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Chouinard packing its easels for good

The school, a spiritual heir to the famed L.A. art college, struggled from its 2003 start to attract students and funds

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After struggling three years to keep alive a modest reincarnation of Chouinard, a famous long-vanished L.A. art college, the artists and art patrons who established its spiritual heir in South Pasadena have decided there isn't enough money or student interest to continue.

Barring a miracle, the Chouinard School of Art will close when spring classes end Sunday, Executive Director Dave Tourjé said.

Since 2003, the school has offered year-round instruction in a renovated, 101-year-old brick building at 1040 Mission St. but has had no accreditation or degree program. The staff consists of 10 part-time teachers and four office workers, only one of them full time. Chouinard typically has 145 students enrolled, Tourjé said — about 100 fewer than it needed to break even.

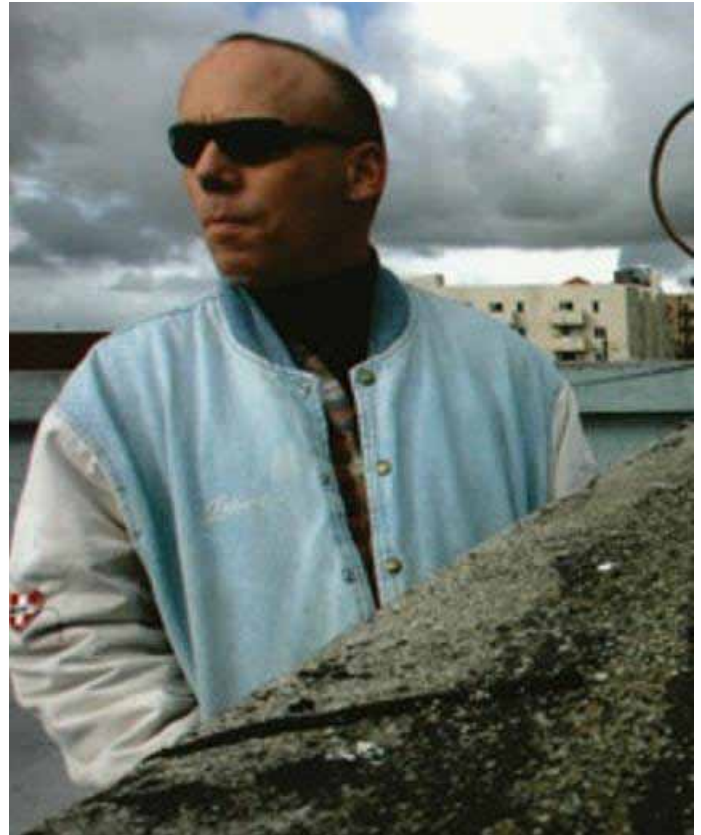
Tourjé, an artist and contractor, said he and three other volunteer board members

were so caught up in the day-to-day demands of running the nonprofit institution that they didn't have time to build a broader donor base to back their vision of an art school run by artists. The school failed to generate the \$360,000 a year in tuition and donations needed to meet expenses, he said, and the directors wound up floating annual deficits of \$180,000 out of their own pockets.

The decision to stop came after a fundraiser raffle and art auction, scheduled for Saturday, had to be canceled because of tepid response. A panel discussion the same evening also will not take place.

"It was a pretty impossible task," Tourjé said. "We knew what we were getting into. This kind of project can only survive with massive support. We have very illustrious artists on our advisory board, but we ask them for advice, not money."

The effort to reestablish Chouinard began in 1999, when



DIRECTOR: Dave Tourjé has plans for the parent foundation.

Tourjé teamed with artist Robert Perine to create a foundation to fund and operate the school. Perine was a Chouinard Alumnus who felt dispossessed after the original debt-ridden institution closed in 1972, subsumed by Walt Disney in a financial bailout that eventually resulted in the creation of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia.

In 1985, Perine published a history of Chouinard and its demise, titled "Chouinard:

An Art Vision Betrayed." His death at age 81 in 2004 was "a difficult blow...He was a prime mover in the whole project," said Tourjé, who is not an alumnus of the old Chouinard but became fascinated with its history when he bought a fixer-upper in South Pasadena that had been the home of Nelbert Chouinard, who founded the college in 1921.

Although the school will die, Tourjé said that he and the other board members planned

Chouinard packing its easels for good (cont'd)

to keep its parent Chouinard Foundation alive. They'll take some time for planning, he said, then try to become active in grant-making, although with the school's closing the foundation's resources "will be pretty much down to zero." A promised bequest gives the foundation hope for the future, Tourjé said, and the hope "to find gifted artists and invest in them in a very focused way"

The foundation poured \$450,000 into renovating and seismically stabilizing a former grocery that was "vacant and unusable" and turning it into a school, Tourjé said. Taking donated materials and sweat equity into account, he said, the value of the makeover topped

\$1 million. In return, he said, the building's owner set the rent at about half the market rate.

"We helped the progression of development on Mission Street and created a building that could be construed as a centerpiece of the West Mission Street district," Tourjé said. At the same time, he said, "I don't think our departure will significantly impact development there. The city has plans for development that we didn't affect. We were an unexpected arrival, an out-of-the-blue bonus. But we did bring more profile and appeal to the area."

Glen Duncan, who chairs South Pasadena's Cultural Heritage Commission, expressed sorrow at the school's impend-

ing demise, saying he had helped bring it to the area and saw it as an asset for the city.

He agreed, however, that its loss would be unlikely to hamper prospects for development. The school did such a terrific job of restoring the building, he said, that it should not be difficult to find a new tenant. "They've helped raise the development bar in the city," he said.

Tourjé said the school's failure to thrive can't be attributed to a single factor. "I think you can get into the larger question of apathy toward the arts."

The instructional focus was what the executive director called "the core of the old Chouinard's success, meaning drawing, painting and design."

This "pure-art" philosophy may have struck some potential students as old-fashioned, he acknowledged. The prevailing notion in art education, Tourjé said, is that "you go to art school, you get a degree and then you are an artist. We disagree with that completely. We don't have any ideas about degrees making a person an artist."

Tourjé said the foundation will relocate to its previous headquarters, in Eagle Rock.

"We don't view this as Chouinard's end. We view it as a transition and a new beginning of some kind."