

The Tradition of Mentoring

by Kirk Silsbee

IT HAS LONG BEEN OBSERVED THAT TALENT IS AN ALL TOO COMMON COMMODITY, AND THAT TALENT ALONE can almost never lead to success. In fact, undisciplined or misdirected talent can dry up like a shallow puddle on a hot day. Creative people need guidance to steer them through the thickets in developing their respective artistic professions, all of which seemingly have a thousand pitfalls. Emerging creative types also benefit from templates—role models who've blazed the paths they seek to walk. Unless you're an outsider artist, or are entirely self-motivated and have little regard for the greater art world, you need a mentor.

The **California Art Club** has taken steps to address the challenges that artists face in finding their way. Its Mentor Member Program, a membership category designed for practicing artists under the age of thirty, pairs these young painters and sculptors with renowned Signature Members to help sharpen their technical and creative skills and to navigate the marketplace. It's always been difficult for artists to flourish in their chosen disciplines, but for those working in realist styles and genres; today they face a special set of obstacles. For foreign-born artists the career puzzle becomes especially daunting.



Nikita Budkov

Born in Russia, **Nikita Budkov** is one of the émigré artists benefitting from the Mentor Program. Initially, Budkov was headed for a career as an architect in Moscow, but decided to change directions and followed his first passion, painting. As a youth, Budkov had attended the **Children's Art School Program** in his hometown of Odintsovo, where he learned the basics of draughtsmanship and painting with water media. But his parents had plans for him to study abroad. At age sixteen, Budkov moved to Winona, Minnesota where he lived with a host family in the farmlands while attending Cotter High School, a private catholic school. "I'm not really a city boy," he says, even though he now lives in the Los Angeles area, "I liked the outdoor labour in Minnesota, and I like staying physically fit." Budkov adapted well to private school, earning top grades, as he had also done in Russia. At Cotter, he played nose guard for the school's Ramblers Football team and was crowned homecoming king.

Settled into life in the U.S., Budkov scotched his architecture



Nikita Budkov
Born to Lose, Live to Win
Oil on panel 40" × 30"

plans and, after high school graduation, took a risk and travelled to Los Angeles. The **Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art (LAAFA)** proved an ideal fit for his art training. Here, he studied with American-Russian artist **Leon Okun** who graduated from the **Repin Academy of Fine Arts** in St. Petersburg and introduced Budkov to the Russian painting tradition. "LAAFA formed me as an artist," Budkov states. "It was a hard-core educational environment and some of the teachers were just perfect for me. Since I didn't study art formally in Russia, my work is a mix of Russian influences and my American training."

"Last year **Jon Swihart** was my mentor at LAAFA and

he taught me to mix pthalo blue, burnt sienna, and yellow ochre for my greens,” he discloses. Budkov’s Russian tradition is reflected in the layering—usually four or five coats—in his paintings. Budkov, who works at **American Legacy Fine Arts**, a fine arts gallery in Pasadena, has a strong narrative quality to his paintings. In his entry for this year’s **107th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition** held at the **Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County**, his painting, *Victim of Fate, John Dee*, depicted a learned old man contemplating an egg-shaped stone as the mists of Avalon gather outside; a touch of mysticism is unmistakable yet subtly expressed.

Peter Adams, a Signature Member and President of the California Art Club, is currently Budkov’s mentor. They got to know each other through LAAFA when Nikita was a student. “They thought he was one of the best students they ever had,” Adams says of the school. “It’s amazing he already had that much talent at the young age of twenty.” Budkov received a position at American Legacy Fine Arts as a six-month Special Project College Volunteer, all along keeping pace with Peter’s instruction. Last year he began working around Adams’ studio, and, work aside, they’ve become friends. “I can go to Peter with questions and ask his opinion,” Budkov says. “I’m learning the art business here in the office and, of course, I’ve learned how he works.” The benefits of mentoring go both ways. Adams adds, “Nikita photographs a lot of my paintings. We also discuss them, and sometimes I’ll change some things. It helps to talk about your work with another artist who has a fresh eye.”

Adams’ admiration for his charge mirrors **Craig Nelson’s** enthusiasm for **Hsin-Yao Tseng**, the artist he is mentoring. A native of Taipei, Taiwan, Tseng came to the United States at age eighteen. He drew Japanese-style comics and graphic novels, known as *Manga* cartoons, when he was young, and began watercolours at age eleven. Later he studied drawing and painting at the **Academy of Arts University (AAU)** in San Francisco. His most important figurative teacher was Nelson, who directs the University’s Fine Art Department. “He taught us about painting,” Tseng says, “but he also helped us get in touch with galleries.”

