

*No prep school has turned
out more major artists than Andover.
Here's why it gets*

AN 'A' IN ART

By John Sedgwick

Phillips Academy, better known as Andover, doesn't think of itself as an art school in the exalted manner of New York's Cooper Union or the Yale School of Art. No, it is a prep school—one of the oldest and, arguably, finest in the country. And, like any self-respecting prep school, it is no more bent on turning out professional artists than it is on graduating professional squash players.

But in Andover's 215-year history, along with the hundreds of alumni who have gone on to the usual successes—President George Bush; poet Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.; landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted; *Tarzan* author Edgar Rice Burroughs; actors Humphrey Bogart, Jack Lemmon, and James Spader; and the late A. Bartlett Giamatti, baseball commissioner and Yale president, to name but a few—the school has turned out a surprising number of true stars in the rarefied world of the visual arts.

First, perhaps, was Joseph Cornell, from the class of 1922, best known for his “box” art, and then the Depression-era photographer Walker Evans, class of '22; minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, class of '53 (who acquired a heap of un-Andoverian notoriety in 1985, when he was accused of murdering his wife); avant-garde filmmaker and photographer Hollis Frampton, class of '54; renowned minimalist-turned-maximalist painter Frank Stella, class of '54; curvilinear wood sculptor Mel Kendrick, class of '67; contour painter Carroll Dunham, class of '67; free-form metal sculptor Wade Saunders, class of '67; and Neo-Geo artist Peter Halley from the class of 1971.

And those are only the better known. When one of Andover's current art instructors, Christopher Cook, set about

producing a show of artists who graduated from Andover since Stella's class of 1954, he set the modest goal of finding twenty working artists whose works he could showcase. To Cook's surprise, he found thirty-eight, and after the show went up he found forty more. “It was incredible,” he says. “I had no idea so many Andover artists were out there.” No other prep school, regardless of size (An-

dover graduates more than 300 students a year), comes even close to this record.

At the school's handsome Georgian campus, a half hour's drive north of Boston, one does not have to look very hard to see why this might be so. Two buildings dominate the view from Main Street. One, as might be expected of a New England boarding school, is a soaring chapel. The other is a large, proud,



Guiding spirits: Jock Reynolds, current director of the Addison, with Maud Morgan, a former art teacher.

neoclassical edifice with a festive banner billowing between a pair of stout columns. It is the Addison Gallery of American Art and an enviable academic resource, with its 11,000 pieces of art, including 800 paintings and nearly 5,000 photographs. "The Addison certainly sets a certain mood on campus," says Mel Kendrick.

All the major American artists are represented in its permanent collection, from Gilbert Stuart and John Singleton Copley to Jasper Johns and Mark Rothko, as well as a healthy sampling of Andover's own artist graduates. Among its more noteworthy works are a rare Man Ray landscape called *Ridgefield*, a striking Stuart Davis oil called *Red Cart*, a complete collection of Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies, and eighty Winslow Homers. So fine, in fact, is the collection that it stirs envy even in the museum world. "Their early-twentieth-century collection rivals ours in some areas," admits Trevor Fairbrother, contemporary arts curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. "Given that it's a prep school, some of its holdings are incredible."

Founded in May 1931, the Addison, like New York's then brand-new Whitney Museum, was devoted exclusively to American art. Thomas Cochran, an Andover scholarship student who rose to become a partner of J.P. Morgan, gave \$1.5 million for the museum as part of his prodigious \$11 million gift for the expansion of the campus in 1930. Cochran also added the chapel (which bears his sister's name), a library, and a sixty-acre bird sanctuary. In pondering how to fill his gallery, Cochran was impressed with how many prominent Americans had touched the school over its long history; aside from all its own illustrious graduates, George Washington reviewed the local militia on Andover's green in 1789, and Paul Revere designed the school's seal. And so Cochran, ever a patriot, determined that the museum should celebrate American art.

Curiously, he named the gallery after an obscure art teacher and a friend of his mother: Keturah Addison Cobb of St. Paul, Minnesota. But perhaps she was distinguished in Cochran's mind for being the mother of the New York socialite Mrs. Cornelius Bliss, of whom Cochran was known to be "fond," using the careful word of the gallery's associate director and resident historian, Susan Faxon. Since there was also a Mr. Cornelius Bliss, Faxon suspects that by naming the gallery after her mother, the widowed Cochran was declaring his

affection for Mrs. Bliss in the only way he safely could. (Equally curious, he supposedly chose his teacher's middle name so that the Addison would appear at the top of any alphabetical museum listing.)

Whatever the motivations, Mrs. Bliss served on the founding committee of Cochran's new museum. Cornelius Bliss's sister, Lizzie, whose bequest of post-Impressionist paintings helped establish the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929, served on the committee as well, and it was she who gave the Addison its forward-looking cast. After putting on a rather humdrum display of American classics in its first show in 1931, the gallery set a more electric tone by exhibiting the masterpieces from Lizzie Bliss's Modernist collection,

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including twenty-two Cézannes, sixteen Gauguins, nine Picassos, and selected examples of more than a dozen other leading post-Impressionists. By exposing the school to the challenge of modern art, it lit a fire that has never gone out.

