

# AMERICAN ARTIST

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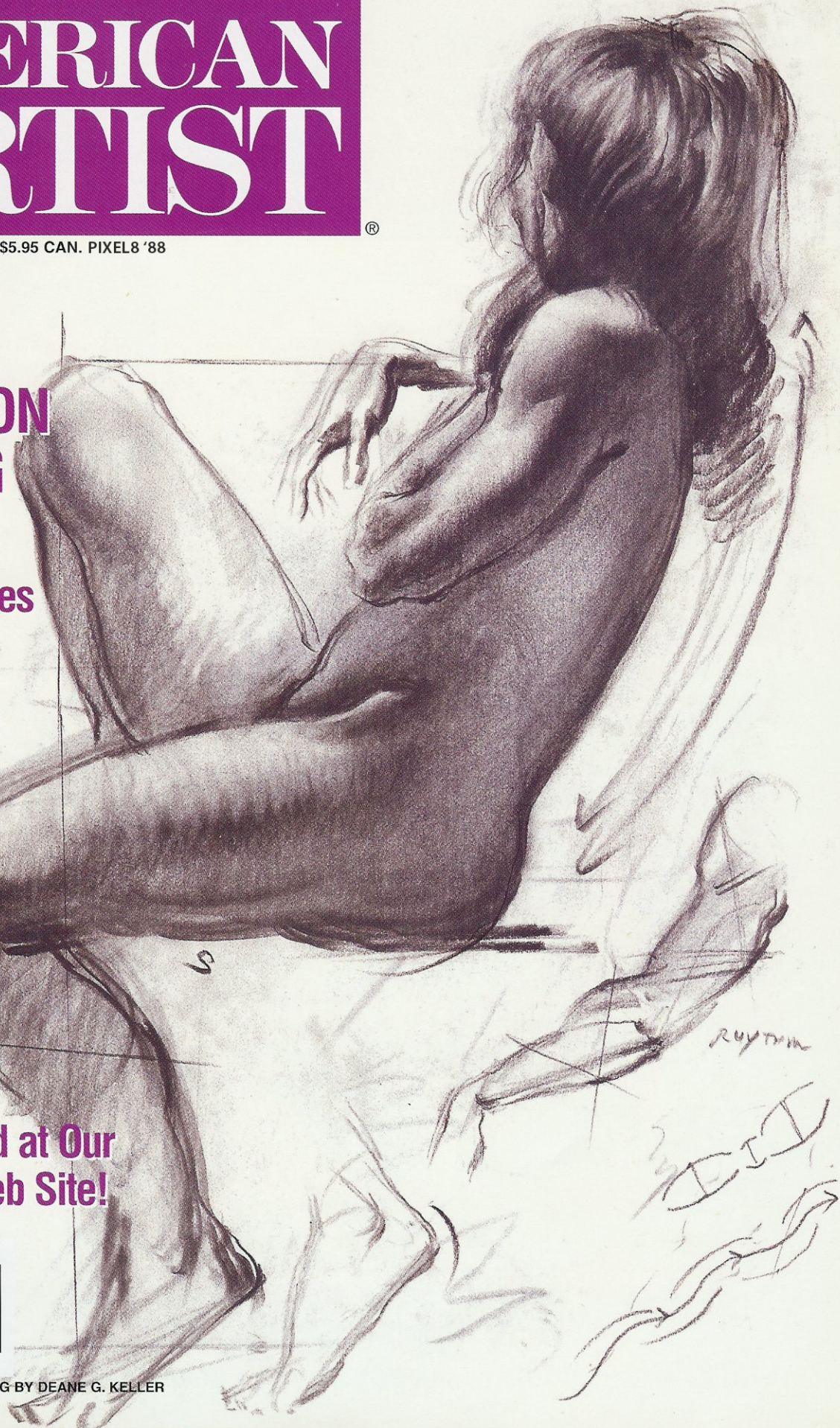
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COVER: CLASSROOM DRAWING BY DEANE G. KELLER





# *Identifying* WITH THE *Past*

One painting moved Dennis Sheehan to value the emotion of late-19th-century art over accurate rendering and develop an intuitive method of working.

BY LORI W. SIMONS

**E**arly in Dennis Sheehan's painting career, the New Hampshire artist worked in an ultrarealistic style, painting every detail accurately because that's the way he thought he should paint. That all changed one day when he entered a Boston bookstore and saw a poster of a landscape painting on display. Mesmerized by what he saw, Sheehan thought, *That's amazing! Who did that?* The poster depicted the painting *June*, by the great 19th-century landscapist George Inness.