Nelson introduced Tseng to the CAC and encouraged him to join. Speaking from Italy by phone, where he leads a summer study course, Nelson shares some history: “Teaching at Academy of Arts University showed me that there were a lot of graduates who still needed information about the art market. I met Peter and **Elaine Adams** around eighteen years ago and they asked me to get involved in the newly launched Mentor Program. I didn’t go into teaching for the glory or the money; I wanted to give the information that was imparted to me, in turn, to young artists, and to combine that with what I learned

on my own.” Nelson had met Tseng while the latter was in his sophomore year. “He was mimicking other teachers’ work,” Nelson recalls. “There’s nothing wrong with that, as long as you don’t stay there.”

Tseng recalls Nelson’s influence, saying, “Craig and his wife **Anna Nelson** were looking after me and other students, helping us to get into galleries. They’re like my American parents.” According to Nelson, “Hsin was one of the hardest-working young people I’ve ever seen. He’s talented, yes; but he’s also totally dedicated. He’s still attempting to find his own subject matter, but he’ll get there. When people work that hard, it all eventually comes around. It’s talent, yes, but it’s also



Nikita Budkov
Perfection or Vanity
Oil on panel 28" × 36"

perseverance that will take you where you want to go.”

As an artist living in San Francisco, Tseng declares, “The California Art Club has been perfect for me. I met Peter and Elaine Adams at **Waterhouse Gallery** in Santa Barbara and they told me about the Mentor Program. Peter has referred my work to other artists and galleries.” Tseng has seen a fair number of galleries close in just the last four years, though he sees possibilities. “Many of them have just moved online,” he points out. “That’s the biggest change in the market now.”

A third partnering, soon to commence, is New Zealander **Rohini Sen** and her mentor **Alexey Steele**—a good match as both have superb drafting skills. Sen’s charcoal portrait of a Chinook woman (after a 1910 photograph by **Edward S. Curtis**), an entry in this year’s Gold Medal Exhibition, though tightly-rendered, also manages to capture the sense of wind that’s depicted in the photograph—a neat trick by anyone’s hand. Sen teaches at LAAFA and also works in their admissions office. Her fine art has even made it onto T-shirts with a design she developed for **Passport2Freedom** apparel.



Hsin-Yao Tseng
First Pumpkin Picking
Oil on linen 18" × 14"



Hsin-Yao Tseng and Craig Nelson



Hsin-Yao Tseng
Evening Market
Oil on panel 16" × 16"

Sen's quest for study began with querying various artists about institutions and programs. "I had a very special mission in mind as a student," she offers. "I heard about older artists and their troubles in the art world, which motivated me to find the best teachers. I looked for the right academy and long-term study." For three months she studied at **Studio Escalier** in Argenton-Chateau, France, an atelier founded and operated by American husband and wife artists, **Timothy Stotz** and **Nicole Michelle Tully**. Sen also attended a summer workshop at New York's **Grand Central Academy** before making her way to the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art. "LAAFA was a good long-term course of study for me. The instructors there helped me build my own professional art practice emphasizing strong work ethics that have become my foundation since I graduated," she confirms. "The work was very intensive and I grew exponentially." In answering how CAC and LAAFA were connected, she points out, "I've observed a direct line from the California Art Club to LAAFA where I met Peter and Elaine Adams." Thanks to that introduction, Sen had the enriching experience of helping hang a previous Gold Medal Exhibit at **USC Fisher Museum of Art**. "They were welcoming," she notes, "and very generous with their knowledge. They felt like family from the get-go."

In searching for the best training, Sen also had a personal style in mind. "I wanted to find the grace and beauty of related forms," she states. A degree in zoology has informed

and deepened a figurative narrative in her art. “I can’t really separate the two,” she confesses. “I’ve always had an appreciation for and a passionate wonder of animals in art—and find their movements and behaviour to be fascinating. I went back to the masters and studied their work,” she explains. “But I also looked for those values whenever they appeared—right up through the modern experience. Now, those animal observations just infuse my art. It all surfaced later in my figurative work.”

Sen’s soon-to-be mentor, **Alexey Steele**, taking a break from the activities at his busy Carson studio, has some definite thoughts about mentoring and the value of such guidance. Taking the long view Steele says, “This is one of the most important things that a nurturing arts organization such as the California Art Club can do. Yes, we can offer career advice

and tell students about competitions, but we have a larger responsibility to guide younger artists—that’s how to process the collective knowledge that we, as a culture, have gathered over the last five millennia. How to understand and adapt that knowledge is what we must do in order to extend our art into the future. That’s our work—as much as creating one more canvas or one more sculpture.” 📍

Notes:

Kirk Silsbee writes about jazz and culture, and has written about art since 1990. His articles appear in various publications including *L.A. Weekly*, *Downbeat*, *Artsmeme.com*, *Jewish Journal*, and *Downtown News*. Silsbee is known primarily as a music journalist, and has degrees in drawing and painting.



Rohini Sen
Houdon's L'Ecorche Cast Drawing
Graphite on paper 24" × 18"



Rohini Sen presenting “Chinook” a 17" × 10" charcoal on paper.