In 1877 a group of visionary, socially prominent Hartford women established a decorative art society with the goal of providing cultural enrichment by offering art classes of the highest quality. They started small, with basic classes in drawing and painting, and hoped that there would be enough public interest for the organization to survive.

Preparing for a Changing World

by Barbara Steinberger
It didn’t just survive, it thrived—and 125 years later, that small society has become one of the nation’s leading art schools.

The Hartford Art School is preparing to celebrate its 125th anniversary during a period of revolutionary change in the visual arts, as factors like the Internet, computer and video technology, and shifting cultural values present art students with an enormous range of new possibilities and new challenges.

Today, the Hartford Art School’s faculty and students are exploring a rich new world of 21st-century media and expanded opportunities for artists, while at the same time remaining firmly rooted in the core artistic disciplines and values on which the School was founded.

“It’s a very different world out there,” said Power Boothe, dean of the Hartford Art School. “Our goal is to bring the old and the new together, to expose students to a broad range of applications without losing the integrity of the disciplines that have brought this School such high esteem.”

A Remarkable History

The Hartford Art School, one of nine colleges of the University of Hartford, is the direct descendant of the Hartford Society of Decorative Art of 1877. The society’s founders would undoubtedly be proud to know that their organization gave rise to what is today one of the most highly regarded art schools in the country.

The School has a remarkably rich history, beginning with the society’s founding by a virtual who’s who of late-19th-century Hartford women: Mrs. Olivia Clemens, wife of author Samuel Clemens (better known as Mark Twain); Mrs. Elizabeth Colt, wife of firearms manufacturer and industrialist Samuel Colt; Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, renowned author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Mrs. Susan Warner, wife of Hartford Courant publisher Charles Dudley Warner; and Mrs. Mary Bushnell Cheney, wife of textile manufacturer Frank W. Cheney.

The founders’ mission, according to notes written by the secretary of the Hartford Society of Decorative Art, was to provide “elemental instruction by superior teachers” in the visual arts. The society’s first classes, held in January 1878, included charcoal drawing, painting, and china decoration. Thanks to enthusiastic students and generous support from the Hartford community, the society flourished. Over time, the number of students and faculty members grew, the curriculum expanded, and prominent artists came from New York and other locations to teach classes.

In 1940 the name was changed to the Hartford Art School, Inc., and in 1957 the School joined Hillyer...
College and the Hartt School of Music to form the University of Hartford. In recent decades, the Art School’s enrollment, facilities, and program offerings have steadily expanded, and it has evolved into one of the nation’s preeminent art schools. The creation of a number of prestigious endowed programs has brought artists of national and international renown to campus and has further enhanced the School’s reputation.

Celebrating a Milestone

The Hartford Art School kicked off its 125th anniversary celebration late last year with the publication of a 2002 calendar that tells the story of the School in words and images. Each month of the calendar features a colorful montage that illustrates a different aspect of the School’s vibrant life. The calendar, which was designed by faculty and staff, is filled with comprehensive information on the milestones of the past 125 years.

“I think it’s much more than a calendar—it’s a historic document,” Boothe said. “It will serve the School as a resource for years to come.”

The anniversary celebration will continue in the fall, when the Art School hosts a major conference titled “Artists: What/Now?” The conference will explore the changing roles of artists in the 21st century in light of revolutionary factors as globalization and the rapid growth of technology.

The program, to be held Sept. 20 and 21, will feature a keynote speaker and panel discussions with leading artists and arts educators from all over the East Coast, Boothe said.

“We really want to look at broad philosophical issues. What are the roles that artists play today in our culture, and how do we prepare artists for the 21st century?” Boothe said. “Technology has changed the way we make art, the way we view art, and the way we communicate with each other, and it’s given us a tremendous amount of knowledge about other cultures. We are living in a very pluralistic time, a time of overlapping communities with contradictory values. How do artists sort through all these factors and create work that’s meaningful to them and to others? That’s what we want to look at.”

As its 125th anniversary year continues, the Art School will host exhibitions by several artists whose work embodies the kinds of sweeping changes that have taken place in the art world. A six-week exhibition of work by Robert Morris, whose minimalist sculptures and eclectic installations challenge traditional notions about art, will open on Oct. 30. In early 2003 the Art School will host a lecture and exhibition by one of its alumni, Mark Dion ’86. Dion is known for creating installations based on natural history and science and for conducting his own brand of archaeological digs and then using the discarded items that he unearthed in his art work.

Looking to the Future

While the Art School celebrates its history, the School’s administrators, faculty, and staff also are looking ahead to the future.

A special 125th Anniversary Fund has been created to help support the Art School’s long-term strategic priorities. Faculty and staff began developing and refining those priorities last fall in a two-day strategic planning session. During that session, they identified a series of long-term goals and objectives that fall under two general headings: an undergraduate initiative and a graduate initiative.

