Howard Pyle & THE ACADEMIC TRADITION

This year marks a century since the death of **Howard Pyle**. To honor the artist, museums in Delaware and Massachussetts have mounted major retrospective exhibitions that highlight his continued influence on picture making in America.

by JAMES GURNEY

One afternoon in Wilmington, Delaware, six of Howard Pyle's top students were working on their drawings when a new student entered. The newcomer had just been admitted into the select company, and he was eager to prove himself. He already had some art training under his belt, such as drawing from the plaster cast and the figure, and a grounding in perspective and anatomy. Mr. Pyle set him to work in front of a cast of Donatello's portrait bust of the "Unknown Lady."

The next morning, when Pyle glanced at the results of the student's careful effort, he dismissed it with a gesture. "I don't want you to go at it that way," he said. "You are thinking of that head as a piece of plaster." Pyle urged him to see beyond the surface, to look for more than mere outline and shading. "I'd like you to think of the beautiful Italian noblewoman who sat for it," he said. "Of her rich medieval surroundings; of silks and damasks; of courtiers and palaces; of the joy with which Donatello modeled the curve of that eyebrow, the sensuous lips, and the delicate feathering of the shadow over that cheek!"

As a painter, writer, and teacher, Pyle championed the practice of "mental projection," the ability to envision unseen worlds through the lens of direct experience. To Pyle, every object stood as a token for something unseen. "It is not the mere outward part—the part the eye sees—that holds the interest," Pyle remarked, "but what the soul feels."

OPPOSITE PAGE
We Started to Run Back to the Raft for Our Lives
1902, oil, 24¾ x 16¼.

All artwork this article courtesy Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

ABOVE
The Buccaneer Was a Picturesque Fellow
1905, oil, 30⅞ x 19⅞.

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LEFT
An Attack on a Galleon
1905, oil, 29½ x 19½.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The Mermaid
1910, oil, 57⅞ x 40⅛.

ACADEMIES & IMAGINATION

Pyle was distrustful of European academicism, partly out of a desire to develop an authentic, practical American art that was not overshadowed by France. Although he did not travel abroad until his last years, he was familiar with the academic painters of the French Salon and the British Royal Academy through prints and illustrations in magazines, as well as originals in private and public collections. Pyle trained at a private art school in Philadelphia run by Antwerp-trained Francis Van der Wielen, who taught him rigorous observational drawing using plaster casts and models in long poses. Pyle insisted that his incoming students should have a mastery of these skills. "I would not belittle the necessity of accurate technical training," he said. "I insist upon that in my own school ... but I subordinate that technical training entirely to the training of imagination." He drew a distinction between imitative and creative art, and he believed that concentrating solely on copying stifled the imagination.

Unfortunately, Pyle did not leave behind a systematic theory of art in his own writings, and although many of his students took copious notes, the instructor rarely expounded on materials and methods. Too much emphasis on technique, he warned, would result in a kind of mannered overindulgence in which the means become more important than the message. When an idea for a picture began to germinate in Pyle's imagination, he made many thumbnail sketches before settling on the final design. Student Charles DeFeo recalled seeing a desk drawer filled with thousands of such sketches, as many as 50 for a single picture. His thumbnails were loose and tentative, with scribbly lines moving in and out of the form. What he was looking for was a simple, elemental idea.

The concern for simplicity applied to the arrangement of tone. "The fewer tones, the simpler and better your pictures," Pyle said. Sometimes he unified shapes by connecting them with an enveloping shadow; other times the light areas spilled over into one another. Pyle recommended lightening the light areas and darkening the dark areas so that the lights and darks were distinct from one another and the small shapes merged

"After the first half-hour of work, your lay-in should kill at a hundred yards."
- HOWARD PYLE

to make larger tonal shapes. By deliberately placing two shapes of similar value adjacent to each other, the shapes formed a larger unit. "Put your white against white, middle tones (groups) against grays, black against black, then black and white where you want your center of interest," Pyle advised. "This sounds simple but is difficult to do."

In the picture *An Attack on a Galleon*, for example, the smoke, the sails, and the sky are all rendered in light warm tones so that they fuse to form a larger unit behind the darker sail of the attacking vessel. The dark shapes of the water and the base of the ship are flattened and simplified, and the figures are crowded in clumps behind the front wave at left and between the two sails at center.

Pyle recommended establishing the tonal structure of the picture immediately. "After the first half-hour of work," he said, "your lay-in should kill at a hundred yards." Indeed, the artist's compositions are so arresting and original that it is tempting to analyze his images purely in abstract terms. Although his paintings are notable for their aesthetic appeal, they were not conceived with only design in mind. To Pyle, art did not exist for its own sake but rather for the sake of the story. Pyle's student Jessie Willcox Smith recalled how one's awareness of the story influenced compositional choices.

