



The Importance of Mentorship: One Artist's Journey

*Los Angeles artist and filmmaker **George Gallo**—the writer and director of *Local Color*—has seen first hand what the power of mentorship can do. Here he tells us about the people who have come alongside him during his artistic journey. | BY GEORGE GALLO*

Throughout my life I have been fortunate enough to meet individuals who have become mentors. Whether it was those who helped me during my formative years as an art student or the master artists of today who have become advisors to me, each has taken the time to share his wisdom and understanding. My first experience with a mentor was in the spring of 1972, in Port Chester, New York,

when my Aunt Rose and I walked past the frame shop of Aurelio Yammerino. Yammi, as his friends called him, had a better understanding of line and design than just about any artist around, and I believe his paintings should be hanging in museums today. He truly was a forgotten genius of art. But like many great artists, he preferred painting to self-promotion and remains largely unknown.



ABOVE
February Snow
2001, oil on linen, 38 x 48. Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
In George Gallo's movie *Local Color*, Nicholi (Armin Mueller-Stahl) teaches John (Trevor Morgan) how to see like an artist.

Yammi and I became instant friends, and he began to teach me about the importance of design. He was a great teacher and a great mentor. He knew how to get a student excited about the world around him and how to translate that excitement into design. Yammi would talk about screen patterns, circle patterns, and triangles. I thought he was crazy at first, but eventually I saw what he was getting at. He was talking about the simplification of elements to make everything into a cohesive design in order to make a strong statement.

We would look out the window together, and he would encourage me to articulate my responses to the imagery. Was it joyful or stoic? More important, what were the big shapes and how did they all interrelate? What did those big shapes say? How could they all be manipulated to make an even stronger statement? These were all concepts I was familiar with from reading about art, but until I had a mentor standing there

with me and showing me the real-world applications of those concepts, they never fully clicked. It is this dialogue that I find one of the most important aspects of the mentor-student relationship.

Looking at the masterworks of the last few centuries, the value of design is abundantly clear. From the portraits of John Singer Sargent to the paintings of boxers by George Wesley Bellows, to Winslow Homer's paintings of the sea,



ABOVE
Master and student paint together. From *Local Color*.

LEFT
Nicholi tests John on his knowledge of art and the Old Masters. From *Local Color*.

design is the foremost element. A lot of this seems to be lost today. Not to say that today’s designs aren’t pleasant, but by and large the compositions aren’t dynamic. Winslow Homer’s paintings of the ocean depict the water moving in ways it never could in nature, yet his imagery says more about the power and energy of the sea than many of the seascapes being painted today. I am able to make these

distinctions because of the lessons Yammi taught me, and I am forever indebted to him.

Although my time with Yammi was invaluable, his interests lay more in the abstract realm, and I wanted to focus on landscapes. I knew Yammi was friends with landscape artist George Cherepov, so I asked him to introduce us. At the time, Cherepov was teaching a group of students on Saturdays in nearby Greenwich, Connecticut. I think the youngest participant was in her 70s, and I remember everyone looking at me like I was some sort of hippie when I arrived. Cherepov took an instant liking to me, and I to him. He later thanked me for studying with him. “All those old women....”

he once grumbled and then followed it with a hearty laugh.

In addition to his home in Connecticut, Cherepov had a wonderful house in Jeffersonville, Vermont, and he took me on many trips there to paint. His most important contribution to my growth as an artist was requiring that I see things not as objects, but as abstract shapes that have a very specific color, value, and temperature. If I labeled formation of rocks a “mountain” he would reply, “No! Not mountain! Shape. Color. What color? Warm or cool?” In the past I would get hung up on the notion of painting a mountain covered with trees, and trees covered in leaves, and so on, until I would get overwhelmed. Cherepov taught me to squint at an object, reject the details,



go for the essentials, and just put it out there. I cannot tell you how freeing this was. I began to see things through the eyes of a painter, and I was well on my way to doing better work.

I remember painting with him on the side of a road in Vermont. He came over to me and said, “What is your painting about?” I shrugged and replied, “I don’t know.” Cherepov didn’t like that. “If you don’t know, how the \$#%@ am I supposed to know?!” he said angrily. “How do you feel about the road in the painting?” I told him that I loved how crooked it was. “Then exaggerate!” he yelled. “Tell me a story!” He was right. Tell a story. It was so simple, but true. He also said that there was a big difference between something being pretty and something being beautiful. To him, “pretty” was just about the surface. Any clever student could make something pretty. Beautiful was something else entirely. Beauty was about truth. A rotting old farmhouse painted from an artist’s heart could be the most beautiful thing you’d ever seen if it was done truthfully.

While studying with Cherepov I began skipping classes in high school and heading into New York City. I’d often spend my time at Grand Central Galleries on 57th street, which then represented Cherepov. The manager, John Evans, would catch me sitting in front of paintings by Edward Redfield, Daniel

ABOVE
Des Plaines River in Fall
2004, oil on linen, 30 x 40. Collection the artist.

