



# Art Students League of New York on Painting: Lessons and Meditations on Mediums, Styles, and Methods

By James L McElhinney

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### A *New York Times* Gift Pick: Coffee Table Books About New York

A lushly illustrated, comprehensive guide to painting in all media from the prestigious visual arts education institution Art Students League of New York.

The Art Students League of New York is America's signature art school, run by artists for artists. Founded in 1875, it has nurtured students like Jackson Pollock and Georgia O'Keefe. Today, more than 2,500 students of all ages, backgrounds, and skill levels study there each month.

This unique book brings you into the studio classrooms of some of the League's most celebrated painters—including William Scharf, Mary Beth McKenzie, Henry Finkelstein, and Knox Martin—for lessons on a variety of fundamental topics, idiosyncratic approaches, and quirky philosophies. Scanning the table of contents is like flipping through a course catalog: do you want to take Naomi Campbell's "Working Large in Watercolor," James McElhinney's "Journal Painting and Composition," Sharon Sprung's "Figure Painting from Life in Oil," or Ellen Eagle's "Poetic Realism in Pastel"? Now you can—from the comfort of your own home studio (or living room).

Richly illustrated with artwork from the League's considerable archives, its instructors, and its students, this guide will inspire painters across all mediums, subjects, and styles.

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## **Editorial Review**

Review

### **A *New York Times* Gift Pick: Coffee Table Books About New York**

“The League’s diverse instructors are among the world’s best, so I’m grateful that James McElhinney has brought readers along to gain their insight. The art is both apt and luscious, and it’s especially fascinating to consider the work of top pupils alongside their teachers.”

—Peter Trippi, editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur* magazine

“The diminishing returns of a media-saturated culture have produced a remarkable visual illiteracy in our time. The antidote is a hands-on engagement that works toward the mastery of seeing what you are looking at and discovering a personal attitude toward what you are seeing. The final result is a record of what it means to be in this world. This book is a doorway opening to that journey.”

—Howard Kunstler, author of *The Long Emergency* and *The Geography of Nowhere*

“This informative and lavishly illustrated volume, with its step-by-step demonstrations, personal histories, and interviews, provides readers with privileged access to the distinct philosophies and painting practices of artists, illuminating their alchemical transformations of raw materials—of charcoal and pigments and oils—into unique and inspiring expressions of human values.”

—Adrienne Baxter Bell, associate professor of art history at Marymount Manhattan College and author of *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape*

“Richly illustrated, this thoroughly modern painting guide invites painters working in every medium, style, and subject matter to pull up an easel or open a sketchbook to explore new and different ways to think about painting.”

—Charles C. Bergman, chairman and CEO, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation

“*Art Students League of New York on Painting* is such a gift: it provides information on techniques, philosophies of art, and the art of seeing. You should treat yourself to this book.”

—Audrey Flack, painter, sculptor, and former Art Students League student

### About the Author

JAMES L. MCELHINNEY has a BFA from Tyler School of Art and an MFA in painting from Yale University. His teaching career began as an assistant to Bernard Chaet at Yale, followed by appointments at Bowdoin College, Moore College of Art, Skidmore College, East Carolina University, and University of Colorado. He was artist in residence at Harper's Ferry National Historic Site in 1999. He has been visiting associate professor of drawing at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, since 2004 and has taught at the Art Students League of New York since 2005.

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### Foreword

I won an out-of-town scholarship to the Art Students League in 1955 and stayed at the YMCA for 79 cents a night if I made my own bed. Stewart Klonis was the president of the Art Students League at the time, and Rosina Florio was the registrar. She said when I arrived I jumped up on her desk and said, “Hurray!”

I studied with Robert Beverly Hale, George Grosz, Vaclav Vytlacil, Edwin Dickinson, Sidney Dickinson,

Morris Kantor, Will Barnet, and all the old-timers. The school was all about drawing and composition. My previous teacher, Cameron Booth, who had taught at the Art Students League and taught me at the University of Minnesota, excelled in both and gave me a good grounding before I arrived in New York City.

