

INDELIBLE

MARKS

Despite the decades that passed since their days at the Museum School, the memories are as vivid as the marks they make on paper, canvas, and stone. The seven alumni interviewed for this article attended the School in the 1920s through 1950s, when headlines spoke of Amelia Earhart, Hitler, Mao Zedong, Jackie Robinson, and Picasso. As students, they worked with some of the School's finest teachers: Alexandre Iacovleff, a Russian émigré who headed the painting department from 1934 to 1937; the German-born Karl Zerbe, a member of the Boston Expressionists who headed the same department from 1937 to 1955; and David Aronson, another Boston Expressionist who earlier was a classmate. Those students, now in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, are all somehow connected. And the art they make will forever be influenced—distinctly or subtly—by their experiences at the Museum School.

Will Barnet (Attended '28-'31)

Will Barnet was an artist long before he went to the School. He learned to draw in his teens, studying the masters, and painted in a studio in his father's basement. "I was already thinking about art in a serious way," Barnet says. He studied Rembrandt, Daumier, Watteau, and Ingres, and read art journals throughout the 1920s. Formal study at the Museum School, Barnet says, offered the promise of structure and an academic and cultural background he felt was vital to the career of an artist.





WILL BARNET. *Central Park Siesta*, 1932. Lithograph. Photo: John D. Schiff.

He remembers arguments with classmates about who deserved to be called the greatest painter in the Modernist school. "This very tall guy, Crawford I think, and I had a fight over Cézanne in the lunchroom," Barnet says. "He said things I didn't like and we put up the dukes and played at it a little."

The 1930s was a tumultuous period, Barnet says, with changes in the art world and at the School, too. "They got rid of everybody and started the new regime," he says. Barnet didn't care much for the instructors, or the School's definition of modern art, so he left for New York, with a scholarship to the Art Students League. "The Depression was a very terrible crisis," he says. "People were in trouble and I was influenced by what I saw there, the starvation, breadlines, evictions. I rented a room for two dollars a night and worked in a shoe store to make a few dollars. It was perfect for me. I was ambitious and excited."

Barnet taught at the League in the mid-1930s. He made a living in the early years as a printer and was also a technical advisor to the Works Progress Administration, "giving people a living and saving people's lives."

A painter for eighty years, Barnet is known for his simple yet moody images of human figures and animals. He has adjusted his style through the decades, beginning with the academic drawing he studied at the School, then more abstract work in the late 1930s and 1940s to starkly bold abstractions in the 1960s. "The influence of Rembrandt and Daumier made me a humanistic artist," Barnet says. "I'm more interested in people; my subject is humanity."

His training at the Museum School in light, shadow, and use of models was valuable, he says, but he has moved on: "New York was the center of the art world and I was part of it as a young man."



Edna Hibel (Attended '34-'39)

