

WEEK 32, 2019

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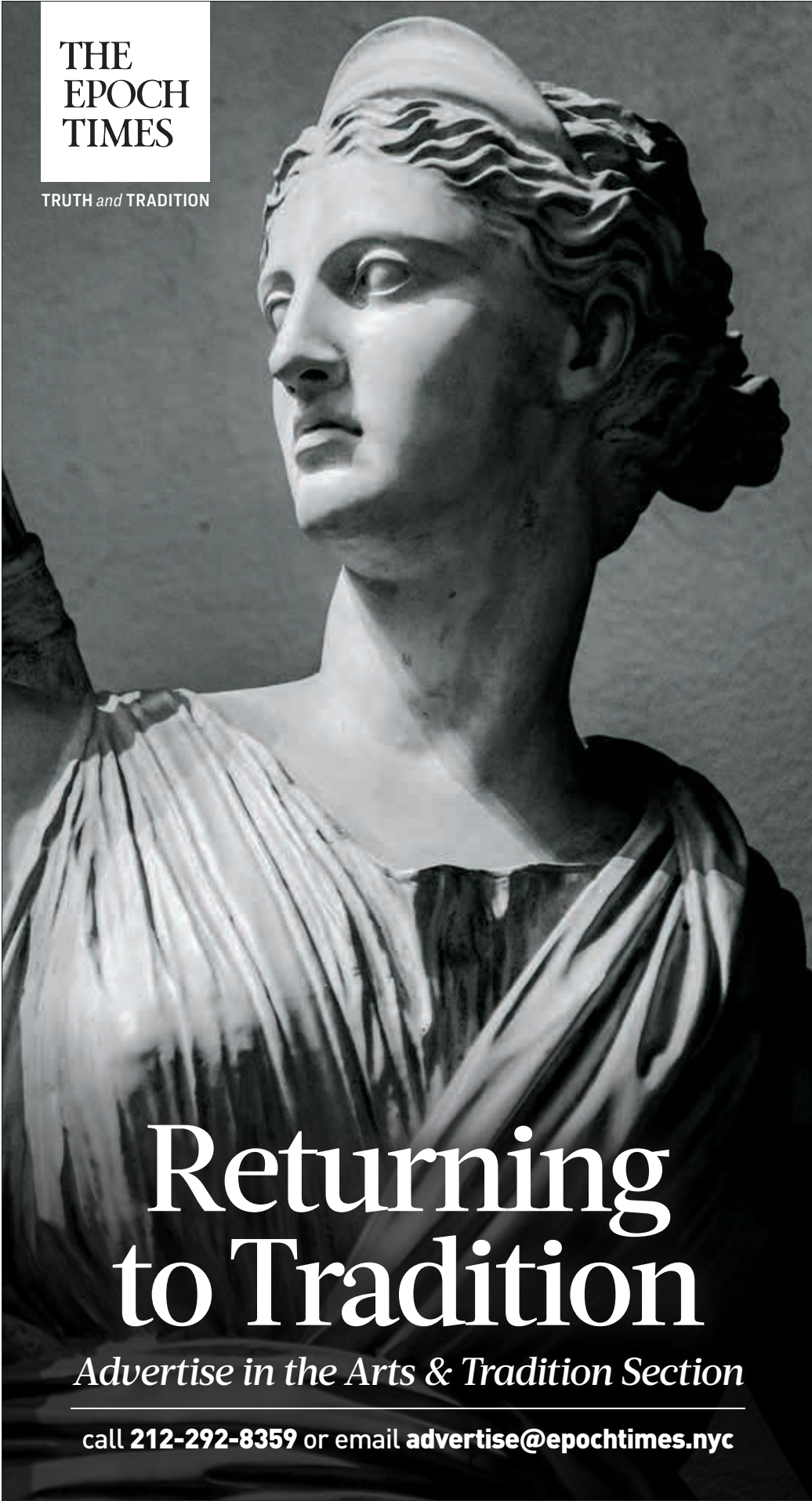


New Masters Academy shooting a video of art instructor Iliya Mirochnik at work.

The Mastermind and Heart Behind the
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"The Cotton Pickers," 1864, by Winslow Homer.

LEST WE FORGET

Up From Slavery: A 400-Year Journey

JEFF MINICK

In August 1619, a privateer docked at Point Comfort near Jamestown, Virginia. In exchange for food and supplies, the privateer left behind "20 and odd" of the slaves it had seized from a Portuguese vessel.

And so, 400 years ago, began a blot on American ideals that would in time develop into the ugliest of stains.

Not exactly a quadricentennial deserving of celebration.

About a quarter of a century ago in this same month, my wife and I visited the campus of Tuskegee University, the private, historically black institution in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Though we were on the campus less than two hours, our time there remains vivid in my memory. Because of the season, few students and teachers were present, and the silence of the afternoon lent mystery to the hot, still air.

As we walked past the older buildings, many of them built by students in exchange for tuition during the school's early years, I felt as if those bricks, mortar, and wood were alive and breathing, replete with the sweat, dreams, and hopes of all those young people who had worked and studied on these grounds.

