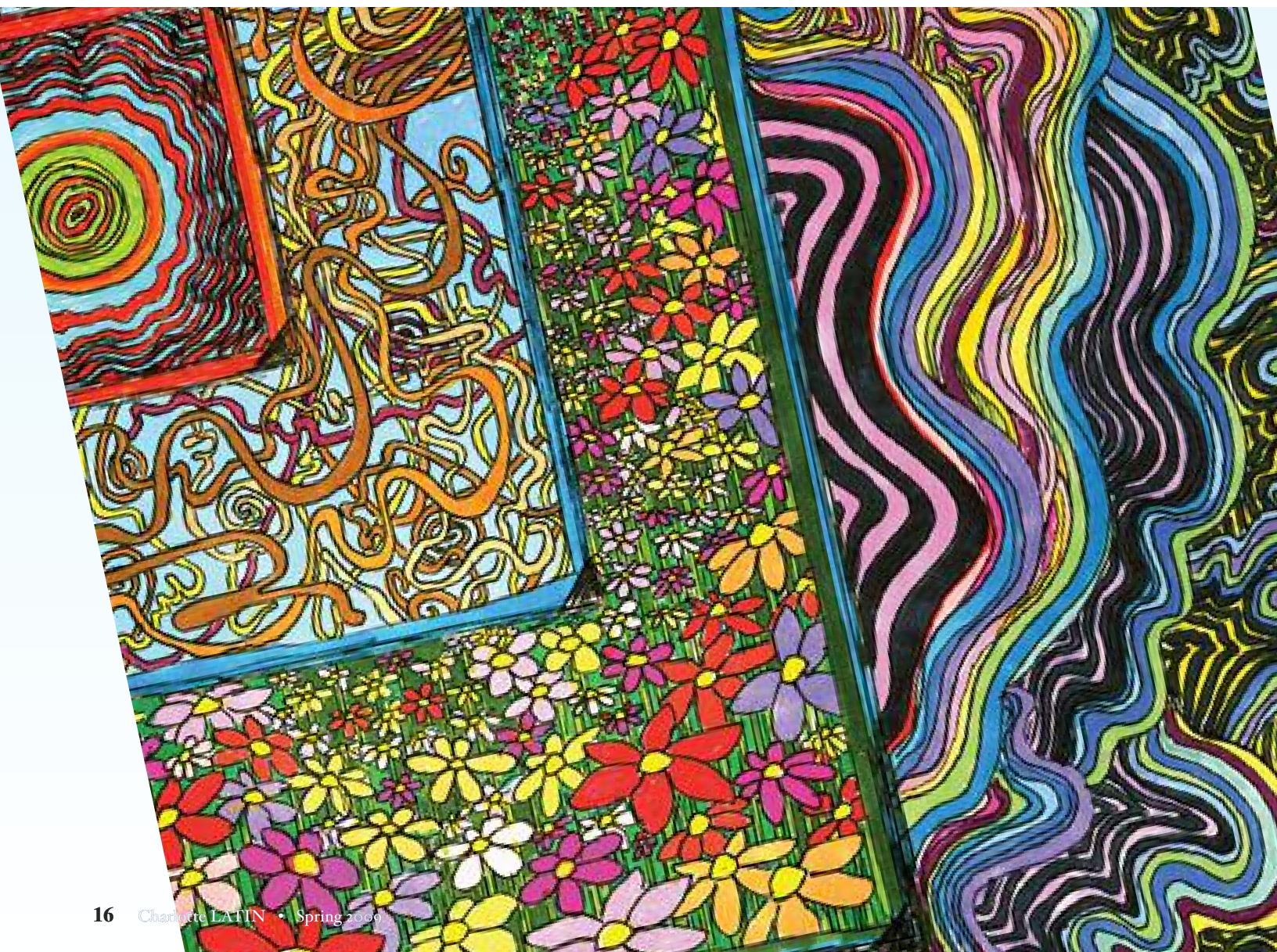




Drawing outside the lines...