Now that Sheehan had experienced art emotionally, he embarked on a mission to learn more about Inness and other 19th-century artists. "I started spending time in museums, libraries, and bookstores, and I began collecting magazine articles and art-auction catalogs on artists such as Corot, Bruce Crane, J. Francis Murphy, Alexander Wyant, and Hugh Bolton Jones," Sheehan reflects. In the years that followed, Sheehan's artistic identity became clearer to him, and his style changed to a more emotional interpretation of the landscape, rather than an accurate reproduction of what he saw.

SHEEHAN'S STUDIO IS A CREATIVE atmosphere on the upper floor of a historic Manchester, New Hampshire, mill building. North light filters through four 10-foot arched windows, illuminating Sheehan's work space. Beyond his easel are an impressive collection of books on fine art, a sitting area adorned with oriental carpets, posters by Sargent and Inness, and a separate area for his computer. When he arrives at the studio each morning, Sheehan checks his E-mail and attends to a few business details, then begins the psychological transition from everyday chores to painting.

Much of his inspiration comes from the pictorial references from



**Above:** *Fall Colors*, 2000, oil, 16 x 28. All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.



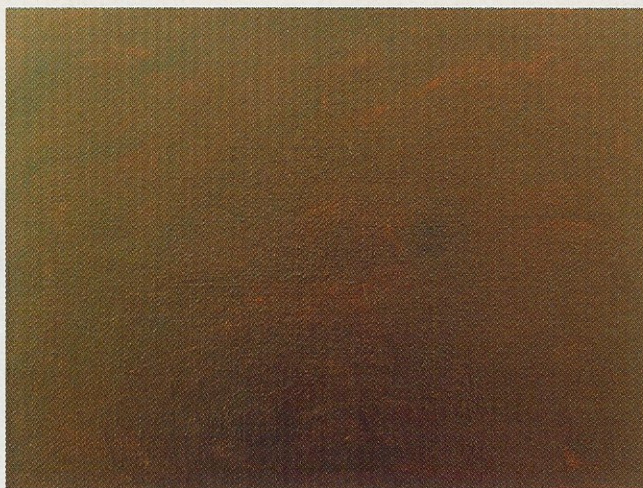
**Left:** *June*, by George Inness, 1882, oil, 30 x 44½. Collection Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York. Sheehan says this piece suddenly changed his approach to painting.

**Below:** *Valley Mist*, 2000, oil, 24 x 36.

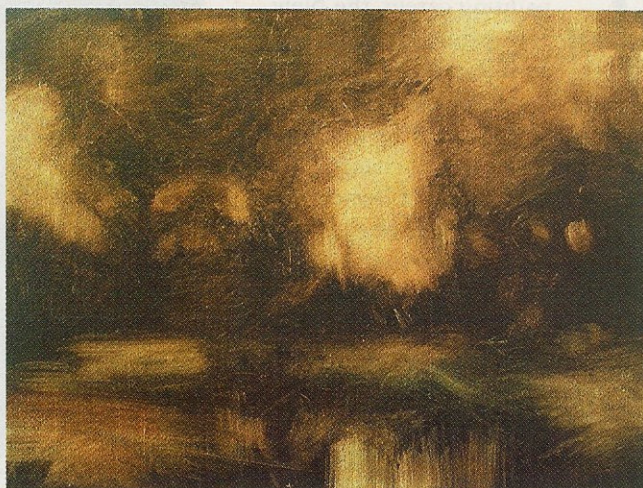
**Opposite page:** *The Golden Hour*, 2000, oil, 30 x 36.



