10 STEPS TO BECOME A WORLD-CLASS ARTIST

BY
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About the Author



B. Eric Rhoads

As publisher of Fine Art Connoisseur, I encounter thousands of artists every year, and I've had an opportunity to explore the careers of many. I've also had my portrait painted by almost every major living (and some now-deceased) portrait artist and have found myself carrying on conversations with them, in some cases over several days. Through that process I've determined the success factors of these great artists.



B. Eric Rhoads, Publisher

Eric Rhoads is an authority on the realism movement and publisher/founder of Fine Art Connoisseur magazine. He is the founder of the annual Figurative Art Convention & Expo and the new Realism Live!Virtual Event. He is also an expert on plein air painting and has been a leader in its resurgence across the world. He is the founder of PleinAir magazine and Plein Air Convention & Expo, PleinAir Live!and publishes weekly newsletters including Realism Today, Fine Art Today, Plein Air Today, and American Watercolor Weekly. Rhoads is an expert on art marketing and the author of Make More Money Selling Your Art, a contributor to ArtMarketing.com, author of the 6-part, 22-hour video series Art Marketing Boot Camp. Rhoads is also a figurative, portrait, and plein air painter.

10 Steps to Becoming a World-Class Artist

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1. Being Self-Taught Is a Myth. Study Under the Very Best Available.

Very few of these well-known artists started out with natural talent, and all of them highlighted the importance of studying under the best possible instructors. Being self-taught is, from what I can tell, a bit of a myth, and many say it's a foolish waste of time. There are brilliant, experienced artists who have spent decades learning and making mistakes, and they can pass along their lessons and save you years of experimentation.

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2. You Cannot See Your Own Mistakes.

It's also important to have the critical eye of someone experienced to help you correct your drawing or painting mistakes. Each artist spoke of their mentors and the influence of those mentors on their own work. We all get too close to our paintings and we tend to fall in love with what we've done, often because we've labored so hard. So if our drawing is off ever so slightly, we often can't see it, even using a mirror or black mirror. Though we can get feedback from friends or other artists, it's the highly experienced pros who can spot the nuances, the tiny changes that are needed to make a painting or drawing perfect.

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3. Practice Does Not Make Perfect.

Though practice is important, bad practice makes permanence. That is why excellent instruction and feedback are the most important things you can receive as an artist. Every artist I've spoken to has emphasized this critical factor, but the best of the best, those who have risen to the top, all point out that there were specific mentors who were exceptional at their craft and who caught problems early on so those problems were not repeated and absorbed.

This is a sub-heading

4. The Level of Mentorship Makes a Huge Difference.

With few exceptions, the highest level an artist will reach is the level of that artist's mentor. That is why seeking top-tier artists as mentors is crucial. But, as one artist I spoke with suggested, many artists seeking mentors do not have the experience or understanding to discern who is best. They are drawn to someone whose work they love – but they may be being drawn to substandard work. Students may even end up studying under someone who will lead them into bad habits that, once practiced, become difficult to shed. This is why going with highly respected and sanctioned schools and ateliers, such as Art Renewal Center-approved ateliers, is so important. The Art Renewal Center makes sure standards are high before sending students to schools, and recommendations from top artists are crucial.

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5. Develop Hand-Eye Coordination Before Working from Life.

Artists often try to move forward too quickly, and end up building their artistic "house" on a weak foundation. Most top artists recommend copying Bargue plates relentlessly until you can copy each one perfectly – it's a practice employed in almost all top ateliers. Having mastered the plates, students have enough understanding of drawing and shading to move to drawing from plaster casts, starting out with light/shadow drawings and then moving into the depth of realism. These tools give artists a tremendous advantage by dramatically improving their hand-eye coordination. Though these exercises can be tedious and take a lot of time – and students naturally want to skip forward to color and working from life – artists need to be prepared for those steps by perfecting Bargue and then cast drawing.

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6. Insist on Learning Anatomy if You're Studying Figure.

Not all schools care about it, but most of the good ones insist students learn anatomy, which informs painting accuracy. Anatomy is a critical foundation taught alongside drawing at the best art schools worldwide, but it is considered difficult and some schools don't think it's necessary. Great artists tend to know their anatomy; they can see the effects of bones and muscles under the skin, making their drawings and paintings stronger. The best say this is absolutely the difference between amateurs and the pros.

7. There Is No Substitute for Easel Time from Life.

All the artists I've spoken with have highlighted the importance of spending extensive time drawing and painting from live models. Most say that live model figure sessions provide the best overall experience, allowing the artist to capture the essence of life while working in a less-than-perfect environment where the subject may move. Some insist on sight-size drawing at this stage, while others believe hand measurement is an important skill to learn. It all boils down to the preference of your mentors. Most of the top artists pointed out that they drew more than their fellow students, and some said they drew from live models every day for years — including after graduating from school — for four or five hours at a time. By doing this, they gave themselves a big advantage. Most, even though experienced, continue to work with live models as much as possible as a means of maintaining their skills.

