



# The Cape Cod School Of Art:

## Creating Form Through Color Relationships

**F**rom its inception in 1899 to its official closing in the 1980s, the Cape Cod School of Art (renamed the Cape School of Art, in 1932), in Provincetown, Mass., was one of America's most influential schools of painting—and was particularly known for its teaching on color. Founded by Charles Hawthorne (1872–1930) and directed by him until his death, the school was taken over in 1932 by Henry Hensche (1899–1992), who continued to teach painters how to understand the effects of natural light on their perception of color.

Hawthorne had been a young protégé and assistant of the American impressionist William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) at the Art Students League of New York and at Chase's Shinnecock Hills Summer School of Art, on Long Island. From Chase, Hawthorne learned a tonalist approach to painting, which included a somewhat exaggerated view of color.

By the time he was leading the Cape Cod School of Art, Hawthorne had perfected a way of seeing and painting based on creating form through color relationships rather than through drawing and rendering. "Painting is just getting one spot of color in relation to another spot of color—after you have covered acres of canvas you will know," he states in the seminal book *Hawthorne on Painting*. "Let color make form—do not make form and then color it." One of the primary ways Hawthorne helped his students learn to see color was to have them paint a model outdoors, silhouetted against direct sunlight, using only a two-inch putty knife. These "mud heads," as they were called, helped students understand the effects of sunlight on color and forced them to use only large, simple masses to record what they saw.

When Hensche, who was one of Hawthorne's standout pupils, took over the school, he steered students toward a broader understanding of color. Continuing to help them see and paint light, he began their training by having them paint colored blocks stacked on tables outdoors in the sunlight. More advanced students painted still life setups—also outdoors. Observing how the shifting light and atmospheric effects changed the appearance of shapes helped strengthen the artists' observational understanding—or the art of seeing, as Hensche called it. Using a palette knife, the students would paint planes of light and shadow, and "color shapes" in relation to other color shapes in order to create the illusion of three dimensionality. Hensche believed that if you got the correct color, the value would be correct automatically (see *Late Afternoon, Still Life*, opposite).

Today a cadre of seasoned painters who studied with Hensche directly continue to pass on his color teaching. One such individual is artist John Ebersberger (see *Apples, Kettle and Jug*, page 46), a student of Hensche's from 1982 to 1992, during the last 10 years of Hensche's life. Ebersberger's other influential mentor is Cedric Egeli, a traditional portraitist with a colorist's palette also derived from his close association with Hensche. "The sense of light and color in Hensche's paintings was breathtaking to me," Ebersberger says, recalling his first encounter with the influential artist's paintings, almost 40 years ago. "Through Hensche, I immediately felt a strong connection to the grand historical tradition of representational art, from the classicists up to the Impressionists." (See *Autumn Landscape*, page 46.)

Ebersberger says Hensche differed from Hawthorne in that he advanced from simply studying the silhouette of the mud head to a refined modeling of the form through color

OPPOSITE TOP  
Henry Hensche  
taught that  
correct colors  
assured correct  
values. His  
painting **Autumn  
Landscape** (oil  
on board, 16x20)  
exemplifies this  
concept.

OPPOSITE,  
BOTTOM LEFT  
**Apples, Kettle  
and Jug** (oil on  
board, 20x24), by  
John Ebersberger;  
Ebersberger  
studied under  
Hensche and  
Cedric Egeli,  
whose palette  
was influenced by  
Hensche. "When  
I model the form,"  
says Ebersberger,

"I strive to do so  
with distinct color  
changes, rather  
than tonal value  
changes."

OPPOSITE,  
BOTTOM RIGHT  
**Harlequin** (oil on  
canvas, 20x16),  
by Nelson Shanks,  
founder of Studio  
Incamminati,  
in Philadelphia;  
Shanks studied  
with Hensche in  
the 1960s.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

changes, pushing beyond the simple patterns of light and shadow to creating increasingly smaller color variations. "He called the initial shapes masses, followed by smaller shapes—major variations—and finally the minor variations," says Ebersberger. "He often repeated the dictum of Paul Cézanne [1839–1906] that every form change is a color change. The method was to put down, as accurately as you could, the color that you perceive. The challenge lies in how to translate what you see in the world into the language of paint and pigments. That only comes from diligent work, careful observation and many hours painting directly from nature. Henry was a patient (and sometimes impatient!) guide on our exploration of nature's beauty, revealed through color."

Another student of Hensche was the late Nelson Shanks (1937–2015; see *Harlequin*; opposite, bottom right). In 2002, Shanks and his wife, artist Leona Shanks, co-founded Studio Incamminati (Italian for "progressing forward"), in Philadelphia, a school known for its approach to color as well as its connection to Italian art history. "The Carracci launched the Baroque period in art, which was the intersection of drawing, color and light through chiaroscuro," says Leona Shanks. "Their first school was titled Accademia degli Incamminati. By naming the school Studio Incamminati, Nelson wanted to pay homage to an important group that played a significant role in the lineage of great art."

Although Shanks studied only briefly with Hensche, in the 1960s, and developed Studio Incamminati's curriculum through several influences—including Italian classicism, French

academia, Impressionism and his own training with Edwin Dickinson and John Koch—he would often send students in the 1970s and 1980s to Hensche to learn more about color. Lea Colie Wight, one of Incamminati's first graduates and an instructor at the school for 15 years, shares how one of the school's first objectives is to improve students' ability to perceive color: "Students are trained to see and paint color relationships through color-study exercises, not by color charts or mixing colors formulaically," the artist explains. "It's a reaction-based process in which colors are mixed and adjusted directly on the canvas. Ultimately, the artist develops the ability to show any relationship, even the most subtle."

Wight goes on to clarify a common misconception surrounding the school: "Studio Incamminati is known for color, which I think is great," she says. "Unfortunately the color-study examples, which are highly chromatic, are often what people associate with Incamminati—but that is a bit misleading. Color study is a stand-alone exercise and not taught as a finished stage of painting. In looking at the work today of artists who have completed the program, one can see the use of a limited palette, a chromatic palette and everything in between."

In Hawthorne's and Hensche's teaching, students were also using color studies as a means to learn how to understand visual information and cultivate a deeper sensitivity to color. "You are not here to make pictures," Hawthorne told his students. "You are here to represent by color, by separation of color, by exact matching of color, what you see and thereby learn to see."