Here, too, on these sweltering lawns lingered the ghosts of two famous Americans: Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.

Most of us think of the peanut when we hear the name of George Washington Carver, the agricultural scientist who invented over 300 uses for the peanut, including shaving cream and shampoo. Though he didn't invent peanut butter, his work doubtless contributed to its manufacture. Those of us who relish peanut butter hold Mr. Carver in high esteem.

But it is to Booker T. Washington I wish to pay homage.

A Remarkable Legacy

For many years, in the American history and literature seminars I offered to homeschoolers in Asheville, North Carolina, I taught Booker T. Washington's autobiography, "Up From Slavery." Here was a remarkable American: born into slavery, a boy with a thirst for learning, graduate of the Hampton Institute, principal and then president of the Tuskegee Institute (later to be renamed Tuskegee University), renowned public speaker, and tireless fundraiser for his college.

When he arrived in 1881 to help found the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, a school for educating teachers that later became the Tuskegee Institute, Washington faced a multitude of challenges: a lack of books, professors, and even buildings for housing his students.

Under his direction, the students not only attended academic classes but also built their classrooms and dormitories. During his years as Tuskegee's president, Washington remained a staunch propo-

nent of learning trade skills along with academic subjects.

In addition, as he records in his autobiography, many of his students hailed from so impoverished a background that he and other teachers had to instruct them in personal hygiene. By example and by instruction, he also taught the young people manners, decorum, and dress.

Until his death in 1915, Washington presided over Tuskegee, and the institute flourished. His work attracted many benefactors, presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft sought political advice from him, and the institute produced an impressive array of graduates.

Particularly important to blacks at this time were the teachers born from this endeavor, who took the gifts of learning bestowed on them by Washington into communities across the South, thereby changing the lives of thousands.

Some black leaders have criticized Washington for his advocacy of compromise and patience regarding racism and segregation. In 1885, he gave his Atlanta Exposition Speech, in which he proposed an arrangement by which blacks would recognize and accept the divisions between blacks and whites in the South, and so submit to white political rule, in exchange for state support of education and due process of law for blacks.

As time passed, many black leaders desirous of more rapid changes and for greater political power referred to his speech as the "Atlanta Compromise," believing his approach too conservative.

We should also pause in this particular year to recognize the great strides forward America has made regarding race.

Another Remarkable Legacy

Whether Washington or his detractors were correct in their ideas regarding change will be long debated among historians. But from the landing of that ship in 1619 in Jamestown and from the life of Booker T. Washington, we may draw some conclusions about America.

First, America remains what historian Wilfred M. McClay calls the "Land of Hope." While slavery and other injustices have indeed blemished the American dream of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Booker T. Washington and an army of others—men and women of all races—stand as examples of courage and perseverance in pursuit of this dream. Our history is filled with heroes who faced horrific challenges yet worked tirelessly to bring American realities more in line with its ideals.

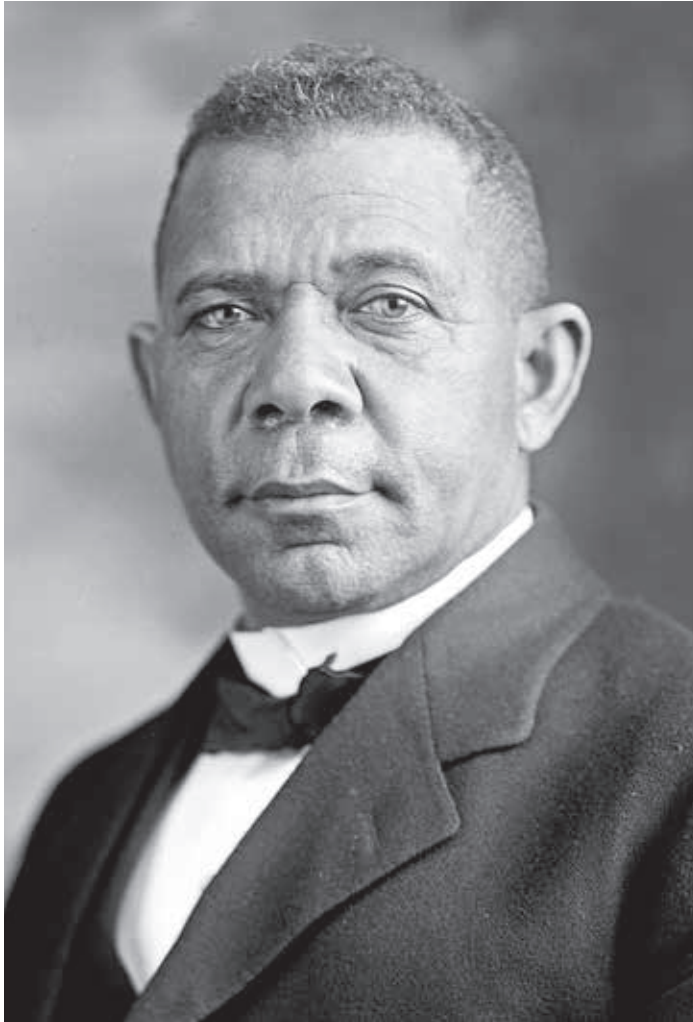
We should also pause in this particular year to recognize the great strides for-

ward America has made regarding race. Between the slaves of Jamestown and the founding of Tuskegee, there was one mighty difference—liberty. Between the time of Booker T. Washington and our present era, we see the fruits of that liberty: equal opportunities, black successes across a broad spectrum of professions, and the election of a black president.