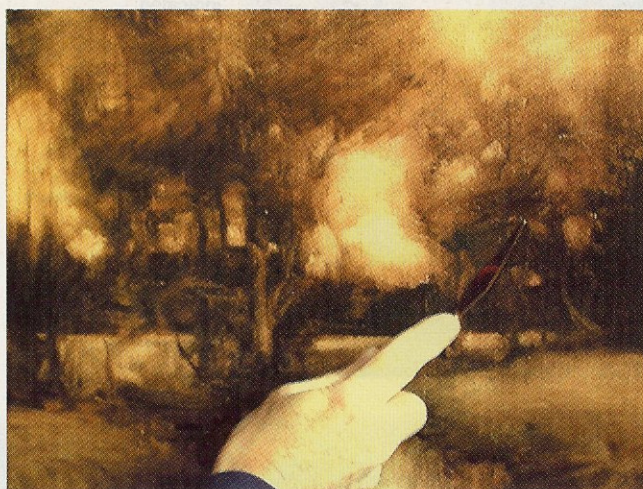
## DEMONSTRATION: SUN PEKING THROUGH



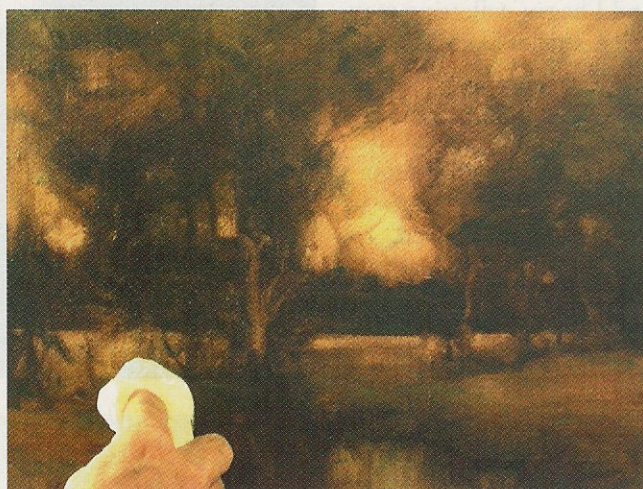
Step 1. Sheehan begins by covering his untuned canvas with a brownish-green mixture of paint. The exact color combination is flexible; he dips his brush into several of his pigments at once, almost by intuition. In general, he uses a combination of bright tube greens, brown madder alizarin, and orange-reds to cancel the high chroma of the green. He adds pale drying oil medium before brushing it onto the canvas.



Step 2. While the canvas is still very wet, Sheehan uses a paper towel to wipe out the lighter areas for the sky and stream, leaving dark shapes to represent trees and grasses. If the edges are too hard, he'll smudge them with his finger. At any point, he can decide to start over and recover his canvas with the original mixture.



Step 3. Next, Sheehan uses the tip of his finger covered by the paper towel or a palette knife to wipe out the sharper, lighter lines for the tree trunks. The artist then stands back to see what natural elements are emerging on the canvas. He'll further rub out paint to give more definition to, say, an emerging rock. He uses a bristle brush to draw in tree branches and twigs. When Sheehan has a pleasing composition, he sets the canvas aside to dry.



Step 4. With a paper towel, Sheehan then adds transparent glazes to the dry painting, using green, blue, pink, and yellow pigments. He mixes opaque paints with a brush for the sky, tree trunks, and the lightest areas of the grass. Occasionally, he'll use a palette knife to add more color to the grassy areas. If the artist decides he doesn't like what he sees at this point, he has the option of wiping off the color glazes and returning to the basic composition to apply color in a different way.

his library and collection of photos, but Sheehan is more productive if he saves research activity for his non-painting hours. "Ironically, my most productive painting days are those when I have appointments and errands to run, because I don't have time to mull over my options," he admits. "I just dive into my work. When I have unending free time, I tend to get distracted by books and references and never get to the

easel." Having his materials ready to use at a moment's notice increases his productivity; boxes of inexpensive bristle brushes, backup jars of medium, and a few dozen stretched canvases of various sizes congregate near his easel.

When he does set aside time to peruse reference material, Sheehan enjoys reading about the lives, thoughts, and techniques of 19th-century artists. "I love it when I can

identify with a historic artist's discoveries," he relates. "For instance, it amazed me when I read that Sargent made the smallest details with a large brush—I came to that same realization on my own through experimentation."

Although Sheehan's paintings contain the seeds of Inness, they are in no way copies of his or any artist's style. His technique is all his own, developed over the years through



The completed painting: *Sun Peeking Through*, 2002, oil, 11 x 14.

experimentation with everything from palette knives to paper towels—even his fingers. “I don’t usually begin with a preconceived idea,” the artist explains. “What develops on the canvas is the result of my emotion about the landscape combined with finding pleasant shapes and tones.” In many ways Sheehan composes his landscapes as a musician composes a piece by ear. These paintings often evolve from his imagination, although he makes it a practice to paint en plein air.

Forgoing preliminary sketches or other planning, Sheehan paints directly, and after the first few minutes he enters an almost trance-like state. It’s not a metaphysical state; his mind and sensibility are fully

engaged. Painting spontaneously, he relies on decades of learning about and looking at masterworks to create his imaginative landscapes.