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8. Values Make or Break a Painting.

Part of the purpose of Bargue drawing and cast drawing is learning to understand values (darks and lights). A painting or drawing will fall apart if the values are wrong, yet many artists have told me they learned about values late in their career, and that mastering them changed everything. Learning to paint the portrait and figure in grayscale is critical to master painting — and, as you know, a grayscale painting can look finished and is very desirable to many collectors. Many schools teach students to create a gray or green underpainting, with thin glazes of color over those foundations — something that can create a lovely feel without a lot of additional painting. Master values to master painting.

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9. Mastery of Color Makes You Stand Out.

Color is often considered "the fun stuff," yet it is usually misunderstood. Early-stage painters tend to use too much chroma (brightness) and garish coloring. But artists like the late Nelson Shanks (1937-1915), who used a lot of strong and bright color, understood that it didn't work if the entire painting was overly colorful or if there wasn't proper color balance. Strong study of color, color temperature, and color harmony is critical. The Munsell method of color is highly popular for teaching artists how to use subtle color to make lovely skin tones and to turn forms. Make sure you seek out color professionals as part of your studies.

10. Take the Time to Learn Proper Painting and Glazing.

Drawing is, of course, the foundation of all painting, and a critical skill. At some point most artists want to graduate to painting, and that is where styles begin to diverge. Some ateliers are more interested in underpainting in various tones, while others feel a direct wet-into-wet painting technique is important. Most, but not all, schools also believe that learning to glaze is important. All will insist that this is another time when proper instruction makes a huge difference. We recommend you find an instructor with a style you love so you can learn that painting style. While some schools are insistent that students not try various approaches, we believe you won't know what works for you without sampling a lot of different approaches – though it is important to stabilize on one method eventually.

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11. BONUS: Take Advice from the Great Ives Gammell (1893-1981).

R.H. Ives Gammell was probably the artist most responsible for the foundation of today's realism movement across the world. Gammell trained some of the finest artists alive today, helping spread realism in the lineage of Paxson and Gérôme. One thing Gammell insisted upon was his students going outside to paint landscapes from life, which is called plein air painting. He believed it was one of the best ways to train the eye in color and form. This is also strongly integrated into the Russian academic system, which is probably the best training in the world. They insist that students spend their summers doing daily plein air painting, even if they are not seeking to become landscape painters. They also insist that students practice painting the figure from life outdoors (clothed and unclothed), which they believe is one of the best disciplines for training. (Note: My company produces a magazine called PleinAir and an event called the Plein Air Convention & Expo.

A Word to Concerned Parents About the Art Life and the Right Art Experiences for Students

There are concerns among parents when a child wants to pursue life as an artist because some fear their child won't be able to make a good living. As the publisher of some significant art magazines, and someone who has coached and trained thousands of artists in art marketing, I can tell you that I personally know or have met a huge number of accomplished artists who have become multi-millionaires or who are making a very strong living with their art. Folklore about unstable, "starving" artists like Jackson Pollock or Van Gogh has helped create this discomfort among parents. Though I can find starving artists, I can find as many or more who are financially successful.

I should also mention that someone who embraces the gift of painting and drawing, who is passionate about it, has a rare gift that many people wish they had. Trying to sway your child from this passion is probably counterproductive, and ultimately they may well return to art no matter what else they pursue. I'm reminded of a person I know who resisted her parents' push for law school. She did finally get her law degree, then quit her job as a lawyer, went to art school, and has made her living as an artist ever since. Though this may not be the path you've hoped for your child, you can rest assured that a bright artist, with great training and some good business and marketing training, can not only survive, but thrive.

A Note About Schools

As parents, we want our kids to receive a degree from a good college. So the tendency is to think that if your child wants to pursue art, they should do so in a college art program at a major institution. Sadly, very few college art departments in America are teaching art properly anymore. They have been seduced by the idea of pure creativity without training, with an anything-goes attitude. I've been approached by students with a four-year Masters of Fine Art degree who have told me they wasted their time cutting out shapes in colored paper rather than learning drawing and anatomy. Many top college art programs no longer offer drawing classes, and I have encountered professors who couldn't teach their students to draw if they wanted to. Though a person should pursue creativity and modernism if that is what they love, having a solid foundation makes a huge difference in the work they will produce. Remember, Picasso was classically trained.

One solid option for your student is an atelier (a school operated by one or more artists). There are many wonderful ateliers in America and Europe that offer the kind of training that will turn your student into a highly skilled and accomplished artist capable of drawing or painting at the level of some of the Old Masters. If they pursue this path, there is a wonderful career awaiting them, as these graduates tend to be the most sought-after artists and have the most financially rewarding careers.

