

# Alexey Steele:

## Pursuing Passion and a Personal Vision

**Alexey Steele** is not the type of teacher who imposes strict guidelines or rules on his students. Rather, he offers an encouraging educational environment for artists to discover their own personal vision while he demonstrates his own passionate pursuit of the great artistic and cultural ideals of the past.

—  
by **Michael Zakian**

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Alexey Steele demonstrated painting techniques during a workshop in his Los Angeles studio that was sponsored by the California Art Club.



Photos this article: Olga Vlasova and Michael Zakian



**S**tepping into Alexey Steele's studio is like entering a fantastic time warp. Set in a cavernous, industrial space south of downtown Los Angeles, his massive studio would dwarf that of most other artists. But at 7,500 square feet, it is perfectly suited to both his oversized personality and his grand ambition of reviving the humanistic Renaissance-Baroque tradition in our own time.

Filled with an amazing array of paintings, plaster casts, props, and artifacts, it looks and feels like an Old Master atelier transported into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Steele knows the grand European tradition of painting extremely well because he experienced it firsthand. A native of Russia, he is the son of an academically trained painter, Leonid Steele, who is an acclaimed social realist of the Soviet School. Steele followed in his father's footsteps and studied at the V. Surikov Moscow State Academy Art Institute before he moved with his parents to Southern California when he was 23 years old. As a young artist working in Los Angeles, he set out to bridge two cultures and synthesize two traditions by combining what he learned at the Russian academy with a new appreciation of California light and color.

A hallmark of Steele's life and art is passion—a passion for painting and for promoting the highest ideals of great culture and fine art. He recently shared these principles in his characteristic exuberant manner during a three-day workshop sponsored by the California Art Club. Rather than impose strict rules and methods, Steele served as an inspiring guide who enthusiastically encouraged participants to pursue their own manners and styles. "Everyone has the capacity to figure out the process of painting," he announced at the beginning of the workshop. "Your mind will give you the answers, if you ask the right questions. My job is not to give you answers. I want to help you ask the right questions." Painting, he noted, "is simple, it follows basic logical principles. Difficulties arise

when our brains confuse what we see." By posing the right questions—and by offering helpful insights—Steele created a learning experience during which everyone gained a new understanding of their craft and of their goals as artists.

### Light

Steele began the workshop by drawing attention to the visual characteristics of the studio environment. "Space is your principal tool," he stated. "It defines the scope and range of your painting." He explained that he selected this particular location for his studio because he could add 19-foot-high skylights, which bathe the interior with natural light. "I do not believe in artificial light," he told the students. "It does not flicker or vibrate in the same way as natural light. I want my light to be alive." In Southern California normal daylight can be blinding and intense. "Light needs to drop a distance so that it cools and becomes diffuse," he explained. "Sunlight is usually too strong and too hot." When a student asked about the many baffles and scrims covering parts of the skylights, Steele remarked on the importance of controlling your light. "Although I need an abundance of even light when I

**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE AND BELOW RIGHT**  
Steele's studio is a vast warehouse modified to suit the needs of a contemporary realist. He added skylights so that he can paint under filtered natural light, which he feels is more vibrant and alive than artificial light.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW LEFT**  
A camera can record only a small percentage of the visual information seen by the human eye. Steele encouraged students to rely on a broad range of their perceptions and emotions to add fullness and life to their paintings.







work on big canvases, when I'm working on smaller figure studies, I close or dim down many of the skylights to create low focused light falling on the model. It allows me to see color better. In this way, color becomes more subtle yet more powerful. It glows." To illustrate his point, he mentioned the artwork of the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian realists, such as Repin, pointing out that in Russia, "the permanent overcast gives you rich color relationships."

