

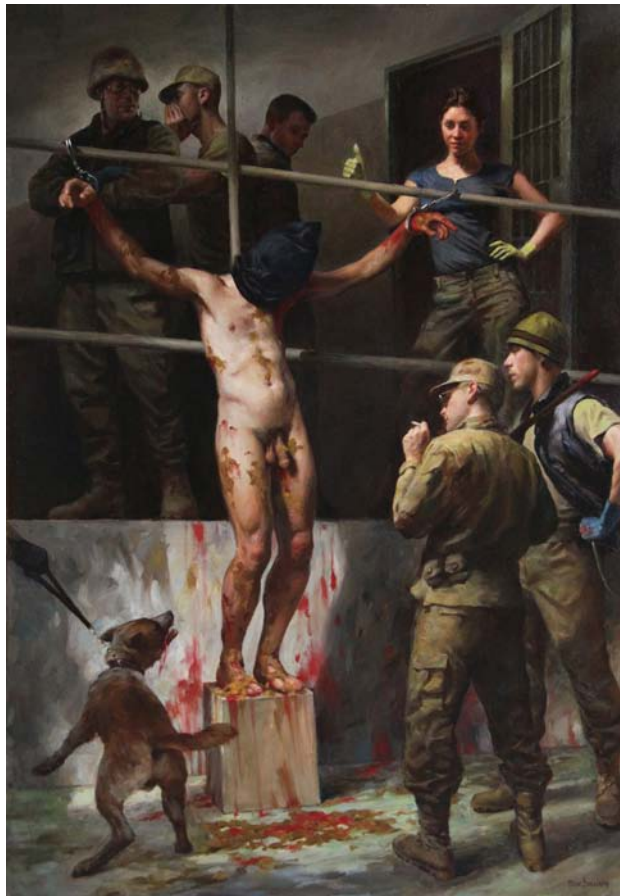
TRUTH IS BEAUTY

Max Ginsburg

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

- John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

PART 1: TRUTH IS BEAUTY: CONTENT



Max Ginsburg, *Torture Abu Ghraib*, 2009

Telling the truth is beautiful. Facing up to reality is beautiful. How often do we see situations of injustice where people keep quiet for their own "security" or some personal advantage? The Germans did this in the 1930s and 1940s when they saw Jews disappearing from their neighborhoods. We, too often, look the other way when we witness discrimination and racism in the workplace.

Certainly in a free society we should have the courage to speak the truth, and as artists we should have the courage to paint the truth. I aim to do this in many of my paintings; two examples are *Torture Abu Ghraib* and *War Pieta*.



Max Ginsburg, *War Pieta*, 2007

With these paintings I protested an injustice by my government which was unleashing a senseless war against the people of Iraq, ostensibly because of 9/11. Iraqis were not involved in 9/11 and they had no weapons of mass destruction, which they were accused of having by my government. Therefore my paintings about this injustice were about painting the truth. At the time there was hostility towards people who were critical of this war and it was somewhat dangerous to express an anti-war opinion. However "truth is beauty," so I decided to have the courage of my convictions and paint these anti-war paintings. People often said to me, "Don't look for trouble, play it safe. Why don't you paint a still life or a pretty girl?" But I believe that the most beautiful thing is truth. Avoiding the truth is dangerous and destructive; avoiding the truth is living a lie.



Max Ginsburg, *Bus Stop*, 2010

In keeping with this same belief, I painted the truth about people at a bus stop in New York City. I sought to capture the reality of the people and the situation. Every individual was different in the way he/she looked and acted. They were from all walks of life, different classes, races and religions, young and old, recent immigrants and immigrants from way back, in an inclusive society. They are not mannequins but real individuals. The sidewalk has cracks and is imperfect. The reality of this scene is beautiful to me because it is a truthful painting of humanity.



Anthony van Dyck, *James Stuart (1612–1655), Duke of Richmond and Lennox*, 1633-35

Many well-known artists like Van Dyck, David, and Sargent painted flattering portraits of the rich and the famous, elevating them to grander heights than those they truly held.



Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767



Max Ginsburg, *Brighter than the Sun*, 1990s

Similarly, the Rococo painters like Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard painted the rich and the playful French aristocracy of the eighteenth century playing in their gardens. Certainly their subjects represented only a small fraction of society. This very much influenced my vacuous illustrations for romance novels in the 1980s and 1990s.

