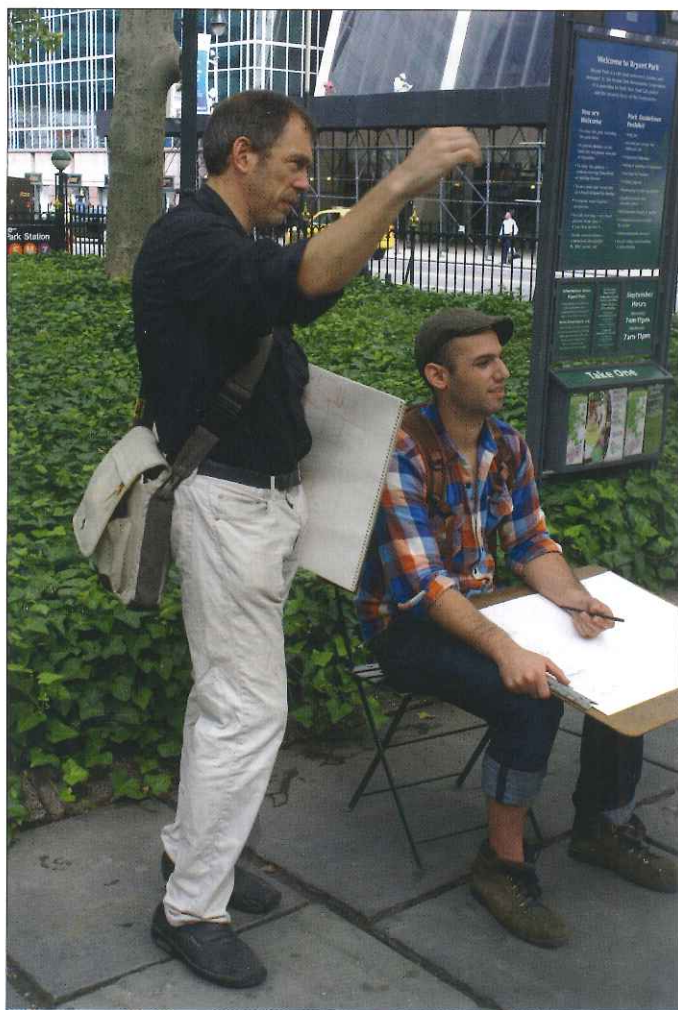
In the Beaux-Arts style of working, you have to make a decision quickly and commit to it. This idea is very much in line with a designer trusting himself or herself, knowing intuitively that the first idea is a very strong one, that it's the one worth pursuing. In this year-long program, you are meant to be very focused—you spend the time *developing* the idea you've conceived rather than *thinking* of an idea. That's the big difference between the Beaux-Arts approach and the modern approach to education.

For a program that is dedicated to the study and practice of architectural design, such a directive to act, rather than ponder, makes sense. After all, architecture is an applied art, not a theoretical one.

Indeed, that statement of purpose seems appropriate for the entablature of a great classical building. Instead, the building in which the students and some ten faculty members work and study, draw and sculpt, build and paint, model and render, all day, five days a week, was built in 1891 for the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesman, a decidedly classical-motif, albeit dour edifice in midtown Manhattan. But taking the elevator to the third floor, a visitor arrives at a nineteenth-century version of the Parthenon, along with elements of Trajan's Arch and the Arch of Augustus. Hanging on the walls, frieze-like, and standing erect on tabletops and ledges are plaster casts of statues and architectural elements from antiquity.

According to Richard Cameron, who co-founded and now heads the Beaux-Arts Atelier, the figures and decorative elements that adorn the classroom spaces belonged to the original Metropolitan Museum of Art. Like so many newly founded encyclopedic museums in late-nineteenth-century America, the original Met did not start with a large inventory of original artworks. To augment their early collection, the museum displayed galleries of plaster casts. At a certain point in the 1930s or 1940s, Cameron, a practicing architectural designer, remarks:

The thought of mixing reproductions with original works of art was



Richard Cameron
and David
Markel sketching
in Bryant Park

considered problematic. So, all of these works were taken from the museum and put in sheds, some of which were buried under the West Side Highway, subject to rain and soot and the elements. When we came upon these works in 2003, it was as if we had uncovered an embarrassing secret the Met had and didn't want to talk about. The works had later been moved into a vast warehouse in the Bronx, and when we first entered and saw these creations, it was like a scene from *Indiana Jones*.

