

Excellence in Art Education Award - Acceptance Speech

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Upon receiving the Excellence in Art Education Award from The Portrait Society of America on April 12th 2008, Charles H. Cecil gave the following acceptance speech:

I would like to thank the Portrait Society of America for this award and for its recognition of our efforts in Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance and, it should be noted, the birthplace of John Singer Sargent.

When speaking of excellence in art education, we must remember that Sargent was one of the most thoroughly trained painters of his generation - first in Florence and then at the ateliers of Carolus Duran and Léon Bonnat in Paris. By the end of the nineteenth century the kind of training Sargent received was on the verge of dying out, though Sargent's visual procedure, his use of sight-size, was to have a profound and enduring impact on the Boston School. It was R.H. Ives Gammell who, in the aftermath of World War II, revived the atelier tradition and the sight-size technique. In the 1970s and 1980s, his pupil Richard Lack continued his work.

I was privileged to be trained by both men, and during my twenty-five years of teaching I have sought to pass on this legacy. Sight-size, when properly understood, is not a mere measuring technique but a philosophy of seeing. It is above all a portrait practice whose history extends back through Sargent to the British School of the eighteenth century, notably Reynolds, Gainsborough, Raeburn and Lawrence. Gammell had met Sargent in Boston in the 1920s, and he once told me that he considered Sargent to be our last link to the masters of the past. It is my opinion that the best way to emulate Sargent is not to imitate his style, but to do what he did - to study the great masters in depth and to paint directly from life.