

By Bennett Schiff

On a Roman hill scholars dwell in an estate of mind

*The American Academy in Rome: a place
to live, time to think and room to
study and create, with no strings attached*

To be in Rome on the brow of the Janiculum hill on an early winter's morning is to be reminded that the city is Eternal after all and that, oh yes, in some indefinable way, so are you.

It is a rather large thought, but yet not ponderous, this being an accommodating and spacious place to say the least, and the concept sings and decorates the day. You are standing at the railing of the Piazzale del Gianicolo (at one time a Garibaldi fortress since it commands the city across the Tiber) looking eastward over the great city resplendent and it is one of the most glorious views of all of Italy and, therefore, of all the world.

It probably was, you reflect, with the Italianate grandeur of the McKim, Mead and White mansion which houses the American Academy in Rome a five minute's stroll away, just such thoughts as these that got the building there in the first place. It makes a neat and comforting continuum, the Academy being put there because of such feelings, in order that such feelings may continue to be inspired. For the Academy is—and not at all in the sense of empire—an entirely respectful and admiring extension of America.

Its purpose is to absorb the tradition of classical creativity and knowledge and to increase the culture of the United States. And for 84 years now some quiet time spent at the Academy by a select number of the country's most creative and thoughtful people has had a widely reflective effect on our society at home: upon its architecture, its music, poetry and literature,

painting and sculpture, its academic training in the classics and the other humanities. Which is to say that for four generations men and women who have spent time at the American Academy in Rome have been contributing in very substantial ways to that grain of any society—its arts and its learning—which establishes its lasting virtue and worth, in essence, its very nature and character.

It is impressive to consider some of the people who have lived at the Academy and worked in Rome:

In music the first three composers to be awarded the Rome Prize, the winning of which designates the recipient as a Fellow of the Academy (FAAR), were Howard Hanson, Leo Sowerby and Randall Thompson. Sowerby became professor of composition at the American Conservatory in Chicago; Hanson, director of the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester; Thompson, professor of music at Wellesley College and later at Harvard.

In 1921, Dean West of Princeton wrote of the Academy's Classical School: "We have furnished our universities with nearly 150 professors trained in the humanistic as opposed to the pedantic spirit. We have also trained a group of curators for museums and a fair number of gifted writers and critics."

Francis Henry Taylor, later to be director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, was a visiting Fellow. John Walker was the Academy's resident associate in charge of the fine arts before becoming director of the National Gallery in Washington. Thornton Wilder wrote his important novel, *The Cabala*, while at the Academy.

After World War II, a program was established to bring people of prominence to the Academy to share their expertise with the Fellows. They included: Elizabeth Bowen, Archibald MacLeish, Barbara Kolb, Van Wyck Brooks, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Robert Venturi, Edward Durell Stone, Louis Kahn, Donald Oenslager, Robert Penn Warren, Alfred Kazin, Philip Guston, Allen Tate. And it was the architects Wallace Harrison and Max Abramovitz who set up a special fund to enable foreign artists to visit and stay.

When one of the Academy's distinguished directors, Laurance Roberts, retired in 1960 he received a letter from a group of former Fellows and associates which said, in part, "If a list were composed of all the compositions played for the first time by American symphony orchestras in the last ten years, it is a modest guess that 75 percent of the composers would be found to have been guests of the Academy."

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Board of Editors, is a former art critic
and a lifelong admirer of Roman life and art.*



Portraits of some former Fellows added over the years form a suitable backdrop for the bar where, if

you feel like it, you turn up for *cappuccino* in the morning or a drink later on, served by Patrizia Minto.

Photographs by Charles Eames and Pierre Boulat



Charles Follen McKim, the Academy's founder, was of the eminent architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White. McKim moved easily within the halls of the mighty, having designed so many of them himself. Born in 1847 to a Quaker family in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania, he grew up with a high regard for learning and social responsibility. He spent a year at Harvard, attended the Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris, traveled in Europe and firmly decided that Rome was the center of civilization.

