

Painting a Brighter Picture

A new curriculum encourages art students to tap other University resources.

By Carol North Schmuckler

The School of Art at Syracuse offers 22 separate and distinct programs of study—an impressive array ranging from traditional fields, such as painting and sculpture, to the newer disciplines of computer graphics and industrial design.

Though they will eventually choose and major in one of them, students do not enroll in any of these programs in their freshman year. Instead, all School of Art students begin their first year with the same foundation program of courses emphasizing drawing and basic design.

It's only in the second year that students begin intense concentrations in their own fields—often to the exclusion of anything else. While they are required to take some arts and sciences courses (and may select some others), for the most part art students stick closely to their own disciplines and take few outside courses. It makes for a rather narrow education.

That's a situation that Donald Lantzy, dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA), is determined to change. He's found a willing collaborator in Rodger Mack, the school's director. (The School of Art is one of VPA's schools and departments).

Together, Lantzy and Mack have begun an overhaul of the school's curriculum.

"What we've had up to now is a school in which the individual parts of our program were stronger than the whole," Lantzy admits. "Students worked within very restricted limits and seldom explored other art disciplines or academic areas outside the school. For instance, visual communications students would finish the foundation program, start their specialized work in visual communications, and never be seen again by anyone outside 'viscom' until they graduated. That's not education—that's training. A

university education should offer more."

The curricular remedy Lantzy and Mack have devised involves two major steps. The first is restructuring the freshman foundation program to include exploration in two-dimensional and three-dimensional thinking. According to Lantzy, this will help students enlarge their "visual vocabulary."

The second step is actively encouraging students to take more elective courses both inside and outside the art school, particularly in the sophomore year. To accommodate these new options, requirements in every program are undergoing a sometimes painful reevaluation, as overlapping and outdated courses are being dropped.

According to Mack, the current narrow focus of the sophomore year means students concentrate too much on one specialty and don't experiment in other artistic areas.

"Now they can choose studio electives that either support their concentrations or give them insight into completely different disciplines," Mack says. "Either way, they benefit. By the time students arrive at the end of the fourth year, they'll have good working knowledge of a given concentration, but also will be aware of other ways of making art."

"I can tell you dozens of stories of students who majored in one area but found jobs in another," he continues. "A painting student who had taken some surface pattern design courses has a full-time job designing printed fabrics for women's apparel, which allows her to live comfortably and afford a studio for her painting. Another graduate in advertising design wasn't happy in the field, but he'd taken some ceramics courses and now makes ceramics in his own shop and makes a good living from it. With the broader, more flexible curriculum we're starting, current students will have even more career options."



For his part, Lantzy is determined to emphasize what he calls the "riches" found in other areas of the University.

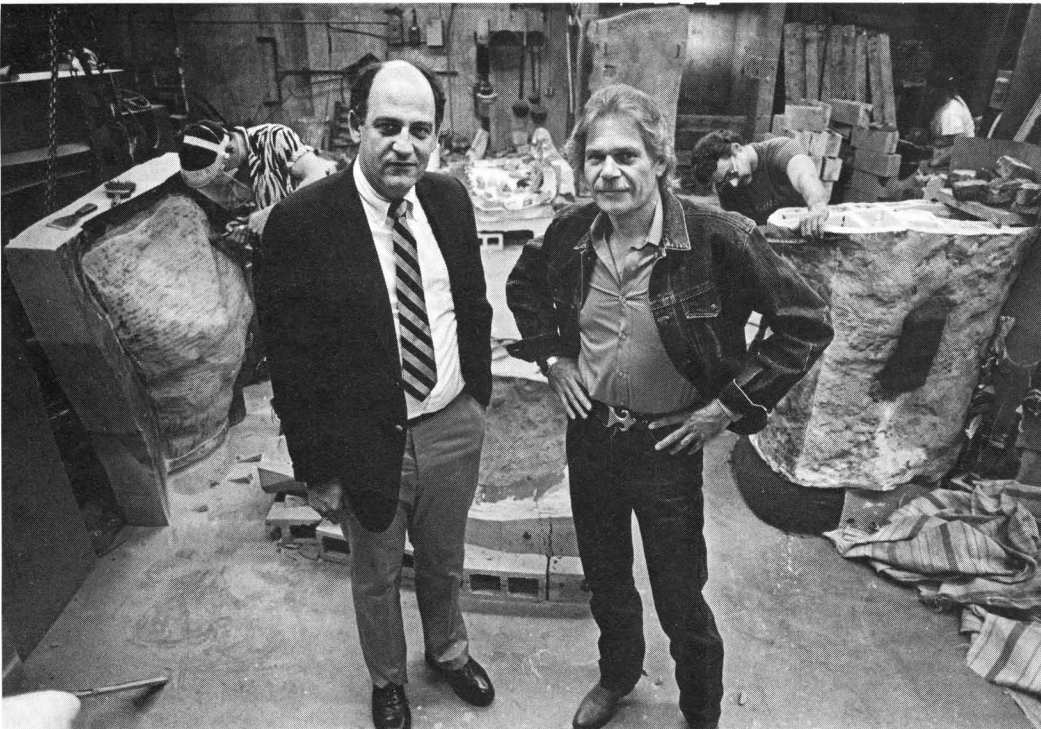
"The education of an artist goes beyond the studio," Lantzy says. "One of our greatest strengths is that we are a professional art school housed within a major university. We actually have the best of both worlds here and we want each of the 1,000 students in the School of Art to explore all areas of SU: humanities, sciences, social sciences, management, communications.