The undergraduate initiative calls for the construction of an Arts and Technology Center, which would house four departments: visual communication design, photography, illustration, and a new program in media arts. The media arts program would have a cross-disciplinary focus, training students to think critically and creatively in a variety of artistic disciplines and to utilize technology in a wide range of applications.
The media arts program currently is awaiting state approval. Pending that approval, Boothe said he hopes to begin offering the program in the 2002–03 academic year. Media arts would be a critical component of the proposed Arts and Technology Center. The center would be designed to foster interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration. It would connect all the existing Art School buildings, provide cross-disciplinary laboratories and studios, and create informal areas where students and faculty could exchange ideas. The new building also would house administrative and faculty offices and two student galleries.

"The construction of the Arts and Technology Center with a media arts program will make us the preeminent professional art school in New England," according to the strategic plan that was developed by faculty and staff last fall.

The second major initiative to come out of the strategic planning process would create an expanded Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) graduate program, to be based at an off-campus location.

Under the strategic plan’s recommendations, the size of the M.F.A. program would increase from 15 to 45 students, and an independent graduate faculty would be created. The plan also calls for the establishment of a 15-student postbaccalaureate program. The intensive, one-year program would be designed for students who show great potential but who are not yet ready for the rigorous graduate program—for example, those who have earned undergraduate degrees in another field.

As part of this long-term plan, the Art School would purchase or lease a warehouse in the Greater Hartford area and renovate it to accommodate the graduate and postbaccalaureate programs. The off-campus facility also could serve as a home for the Art School’s Civic Design Program, in which students provide graphic design services for community-based nonprofit organizations.

"By improving a building in an underserved neighborhood and encouraging graduate students to work within that community, we intend to be part of that locality’s revitalization,” according to the strategic plan. The building also would have galleries and spaces available to rent to businesses that serve the neighborhood.

The undergraduate and graduate initiatives represent long-term goals, and they would require significant financial support in order to become reality. But the 125th anniversary celebration serves as a wonderful starting point, as faculty and staff take stock of the Art School’s past and begin shaping its next 125 years.

### Guiding Principles

One hundred twenty-five years after the formation of the Hartford Society of Decorative Art, the Hartford Art School is entering a new era in its rich history. Having established itself as one of the nation’s top art schools, the institution is now working to prepare students for a changing world—a world of exciting new possibilities and challenging new roles for artists.

But while the School has experienced tremendous growth and change over the years, it has never lost sight of the guiding principles of its founders: the pursuit of excellence in the visual arts; a belief that art should be taught by accomplished artists working in a hands-on, creative environment; an emphasis on individual instruction that is both challenging and supportive; and a commitment to innovation and an openness to new directions and new disciplines.

That was the vision of the five remarkable women who came together 125 years ago to bring art instruction to Hartford citizens. And it will continue to guide the Hartford Art School throughout the new century.

---

If you are interested in purchasing a 2002 Hartford Art School calendar or making a gift to the Art School’s 125th Anniversary

The illustrations of the five women who founded the Hartford Society of Decorative Art were created by Alan Carlstrom ’99. He currently works as front-office coordinator for the Art School. Alan’s illustrations have been featured in Art School posters and have appeared in the Village Voice and American Spectator. His website is www.alancarlstrom.com.
Bringing Renowned Artists to Campus

As the Hartford Art School prepares to celebrate its 125th year, it has added a new lecture series to the growing list of prestigious endowed programs that bring prominent artists to campus, such as those pictured here.

The Beatrice Fox Auerbach Visiting Artist Lecture Series began in November with a presentation by well-known illustrator, educator, and historian Murray Tinkelman. The series continued in March with a lecture by sculptor Ellen Driscoll, and two more visiting artists, Abelardo Morell and Lynne Yamamoto, scheduled to speak in April.

The lecture series was made possible by a gift from the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. The gift will enable the Hartford Art School to bring to campus up to eight visiting artists each year. The artists will be in residence at the Art School for one to two days. During that time, each artist will deliver a public lecture and spend time in the studios critiquing student work.

The Art School has several endowed programs that expose students and the public to well-known artists who work in a variety of media. Those programs include the Richard Koopman Distinguished Chair in the Visual Arts and the International Distinguished Artists Symposium and Exhibition.

Tinkelman, the prominent illustrator who was the first speaker in the new lecture series, will return to campus in September 2002 as the recipient of the Richard Koopman Chair. A professor of illustration at Syracuse University, Tinkelman kicked off the visiting artist lecture series last fall with a slide presentation and talk titled “The History of American Illustrations.”

Driscoll’s March lecture was titled “Parallel Universe.” She is known for her innovative sculptures, installations, and public art projects. Her work includes a series of mosaic, bronze, and glass reliefs in New York’s Grand Central Terminal, that depict the night sky above five different continents.

Abelardo Morell, a Cuban-born photographer, uses the camera to look at objects of daily life from unusual points of view. He has pioneered the modern-day use of the camera obscura technique, in which he uses the principles of a pinhole camera to create complex, multileveled prints by capturing an inverted projection as it fills a room.

The fourth speaker in the lecture series, Lynne Yamamoto, is a Hawaiian-born artist and educator. Many of her installations originated from a narrative about the life history of her maternal grandmother, who traveled from Japan to Hawaii as a picture bride and worked as a laundress on a sugar plantation in Hawaii.