Back in the United States he worked at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, along with John LaFarge, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Chester French, under the leadership of the fair's chief architect, Daniel Burnham. "Do you realize," Saint-Gaudens once said of this group, in a remark not notable for modesty although it may be excused for its simple enthusiasm, "that this is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century?"

McKim was excited by the experience of working in the same environment with others who had similar passions and great talents. He knew of the French Academy housed in the outstandingly beautiful estate of Rome's Villa Medici, and knew that it provided a stimulating experience for visiting scholars and artists. Why not an American Academy in Rome?

Less than a year later, on March 31, 1894, McKim launched the idea at a dinner he gave for his partners, William Rutherford Mead and Stanford White (Mead used to say that his name was between McKim and White "to keep the two damned fools out of trouble") and three other members of the office.

His financial plan was simple: to persuade existing organizations with prize funds for study abroad to send their winners to an atelier in Rome. McKim went on to appeal to all of the country's schools of architecture, there being six at the time, to send their prize students to the new school he envisioned.



The view, looking eastward from the heights of the Janiculum hill, toward all of the splendor of Rome.

Nearby is the Academy building. At corners of garden there are four large, squarish adjuncts, spacious studios for sculptors.

By June 12, 1894 the new organization had \$15,000 subscribed, enough to defray expenses for three years, costs being what they were in those simple days, and the Academy, then called the American School of Architecture in Rome, became a fact. To give an idea of the kind of clout it commanded, its committee on a plan of study included, in addition to some of the nation's leading architects, the heads of the fine arts and architecture departments of six universities: Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, the University of Illinois and Columbia. On November 8 of that year eight rooms were found on the corner of Via del Condotti and Via Bocca di Leone and the Academy was under way. It had a staff of one, three Fellows in architecture and a guest student. Very quickly painters and sculptors became Fellows, and soon classicists as well. In time there came the poets, composers, writers and art historians, all of whom together form the

two divisions of the Academy, the arts and the classics.

The young institution struggled along year after year with McKim prevailing on friends to donate money and digging into his own pocket when necessary (he was not a rich man, but comfortable) to keep things going. Eventually he was able to persuade nine donors to give \$100,000 each, in return for which they would be designated Founders. There is some indication of McKim's persuasiveness apparent in the permanent list of Founders: J. P. Morgan, Henry Walters, William K. Vanderbilt, Henry C. Frick, Harvard College, John D. Rockefeller jr., Charles F. McKim (subscribed to in his name by friends after his death), J. P. Morgan jr., the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation.

McKim had written to Mead, in 1902, "For the first time, let me tell you we have enough money in the bank to carry us not only through this year's but also next year's running expenses." It was a statement that



Architect, former dean and arts administrator, Academy President Bill Lacy in the billiard room.

could not be made of the Academy's finances often during the 75 years that followed although Bill Lacy, the Academy's president, reporting at the end of his first year, was able to say that the organization was in the black "for the first time in many years."

Lacy came to the Academy in January 1977 after five productive and innovative years as director of the Architecture and Environmental Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts. An architect himself, and former dean of the school of architecture at the University of Tennessee, Lacy has got the kind of background and access that the Academy can today use so well as it prepares to move back into the prominence it once held and which, somehow, faded in recent years.

There is, too, a new resident director at the Academy, the distinguished classicist John D'Arms, who took leave from his job as chairman of the classics department at the University of Michigan to head things in Rome. D'Arms has had a good deal of experience of the Academy, having been, at different times, classicist-in-residence, director of the summer session of the Classical School, and a trustee since 1973. He, like Lacy, has a nicely tuned sense of humor and a sharp eye for the practicalities of the mundane world of administration and finance. With Walker O. Cain (FAAR), head of the architectural firm which bears his name, and which is the lineal descendant of McKim, Mead and White, as chairman of the board, the Academy is today taking a fresh look at itself, and there are already indications that the accolade of the Rome Prize is again going to carry with it one of the highest distinctions the country can offer to its scholars and artists.

