

DRAWING FROM THE PAST

CHOUINARD SCHOOL OF ART REBORN, REVAMPED

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When artist Nelbert Murphy Chouinard founded the art school which bears her name in 1921 in an old house on 8th Street in downtown L.A., few would have predicted it would still be going strong – albeit with a three-decade break – in 2006.

[Chouinard](#) taught the basics, using teachers (including herself) well-grounded in drawing. With this simple formula and an open mind towards art-making, [Chouinard School of Art](#) flourished, becoming one of the top art schools in the world for 50 years and the fountainhead for many of the 20th Century's most important art movements.

In 1955, Chouinard fell victim to embezzlement and was about to lose the school when her old friend [Walt Disney](#) stepped in (Chouinard had taught all the original [Disney](#) animators), not only saving the school but expanding it into a multi-disciplined institution with music, theater and film classes. But Disney's death in 1966 threw the school into chaos and by 1972 it closed.

In 1998, artist [Dave Tourjé](#) bought an old estate home in [South Pasadena](#) which he later learned had belonged to Chouinard. Tourjé restored the property, acquired and trademarked the Chouinard name, and in 1999 started the Chouinard Foundation with Bob Perine (a former student and teacher at the original school who'd already written a book chronicling its past). By 2003 they'd renovated another building in South Pasadena and opened the new Chouinard School of Art.

“It’s essentially the return to the idea of drawing that was somewhat abandoned over the last 30 years,” says Tourjé. “No matter what the discipline ... if you can draw well, you’ll probably execute your vision more clearly.”

President/Executive Director Tourjé and his team have brought a fresh approach to Chouinard’s original model. “We’re all artists/teachers,” he explains. “We have many people that have many different angles towards the art-making process – everything from abstract to traditional, to primitive, punk, animation. We’re taking a broad approach to the same subject – that approach didn’t exist 30 years ago when Chouinard ended.

“We’re not reactionaries. We’re not sitting here saying that traditional art making is what is correct ... we’re actually contemporary artists who are simply bringing our totally different views to the table with the common ground being primarily drawing and painting.

“We have two Programs. One is the Open Program, where anyone - be it a professional or even someone who thinks they can’t draw - can come in and just take classes, be it beginning or life drawing, design, painting, or oil painting. We have beginning, intermediate and advanced approaches to each.

“We also have a Certificate Program, if you want a ‘total result’ – taking you from wherever you’re at to what we view as a completed program. We will take your portfolio and analyze it, place you. Then you would take more of a sequential path.”

With enrollment swelling, Chouinard School of Art is now hoping to buy the original Chouinard building (where they recently discovered [David Alfaro Siqueiros](#)’s long-lost first mural in the U.S.) in downtown L.A.