**WHO PAINTED THE POOR, THE MASSES OF WORKERS AND PEASANTS,
THE MINORITIES?**



Carravaggio, *The Flagellation of Christ*, 1607

Caravaggio was one artist who painted ordinary people from the street into his biblical paintings.



Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*, 1650

Velasquez painted Juan De Pareja, his African assistant;



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of an Old Jew*, 1654

Rembrandt painted many Jews who were outcasts in Christian society;



Grande hazaña! Con muertos!
Francisco Goya, *Disasters of War*, 1810 – 1820

Goya expressed the truth about torture in his *Disasters of War*;



Honoré Daumier, *The Third Class Carriage*, 1862

Daumier painted his *Third Class Carriage*;



Henry-Jules-Jean Geoffroy, *Forlorn*, 1901

Geoffroy painted working class families with compassion;



Jean-Francois Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857

Millet painted three peasant women doing backbreaking work in *The Gleaners*;



Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870-73

Repin painted the Volga boatmen;



Winslow Homer, *The Fog Warning*, 1885

Homer *The Fog Warning* fishermen;



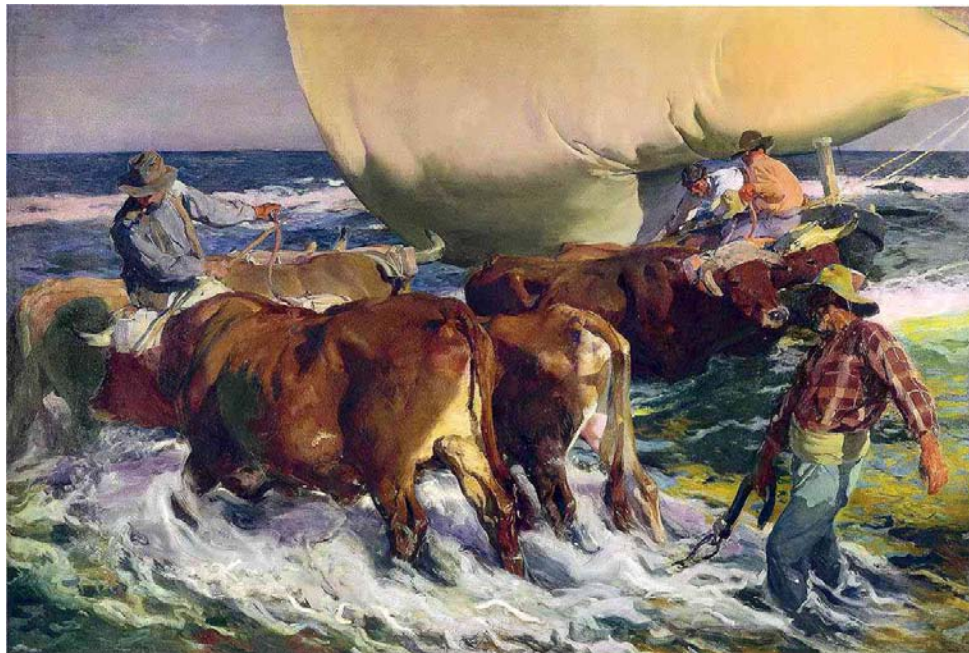
Nikolai Yaroshenko, *The Stoker*, 1878

Yaroshenko depicted a Russian metal worker in *The Stoker*;



Kathe Kollwitz, *After the Battle*, 1921

Kollwitz made an etching of a woman looking for her dead husband or son in *After the Battle*;



Joaquin Sorolla, *Afternoon Sun*, 1903

Sorolla expressed the power of Spanish fishermen. It is in the work of these artists that I have seen the truth about humanity reflected.

PART 2: TRUTH IS BEAUTY: FORM



Robert Henri, *The Old Model (Old Spanish Woman)*, 1911/1913

The twentieth century brought on "modern art" which put "truth" in a different light. Here I'd like to add a second dimension to this discussion of truth and beauty - that of form. One of the important movements in twentieth century art was the Ashcan School. These artists rejected the aristocratic art of the Salon. Artists like Henri, Bellows, and Pene du Bois, not only rejected the aristocratic content but also the academic form of Salon painting.