Cameron's then-nascent Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (ICAA), of which the Beaux-Arts Atelier is a part, secured several of the works, largely through the negotiations of architect Peter Pennoyer, who had connections with the Met and now serves as chairman of the ICAA. "These are invaluable

to our students,” says Cameron, pointing to the heavily patinaed and weathered torsos, columns and friezes—analogueous to the bones and ribs and skeletons one would find in an anatomy class. “The making of these objects is an art in itself. Not many people know how to fashion these anymore. And in the case of the actual buildings from which these are derived, these casts are better than the buildings themselves now, because those structures have gone through yet another hundred years of degradation and exposure to the elements. These are extremely important records of casting and the casting process.”

Loss—and the recovery of what has been lost—is yet another central tenet of the Atelier. Up until the advent of modernism in architecture, brought about largely by Germany’s Bauhaus School, whose ideals were embraced in the 1930s and 1940s in America, architects were largely trained not only as technicians, but also as true artists. An architectural education was as much about learning how to paint and sculpt and draw by hand as it was about knowing the methodologies of engineering and the formulas of mathematics. Classicism and all of the lessons and ideals it embodied became as buried as ancient Troy, the final siege, perhaps, being the 1968 student riots in Paris, in which the venerable École des Beaux-Arts was infamously destroyed—actually and academically. In both the visual arts and the practice of architecture, a respect for the classical ideals of proportion and symmetry, the sense of scale related to the human form, the studying of the Orders, the learning of anatomy and figurative drawing, the very embrace of beauty, were all cast aside.

“By the time I arrived at architecture school in the 1980s,” says Cameron, “the Beaux-Arts system of learning was treated with derision. I had to teach the principles to myself. I practically got thrown out of school in Toronto [University of Toronto] for wanting to study these things. It was considered forbidden to even open books on Beaux-Arts architecture, let alone to try to draw like that. ‘It is not of our time,’ was a classic response to my interest in classicism. ‘It doesn’t speak to the current moment.’ Once you destroy something, it’s very hard to rebuild it.”

But that temple to classical knowledge is now being built anew. The moment for that re-emergence has arrived via the Atelier. Cameron, his faculty, students and visiting lecturers are out to prove that the Beaux-Arts tradition cannot only be recreated, but that it is necessary for the practice of architecture. “Our program is foundational,” says Michael Djordjevitch, who co-teaches the Atelier’s architectural design studio with Cameron, along with a course he devised on the urban history of New York, Paris and London. “We teach the fundamental drawing skills and about learning directly from existing buildings. We are about laying the foundations for the study and practice of architecture. Architecture schools these days, even the quasi-traditional ones, assume its students have already mastered these skills and don’t even bother to teach those fundamentals.”

Although the buildings of “starchitects” like Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid

continue to be celebrated, Cameron points out that notable traditional work is being practiced today, by such architects as David Schwarz, Alan Greenberg, John Blatteau, Robert A.M. Stern, Peter Pennoyer, the firm of Ferguson & Shamamian, Andreas Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and, to an extent, Michael Graves, with whom Cameron studied at Princeton University.

After earning architecture degrees in Canada and at Princeton, Cameron taught at the University of Notre Dame's Rome campus. When he returned to New York and was employed by the firm of Ferguson & Shamamian, which remains one of the country's most successful and prolific practitioners of traditionally styled architecture, Cameron happened to visit the New York Academy of Art, then located on Lafayette Street. "I walked in the front door and nearly fell over when I saw a bunch of art students making exquisite drawings from plaster casts from the Met, not unlike the ones we have here," he says. "The whole scene was like an atelier from the nineteenth century, yet these were contemporary art kids from the 1990s." Ironically, the Academy was funded in part by the Pop artist Andy Warhol, who one might think would be wholly divorced from the classical, given his embrace of such elements as Brillo pads and soup cans. Yet, according to Cameron, Warhol was always haunted by the fact that he had missed out on a proper academic art education.