When I was 4, my family moved from Pennsylvania to a small town in North Carolina so that my dad, a fledgling physician, could practice medicine. Dad put an end to the separate waiting rooms for black and white patients, and the 1960s put an end to the segregation of the town's schools, movie theater, churches, and restaurants.

Were we to visit that town today, we would find a community where black and white intermingle socially, attend the same schools, and lead generally harmonious lives. It has taken many years, but today there exists among us only the residue of the racism faced by Booker T. Washington.

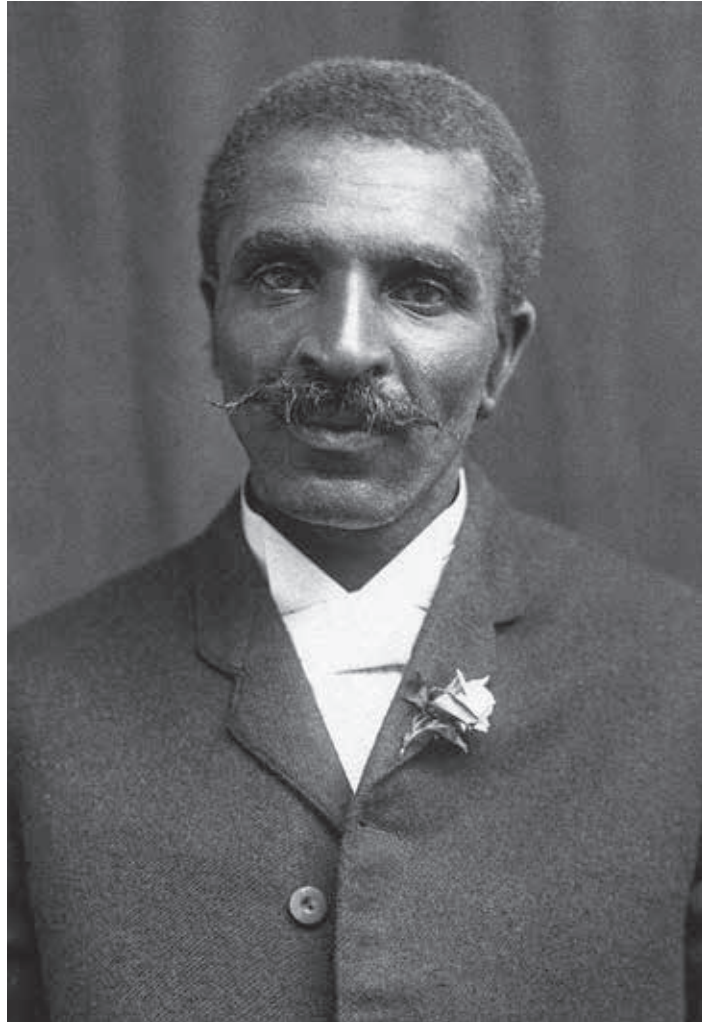
We have come a long way. Finally, we should refrain from using



(Top L) Booker T. Washington, 1905.

(Top R) The botanist George Washington Carver, circa 1910.

(Above) The Tuskegee campus in 1916.



racism as a smear tactic against those whose ideas or politics we dislike. Some people today bandy the word about as a weapon, an accusation without merit or proof. When we do so, when we sling the epithet "racist" at others in hopes of political or personal gain, we demean the word, our complicated American story, and figures like Booker T. Washington who knew full well the cruelty and evil of real racism. By engaging in such wild and irresponsible rhetoric, we prove ourselves ignorant of the travails of history.

Booker T. Washington once wrote, "There are two ways of exerting one's strength: one is pushing down, the other is pulling up."

In the "Land of Hope," we should all be pulling up.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



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THE EPOCH TIMES
TRUTH and TRADITION

FINE ARTS

The Mastermind and Heart Behind the New Masters Academy

MASHA SAVITZ

COSTA MESA, Calif.—“We’re changing the art world,” claims the New Masters Academy website.

I wanted to understand exactly how and why the internet’s subscription-based art education website is making this ambitious assertion.

I had an opportunity to tour the impressive film and sculpture studio facilities in Huntington Beach, where the art demonstrations are filmed and edited, and to meet the company’s founder, Joshua Jacobo, in his home, where I learned more about the mastermind behind New Masters Academy (NMA).

His home, which he shares with his wife, Austrian sculptor Johanna Schwaiger, have shelves lined with a notable collection of art books that rivals the library at my prestigious East Coast art school. But then again, that’s at the core of what Jacobo and NMA are doing: challenging the present art school paradigm.

What New Masters Academy Aims to Do

NMA is challenging the paradigm in both form and content.

“Our goal is to offer the world’s most affordable, most comprehensive art education and to get it in the hands of anyone who wants to learn the craft of drawing, painting, or sculpture,” Jacobo said in a follow-up email interview.