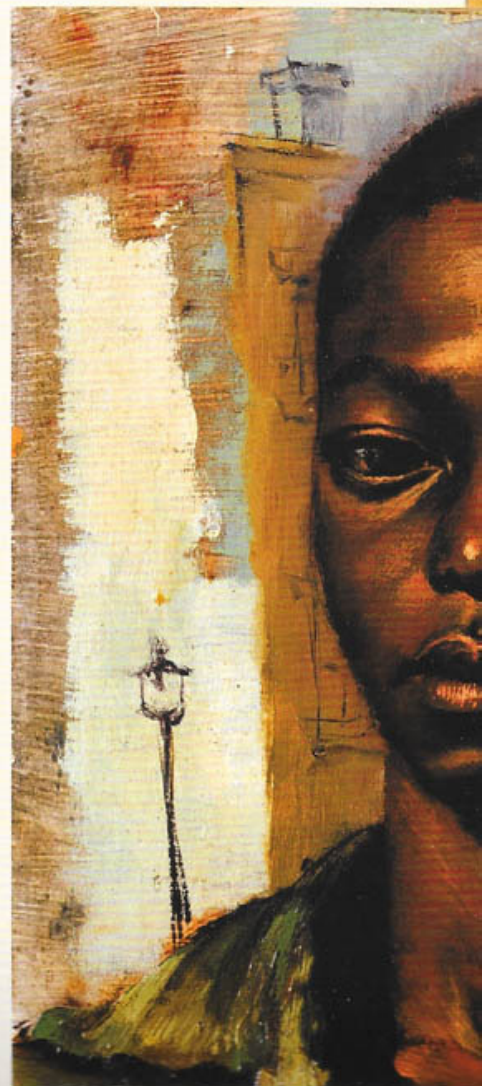


"Everything I'm doing, I could probably trace back to the School," says Edna Hibel, who has achieved international recognition with her paintings of mothers and children over the past seventy-plus years. "I was very, very influenced and shaped at the Museum School and I was lucky to have the two best teachers that probably have ever been there: Alexandre Jacovleff and Karl Zerbe."

Hibel started in beginning drawing but quickly moved to the advanced class, where Jacovleff visited twice a week for critiques. "He said to me, 'You're a wonderkind, do you know what that means?' I said no. He said, 'You're a wonder child, but that can be your undoing.'" Jacovleff pointed out how the other students watched Hibel draw with such ease. He told her she would never progress if she continued to enjoy the attention and not challenge herself. "I got scared," Hibel says. Instead of using Conté crayon or charcoal, which were "showy," Jacovleff had her switch to gray crayon. "No one watched me because they couldn't see it." When models posed, Hibel would make two or three drawings, very quickly, when other students made one. Jacovleff wanted her to slow down, so he had her paint a dead bird and each of its feathers.

Zerbe's influence was equally powerful and long lasting. "He critiqued our work and when he got to mine he said it was the best painting ever done in the School. I felt pretty good! Mrs. Gibson, the manager and registrar, called me to her office. She wanted to buy that painting. I went crying to Zerbe. I didn't know what to do. I had the best painting in the School and she wanted to buy it." Zerbe asked whether Hibel thought there was room for improvement. "I said, 'I'm just starting, I'll do better.' Then I ran back to Mrs. Gibson and told her she could have it, she didn't even have to buy it. With every painting I do, I think it's the best I can do at the moment, but I can do better tomorrow. I hope I never forget that."

Hibel won a Traveling Scholarship and had intended to study in Paris. But the war broke out and she headed to Mexico instead, driving down with her mother. Hibel was ill, however, and spent the three months there painting in her room, mostly models her mother brought in.



LEFT: EDNA HIBEL, *Our Mothers Before Us*, 1995.
Oil glaze, gesso, and gold leaf on canvas.

BELOW: JOHN WILSON, *My Brother*, 1942.
Oil on panel. Courtesy of Smith College Museum of Art.

She enjoyed early success and the sale of two paintings to the director of the MFA and his wife, but says she felt like she "didn't know anything." Hibel's husband suggested she talk to Zerbe, who counseled her to study the techniques of the Renaissance artists. One day she knocked on the door of Mr. Lowe, an MFA employee about to retire from the restorations department. "I got my courage up to ask how a certain painting was done," Hibel says. "We got friendly, we walked around every day and I got a wonderful education. I was a flamboyant painter and the Renaissance painters were tight, almost formulaic. Mr. Lowe thought that by studying them, I would realize what I was doing, and it did. I painted in those techniques for a year. I'd copy little areas to see how they did it."

One day, Hibel went to the Museum to copy one of the paintings she was studying. It had been moved to a gallery that held *The Orange Lady*, Hibel's painting that the Museum had purchased when she was twenty-three. Two young boys from the Mass. College of Art and Design came running in, shouting "here it is, here it is." "They were pointing to my painting," Hibel says, laughing with the memory. "I'm sitting there in front of an easel, wearing my little smock, and I said, 'I painted that.' They said it was impossible, but I finally convinced them."

Now there is a Hibel Museum of Art on the campus of Florida Atlantic University and an Edna Hibel Society that produces an annual HibelFest. "No one asked me what I wanted to be," says Edna Hibel. "But from the time I picked up a brush at age nine, I didn't stop. It was just something I loved to do. I am ninety-two (in January 2009), but I'm still painting, oh yes, it's like breathing to me. It's what my life has been."