Cameron remembers describing his experience to a co-worker, Don Rattner, and voicing his fantasy scenario of creating an undergraduate architecture program based on the model of the Beaux-Arts school. "Don and I soon created the agenda for what would be a six-week summer program," says Cameron, "never thinking that anything would come of it." Gregory Hedberg, then head of the New York Academy of Art (now director of European paintings and sculpture at the Hirsch & Adler galleries), agreed. What was originally a part of the Institute of Classical Architecture became a full-fledged program known as the Beaux-Arts Atelier. The 2011–12 academic year marks its inaugural class. According to Djordjevitch, the Atelier has already received far more applications for next year's class than there are available spaces. "Many of our current students have an MA in architecture, and they were attracted to our program because, after having gone through academic programs, they discovered that they hardly knew anything about buildings other than those in current architecture magazines," says Djordjevitch.

Enlisting the support of such then-board members as architects Stern, Pennoyer, Graves, Plater-Zyberk and Schwarz, Cameron and Rattner also sought funding from various foundations sympathetic to their agenda. They paid a visit to Richard Driehaus, the billionaire Chicago businessman and arts patron (among his many art ventures is his namesake museum of decorative arts, housed in a nineteenth-century mansion on Chicago's Near North Side). "The moment we presented our case for his support," recalls Cameron, "Driehaus got up from the table and said, 'I'm going to give you the money.' He

decided that quickly. And he is providing support over a ten-year period, which is the next best thing to an endowment." Students who qualify for financial support (tuition for the inaugural year was \$15,000) are recognized as Driehaus Scholars.

"So much new building development lacks a sense of place," says Driehaus from his office in Chicago. "I was, and am, thrilled by the mission of the Beaux-Arts Atelier because I believe that the wisdom and hands-on practical knowledge of classical instruction can help produce architects who design in the human scale with special attention to the existing urban fabric." Michael Graves was the recipient of the 2012 Richard H. Driehaus Prize for Classical Architecture, a \$200,000 prize administered by the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. Making the announcement, Driehaus said: "Beauty, harmony and context are hallmarks of classical architecture, thus fostering communities, enhancing the quality of our shared environment and developing sustainable solutions through traditional materials."

Much of the hands-on practical knowledge of classicism is imparted through the Atelier instructors, all of whom are practicing architects, architectural designers and artists, not just theoretical academicians. "We're not setting out to be a Master's program, but rather to teach architects how to learn art," says Cameron. "This is almost like grammar school for architects." Cameron outlines the tautology of the profession of architecture. He says that so much of what is built today is bad architecture because architects have become disconnected from their profession. Locked into adhering to fashions of design, many architects no longer know how to draw, especially with the advent of CAD (computer aided design) systems. They are actively discouraged from looking to the classical past for design ideas today. "Architects were once trained as artists," stresses Cameron. "An architect once came out of school knowing how to draw, how to paint, how to sculpt. An architect knew the Orders, understood symmetry and proportion and history."

Djordjevitch adds that the difference between the way architecture was taught generations ago and now is as fundamental as this: "Our program engages with the architecture of the last three and a half thousand years," he says. "Most other architecture programs, with the exception of only two in North America (University of Miami and Notre Dame University), deal with architecture only of the present moment. The farthest back they go is the 1930s."

Asked why there is such a pervasive fear among present-day architects of the ideals established by the Beaux-Arts, Cameron responds without pause, "Ignorance." He adds:

I don't mean that in any condescending way. I include myself in this. We were all ill educated by not being raised with what we're teaching here, now. Just as we weren't taught Greek and Latin. So much was jettisoned in

the progressivist idea of what education ought to be. Most of us in school were taught that this, this agenda we have here, was forbidden. That you were a Fascist or a crazy Monarchist or a Stalinist if you were interested in creating classical architecture. Academics in particular decided that we all needed to disconnect ourselves from such history, rather than to see ourselves as part of some continuity with it.

Susanne Smith, a practicing interior designer who took a year off to join the Atelier as a student, says: "I know that I really have gaps in my design education. My education in Switzerland was more rational and analytic and practical. The Beaux-Arts Atelier is a more artistic-based one. This program is making me a better designer, a more artistic designer, a more informed designer. It has refined my eye." Nina Roefaro admits, too, that the program is a realistic amalgam of both the traditional and the modern-day. The students are not confined by nineteenth-century roles or technology. Every instructor and every student comes equipped with a healthy working knowledge of computers and state-of-the-art technology. "I'm very pleased with having learned all about computer design when I was an undergraduate at Syracuse (University) and all of the key technical aspects of interior design and architecture. This program recognizes the importance of all that."

