



JUNE 1993

## TEACHER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD/OILS

### *Cesare Borgia, White Plains, NY*

When Cesare Borgia founded the Reilly League of Artists in White Plains, New York, in 1973, he intended to perpetuate the teaching style and philosophy of the late Frank Reilly, a master teacher of American Realism at the Art Students League of New York, with whom he studied for seven years. As the Reilly League's principal instructor, Borgia immediately earned a reputation as an inspiring and effective teacher. In a sense, he has been trying to put himself out of a job ever since.

Explains Eric A. Peterson, a Reilly League member and professional illustrator, "One of the first things Cesare tells a new student is that the job of the teacher is to enable the student to do without him. Unlike so many teachers who foster dependency, Cesare constantly stresses self-reliance and initiative."

The dozens of artists and illustrators who nominated Borgia for the Achievement Award echo Peterson's comments. "Cesare Borgia enabled me to believe in myself and my ability to achieve excellence," writes Mary Smoot Souter, "He encouraged me, guided me, and never let me give up," recalls Kathi Valiha-DeLisa; "He has always made us believe that if we work hard, we will get there," notes another. Almost all of the Reilly League members claim to have benefited from the central lesson of Borgia's teaching: "There is only one right way to paint, and that is your way."

"Reilly himself didn't believe in any 'method,'" Borgia says. "He believed in common sense, observation, and an exhaustive study of the Old Masters-plus a certain amount of initiative on the student's part. Eventually, his purpose was to enable the student to do without the teacher, to be an independent seeker. I try to give students the tools to be able to do that."

According to portrait painter Fran Lew, Borgia's lessons (which always use a live model) cover the fundamentals: "Basic to his teaching are the techniques of oil painting-glazing, scumbling, the use of the palette knife, and the application of thick and thin paint." In addition, she says, "Cesare teaches creative use of edge work and stresses good drawing and strong composition." Adds Borgia, "I explain how other artists—from the masters to modern painters—got their results and what they believed in. I teach students to experiment a great deal, and I tell them, 'Don't believe everything I tell you. Check me out—and ask questions!'"

Dedicated to the principles of realism, Borgia relies on repetition to convey the basics to students, chanting concepts over and over until they begin to sink in. Reflecting on the instructor's infamous teaching methods, Peterson says, "These 'Cesarisms' seem like clichés until the day you finally understand the principle represented in full. Because of his emphasis on the basics, it may seem that Cesare does not teach you everything you want to be taught. This is true—but he teaches you everything you need to know."

"I cover all the aspects a person needs to know in order to earn a living," Borgia confirms. "I believe very strongly that after a student has been in art school for three or four years, he or she should be able to earn a living drawing and painting. A lot of schools don't. They believe that you pursue art for your own edification, for your own pleasure, which is okay up to a point. But if you can't earn a living after five years of study, forget it. People may think my approach is a bit commercial, but you have to become a practitioner of your profession." Indeed, most of his students go on to

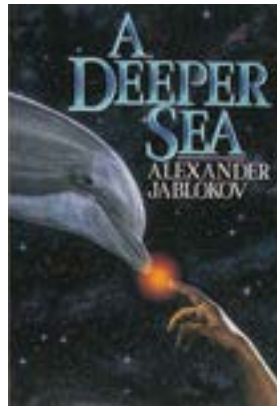
become practitioners, earning their living in commercial illustration, portraiture, and other areas of the fine arts.

Although his classes are always conducted in groups, Borgia gives students individual attention, seeming to intuitively sense the most effective way to guide and encourage each one. “From the beginning,” he says, “I assess the students individually, and I try to see their strong points, their weaknesses, and how much time they can put in. The student is the method. I have no method outside of the student because each dictates the way he or she should be taught.” Many Reilly League members wrote about having experienced a true understanding of artistic principles-“a new way of seeing”- as a result of Borgia’s approach, despite having fine-arts degrees or years of prior academic training.

Knowing the commitment Borgia has made to the visual arts throughout the last twenty years, league members are usually surprised when they learn that he is a professional violinist and conductor, having trained at the Juilliard School of Music and toured with the Boston Pops Orchestra. He earns his living as a musician and private tutor, volunteering his time during the three or four days per week he now spends at the Reilly League (the school has been run cooperatively by the students since 1976).

Not surprisingly, this gifted instructor has been known at times to use musical comparisons to coach students. As artist and musician John C. Orcutt notes, “He’ll say, ‘Legato, legato! More legato in your calligraphy! Make the line flow to somewhere, like a resolved phase!’ Or, ‘Values are ninety percent of the picture. Did you ever hear a symphony played only mezzo-forte? Of course not! All great paintings and compositions have contrast, dynamics!’”

As much as Borgia strives to foster students’ self-sufficiency, his interest and enthusiasm for everything about the arts may yet ensure that there will never be such a thing as a “former” Borgia student. Although artists eventually move on from the studios of the Reilly League, they cannot resist consulting him with problems or calling him to share news of their successes. With gratitude, many league members claim, “I wouldn’t be a professional artist today without him.” To this, their teacher might respond with one of his well-known sayings “If not you, who?” Cesare Borgia asks. “If not now, when?”



The works reproduced here were created by students of Cesare Borgia.

Top: *The Hon. Mario M. Cuomo, Governor, State of New York*, by Fran Lew, oil 30 x 24. Collection the Honorable Mario M. Cuomo.

Above: *Yankee Stadium Matinee*, by William Feldman, 1990, oil, 34 x 72. Private collection.

Left: *A Deeper Sea (detail)*, by Eric A. Peterson, 1992, oil on illustration board, 18 x 28. Collection the artist. The painting was commissioned for the book jacket shown.