Rome Fellows are chosen by panels of eminent men and women, receive a monthly stipend, transportation, board and housing at the Academy, some money



Fellows gather, if they are so disposed, by the fire in the great lounge of the Academy building.

for travel in Europe, supplies, materials, studios and the use of a splendid library of 86,000 volumes, itself one of the notable libraries of Italy.

Some idea of the scale of the Academy, a grand neoclassical Italian Renaissance structure (built by the firm of McKim, Mead and White, naturally, but not actually dedicated until four years after McKim died in 1909), is indicated by the fact that the great library is tucked away in one wing of it.

The building has 12 double rooms, 24 single rooms, seven studios, 16 studios (some so sweeping that they are really halls) three one-bedroom apartments, one three-bedroom apartment, a dining room that is the closest thing in secular life to a clerical refectory (including one communal dining table running about 30 feet down the center of it), a truly baronial lounge (it is about 30 by 40 feet with a 35-foot ceiling and windows looking out on the Alban Hills, the light upon which is often pure gold), a billiard room of the kind early American millionaires considered standard,



The atmosphere is amiable, the company congenial, and the talk wings its way in all directions.



Rome residents, cellist Frances Marie Vitti, pianist Yvan Kikhashoff, entertain Fellows at a weekly concert.

a little bar, and more, not the least of which is the world's most agreeable staff. And yet, it is quiet in a suitably reflective way and as private as its residents choose it to be.

All through this, well, estate of the mind, there is the quiet talk of scholars drifting around, talking perhaps of third-century Roman portraits, a showing of Poussin at the Villa Medici, or a trip to Cosa, the Academy's famed archaeological dig in the Tuscan hills overlooking the sea some 90 miles north of Rome. A scholar walks through, his head filled, if you listen carefully, with the sound of clinking shards. The Fellows and residents are in jeans, boots, tweed jackets. It is all friendly enough, but not effusive. Coffee at 10 A.M. in the main lounge. Tea comes in the late afternoon. Lunch at 1. Dinner at 8. Breakfast in the bar at your convenience.

We are in the lounge; coffee time.

George Hartman, 41, of Washington, D.C., mid-career Fellow, spending six months at the Academy

and having the time of his life. Hartman is very much an arrived architect, half of the firm of Hartman and Cox, architects in charge of the remodeling and addition of Washington's Folger Library, and of other notable buildings in Washington. "Twenty years ago when in Italy," he says, "I thought it was all very nice but now I've just come back from seeing a bunch of 400-year-old villas and how marvelous they are. One of the fine aspects of this is the break of time with an excellent library, buildings, gardens, villas and the opportunity to look very carefully at them, to draw them. My project is to see why we have so much trouble with modern architecture and why our own vocabulary is so poor. It's exciting to see just how good these people were. It's been a real revelation to me and I can see very clearly why contemporary architecture is so bleak, why it has the problems it has. It requires more background, more study and more collaboration with other arts. Palladian architecture was so coordinated with other arts. It never occurred to them not to

do the gardens with the villas. It's reassuring to see how well things can be done, given time. You have to admire people like Palladio, Bramante."

Paul Arthur Kubic, 36, sculptor. A smiling man, Kubic doesn't talk much, very unusual these days for an artist. He has taught sculpture at the University of North Carolina, Humboldt State University and the Maryland Institute of Art. He is interested now in 14th-, 15th- and 16th-century altarpieces and carvings, and stories and myths illustrating human development symbolically. In his studio he is readying small wax pieces which he will cast in the little foundry the Academy has in its garden. The pieces are of fantastical animals and, think of it, of fallen angels. "The place is staggering," he says, smiling. And well you might think so, for he has one of the most impressive sculptor's studios to be found anywhere to work in; there are no demands other than his own, no students to meet, no schedules to keep, just time and the space and materials he needs.

