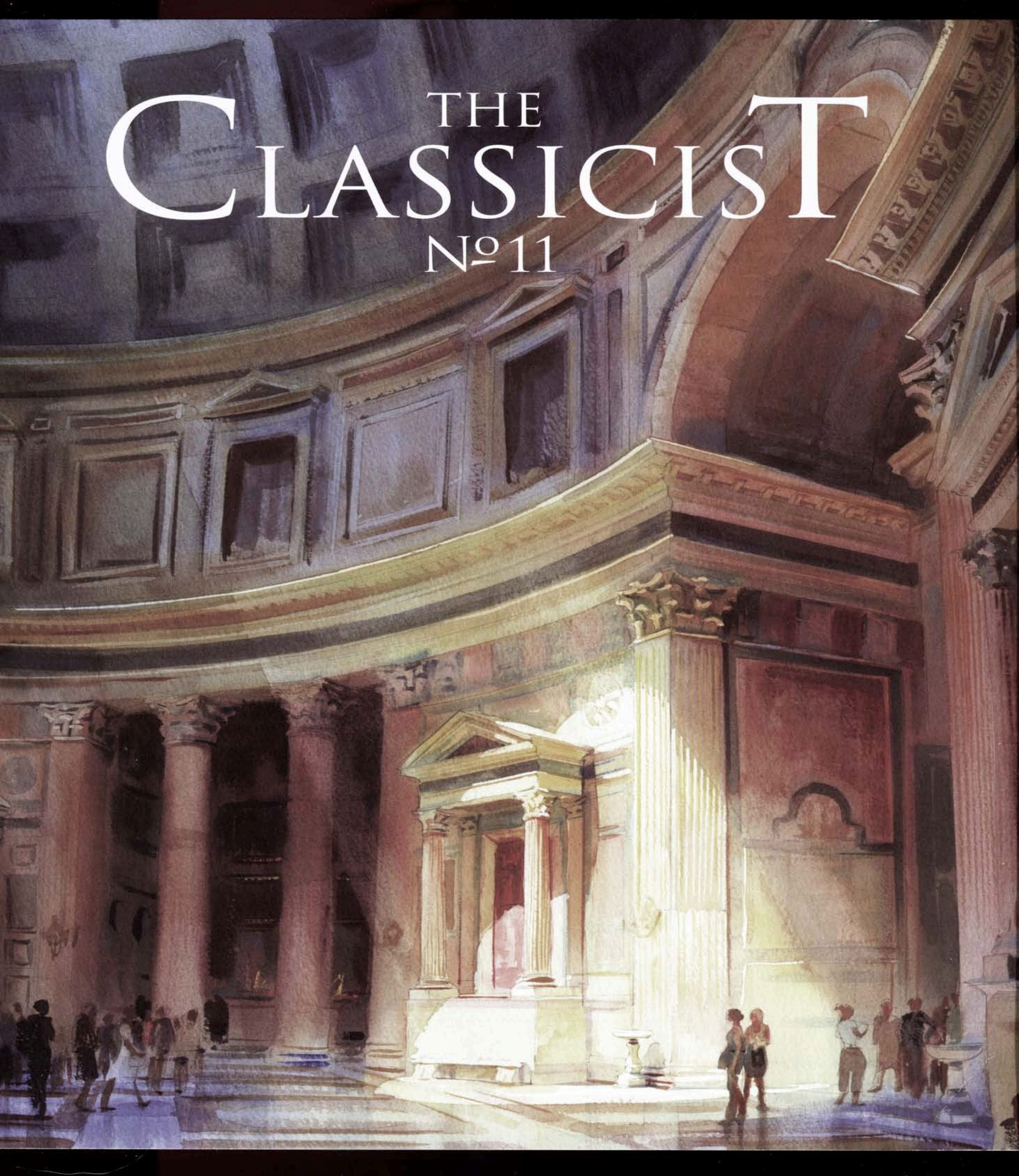


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Academy of Classical Design

By D. Jeffrey Mims

As sometimes happens in life, many years may pass before we recognize the significance a single moment can have for our future. For me, such a moment was the Arthur Ross Awards ceremony on May 7, 1984 at the National Academy of Design in New York. Having just turned thirty, and in the august company of accomplished classicists, I was to receive an award for my fresco work in North Carolina. This ceremony, only the second since its inception, was held before the great mural study for the Minnesota State Capitol building painted by the American artist Edwin Howland Blashfield.

This image was familiar to me through having read a 1913 edition of his *Mural Painting in America*, which seemed to hold historical secrets from an ancient past, inspired with an optimism that was to be checked the following year by the outbreak of World War I. Presiding over this ceremony was Henry Hope Reed, Jr., President of Classical America and one of its founders. Reed had been born right after the first year of that terrible war and had begun his life during the waning years of the American Renaissance. During his long life, he witnessed the twentieth century's "secession" (as he so aptly labeled it) from the beauty and logic of our classical heritage; fittingly, he was destined to become the leading champion of its restoration.

