

Classical Life Drawing Studio: Lessons and Teachings in the Art of Figure Drawing by James Lancel McElhinney and the Instructors of the Art Students League of New York. New York and London: Sterling, 2010. Illustrated, 207 pp.

Review by Gail Leggio

The current realism revival has stimulated interest in a style of art instruction that, for much of the twentieth century, was largely dismissed as irrelevant. Today, many new ateliers firmly committed to the academic curriculum have sprung up. In this situation, the history of the Art Students League of New York is worth a closer look. Founded in 1875, in the heyday of the Beaux-Arts system, the institution changed over the decades to reflect new influences, and the faculty roster included artists as diverse as William Merritt Chase and Hans Hofmann. But the League, whatever the vagaries of fashion in art, continues to offer figure drawing to those who want it. More loosely structured than most of the contemporary traditionalist academies, the League was and remains a pluralist environment, but classical life drawing has always been a significant part of the mix. The authors of *Classical Life Drawing Studio* approach the subject from several perspectives.



Josephine Mallonce, academic drawing, c. 1912–13,
student of George Bridgman

ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK, NEW YORK CITY

McElhinney provides background. He defends the classicism underlying the traditional academy: “A popular and wrongheaded take on classical principles is that they are either static formulas...or a recipe book of proportions.” Instead, he argues, they offer “a visual language that intersects with similar lan-

guages of poetic form” and other arts, “measuring how the world is expressed as a balance between nature and ideas.” This definition is serviceable enough, but the meatier part of McElhinney’s Introduction briefly outlines the atelier tradition and then describes the often-contentious history of the competing academies that arose in New York City as the United States came of age as a nation that took art seriously. Visual literacy was recognized as an important part of a civilized education. McElhinney reproduces a page from John Gadsby Chapman’s *American Drawing Book* (1847) and cites Chapman’s claim that “Anyone who can learn to write can learn to draw.”

In mid-nineteenth-century American academies, there was a progression of exercises: “Students who mastered the rudiments of drawing might be allowed to copy old master compositions from engravings—a process from which most students gained an understanding of pictorial composition.” Drawing from casts, replicas of ancient and Renaissance sculpture, was the next step. Cast collections were a valued component of the fledgling American museums, which did not own as much original art as they would have wished. As the museums strengthened their holdings and, more significantly, as artistic fashion changed, cast collections were eventually relegated to storage or disposed of altogether. With the ascent of contemporary traditionalist art, attitudes have changed once again, and Jacob Collins’s Grand Central Academy of Art proudly informs potential students that they will have access to 200 casts, donated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America. The twenty-first-century ateliers value casts, although they are not as rigorous in their sequencing of pedagogic tasks as the nineteenth-century institutions, which required a good many preliminaries before a student could join a life class.

For aspiring Gilded Age professional artists, a thorough education called for a pilgrimage to the ruins, churches and museums of Europe; training at one of the European capitals’ art academies was highly desirable. By the time the Art Students League was founded in 1875, Paris, Munich and Düsseldorf were favorite choices. Artist-instructors came from both camps: William Merritt Chase and John Henry Twachtman were exponents of the more painterly German schools; Kenyon Cox and John Sartain build on Beaux-Arts training. McElhinney suggests: “Lively debate promoted a tolerant environment that welcomed diverse instructional philosophies.” The Art Students League arose, in part, from students’ dissatisfaction with the older National Academy of Design. Chase came to teach at the League after a public falling out with Robert Henri, whom Chase had hired to teach at the New York School of Art (originally known as the Chase School). The New York School of Art was generally considered more progressive, the League, more conservative. But those categories are slippery, at best: Georgia O’Keeffe credited Chase as a formative influence. The rivalry between the School and the League, not dis-

cussed in the book under review, was explored in a 2007 exhibition, “Painterly Controversy: William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri,” at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut.

