TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO I saw and was staggered by a gem of an oil sketch painted by Cecilia Beaux. Seated Girl in a Long Black Dress (fig. 1) hung in one of the galleries at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where I was a first year student. To this day it has remained an important impression. In its brevity, Beaux made a complete and graceful poem in oil. The student sensitive to the visual poetry of chiaroscuro could examine it and learn something about the Philadelphia School of painting.

It was that oil sketch, and the Thomas Eakins oil bozetti displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, that prompted me to try and paint some sketches of my own. Oil sketches were the first consistent successes I achieved in oil painting. They provided a foundation for all my artwork in their immediacy and directness. Although my initial attraction to oil sketching was instinctual, its allure and historical significance have long been known. In 1767, Diderot asked "Why can a young student, incapable of doing even a mediocre picture, do a marvelous sketch? It is because the sketch is the product of enthusiasm and inspiration, while the picture is the product of labor, patience, lengthy study and consummate experience in art."

My first oil sketches were portraits, and for this pleasurable endeavor Beaux's work was an inspiration. I was able to examine her portrait sketches, as well as her finished oils, in the Academy's collection. This unique opportunity, outside of classes or instruction in oil sketching, revealed that

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the poetry in painting is rooted in the principles of craft and guided by inspiration. Portrait sketches led me to think about how one would approach the more difficult discipline of sustained portraits. Since that time, portrait painting has remained for me a satisfying way of speculating about human nature.

The Pennsylvania Academy has long offered classes in oil portraiture. This is one of the reasons for its reputation as the standard bearer of a traditionist approach which has attracted so many students, past and present, to come and study there. Yet for a good part of this century students in serious pursuit of training in portraiture have usually been dissuaded from it, both at the Academy and elsewhere. A bias toward modernism was prevalent in most art schools by the 1970s, but I did not expect to find it in the school where the Peales, Thomas Eakins, Thomas Anshutz, Alice Barber, and Beaux, to name but a few, had developed a regional crucible for representationist work.²

While a student, I remember requesting permission to copy a portrait in the collection. The then curator of the Academy asked me, “Why would you want to do that?” After I realized that his question was not a joke or a test of my worthiness to attempt such a task, I mumbled a vague response. I quoted the Academy’s own catalogue about the importance of the collection for training students. He reluctantly signed my permission chit with a look of unpleasant bewilderment.

It was not much easier to find support for representationist portraiture among the faculty. Generally, one could expect well-intentioned but erroneous advice. The importance of black and white pigments on the palette was misunderstood. A student was counseled “don’t use them” or “they are not really colors.” Portraiture as a serious discipline was further hindered by suggestions such as “make it more than a portrait” (to which a student could cravenly reply, “but, sir, it is a portrait”).

My first realization of the survival of a representationist approach at the Academy was in 1976, during a first year class. Arthur DeCosta, a senior instructor, was discussing the chromatic development of the portrait. His classes were primarily attempts to study and resolve in oil paint or charcoal the fall of light. The historic studios at the Broad and Cherry streets

²The author and other painters of the Philadelphia School prefer the term “representationist” to the often-pejorative “representational.”
building, originally designed for this very experience, were no longer appreciated for, nor dedicated to, these ideas. DeCosta steadfastly encouraged students to investigate light—even in the 1970s, when one was encouraged to contemplate nearly everything but that.

At one point he said, "Well, it would be easier to show you what I mean." He led the class up the staircase to the Academy's galleries. Two of the
paintings he showed us were by Franklin Watkins and Daniel Garber, both of whom he noted had been Academy instructors of his in the 1940s. Both Watkins and Garber had been students of Cecilia Beaux and Thomas Anshutz, who in turn had been students during Eakins's time. This revelation was quite an important moment for the class. Academies, whether they are for painting, music, or soldiering, acknowledge the importance of legacy. In this way, they promote the maturation of the individual and the development of thought.

Illusionistic painting as practiced at the Academy since the beginning of the twentieth century has been derived from different experiences of represent-
One of the loveliest Beaux paintings we saw that day, and one I would return to often, is A Little Girl (Fanny Travis Cochran) (fig. 2). The Academy is fortunate to possess, among its forty-one oil sketches by Beaux, a small palm-sized sketch for this portrait (fig. 3). In it, Beaux has made a matrix of all the elements of the finished image, and displayed in this one work the genius of her sketches. The completed portrait is a handsome and intelligent
counter-argument to those who deny the importance of white on the palette. As with nearly all representationist imagery, this painting's effects are achieved with white. The complexity of the chromatic development of the white dress not only provides a foil to the yellow sash that encircles the girl's waist. It also provides a complementary setting to the exquisite moment of the light mass on the flesh and hands. Completing this is the grace note of the bouquet of pansies in her hands.

