

Honors Student

David C. Hancock gives schoolwork an artful turn.



David C. Hancock, "Still Life," 2003, oil on canvas, 24" x 16". See Resources on page 163 for gallery representation.

across a similar drawing. Next, he sent a photograph to the specialist on that artist, and very soon he had a cordial reply from Adrien Chappuis, who wrote that although Wolf's drawing was a youthful exercise that "cannot be said to enhance the Master's reputation," it was indeed by Paul Cézanne. Naturally, Wolf was delighted to have his intuition rewarded, but as a knowledgeable collector of Rembrandt, Boucher, Fragonard and other master draftsmen, he also was well aware of the differences between memorabilia and a masterpiece. Schoolwork and artwork are rarely one and the same.

Twenty-five years ago a New York collector named Emile Wolf was rummaging through a bin at the gallery of Walter Schotsky on 57th Street. After amassing thousands of works on paper, Schotsky was going out of business. Most people stopped going to the sale after snapping up the best stuff for \$100 or \$50, but not Wolf. Patiently examining the dregs, my friend picked up a rumpled drawing of a few loose figures copied in short, thick strokes from an old engraving. Thinking it had something, Wolf paid \$20 and took it home.

When searching for an attribution, Wolf liked to go through his books one by one starting with the letter A. As luck would have it, it was still early in the alphabet when he came

of course. Great drawings poured out of the French academies so long as the students were named Boucher, David, Ingres or Degas. Evidently having the right teacher makes a big difference. Now that life study is making a comeback, we are beginning to see paintings and drawings originate as studio exercises and then, chrysalis-like, burst out and fly. A recent example well worth closer examination is David C. Hancock's "Still Life," which was a finalist in this year's painting competition sponsored by Fred Ross, the noted New York art collector. Hancock, who completed his studies with the renowned Florentine-Canadian painter Michael John Angel, now is working on his own.

Granted, it is a little hard to believe that

Hancock's arresting still life was dictated by a classroom exercise. In mood it is almost austere. A water pitcher emanates a deep white like a linen cloth painted by a Spanish mystic. Though the books are commonplace, the artist makes us feel that they have beauties we have inexplicably overlooked. They rest on top of a fiery red fabric that seems to resent their coolness. As carefully rendered as these items are, we mainly see them for their colors. Yet even as we savor them, Hancock uses the shriveled flowers, so vulnerable and dry, to shake up our complacency.

The class assignment, according to Hancock, was to paint a still life that contained: a glossy white enamel object to learn how dark it must be painted to leave room for a white highlight (and thereby bust the student's concept of a "white" object) and as a refining exercise in gauging contrast; a red drapery, which would be glazed over a white preparation (this was an introduction to glazing technique, and according to Angel, red is a uniquely difficult color to model); and a green background to offset the red drapery.

Hancock, a college philosophy major, then explained how he tried to make the project more interesting by assigning personal values to each motif. The white pitcher and the red cloth were studio props. Instead of simply rendering them, he decided to give the pitcher the personality of something soulful, pure and perfect. The red cloth would embody passion. The books were brought from home, and he found the flowers discarded on a sidewalk. Though unaware, he was instinctively supplementing his curriculum with a lesson taught by one of the greatest still-life masters. When asked the secret of his colors, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin replied, "My friend, do not paint with colors. Make use of them, but paint with feelings." ☞

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