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EVERYTHING I'M DOING, I COULD PROBABLY TRACE BACK TO THE SCHOOL."

— Edna Hibel (Attended '34-'39)

John Wilson (Diploma '47)

John Wilson spent much of his youth at the Roxbury Boys Club, where his artistic skills quickly earned him the right to make posters and illustrations. "My teachers there were Alexandre Jacovleff's students from the Museum School," he says. "They became close to me and taught me an awful lot about basic drawing." Those student-teachers also compiled a portfolio of Wilson's work for submission to the Museum School: he won a four-year scholarship after his high school graduation.



"Those early beginnings were the opening of a door, of how I could do something that would give me a sense of satisfaction and having contributed something," Wilson says. "I experimented with purely abstract paintings. I looked at all kinds of expressionistic artwork. It gave me a way of sorting out what is significant for me."

Only one of a few African-American artists at the School, Wilson says he wasn't subject to overt racism. "The Museum School was part of the real world and there were subtle things that came up that I'm sure my fellow students didn't understand," he says. "But I had nothing but positive feelings about the School. There, being a black person was put on the back burner."

Because artists see art as a universal, unifying language, Wilson says, students and faculty saw him as a peer. They judged him on his ability to make and understand art, not on the color of his skin. Outside the School was another story. When Wilson and two white classmates applied for kitchen jobs in a downtown Boston hotel, the two white men were hired immediately. "The guy said I was a clean-cut looking colored boy, but he had to call someone before he offered me a job working in a separate part of the kitchen away from the other staff. I told him to take the job and shove it."

In Allan Rohan Crite (Diploma '36) Wilson found an African-American role model and important psychological influence. "I went to visit him in Roxbury during my first or second year," Wilson says. "I didn't know what I was going to do with all of this art knowledge and skill after I graduated." Crite advised him to enter an annual art exhibit for African-Americans held at Atlanta University, a black collage. "I submitted a painting and it got first prize," he says. "Allan was a very key person in terms of my development as an artist."



Wilson's realist body of work reflects mostly African-Americans—realized in bronze sculpture, in oils, or prints—often with large heads and hands. In 1985 he won a prestigious competition to create a sculpture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the U.S. Capitol. Wilson's *Eternal Presence* (1987), at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, is a study for the colossal sculpture of an idealized head that stands outside of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston.

"I remember the first time I became turned on about what people could do with the human figure by exploiting the natural characteristics of what we were using to create these optical illusions," Wilson says. "Karl Zerbe gave a lecture on Picasso, his Blue Period. I still remember the impact of these blue paintings, which had an expressive quality that brought out aspects of the figure in a much more powerful way than you could with a naturalistic, realistic interpretation of what you visually saw. That whole attitude was instilled in me at the Museum School."

Zerbe practically forbade Wilson from taking a job as a commercial printer, helping him instead compete for a Traveling Scholarship. Once he got to Europe, Wilson worked with the French cubist Fernand Léger. "He believed that the naturalistic, visual rendering of what you saw was not fundamentally significant," Wilson says. "I remember doing a drawing the first couple of days in his class. Léger made a sarcastic comment about my work, saying, 'How beautifully that tree looks just like a tree,' and, 'The figure looks as though it is standing in a room that is very real.' He was suggesting to me that this skill to simply imitate the visual impact was not really getting at the basic, the *form plastique*. That thinking, combined with the early anatomical, more classical approach to dealing with the figure (with anatomy teacher Ture Bengtz) was very important to me. I tried to make use of both visions and techniques for interpreting things."

Arthur Polonsky (Diploma '48)



A connective thread still runs through the seventy years' worth of art made by Arthur Polonsky. "It's the love of materials," says the acclaimed painter and draftsman. "To me, it is not only the how, it's the what. It's not just the physical composition or the approaches to underpainting. All these things are expressive to me beyond just technique."