The Fanny Travis Cochran sketch, and others such as the sketches for Les derniers jours d'enfance (see Tappert, fig. 4), or Harold and Mildred Colton (see Yount, fig. 3), recall the unique quality that is found in nearly all representationist portraiture. As Baudelaire described it: "A portrait! What could be simpler and more complicated, more obvious and more profound?"
A portrait "at its best should be a poem full of space and reverie."

At the Pennsylvania Academy the aesthetic tradition in painting—which is of primary importance—is about pictorial space. For the representationist painter the works of Cecilia Beaux display, one after another, gorgeous resolutions of pictorial space. She was tireless in her attempts to investigate the structural underpinnings of painting, mostly in portraiture. In her strongest and most successful work, the chiaroscuro is maintained. The light mass of the painting is secured as an illusionistic perception, primarily in tonality, but also in chromatic development and brush response. Singly or together, her paintings constitute a veritable school of painting.

The intelligence and charm of Beaux's work is evident in her manipulation of the medium. She penetrated the mystery of the surface of the oil painting, and by so doing she secured that crucial moment in illusionistic painting that engages, and then encourages the viewer to contemplate the subject matter. This effect illustrates an aspect of Beaux's skill: her employment of opaque passages to recall transparent effects, a technique particularly evident in the grand double portrait Mother and Daughter (see Toohey, fig. 9). The seemingly unimportant ground plane and background create not only a substantial chromatic and tonal ambience, but also a subtle spatial illusion. This most difficult effect begins with a neutral transparent wash, called an imprimatura, placed on linen that has been primed with a toned ground. Beaux probably began with a pearl-gray ground over which she brushed an

\[^{3}\text{Charles Baudelaire, Art in Paris, 1845-1862 (London, 1965), 189.}\]
\[^{4}\text{Ibid., 88.}\]
imprimatura made from two complementary colors, e.g. burnt sienna (an earth orange) and ivory black (an earth blue). The next stage, done while the imprimatura was still wet, established the chiaroscuro of the entire painting, transparently. The neutral wash would have been “wiped out” with a rag down to the toned ground which represents the light mass. The shadow mass was realized where shimmering imprimatura still remained. The lustrous optical effect of the imprimatura was then established with the substance of paint. The difficulty of this technique can be realized when one sees how few painters mastered it before their mature stage. Nearly all subsequent schools of painting achieved transparent effects—if they bothered at all—by transparent washes or stains.

Another important aspect of Beaux’s work is that it promoted an interest in portraiture that was not camera-conditioned or camera-influenced. By this, I mean that her work is permeated by space. The divergence between the depiction of representationist pictorial space and that derived from the experience of photography occurred in the nineteenth century. This difference between classical pictorial space (images creating the illusion of depth), and non-classical pictorial space (images lacking the illusion of depth, specifically photographic depictions of space), has been the main aesthetic and intellectual impetus behind nearly all modern movements in the twentieth century. A painting inspired by the classical spatial illusion, viewed upside-down, retains its impression of space and all its volumetric elements. A camera-conditioned painting or photograph, viewed upside-down, cancels nearly all its illusion of space and volumetric elements, and becomes an assemblage of tonal and linear patterns. As Gore Vidal noted, “a photograph is... all busy flatness.”

Over the years, as a student and now as a visiting lecturer and instructor at the Pennsylvania Academy, I have often stood in the galleries, or taken groups of students into the vaults, all the while amazed and delighted by the works of Cecilia Beaux. Her paintings continue to provide opportunities for enjoyment and study. The breadth and depth of the Academy’s Beaux collection fulfills, subtly and wholly, one of the fundamental aims of the Academy: the

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5 In a 1919 photograph of Beaux at work on the portrait of Cardinal Mercier (Cecilia Beaux Papers, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art) this technique is visible. The portrait’s hand reveals at this early stage the toned ground surrounded by transparent washes representing costume and background. In its finished state (National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.) the light mass of the hand has been painted in or “loaded” opaquely.

edification of the student. It was, and is, a wonderful way to be drawn into an aesthetic.

*Philadelphia*