

The New Dawn of Painting

by Louis Torres



R.H. Ives Gammell, *Predicament*



Richard Lack, *Nude with Red Robe*



Stephen Gjertson,
The Recorder Lesson

The following article is an essay-review on the recently published *Realism in Revolution: The Art of the Boston Painters*. Shown above are works by three generations of painters from the Boston School: R.H. Ives Gammell (1893–1981), Gammell's student Richard Lack (1928–), and Lack's student Stephen Gjertson (1949–).

In the turbulent period marking the outbreak of the Second World War, an American realist painter named R.H. Ives Gammell, feeling increasingly alienated from an artistic world dominated by modernism, wrote a book poignantly entitled *The Twilight of Painting*. Gammell had begun his formal study of painting in 1911, at the Boston Museum School, whose faculty included Edmund Tarbell and William McGregor Paxton. Nearly two decades later, believing that his drawing skills were not sufficiently developed to accomplish his artistic goals, Gammell interrupted his active painting career to spend two more years of study with Paxton, relearning the fundamentals of drawing—a move that dramatically underscored the difference between Gammell and the modernist art establishment, which had virtually eliminated the teaching of drawing from schools of art.

As the older painters began to die, and with them the craft of painting that had been cultivated for more than five centuries, Gammell's growing sense of isolation prompted him to write his artistic testament, published in 1946. In his view, the condition of painting had so declined

that there was no longer anyone alive in the world capable of teaching all a student had to know to become a thoroughly proficient painter. By comparing the art of painting of his time with that of past eras, Gammell hoped "to hasten the day when some young artist, marked with the seal of great talent," would "dispel the twilight which [had] descended upon the art of painting" and would lay the foundation for a genuine renaissance. "Surely the time has come," he concluded, "to give some consideration to the little band of young people who, against the tides of fashion and apart from all reward, [will] still strive to become honest and competent practitioners of an extraordinarily difficult art."

R.H. Ives Gammell spent the rest of his life giving more than mere consideration to just such a "little band of young people" through his teaching and writing, while he himself continued to paint pictures in the traditional manner. He died on March 26, 1981, unknown except to a small circle of admirers and to his students, to whom he had bequeathed his craft and his spirit. One would like to think he sensed at the end that the spark of inspiration and enlightenment he had passed on would, in the not-too-distant future, catch fire to "dispel the twilight" and usher in a new dawn of painting. He would undoubtedly be pleased to know that forty years after the publication of his artistic testament, and only four years after his death, his students and their students have banded together to issue their own testament, in a volume boldly entitled *Realism in Revolution: The Art of the Boston Painters*.

Louis Torres is Editor and Publisher of *Aristos*.

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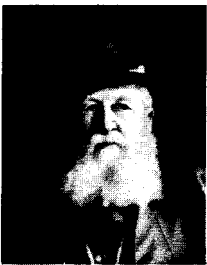
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A Classical Realist Manifesto

Realism in Revolution was conceived and edited by Gammell's principal artistic and intellectual heir, Richard Lack. As a painter, teacher, author, and editor championing the cause of classical realism in painting, Lack (who is also painting advisor to *Aristos*) has exhibited an undaunted vision and a prodigious energy worthy of his mentor. This volume is a logical outgrowth of his activity as the acknowledged "Dean" of the Boston School of painters.

Though handsomely produced and profusely illustrated, *Realism in Revolution* is no mere coffee-table art book. It is the resounding manifesto of this school of American realist painters, presenting their compelling analysis of the crisis confronting the contemporary realist painter and their exhortation that painting return to representation of the natural world. The text of *Realism in Revolution* comprises twelve essays by painters trained in the tradition of the Boston School (one of the twelve, Mark Steven Walker, no longer paints professionally but is an art historian). More than 160 color reproductions (many of them full-page) illustrate the work of the Boston painters, and of the old masters from whom they draw inspiration. In addition to providing direct visual support for the arguments advanced in the essays, the plates can, happily, be enjoyed on their own (as even the much-reduced black-and-white reproductions on these pages begin to suggest)—in spite of the uneven quality of reproduction, more on which below.

The Essays

Spanning three generations, the essayists in *Realism in Revolution* differ widely in temperament, taste, judgment, and, consequently, in their choice of subject matter, theme, style, and technique. While they speak as with one voice on the cause which inspires their book—unswerving dedication to the tradition of realist painting as it has been handed down from generation to generation since the Renaissance—each of the twelve makes his own distinctive contribution to the manifesto.