He wants “to empower artists from many different backgrounds with many different stories to tell with a solid education of art fundamentals as well as a historical context for how these crafts have evolved.”

Learning art history is impor-

tant. Just as scientists “stand on the shoulders of giants” who preceded them, artists should learn from the art and masters of the past, he believes, in order to move beyond the artistic nihilism and obscurantism of our day. In this way, we can move art forward.

By returning to the “humility and discipline of our craft, we can create the al-most magic and sacred experience in the minds of our viewers once again,” he said.

Joshua Jacobo’s Early Years

Though his childhood was filled with the wonder of creativity, Jacobo took many years to come to this craft, career, and mission. It happened in a circuitous manner, befitting a hero’s journey.

“My mother taught my brother and me how to draw at an early age. She would decorate our rooms with murals of dinosaurs, jungles, circuses, or whatever our particular fascination was at the time. She showed us how drawing could be used to connect our imaginations with the real world,” he explained.

But life took a sharp and traumatic detour when, at 20, while studying at a Los Angeles university, Jacobo learned that his mother and step-father had been killed in an auto accident. This catapulted his life in unexpected ways.

Within mere weeks of the accident, Jacobo started working to pay rent and legal bills. He put any and all of his skills toward earning money

and gathering skills and experience that would later prove invaluable to his future endeavors: He worked as a designer, copywriter, salesperson, software developer, videographer, photographer, and anything else he could, to try to make ends meet.

After almost a decade of living a responsible adult life, and with the attainment of some financial security and a range of professional experience, his feeling of panic and survival started to dissipate.

But the call to create—to engage in the mysterious activity of observing, extracting, and recording the relationship between truth and beauty—did not abate.

He began to draw again, only part-time at first. But as he regained stability and financial security, Jacobo felt that, if he was serious about

pursuing art for a lifetime, it was time to study it full-time.

“I had fantasies about creating masterpieces that rivaled those of the old masters. I felt I had aptitude and talent and only needed the right training,” he said.

The search to learn how to paint and draw like the master draftsmen of the Renaissance, however, proved more difficult than he imagined.

Jacobo’s quest became the impetus that set him on his path.

The Search for an Art School

“While I was aware that the skill of artists today paled in comparison to the great masters of the past, I assumed that serious artistic training still existed in the world,”

Jacobo said.

He was willing to move to wherever a school could be found and pay whatever was needed.

Jacobo spent a year researching university art programs, specialty schools, and ateliers around the world to find the perfect fit. He was shocked, however, to discover that most of the fundamentals of the craft of drawing, painting, and sculpture were no longer being taught.

“Something had happened to art training, and art itself, and I struggled to piece together the enormity of this disaster,” said Jacobo, contextualizing the state of art within the frame of Western history.

He learned that the 20th century had seen a radical shift in culture, so dramatically altering the visual arts that figure painting was proclaimed dead, painting irrelevant in some countries, and the craft aspect of it had become separated from the “effable notion of ‘art.’”

Traditional art was replaced by the “highly subjective, infinitely inscrutable, and quite lucrative for a select few,” he said.

He hadn’t realized that art had been “liberated” from “the authoritarian, nationalistic, bourgeois, power structures that had apparently so oppressed it.”

“The newly liberated artists...dispensed with restrictions like drawing fundamentals, humility, and a collective sense of artistic tradition in favor of individual expression, originality of style, and above all, the edgy concept. Beauty had become kitsch, and mastery of craft irrelevant.”

So rather than enrolling in a deficient or misguided art program, Jacobo decided to teach himself, laying out a self-imposed training

regimen of copying masters, studying anatomy, and drawing from the imagination, practices he continues daily and that he thinks are vital.

He purchased a four-volume set of beautiful reproductions of the corpus of Michelangelo’s drawings from the master’s home, now a museum called Casa Buonorotti, in Florence, and began the exercises given to apprentices for hundreds of years: painstakingly copying hundreds of the master’s works.

Finding a Teacher and a Mission

Recently, there is a revival of academic representational art being taught in ateliers in the United States and Europe.

Of these few artists that Jacobo found who were versed in the craft of drawing and painting, one stood out to him—Glenn Vilppu.

“Learning about Glenn from another artist, I was astounded when I first saw his drawings. Here was a living person who could really draw like the old masters.”

Vilppu, then in his 70s, was a drawing teacher who had studied with some of the best draftspeople of this generation and had taught for nearly 50 years in schools, and later worked in the animation industry. He traveled the world giving workshops and selling a wide variety of self-published books and videos on his technique: an approach to drawing with an emphasis on gesture—the visual movement that ties together nature, design, and inventiveness.

“I had no choice but to hunt him down and demand that he teach me, perhaps having watched too many kung fu movies as a kid.” Jacobo joked.

But it worked, and what transpired became a mutually beneficial relationship, both professionally and personally. It would also become the genesis of the New Master Academy.

With real-world professional and technical experience, Jacobo offered to help Vilppu’s art business in exchange for the opportunity to study with Vilppu one-on-one.