Polonsky and his cohorts would visit the Museum to look at early Italian painting and then experiment with the application of gold leaf over gesso. "Not that we continued using that, but the interest in the surface and expressive color was important," he says. Polonsky also tried encaustic, inspired by Karl Zerbe's work. "Karl came to this country interested in what the Mexican painters were using, like paint used for automobiles, which is practically indelible. Working with these materials was typical of what we were doing to produce something startling."

The artwork Polonsky and the other Boston Expressionists created now looks hopelessly old fashioned, he says, but back then they were considered the "young scoundrels" of Boston art. A painting by David Aronson, for example, was denounced from church pulpits because of its characterization of sacred figures. "I never intended to work that way," Polonsky says. "I did things hopelessly conventional until Zerbe said, 'I don't like what you do, but I understand why you're doing it.' After that, I had to try them out."

Polonsky and many of his classmates met before actually attending the Museum School. They were part of a scholarship program at the MFA for high school students, in 1941 or 1942. He recently saw a photograph of the class when he visited Reed Kay. "There we are," he says, "wearing our neckties and jackets and attending classes with our inspiring teachers, working from sculptures." Two afternoons a week, Polonsky would leave his regular school, get on a streetcar, light his pipe, and go to his classes



MY WORK BEGINS TO TAKE ON THINGS YOU CAN SEE IN DREAMS, I'M INTERESTED IN HOW CONCRETE THINGS BEHAVE IN DREAMS, NO MATTER HOW STRANGE.

— Arthur Polonsky (Diploma '48)



ABOVE: ARTHUR POLONSKY, *The Light Thief*, 1965. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Audrey Gayne and the Danforth Museum of Art.

RIGHT: LOIS TARLOW, *Deep Discovery #1 (detail)*, 2007. Ink, collage on paper.

NOT ALWAYS SEE UNLESS IT
CONVINCING THOSE IMAGES ARE



at the MFA. "It was so cool and peaceful there," he says. "I'd make studies of ancient wooden sculpture and artifacts. It was like an introduction to the School."

During the early years of the War, the School was turned into a maternity hospital for women sailors, or WAVES. The rooms in which he studied drawing became operating rooms so students were relocated to unused areas of the Museum. "We could work until midnight if we wanted to," Polonsky says. "There was a lot of silly fooling around and very serious work, two extremes knowing that this could end at any time."

In 1947, Polonsky and then-Dean Russell Smith established a summer program at the Berkshire Museum. The nineteen-year-old student was an assistant to Ben Shahn. "He was quite famous then but never taught before," Polonsky says. "He tried to respond to every student—including Joseph Ablow—and he just couldn't. Poor Shahn. I only told him to go across street and get coffee and smoke his pipe for a while and come back and try not to answer everybody."

Polonsky later went to France on a Traveling Scholarship. The three-thousand-dollar stipend was enough, he says, for two years in post World War II Europe and the purchase of many art books.

Upon retirement in 1990, he returned to the schedule he maintained as a student—sleeping late and working through the night. He's also returned to some of his earlier work. One painting, begun years ago, resembles an ocean with an isthmus, similar to the way Nahant juts into the Atlantic from Boston's North Shore. "I didn't mean for it to look like that, but that is what it became," Polonsky says. "I'm eighty-three now and I still work on it occasionally. I concede to the naturalistic part of the painting and make it look possible. I can't stand not working on it."

Polonsky says he has had a secret life of sorts, painting conventional portraits of hospital CEOs and college presidents along with the more metaphysical subjects he finds inspiring. "That work is generally from imagination and usually not planned," he says. Like the work on view in "Arthur Polonsky: A Thief of Light," a retrospective in 2008 at the Danforth Museum of Art, he starts with seemingly abstract colors and mystical shapes that evolve. "My work begins to take on things you can't always see unless it is in dreams," he says. "I'm interested in how convincing those images are in dreams, no matter how strange. I want to make it visibly convincing even though it's impossible what is happening in them."

Lois Tarlow (Attended '50-'54)

Lois Tarlow attended the Museum School at a time when women were treated like second-class citizens, and Karl Zerbe's attitude didn't help. When she sought a Traveling Scholarship, Zerbe told her she wouldn't get it because she was married to an artist. "He said there could only be one artist in a family and it won't be the woman. He said I wouldn't get the scholarship because my career wouldn't endure." Zerbe was wrong.