"At the [Pennsylvania] Academy [of the Fine Arts] we had to think about compositions as an abstract thing, whether we needed a spot here or a break over there to balance," she said. "With Mr. Pyle it was absolutely changed. There was your story, and you knew your characters, and you imagined what they were doing, and in consequence you were bound to get the right composition because you lived these things."

Another student, Elizabeth Gurney, said that Pyle's most frequent admonition was "Respect the truth." According to Gurney, "He taught that an artist must have reality, not a picture, in his mind, when he put brush to canvas." Once, while painting a Civil War scene, he felt the reality so vividly that he had to go to the studio door to breathe fresh air as an escape from the powder and smoke that was choking his lungs.

Marooned
1909, oil, 40 x 60.

Pyle ruthlessly removed any element in a picture that was not essential to conveying the central idea. "They will never shoot you for what you leave out of a picture," he once said. His reductive instinct sometimes gnawed on a picture for years until it stripped the idea to the bone. The full-color oil painting *Marooned* (1909), for example,

was preceded by a black-and-white composition in oil 12 years earlier that Pyle had created to illustrate his own pirate story. As the visual idea matured in his mind, he took away the figure's gun, made both the near waves and the far sea smaller, and reduced the size of the hat, the sash, and, most important, the figure itself. The power of subtraction echoed through Pyle's student N. C. Wyeth to Wyeth's son Andrew, who expressed the belief that an element removed from a picture still remains as a phantom presence.

Pyle pushed every picture toward extremes. "If you're painting a sky full of birds, or a garden of flowers, or any objects—show one or a thousand," he urged his students. "If an object in the foreground of your picture looks too big, make it bigger. If it looks too small, make it smaller." In every story he looked for what he called the "supreme moment"—the phase of action that conveys the most suspense, often a fateful encounter or a moment of decision. When scenes of extreme action were called for, Pyle often chose to portray a moment just before or just after the peak of the action, believing that putting figures amid violent action is less dramatic.

Pyle created some illustrations completely from his imagination and others with the benefit of posed models. The figure study for the painting *In the Meadows of Youth* is a testament to careful observation, with the folds of the fabric rendered in painstaking detail. Painting directly from costumed posed models, both indoors and outdoors, was a central part of his teaching, and it was also a typical practice of French academic painters. Pyle wanted his students to study models in costume because very few subjects they would interpret as illustrators or mural painters would call for nudes. (Pyle once compared painting a nude model to painting a plucked bird.) He encouraged students painting the model in the studio to make the background disappear and to replace it with an imaginary background, such as rocks and trees or an interior of a quaint old inn.

During Pyle's years of maximum productivity in the late 1880s, when he painted more than 200 illustrations per year, he understandably could not find the time to use models or costumes for every figure, so he relied instead on his imagination. Sometimes the lack of models is evident in poses or faces that are less than fully convincing. But being able to trust one's imagination and to work without references was important to the artist. "You should not need models," he said. "You know how a face looks—how an eye is placed and the form of it, and you should be able to draw it from your knowledge. ... I would advise you to draw your figures and carry them as far as you can without the model, and then get the model to correct by."

Study for *In the Meadows of Youth*
1902, graphite on laid paper, 12 x 6½. Collection Ian Schoenherr.

Pyle's example inspired several generations of artists in the 20th century, and his ideas continue to stimulate artists today, not just in illustration but also in animation, concept art, and fine art. His unique brand of teaching benefitted every kind of visual artist: portraitist, landscape painter, muralist, and illustrator. His dramatic sensibilities, his love for pageantry and drama, and his

The Delaware Art Museum Celebrates 100 Years

The Delaware Art Museum, in Wilmington, was founded in 1912 to preserve and exhibit the art of Howard Pyle following his untimely death in November 1911. Its recent exhibition "Howard Pyle: American Master Rediscovered" kicks off a series of shows and events that honor the museum's centennial. In addition to an exhibition of the work of the artist's sister, Katharine Pyle, and a complete reinstallation of its illustration galleries, the museum will also host a juried exhibition. For more information on upcoming programs and events, visit www.delart.org.

interest in history influenced not only still images but also the emerging form of motion pictures, where imagination and story met a new and growing audience. *A*

James Gurney is an author and illustrator best known for his book series Dinotopia. *Recently named a Living Master by the Art Renewal Center, Gurney's latest book,* Color & Light: A Guide for the Realist Painter, *is a bestseller. For more information, visit www.gurneyjourney.blogspot.com.*

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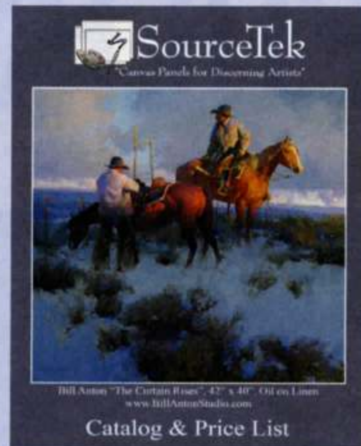

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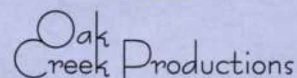

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