Despite the realism of his images, Sheehan does not consider himself a true-to-nature painter. “I almost feel like I’m painting abstractly, just being aware of how the shapes and spaces relate to the natural world,” he explains. His process appears arbitrary, as though he is mimicking the randomness of nature itself. “There’s no sense in worrying about whether every painting will be a masterpiece,” says Sheehan of his cavalier approach, “because the more paintings I work on, the better the chances of creating a good one. Having several paintings in progress

relieves the fear of failure.”

Sheehan often begins a painting by covering his untuned canvas with a semitransparent mixture of greens, oranges, and yellows, arriving at a greenish-brown mixture. While the paint is wet, he wipes out the spaces with a paper towel to represent sky or water areas. The brown tones that are left often represent the positive objects such as trees, grasslands, marsh, or mountains. He also scrapes off areas with a fingernail wrapped under a paper towel to reveal sharper lines for grass or tree limbs and trunks.

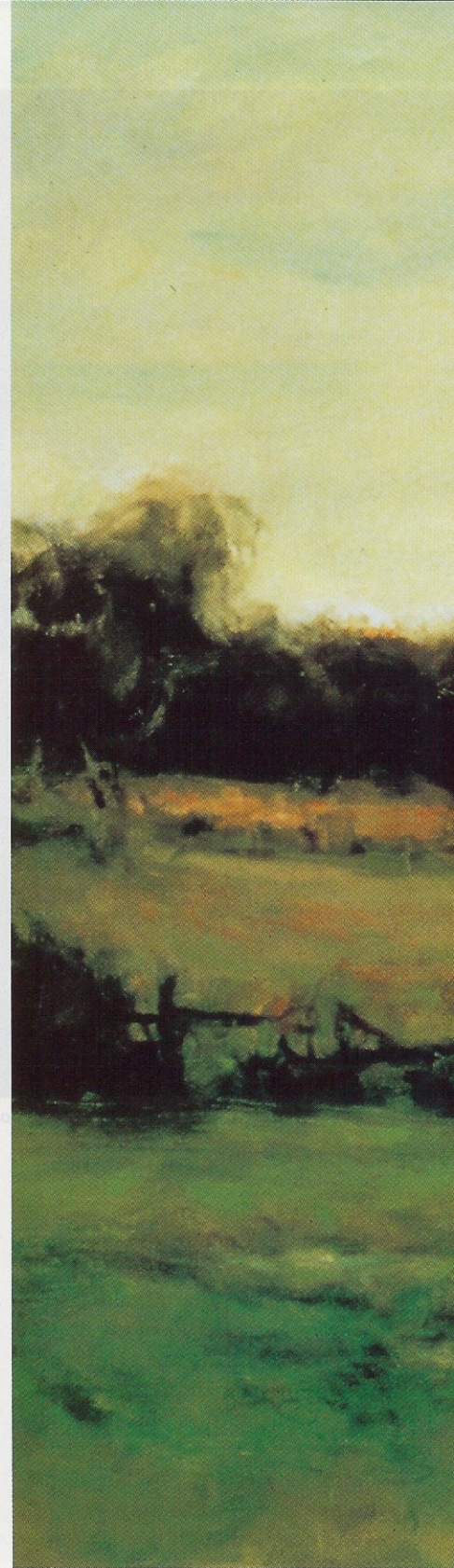
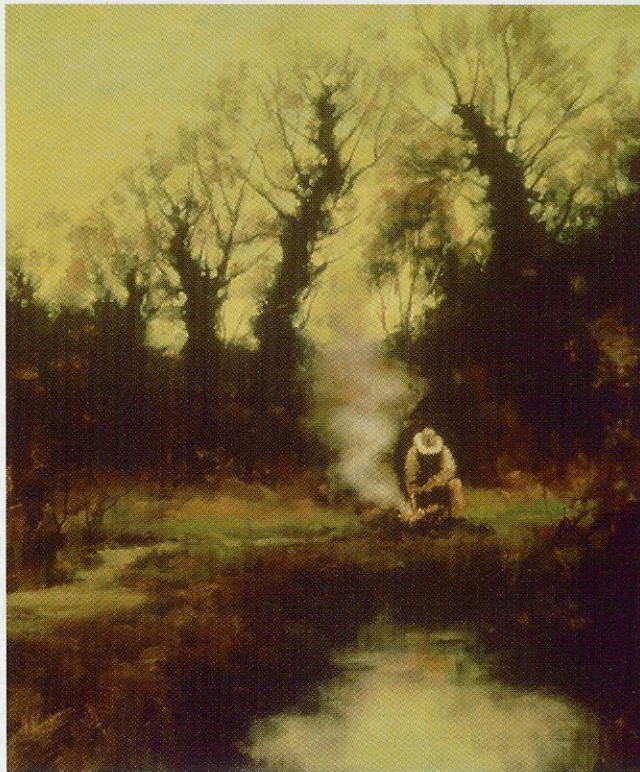
At this point, Sheehan stands back to examine the light and dark shapes, looking for compositional balance and searching for serendipi-



Above: *Winter Calm*, 1999, oil, 24 x 30.