By Karla Jennings

Upper school students thrive through innovative approach to visual art classes

AS GLOBALIZATION BECOMES A PROMINENT BUZZWORD in the modern vernacular, there is a growing consensus among educators and researchers that students need an appreciation of the arts more than ever. Art has the ability to transcend physical and cultural barriers and enables global communities to find creative ways to interact. "All art, especially visual art, is such a central part of our society; a mirror of what's important to us," says Upper School art teacher Will Thomason. Artists can initiate dialogue about wide-ranging topics while engaging viewers in an analysis of the people, places, things, and concepts that they record.

"It's critical for students to be involved in the arts because they address the abstract thought process—the critical, problem-solving, non-linear thought processes—that students will need to be successful," Thomason says. In a September 2007 article published in *The Boston Globe*, Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner, researchers at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, point to a particular set of skills that students learn specifically by taking visual art classes. These skills include the ability to observe, innovate, envision, and self-evaluate.



On page 16: Alex Walls '09;

Above: Boo Lander '09, "Nadia";

Right: Will Rudolph '09, "Digital Photography"

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Students, too, understand the value of visual art. They view art classes as “an outlet, a safe haven to do something constructive and fun without the pressure they have with their academic work,” says Upper School art teacher Chip Martin. Thomason adds, “Visual art is more nurturing than any of the other disciplines. Students can explore concepts and experiment without fear of ridicule.”

What I loved most about the art department at Latin was how each teacher gave you the tools to better produce the art you already were capable of producing. I think of watercolor techniques shown to me by Richard Fletcher or painting techniques (former Latin art teacher) Anne Rutherford showed me – there never was a mandate to try anything; everything always was a suggestion that led to a new path of discovery. And like all the teachers at Latin, the art department is made all the richer by the fact that each of its teachers is passionate about his or her art as well. I never felt the classroom experience was as much teacher-student relationship as it was artist-artist. For me, art complemented everything else I was doing. By my senior year, I was using my art to illustrate many of the stories I was reading (and loving) in my English classes. Being able to cross-reference across disciplines and have that inquisitiveness encouraged by my teachers truly made my Latin education extraordinary and more like a collegiate experience.

- Regan White '99



Left: Tori Bilas '13, (Graphite) "Self-Portrait"

While students feel less pressure in the art classroom, there is no loss in the standard of excellence. “Students may initially perceive freedom in the art classroom as the absence of rules,” Thomason says. “However, art has rules; there are elemental forces in art that every artist has to be aware of to manipulate it and achieve a desired effect.”

“Our art department’s philosophy is sort of a rejection of the traditional academic view of the visual arts,” says Art Department Chair Richard Fletcher '85. “Some people are very successful with that kind of program, but our department found something different. We want hands-on learning where kids can forget about academics for a while and make art.” Since Latin’s visual art curriculum is sequential, students learn basic skills based on classical techniques and themes in Lower School and then build upon that foundation with the study of art’s greatest masters in Middle School. By the time students reach the Upper School, Fletcher hopes that “they’ve had enough background where teachers can have an individual dialogue with them and guide individual projects.”



Latin’s art teachers emphasize that every student’s art is important, not just the art from students who are deemed “talented.” Fletcher admits that one of the reasons he stopped taking art his senior year at Latin was because he got tired of not being one of the students considered to possess artistic talent. “It was a very academic way to treat art and I got pretty bored with it,” he recalls.

Fletcher also notes that the Upper School art department has an open-door policy for any student interested in art. “We just want to expose the kids to the act of creating things.

We don't care if they're twelfth graders taking Art I." During the 2008-2009 school year, half of the senior class took an art class.

"The reality is that the majority of art students may be considered 'average' or 'above average,'" Martin says. "About two percent are identified as 'gifted and talented.' It doesn't make sense to teach the group based on those two percent. Average students with a solid work ethic can become really good artists."