Gareth Schmeling, 36, PhD, professor of classics at the University of Florida and recently named "Teacher of the Year" by the university's College of Arts and Sciences. He is working on an edition of a Latin text of *Apollonius of Tyre* and he is, as they say, *contento*. "This is a marvelous institution," he says. "There's a respect for knowledge for itself here. I know it sounds corny, but respect for learning for learning's sake. A piece of information is respected just because it is. That's so easy on the job in a university to forget about. And, a marvelous army of scholars comes through. It's leisure time to be used for thinking. When I first got here I felt disoriented: no schedules. And, no telephone. It's marvelous. A bit like walking in downtown New York and all of a sudden you're in a garden. That's what it's like here and putting it in Rome is a nice thing. It encourages each person to be a free



Paul Arthur Kubic and some of his work; small figures in wax will be cast; the dragon is welded metal.

scholar." A scholar in a state of exhilaration. That's a nice thing too.

Judith Silver, 27, painter, is staying on at the Academy as a Fellow for a second year through a grant by the Cafritz Foundation. She is in one of those grand, sweeping, skylit studios on the second floor. She has worked prodigiously in Rome. The walls are stacked with canvases. She works in painted collage, some of it huge for the medium, four-and-a-half by seven feet. "The old walls of Rome and Italy began to affect me," she says, "and now they are in my work."

Daniel Mark Epstein, 28, of Baltimore, a poet. He has published two acclaimed volumes of poetry and was nominated for the Academy Fellowship by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. "For one thing," he says, "it's the best working situation I've been in for a long time. Unlike a lot of poets I need to work every day. It's a full-time job for me. This is an opportunity to work on a long poem and have a year to complete it.

"I'm very influenced by the city, the power of the city. Because of the pressure of 2,000 years of history I'm getting a new perspective of the power of the individual. The other day we went to the roof of the Pantheon and looked down from the dome and that's what it's like being in Rome: a focus on Western civilization I never had before."

Epstein's studio, a rustic hut of brick, is built into the garden wall—put there in the early 16th century by Pope Leo X, a Medici, as a defense against the army of Charles V which, nevertheless, sacked Rome in 1527. Beneath it runs the famed Aurelian Wall built by the Emperor Aurelius between A.D. 271-275. The poet is almost dizzy with the beauty of the place. "I feel the vibrations and sparks that created Rome here," says Epstein, a poet in a state of exaltation. You wait for his next book.

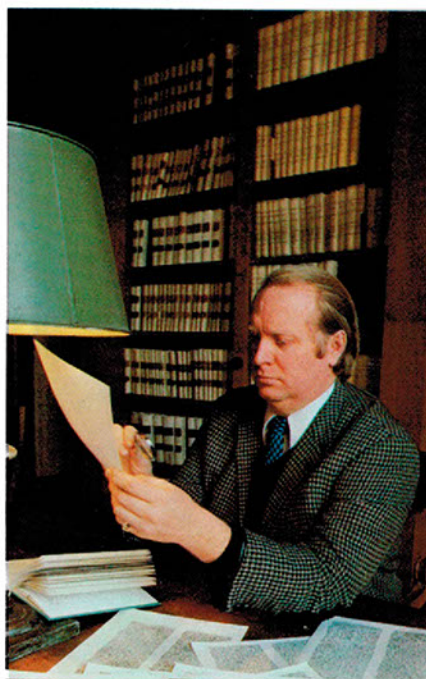
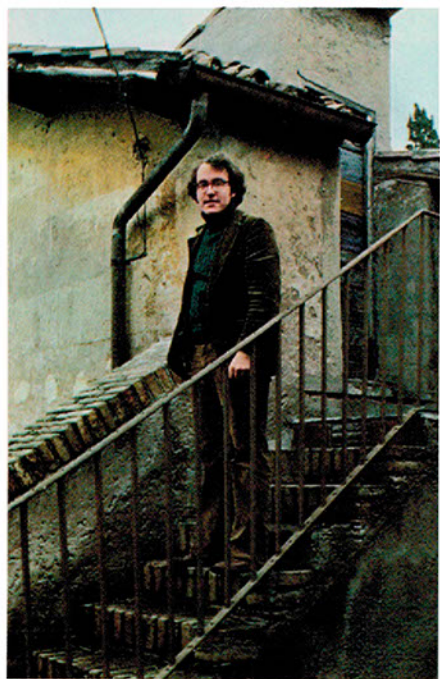
John Holland Thow, 27, is a composer from Ventura, California. He had visited the Academy in 1973 while on a Fulbright from Harvard. "I got to know the Academy. I had a very rich yield. I learned so much visiting with the composer Leon Kirchner, who was in residence that year. I wanted to come back. I tried once and didn't make it. Last year I tried again and was very surprised to succeed. The competition is very intense." He is working on an orchestral piece which will be performed by the R.A.I. Radio Symphony of Rome, one of the best in Italy, which each year ac-

