

Investing in Futures

Lyme Academy Asserts the Primacy of “The Hand of the Artist” in a Culture that Is Becoming Electronic

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Most college students and parents want higher education to marry two lifelong goals: pursuit of what one loves and financial security. They know the subtext: college is an investment, and the higher the education level one achieves, the higher one’s potential income for life. So what about the education of artists?

Most art departments and colleges educate for careers in the so-called “applied arts.” The majority are in design-based fields, and their graduates do, in fact, find financially rewarding careers ranging from architecture or animation to aerodynamics or automobiles—and those are only a few of the A’s.

There is only one accredited art college in New England, however, that is “fine arts only.” In fact, there are only three nationally accredited fine-arts-only colleges in the United States: the San Francisco Art Institute, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Conn.

Of those three, the Lyme Academy—with only two B.F.A. programs, one in painting and the other in sculpture—is uniquely dedicated to classical, Renaissance traditions in drawing, printmaking, painting and sculpture. That means four years of intensive drawing as opposed to one semester or one year in other art programs. It means two or three years studying human anatomy. It means in-depth study of the humanities. Student work is representational based on a foundation of historical disciplines. The Lyme Academy asserts the primacy of “the hand of the artist” in a culture that is becoming electronic and digital. It’s about a commitment to the foundational disciplines that led to creation of the images by which Western civilization defines itself, from Michelangelo to Picasso.

Founded in 1976 by the sculptor Elisabeth Chandler DeGerenday and accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges in 1997, this fine-arts-only, tradition-based upstart came to be, in some degree, because of place. Old Lyme may be the only town in America that defines itself by art. Even the plaque in front of Town Hall boasts about the town’s history of supporting artists. A few years ago, the town’s Planning Commission asked taxpayers to rank the relative importance of items such as public schools, care for the elderly, protection of wetlands and nature, public

safety and security, and the rest. Art and culture ranked as the first priority—with 66 percent of the votes.

The people of Old Lyme represent high levels of education, career accomplishment and affluence. They include significant numbers of business leaders who keep second homes or spend retirement in this beautiful place. They continue to invest their time and money in supporting the artistic and cultural resources of the region. They know the Lyme Academy has an increasingly positive economic and quality-of-life impact on the town and the region. Call it a “return on investment” as this young college adds an estimated \$2 million a year to the economy and pushes up local real estate values. Meanwhile, the expanding campus creates a “greenway” which protects the historic town from the intruding interstate highway. The college acts as a generator pumping out artistic energy, intellectual discourse and new galleries and artist communities that renew urban areas in nearby New London, Norwich and New Haven.

Moreover, Old Lyme’s art patrons are deeply proud that in an era of trash art and reality TV, the Lyme Academy is committed to a centuries-old tradition of a different reality—one in which the human experience of beauty is central to civic life.

The Lyme Academy is the result of a consensus among those who represent the highest levels of educational and professional achievements, special financial capacity and a dedication to “that which one loves.” Their investment of choice is aimed at developing creativity in our young people through charitable contributions to the college as well as sustained purchasing of student and alumni art. Such patronage itself is a noble and foundational tradition, dating back to Solon and Pericles in classical Greece.

Those who support the education of fine artists today are investing in “futures.” They know that the record of our civilization will be in direct proportion to the ability of fine artists to express our highest aspirations and darkest fears in timeless images which affirm the struggle and integrity of the human spirit. The Michelangelos of the 21st century need a foundation in the traditional disciplines, which will empower them to give society visions not yet seen.

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