R. H. Ives Gammell

Aristos
THE JOURNAL OF ESTHETICS
Vol. 5 No. 1
May 1990

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

In an interview for *American Artist* shortly before his death, in 1981, R. H. Ives Gammell wryly referred to himself as a "fossil." However humorously intended, it was a poignant remark. He had devoted a long and productive career to perpetuating the time-tested traditions of Western painting, while he had seen modernism gradually take possession of the contemporary cultural arena, in which artists like himself were increasingly regarded as mere anachronisms.

Born in 1893, the youngest son of a prominent Rhode Island family, Gammell was reared in the patrician New England society that was both patron and subject matter to the fashionable Boston painters of the turn of the century. That small group of artists, thoroughly trained in their profession, staunchly maintained the old standards of craftsmanship, at a time when the avant-garde forming in New York and Philadelphia had begun to reject such standards. Gammell received his most important training from the Boston painters. His principal mentor, William McGregor Paxton, had studied with the eminent French academic painter Gérôme, whose teacher, in turn, had been a pupil of the great Jacques Louis David.

Despite their close ties to the French academic tradition, the Boston painters, including Paxton, were essentially impressionists; that is, they painted scenes from daily life in a manner capturing effects of light and atmosphere and making subtle use of color. Unlike the French Impressionists, however, they did not repudiate academic technique, with its rigorous emphasis on sound draftsmanship and its more deliberate approach to execution.

Gammell became fairly adept in the Boston style of painting. As the 1985 retrospective of his work at the Hammer Galleries in New York City demonstrated, he could competently, sometimes even sensitively, render an "impression" of a portrait, landscape, still life, or interior. But, as that exhibition also indicated, his real passion was for *imaginative painting* —the creation of complex allegorical, historical, or literary scenes, composed of dramatic figural groups in elaborate costume and architectural settings. The choice of this most demanding of all painting genres was an extraordinarily challenging one for Gammell, since he was by his own admission a painter of only average talent (taking as his standard the great works of Western art), and his teachers could offer little specific guidance on this approach to picturemaking.

Gammell spared no effort toward the creation of an ambitious body of imaginative paintings. He traveled extensively in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, visiting museums to study the Old Masters, and tirelessly recording exotic details of costume, ornament, and architecture that he observed in various locales. More remarkable, when he was past thirty and had been painting professionally with a fair degree of success for a decade, he interrupted his career to spend two years relearning drawing under Paxton. Finally, in the early 1930s, he began work on his allegorical paintings. In purely formal terms, they are often stunning images, brilliantly composed, with complex groups of carefully drawn figures and a vivid sense of color. But in terms of facial expression, gesture, and overall emotional impact, they generally fall short, lacking an expressive power equal to their apocalyptic themes, which suggest a virtual obsession with death, destruction, and retribution.

That work may well have taken its toll on Gammell. By the end of the decade, he was exhausted, overcome by a growing sense of despair and isolation. The First World War and the Depression had transformed American society and culture. The other painters of the "old school" were dying off, and their elegant, well-crafted pictures were being relegated to museum storerooms, along with the work of the nineteenth-century French academic artists, reviled by the modernists. Not only was there little likelihood of a wide audience for his own idiosyncratic work, it seemed that the entire Western painting tradition was in jeopardy. Moreover, a second great war threatened to annihilate civilization itself. Gammell sank into a profound depression. When he emerged from that dark period, however, it was with renewed purpose and a significant shift of focus. Seeing himself as the guardian of a priceless cultural tradition on the brink of extinction, he began to write and, eventually, to teach—as well as continuing to paint.

Gammell's first book was *Twilight of Painting*. Written in the early years of World War II, it was published in 1946. (Long out of print, it is soon to be reissued.) It was, the author said, "a painter's book about painting," addressed to the general public and to the future artists who might someday undertake to revive the "all-but-lost art of picturemaking." He explained in the opening chapter:

> The ultimate importance of Modern Painting in the history of art will be seen to lie in the fact that it discredited and virtually destroyed the great technical traditions of European painting, laboriously built up through the centuries by a long succession of men of genius. The loss of these traditions has deprived our potential painters of their rightful heritage, a heritage without which it will be impossible for them to give full scope to such talent as they may possess.

Gammell's purpose was constructive: to show how this unfortunate situation had come about and to propose a remedy.