After returning home, I ordered a copy of Reed's *The Golden City*, which introduced me to his revolutionary ideas, articulated for me

the purpose of mural painting, and confirmed the earlier emphasis by Blashfield on its role as part of a larger ensemble that included architecture, sculpture, and landscape. I had dimly felt this sense of overall design in beautiful civic spaces in my earlier travels, but learning the fundamentals of traditional painting had been such a struggle in those days that understanding its employment in a broader context was a great discovery.

Now thirty years later, encouraging advances have been made by a small band of determined artists to recover the nearly lost art of figure drawing and painting; however, very little attention has been given to what Reed considered to be its ultimate application—the decoration of architectural space through mural painting, particularly in the public realm. Considered in this context, the figure is one of many design elements used to orchestrate the decoration of an architectural space, joined in this task by painted borders, geometric patterns, cartouches, festoons, and other ornamental devices. But where can these be studied today? It is our emphasis on traditional mural painting that distinguishes the Academy of Classical Design from the growing number of studio schools dedicated to a renewal of the fine arts. The Academy, which began as Mims Studios in 2000, traces its philosophy at least as far back as that auspicious evening in 1984 when I was introduced to Reed and his vision of the allied arts—a vision of built environments that please, inspire, and leave us with a sense of wonder.

To achieve this purpose requires a profound knowledge of "the classical" and the many variations within that heritage—a requirement involving no small amount of time or patience—and this is the first lesson taught to our students at the Academy. In the tradition of Renaissance workshops and the art academies that evolved from them, our curriculum devotes a great deal of time to the very thing modern art education has taught us to avoid—copying. For us, copying has three primary goals: The first is to gain a rich visual vocabulary; the second two are closely related—to develop recognition of excellence

Figure 1 (Section opener, pages 36–37): Academy of Classical Design. Students Allison Sexton and Olena Babak at work on paintings from plaster casts of antique statuary, 2013. Photograph courtesy of the Academy of Classical Design.

Figure 2 (opposite top): Academy of Classical Design. Student Peter Daniel working on underpainting a section of a mural copy from Raphael's ceiling tondo "Justice" at the Stanza della Segnatura, The Vatican, oil on panel, 96" x 120", 2013. Photograph courtesy of the Academy of Classical Design.

Figure 3 (opposite left): Academy of Classical Design. "Cast Drawing of the Torso Belvedere in The Vatican," charcoal on white paper, 32" x 22", 2013, by Peter Daniel.

Figure 4 (opposite right): Academy of Classical Design. "Life Drawing," charcoal and white chalk on toned paper, 27" x 38", 2013, by Olena Babak.

Figure 5 (following page): Academy of Classical Design. "Acanthus Relief," 26" x 31", graphite and watercolor on toned paper, 2013, by Allison Sexton.





as well as the ability to recognize its opposite. Two other components within these goals are the imitation of nature and familiarity with the historical uses of that ability. The oscillation between realism and idealism found in Greek sculpture is a stylistic conversation with a variety of accents that continued into the twentieth century. For the mural painter, the ability to idealize forms and generalize effect is crucial for the successful decoration of architectural spaces; but to reach that point one must first be a humble student of nature. More accurately, I should say nature guided

by antiquity, because in learning to manage a credible likeness, there are also lessons to be absorbed indirectly through working with the masterful conventions of Greek form.

Meticulous plaster cast work is augmented with assignments that reach beyond the mysteries of illusion, such as the making of compositional and color studies from different periods in the history of Art, as well as the study of anatomy and pure ornament. A basic architectural vocabulary is introduced as it relates to classical interiors that have traditionally made use of painted and sculpted

decoration. Unique to our program is what we call the Mural Guild, which allows advanced students the opportunity to produce full scale painted copies from acknowledged masterworks. Each of these studies contributes to the development of the taste and ability necessary for future work of a more collaborative nature.

Unlike many other art schools, working from life and the model enters our program only after a profound study of the role it has played in the history of drawing, sculpture, and painting. Such a departure from usual practice is based on historical precedent, as well as the need to counteract a contemporary abandonment of the traditional use of the human figure. Each student begins with a series of two-dimensional copies from the nineteenth-century drawing course of Charles Bargue, taught using a translation developed specifically for our curriculum. From the very start, emphasis is placed on mastering the skills needed to imitate nature as beautifully and as intelligently as possible. Considerations of time are never allowed to interfere with quality: A project may take from one week to several months, depending on a number of factors.

Growing awareness of the role of the painter in architecture has brought an increase not only of public interest but also of knowledgeable partners to collaborate *with*—including patrons, architects, artists, and artisans. Henry Hope Reed's argument for beautiful public spaces embellished through the allied arts becomes ever more convincing as we see how the barren modern alternative has affected the quality of our lives. The growing number of committed people working toward a renewal of "the classical" is testimony to the success of his life's mission, which continues to give direction to so many.

D. Jeffrey Mims is founder and director of the Academy of Classical Design in Southern Pines, North Carolina, a non-profit school of art dedicated to the classical tradition with an emphasis on public mural painting. Mr. Mims is the recipient of an Arthur Ross Award in 1984 and the ICAA 2009 Alma Schapiro Prize for an affiliated fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. For more information see www.academyofclassicaldesign.org