

STUDYING ART IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Carla Puppin connects students with their surroundings

BY ANNE O'DONNELL

Once musicians get into Curtis, art history instructor Carla Puppin likes to get them out of it — out of the building, that is, to look at great works of art. Whether it's to the Philadelphia Museum of Art or around Rittenhouse Square, field trips are an important part of her syllabus each semester. Seeing reproductions of art and architecture on slides and in textbooks cannot replace the experience of looking at the original, she believes. Moreover, while students are living in Philadelphia, she wants to help them take advantage of world-class institutions in addition to the one where they go to school.

Dr. Puppin's love of art struck her when she was an undergraduate student at Indiana University in the 1970's. She had never studied art, nor art history, and began college as a French literature major. But during her first art history class, she was hooked. "I had these fantastic teachers who made great connections talking about works of art and how they had meaning. I loved learning about works of art and thinking about them in terms of style."

In one class, the professor spent an entire lecture on a single sculpture from antiquity by the artist Polyclitus. "I don't know about everyone else there, they may have been bored to tears," said Dr. Puppin, "but when the professor spent 45 minutes talking about the rhythm of the sculpture, the balance, the way it was achieved, the right and left sides, I just found it absolutely mesmerizing."

Her undergraduate studies focused on the formal analysis of art, looking at a work's physical characteristics, such as size, color, line, composition and arrangement of figures. During her graduate classes at Bryn Mawr College, she learned the contextual approach to art, which had become more popular. This approach takes into account the historical, social and cultural milieu out of which a work grows. Since her area of specialization was 19th-century French landscape paintings, Dr. Puppin put her own education into context by spending two years of graduate school in Paris. She received her doctorate in 1986, began teaching in the Philadelphia region, and, in 1991, joined the Curtis liberal arts faculty.

In her own teaching, Dr. Puppin employs both formalist and contextual approaches. "If you're doing a sociopolitical approach and you never spend time looking at the actual object, you're missing something and you end up not talking about beauty — or ugliness — and to me, those are absolutely vital things to talk about in the first place," she said.

To engage students in both formalist and contextual ways of looking at a work of art, Dr. Puppin targets her written assignments. She may assign a short paper whose starting point is: what emotion or sensation does the painting inspire? The student must then describe the formal elements the artist uses to arouse that sensation. "Sometimes I've had the most beautiful essays from people who really looked and saw something," she said about the rewarding results. "What is fun is when they see something that you, as a teacher who has looked at a painting again and again, didn't see. That's always a really gratifying thing." The next assignment she gives will often be a paper on the same painting, in which the student must analyze the socio-historical context. In this way, students develop a variety of analytical skills and perspectives.

Dr. Puppin's methods are effective, if you ask Kateřina Englichová, who has kept her notes from her studies in the 1990's. "I enjoyed her classes because she was demanding and entertaining, as well as to the point," Ms. Englichová said. "To understand any kind of historical event or piece of art, it is important to know what was happening at the same time politically, economically and in other countries, and to read the letters of the artists. I realized that in many ways, life hasn't changed much (such as looking for sponsors)."

When Dr. Puppin first began teaching at Curtis, she taught a traditional two-part art history survey: ancient to medieval in the fall, and Renaissance to Modern in the spring. However, it became apparent that all of Western art in one year was not appealing. So she began a series of focused classes, which better fulfill the needs and desires of the students. Over two years, they may choose



Above: Carla Puppin
Top: The Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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from courses in Renaissance, 17th-century, 19th-century and 20th-century art. Courses Dr. Puppin is considering for the future include thematic ones on mythology and censorship, both covering the art of many centuries.

"This past semester worked out really nicely with the Degas show," said Dr. Puppin, referring to *Degas and the Dance*, a special exhibit at the art museum from February to May. "I did a course called 'Work, Leisure and Entertainment in 19th-Century Art,' and then I tailored what we were doing to those themes. They were all assigned to go and see the Degas show and write an essay about their reactions." Curtis trustee John Medveckis, who is also on the board of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, arranged for complimentary tickets to the show.

Students also learned about the transformation of Paris by Baron Haussmann, a leading force in developing that city's broad, tree-lined, monumental boulevards, in particular the Champs-Élysées. On a guided architectural tour, they observed a Philadelphia scene influenced by Haussmann's work: the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, designed in the 1920's as a grand diagonal boulevard between City Hall and the Philadelphia Museum of



Art. As had happened in Paris, wide swaths of small streets and houses were cleared, displacing the poor who lived there.

Dr. Puppin discussed the current mayor's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative and urban renewal with her students. "I mentioned these things because wherever they're going to live, they're going to live in some kind of community," she said, "and hopefully they'll engage with the community in many ways."

Dr. Puppin knows much about her own neighborhood's transformation. She is executive director of the Queen Village Neighbors Association, an organization supporting neighborhood community activities. (Her own neighborhood is nearby Bella Vista.) Several years ago, an entire block behind the house she shares with her husband and their two children was left vacant when a building burned down. Dr. Puppin and her neighbors began working with Philadelphia Green, a community greening project of the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, to grow a tree farm on that land. The neighbors ultimately convinced the absentee landowner, who wanted to build commercially on the property, to donate the land in perpetuity to the city. The tree farm was transformed into a community garden, which Dr. Puppin tends with many of her neighbors.

Just as she encourages her students to really look at art, Dr. Puppin's garden does the same for her. "I never really thought about still-life painting much," she said. "But through my years of being a gardener and knowing different kinds of flowers, I approach 17th-century still-life and flower paintings in a very different way than I would have 20 years ago." As she knows, you gain a new perspective when you get out and really look at things. ☺