



Robert Grant

# THE MASTERS

ART STUDENTS LEAGUE TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS

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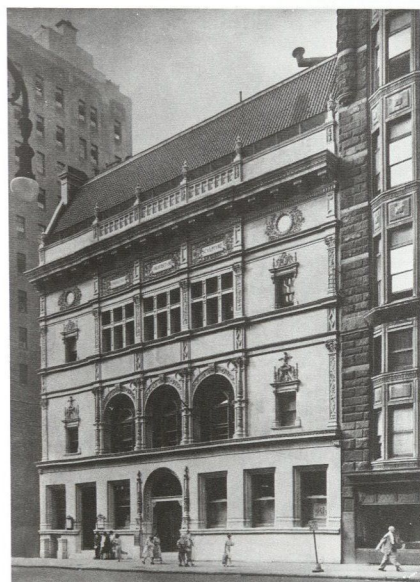






## A Short History of the Art Students League as an Artistic Community

Jillian Russo



The Art Students League, New York, 1940

Founded in 1875, the Art Students League was conceived by a group of rebellious art students who defected from the National Academy of Design, New York's most esteemed art academy. The founding members, many of whom were women, sought reforms to the rigidity of academic art education. First opening in a small skylit space on lower Fifth Avenue, the League remained firmly rooted in the French *atelier* tradition. But its upstart origins gave it a community-oriented character from the outset.

The announcement of the League's creation outlined objectives that included both "the attainment of a higher development in art studies" and "the encouragement of a spirit of unselfishness among its members; the imparting of valuable information pertaining to Art as acquired by any of the members."<sup>1</sup> The founders, aware of women artists' struggles for equality within art academies, established designated women's life-drawing classes. Later the school became one of the first to allow co-ed drawing of the male nude integrating the men and women's life classes by 1898. The school's constitution even stipulated that a woman hold one of the two vice-president positions on the Board of Control, a governance guideline that reflected the founders' commitment to "the cultivation of a spirit of fraternity among Art Students."<sup>2</sup>

This dedication to creating an inclusive artistic community, combined with a flexible enrollment policy and affordable tuition, made the school attractive to artists from all over the world. *The Masters: Art Students League Teachers and Their Students* examines the League's contribution to American art as a site for the exchange of ideas, an incubator that attracted a remarkable lineage of independently minded artists from modern masters Peggy Bacon, Romare Bearden, Isabel Bishop, Elizabeth Catlett, Georgia O'Keeffe, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Louise Nevelson, and Jackson Pollock to contemporary artists Frederick Brosen, Bruce Dorfman, Naomi Campbell, Bob Cenedella, Cornelia Foss, Gary Hill, Zhang Hongtu, Ronnie Landfield, Abby Leigh, Pat Lipsky, James Little, Knox Martin, Adrian Piper, William Scharf, Susan Weil, and Ai Weiwei.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the League hired prominent instructors including Kenyon Cox, William Merritt Chase, James Carroll Beckwith, and Julian Alden Weir, whose teachings incorporated the latest artistic developments from Paris and Munich. Following the French *ateliers*, drawing from the model and from antique casts formed the core of the curriculum. By 1892 enrollment had grown to nearly one thousand and the school joined forces with the Society of American Artists and the Architectural

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WILL BARNET

1911–2012

*Woman Reading*, 1970

Gouache and pencil on board,

36 x 27 in.

PLATE 2

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The Art Students League  
Women's Life Drawing Class, about 1900

League of New York to raise funds to construct its permanent home on 57th Street. Designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh in a French Renaissance style, it opened in 1892.

The new building offered enhanced studio and exhibition space and by 1901 student concours exhibitions became a central part of the educational experience. Concours is a French word (meaning “competition” or “examination”) derived from the challenging *concours des places* examination required for acceptance in the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts*. At the League, the concours functioned both as a competition and as a community event. While each instructor had autonomy over the structure of their own class and created model poses or other assignments of varying lengths, every month students participated in a class exhibition. The concours offered students the opportunity to share their work and to compete for prizes, scholarships, and red-dot awards. This tradition continues today, with each class participating in a weeklong exhibition between January and May, during which instructor judges distinguish exceptional works with a red dot. In the late nineteenth century, the concours presented a significant opportunity for exposure for women artists.<sup>3</sup>

In the decades that followed, many women launched their careers at the League. Peggy Bacon studied with Kenneth Hayes Miller, John Sloan, and George Bellows. And Isabel Bishop studied with Max Weber, Frank Vincent Dumond, and Miller. Both went on to become influential participants in the art world and admired League instructors.

