

*Introduction by Gardiner McCauley (BA '56, MA '57)
to the morning panel of the art alumni symposium,
"The Berkeley School of Painting", Kroeber Hall, 10/25/03*

Bauhaus was not our house!

The Art Department then.

It has been said that the past is what we bring with us into the future, and here we are doing just that. The Berkeley art department in the 1940s and 1950s certainly was a home away from home for so many of us. Spreckels Hall, the lovely brown shingled building with redwood beam interiors that housed the studios during most of those years, I remember as an oasis on campus. Set among trees and lawns, it was a place where you could avoid those anonymous granite institutional buildings most students had to spend their time in, a place with a warm, comfortable and welcoming ambience, where it felt natural to make art, where art students felt they belonged.

But was it the Golden Age of Painting?

Recently, I was asked if those years were the Golden Age of painting in Berkeley. Well, it certainly was a high point, now that I think back. In those times serious fine art consisted of painting and sculpture. Period.

Painting in the Berkeley art department then had little competition from sculpture, which didn't come into the department until the end of the 1950s when Kroeber Hall was built. Other media and expressive vehicles common today were as yet unknown or were not yet accepted as serious art forms. Painting was the only kid on the block. We had it all to ourselves. That's important to remember, as much of the art department's achievements and recognition in studio work in those years were due to this concentration.

Of course history of art still was integrated with the studio art program in those years. And we were exposed to the philosophy of art and esthetics - I still remember Stephen Pepper's cheese theory of artistic taste! The introductory art history course on European painting even was taught by an artist, Worth Ryder. I remember many painting students then who also immersed themselves in art history, completing dual majors; many went on to become art historians - and yes, I even married one! And there were some art history students who voluntarily took many studio courses, and even some of them became artists. I always thought that was a healthy interaction, which promoted mutual understanding.

If this indeed was a Golden Age for painting in Berkeley, it was probably due to the convergence in the 1950s of three factors.

The first factor was the culmination by the Berkeley art faculty of years of commitment to and understanding of the painting esthetic of Hans Hofmann along with their own formal analyses of modern painting in the first half of the 20th century. Erle Loran's deep commitment to the study of Cézanne's composition contributed an original analytical method and was a unique approach, not yet surpassed; his book is a classic and still is in print after 60 years![\[1\]](#) All this was condensed into the teaching of the foundation courses of the art department. Hofmann's ideas had not been taught by any other college or university art department – only Berkeley – and those ideas were at the center of much of the new painting of those years.

The second factor was the simultaneous emergence of abstract expressionism and the New York School as a radical international force in painting. Of course Hofmann had been teaching privately in Provincetown and New York for many years and many of his former students had become influential in the New York art world. Much of this new painting seemed to embody principles taught at Berkeley and so quickly became accepted and emulated here.

And the third factor was the new and pioneering Berkeley program of inviting visiting painters, principally from New York, to teach and serve as role models. Such painters as *Esteban Vicente, Corrado Marca-Relli, Kyle Morris, Milton Resnick, George McNeil, Herman Cherry, Carl Holty, Felix Ruvulo* and others. There were two or three in residence at a time when I was a student. Most of them had no formal university credentials or experience. I remember that Milton Resnick, a rising light in 1950s New York, had not finished high school and rarely sold paintings, and then for about \$800 – now of course they go in the six figures. I believe that no other university at that time in the 1950s had such an intensive visiting artist program. Few universities then or now have been willing to forego university training as a prerequisite for professional qualifications in art faculty. Of course now the MFA is ubiquitous. But soon others began to emulate our visiting artist program and this became a standard educational strategy everywhere for advanced art studies.

So what did other university art departments do in the 1940s and 1950s?

Seldom did other American art departments in the 1940s and 1950s offer a positive, thoughtful and constructive view of the innovative painting of the 20th century. In fact, many schools refused to recognize the

accomplishments of the pioneers of modern painting, let alone to praise or emulate them.

Too many schools continued the old, tired, European academic régimes, modeling with color inside outlines of a linear composition. Many schools simply continued a kind of apprenticeship tradition, a student following a teacher's methods and style, for better or worse. Many more just offered uncontroversial craft skills such as simple hand/eye coordination exercises, linear perspective, anatomy studies and media skills.

Some progressive schools in those days, led by the New Bauhaus in Chicago, later the Institute of Design, had adopted some version of the renowned Bauhaus foundation course, which employed some of these concepts, but used them to focus on its mission to serve architecture, design and applied arts for industrial production. Fine art or painting had little place in the original Bauhaus teaching after the early days when Klee and Kandinsky had left. Hofmann wrote that the Bauhaus wanted to be like the cathedral builders, using architecture as the grand umbrella and coordinator for all the arts in the cathedral. Today, Bauhaus inspired foundation courses still are widely offered and usually serve as a preparation for graphic design or architecture.

No, Bauhaus was not our house!

Well, we are here today to reaffirm that in our student days the Bauhaus certainly was not our house. It was not even close. I am certain we all remember well our first exposure to and experience of *Art 2A: Form in Drawing*. It was our introduction to the Berkeley Art Department. It was meant to be and was our common experience. It was meant to comprise visual knowledge. We all used it as a point of reference, whether we loved it or hated it. It was meant to serve as a guideline to the grammar and language of making paintings intended to be expressive works of art, to be useful as a formal interpretation of modern painting, and to be a basis for critical analysis. Yet it also was applicable to historic old master painting, as Worth Ryder certainly taught me; as a result, for me Giotto's paintings still are *architectonic*, as he always described them.