In the lead essay, "Radical Currents of Classical Realism in Contemporary American Painting," art historian Mark Steven Walker (who studied painting with Richard Lack) briefly characterizes "classical realism" as a style concerned with "classical proportions, informed by realist perceptions," and goes on to quote a wonderfully eloquent statement by Kenyon Cox on the classical spirit. As Cox explains, that spirit

asks of a work of art, not that it shall be novel or effective, but that it shall be fine and noble

... It does not deny originality and individuality. ... But it desires that each new presentation of truth and beauty shall show us the old truth and beauty, seen only from a different angle and colored by a different medium. It wishes to add link by link to the chain of tradition, but it does not wish to break the chain.

Walker devotes much of his essay to the tradition of imaginative painting cultivated by Gammell and Lack. Most interesting in that regard are the lengthy passages Walker includes by Bouguereau, Gammell, and other artists.

However, a concluding quote expressing Gammell's dark view of the future of traditional painting sounds an inappropriately gloomy note at the outset of an otherwise optimistic manifesto.

The Heritage of Pastel Painting

One of the finest chapters in the volume is Leesa Hoffman's unpretentious yet informative essay, "The Heritage of Pastel Painting," a manifesto within a manifesto—in defense of pastel painting as a serious artistic medium. At the outset, Hoffman quickly dispels two common misconceptions about pastels. The first is that pastels are less permanent than oils (they are not, she tells us, explaining why in a succinct elucidation of the nature of pigments and binders). The second is that pastels are eschewed by serious artists. To rebut this widely held view, Hoffman argues that it is the artist's talent, vision, and sensibility—not the medium per se—that establish the "credibility" of a painting and enable the artist to make a meaningful and lasting statement. In a brief history of pastel painting from the early eighteenth century through the twentieth, she touches upon such well-known artists as Edouard Manet and Mary Cassatt, as well as on Gammell. With respect to the choice of paint medium, she emphasizes that it "must be compatible with the artist's temperament and allow him the freedom to make [a] personal statement," but she regrettably does not elaborate on the specific qualities of temperament that attract artists to pastels. Nor does she account for why the majority of portraits (and other paintings) by major artists are, in fact, in oil.

Hoffman is clearly inspired by the work of Rosalba Carriera, an eighteenth-century Venetian miniaturist. "Carriera's portraits," she writes, "show a special quality of luminosity and are well characterized. After two hundred years, [they] retain a startling vitality and freshness." A fine reproduction of Carriera's sensitive *Portrait of a Gentleman* confirms Hoffman's judgment.

Leesa Hoffman's own contribution to the rich tradition of pastel painting is evidenced by the range and quality of her paintings, six of which are reproduced with her essay (see fig. 3).

Landscape Painting

In one of the most engaging and authentic essays, "Landscape Painting: The Artist's Perspective," Don Koestner draws upon his long experience to shed light on the craft and mechanics of this genre. (In addition to being one of the more interesting landscape painters whose work is represented in *Realism in Revolution*, Koestner is an insightful portraitist, as exemplified by his gentle, wistful portrait of a young girl, *Lorna*; and the beautifully lit *Sunday Afternoon* [fig. 4].)

Koestner's essay is an absorbing biographical narrative and an informative exposition of his craft. "Having come from a working class background and having spent my childhood in the depression years of the 1930s," he reveals, "I knew nothing of the rich history of art. Did not, in fact, know even the names of the old masters other than Rembrandt. Yet I began sketching landscape elements in my adolescent years."

The painter skillfully guides the willing reader into his working environment—into "my north country," as he puts it, rightfully claiming spiritual ownership of the land he loves, the region

around Lake Superior and the headwaters of the Mississippi River. "For the artist addicted to landscape painting, working outside is that time of 'wild delight,'" Koestner confides, borrowing a phrase from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*. The reader senses some of what the painter means as he describes the challenges of nature: the wind, making "a large canvas act like a sail"; the "creeping, crawling, and flying pests"; the fleeting light; and the sub-zero weather he often works in. Bringing us back into the studio, Koestner explains the work that goes on there and the reasons why artists sometimes forgo direct work and turn to producing landscapes indoors, or sometimes begin painting in the studio and then continue working outdoors.

Lamenting that the "modern art establishment has had a devastating effect" on traditional painters, Koestner concludes his essay by asserting that these painters (rather than academics or critics) must once again be recognized by the general public as the authorities on the artistic aspects of painting.

The Necessity of Excellence

The longest and most substantial essay in *Realism in Revolution* is Stephen Gjertson's "The Necessity of Excellence: The Artist's Search for an Ideal." It is a lucid commentary on realist painting prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, the reasons for its near eclipse in the twentieth, and the conditions required for its revival as we approach the next century. In an often brilliant (if sometimes disconcerting) discourse, Gjertson—whose thought and writing match the high order of his paintings—demonstrates keen insight into fundamental issues of esthetics and art history. "For a work to be declared excellent," he writes, "there must be a generally recognized and authoritative standard by which it can be evaluated"—a standard "reflected in the accumulated knowledge and expertise which has been bequeathed. . . by masters of the past." Defining modernism as a "system of viewing the world which is opposed to any tradition, knowledge, or authority (outside itself) which could establish a rational basis for life and art," Gjertson decries the modern view that "we live in an essentially non-rational universe in which it is impossible to have absolutes."