The workshop was structured so that Steele painted his demonstration and lectured on the first day. On the second and third days, participants painted the same model in the same pose while the instructor offered advice and critiques. He took time to arrange the model so that there was a sensuous twist between her rib cage and pelvis. "The torso is the origin of what we call a 'plastic language,' he explained. "Begin by looking for the dynamics between the shoulders and hips, as this main dimensional volume of the body defines the weight equilibrium." He had adjusted the skylights so that the upper torso would be in shadow and the legs in full light to help participants notice subtle shifts in color and value. "Pay attention to what you see," he advised. "A good model teaches you. What you take in visually becomes a source for your ideas."

For Steele, painting is a deeply humanistic endeavor and is

essential to maintaining the vitality and health of our culture. He drew attention to the model stand and talked about how the task of painters differs dramatically from simple photography. "We live in a world of cameras," he pointed out. "Our society thinks photographic images are the ultimate truth. But the camera can only record a very narrow spectrum of tone in either a light or a dark range, never both. It also has a very limited ability to read color. The human eye can see so much more. If a camera snaps one frame at, say, one-sixtieth of a second, it captures only a tiny part of reality. Life painting takes hours or days and involves the full richness of human experience. Processing such enormous amounts of information requires making thoughtful personal choices. As an artist you have to synthesize thousands of seconds of seeing—and reflect deeply on each step of the process. That is why painting offers so much more than a snapshot."

#### ABOVE

In his critiques, Steele continually urged painters to sharpen their observational skills. "If your painting does not look right," he explained, "the problem usually lies in not looking carefully enough. Always rely on the visual information before you. The model is never wrong."

#### OPPOSITE PAGE (ALL)

Steele painted in an assertive, determined stance, projecting his body's physical energy into his canvas. He believes that artists must instill this vitality into their image if they want their paintings to be alive.



## Steele's Materials

### PALETTE

Williamsburg and Utrecht oils in the following colors:

- cadmium yellow medium
- yellow ochre
- cadmium orange
- cadmium red medium
- alizarin crimson
- cobalt blue
- cobalt turquoise
- viridian
- raw sienna
- burnt sienna
- raw umber
- burnt umber
- zinc white
- Mars ivory black

### BRUSHES

- Escoda, Utrecht, and Da Vinci bristles, sizes 1 through 100
- Da Vinci acrylic flats, sizes 1 through 32
- Escoda kolinsky sable, size 0

### CANVAS

- oil-primed stretched linen or linen board





## Demonstration: Das Kapital



### Step 1

Steele began this demonstration by encouraging everyone to spend time on the block-in drawing. "Use straights to define masses and to establish the location of your figure on your canvas," he advised. Occasionally he will let his drawing sit overnight so that he can reassess relationships the next day with a fresh eye.

### Step 2

He next advocated using a rich middle-value color to lay in the mass of the figure. "The real beauty of the color lies in your middle-value tones," Steele said. "Get this color right. It provides the key to the rest of your painting."



2



3



4

### Step 3

Once he had established a basic middle-value color for the figure, Steele began to model form. "Modeling involves adding and turning away," he explained. "It is an ongoing process of lightening and darkening. You only need three values to produce volume. Once you are within the proper range, you can shape anything."

### Step 4

"Finish is not adding more detail," the artist explained. "It is a further refinement and subdivision of what you have established on your canvas. Your goal is not to fill your painting with countless details. You want to further refine your large statement."



THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:

### Das Kapital

2010, oil, 30 x 30.  
Collection the artist.





Steele began his demonstration by laying in a broad wash of a neutral dark tone and then proceeded to block in the broad masses of the figure and bed. He had sound advice for handling the eccentric shape of the figure's body: "I chose the extreme foreshortening of this pose to help you combine figure drawing and composition," he said to the students. "Think of everything you see as a series of two-dimensional lines and shapes, with a dimensionally foreshortened object always inside. Foreshortening is easier to understand once you realize that regardless of which angle you view an object from, part of it is always foreshortened. It is simply the relationship of objects in space to you as the viewer. One simple way to deal with foreshortened elements is to always look for and contrast them with those that are not."

