

PENLAND INSTRUCTORS: PASSING IT ON

Penland is lucky enough to attract many instructors who are as dedicated to the craft of teaching as they are to their studio craft. Three artist-teachers who will be with us this summer were kind enough to share their thoughts with the Penland Line. —Robin Dreyer



John T. Scott with work done by his Penland students.

JAZZ THINKING

John T. Scott is a soft-spoken man, but he is a force to be reckoned with. As an artist, he moves easily between drawings, paintings, prints, painted steel sculptures, and large kinetic pieces. ("I don't limit myself in terms of media.") He teaches five days a week at Xavier University in New Orleans, covering a range of subjects including printmaking, sculpture, stone carving, welding, drawing, and calligraphy. ("My favorite thing to teach is whatever I'm teaching.") He's also the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. ("How I got it, I don't know.")

One afternoon last summer, after he spent fifteen minutes showing me work done by his students, I sat in the printmaking studio and talked with this fascinating man. Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

Basically, I think there are three ways that people think. Some people think in a linear fashion—straight line. Then there are people who think in a planar fashion—across a field. What I'm after is spherical thinking. One way to explain that is through jazz. If you've ever watched a really fine jazz group perform, three things are self-evident: Jazz musicians are always in the now, constantly—right now. And they have an unbelievable understanding of where they've been—the past, history. And an incredible anticipation of where they're going—the future. These musicians are simultaneously conscious of the present, the past, and the future, which is what I call spherical thinking.

Do you think this can be learned and taught?

I try to do this with all of my students. Part of the dilemma we're in right now is that we're trying to make people one-dimensional; you have to be a specialist, even in the arts. I would like to remove the limitations. For instance, chemistry is related to printmaking because you can't have inks without chemistry, and you can't have paper without some kind of chemical bonding. I'm trying to get the people I teach to think on that level, that it's all connected.

In my college classes, I try to construct problems that can't be solved without doing some research. If it's a drawing class, for instance, they will have to research paper; there are thousands of kinds of paper. If they want to use colored pencils, then what makes some good, some bad? If someone

wants to use imagery that comes out of African mythology—great! Go to the library and do some research.

So in the process, what normally happens is that it acts like a funnel. You have all this stuff coming in but it's focussed down to this one object that you are going to make. By the time you get to that object, it's going to be aesthetic, it's going to respect the materials, etc., because it's going to have all that content that it's based on.

What about a workshop situation like Penland?

Well, I taught one process, but I tried to teach it in a way that each person could hear it in their language, in their spirit. The problem is how to teach in a way that makes each person focus through the lens that is their self.

The thing I keep getting out of teaching is how much I don't know, so I'm as busy as the students trying to learn something. My mother told me when I was a kid, "The most selfish thing you can do is to be totally unselfish because everything you do is going to come back tenfold." So any idea I develop in the morning, my students get in the afternoon. Then all I have to do is watch them to see the potential for that idea. It doesn't take anything away from them; either, it just expands the idea one way or another.

We had one ground rule in this class: If I gave you anything, you have to give it to someone else. Because where I come from, if somebody gives you something and you say thank you, the response is, "pass it on." I really feel that information is like a butterfly. The only way you can hold a butterfly is to never close your hand, because if you do, you'll kill it. The same is true with ideas and information. The minute you try to make it yours, it's nobody's and it dies. So I believe in passing it on. ✽

John T. Scott will teach printmaking second session.

A transcript of my entire conversation with John T. Scott is available on Penland's Web site. (See page 8 for more information.)



Goldsmith Jaime Pelissier using a bigger hammer in the Penland iron shop.

TEACHER-STUDENT-TEACHER

An intriguing aspect of the Penland student body is how often it includes Penland instructors. Last summer Cynthia Bringle, Nick Joerling, Kitty Couch, Rob Levin, and Jan Williams all turned up in various classes. But no one personifies this phenomenon more than **Jaime Pelissier**, an accomplished goldsmith who taught here in 1993 and has four times been a student in the iron studio.

"When I discovered iron I decided to learn it at Penland," he said. "I took a class in basic blacksmithing and started to collect tools and set up a shop right away. I was in love with the whole thing; I got hooked and I keep coming back."

It would have been a shame, however, if Jaime had limited his Penland visits to the forge. Not only is he a well-respected jeweler, but he is an experienced and committed teacher.

He dates the beginning of his teaching career to an unusual encounter with a French monk in the 1960s. While studying goldsmithing in Helsinki he made periodic trips to France to see his brother; the two would meet at a Benedictine monastery. He arrived for one of these visits at a moment of great personal doubt. "I looked around at the world and saw how bad things were and wished to commit myself to something of a social nature. And I felt that somehow this meant that what I was doing in the crafts was wrong, that to make a difference in the world I would have to go into some sort of direct social work."

It happened that one of the industries that supported the monastery was a pottery workshop. One day Jaime explained his doubts to one of the potter-monks, who had a very strong reaction. "He put the arts and crafts into a whole different context which I had never thought about before—the context of human redemption. His idea was that our society was being destroyed by dehumanizing factors and that the arts were the redeemers of our world in the sense of keeping that very important human value.

"He said, you have two responsibilities: one is to learn—the more you can the better. The other is to transmit this knowledge to as many people as you will. It hit me very hard. Here was a man who had been removed from the world but who in a very clear way could see that all creative force has a deeper meaning than the actual product, and part of this is the effect it has on the person who is producing it."

Since that time, Jaime has devoted many years of his life to teaching. "We become a continuity," he said, "One person after another, we join hands in something that was started long ago. That is my philosophy of teaching."

Although he has done quite a bit of formal teaching in the past—including seven years at the Parsons School of Design—today he fulfills this commitment primarily by taking apprentices in his shop in Greenwich, CT. "It's an opportunity to work with a person, not just for hours but for days and months." He also accepts occasional invitations to teach workshops in Latin America, and once in a while, Penland gets him out of the iron shop and into the jewelry studio.

"What Penland has given me is a level of intensity on the part of the students that is very hard to find anywhere else. And from my own learning at Penland, I understand this from the student's side—the desire to get the maximum possible from a teacher." ✽

Jaime Pelissier will teach metals first session.



Artist-educator Meg Peterson

Dana Moore