Old Masters—
New Apprentices

BLYTHE BOHNEN High School Lecturer

What about Jaime Rivera, who has taught himself to make magnificent portraits by copying Clairol ads, but whose pentecostal parents feel that the devil has taken hold of him because he does nothing but draw all day? Who somehow got hold of a book on Michelangelo and soaked up every page of it, but whose mind otherwise is a vacuum about art?

What about Otis Crawford, who signs his work “Otis, the one great artist,” whose work radiates a penetrating and versatile, perhaps major, talent, but whose art education consists of one elective a year in high school?

What about Luisa Martinez, who got an “excellent, very talented” critique on the art trial test she sent for, but whose family was unable to finance more than the course at a neighborhood “art school” where she copied Technicolor calendar landscapes and portraits of saucer-eyed children?

Does the Metropolitan have anything to do with these young artists-to-be? With the art school resources of New York City available, the Museum need not enter the professional field. Indeed, with the present plant this would be impossible. Still, we wondered if our collections could play a significant role in a studio course for underprivileged teen-agers.

As part of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and with the help of a generous friend of the Museum, the Education Department held a small pilot class this past summer to see in what ways the Museum could implement its charter goal of “developing the study of the fine arts” with serious high school students from deprived areas. Jaime, Otis, and Luisa were three of a class of thirteen chosen from public and parochial schools and community centers on the basis of their past work, None of them had been to a museum more than once.

The small size of the class was a deliberate choice based on the assumption that “exposure to culture” on a broad basis, though necessary and good, remains a tenuous, usually superficial means of relating kids of the ghettos to the culture that is strongly enclosed by and identified with the sophisticated white
establishment. “Exposure” fails because it does not establish any personal connection between the “white” culture and the minority group and therefore allows no feeling of personal claim or involvement. We wanted to offer the students a chance to establish an intimate rapport with the Museum’s collections, and by such intense work, claim this culture as their own right. This personal contact is a real investment in the future because it reaches the students on a level that continues to operate long after they leave the program.

The class met for eight weeks in a classroom at the Loyola School on Park Avenue at Eighty-third Street to work from the model, still life, or imagination. The students were introduced to the Museum’s galleries and encouraged to spend time here, observing and sketching, or in group discussion.

For the first week, the students worked on their own. They had to get comfortable and we wanted to get acquainted with their ways of working. It was clear that any routine that was developed in the Museum would be an outgrowth of the premises the instructors explored in class. Bosley Latimer, who had been teaching an art workshop at Harlem Teams for Self Help, Inc., for four years, evolved an approach that seemed valid on any terms, but especially for the kids we were working with. The teachers try, first of all, to find out how the student sees things. Does he always key up colors? Does he insist on the outline of objects, or does he use areas of tone? Is the flat pattern in his work insistent, or does he seem most concerned with solidity and volume? Once a student’s propensities are understood, the teacher can begin to help him discover the formal consequences of his vision.

Luisa Janáček always juxtaposed brilliant colors, substituting oranges and purples for the browns and grays before her. She needed to study how one color affects another adjacent to it, what colors attract the eye in a composition. Her friend, Luisa Martínez, turned her back on a colorful still life and drew the dirty brushes and turpentine cans spread over a studio worktable. She saw light and tone: the quality of metal surfaces, transparent bottles, oily rags, the polished tabletop. She needed to study control of tones, to pay attention to the edges of her brushstrokes, and to learn which color mixtures recede, which advance. Although there were lessons everyone in the class had to master for his general knowledge and experience, the individual student and individual growth provided the direction of the course.

After a week we began to know the students as people: Victor, Amelia, Jesus D. and Jesus G., Otis, Luisa M. and Luisa J., Charles, Albert, Arnold, Jaime, James, and Dexter.

By the end of that week we had also seen that their intellectualization was lower and their commitment higher than we might have guessed. Thus, the many analytical exercises we had planned in the galleries were not possible until intellectual ground had been laid. For example, the directive “make a sketch/diagram of the basic composition of this Titian” presupposed that they understood what “composition” is. They did not. Nor had they developed the skill of sketching quickly and minimally, recording just structural essentials. With the exception of Luisa J., none of them had thought or verbalized about what they were doing. Their work was entirely intuitive, their decisions unconsciously made. Composition, balance, design, harmony, rhythm, tension, spatial relationship—none of these concepts existed in their minds. In most cases, even the bare terms were not recognized.

So each concept had to be introduced through the presentation of a lesson, followed by several practice periods with individual criticism. We tried to develop several compositional basics: how the eye can be directed around a painting; how its speed and time pat-
terns can be controlled; how a painting can be related to its edges. The concept of rhythm was exploited with rapid figure studies that served at the same time as a lesson in developing sketching style.