As Steele worked on his initial lay-in, a student remarked his surprise that the instructor was using such a large brush for the beginning stages. "You can paint amazing detail with a size 30 brush and fill large areas with a size 2," Steele explained. "The brush is simply a way to record your thinking. By stretching the limits of your tools, you develop your skills as a painter." The instructor encouraged everyone to find their own set of materials. "There is no one selection of materials that is superior to another, just as there is no one right way to capture what you see," Steele said. "My choice of brushes and pigments is an extension of my body and works

for me, but it may not work for you. Select the materials and colors you feel most comfortable with. Then explore how you can use them to solve visual problems."

### Value & Color

Once he finished the block-in of the figure and the general composition, Steele switched his attention to laying in color. He advised the class to mix a generous amount of a rich, middle-value flesh tone to serve as a foundation for the entire figure. "Look for this general middle-value color of the model's skin by finding a spot somewhere between pure light and pure shadow," the artist said. He used white, raw sienna, and alizarin crimson as a base, adding burnt sienna, cobalt blue, and viridian to cool and adjust the color. "Take the time to get this first color right," he advised. "The true beauty of color is in your middle-value tones. These values establish the key of your painting. It is very subjective, and everyone will see it differently. Do not fight your decisions. Embrace them as the beginning of your personal style."

As Steele made the transition from lay-in to modeling, he emphasized the importance of observing and understanding the range of values. "Be careful to keep your light and shadow ranges separate," he said. "If you do that, you can go on to develop each range however you like." After you have established a certain tonal range, you can advance to modeling. "Modeling

**"Everyone has the capacity to figure out the process of painting. Your mind will give you the answers, if you ask the right questions. My job is not to give you answers. I want to help you ask the right questions."**

involves adding and taking away," the artist explained. "It is an ongoing process of lightening and darkening. Once you are within the proper tonal range, you can shape anything. Remember, you need only three values to model a form: a light, a midtone, and a shadow. You can then break each value into three smaller parts, break those parts into smaller parts, and so on. If you are comfortable with a certain value range, stick to that range to turn the form in space. You will find that you can easily shape form, and your values will be harmonious. Develop the ability to stay precisely within your chosen range."

Keeping your values consistent will help you make a logical transition to using color. "Color harmony arises from value harmony," Steele said. "It is helpful to think of value as tone, just as in music. Make the midtones talk to one another, then focus on your range of lights and darks. If you add color to this consistent system of values, your colors will be in concert with one another." In order to introduce color successfully, an artist needs to observe how it functions within his or her subject. Steele asked the class to look carefully at transitions. "Transitions are never just lighter or darker," he noted. "They are also warmer or cooler—a change in temperature. Color transitions help move the eye around forms."

In order for students to master the shift from value to color on their palettes, Steele recommended they rely on different pigments for specific functions. The artist conceptually divides his palette into a series of earth and mineral colors, turning to each set to produce particular results. "Build your values with earth tones, such as ochre or umbers, to establish a tonal range," he advised. "They are the muscle and force of your palette. Then you state and clarify your color range using the mineral colors, such as the cadmiums, cobalt, and viridian. They are the violins that add the lyric melody."

### Personal Vision

On the second day of the workshop, the participants worked on their own paintings. Steele provided encouragement as



#### OPPOSITE PAGE

After absorbing Steele's passion and dedication to painting, students worked on their own canvases with a focused intensity.

#### ABOVE

Steele emphasized the fact that figure painting "is always a personal interpretation based on your individual point of view. You are your main tool. If you have confidence in your decisions, your art will be stronger."

each student began to establish his or her composition and color key. His suggestions for improvement were always insightful. To assist people who struggled with their drawing, he said, "Check your angles with your brush. And reduce your subject to straight lines; it helps you build shapes correctly. Also, use cross-references. Employ as many systems of checking and execution as possible, such as diagonals and plumb lines—cross-checked by thinking of a form in terms of a block or cylinder—to help you accurately capture your composition on canvas."

