

MEMPHIS COLLEGE OF ART

1936-2020



AN ENDURING LEGACY

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SATURDAYS IN THE PARK

Lynne Sachs

Memphis Academy of Arts
Saturday School, Student, 1970s

Artists are always trying to figure out where they got their start, who were their inspirations, what painting or movie or poem sparked them to follow their creative muse for so many years—well after we put away our box of crayons and start to think of ourselves as adults. I've been thinking lately about my own childhood. In my mind's eye, I revisit the canvases I discovered at age nine with my mother when we entered the Metropolitan Museum of Art during my first trip to New York City. I ponder my third-grade obsession with making needlepoint pillows featuring rainbow-colored mushrooms. I look in a scrapbook for a photo of a lone bicycle leaning against a wall in an alley somewhere in France, my first attempt at creating an image with a "mood." I contemplate my entire sixth-grade school year in which I was forced to build a single papier-mâché dragon for a school play in which I refused to perform.

Unfortunately, I never had a school art teacher who actually inspired or even truly encouraged me to dive into the haptic, cerebral, even therapeutic, aspects of making art. After far too many disappointments, embarrassments, and frustrations, I abandoned the classes that were offered by my elementary, junior, and high schools and headed to Overton Park where I discovered the wonders of the Memphis Academy of Arts' Saturday School program for children. There, just a few steps away from our city's last remaining primordial forest, I embraced a program that supported me and all of the other enthusiastic kids who were looking for something fun, unstructured, and, yes, serious.

In order to understand what it was really like to participate in the weekend classes offered at the academy in the 1970s, you need to think about the building itself, how different it was from any other place where we were expected to learn. Designed by architect Roy Harrover, the academy was a visionary edifice situated in the middle of a metropolitan green space. Rust Hall, its primary building, was named after beloved artist Edwin C. "Ted" Rust, the academy

director from 1949 to 1975 and a profound enthusiast for things found in the natural world. No surprise then that the building's white cement epidermal layer, its skin, was an exquisite latticework that invited nature to enter our consciousnesses. As we stood at our easels with our brushes or our pencils, we gazed wistfully at the old-growth oaks and sycamores just beyond the glass, framed by the distinct graphic configurations of the exterior walls. Even if we were not actually drawing en plein air, the porous sensibility of the building itself invited us to contemplate our place amongst the trees. Whether we recognized it then or not, this was an entirely different sensation from the hermetic experience we found in our more traditional Monday–Friday places of education. Saturday mornings at the academy were different.

It's equally important to know, at least from a child's perspective, that the Memphis Zoo was only about a five-minute walk from the grand, inviting front stairs of Rust Hall. Animals from every continent were there for us to visit. Of course, with the zoo so close, our teachers would lead us across the park with sketch pads in hand through the entryway, and into the various animal areas. Keep in mind, this was the early to mid-1970s; so, the enlightened late-twentieth-century redesigns of zoos around the country had not yet begun. Most of the creatures were behind bars, shall we say. Nevertheless, we appreciated the sense of adventure that came with being so close. Looking, really looking, at a grand, majestic wildcat for an extended period of time was very different from frolicking from exhibit to exhibit with your family. Now with hindsight, I think about Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Panther" (1902–03) and the way that we as young artists were able to connect with the animals, from their eyes to our paper.



Photograph of Diane Sachs
by Lynne Sachs

*His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.*

*As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.*

*Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.¹*

Half a century later, my memory insists that the animals were so close to the academy that we could even hear the hoots and screams of the monkeys or the grunts and roars of the elephants from inside the building.

Of course, I can't speak about a school without talking about its teachers. I have been an artist and a college-level professor for more than thirty years, so I think a lot about pedagogy and its impact on students. How we present and talk about art leaves a lasting imprint on the inchoate sensibilities of their evolving, creative minds. I clearly remember two distinct approaches to teaching that were part of my Saturday School and, later, high school night class experiences. There was one painting teacher who insisted that all of his students stand behind him as he rendered a house on a hill with his palette of watercolors. I felt as if I was tied to the ground, being introduced to one methodology that certainly suited him but never resonated for me. I also remember a photography teacher who encouraged us to explore the world we knew and the world we didn't know, to make the familiar somehow exotic and to make the strange somehow everyday. One day I took a picture of my mother, Diane Sachs, with her hands raised high to the sky, like a tree. She became more than my mom, more than a woman living in Memphis, she became a tree of her own. Both my mother and I still have that black-and-white picture. It will always remind me of that moment in my life when I discovered how art could make me see everything in a new way.

1 Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Panther," in *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 31.



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