Jacobo suggested that Vilppu take his business online to reach the maximum number of art students around the world, as both agreed that what was needed was a return to traditional foundational training.

As a result, the new, small, online school called the Vilppu Academy transformed Vilppu’s business, “winning awards and getting great buzz from the art community.”

With this success and the desire to reach more people, Jacobo thought: “What if there was an online art school that functioned like a modern subscription site such as Netflix. Instead of one master artist, what if there were dozens, each providing expert training on a range of art subjects from anatomy, perspective, painting technique, creature design, the portrait, and, of course, the figure?”

At first, the content was recorded in the garage of Jacobo’s Newport Coast home, but eventually, they rented a studio space in Huntington Beach.

The website went live in March of 2013 with about 100 hours of content in the library, with thousands of beautiful reference images of art models in portraits and dynamic poses.

They developed the world’s first 3D-art reference viewer. It allows artists to study scans of people and of master sculptures as well as references to anatomy. Artists can then transfer the real measurements from the web app to their own work.

The comprehensive resources offered on the website are nothing short of remarkable.

ALL PHOTOS BY NEW MASTERS ACADEMY UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE



(Above) Artist and instructor Ed Fraughton with his sculpture of Abraham Lincoln.

(Left) “Lady Madonna” by sculptor and New Masters Academy instructor Johanna Schwaiger.

Since 2013, the website has grown to include over 1,000 hours of content from over 20 instructors, including Juliette Aristides, John Asaro, Mark Westermoe, David Simon, Johanna Schwaiger, and Rey Bustos.

It turns out that there were many others around the world who, like Jacobo, were dissatisfied with the educational options available. Over a million people follow their network, and tens of thousands around the globe study with their program.

“We started seeing the influence of our instruction early on. The quality of work being produced and shared online on art forums, Facebook, or Instagram was improving, and many artists were crediting us with their changes of understanding and thinking, some of them quite influential and well-subscribed,” he said.

Universities, film and game studios, and other professionals contacted NMA, and soon the website was being used to train artists at Disney Animation Studios and art departments globally.

“My decision to pursue my love for art as a full-time career was the best one I ever made,” Jacobo said. “I am healthier, happier, and I have found the woman of my dreams in my wife, all as a result of taking the plunge and betting on the risky world of art and art education,” he said.

Looking Toward the Future

This year, NMA will add the world’s most comprehensive landscape painting courses to its website, and many international artists from China, Russia, and Europe have been invited to film their traditional cultural arts—from Tyrolean wood carving to traditional Chinese ink painting.

Also underway are an artist store, an art news section called Canvas, and an original program for children (think “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” meets Bob Ross) that teaches art fundamentals as well as life lessons and values, such as the power of creativity and how to find beauty in the world around us.

“What I love most about art is its ability to connect us with our intrinsic nobility and love for each other and for nature,” Jacobo said. “I love how great art can inspire, challenge, and comfort us. I believe art can elevate us, that it is anything but useless. In some respects, our artistic creations represent the best of our natures.”

“We can make our society better, and despite new challenges and crushing setbacks, I think that we are succeeding,” he said.

So it seems that New Masters Academy is changing the art world, one brush stroke at a time.

Masha Savitz is a freelance writer and filmmaker in the Los Angeles area.

To learn more about New Masters Academy, visit **NMA.art**



(Top) In the studio with New Masters Academy instructor Iliya Mirochnik, recording a new portion of the Russian academic drawing course.

(Top right) Sculptor and New Masters Academy instructor Johanna Schwaiger.

(Right) A drawing by Glenn Vilppu, Joshua Jacobo’s mentor.

“While I was aware that the skill of artists today paled in comparison to the great masters of the past, I assumed that serious artistic training still existed.”

Joshua Jacobo, founder of New Masters Academy





(L-R) Actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt star in director Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood."



Margot Robbie stars as the Hollywood starlet and wife of Roman Polanski, Sharon Tate.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

Classic Tarantino, Pretty Funny

MARK JACKSON

Quentin Tarantino personally drives me up a wall, but love him or hate him, QT's a cinematic fixture. He'll someday—guaranteed—be in the director Hall of Fame, and I have to give credit where credit is due: “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood” is too long but very amusing.

It's got all the QT ingredients: eye-grabbing cinematography; vibrant colors (such as a luscious, neon-orange screen text); ridiculous, bone-crunching violence; political-correctness-be-damned use of racial epithets for cheap shock value (usually one race per movie, in this case, Mexicans); excessive running time; displays of Eastern martial arts (here a brilliant Bruce Lee spoof); an uncanny knowledge of 1960s/'70s deep cuts for the soundtrack; and use of '60s/'70s commercials and AM-radio deejay blather as an alternative

soundtrack. And of course, QT's particular brand of sneaky-but-outrageous humor.

Hollywood
QT's always paying tribute to something '60s/'70s. He's forever nostalgia-fying. Here he nostalgifies about Hollywood, with a little story about fictitious B-list movie actor Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his stunt double Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt).