The collapse of traditional values in art, he says, was hastened by impressionist theory pushed to its extreme. "The painter's single emphasis on the painting of light, as perceived by the eye, reduced the importance of the forms of nature as physical reality." Eventually, he explains, the *effect* of these forms on the eye became the reality. (The end result of this trend, of course, is abstract "art.")

Attesting to the openness of the Boston painters on the issue of individual style, Gjertson maintains that the representation of nature "varies with each individual and, for the same individual, varies from time to time according to his purpose. . . . Each method proceeds from the individual painter's love for, and emphasis upon, different aspects of nature, without completely disregarding the other aspects."

Gjertson rightly determines that before we can differentiate between good and bad painting, based on rational criteria, we must return to a "philosophical foundation which assures us that such criteria can and do exist." For him that phil-

osophical foundation is rooted, incontrovertibly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the faith that God exists. His pronouncement to that effect is somewhat surprising, given his emphasis, throughout his essay, on the power of man's reason. What is most intriguing, however, is that Gjertson's deep religious convictions lead him to precisely the same artistic conclusions and values as are shared by many (like myself) for whom the "philosophical foundation" of art is rooted in reality—without recourse to religious faith.

The Other Essays

The remaining essays, albeit uneven in quality, contain much of value, though there is not space to do more than briefly summarize them here.

In "The Visual Image," Charles Cecil persuasively argues that "the lost law of the art of painting is nature," and that both abstract art and photo-realism have abandoned the connection to nature.

Kurt Anderson's highly personal essay, "The Experience of a Young Painter," expresses his frustrations as a young painter seeking traditional training today, but projects confidence in the future of his chosen craft.

In a related essay, "The Art Student's Dilemma," Kirk Richards reflects on his experience as an art student in college prior to his years of training at the Lack atelier. He gives the general reader a rare glimpse into the essential ingredients of studio training: drawing from life, cast drawing, and mastering the craft of painting.

Richard Lack's essay, "Painting: Understanding the Craft," is valuable for its insights into the "impressionist vision," but even more so for its discussion of the "imaginative vision," in which "the painter draws upon the inner world of his psyche," rather than exclusively and directly upon nature.

In "Ethics and Aesthetics," Lisa Bormann presents a much-needed analysis of the meaning of abstraction in painting and the idea of originality, or "new forms," in art. Despite the promise of her title, however, she says nothing about ethics.

In his brief "Thoughts on American Impressionism," Gary Hoffman (whose appealing *Matthew's Letter* was pictured in the February 1984 *Aristos*) traces the roots of the style to Velasquez and Vermeer in the seventeenth century, and Chardin in the eighteenth—painters whom he describes as "paragons of impressionist vision."

Jim Prohl's essay, "Still Life: The Tradition Continues" (an expanded version of the article which appeared in the February 1984 *Aristos*), adds welcome insights into this genre so important to the Boston painters.

Finally, there is Richard W. Whitney's "An Approach to Painting." Whitney—a highly accomplished landscape and portrait painter—has much of interest to say about craftsmanship and artistic expression, and about how he solves problems of composition, form, and style in his work. (An illustrated article about Whitney, including excerpts from his essay, will appear in the next issue of *Aristos*.)

The Paintings

As one might expect from the essays, the paintings in *Realism in Revolution* are highly individual expressions. They vary markedly, not only in subject matter and style but also in depth

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of conception and quality of execution. Though the best achieve great beauty, and many have delightful and appealing qualities, a few struck me as banal or insipid—a reminder of just how “extraordinarily difficult” the art of painting is.

In selecting the illustrations for this article, I focused on my own personal preferences, giving weight not only to the overall quality of the work but to how well it would translate to a much-reduced black-and-white reproduction (a consideration which eliminated all the impressionistic landscapes).

Most memorable for me among the many fine portraits is Mark Balma's *Maryann Graziano* (fig. 2), which exquisitely evokes the unconventional old-world beauty and poise of his subject. In originality of design, depth of insight, and sensitivity of rendering, it is a mature achievement—though painted when the artist was only twenty-four years old.

Stephen Gjertson's work, encompassing every major genre, is well represented in the book and is consistently impressive. Particularly striking are his luminous double portrait of a woman and child (*Midmorning*, fig. 6); a powerfully dramatic depiction of Christ Stilling the Waters (*Peace, Be Still*, fig. 10); and his jewel-like still lifes.

In view of the importance of the nude in the tradition of Western art, it is surprising that Richard Lack's *Nude with Red Robe* (see cover) is the only oil painting of this genre in the volume. It is an effective reinterpretation of this traditional subject, with echoes of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* and Ingres's *Baigneuse de Valpinçon*, but with its own stamp of originality.