Tarlow's award-winning paintings, drawings, and prints are in the collections of major museums and corporations. She wrote profiles for *Art New England* for twenty-four years, a career that fulfilled her own interest in other artists. She also taught art, employing the skills she gained in her own education. "I had some students who later went to the Museum School who excelled," Tarlow says. "They tell me my teaching was most important to them." And in February, Tarlow made her ninth trip to Vietnam. She travels with a group run by Museum School alumnus C. David Thomas under the aegis of the Indochina Arts Partnership. The volunteers bring art supplies, books, pharmaceuticals, and money for young children in need.

For decades, Tarlow's artwork reflected what she learned and practiced at the Museum School. Her Mercy Gallery show in the late 1960s offered representational paintings, of her children, the kitchen Mixmaster, and some landscapes. Later, as Tarlow moved toward interpretation and then abstraction, she experimented with less traditional materials. Her current work draws from the natural universe, manifest in ink on paper, collage, solar panel etchings, and marble dust. Her interests, she says, become images through interaction with her materials.



At the School, however, Tarlow felt that too much credit was given to the artist and not enough to the paint, charcoal, or the as-yet-undefined material of choice. "Students were supposed to be able to control their medium, corral it and make it do what you thought your image needed," Tarlow says. "I found through the years that that did not give enough respect to the medium and that there was not enough conversation with the medium. That led me on the path I'm on now." For *Aftermath*, a painting she made in 1996, Tarlow added the detritus of fire. "I tossed ashes onto the canvas and they stuck because it was oil paint. I felt liberated from the representational work I was doing. I was off in a whole new direction, seeing what the materials had to offer me, acknowledging that the medium might have something to say to me."

Tarlow credits Zerbe with showing students how to look at art, and not necessarily from his own point of view. "We learned that making art is a lot about making decisions," she says. "Everything that goes into the work, every choice you make, the composition and all of its elements, will affect how people respond to it. That response can be intellectual, but also visceral. The body responds; you can feel like you're at a slant or firmly positioned on the ground."

Henry Schwartz (Diploma '53)



Not long ago, Henry Schwartz reached for a paint brush only to throw it down. "My hand trembles," he says, "a symptom of my breakdown. I thought I'd never paint again." Then Schwartz picked up a pencil. He "let it have its way" until his hand settled enough to draw in the Strathmore sketchbook by his bed.

On this occasion swirls fill the page, each line manifesting in tiny portraits of Beethoven, Proust, and Mozart. Figures march along the bottom edge through a

veil of smoke from concentration camp crematoria. "Would you like to see another one?" Schwartz asks. His hand shuffles, waiting for an unseen signal to begin. "I see a figure," Schwartz narrates as the drawing takes shape before him. "I'll add a hand and a baton. I've got a conductor. It's Mahler."

A self-described prodigy at six years old, Schwartz began drawing in the shade of the Museum of Fine Arts. At nine, he exhibited in a show of children's art. A *Boston Globe* review said his work was outstanding. Now eighty-one, Schwartz doesn't argue with the assessment.

Schwartz deferred a scholarship to the Museum School to serve with the U.S. Army in Japan. When he returned to Boston, he enjoyed his classes and won the first-year prize (\$10!). He painted from the figure and also worked on cityscapes and fantasy themes. But his favorite memories revolve around classmates and teachers. Schwartz provides a long list of names: Karl Zerbe, David Aronson, Arthur Polonsky, Reed Kay, Jason Berger, and a French woman, a first-year student with whom he had a romantic affair. "She said she was in love with me but couldn't marry me because my family was the School, which it was."

Schwartz won a Traveling Scholarship and planned to head to Paris until his mentor, Russell Smith, suggested Rome. "I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I went to Rome and stayed about three weeks. Then I went to Paris for two years." His painting, which had already moved from oils to acrylics, changed completely in Europe. He discovered brass resist and a cubist style that further alienated him from oil paints. "I started feeling lost and homesick for my loft in Boston. I really wanted to be an expressionist with oil paint. I didn't know what I was doing."