New York was intimidating. I walked everywhere and never took the subway. The museums were free, empty, and like sanitariums; today they are packed. I would see Marlon Brando and Wally Cox having coffee at the MoMA coffee shop. Life was free and casual. I applied myself and attended night classes at the Art Students League until I caught pneumonia and went to the Roosevelt Hospital Welfare Ward. I had a close artist friend, Ray Donarski, who lent me his last 5 dollars after he borrowed 10 dollars from painter Henry Pearson. Life was precarious but interesting.

My fellow students were Ray Donarski, Takeshi Asada, Chuck Hinman, and Lee Bontecou. The art world was small—57th Street, 10th Street, 23rd Street—with few galleries and few museum shows. Besides making art, my energies were directed to finding new lofts or apartments and getting enough to eat. My friends and I would do eating combines; we would chip in 50 cents and make huge meals. All you could eat. Also we would keep cheap apartments and pass them along as much as possible—the rents were 23 dollars a month. It was our underground. I would continue to go to free art classes at the Art Students League and continue to draw. A friend told me about a great job with the Stearns family in Irvington, New York. I went to see them, and Joyce Stearns jumped out the front door and said, “Hop in my Wildcat and I’ll show you the castle.” We were fixed a lunch, and Joyce said, “What do you think?” The job was to watch the children and chauffeur the family. I said, “I’ll take it.” Tending bar for the Stearns in 1956 I met Romare Bearden and John Chamberlain. And I later became friends with both of them.

The Art Students League showed me that methods are simple but the results can be incredible. All the paintings in museums around the world are merely minerals mixed mostly in oil, smeared on cloth by the hairs from the back of a pig’s ear (a Chinese bristle brush). And all the famous drawings in most museums are done merely with burnt wood (charcoal) drawn on parchment. With these basic materials you can do most anything.

The seriousness of the teaching at the Art Students League had an impact and helped me use my materials to explore the fantastic.

—James Rosenquist, artist and former Art Students League student

## Preface

Whether civilization gave birth to art or art to civilization, the two are inseparable. From the first time images were made on the walls of caves going back forty millennia, there has been an enduring enchantment with the art of painting and our ability to interpret what we see—which in turn deepens our understanding of nature and the nature of being human. Along with survival, communication is our strongest imperative, and that ongoing drive has given birth to the creation of different forms of language to bring clarity to what we perceive. Painting conveys perceptions that words cannot. We continue to be inspired by the likes of Rembrandt, Poussin, Titian, Velázquez, Rubens, Vermeer, Ingres, Corot, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, O’Keeffe, de Kooning, and so many more whose art endures today and will speak to generations to come. As one creates a picture from observation there is an awareness and a palpable sensation of being connected to the world we are observing. At first, we’re fascinated that through the application of viscous colored material to a blank surface, we can make a picture appear like what we’re seeing. That’s when the journey begins. As when we learned to speak or even to walk, the beginnings are clumsy. The idea of “painting what we see” steers our thinking well before we learn to understand how to see. The language of visual art is as complex as any other, with intrinsic grammar and vocabulary that take many years of commitment, discipline, and guidance to master. After time, the brush becomes an extension of one’s hand. Intuition relieves the brain of overthinking and overanalysis. Seeing becomes perceiving. Subject matter is form, color, and space animated by a face, figure,

landscape, or still life, or it can be without any literal reference. There is artistry in each paint stroke as the brush makes its way across the surface, like a signature with no name, just indications of cognizance spoken with color.

At the Art Students League of New York, more classes are devoted to painting than to any other discipline. As the League has grown with the times, so has the number of approaches to the medium. The language of art has many dialects, and we initially choose what suits our temperament. Whether academic realism, chiaroscuro, expressionism, or abstraction, the means of communicating with paint are endless, and the creation of art—to both painter and viewer—remains as significant today as it has been since before the dawn of recorded history.

—Ira Goldberg, executive director, Art Students League of New York

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