It's the summer of 1969; we're witnessing the career nosedive of TV actor Rick Dalton, who was a big Western star in the early '60s, but as pointed out to him by a fleabag agent (Al Pacino) hoping to rope Dalton into spaghetti Westerns, he's being surreptitiously punked and gradually marginalized by the Hollywood industry: He's being asked to play heavies who constantly get killed in TV-guest spots. He's a has-been now. Drinks too much. Can't remember his lines anymore.

Then, there are the shenanigans

Cliff gets up to while waiting for his boss to get off work. Cliff's got problems too, mind you. In addition to being Rick's long-in-the-tooth stunt man, Cliff is also Rick's driver, gofer, plus low-level fixer of all of Dalton's problems as they crop up. He lives in a trailer (QT can't pass up a good low-rent trailer) with his pit bull.

Now, while being so dependent on Rick is maybe not the most manly, independent of existences, Cliff is cool, Cliff wears moccasins, and Cliff understands, in a Zen way, Dylan's lyric: “It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.”

Heck, Cliff is so cool, he can beat up Bruce Lee. (Apparently, Lee's daughter was going to take legal action about QT's bypassing her approval to feature a Lee look-alike in this movie, and you can see why). Oh, and Cliff may or may not have killed his wife. And while women will not find this funny, some men may find it a little bit funny.

bull's dog food, is pretty funny.

So, speaking of the hippie-chick—after a running gag of numerous Cliff-Cadillac drive-bys, and her flirting attempts to flag him down, he finally drives her home to a now-defunct movie set/ranch. It's populated with what is clearly a '60s/'70s NXIVM-type cult, with a lot of scary, slightly zombified hippie girlies (Lena Dunham, Dakota Fanning, and so on).

They're Charlie's Angels. Charlie Manson, that is. The summer of '69 Hollywood Hills murder ballad of what they did to Roman Polanski's wife, the up-and-coming starlet Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie), is Hollywood legend. The Beatles wrote “Helter Skelter” about the horror of it all. In QT's version, she's Rick Dalton's next-door neighbor.

Will QT go there and display it in all its ghastly gruesomeness? Kinda. But not at all how you'd expect him to. And that's a good thing.

Nostalgiafication
QT's clearly paying tribute to the '60s/'70s buddy chemistry of Robert Redford and Paul Newman, except that those two were very manly. Whereas, while Brad Pitt has always been the newer version of Robert Redford, playing largely manly characters, DiCaprio's character here is a serious whiner.

An amusing whiner. But the character's endless chain-smoking, coughing, red-faced, throat-clearing, spitting, blood-shot-eyed alcoholism eventually grates.

Generally, all narratives mosey along too slowly, which is classic, too-full-of-himself Tarantino. At what feels like three hours, one senses that QT still hasn't grasped writer William Faulkner's advice to “kill all your darlings” and cut his films down to a normal running time, because he finds all his darling footage too precious.

However, Margot Robbie is a precious ingredient in any film and should never be given this little to do. She's the rare beauty with great comedic talent. And while Sharon Tate's story is anything but comedic, I do appreciate the fact that QT gave us a Hollywood ending and played everything for chuckles.

“Once Upon a Time in Hollywood,” though, makes you want to see Robbie do a Tate biopic on par with the one she did for that other tragic American girl—Tonya Harding.

Doesn't Sound Like Much
It's not profound, not insightful or uplifting, but like I said, it's amusing. Rick striking up an on-set friendship with the quintessential Hollywood child-actress brat-prodigy, who becomes his psychologist and acting coach, is worth a good chuckle.

Mike Moh's hysterical, Bruce Lee-channeling performance sends up the martial arts legend's outsized ego. Lee probably, mostly managed to keep his ego within the realm of cool. But one just senses on a gut level (knowing well his “Beee like waaaawh-tuuuh, my friennnd” advice), it probably slipped over into the level of obnoxiousness on display here, every once in a while. Probably more often than that.

Brad Pitt, while funny and cool throughout, is also the movie's sole moral anchor. His scene of fending off the advances of an extremely comely, hitchhiking jailbait hippie-chick (Margaret Qualley) with good humor backed by deadly seriousness and rock-solid conviction, flies in the face of the current sordid news of the world's Wieners, Weinsteins, Epsteins, Spitzers, Bill Clintons, and Ranieres. This actually surprised me, what with QT's general lack of a moral compass. But Cliff's smoking an odd-looking cigarette and then sampling his pit

Al Pacino plays a fleabag agent.



Stunt man Cliff (Brad Pitt, L) and Bruce Lee (Mike Moh) spar, in “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood.”



Leonardo DiCaprio plays a washed-up star.



‘Once Upon a Time in Hollywood’
Director Quentin Tarantino
Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Margot Robbie, Dakota Fanning, Timothy Olyphant, Al Pacino, Kurt Russell, Luke Perry
Running Time 2 hours, 41 minutes
Rated R
Release Date July 26
★★★★★

‘Death Is Elsewhere’ When Beauty Is Present

A touching Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit depicting life and love

J.H. WHITE

Sweet acoustic melodies floated out of The Met's Robert Lehman Wing court as I peered down from one floor above the exhibition “Death Is Elsewhere,” going on until Sept. 2. As I walked down the stairs to the exhibition, I realized the Dutch Golden Age of painting installation encircled where I was heading. It was like a mandala of art—a small universe of beauty—with soft folk mantras pulling me into its center.