The program, which runs from September to June, ending in a one-week drawing trip in Rome, is divided into five six-week terms. The coursework involves geometry and proportion, the Orders, drawing and drafting, modeling and sculpting, architectural rendering in wash, all coupled with the history and theory of classical architecture and the study of urban history. Djordjevitch helps lay the historical and architectural groundwork for the students prior to their Rome visit. Although that week-long tour of the Eternal City is, ultimately, about work, leisure and observation are also its coveted agendas. "If you look at where people vacation and where they choose to spend their free time," says Djordjevitch, "they travel to places where there are the essential remains of the architecture of our grandparents, and our great grandparents, and our great, great grandparents, etcetera, so, clearly, that architecture of the past is still alive to us, and on a fundamental, visceral level." That fact alone speaks to the necessity of the Atelier.

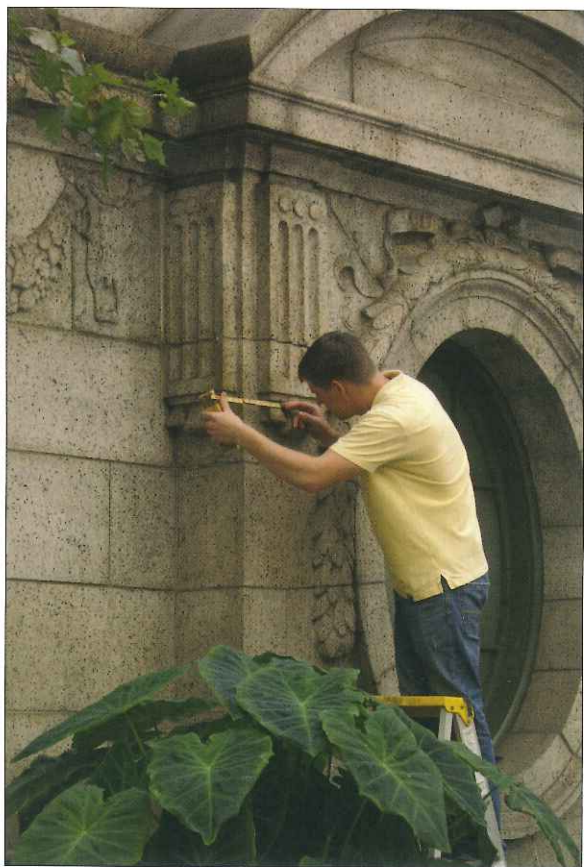
What Roefaro and the other students recognize as another key difference between their traditional academic programs at universities and the agenda at the Atelier is the notion of mentorship. The original Beaux-Arts method fostered the exchange of ideas and experience between the wiser, more experienced upperclassmen and the lowerclassmen. In the case of this program, because there are no distinctions among the students, the upperclassmen, by default, are the instructors. "As the program grows, someday, there will be upper- and lowerclassmen," says Roefaro, "where students will be learning also from each other, as well as from experienced instructors." Cameron echoes

such remarks: "We all work together on the same projects and in the true Beaux-Arts tradition, the less experienced learn from the more experienced. At our school, our instructors are like the senior students, helping the actual students to learn."

All of the current students are working on the design of a monument to commemorate the very spot in New York's Federal Hall where George Washington was inaugurated. To visit the site now is to see a rather forlorn inscribed stone, measuring some six-by-ten feet, marooned in the rotunda, propped up on a dolly and cordoned off with frayed roping. "It's a very sad sight," says Roefaro. "So much history happened there and, yet, this is how it's presented." Indeed, that very degradation of a key American historic site bespeaks the problem of architecture and art today—and the ignorance of, if not lack of respect for, history. "Just a few decades ago, this is exactly the kind of project architecture students would have been engaged in," says Djordjevitch. "Then, students encountered the full spectrum of what architecture does in society. This project we've chosen for the students offers a very rich design exercise, proving that even a small-scale change can make a huge difference in the culture. It represents a small-scale issue in a large-scale, cultural context."

Each of the enrolled students is involved in designing an actual monument and frame for the stone, as well as a specific assignment to design a related element. While one student may be working, for instance, on a commemorative mural in the Federal Hall space, others may be designing a new staircase, interior doors or exterior detailing. "Eventually, we'll put together the main exterior and interior elements that we're all working on," says Roefaro. "In the end, we'll have a new, improved Federal Hall." While Djordjevitch, Cameron and the other instructors certainly hope that one of the designs will actually be realized, their goals are more modest. "Our intention is to produce a set of drawings which we will present to the [New York City] Department of Parks in the hopes that they could set up an exhibition of the ideas," says Djordjevitch.