As we investigated these concepts in the studio, we inaugurated visits to the Museum. A lesson in foreshortening was held in the Arms and Armor gallery where you can get wonderful head-on views of the lances, or, from its balcony, look down on the knights. Perspective and spatial relationship became exciting realities.

The class’s first real exposure to analysis of a specific painting was a lecture delivered by Mr. Latimer on the sequence of forms and the rhythms in the composition of The Death of Socrates by the eighteenth-century French painter Jacques-Louis David. From then on The Death of Socrates became the reference point of the summer. Mere mention of this painting was sufficient evidence to silence all opposition in an argument over aesthetics.

Often, we would suggest a different painting to each student to be looked at carefully. Luisa J. did a sketch of Van Gogh’s Cypresses showing eye movement around the canvas. To her surprise, she discovered that the textural strokes were mainly what led the eye. This was a great help in bringing her to an awareness of the meaningful use of texture, which in her work was merely a filling in of areas. (As could be expected, Luisa later took tremendously to a Matisse in the summer loan show.) But letting the kids wander at random through the collection, “digging” artists they liked, proved more successful. And their choices gave us an indication of what each held as an ideal. Sometimes this was a shock: Albert’s first favorite was an undistinguished and sentimental Salon painting. His teachers were secretly aghast. What could he see in that of all the paintings in the Museum? He told us he liked the large round basin. A week later he came on his own to firmer ground: Cézannes that were a mature version of his own little patches of tone and color.

Comparing their preferences to each student’s productions was fascinating. Sometimes their own talents ran counter to their expressed choices, a clue to confusion and inconsistencies in their work. Sometimes it was helpful in assisting us to guide the student in a direction she desired but didn’t yet know. Luisa Martínez, who is virtually inarticulate about art, said that she liked Cézannes because she felt she could put her hand around his apples. Space. Volume. Soon she was coordinating her tonal proclivities with this new interest, in still lifes of her own.

Jesus Galindo sympathized with not one or two artists, but a whole genre. On his first trip to the Metropolitan, he worked for two and a half hours on a study of a Hubert Robert. A few days later, he quietly rebelled against the large quick drawings the class was doing, politely requested tiny brushes, and started in on a landscape that took him three weeks to complete.

Explaining why they liked x or y, often not for the obvious reasons, was especially important for the students. For, in identifying their feelings, they began, in rough form, to isolate and understand the elements of art.

In the studio, this knowledge of artists was of great help in communication. “Do you remember in that Degas you liked how the floor was handled? Well, you could use diagonal boards to move the eye into your painting, too.” “Art talk” became more comfortable as the term progressed. By the third week, students were cheerfully insulting each other by comparing their work to that of unpopular painters. “Well,” Luisa J. declared, “it’s encouraging to me to know that there are some pretty crummy paintings in this Museum. Like that Monet, for instance…” While art historians can love everything, it is important for art students to dislike as well as to admire, and issue such challenges to artists of the past.

By choosing their soulmates through history the kids also strengthened their own identities as artists. The discovery in the Museum of precedents for tastes only timidly articulated before, gave to many students the security of belonging to a tradition, the courage to give expression to their visual fantasies, and made irrelevant the questions often put to
them by their peers: "Are you a weirdo if you paint and draw?" "Aren't artists nuts?" At the Whitney Museum, Dexter really went for one painter. "Hey, man, he's really good!" In fact, his style resembled Dexter's. Jaime stopped short before a Baziotes—"His painting is just like mine! Except I used green here instead of blue."

In choosing their own activities in the Museum, the students went beyond the painting galleries. After the quick drawing exercises in class, many of them would spend the afternoon sketching the sculpture. Rodin and Carpeaux were the favorites. Although they were assimilating a lot unconsciously about selection, rhythm, and so forth, they were just using the pieces as substitute models, in the old tradition of plaster casts. Amelia drew in the period rooms. Victor used the Great Hall for architectural details and perspective studies.

Once begun, this process of drawing on tradition to forge an identity could extend beyond the Metropolitan not only to other museums, but to works available only in reproduction.

James cried, "The artist—he should know how to draw everything!" and was given a paperback about Leonardo da Vinci. Soon he
arrived in class with pages of hands, shrubbery, and water reflections captured in Central Park. And, later, after one scorching weekend in late July, studies of water rhythms gushing from an open hydrant appeared.

During the summer the question arose of what the exact value of sketching in the galleries was. We eventually found that sketching often fixed a fleeting visual insight. Albert’s careful study of the Géricault nude undoubtedly set firmly in his mind the use of color as well as tone for modeling.