Fletcher agrees. "A lot of art programs cater to the 'talented' individuals and we strongly believe that creativity is a learning process. Of course, everyone starts out with different levels of ability, but it's like any exercise—the more you do it, the better you get at it. We cater our program to the 'everyman,' and we've had a lot of success, especially when you think that art is not a required Upper School course." As such, Upper School art teachers work with two sets of students: Those who have taken art consistently since Lower School, and those in Art I who have never taken an art class. Since students come from different experiences, Upper School art teachers acclimate students to individualized instruction within the studio environment that defines Latin's Upper School art classes.

Fletcher, Martin, and Thomason agree that this studio setup is greatly beneficial, as it allows students a high degree of independence to pursue artistic experimentation. While some schools' art instructors teach only one medium, and thus specific classes for each medium, Latin's Upper School art teachers have no desire to follow that model. "Some of the energy that's in the class comes from a student looking over and seeing another person working on a sculpture and saying, 'I want to try that,'" Fletcher



Nick Coma '09 (Above: Computer art "Walking in Revelations") is one of the students who has excelled in creating artwork through the use of computer programs such as Adobe Photoshop. "I worked in the traditional art styles, but wasn't as gifted or as proficient a learner with those," he says. "I tended to learn a bit faster when it came to graphics." He also found that his teachers' approach to teaching art was a significant part of his development as an artist. "It's not like a linear learning (process)," he says. "I don't think I would have actually been able to do the art that I'm doing if we didn't have that kind of program."

Coma is beginning his freshman year at Purdue University and will pursue a degree in computer graphics technology. As with his experience at Charlotte Latin, he looks forward to experimenting with various forms of computer technology before determining a definite career path. "Right now, I'm trying to look forward to creating video games. Before I thought I was just a 'pen and inks' guy. I still am pretty good at pen and inks, but I had no idea down the line that I'd be doing art in Photoshop. For all I know, I could end up doing special effects for commercials as opposed to making that video game that's on the shelf," he says.

says. Being in an environment where students and teachers are working on different projects is not only inspirational, but allows students to grow in ways that they may not have done otherwise. For instance, a student can attempt to create a portrait using watercolor for the first time and, realizing that he or she has mixed too many colors to achieve a desired effect, can try again.

The School has been supportive of this approach to teaching art. Providing students with the opportunity to experiment is "completely



Right: Kinsey Sullivan '09, (Mixed Ceramic Media) "Flowers"

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and totally a function of the generosity in budget that we have," Fletcher says. "We're not afraid of making 'mistakes.' When other art departments are getting cut and slashed and public schools are cutting their whole visual art programs, Charlotte Latin has made a very strong commitment to the visual arts. Through that generosity, we haven't had to worry about people experimenting, and we haven't had to limit ourselves to what has proven previously to be successful. People are free to make and learn from their mistakes."

This willingness to try something new is evident in the department's use of technology. "We resisted technology for a long time because students are so inundated with it just being a human in today's age," Fletcher explains. "We kept computers out of our classrooms because we wanted kids making art with their hands and trying different mediums." The teachers changed their minds when they realized that students not only had an interest in this medium, but also wanted to pursue the medium through their own work.

One student, Nick Coma '09, won three Gold Key Awards in the 2009 Scholastic Art Competition for his computer-based artwork. "If Latin's art department failed to embrace technology, students like Nick would fall through the cracks," Martin says. "Digital technology in art classes is one of the greatest inventions since oil paints. It has changed my life. Once I got over my initial fears of computers, it was like opening the creative can of worms without a bottom."

Martin also has noticed a change in student-produced artwork. "The level of artwork students are producing now is much more sophisticated than the level of artwork produced 40 years ago," he says. "The



Top: Michelle Hoover '09 (Digital Photography)

Bottom: Morgan Pendergrass '09
(Acrylic) "Self-Portrait"

introduction of technology has enabled students to manipulate work much more than before. What the students see on TV is much more sophisticated, too." This change, in turn, allows students to think even more "outside the box" in their artistic translations of what they see, hear, and experience in today's society.