The Realism Movement

Today we are in the midst of a return to realism, which was almost lost when modernism took the world by storm. Realism was held together by a few artists who insisted on sticking with the knowledge that had been passed down for 400 years or more. Fifteen years ago, when I started my magazines, there were probably only one or two ateliers teaching these techniques. But today, because of the popularity of this movement among young people, there are many. We believe this movement is important and needs to be promoted, so we've used the pages of Fine Art Connoisseur to highlight these artists and the realism movement. Furthermore, we've launched a convention, the Figurative Art Convention & Expo, as well as a virtual conference, Realism Live - both of which are designed to inspire, train, and encourage collaboration among artists and those learning.

These gatherings draw students, people exploring which school they should attend or which artist they should emulate, and hundreds of artists at all levels, from professionals to amateurs and even beginners. By seeing the top masters in the world live, watching them paint, and listening to them talk, attendees can sample a number of approaches and styles and learn new techniques.

With Realism Live, attendees will have an opportunity to chat with these artists and can practice in their own home with live models and mentors to work with them in real-time. This is an excellent way for any artist, or anyone exploring becoming an artist, to learn from the best of the best, to hear from important experts, and to learn marketing techniques to ensure a strong career. We encourage you to explore this and see who is speaking and presenting. There are also worthwhile pre-convention training sessions for Beginners if you're just getting started exploring this path.

In conclusion, these 11 points are critical. Yet also important is being a part of a community of artists, getting to know others so that the sharing and collaboration that are crucial to success can occur. Artists have said to me that technique isn't everything, that art comes from a level of experience that exceeds technique – and that is impacted by where and how the artist spends her or his time. Each pointed out the importance of being surrounded by a community of artists in order to understand the important unwritten factors that relate to painting. This community provides discussion, exposure to other concepts, and an ongoing dialogue.

One of my concerns as a publisher who is driven to see realism embraced by the art world is that there are tens of thousands of artists who have no quality mentors available in their areas, or who are not in a position to attend an atelier. To address this, we've created hundreds of instructional videos to aid artists who otherwise have no mentors to work with. Though this is a solid and important alternative, it's not a substitute for live interaction and community, which is why Realism Live is so important.

I also believe there are many artists who have become trapped in a single perspective and a single way to do things. Though they can find great satisfaction in the foundation from which they've learned, we've found that artists who expose themselves to differing approaches and techniques find themselves with more options, and more solutions to the challenges they face throughout their careers. Of course, we also hear stories of students who make their way to an atelier, study there for a few years, and come out thinking the way they've been taught is the only way. Often, when given an opportunity to sample other approaches and styles, they find themselves moving to a new atelier, or adding more years to their education. Students who are given an opportunity to sample different techniques and styles in advance of their commitment are often happier with their choices. Realism Live is designed to show a variety of approaches and styles.

We created Realism Live in an effort to address this need for collaboration, exposure to the finest artists, and direction for artists who may find that they are not in a position to attend a school due to careers, stage of life, or the limitations caused by the worldwide COVID pandemic. And it is also for those who seek to collaborate with others, get to know their tribe and be a part of a community, and sample different styles.

In fact, this is our primary goal - to make a world-class level of art education available and affordable to any artist who wishes to pursue it. No travel. No hotel. The foundation of this virtual event is the attracting of excellent mentors, as we invite the top artists in the world to teach you realist painting and drawing in the comfort of your home.

The unexpected magic of an online event like Realism Live is the willingness of the faculty members to interact with attendees on a personal level, offering coaching, critiques, and general discussion throughout the many casual networking sessions. After we ran our successful PleinAir Live and Watercolor Live events, many artists told us they felt like they had found a home, after feeling isolated and alone in their studios and not realizing there were so many others who were trying to accomplish the same things. This has led to artists meeting artists, sometimes in their own towns, sometimes in other virtual settings, and in some cases has resulted in collaboration on shows or paintings.

Becoming a world-class artist requires seeking out the best of the best. I hope this has been helpful, and we invite you to consider the Realism Live virtual event.

The dates for the 2nd Annual Realism Live event are November 11-13, 2021, with a pre-event Beginner's Day starting on November 10.

We encourage you to visit RealismLive.com to learn about the event, and see the latest faculty. We also hope you'll explore Fine Art Connoisseur magazine.

We also encourage you to visit FigurativeArtConvention.com to learn about our in-person event. The 2019 event took place in Williamsburg, Virginia, and included models in Revolutionary War-era costumes and even plein air painting in the streets, in addition to indoor sessions. The events for 2020 and 2021 had to be cancelled due to COVID and were replaced with Realism Live.

Learn More

If you're serious about becoming a better artist, you must attend the Realism Live Global Virtual Experience.

This is THE place to discover how to accelerate your growth, learn from some of today's best artists, and interact with like-minded people who love art just as much as you do.

Join us at RealismLive … and find your tribe!

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