Cochran never intended for the Addison to include any teaching positions. He had conceived of his museum as a quiet retreat from campus life, rather like the bird sanctuary he also donated. But the gallery's first director, Charles Sawyer (himself an Andover graduate), believed that it wasn't possible to appreciate art fully without trying to make it, and in 1933, ignoring Cochran's wishes, he hired a New York artist and Andover alumnus named Bartlett H. Hayes Jr. to teach painting and drawing.

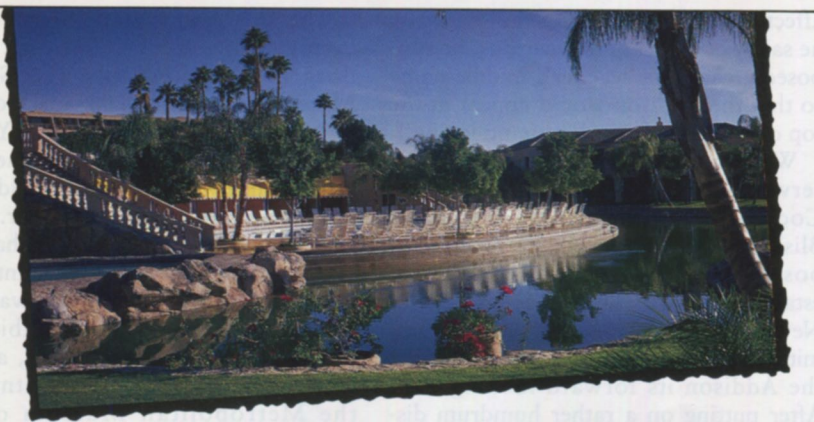
In 1940, when Sawyer left Andover, Hayes ascended to the directorship of the Addison and hired a Harvard friend named Patrick Morgan to take his place as the art instructor. Morgan and his artist wife, Maud, would be the first art teachers to make a deep impression on the Andover students. "The two of them just set you on fire," Carl Andre has said.

The Morgans had been deeply involved in the New York art scene. Both had studied with the German Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann in Munich and later in New York at Hofmann's Art Students League. They were friends with Alexander Calder and, later, with Buckminster Fuller. Maud Morgan—a Boston Cabot who had gone to Ethel Walker—had been painting for only a few years. But her rise was meteoric, and she was soon exhibiting at Julian Levy, a leading gallery, and her work was taken by the Whitney and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Patrick Morgan, somewhat less successful, had turned to giving weekly drawing lessons to make ends meet.

At Andover, the Morgans quickly established a little patch of bohemia in the heart of an otherwise staid country town. Seeing that students had little to do on Saturday nights, the Morgans put out a casserole, played Kurt Weill and Stravinski on the Victrola, and welcomed all the students in for a regular Saturday night open house. The Morgans had their own Abstract Expressionist paintings on the walls, along with works by Hans Hofmann, Arthur Dove, and Loren MacIver, and an amazing Calder mobile hung from the ceiling. The kids wandered dazedly about the artwork. "They were wonderful social, intellectual, and artistic evenings," recalls Gordon (Diz) Bensley, a longtime Andover art teacher, who has now retired to devote his time to photography and painting.

One of the students who meandered into the Morgans' life was a serious young man named Frank Stella. "Frank was so quiet when he was young," Maud Morgan says. "Not nearly so verbal as he is today." He didn't have much to do with the Morgans' loud and fast Saturday crowd. Wrestling was one of his major interests on campus, but he did get absorbed in Patrick Morgan's course in Studio Art, or Stud Art, as the students called it, and the story of Frank Stella's first painting has become something of a school legend.

Morgan liked to start out with a still life that the students were to draw in three media, one on top of another—first in charcoal, then in pastel, and finally, after a coat of shellac was applied, in oil. "That was a way of introducing the kids to several media very fast," says Bensley. The subject set out before Stella was a pot of ivy, and as Stella considered his painting, he realized he didn't want to paint it realistically. "It was too dreary," he recalled in his (Continued on page 86)



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AN 'A' IN ART

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1983-84 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard. Instead, he thought back to the marvelous abstracts he had seen at the Morgans' house, and that somehow brought to mind Seurat. "I looked at the vine on the table, at the shadows and the play of light. . . . That was it. My fingers tapped the equation on the countertop: Static scheme plus daubs of pigment equal a still life painting. Problem solved."

The painting received mixed reviews at the time, although the Addison is glad to have it in its permanent collection now. More important, the painting committed Stella to his lifelong involvement with abstraction. "In that small moment of confrontation when I felt I had to do it or forget it, I formed my basic feeling about abstract painting, although I did not know it at the time."