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THOMAS HART BENTON

1889–1975

*The Artist's Studio*, n.d.

Pencil on paper, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

Private collection

PLATE 3

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YASUO KUNYOSHI

1889–1953

*Virginia City, Nevada, 1941*

Gouache on gessoed panel,

12 x 18 in.

PLATE 4

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PEGGY BACON

1895–1987

*Lunch at the League*, 1918

Drypoint,  $5\frac{7}{8} \times 8$  in.

Collection of Bella Ruth Ehrenpreis

PLATE 6

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Perhaps the most renowned was Georgia O'Keeffe, who won a scholarship award to study at the League's summer school at Lake George for her painting *Dead Rabbit and Copper Pot*, created in William Merritt Chase's painting class in 1908. In 1976, O'Keeffe vividly recalled her experience in Chase's class:

Everyday we all had to paint a new still life. Then, once a week, William Merritt Chase came in to criticize. As soon as he arrived in the office downstairs everyone in the building knew it and we all got out our five or six canvases to be criticized. He wore a high silk hat, rather tight fine brown suit, light-colored spats and gloves, a carnation in his lapel. He had a beard and moustache and glasses on a cord. There was something fresh and energetic and fierce and exciting about him that made him fun. His love of style—color—paint as paint—was lively.<sup>4</sup>

O'Keeffe's experience at the League not only helped established her tenacious approach to her artistic career, but also spurred her first visit to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery to view Rodin's drawings along with fellow Chase students.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the League's formative years there are several pivotal periods within its history that further defined the community as accessible and influential. Throughout the 1930s, as the Harlem Renaissance attracted young African American artists to New York, the League became an important resource in tandem with the New Deal Federal Art Projects and the Harlem Community Art Center, which was spearheaded by

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MARK ROTHKO

1903–1970

*Subway*, about 1937

Oil on canvas,  $29\frac{7}{8} \times 35\frac{7}{8}$  in.

Collection of Christopher Rothko

PLATE 5

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Exhibition of drawings from  
George Grosz's class in the League's  
first floor galleries, about 1935



Augusta Savage and Charles Alston. Chicago painter and designer Charles Dawson, who went on to be one of two black artists on the Public Works of Art Project in Illinois along with Archibald J. Motley Jr., was the first black artist to attend the League in 1907. From 1936–37, Romare Bearden, whose family had close ties to the cultural leaders of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, studied with George Grosz at the Art Students League. Bearden recalled that Grosz advised him: “I want you to just draw the model’s hand, or maybe just the face. Just use the whole paper and draw it here because I want you to really observe.”<sup>6</sup> This teacher/student relationship, which shaped Bearden’s interest in collage, was made possible by the League’s 1932 invitation to Grosz to be a guest lecturer, facilitating his escape from Nazi Germany and eventual U.S. citizenship in 1938.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Robert Blackburn, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett were all drawn to the League’s strong printmaking department. Blackburn followed his formative art education at the Harlem Community Art Center with lithography classes by Will Barnet and painting classes with Vaclav Vytlacil. Between 1941 and 1945, White and Catlett enrolled in a graphics class with Harry Sternberg. At the time, White was creating a mural for the Hampton Institute and Catlett was also studying sculpture with Ossip Zadkine and teaching at the Washington Carver School in Harlem.

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GEORGE GROSZ

1893–1959

*Two Women*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 33 1/4 x 27 in.