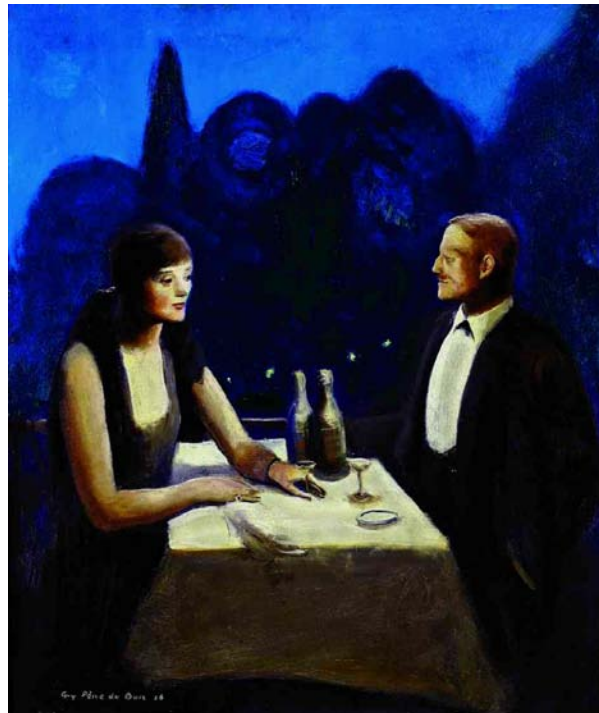
George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey's*, 1909

As their art became more abstract, their communication of the "truth" about the majority of society became more limited.



George Bellows, *Dempsey and Firpo*, 1924

Note especially the amateurish quality of the second Bellows boxer painting and the painting by Guy Pene du Bois.



Guy Pene du Bois, *Café Madrid (Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Chester Dale)*, 1926

When artists decide that the realistic form we see is not creative enough they deny the truth of natural forms. This is what the "modern art" movement has done.



Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

Witness not only the work of the Ashcan School and many social realists of the twentieth century but even Cubists and other abstract artists who identified with the truth about society. For example, in his painting *Guernica*, Picasso recognized the truth about the Fascist bombing of a Spanish village during the Spanish Civil War in 1936, but his abstract form was not true and limited the expression of the content.



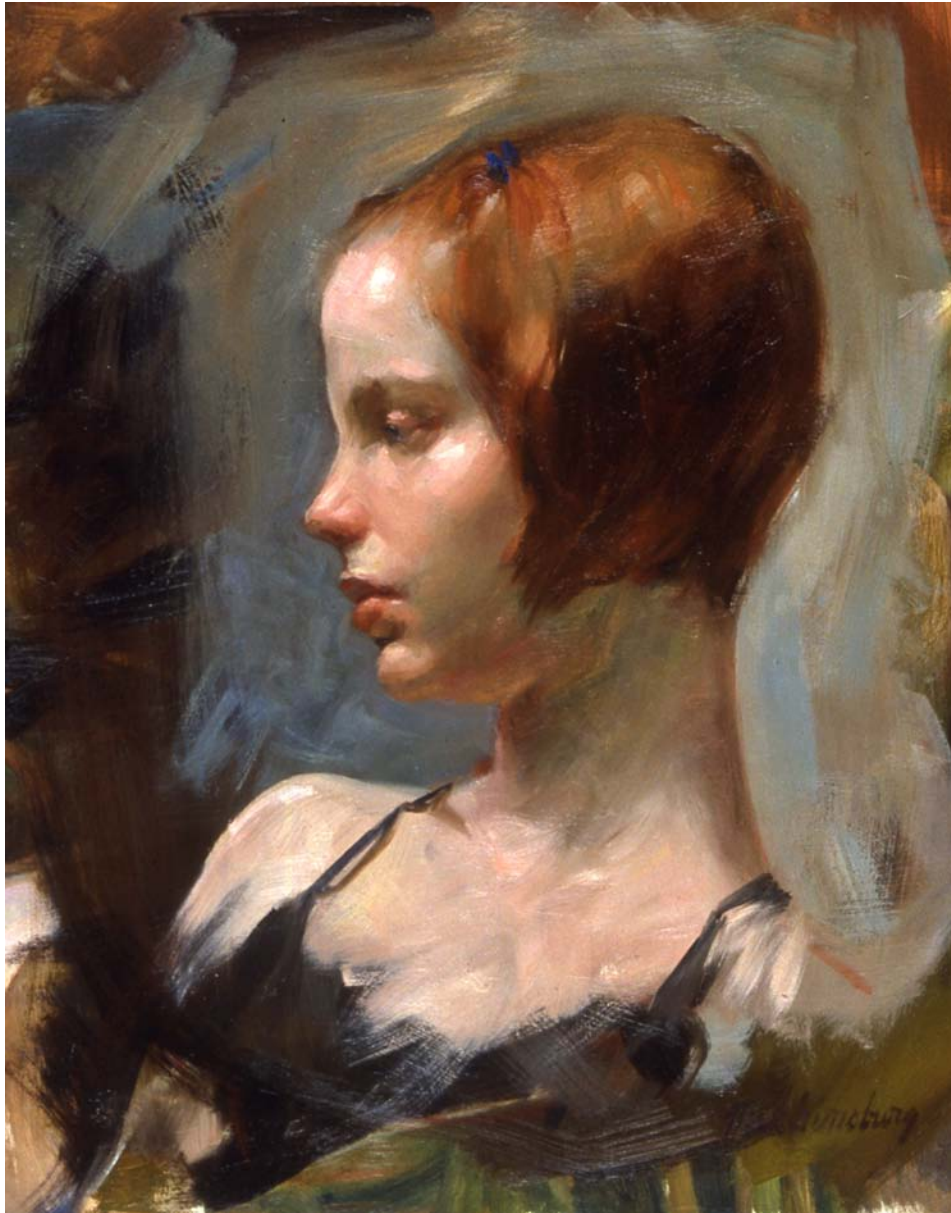
Raphael Soyer, *Men at the Mission*, 1935