The talents of Hollis Frampton and his roommate Carl Andre, both of them a year ahead of Stella, developed after they left Andover. But at the school, they were the real hipsters of the day. Framp, as he was known, sported a kind of elongated crew cut that set him apart from the other boys. "He wasn't preppy-looking," recalls Gordon Bensley's wife, Audrey, who teaches pottery at the school. "He was an individualist." Interested in Sartre and Ezra Pound, he found the school literary magazine, *The Mirror*, too juvenile and started his own journal, simply called *The*, which he filled with his own offbeat poetry.

Andre, a working-class kid, was more whimsical. "He was always itching to do things that were oddball and different," Gordon Bensley says. Andre could not overlook the fact that Andover's sister school, Abbot Academy, was located just a few blocks away, and that it was filled with girls. "I was able to hide in the sumac bushes and make love to my friends," Andre has said. He found greater pleasures in the studio. Bensley remembers a collage: Andre spray-painted a man's profile, then glued a cigarette to his mouth, rendering the cigarette smoke in seashells with eyes painted on them. Andre titled the piece *Eyes Get in Your Smoke*. "He had a great sense of humor," Bensley recalls. "He was great fun to be with."

The Morgans left Andover in 1957, and the spark plug of the art department became Gordon Bensley. He was assisted by a young sculptor named Gerald Shertzer, fresh out of Yale, who brought

to the school the Yale concept of visual studies. Vis Stud, as it was termed, replaced Morgan's Studio Art course and opened up the field of art from painting instruction to a broader cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility. It aimed to develop a facility in the visual "language" and was a school requirement. "When I was at Andover," explains painter Carroll Dunham, "they weren't trying to pick out talented boys and girls. They were trying to demonstrate that there was another way to think."

Vis Stud was a pre-art course, and, if anything, the instructors did their best to keep the whole notion of "art" out of the students' heads for fear that it would be paralyzing. Rather than employ paintbrushes, pens, or pencils, Bensley gave out cheap aim-and-shoot plastic cameras called Dianas, using cut-rate army surplus film and drugstore development. "With the camera, you immediately, like, saw something," Dunham recalls—meaning, students gained insight into issues of perspective, contrast, and composition. For interested students, it didn't hurt that the Addison Gallery stood nearby to validate the whole artistic enterprise.

Andover's second wave of artists really began to develop when Mel Kendrick, Carroll Dunham, and Wade Saunders entered the class of 1967. Kendrick and Dunham were particularly taken by Bensley's photography, and, since these were the '60s, they reputedly took advantage of their photographic prowess to dummy up some workable IDs to allow themselves to buy liquor, a move that ultimately won them a visit from the FBI. As they recall it, Andover was narrow-minded at the time—"pretty grim," says Dunham. "But the art department and the Addison represented an oasis for me."

Kendrick was impressed with the mind-expanding quality of the art teaching. He remembers one exercise in which the students were supposed to redesign a Christmas tree. "We decided it couldn't be done," he says, "but I loved the level of abstraction. Also, people were just nicer in the art department. There was this idea that you could do anything. It was all positive and noncompetitive and unlike the rest of the school."

Andover's prep-school environment may have infiltrated its graduates' art in unintended ways. Trevor Fairbrother, a

friend of Peter Halley, claims to see a preppy neatness—a "Filofax mentality"—in the tight geometry of Halley's Neo-Geo paintings. But Halley attributes his geometric interests more to a childhood spent amid the grid patterns and plumb verticals of New York City. One might also imagine that Andover is behind the rebellious streak in Dunham's art, with its giddy penis imagery and general cartoon exuberance. Dunham downplays that: "The fact that I had to wear a necktie and have my hair cut when I was 16—I don't think that accounts for the pictures I make. We're all forced into a box. A lot of other people went through Andover. But they don't make the pictures I make."

The work goes on. Today, Jock Reynolds, an artist, is director of the Addison, and there are eleven teachers in the art department, many of them practicing artists. Despite the increased importance lately accorded the sciences, Andover has doubled the visual studies requirement in recognition of the importance of visual culture in everything from MTV to urban design. Besides visual studies, the school offers twenty-two elective art courses, ranging from painting to filmmaking and computer animation. And an extracurricular Art Club has been organized to bring in live models for evening drawing classes.

Recently Christopher Cook showed off some of his students' work in a beginning painting course. He restricts the course to twelve students, although many more would like to take it. He stops at a painting by a student in the class. Her very first painting ever, it is an eye-catching abstract of multicolored dabs of paint set against a purple background. It calls to mind swirling planets, subatomic particles, microorganisms. "Isn't this something?" he asks with a grin. "I think it's absolutely extraordinary." He points to a larger reddish blotch at the center that seems to stand as the mother planet around which the rest of the dabs revolve. "We call that 'the cosmic tomato,'" he jokes. "Once she had the strange quality of the naked space, the whole thing began to grow."

"I think of what we do as being a lot like agriculture," Cook goes on, continuing the metaphor. "A seed starts, we carefully nourish the plant, and it grows. And sometimes, you know, something really incredible happens." ■



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