"Artists' ideas don't just fall out of the blue. They happen because people exercise their brains, because they can find an idea in visual history or in the *Sunday Times*. I constantly receive letters from employers who say, 'I've seen a lot of beautiful portfolios. What I need are more kids who know how to think!'"

Curriculum, however, is only one of three areas Lantzy and Mack feel are vital to reshaping the School of Art. The other two involve developing adequate facilities and taking fuller advantage of the school's talented faculty.

The quest for better facilities got a major boost earlier this summer with the announcement of a \$3.25-million gift from trustee Dorothea Shaffer, earmarked specifically for a new art building (for more on Shaffer's gift, see page 7). When constructed, it will accelerate the progress already started with the 1982 opening of the Comstock Art Facility, next to Manley Field House, ComArt, as everyone calls it, has already had a dramatic effect on the way art students are learning, and Shaffer's gift takes further steps in the same direction.

"For years art students had been scattered in buildings all over cam-



Above, Donald Lantzy (left) and Rodger Mack are shown in the new ComArt building; at far left is a student's studio. Among recent visiting teachers was Marsha Pels (left).

pus," Mack explains. "Unfortunately, that meant there was rarely any crossover or exchange of ideas between disciplines.

"For instance, sculpture was housed in the Continental Can building on Erie Boulevard, while metalsmithing and printmaking were crowded into the basement of Steele Hall. But when those three disciplines began working in the same building, it was fun to watch their students discovering the similarities in some of the problems they were trying to solve.

"Suddenly there were discussions in the hallway as students found out how much they shared in philosophy, if not in media, and people began visiting each other's studios and taking courses in other disciplines," Mack says. The opening of a new wing last spring added yet other disciplines to ComArt.

"We aren't looking for anything fancy in our buildings," says Mack. "We don't want dropped ceilings or rugs on the floor or painted walls—just no-frills buildings with good light and good space where artists can work. And, equally important, where students in one art form can

observe the work of students in other media."

Lantzy adds, "I don't claim that bricks and mortar will make artists, but the right space can significantly affect their development. We are now well on our way to becoming a real community of artists."

The final ingredient in the plan—a talented faculty—is already firmly in place, according to Mack. But because art students learn from their teachers in a somewhat different fashion than chemistry students learn from theirs, the School of Art sets some rather specific standards.

"For us, it's not enough just to be a good teacher," Mack explains. "You must be a practicing artist as well. If you're not doing it yourself—if you're not growing as an artist and serving as a role model for your students—you shouldn't be allowed to teach."

Such a philosophy means that students are working every day with people like painter Jerome Witkin, whose shows have been featured in five major art magazines this year alone; sculptor/designer Lee Dusell, who has just completed a major commission for the Saudi Arabian government with Japanese architect Yamasaki; and ceramist Margie Hughto, whose clay pieces hang in corporate offices all over the nation.

Lantzy also plans to continue supplementing the 63 full-time faculty members with a constant stream of high-powered visiting teachers. New York-based painter Frances Barth spent the entire spring semester in residence at the University, and recently sculptor Marsha Pels, winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome and herself an SU grad, spent a grimy, hot, enormously satisfying month producing a major piece of sculpture with art school students.

The bottom line for Lantzy is creating an atmosphere at Syracuse where art can happen. "Of course we show students techniques and increase their skills, but art isn't like math. There's never really a right or a wrong answer. The important thing is the opportunity to grow.

"For the artist, time is irrelevant and the creative process can't be rushed. What does it take to make an artist? I really don't know, except for one thing: It takes the rest of your life."