Inside “Death Is Elsewhere,” the acclaimed Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson had placed seven screens in a circle “like a high-tech Stonehenge,” he says in The Met's on-line artist interview. On screen, two pairs of twins walk opposite each other, continuously moving from screen to screen, singing and strumming the guitar.

[Singing] In the dark, in the dark, my love, my love . . .

By the stream, by the stream, my love, my love . . .

The male twins are Aaron and Bryce Dessner of the popular American band The National, and Icelandic musicians Gyoa and Kristin Anna Valtysdottir, formerly from the band Mum. Since each pair is made of a man and woman (a Dessner brother and Valtysdottir sister), the two couples appear like mirror images of each other 180 degrees across the room. The men play guitar and sing; the women harmonize in dulcet tones, or echo back in a call and response.

“It becomes a reflection of individuality. It almost feels like portraiture,” Kjartansson says in the same interview. “I really look at it as a kinetic painting.”

These motion-picture portraits did remind me of Rembrandt—introspective, honest, relatable, human. On screen, one pairing seemed to be more focused on each other, smiling, walking their own path; the other couple seemed to be more self-aware, occasionally looking across the exhibition at their reflections.

In one continuous 77-minute loop, they walked their path, figuratively smelling the roses and making music.

[Singing] Death is elsewhere . . .

Into the Journey
Kjartansson grew up in Reykjavik, Iceland, the son of a famous Icelandic actress, Guorun Asmundsdottir, and a director-playwright father, Kjartan Ragnarsson.

“I'm raised in the theater, and I always loved rehearsals because it's just the same scene, over and over again,” Kjartansson says. “I remember the disappointment of seeing a play, with its narrative structure. Then there's no space for the imagination.”

Kjartansson uses clichés in his craft, il-



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK, AND IS GALLERY, REYKJAVIK

(Top) One of the couples made up from two sets of identical twins, in Ragnar Kjartansson's “Death Is Elsewhere.”

(Above) Ragnar Kjartansson's installation “Death Is Elsewhere,” 2019.

lustrating the pairs as archetypal couples whimsically in love.

“The core of the piece is this circular song that has no beginning and no ending, all about spring and love,” Kjartansson says. “We're just having a lovely time in nature, and death is really elsewhere.”

But life does have duality, so where there is life, there is also death. On the screens, the foreground is lush and alive with vibrant grasslands, but far away on the horizon, we see hardened volcanic landscapes—a subliminal presence of death.

The project was filmed “around Eldhraun—the biggest lava field on Earth and one of the greatest natural disasters in history,” Kjartansson says. In 1783, the Laki volcano erupted and flowed for eight months, not only covering the earth with lava but also blanketing the sky with ash. Not many Icelanders died directly from the lava flow, but one fifth died from the effects of the dark, ashy sky blocking the sunlight. Crops and livestock died; disease and famine lived.

The Chinese Ruler Who Set an Example of Goodwill

SU LIN

King Wen of Zhou (around 1152–1056 B.C.) was a paragon of virtue and a model ruler. His personal name was Ji Chang, and he was born in present-day Qishan, in Shaanxi Province. His father was a duke during the Shang Dynasty. After his father's death, Ji Chang took over his position.

Throughout the thousands of years of Chinese history, whenever an emperor was wimpy or the country underwent trials and tribulations, people would look back and remember the society under the reign of King Wen of Zhou, where harmony and goodwill prevailed. During that time, farmers renounced their claims to land, officials relinquished their positions, and everybody was benevolent and observed propriety. King Wen of Zhou set an example for future generations.

Giving Up Land for His People
King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty (not to be confused with King Wen of Zhou) invented the Cannon Burning Punishment. Prisoners were made to walk on a hollow bronze cylinder that was stuffed with burning charcoal,

and they'd burn to death. His favorite concubine, Daji, enjoyed watching people tortured like this.

The punishment filled the vassal state rulers and people with disgust, and Ji Chang offered King Zhou the land west of the Luo River in the state of Zhou in exchange for the abolishment of the Cannon Burning Punishment. King Zhou agreed, and Ji Chang won the support of the vassal states.

Resolving Disputes for Vassal States
According to the “Records of the Great Historian—the Basic Annals of Zhou,” there were disputes between the vassal states of Yu and Rui. The leaders thought of asking Ji Chang to play mediator.

On reaching the state of Zhou and seeing how modest and courteous the people there were, the representatives from Yu and Rui were ashamed of themselves. “We are fighting, but the people of the state of Zhou see fighting as a disgrace. We're humiliating ourselves.”

The men apologized to each other and left. People from the other states learned about it, and



BLUE HSIAO/THE EPOCH TIMES

King Wen ruled the Zhou kingdom by virtue. There is a story of disputing officials who, seeing the gentlemanly state of his people, resolved their differences.

everybody went to Ji Chang to settle their disputes.

Ji Chang was only Count of the West at that time, but during his reign, his subjects were so gentlemanly that the two vassal state representatives felt ashamed of themselves and decided to make peace. If a leader sets an example, it will be followed by his subordinates. The people of Zhou were of a kindly disposition under his influence.