As an instructor, Steele has a remarkable and rare capacity to focus on improving each student's own vision and style, rather than imposing his own method. When one painter remarked that she thought her color range might be too blue, he advised her to explore it, rather than change it. "Each individual interprets color differently," he said. "As you continue to model your forms, simply stay in your established value range." By showing her how to work within





ABOVE LEFT

Steele urged everyone to be fully conscious of every decision. “Even Rembrandt and Michelangelo made mistakes,” he said. “But there are no real mistakes. It is all part of the process. You gain knowledge with each brushstroke.”

ABOVE

Steele has the ability to work with artists of all levels of ability—and bring out their best. He encouraged everyone to pay attention to the qualities of the image evolving on their canvases. “Everyone’s personal approach is unique and forms the basis of his or her individual style,” he explained.

## About the Artist

**Alexey Steele** was born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1967 and began his art training at an early age in the studio of his father, Leonid Steele. He furthered his professional education at the V. Surikov Moscow State Academy Art Institute under Ilya Glazunov. In 1990, Steele moved to Los Angeles, where he has established a career painting large-scale figurative works, commissioned portraits, and plein air landscapes, in addition to advocating fine art’s greater role in everyday society. He is a signature artist member of the California Art Club and the founder of Classical Underground, a unique platform showcasing the interconnection of classical forms in music and visual art. He has exhibited at the Fleicher Museum, in Scottsdale, Arizona; Bowers Museum, in Santa Ana, California; Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County; and the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University, in Malibu, California. Articles on his work have appeared in various publications, including *American Artist*, *Southwest Art*, *Fine Art Connoisseur*, *Gramophone*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2009 he received both the Artemis Award, in Athens, Greece, and the Gusi Peace Prize, in the Philippines. Most recently he became the founder of [www.novorealism.com](http://www.novorealism.com), arguing for a new role for contemporary realism within modern culture. He is represented by American Legacy Fine Arts, in Pasadena, California. For more information on Steele, visit his website at [www.alexeysteele.com](http://www.alexeysteele.com).

her chosen color key, Steele helped her produce a fine figure study distinguished by a slightly cooler tonality. “No two artists see the world exactly alike,” he explained. “Rembrandt perceived reality in low light with dark shadows and lost edges. Egon Schiele saw everything as clear volumes defined by hard, razor-sharp lines. Both artists produced powerful renderings of form. Neither view is right or wrong. That is the beauty of a personal vision.”

When a student asked how to handle edges, Steele immediately responded: “Edges arise directly from the successful rendering of form. Strict rules for hard or soft edges can become shallow tricks that lead to formulaic paintings. Focus on modeling form first. If you are looking at your subject closely and as a whole, the correct edges will follow. Do not think of drawing and painting as separate processes. Remember that with every brushstroke, your job is to produce form. Great artists such as Velázquez were able to capture correct color, value, and form in each brushstroke. This integral unity is what separates great art from good art.”

During breaks, Steele engaged the class in lively discussions of art and its function in society. He showed students his sketches for new, large multifigure works that drew upon his studies from life. He even brought out work he did as a teenage art student in Moscow, as well as a phenomenal academic drawing created by his father at the Repin Art Institute, in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), Russia. In between critiques, the instructor returned to



ABOVE

Steele represents a continuation and a revival of the European academic tradition. He proudly shared a remarkably accomplished figure study drawn by his father while he was a student.

could use further work. Someone asked, “How do you know a painting is complete?” Steele answered, “Finish is not a question of putting more in. It is just a matter of increasing refinement and formulating your choices. As you work, you are further breaking down value ranges. It’s not necessarily about adding more detail but rather about making finer and subtler subdivisions of tone. I can finish a painting in an hour, a day, or a week. It becomes a question of how much you want to say. But even when producing a large painting over months or years, your ultimate goal should be to retain the freshness of the quick study.”