Encouraging students to explore and not to be intimidated by a blank canvas are hallmarks of Latin's visual art program. The program gives students the freedom to experiment with various media, the confidence to pursue an artistic direction that may produce unexpected results, and an appreciation of the creative process.

The importance of this freedom is why Latin's art teachers have deliberately chosen not to offer an Advanced Placement art course. Not having the AP course allows the teachers and their students to have flexibility with the art curriculum, which allows Upper School students to pursue their artistic interests rather than having a course of study dictated to them. Recent Latin graduate Michelle Hoover appreciates this approach. During her visit to the Savannah College of Art and Design, where she plans to pursue a BFA degree in illustration, she met students from other schools who had specific course requirements and homework. "I like the freedom of art classes at Latin," she says.

"If students want to pursue a formal career in the arts, they're going to get academic art instruction in college," Fletcher says. "And the feedback we receive from our students is that the college professors love what our kids can do in the classroom because they can go in and they're not intimidated by coming up with an idea and executing it. They've done that."

While Latin's students have earned numerous regional and national awards, their teachers note that the art program is not so much about product as it is about the growth of students as individuals and artists. In the Upper School, students are taught to think conceptually about their art. "When you look at things conceptually rather than literally, it changes your perspective," Martin says. "When people think of a portrait, they think of what they see in the mirror. A portrait can be something different. It doesn't have to include a face or person. It contains clues that reflect who the person is. We encourage students to think more broadly and to find their place."



Emma Getz '11 (Acrylic) "Purple Horse"

Not only do students find their place within the visual arts program, but teachers also notice a rise in students' confidence. "You'll see a person who was not confident at all be filled with confidence about his or her art. It's fantastic," says Fletcher. "We encourage our kids to take risks and people will ask, 'How do you take risks in an art class?' Well, take something that you've worked on for three or four months and then put it up for everybody to comment on and see. It's a huge risk. But for the most part, students are very kind with each other's work."



When graduation nears each spring, Latin's art teachers hope that their seniors "leave open-minded with a better sense of who they are and what is important to them," Martin says. Fletcher adds, "I think one of the biggest problems that Charlotte Latin stu-

dents have, in many ways, is that they are very good at doing what they're told—they're very good at spitting out a formula perhaps, or memorizing something. But when you put a blank sheet of paper in front of them and say, 'Come up with an idea,' their response may be, 'What do I do?' I think our program fits that niche extremely well because they have to come up with original ideas and think for themselves. There is no wrong answer, but they've got to search and find a solution that's not been there before."

Above: Mary Claire Evans '11, (Mixed Media) "Hen"

It is this creative growth process that art teachers say defines the power of the visual arts, regardless of whether or not a student chooses to pursue art after he or she graduates from Latin. But for those who want to continue their art studies in college, Latin students are well prepared. "We have found that kids who graduate from our school have no problem getting into an art school with the portfolio produced in class," Fletcher says. "Our portfolios are a very successful product of our alternative method of teaching."

Whether Latin graduates pursue art professionally or enjoy it as an avocation, Latin's art teachers hope they will, as Martin notes, become "alumni who are advocates for the arts, will support the arts, and who will involve their own children in art."

These art teachers hope, too, that their students will apply the lessons that they have learned in art class to seek challenges and opportunities that may compel them to draw outside the lines in every aspect of their lives.



Richard Fletcher, Chip Martin, and Will Thomason (shown here left to right with alumni parent Mary Ann McPherson) have more than 50 years of combined teaching experience. Martin and Thomason have traveled to New York to speak to their peers about the Latin art department's instructional philosophy.

To learn more about Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner's work at Project Zero, visit www.pz.harvard.edu.