PLATE 7

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PAT LIPSKY

b. 1941

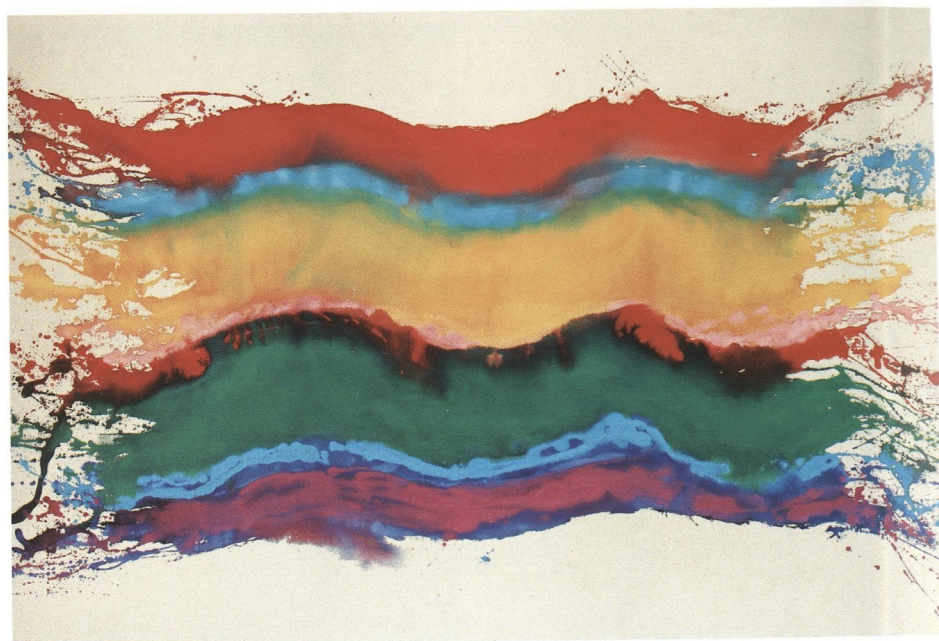
*Springs Fireplace*, 1969

Acrylic on canvas, 62<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 94 in.

Courtesy of the artist

PLATE 8

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The end of World War II brought an influx of young artists to Manhattan, many of whom enrolled at the League. Thousands attended on the GI Bill including Donald Judd, Paul Jenkins, Knox Martin, and Robert Rauschenberg, who, along with his wife Susan Weil, studied with Maurice Kantor. The teaching staff was expanded at this time and included the hiring of Charles Alston, the League's first African-American instructor, in 1950. Jacob Lawrence and Norman Lewis, who had both studied and worked with Alston in Harlem, also joined the faculty, in 1968 and 1972, respectively. Alston was an influential teacher whose students included Rauschenberg as well as current faculty members Bruce Dorfman and Pat Lipsky. Lipsky, with Alston's encouragement, created her first abstract painting, which became a foundation for her later involvement with Lyrical Abstraction.

The League's students of the 1960s and 70s who went on to establish prominent careers also include Ronnie Landfield, Abby Leigh, and Gary Hill. Landfield, who studied with Stephen Greene in the early 1960s, explored minimalism and hard-edged painting before becoming a pioneer of stain painting and Lyrical Abstraction. Abby Leigh studied with Will Barnet from 1973–76 and was encouraged by him to pursue a professional career as a painter. Largely self-trained, she has experimented with a variety of materials including oil, pigment, wax, smoke, and, most recently scraped and hammered dibond aluminum, harnessing their properties to create paintings that are elegant and ethereal. Gary Hill, while studying with Bruce Dorfman in Woodstock, began working on metal wire sculptures. Inspired by the sounds the sculptures made, he



shifted his focus to video, electronic sound, and performance. His 1989 single-channel video *Site Recite (a prologue)* pairs found natural objects such as bones, skulls, and butterflies with a voice-over narrative about time, perception, movement, and change to explore lifecycles and vanitas themes.

Along with the cultural blossoming of Harlem during the interwar years, and the post-abstract expressionist circle that convened at Max's Kansas City, the East Village art scene of the 1980s attracted students to the League. The most notable are Chinese artists Ai Weiwei and Zhang Hongtu, who studied with Bruce Dorfman and Richard Pousette-Dart. Their early works document their involvement with cultural and political activities in the East Village and chronicle their reaction to the Cultural Revolution in the context of the freedom of New York's bohemian circles.

The passage of such a disparate group of artists through the League's studios, which continues today, attests to the school's appeal as a place to master technical skills and as a community that enables catalyzing conversations. The practice since its inception of offering a variety of scholarship and work-study opportunities to support emerging artists and to help make artistic study possible for anyone who wants to pursue it, remains a core part of the League's mission. The esprit de corps that was one of the League's founding tenets, facilitated an exchange of ideas that, as Mara Miller argues in her essay for this catalogue, shaped American modernism. We are grateful to 511 Projects and Hirschl & Adler for undertaking this exhibition celebrating and re-evaluating the Art Students League's exceptional history.

1. Announcement by Edward Prescott, Chairman of the Board of Control, quoted in Marchal E. Landgren, *Years of Art: The Story of the Art Students League of New York* (New York: Robert McBride and Company, 1940), p. 18.
2. The Art Students League of New York Constitution and Bylaws, adopted March 26, 1878, Article II.
3. Jillian Russo, "Concours: Painting and the Public at the Art Students League," in James L. McElhinney, ed., *Art Students League of New York on Painting: Lessons and Meditations on Mediums, Styles and Methods* (Berkeley, California: Watson-Guption, 2015), pp. 282–84.
4. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. Henri Gent, "Oral History Interview with Romare Bearden", June 29, 1968, digital transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.