Another component of students' study is regular field trips to the city's best examples of neoclassical, Beaux-Arts architecture, including Grand Central Terminal, the New York Public Library, the Helmsley Building, the Century Club and others. On a class tour of the New York Yacht Club, a 1900 Warren & Wetmore building situated literally across the street, Roefaro recalls: "The most magical part was experiencing the sheer level of fun that is imbedded in that building. Everywhere you look, you can feel the art and design coming together to create such a beautiful space. It was endlessly inspiring to know that that's possible." Smith, too, speaks of the club as "a fantastic piece of architecture. I was trained as a modernist, and I have great respect for some of the modern work out there, but as a designer, I feel that looking back to antiquity provides lessons that we need to have. Those lessons and standards of the past are what inform us, are what relate to the human body and sense of scale. It's about knowing rationality and proportion." The students also visit



Beaux-Arts Atelier student Mark Hendricks measuring the triglyphs of the Bryant Park Pavilions

some of the city's seminal modernist works. Cameron describes a recent visit with students to Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building: "It's a very profound work of architecture, which makes it worth studying. But also, if I were standing long enough inside the Seagram Building, I'd want to briskly walk downtown into a space like the New York Public Library."

While leading his students on a tour of Lower Manhattan's Beaux-Arts courthouse complex at Foley Square, Cameron walked them past the newly completed 870-foot-tall apartment building by Frank Gehry. Touted as "the tallest residential tower in the Western Hemisphere," the building, known as 8 Spruce Street, is notable on the skyline for its shimmering, corrugated stainless steel façade. It is one of Gehry's more restrained edifices. While at a distance, the tower is impressive, Cameron cites it as a perfect example of why so much of what is built now is not good architecture. "I can't even tell you how bad that building is up close," he says with Socratic passion and annoyance. "It is profoundly shocking at the ground level. The base looks like a developer's big-box store from a Paramus (New Jersey) mall. The wonderful thing about such buildings is that you often don't have to say anything to the students when you take them there. You just keep walking past."

Cameron ticks off a list of his least favorite buildings, including Bernard Tschumi's Lerner Hall Student Center on the Columbia University campus, "everything Robert Moses did in the city" and Paul Rudolph's Art & Architecture Building on the Yale University campus. "I was giving Bob Stern

a hard time when his firm decided to restore that building,” says Cameron. “I said to him, ‘The students tried to burn it down in 1971, and now you want to fix it up and treat it like some historic monument?’” And, yet, Cameron lauds Stern’s other ongoing projects at Yale, where the firm is building new, traditionally styled residential colleges. “They are the first traditional building projects at Yale in something like forty years,” says Cameron. He also led the students on a field trip to Stern’s Manhattan office. “It was very interesting to us to see how traditional architecture is practiced today, especially in a leading firm that employs 250 people,” recalls Smith about that tour.

The eight Beaux-Arts Atelier students do not work in a vacuum, sequestered in some university library at individual study carrels, but rather in a communal classroom. Nor are they the only students in their building, which also houses the Grand Central Academy of Art (GCA), a rigorous three-to-four-year non-accredited art school that adheres to the same methodology as the Atelier (also non-accredited). There, some forty full-time students follow traditional methods of drawing and sculpting. By coincidence, GCA’s director, Jacob Collins, was a student at the New York Academy of Art when Richard Cameron visited it back in the 1990s. Establishing his career as an artist, as well as a series of ateliers, notably the Water Street Atelier, Collins later founded the GCA, which is now under the aegis of the ICAA (Collins serves as a board member). Students from both programs mingle and study with each other. “My fellow students and I always joke about the fact we’re all such huge nerds,” says Roefaro, “that we’re all excited by the details we study. ‘These are my people,’ is something I say. When all of us from the program and from GCA are together, it’s inspiring. To know that we all have come together professionally to make these beautiful projects happen is magic.”

The Beaux-Arts Atelier is located at the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art, 20 West 44th Street, New York, New York 10036. On the web at: beauxartsatelier.org

DAVID MASELLO, who lives and works in New York, is a widely published writer on culture and art. He contributes regularly to *The New York Times* and *Fine Art Connoisseur*, among other publications.