Perhaps an outgrowth of the Ashcan School were the American social realists of the twentieth century. Two of these were Raphael Soyer and Charles White. Soyer certainly expressed the truth about the plight of the working class during the Great Depression. He influenced me tremendously in my own painting. But I wondered why he departed from the traditional realist form and skill he studied at the National Academy of Design in 1920.



Charles White, *Harvest Talk*, 1953

I also admired the power and dignity Charles White expressed about African-Americans. His work was very inspirational, however, quite stylized. Perhaps this was the price for recognition in the modern twentieth century.



Max Ginsburg, *Emily*, 1999

When I teach Painting from Life classes I stress the importance of the truth of the forms we see. There is the unique quality of the shapes, values, colors, and their relationships that express the individuality of the model.



Max Ginsburg, *Yellow Turban*, 2016

These are qualities that cannot be replicated from formulas but have to be seen. For example there is no formula for skin color; it is neither pink nor brown. Blonde hair is not yellow. White walls are not white, et cetera.



Max Ginsburg, *Mary Z*, 2016

We must paint what we see, not what we know, to express the unique reality of the forms of the subject. Seeing proportion, perspective, and foreshortening of the model will help us create a feeling of depth and space on a two dimensional surface.

The Old Masters from the Renaissance on saw and painted the true relationships of forms.