Garber, and Walter Schofield for hours. When he figured out I was an art student he gave me an enormous stack of transparencies of the work of artists I liked.

I gravitated the most toward Redfield because there was a kind of energy in his work that I hadn’t encountered before. For my money, he is the best painter of pure landscape this country ever produced. He would paint canvases as large as 50" x 56" outdoors in one session. This method of alla prima painting on large canvases on-site became my goal. It certainly took a while to get the hang of it, but it is a freeing exercise that I would recommend to any painter out there. I don’t think I would have had a chance in the world of even attempting this kind of painting if it weren’t for Cherepov and his lessons on simplification. Much of painting is about accuracy, but I feel that a preoccupation with accuracy can lead to paintings created out of ego and narcissism as opposed to releasing yourself to something bigger than you. Letting go and surrendering to all of your first instincts—which is what one needs to do when working on large canvases outdoors when time



ABOVE
Westlake Tree and Creek
2006, oil on linen, 30 x 36. Private collection.

RIGHT
Sunday Afternoon
2004, oil on linen, 30 x 40. Collection the artist.

is of the essence—will enable you to create effects you didn’t know you were capable of creating. You will be less concerned with control and more open to following the brush.

A good example of this can be seen in the works of George Wesley Bellows. Many of his enormous paintings were painted in one afternoon. The kind of energy that is created when one paints in this manner is irresistible to both the painter and the viewer. It is akin to improvisation in jazz. And most important, the viewer will see the soul of the artist—which, to me, is what makes a painting great. Technical virtuosity is wonderful, but if it gets in the way of





ABOVE

John heads outdoors and begins to produce some good work on his own. From *Local Color*.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Winter Sentinels, Taos, New Mexico

2008, oil on linen, 25 x 30. Collection Vail Fine Art Gallery, Vail, Colorado.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Nicholi agrees to take John on a painting trip for the summer. From *Local Color*.

expression, it is nothing more than a narcissistic crutch.

The mentorship process changes as one gets both older and more established. About 15 years ago I befriended Richard Schmid. His help on edges and color were invaluable. Last year I met David Leffel and Sherrie McGraw at Weekend With the Masters, in Colorado Springs. Since then, David and I have developed a friendship, and we chat on the phone for hours. We get in a dialogue that seems to have no conclusion. It is a constant probing at what makes something great—a conversation I think every painter has had with another at some point. David feels that greatness can only be achieved if the artist is truly out on a limb. Our conversations have encouraged me to keep stretching out on that creative limb.

In my life I have been blessed to have a career as a filmmaker as well as a painter. Unfortunately, this has not left me with any time to take on students. My wife Julie has been my



inspiration for 27 years in both my film and art. It was through her encouragement and prodding that I got to make the movie *Local Color*. The film is all about mentorship, and I urge any painter who is struggling with all the doubts and demons that can arise during the creative process to see the film.

Local Color was a way for me to create an almost mass mentorship program for all artists. There has never been a movie made about the struggle of being a modern-day representational painter. As I got older, I was shocked at the complete dismissal of some of America's finest artists by art critics. These tastemakers nearly destroyed the representational movement and drove its practitioners into obscure corners. Cherepov was one of those artists. He was livid that great painters couldn't find galleries. I drew on some of his qualities while creating the character of Nicholi Seroff for this movie.

The most important reason for making *Local Color* was that I wanted to communicate the importance of mentorship to two generations of artists. The generation of artists working now must pass on their knowledge in order to keep this unending chain alive. It is also essential for the next generation of artists, today's students, to seek out the best teachers they can find. You'll be amazed, much as I continue to be, at how generous your heroes will be with their knowledge

About the Artist

George Gallo has been painting for more than 40 years and started his art career on the East Coast, painting Pennsylvania landscapes in the tradition of Edward Redfield, and eventually showing at New York's Grand Central Art Galleries in the 1990s. He was recently featured, along with Don Sahli, in the "Legacy of the Russian Masters" event in Beaver Creek, Colorado, and has been an integral part of *American Artist's* Weekend With the Masters event since its inception. As a filmmaker, Gallo has earned awards and honors for numerous internationally acclaimed films he has written, directed, and produced, including *Midnight Run*, *Bad Boys*, *Local Color*, and most recently *Middle Men*. Gallo makes his home in Los Angeles with his producer/actress wife, Julie Gallo. For more information, visit www.ggallo.com.



and time. Every painter who has seen *Local Color* has told me that it's very inspirational, and for that I am grateful. I feel the film has accomplished its intended goal.

Mentorship is essential in the arts. We have to pass down our knowledge to those coming up behind us. These people helped shape me into not only the artist I am but also the person I've become. They have given me the ultimate gift—the gift of encouraging self-expression. It's definitely gotten me through some dark days. I am extremely grateful to all of the mentors who've helped me, and I look forward to passing on whatever I know to whomever will listen. ■