Other works of special appeal, not pictured here, deserve at least to be mentioned (the list is necessarily incomplete): portraits by Allan Banks (*Girl in White Fur and Emerald & Rose*), Kirk Richards (*Timothy Jenkins*), Susan Stokes (*Rebecca*), Richard Lack (*Girl in Blue: Homage to Paxton*, and his series of musical portraits), and Kurt Anderson (*The Shot-Putter*); Jim Prohl's still life *Lemon and Oranges*; landscapes by Robert Moore (*River with Expansive View*) and Anna Van Demark (*Twilight Glow*); and Allan Banks's outdoor figure painting *The Rosegarden*. Finally, there are Robert Douglas Hunter's beautifully arranged and subtly illuminated still lifes (fig. 11).


A Landmark Publication

Realism in Revolution is a major artistic and cultural statement in defense and celebration of traditional values in painting. As it is unlikely in today's climate that the project would have been undertaken by an established art book publisher, the Taylor Publishing Company is to be doubly congratulated for venturing onto unfamiliar terrain (this is their first art book) to produce a book whose popular success is by no means assured.

In many respects, the book has been well produced. Attractively designed and printed, it is generously illustrated with color plates that are for the most part of high quality. It has an index of titles and names (one wishes it covered subject matter as well); many of the essays are generously footnoted; and an appendix of biographical sketches of all the Boston painters whose work is represented provides a wealth of information of

interest to both the general reader and the art historian.

The volume is, regrettably, not without flaws, however—some of them substantial. The quality of color reproduction, particularly for several of the impressionistic landscapes, is occasionally very poor; and a number of fine plates are marred by prominent specks. The text is flawed at times by careless writing and major typographical errors—oversights and mistakes that should have been weeded out in the professional editing and proofreading process. Finally, there is *American Artist* editor M. Stephen Doherty's Preface, which fails to fully comprehend the spirit and content of *Realism in Revolution*, much less what differentiates the art of the Boston School from the “art” prevailing into today's culture.

Nevertheless, this is a worthy publishing achievement, bringing before the public a little-known twentieth-century perspective on painting, a perspective never before presented in so comprehensive a form. *Realism in Revolution* deserves the widest possible public distribution. There is, quite simply, nothing else like it available today. 

Readers are encouraged to use this review to urge librarians and booksellers to make Realism in Revolution available to their patrons—L.T.

Illustrations

- Cover (left). R.H. Ives Gammell, *Predicament*, oil, 60x38", 1958, courtesy of the R.H. Ives Gammell Studio Trust.
- Cover (center). Richard Lack, *Nude with Red Robe*, oil, 63x37", 1983, collection of Mr. & Mrs. Christopher Hashioka.
- Cover (right). Stephen Gjertson, *The Recorder Lesson*, oil, 28x22", 1981, collection of Mr. & Mrs. Mario Fernandez. (This painting appears on the dust jacket of *Realism in Revolution*.)
1. Kurt Anderson, *Elizabeth*, oil, 17x14", 1980, collection of the artist.
2. Mark Balma, *Maryann Graziano*, oil, 36½x24½", 1981, private collection.
3. Leesa Hoffman, *Portrait of Mr. Van*, pastel, 20x16", 1980.
4. Don Koestner, *Sunday Afternoon*, oil, 22x28", 1982.
5. Richard W. Whitney, *Self Portrait*, oil, 24x18", 1973, collection of the artist.
6. Stephen Gjertson, *Midmorning*, oil, 33x42", 1985, private collection.
7. Charles Cecil, *Tuscan Rooftops*, oil, 14x24", 1983, collection of Dr. & Mrs. William R. Beardsley.
8. Don Koestner, *April Evening*, oil, 29x37", 1983, collection of Mr. & Mrs. Richard Lack.
9. Richard W. Whitney, *End of an Era*, oil, 20x30", 1973, private collection.
10. Stephen Gjertson, *Peace, Be Still*, oil, 27x45", 1980, collection of United Church of Christ, Sandstone, Minnesota.
11. Robert Douglas Hunter, *The Polished Brass Container*, oil, 20x36", 1984, private collection.
12. Allan Banks, *Studio Visitors*, oil, 20x24", 1981, collection of Frederick and Sherry Ross.

Realism in Revolution

Realism in Revolution: The Art of the Boston Painters (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1985), hard cover, 9¼x12¼", 216 pages, 160 color plates, may be ordered for \$47 postpaid from Atelier Lack, 2908 Hennepin Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55408.

The Heritage Art Gallery

Located in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, the Heritage Art Gallery of Classical Realism opened last November. The Gallery will feature works by Boston School painters. Heritage Art Gallery, 228 South Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314.