The bulk of *Classical Life Drawing Studio* is devoted to reproductions of studio drawings: around seventy-five pages to historic examples from the collection, a group curated by Pamela Koob, and a hundred pages to contemporary examples by instructors and their students. In the historical material, the curator has not cherry-picked the collection looking for famous names, and recent examples do not have the quality of finished drawings by contemporary master draftsmen such as Steven Assael. This is a solid studio product, valuable in its own right and illuminating as a record of visual thinking. There are many cast drawings among the historic sheets, and both sections focus on *académies*, figure drawings based on long poses.

Many of the historic drawings are by women. Women were admitted into the major ateliers of the United States earlier than in Europe. Among the drawings reproduced in the book are a chiaroscuro-heavy study of an armless goddess statue (1894) by Mary Tynedale, a female nude by Ethel Turnbull (c. 1898) and a very fine male figure by Katherine Hall (1914–15), a student of George Bridgman. Looking up at the model from a low vantage point, Hall focuses on the head and shoulders, just sketching in the body from waist to feet but still, in the twist of the body, suggesting potential movement. A 1904 antique drawing, based on a Michelangelo cast, by Hilda Parton, a student of Kenyon Cox, is more fully worked out. Parton deploys shadow and highlight effectively. All of these drawings are executed in charcoal on cheap paper. The finished drawings of a master draftsman, in contrast, entail a carefully considered choice of paper and, frequently, a prepared ground. Yet these work-product studio drawings have their own aesthetic appeal, which the designers of *Classical Life Drawing Studio* have honored by, in many cases, devoting a full page to an individual work.

The second section of illustrations focuses on a number of today’s instructors. Instructors select historic drawings from the collection, which they discuss in a brief statement about their teaching philosophy. Examples of the instructors’ work and that of their students follow. *Philosophy* may be too elevated a word for these reports from the trenches. The best of them are peppered with anecdotes: Frank Mason recalling how, as a seven-year-old boy, he watched Attilio Piccirilli carve marble, Leonid Gervits discussing his education at the Repin Institute in Russia, Harvey Dinnerstein criticizing the limitations of the figurative classes in the 1940s, when modernism was in ascendance.

The drawings by today’s instructors and students are both less conventionally academic and more polished, in many cases, than the historic works. Ellen Eagle works in pastel on pumice board, a support which provides a rich textural tooth. Shadows cocoon her nude figures, illustrating the imperative to

be “attentive to the way in which the light reveals and veils form and creates atmosphere.” Michael Grimaldi builds on the antique cast study for *Judgment of Paris* (2007), a complex graphite drawing of three sculptures, seen and lit from below. Dramatic shadows play against the ceiling, and the diagonal thrust of the barely sketched platform on which the sculptures are mounted makes for a dynamic composition. Toned paper gives warmth and richness to McElhinney’s nude portraits in pastel and Conté crayon. Nelson Shanks, who dislikes what he calls “the pseudo-classical outline,” is represented by a couple of oil sketches, including the luminous *Young Male Wearing Turban* (n.d.). His students bring a painterly quality to their drawings. Jon de Martin’s *Triton* (n.d.), in sanguine and white chalk, and Lea Colie Wight’s *Tree-Figure Study* (n.d.), in red Conté crayon, are impressive explorations of musculature and chiaroscuro. There are other noteworthy student drawings: McElhinney student Tim Buttké’s *Seated Nude* (2007), in black-and-white Conté crayon on toned paper; Dinnerstein student Patricia Graham Arrott’s *Female Nude Torso* (n.d.), in graphite, which has an acid sharpness; Grimaldi student Eddie Nino’s charcoal *Standing Female Nude* (n.d.).

The visual evidence does not yield tidy conclusions about the nature of classical studio drawing, but then the Art Students League has never been a dogmatic institution. In many ways, the League’s history reflects the course of art education in the United States, and this somewhat scattershot but ultimately fascinating volume brings to life a significant part of the story. It is especially heartening to see, in these excellent color reproductions, how visually literate, passionate and accomplished these student-artists were. These are skills and attitudes worth reclaiming. *Classical Life Drawing Studio* was named one of the Best Books of 2010 by the editors of *Library Journal*, who described it as “a landmark volume.”