

Calyxte Campe

COMMENTS

Interview with Charles H. Cecil April 2022

Can you describe your school, and tell us a little about the classical training your pupils receive? How does this schooling compare to the training that Camille Claudel would have had in Paris?

Fifty years ago, I had great good fortune with a painter who was then the age that I am now, in his mid-seventies. He had inherited the Beaux arts techniques of the French Academy in terms of draughtsmanship and painting. I was desperate to get a training myself. I'd just been at Yale University and was very dissatisfied with modernism. Fortunately, I discovered this figurative painter in Boston, R.H Ives Gammell, who had direct access to the traditional techniques. He taught me on the condition that I would go on to teach. He actually trained for free, in the hope that his students would go on to do the same. I honoured that tradition when I started the school here, in Florence, 30 years ago. Calyxte was one of my first pupils.

The technique is figurative in basis, but also involves drawing from sculpture and casts. The sculptors of the 19th century received the same education in draughtsmanship as the painters did and part of Calyxte's great strength is that he has received the training in drawing and painting that is not normal today in figurative sculptors and this gives him that great link to the figurative work that descends from the Renaissance.

Gammell was the one who revived atelier painting in the 20th century and this is the legacy that he gave, a small group of students working closely together as opposed to something like an art school or an academy. Gammell's method of teaching is what I have conveyed to my students based on the sight-size technique, which is working to scale from life and it means comparing the image and the model for measuring proportions and conveying the sense of life.

Without question, Camille Claudel would have been trained in the sight-size technique. She was closely associated with Rodin who was an expert and close friend of John Singer Sargent who was the most eminent sight-size painter of the era.

When Calyxte joined the school, there was a small group of students who were hardworking. All have gone on to be successful artists.

You took your students on landscaping trips in the hills surrounding Florence and to France to the Claudel family chateau. What was a typical day like on these painting trips? What memories do you have of Brangues?

I was very fortunate to initiate my studio, 30 years ago, with an exceptional group and Calyxte joined that group from the very beginning. It was a close-knit group, a family, and we did many things together outside the school itself. There would be field trips to Venice or to Rome, but most memorable were the landscaping trips in the South of France, in Campagnac and at Brangues, Calyxte's family home. His mother very kindly invited us, and the day consisted of going out into the fields, putting up our easels, picking a motif and working until noon, having a light lunch, and then continuing, weather permitting. We'd get together afterwards for drink and conversation, with a

great deal of conviviality and a close sense that we were functioning as plein air painters had done in France in the 19th century, using the same technique. We had the same camaraderie, and this is something very rare in the art world today, since the demise of figurative painting. We were fully involved in a tradition that was alive and active.

Why did you encourage Calyxte to sculpt and were you surprised by his immediate ability for it?

When I learned that he was the great nephew of Camille Claudel, I personally insisted that he start sculpture. At first, Calyxte was very reluctant. He didn't want to over identify with his own background; there was something in his blood that he did not want immediately to recognise. The reputation of his great grandfather, Paul Claudel, and Paul's sister Camille was so daunting a challenge to live up to. However, I insisted that he start, and he's never stopped sculpting. In fact, his sculpture has now really taken precedence over his painting. Although he is as much of a painter as a sculptor. But in my experience, you cannot do everything. I, myself, would have loved to have been a sculptor, but you have to choose.

Florence must be a very inspiring place for a sculptor. Do you see any particular works that might have influenced Calyxte and his later work?

I see a group of works that is very much linked to Calyxte and I believe it has actually influenced him. It's the animal sculptures in the Bargello Museum by Giambologna. They are exceptional, unique in the history of art. There is a sense of life and movement and deft handling that Calyxte himself has inherited through observation of nature, and there is also the close kinship with the very works themselves. I really believe that not only has his own background at sea, travelling the world and his exposure to other cultures and places, was as crucial to his creativity as these works in this very city.

Recently, Calyxte created a bronze bust of you. How did it feel to be sculpted from life and what was the process? How did the sculpture develop over time and how many sittings did you do?

I'm a reluctant sitter. I've had only a few self-portraits, but when Calyxte asked, I consented, and I was fascinated to see this portrait bust evolve over a week of sittings, using the adaptable technique that I teach as a painter. The work in clay was alongside me, and Calyxte moved back at a distance and was able to compare the proportions. This is how sculptors in the 19th century worked. For me to see something three dimensional evolve, where I usually critique students in the two dimensional, was fascinating, I don't think he would have had this ability without his experience as a painter and draughtsman. It was so successful.

Calyxte still asks you for critiques on his commissions and on his large animal projects. You have visited him often in his studio in the countryside to cast a knowledgeable eye and to determine whether the proportions are accurate, and the overall effect is successful. How does critiquing a life-size racehorse compare to that of a nude figure or a portrait? Can you really apply the same rules to such different subjects?

Calyxte came to me years ago as a pupil. Over the decades, he's become a close friend and now a colleague. When I look at his work, I treat him as someone of experience and forget the pupil idea and see him as an independent artist. That's what pleases me so much. My teacher used to say, "What you need is a fresh guy with a fresh eye". That has a sort of ironic connotation, but one does need critiquing and if you have a colleague with the experience that we both possess, the eye for proportions, for movement, for characterisation, composition, then it is applicable for both large-scale and small-scale projects.