The incident of Ji Chang mediating indirectly was symbolic. He became a model of sanctity, a fig-

urehead for the rest of the state kings to emulate. They looked up to him as their king and gave him the mandate to overthrow King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty.

Giving a Decent Burial
When Ji Chang was Count of the West, he gave the order to build a pavilion 30 li (about 9 miles) from present-day Hu County, in Shaanxi Province. When the construction workers were digging to make a pond, they uncovered skeletal remains.

The official in charge reported the matter to Ji Chang. Out of benevolence, Ji Chang ordered that the skeletons be buried. The official said that since the passing of time made the identification of the skeletal remains impossible, nobody was responsible for them.

Ji Chang replied: “I'm the ruler of this state, and these skeletal remains were found in my state. That makes me responsible for them.” He ordered a decent burial for the remains.

Everybody was moved by Ji Chang's benevolence. “The Count of Zhou is virtuous! He would even give the dead his blessings and protection,” and they pledged their allegiance to him.

THEATER REVIEW

A Strong Cast Can Overcome a Lot

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK—It’s not what you’ve done in life that matters, but what you haven’t done. And thinking about the “if onlys” won’t do anything to change them. These are a couple of the several dozen homilies that appear with the frequency of candy at a children’s Halloween party in the surprisingly appealing “Two’s a Crowd.” The show may be filled with stock characters and sitcom-like situations, but it has a powerhouse cast and a seamless blending of the comedy and music genres. It’s never anything less than a total delight.

Wendy (Rita Rudner), a 59- to 63-year-old wedding planner (who keeps changing her age), has come to Las Vegas for a reset on life after her marriage of 25 years falls apart. Her plans are brought to a screeching halt when she finds, due to a software glitch, that her hotel room has been doubled booked.

She is forced to share the room with Tom (Robert Yacko), a retired electrical contractor who has come to town for the annual Vegas poker tournament. The tournament is the reason that every hotel room in the area is already spoken for.

Initially, Wendy and Tom, who is carrying a hidden pain of his own, appear to have nothing in common—other than a skill at sarcasm and comedic put-downs. They differ in everything from the way they order dinner, to the way they pack their clothes, to the type of music they enjoy.

It isn’t long, though, before the two

start to bond over their loneliness and their desire to move forward. While commiserating about their children whom they rarely see, each begins to feel a strong connection to the other, with the clear hint of something more permanent between them possible.

While this is where some stories might choose to end, “Two’s a Crowd” is just getting started. The show uses the idea of what can happen during a stay in Vegas to explore exactly what a lasting relationship entails. Familiarity and sharing common ground prove to be just as important as trust and understanding—an idea that everyone can certainly relate to.

The characters don’t always act in ways that are “politically correct,” as Wendy puts it. Rather, they are making choices that are right for them. The fact that both Wendy and Tom are in their so-called golden years adds an extra layer of emotion to the story.

All the Fun

Despite the clear seriousness of the subject matter, the one standout element in “Two’s a Crowd” is its overall sense of fun. The work is billed as a “comedy musical” and doesn’t disappoint in either aspect.

The characters break into song in unpredictable ways, which elevates the piece into something that feels fresh. It happens when Wendy’s husband, Gus (Brian Lohmann), appears seeking another chance with her.

Other musical highlights include a duet between Wendy and Louise (Kelly Holden Bashar), the



▲ Tom (Robert Yacko) and Wendy (Rita Rudner) share an uncomfortable meal. They just have so little in common!

Comic Rita Rudner is the star of “Two’s a Crowd,” which she co-wrote with her husband, the piece’s director, Martin Bergman.



hotel’s VP of operations, singing about the myths and realities of Las Vegas; and Lili (Bashar), a hotel maid complaining about the cleanliness habits of the guests. Not to mention an absolutely killer closing number.

Jason Feddy, the show’s composer and lyricist, is one of the onstage musicians, so he adds his own vocal talents to the proceedings when called for.

The script penned by Rudner and director Martin Bergman—the two are husband and wife—works perfectly. The text is clearly tailored to capitalize on Rudner’s comic skills, while at the same time, it evolves from a basic two-person comedy into a piece that asks some impor-

tant questions about life.

Bergman’s direction is also quite strong. It allows both the spoken and musical moments to come through with maximum effect.

The entire cast is excellent, with all of the characters never anything less than appealing. The chemistry that Yacko and Rudner have together onstage is a major plus. Bashar and Lohmann more than hold their own in multiple roles.

The only noticeable hiccup is that Rudner’s musical delivery is not quite up to that of the rest of the cast. This is especially noticeable in her duets with Yacko.

“Two’s a Crowd” ensures that the audience enjoys themselves from start to finish while also imparting a clear message. In these, it succeeds quite handily and will almost certainly have a long life in local and regional theaters around the country once it finishes its New York run.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle. He can be reached at bnchpeop@aol.com

‘Two’s a Crowd’

59E59 Theaters
59 E. 59th St.
New York

Running Time
2 hours (one intermission)

Closes
Aug. 25

Tickets
646-892-7999 or 59e59.org



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