I well remember how I had arrived after three years at California College of Arts and Crafts where I had been immersed in an unthinking, unquestioning apprenticeship in European academic drawing, spending weeks on a single charcoal drawing copying a plaster cast of a Roman copy of a Greek sculpture, including the dust and the cobwebs and the dead flies, erasing with little balls of bread dough, no explanations given. Then I graduated to figure drawing, which was the same thing with a live model in a frozen pose. I

knew virtually nothing about modern art, except for Dalí, who I had discovered on my own.

My Art 2A professor was Worth Ryder, who was genial and explained all the concepts. He gently made corrections and criticisms and introduced me to such concepts as analytical cubist compositional methods and to creating space with overlapping planes, with which I had difficulty, being fresh out of the world of academic teaching. I did not understand the aesthetic value of all of this. Frustrated at first, I challenged myself to master this strange new stuff - but I really only gained deep understanding years later when I taught the course.

In those years when we were students, the art faculty clearly saw their comprehensive philosophy of modern art as a necessary and required foundation for all study in the Berkeley art department. It served as a point of reference for all students, both studio and art history, and even graduate transfer students. It is interesting in retrospect that the faculty sufficiently agreed among themselves to develop and sustain this foundation course, *ART 2A: Form in Drawing*, through various incarnations for some 30 years. At the time when it was first conceived, and for some years after, it was unique among university and college art department courses.

Our Berkeley “Formlehre,” our composition studies; on what was it based?

The Berkeley approach was above all visual. Its originality lay in the use and adaptation of the concept of the *plane*, as used to create and organize the *pictorial space* of the composition, and of respect for the *integrity of the picture plane*, its essential flatness. A *plane*, wrote Glen Wessels in his Art 2A glossary of terms, is a flat uncurved surface; the *picture plane* is the plane, or two-dimensional surface, on which the picture exists. This terminology and approach reflected the influence of the teachings and writings of Hans Hofmann[2] and from careful analysis of early modern art, especially that of Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse. Hofmann’s concept of *form* was essentially based on the manipulation of three-dimensional spatial experience in the painting, employing *planes* of color as the principle means to create expression and give the painting life. Further, relationships between lines, planes, colors and other visual elements created inevitable visual interactions and tensions, thus enabling the expression of visual forces said to embody the mind and spirit of the artist. And all this was independent of subject matter, allegory, symbolism, and other elements external to the painting itself. Hofmann said that propaganda or history did not make the painting a better work of art. Yet this expressive formal structure could be designed to reinforce and clarify such elements, which Hofmann argued indeed was the case in old master painting.

And these Berkeley foundation courses were tailor made for painting students; *Form in Drawing* was followed by *Form in Color*, and *Form in Figure Drawing*. The ultimate purpose here was not to produce a specific style of art, but to develop sensitivities, knowledge and skills most appropriate for the fine art of painting, whether based on images from nature, on personal fantasy, on non-objective imagery, or on any motif or

context. This approach aimed at artistic diversity, not uniformity, using a universal language of painting, and with a deep understanding. These formal ideas were presented as equally applicable to painting of the past and of other cultures.

Back then it struck me as curious that Berkeley's key foundation course was not called *composition* in drawing, but instead, *form* in drawing. How well did we really understand all those elastic terms and expressions the art faculty derived from Hans Hofmann's German/English idiom – *form, planes, the plane concept as the creative element of all the plastic arts, the two dimensional essence of the picture plane, space enlivened by tension, plastic space, plasticity, plastic unity, plastic movement, plastic this, plastic that, plastic whatever.....* It took some time to realize that they were not talking about the stuff milk cartons are made of, but simply malleable visual elements. And of course there were those essential and ubiquitous forces of *push and pull* - the key to successful spatial composition with color planes! And what about that often annoying and dreaded *hole in the picture plane* - a major violation of pictorial unity practiced by the academic artists, demonstrating their ignorance of and insensitivity to the *integrity of the picture plane!* The innovative diagrams that Erle Loran developed to help in understanding Cézanne's composition became an essential tool used in the teaching of all this in visual terms understandable to all.

Michael Polanyi wisely wrote that rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art[3]. I think that *Form in Drawing* was indeed useful, and while it did not entirely determine our practice of art over the years, we were sensitized to key visual issues and we learned to develop deeper understanding of our visual experiences.

And now our panel.

Form in Drawing: Where did it come from, how did it work, did it stick, where did it take us?

We now will try to address these questions, and perhaps even more!

First, Bob Beetem, who has been investigating the origins of Art 2A and some critical issues that developed later, will share his findings. Then, I will present an overview of the version of the course that I once taught with slides of some actual student projects from those days. And then Pat Adams and Sonya Rapoport will show us the very different places where it took each of them in their own art careers since Art 2A.

We have allowed time for discussion and responses after each of our presentations and we do hope that you will feel free to raise any issues and concerns you may have.

[1] Erle Loran, *Cezanne's composition: analysis of his form with diagrams and photographs of his motifs*, 3rd ed., Berkeley, 1963.

[2] Hans Hofmann, *Search for the real, and other essays*, rev.ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1967.

[3] Michael Polanyi, *Personal knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy*, Chicago, 1958.