He was concerned only with painting as it was traditionally conceived, that is, having representation as an essential element. The representation can be literal or stylized, he emphasized, but the things represented must be recognizable to the average observer. "Nature provides the starting point of the rendering, as well as a criterion by which the truth of the finished product may be judged," he later wrote in an essay on Paxton. (With respect to "modern art," Gammell said surprisingly little in *Twilight of Painting* about the trend toward total abstraction, and lamented instead the *incompetence* of the "modern" painters, their sheer lack of professionalism, of craftsmanship.) Because the creation of an effective expression or illusion of three-dimensional reality on a flat surface is, Gammell stressed, a "heartbreakingly difficult art" (as he wrote in another context), only a few individuals are born in each generation with sufficient talent to be good painters, fewer still to be great ones.

Analyzing the factors responsible for the collapse of painting, Gammell clearly identified, first, the pernicious influence of French Impressionism (although he was quick to acknowledge its contributions as well). Most damaging, in his view, it had created a false dichotomy between the "academic" and "impressionist" approaches to painting—approaches which should be viewed as complementary, not as opposing and mutually exclusive, Gammell argued. In its wholesale rejection of academism, the Impressionist movement had made its gravest error in repudiating draftsmanship and discipline (although the first-generation Impressionists were well-trained, and more academic in their working habits than one might suppose). The disastrous effects of that error have become more apparent with each succeeding generation, owing in large measure to the impoverished system of art instruction that developed in the late nineteenth century, as Gammell detailed in a chapter on impressionist teaching (reprinted here). His analysis of academism and impressionism in nineteenth-century French art remains invaluable, debunking many of the myths that have distorted commentary on that and later art, as well as calling attention to political factors that probably contributed substantially to the ultimate triumph of Impressionism and the

(continued on page 6)

R. H. Ives Gammell

(continued from page 5)

concomitant suppression of academic art.

Finally, Gammell also blamed the collapse of painting on the growing influence of art experts, critics, and amateurs who "specializ[ed] in the art of painting without having mastered its craft" and who "ceased to rely on their instinctive reactions of liking or disliking . . . a painting, but tried to estimate its merit according to self-consciously elaborated esthetic principles." Their "misplaced intellectualism imposed on ignorant execution," he said, "is the guiding principle of painting today."

The remedy Gammell proposed in the concluding chapters of *Twilight of Painting* was a return to the atelier method of training, with its intensive, systematic program of individualized instruction. Moreover, some years later, he opened his own studio to a select number of talented students and devoted the next three decades of his life to providing such instruction. A number of today's most accomplished painters studied with Gammell or with his students. And several of them, in turn, have set up ateliers of their own.

Following *Twilight of Painting*, Gammell wrote a monograph on one of the finest of the late-nineteenth-century Boston painters, *Dennis Miller Bunker*; compiled and edited *Shop-Talk of Edgar Degas*; and wrote a collection of essays posthumously published as *The Boston Painters 1900-1930*—apart from much still unpublished material. Evident in his writing are some of the qualities that must have contributed to his effectiveness as a teacher of painting: breadth of vision, clarity of thought and expression, erudition without pomposity, and above all a passionate dedication to the art of picturemaking—a dedication informed by a virtually encyclopedic knowledge of the history and methodology of Western painting.

By all accounts, Gammell was a strict, often crusty, teacher, but he was also extraordinarily generous. He took no fees from his students, and frequently defrayed their studio expenses as well as their room and board, in addition to ensuring that they were exposed to a broad cultural program (also at his expense), which he considered essential to the development of an artist.

In the final pages of *Twilight of Painting* Gammell had written:

> There are painters who, though having an excellent command of many of the abilities needful for the making of pictures, are unable to utilize these very effectively in making . . . their own. Their pictures may be intelligently put together, competently made and skillfully executed, and yet be lacking in artistic interest of a high order. . . . These painters have learned to make the maximum of their limited talents and in so doing have come to a clearer understanding of their own way of working than is always possessed by greater artists, who are able to rely on instinct to pull them through. For this reason [such painters] . . . are often excellent teachers. It may well be that they are the best teachers of all.

The words could apply to Gammell himself. For, undoubtedly, it was as a teacher and a critic and commentator, rather than as a painter, that he made his most significant contribution. Indeed, if the great painting tradition that is one of the glories of Western civilization survives and flourishes into the twenty-first century, it will be due in no small measure to R. H. Ives Gammell's teaching and writing on this art he loved and understood so well. [A]