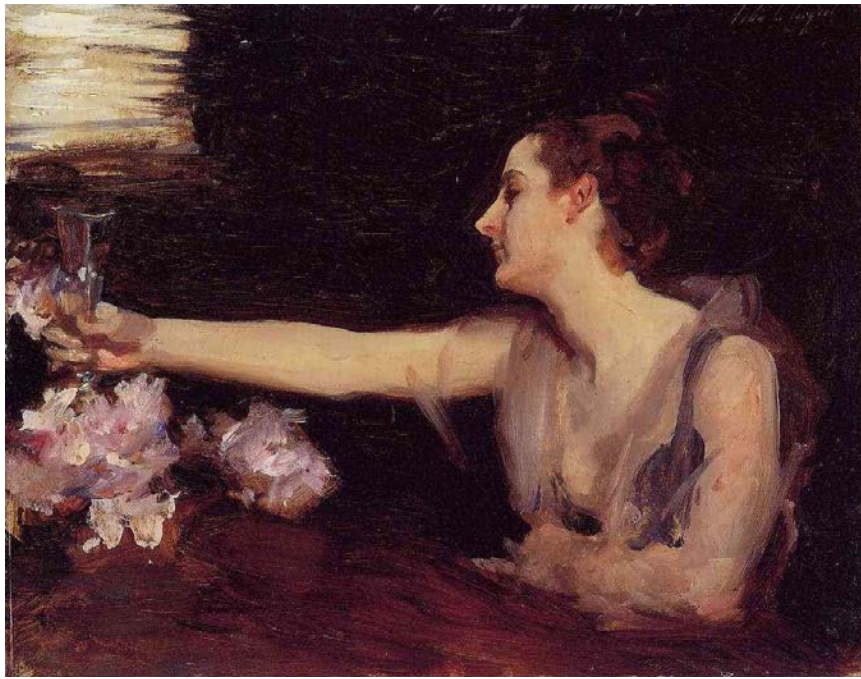


Ivan Kramskoi, *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, 1883



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Snake Charmer*, 1880

Some were highly rendered like Kramskoi and Gerome, while others were looser and somewhat impressionistic like Sargent.



John Singer Sargent, *Madame Gautreau Drinking a Toast*, 1883

It was many of these Old Masters who inspired many artists and myself who paint realistically.

The combination of realistic form and truthful content has inspired me. This is how I see the idea "truth is beauty" manifest in art. It is a humanist interpretation. However I respect other forms of art even if they don't share my interpretation of the words of John Keats.

PART 3: THE LACK OF FREEDOM OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE SCHOOLS OF AMERICA



Henri Matisse, *The Pineapple*, 1948

There has been a concerted effort to prevent serious realist drawing and painting from being taught in the art schools and colleges in America during most of the twentieth century. I witnessed this first hand having attended the High School of Music & Art in 1945-49, and in Syracuse University (BFA) in 1949-53 and later in the City College of New York (MA) in 1960-63. The pervasive trend was modern art, from non-objective to abstract.



Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle*, 1952-53



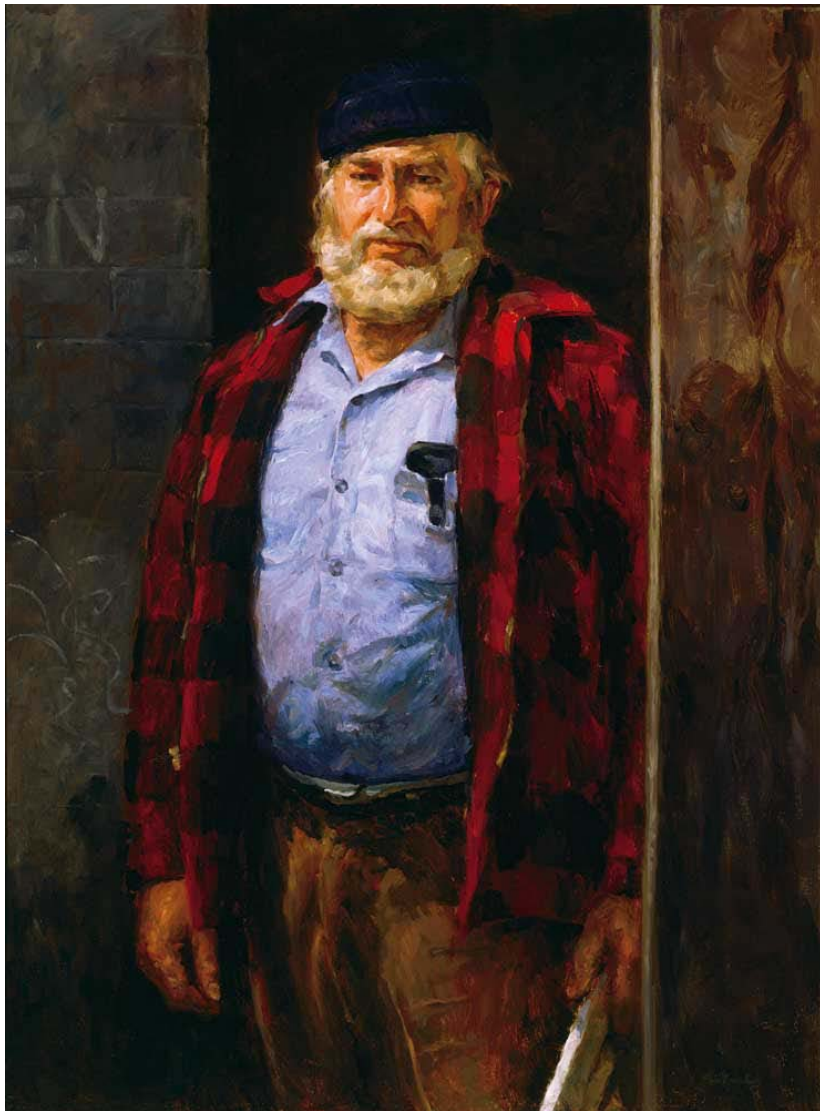
Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1960

