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Disney and Chouinard

July 08, 2001

I was gratified to read Suzanne Muchnic's story about Chouinard Art Institute ("True to a Significant School," July 1). The impact this school had on the art world in this country cannot be overestimated.

My father, Watson Cross, graduated from Chouinard, and for 29 years was one of the life drawing and anatomy instructors. Many of the painters, sculptors, fashion designers and animators who passed through Chouinard were in his classroom near the start of their careers. He was proud of them all and proud of the "creative training ground" that was Chouinard.

Most of the teachers and students were at first exhilarated at Walt Disney's interest and patronage of Chouinard. Unfortunately, as Disney became the school's benefactor, he also became its destroyer. His idea of a university of the arts was a good one--the fact that CalArts has survived attests to that. Clearly, Chouinard and most of its faculty did not fit his tidy, Disneyland Main Street, U.S.A. vision of a factory far removed from the gritty city, churning out talent to feed his empire. The New York academics Disney brought in to head CalArts discarded a dedicated, proven faculty and killed the spirit that was Chouinard.

We will never know what the future might have held for Chouinard if Disney had infused it with money but allowed it to remain its free-spirited, experimental self. Its demise in 1972 left a void in Los Angeles' art education as yet unfilled.

CATHLEEN CROSS OHANESIAN
South San Gabriel

Reader to Reader

August 05, 2001

Re the July 8 letter from Cathleen Cross Ohanesian, daughter of the celebrated painter and teacher Watson Cross, in response to the article about Chouinard Art Institute ("True to a Significant School," by Suzanne Muchnic, July 1): While I did not attend CalArts during the period her father taught there, my good friend Edward Reep was the chairman of the painting department and one of Cross' mentors. We were both surprised and saddened to read her bitter and grossly inaccurate interpretation of Walt Disney's ideals for CalArts.

Chouinard was indeed to be dissolved into the new campus of CalArts, which was to be made up of five separate schools of art, under the direction of a board, with Mr. Disney, Mr. Reep, Bill Moore, Millard Sheets and Robert Corrigan, a doctorate in dance, among others. They were thrilled to be a part of an exciting new school infused with a great deal of new capital. The only thing we can possibly fault Mr. Disney for is contracting cancer in 1966 and subsequently dying from the disease in December of that year.

The "New York academics" Ohanesian refers to were none other than H.R. Haldeman, who left CalArts to go do some kind of work in Washington with the Nixon administration, and his replacement, Harrison Price, the accountant and owner of Price Waterhouse who caused the mass attrition in 1969. To blame Walt Disney for the demise of Chouinard in 1972 is blatantly unfair.

For anyone really interested, there is a book titled "Chouinard, an Art Vision Betrayed" by Robert Perine.

DON MANN
Van Nuys

Chouinard and CalArts

September 23, 2001

Errors in Don Mann's Aug. 5 letter should be corrected to reflect actual events occurring during the creation of CalArts and its absorption of the Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Music Conservatory.

Mann attributes a large part of the responsibility for these events to Bob Haldeman, who resigned from the board in 1970 and had nothing to do with events Mann describes, which occurred in 1972. Similarly, he incorrectly refers to Harrison Price as an accountant and owner of the accounting firm Price Waterhouse. Mr. Price is, however, a trustee of CalArts, which he has generously served for 40 years. Edward Reep and Bill Moore were never board members.

The merging of CalArts and Chouinard was indeed painful. Walt Disney was gone, and the board of trustees had installed a new administration under the presidency of Robert Corrigan. This new administration absorbed some faculty and some programs from Chouinard and the conservatory, but many programs were modified or abandoned in favor of the new directions. The board delegated the business of defining the new academic structure to the administration, which had been brought in to do that job. At times, several trustees took issue with some of these choices.

Nevertheless, CalArts was positively influenced by merging with its two antecedent schools. The bottom line is that mergers are not easy. In this case, however, the quality of the result honors both Chouinard and the conservatory.

STEVEN D. LAVINE
President, California Institute of the Arts
Valencia

Mann indicates that the "New York academics" Cathleen Cross Ohanesian was referring to in her prior letter were H.R. Haldeman and Harrison Price. She was in fact referring to Robert Corrigan and provost Herbert Blau, who resigned in the wake of the chaos surrounding the Chouinard/CalArts transition.

The existing relationship between Chouinard and CalArts is clearly a complex one.

Since buying Nelbert Chouinard's home and co-founding the Chouinard Foundation with Robert Perine, I see that the passion this discussion inspires has at its roots the loss of an important art-education system, one that amply succeeded before its awkward end.

To completely blame Corrigan and Blau for the demise of Chouinard would be shortsighted. The ultimate responsibility lay in the hands of Nelbert Chouinard and Walt Disney themselves: hers for allowing the financial condition of her school to deteriorate to the point of needing Disney and his for not preparing an orderly transition of Chouinard affairs in the event of his sudden and untimely death, which unfortunately occurred.

The "what if" theories will likely continue, but what we have is "what is"--a rich yet nearly forgotten legacy that if explored could only serve to strengthen the foundation upon which rests the ongoing process of art-making in Los Angeles and beyond.

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