But, Amelia objected, the paintings were another person’s interpretation and she wanted to do her own. James pointed out that paintings were “from one point of view” while in sketching the sculpture “you could walk all around.” In the beginning they viewed the paintings purely as a source of subject matter. The growth to another way of looking in which they could learn something from them took varying amounts of time. Luisa commented after the exercise on eye movement with an early Italian Madonna and Child, “I never liked all those religious paintings: the same faces, the same expressions. Now I can see that there are other things to look for in them.”

The kids took to the Museum differently. Initially, most of them seemed not particularly curious, rather passive. They were, naturally, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the place. On his first visit, Jesus de León looked doubtfully at his new sportshirt and freshly ironed chinos and sighed, “Gee, I can’t go in there like this!” Apparently he thought that a suit and tie were the only proper attire. But by the fourth week Albert and Victor were dashing off to go sketching with a casual “See you in the studio later.” Even shy Luisa Martínez, who at first was too nervous to draw a Cézanne unless one of us went with her, the last week the program was in session said, “I used to mind everyone staring, but now I don’t care.” She knew she belonged as much or more than anyone else.

A few, Victor, Amelia, and Otis, were afraid of compromising their originality; they didn’t want to look at anyone’s work, in class or in the Museum, and didn’t. And Jesus D. got enough inspiration from his first two-and-a-half-hour drawing to set him going on three lovely landscapes in oil. He will not, he says, want to return to the galleries until he has exhausted all his own inventions on this theme.

Those who most conspicuously liked working in the Museum seemed to be those students who were most confident of their own talents, and thought of themselves securely as artists. Far from fearing a loss of identity, they were certain that their vision could absorb all the past to project it in a new form into the future. As James studied Ingres in the galleries and Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael in books, he said thoughtfully, “Well, that’s how painters painted then. It is different now.” He is the difference now. Jesus announced one day at lunch, “Everything I learned, I got from the paintings—all the paintings.” He is equally excited by El Greco and the contemporary light sculptures he saw at the Whitney. Jesus even stopped coming to class the last two weeks, because he felt he would learn more in the galleries.

We discovered that our most effective teaching method was a flexible personal approach to the course. Individualized attention is the key, we think, not just for instructing “underprivileged” kids, but for the “ordinary” student as well, who traditionally feels uncomfortable about a gallery course.

This is understandable, for in the depersonalized herding of groups from one masterpiece to another, too often hundreds of years of fierce personal experience recorded in the paintings become lumped into one often bitter pill labeled “culture.” On group visits to the Museum, the teacher ought to point out things of particular use for each student in each painting, once his painterly inclinations have been discerned. “Ellen, look at the handling of color here—this bright red is made important by all the duller colors set around it, isn’t it?” Reference to the same work might highlight a different aspect for another individual: “Do you see, Peter, how overlapping the forms gives an illusion of depth?”

The class closed with the close of summer. As we looked at the pile of work completed, we were surprised at how much, how varied,
and how good it was. At the students' request, the class had been extended from the original three-hour morning session to include a three-hour afternoon period as well. Six of the kids went downtown to still another class run by Mr. Latimer from five to seven o'clock each evening. Many worked at home as best they could, on weekends sketching their parents, vistas from apartment windows, views from the roof tops, and studies in Central Park. Their enthusiasm and diligence was documented. On the last day of class, a visitor appeared. The two Luisas volunteered to show him around the Museum. An hour later when they arrived in the studio, having "covered" every exhibition hall, Luisa J. was visibly shaken. She said Luisa M. had attracted an audience as she lectured on—what else?—The Death of Socrates!

The depth and concentration of the all-day eight-week session changed the kids from gifted youngsters with secret dreams to students sure of their talents, with ambition, and the determination to fulfill themselves.

Jesus de León is changing from a general to an academic diploma program in high school. Luisa J. will be taking equivalent courses in summer school so she can qualify for entrance requirements at Pratt Institute in 1970. Jaime is being tutored extra hours after school, Victor making plans for study at a community college. Albert just passed a special late exam and is entering the High School of Music and Art. Dexter is now enrolled at the School of Visual Arts on a scholarship. All of them are continuing their studies with Mr. Latimer in the evenings.

We feel satisfied that we have found a new and vibrant means of opening up the wealth of the Museum's collections to serious art students of high school age.

Now that we have worked with some of these students, we see how enthusiastic and devoted the kids are, how much such a program matters. We have more than the real but immeasurable personality development to show for the summer session. We have stacks of drawings, and kids enrolled in professional schools, and tested procedures to offer teachers elsewhere.