

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL

OF DRAWING, PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Fall 2021

Monday Evening Sculpture – IN-PERSON

The Head from Life

Instructor: Brandt Junceau
Class Hours: Mondays, 6:30pm – 9:30pm
First Class: September 20, 2021
Last Class: December 6, 2021
No Class: October 11, 2021
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Course Description

In fall 2021, our notional head from life is still a c1900 Rodin portrait bust. Rodin's naturalism, which was the fellow traveler of the literature of Zola and Proust, is our default notion of true to life. That is funny-- why not the naturalism of Alberto Giacometti, c1965? He was just as keen an observer and much closer to us, or Marino Marini(?), closer yet. We have some catching up to do. What if I were to offer you a brisk walk over the ground from 1900 to 2000? From a single model, we would make a first quick bust ala Rodin, then another as a kind of "visit" to the celebrated studio of Giacometti and third, try out the looser, warmer, character-driven mode of Marini. We could fast forward to the present. The technique is basic throughout. If you have not modelled in clay before, you could start here at the front door and take three terra cottas away with you. We will work from one model throughout, with just a few tools (easily found, or supplied), 11 sessions total, a few slide talks tossed in, plenty of on-topic conversation along the way. Pending safety guidelines, we might even meet sometime at a museum. Whether you have prior experience or not, this class is a conceptual eye-opener. You might just bump into the 21st century portrait bust from life, which for contemporary artists, is a wide-open untried field.

Course Outline

The course is observation, working from a model, in clay. We meet 11 times. The same model each class. An efficient portrait commission might take 12 sittings and more, so we must set a brisk pace.

The first class includes a quick slide talk on the head and likeness, from the ancients to the modern era. Our received 19/20th Century naturalism, which is the legacy of Houdon, Carpeaux, Rodin, Epstein and Kolbe, was thousands of years in the making. Humankind went many thousands of years without any individual likenesses. The portrait had to be invented, and thereafter it was re-invented again, and again and again.

In the first weeks we will have established the "arithmetic" of the head from the model; width, breadth, relative heights and placement of features from centerline. We see the difference between life as we observe in the model, and the classical conventions that have made eyes, lips, brows and hairline legible. In monochrome sculpture (terra cotta, stone and bronze, un painted), slight exaggerations of convex and concave (Rodin's "art of the bump and hollow") stand in for differences of color, and fictive solid forms fill in for not-so-solid hair, by seemingly "acting" like it.

The most correct head is still not "life" but a portrait is. So what is likeness? Likeness is *not* a copy. Having reached the point of likeness, we will have a quick talk (with slides) on caricature. Some artists (Picasso for one) have said that caricature is the critical element of likeness.

Lastly, we will get the clay off the armature, and prep it for firing. The clay has to be bone-dry before firing, so the last firing takes place after class. Beforehand we'll talk about mounting, and I will be available later to advise on physically mounting the piece.

Learning Outcomes

This course will familiarize the student with the 19/20th Century western classical naturalistic bust as practiced by Rodin (among others), and given to the modernist generation. Their naturalist bust is still the benchmark for contemporary human likeness. We touch next on the next watershed: was the work of Alberto Giacometti, who made the practice of portraiture an existential confrontation, parallel to the thinking of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. The third touchstone is Marini's cycle of firmly Twentieth Century men and women.

The class is learning by doing. Students will walk away with at least three terra cottas

I take each student for an artist in the making. Therefore, at each practical occasion the course will re-center on the making of an *image*, and the basic human and emotional appeal of the image. At any given opportunity, we will look at the sculptural image as a shapely form of language, like a sonnet or a sonata, saying something the artist means to say, and more.

Life-likeness as practiced by Rodin and his peers is still the baseline "human condition" of contemporary art. *This class is a foundation point for the student's contemporary practice. There is, at the moment, no practice of the portrait bust corresponding to the painted portraits of Elizabeth Peyton, Claire Tabouret and Marlene Dumas. Wide open field.*

Evaluation and Grading

Grading is on a High Pass/Pass/Low Performance/Fail basis for NYSS MFA candidates. To achieve a Passing grade, students must demonstrate the full application of their interest, diligence and commitment to address two basic skills and one basic idea. The skills are careful observation of the model, and the construction of a corresponding structure in clay. The basic concept is the matter of difference and exchange between the thing seen and the thing made. My means of evaluation are primarily the things made. Of course, individual talents vary, and everyone's understanding takes a unique path at a unique pace; that's a given. Work, as is practice for a musician, is the essential element. "Beauty" will not be a criterion, diligence, understanding and progress are.

Readings and Resources

I occasionally distribute photocopy images and text apropos the day's work or discussions during the previous class. I sometimes read aloud during periods of work from the model. If we meet via Zoom, we save the slides and the talk, for further reading. Students are encouraged to keep the distributed materials together, with their own notes, for future reference.

Materials and supplies

Students should have basic wooden modelling tools;

at least one "elephant ear" sponge;

and 14-inch (open) calipers;

all of which can be had from Compleat Sculptor, and elsewhere online.

I will set aside a recommended set of tools at Compleat Sculptor, which you can choose from. They offer our students a worthwhile discount.

NYSS supplies clay, an armature, and firing options to keep your work in terra cotta.

School, Department & Class Policies

Please refer to the Student Handbook for information regarding the School's policies on academic integrity and plagiarism. All students must abide by the general health and safety regulations laid out in the Student Handbook, as well as any specific instructions given by the Instructor. All students will follow the School's current COVID-19 guidelines and procedures to maintain a healthy and safe working environment for the NYSS community.