Steele is able to maintain pictorial freshness by always keeping his vision and image full of life. “If it is not alive, then you have a dead picture,” he declared. “The key to any work of art is vitality. Some of my classical musician friends call this quality *forza*. This Italian term refers to a combination of strength and daring, power and precision. To achieve this, a painter must coordinate his eye, mind, and hand in complete unity to make form, value, and color with every stroke. In powerful and fluid paintings these connections are immediate. In tentative paintings they are slow and hesitant.”

his easel to add finishing touches to his own painting. Although his demonstration was essentially complete, he felt there were a few areas that

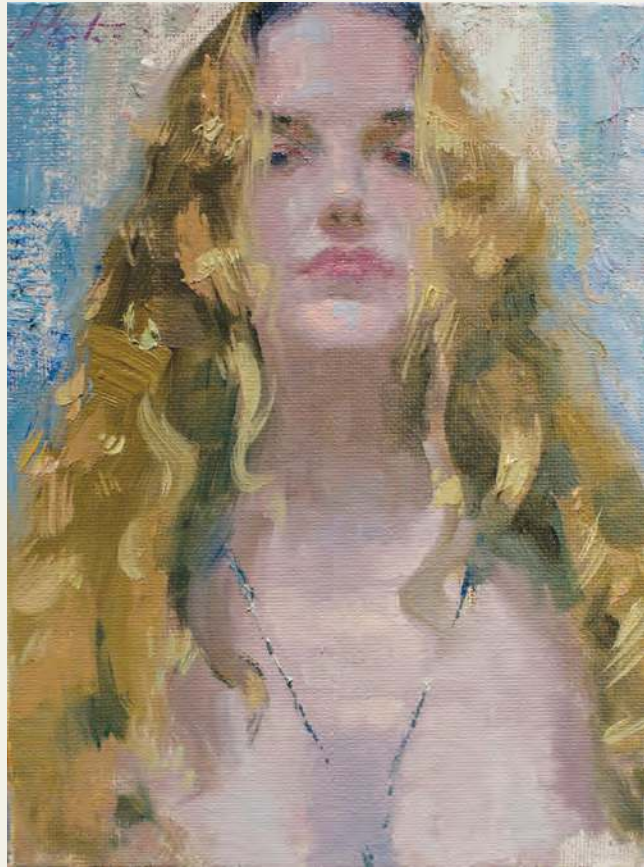
For Steele, art is a passionate battle. It is not only a struggle to render your subject well but also an opportunity to perfect your own sensibility and life. “It’s like Zen,” he said, “a lifelong pursuit of simplicities.” He drew an analogy to Bushido, the Japanese philosophy of the samurai warrior. “Like Bushido, art is a personal quest,” he stated. “You are refining yourself. The artist is in a position of ultimate power. Soldiers use lethal force to kill. Painters use vital force to recreate life itself, and that is art. Focus on the positive qualities of life and you will grow as an artist.”

The workshop concluded with a group critique during which everyone reviewed their progress and talked about what they had learned. Steele encouraged everyone to continue their practice beyond the workshop, particularly through drawing, as there are “no shortcuts.” With his infectious enthusiasm, he reminded everyone to pursue an individual path. “Good painting is never about following rules,” he stated. “In a way, it is about not knowing what you are doing—so you can figure it out as you go. Art is a mental process. Your hand will automatically respond to what your mind is focused upon. Your training is done best by setting specific tasks and solving the problems yourself.” ■

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## Steele's Work



ABOVE  
**Golden Rain**  
2010, oil, 8 x 6. Private collection.

RIGHT  
**Beggar, San Miguel de Allende**  
2010, oil, 16 x 12. Courtesy American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, California.



ABOVE  
**Fire and Water**  
2009, oil, 60 x 36. Private collection.



LEFT  
**Red**  
2008, oil, 12 x 9. Private collection.



LEFT  
**Romy**  
2009, oil, 30 x 60. Private collection.



ABOVE  
**Street Sellers, San Miguel de Allende**  
2010, oil, 16 x 12. Courtesy American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, California.



RIGHT  
**Photographer: Lemuel**  
2008, oil, 60 x 36. Collection the artist.