Right: *The Sentinels*, 2000, oil, 30 x 25.

Opposite page: *Morning Chores*, 1999, oil, 24 x 30.



tous parts that resemble objects of the landscape. "I'm not a linear painter," Sheehan says. "I perceive negative and positive shapes, and I go with it when it feels right. I keep form, mass, and tone in mind while

searching for a balance between dark and light areas."

Within the first 20 minutes Sheehan knows if a design is going to work. If nothing evolves that seems well constructed and natural

at this stage, he'll recover the canvas with his original greenish-brown mixture and begin again. When he is satisfied, he'll usually let the painting dry into what could stand as a finished tonal painting. However, later



he'll glaze transparent color over the trees and foliage and apply opaque paint in the sky and other light areas of the painting.

In the future Sheehan hopes to pursue new ideas in his artwork.

Inspired by George Clausen (1852-1944), who often included figures dressed as peasants in his compositions, Sheehan wants to feature figures in his landscapes to suggest a narrative and make a stronger con-

nection with the viewer. He is also considering using photography as an aid, as did the naturalists. One of his favorite books, *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse*, by Gabriel P.

*Continued on page 76*

in *Angel Leaping, Seven Crows*, which features her daughter. Horses are another favorite subject, and it's no surprise why: She is a co-owner of a horse-and-carriage business. Keeley believes that equine imagery will only become more prominent in her work. "I am an artist and I am also a horsewoman, and I'm very dedicated to both. I feel that in some way those two aspects of my life will eventually gel in my paintings."

Whether from dreams or other sources, Keeley's subjects continually stretch her artistic boundaries, which can only, she believes, lead to greater fulfillment. "I am not afraid to use past experience, yet I am a strong believer in moving on, both artistically and in life," she says. "In no way am I a static soul." ■

*Christine Proskow, a former newspaper correspondent, is a freelance writer living in California. She works in watercolor and pastel in her free time.*

## IDENTIFYING WITH THE PAST

*Continued from page 51*

Weisberg (Harry N. Abrams, New York, New York), shows how these artists photographed models for reference, then added figures to their landscapes. In addition to photos, the naturalists employed sketches and studies from life to construct a finished studio painting. "The photos that were taken by 19th-century artists in the Barbizon forest show how much these photos look like paintings," Sheehan shares. "I think these artists were some of the best early photographers, even though they were using photography as a reference for paintings."

Sheehan attended the Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts, and the Vesper George School of Art in Boston. He later studied individually with Robert Cormier, who is a past presi-

dent of the Guild of Boston Artists, and with portrait and landscape painter Richard Whitney. He is a member of the Guild of Boston Artists, which held a solo exhibition of Sheehan's paintings in 2002, and his work is included in many prestigious private and corporate collections, including the White House. Visit Sheehan's Web site: [www.dennisheehan.com](http://www.dennisheehan.com). ■

*Lori W. Simons received her B.F.A. degree in art education from the University of Arizona in Tucson. She is a full-time artist and arts writer based in New Hampshire.*

The exhibition "George Inness and the Visionary Landscape," featuring some of the images and ideas that inspired Dennis Sheehan, is on view through December 28 at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Forty Inness landscapes are included in the show. For more information, visit [www.nationalacademy.org](http://www.nationalacademy.org).



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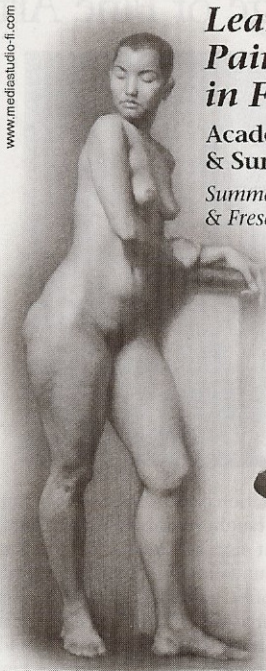
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