Teachers were hired who lacked realistic skills and those teachers who were skilled artists were disappearing from the schools. Disciplined realist study programs did not exist. Students were encouraged to not be "slick" which meant to not be skilled, when they tried to paint realistically.



Max Ginsburg, *Park Bench '61*, 1961

After years of schooling, having earned a BFA and MA, my skills were limited as a result of the anti-realist approach being taught and the lack of opportunity to develop realist skills. Witness my painting *Park Bench '61*, painted in 1961 while I was studying for my MA degree.



Max Ginsburg, *Greeny*, 1975

When I taught at the High School of Art & Design from 1960-1982 there was no long range program to develop a realistic course of study. So my friend and colleague Irwin Greenberg and I taught a group of students to draw and paint from life every day from 6:30am - 8:30am for the three or four years they attended the school. We called ourselves the morning group or "the old hat club." While the administration allowed us to meet in the school building before official school hours they and many of the teachers were critical, saying "why are you promoting old fashioned art?" and "why are you teaching without getting paid?" Yes, my friend and I were volunteering our services free because we felt it was necessary to provide an opportunity when no such opportunity existed.



Max Ginsburg, *Young Steve*, 1975

And what's more is that the students who came to this group did not receive grades but developed into better artists such as Steve Assael, Ricky Mujica, Garin Baker, Costa Vavagiakis, and many more. Here is a mural painted from life by Ricky Mujica in 1979 at age 17.



Ricky Mujica, *Student Mural*, 1979

One of the results of the morning group was that Greeny and I became better artists. Here is a painting, *New York Crowd*, that I was able to accomplish in 1976, four years after the morning group began.



Max Ginsburg, *New York Crowd*, 1976

In more recent times Academic Ateliers have sprung up that have really made realism a little more popular enabling many students the freedom to learn and develop realistic skills. This is wonderful but it is a "drop in the bucket" of the vast number of art schools and colleges that are predominantly modern and offer no serious drawing and painting from life curriculum.

At the end of my sixteen years teaching at the School of Visual Arts, my colleague, Steve Assael, and I approached the Director of the school in 2000 with a request to allow a volunteer class of students to study realistic drawing and painting with us for three years. He turned us down. This was in the Illustration Department, not even the Fine Art Department which was totally "modern." So much for "freedom of expression" at SVA.



Max Ginsburg, *Up Against the Wall*, 2010

I believe that teaching by example is incredibly important for student painters. Since 2008 I have been teaching at the Art Students League of New York where I put this into practice; I teach and critique verbally for half of each session and paint on my own painting for the other half. *Up Against the Wall* is a painting done this way while teaching.



Max Ginsburg, *Subway Trio*, 2017

Subway Trio is another painting done while teaching an assignment on multi-figure painting from life.



Abraham Ginsburg, *Self Portrait*, 1931



Abraham Ginsburg, *Geneva*, 1930

As I was developing my painting during my school years I had the opportunity to observe my father painting with the skill of a traditional realist which was very helpful in countering the incompetence and outright condemnation of realism of many art teachers in the colleges I attended.

When my father, Abraham Ginsburg, attended the National Academy of Design in 1918-22, they had a serious program of study for realistic art. That school deteriorated, like others, with no long-range realistic program of study into the latter part of the 20th and into the 21st century and in fact exists no more.

I wish to make it clear that, while I am not a fan of "modern" art I do believe it has a right to exist and be studied. However, I believe the same opportunity does not exist now for realist art in the major art schools and colleges. Until there is, freedom of artistic expression does not exist in the schools of America.