ords a concert to works by Academy Fellows and resident composers. "It's invaluable," says Thow, "it can't be gotten in the States. And, being in Rome you get an entire cycle of concerts and artists you don't get at home. Maybe just living in another culture is a valuable experience. That is, if you're going to get beneath the surface and not gripe about the mail being slow, which it is."

Thow's studio is in the almost unbelievably picturesque Casa Rustica, at one time an old inn, which sits in a corner of the Academy garden. There is a sloping, raftered roof, some old comfortable chairs, a draftsman's table spread with composer's ruled paper, a piano, and a warm composer's smile. "You can't imagine," Thow says, "what a luxury it is for a composer to have a place in which he can make all the noise he wants to and still be quiet." Whole suites of sound occur to you.

Simon Dinnerstein, 35, New York, painter. He says: "I don't think you could find a better setup for a painter. As soon as I came here I knew I wanted to stay longer. A year didn't begin to seem enough." Dinnerstein, whose work has received warm approbation from John Russell of the *New York Times* and who shows at the Staempfli Gallery in New York, is now in his second year at the Academy.

"In terms of my work, which is figurative, being in Rome is continuing a tradition. Of course, in a sense,



Three Fellows of the Academy: John Holland Thow, above, composer, on the steps of his studio in the Casa Rustica; classicist Gareth Schmeling at work

in the big library and, right, at the entrance of his private studio, built firmly into the Academy wall, the poet Daniel Mark Epstein.

American estate of mind in Rome

it's intimidating. You are given studio space, materials, your responsibility is to come up with something. I get a terrific amount of work done here. I don't work quickly so this has been a very productive time for me. The only studio I've ever seen which reminds me of this space was that of Daniel Chester French in Stockbridge. In terms of light, I don't think I've ever seen a gray day here; even in the rain." Of course, in terms of art, isn't this where light was born?

"I want," says Academy President Lacy, "the former distinction of the Rome Prize, and the eminence of

the American Academy in Rome, to be restored." He is, considering what you have seen and what you have come to feel about the place, well on his way.

It is evening and you've been standing on that esplanade bathing your eyes and spirit in that Rome there before you, a beneficence. You think, with regard to that persistent and nagging question which comes up all the time in discussions of the Academy, why should it be located in Rome, couldn't it be done somewhere else as well?

Perhaps the answer might be, well, yes, in many other places which have rich heritages of their own and of value to Americans. Which is to say that the American experience in Rome as transmuted over the years into the substance of American cultural history has become so valuable that, one thinks, there should be not just an Academy in Rome but others in Tokyo, New Delhi, Peking. Is it too much to suggest an American Academy in Moscow? A fantasy, of course, given the indispensable need for freedom which scholars and artists must have. But if it were possible, such an Academy might do more for the United States than, say, the American Embassy there.

We are speaking now of long-range things, the things which remain after the movers and shakers and noisemakers are forgotten. The kinds of things which, in this case, the American Academy in Rome has been serving for more than 80 years now. Think of it, there are beautiful Americans in Rome, too.



Judith Silver, who works in small and delicate collage, also creates sweeping large works, as in her *Antipodal Landscape*, 30 by four feet.

At right, artist Simon Dinnerstein, now in his second year in Rome, poses with his daughter and an Italian model before paintings for which they posed.