Schwartz was hospitalized for depression more than once over the subsequent years, each time emerging from his darkness to teach, paint, and exhibit his work as an important member of the second generation of Boston Expressionists. He returned to oils and started making portraits of the poets and musicians who brought meaning to his life. Schwartz's later works are fleshy and fantastical; many are tied to youthful memories (his unhappy childhood town of Revere, Mass.), an historical event (the Holocaust), or a revered individual (musician and composer Anton Bruckner).

About sixteen years ago, however, nothing mattered. Schwartz stopped speaking shortly after a successful retrospective exhibition at the Fuller Craft Museum. He

TOP: HENRY SCHWARTZ, *Self Portrait Sculpting a Head of Bruckner*, 1991. Oil on panel. Courtesy of Gallery NAGA.

BOTTOM: NANCY SCRÖN, *Eyore and Winnie the Pooh and the Hunny Pot*, Eyore, installed 1991, and *Pooh and the Hunny Pot*, installed 2005. Newton Free Library, Newton, MA. Bronze, 28 inches.



"awakened" in 2007, listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Gershwin's *I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'*. "I just figured what the hell," Schwartz says.

In February 2008, Schwartz again was the focus of a show, this time at Boston's Gallery NAGA. "I'm a greater painter," Schwartz says, looking at images of his paintings from the last few decades. "I keep forgetting that."

As this issue of artMatters was going to press, we sadly learned that Henry Schwartz passed away on February 15, 2009. We were happy to have interviewed Henry for this piece. He was a beloved member of the Museum School Community and will be missed.

Nancy Schön (Diploma '53)

Nancy Schön walked down to the print department one day and saw classmate Henry Schwartz drawing a royal figure on a lithographer's stone. "He was very, very fast and just amazing to watch," she says. "He said, 'If I stop, I can't continue. The whole secret is in keeping going.'"

Now Schön is the one who doesn't stop. She's well known for her approachable art, including the *Make Way for Ducklings* sculpture on Boston's Public Garden and *Tortoise and the Hare* in Boston's Copley Place near the finish line for the Boston Marathon. She traces her passion for public art and commitment to fundraising through art to the Museum School's collaborative design projects. "The whole School would participate in these amazing projects," she says, singling out the work made for a hunting and social club. "The jewelry people designed flatware, the pottery people designed plates, painters made murals, and the sculpture department made outdoor sculpture." Schön says she made a "very way out" abstract construction of stainless steel and red plastic. "I was into symbolism. This was a hunt club. I made it red." Get it?

The turning point in her career came with an offer from Brandeis University to design a pin that would raise money for the school library. "I was making money, doing something I loved, and helping other people. That became a formula for me and led to what I found I was best at—making public art. It all went back to those collaborative design projects at the Museum School I loved so much, working with a committee, putting together a budget, and solving a particular problem to please my client."

Among her favorite teachers were Betty Smith, who taught the technical part of sculpture, King Coffin, who taught drawing and anatomy, Al Brackeneer, and Ture Bengtz. But her longtime mentor was Edna Hibel (Attended '34-'39). "She helped me think about how to make a living," Schön says, "how to put together a portfolio, how to make a price list, charge money. One of the most important things she taught me was how to use my time intelligently with four kids. Edna told me to go down to my studio in the cellar—not do the dishes—for the two hours a day my last child was in kindergarten. She said I could make the beds or do the dishes when the kids came home."

Schön was pregnant with her first child when she graduated with honors. For her final project, a class exhibition at the MFA, Schön sculpted a pregnant African woman who carried a child on her shoulders. "She was the first piece you came to at the top of the stairs from the Huntington Avenue entrance," Schön says. "It was a great honor." ♦

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EDNA HIBEL HELPED ME THINK ABOUT HOW TO MAKE A LIVING, HOW TO PUT TOGETHER A PORTFOLIO, HOW TO MAKE A PRICE LIST AND CHARGE MONEY."

— Nancy Schön (Diploma '53)