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The Syracuse University Professoriate, 1870-1960: Four Grand Masters in the Arts

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“WAR IS KIND”

VOLUME XXIX · 1994

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The Syracuse University Professoriate, 1870–1960: Four
Grand Masters in the Arts

By David Tatham, Professor of Fine Arts, 5
Syracuse University

Tatham discusses four great teachers of fine arts at Syracuse University—George Fisk Comfort, Irene Sargent, Ivan Meštrović, and Sawyer Falk—whose careers reflected local manifestations of changes that occurred in the professoriate nationwide at four points in its history.

The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth and New
York Dance

By Joseph G. Dreiss, Professor of Art History, 29
Mary Washington College

Dreiss sketches the early career of the sculptor Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, and shows how her best work was influenced by New York dance—especially by a certain lighthearted dancer.

Dialectical Materialism and Proletarian Literature

By Leonard Brown (1904–1960) 41

Introduction: Remembering Leonard Brown

By John W. Crowley, Professor of English,
Syracuse University

Crowley places Leonard Brown, the legendary Syracuse University English professor, in the context of his times. In the lecture that follows (probably prepared ca. 1937), Brown, with characteristic precision, interprets for a general audience the ideas of Marx and Engels.

The Moment of “Three Women Eating”: Completing
the Story of *You Have Seen Their Faces*

By Robert L. McDonald, Assistant Professor of English, 61
Virginia Military Institute

McDonald describes the circumstances in the lives of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White that led to their professional collaboration in producing *You Have Seen Their Faces*, and how a photograph eased the way.

- The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Eight)
 By Gwen G. Robinson, Former Editor, 75
Syracuse University Library Associates Courier
 Robinson reviews the progress of punctuation between 1850 and 1900, showing how—amidst the ongoing (but increasingly sophisticated) contest between the demands of the eye and the ear, of grammar and rhetoric—writing in English reached new expressive heights in the work of Pater, Dickinson, and others.
- The First Editions of Stephen Crane's *The Black Riders and Other Lines* and *War Is Kind*
 By Donald Vanouse, Professor of English, 107
 The State University of New York at Oswego
 Vanouse explains how a critical appreciation of two Stephen Crane first editions, which exemplify a synthesis of poetry and book design, can improve our understanding of both the times in which they appeared, and the cultural impact of Crane's verse.
- Stephen Crane at Syracuse University: New Findings
 By Thomas A. Gullason, Professor of English, 127
 University of Rhode Island
 Gullason corrects long-accepted notions about the brief career of Stephen Crane as a Syracuse University student during 1891, and sheds new light on Crane's life during that time.
- Hats, Heels, and High Ideals: The Student Dean Program at Syracuse University, 1931–1960
 By Thalia M. Mulvihill, Doctoral Candidate, 141
 Cultural Foundations of Education,
 Syracuse University
 Mulvihill tells the story of the Student Dean Program: how it started, what it was all about, and how its impact is still being felt.
- News of the Syracuse University Library and of Library Associates 151
 Post-Standard Award Citation for Arthur J. Pulos
 Recent Acquisitions:
 The William Safire Collection
 The Smith Poster Archive
 Additions to the Russel Wright Papers
 The Odell Cylinder Collection
 The Alan Rafkin Papers
 Library Associates Program for 1994–95

The Syracuse University Professoriate, 1870–1960: Four Grand Masters in the Arts

BY DAVID TATHAM

This paper was read on 15 September 1994 as part of the Syracuse University Library Associates lecture series.

FOR MUCH OF HIS long tenure as Chancellor of Syracuse University, William Pearson Tolley hosted each spring a dinner honoring retiring faculty, to which he invited all other faculty, as well as members of the administration and staff.¹ I first attended in 1960, as a very junior administrator, military service behind me, but still a year and a half from teaching my first class.

The Chancellor's Dinner was the sole occasion each year when the professoriate of all the University's schools and colleges gathered together socially, and it was a time when many of them, at least for an evening, shared a restored sense of community and a heightened feeling that everyone present played a vital part in the enterprise of teaching and learning. By the late 1950s, the Chancellor's Dinner had become a gala event that filled Sims Dining Hall, the present Lowe Art Gallery, with more than five hundred people. The Sims kitchen brought forth its most elegant meal of the year, though in those days of institutional abstemiousness the stemware at each place held water only. A spirit of bonhomie reigned, in part because many of those assembled had arrived from one or another of the cocktail parties that ritually preceded this event at private homes throughout the city, and in part because at this event teaching, the most fundamental of university functions, took center stage to receive honors. This seemed right, since nearly every retiree in

David Tatham is professor of fine arts at Syracuse University. He is the author of books and articles concerning the history of nineteenth-century American art, including many relating to Winslow Homer.

1. "Chancellor's Annual Dinner" and "Chancellor's Retirement Dinner" files, Syracuse University Archives.

those years had spent his or her professional life in the classroom as an undergraduate teacher, and had spent it at Syracuse University.²

The Sims Hall Chancellor's Dinners culminated in an address on a topic of general interest. The subjects ranged widely, from foreign affairs to natural resources; but in 1960 Sawyer Falk, the University's esteemed professor of drama, complimented his audience by taking teaching itself as his topic. He drew distinctions between the great teacher, who, as he observed, "sets aflame the student's mind," and other teachers, an ever-difficult task, since, as he also observed, "tokens of greatness defy classification and analysis."³ But he had no difficulty in categorizing lesser kinds of teachers, all worthy enough, but far from transcendent greatness. Such lesser types constituted the mass of his audience, of course, and those of us at the beginning of careers in teaching seemed to understand as he spoke that while we might become useful pedants of the better kind, none of us was likely to become Falk's highest type, the teacher who succeeds as a creative artist succeeds, who reaches beyond the mind's scholarly engagement with a body of knowledge to touch, without sentiment, the human heart. His speech sparked thunderous applause.

I will return to Sawyer Falk's address and the question of why it made such a stunning impact on his colleagues, but first I take his subject merely as a point of departure to discuss four figures of great achievement in the arts at Syracuse University during its first century: George Fisk Comfort, Irene Sargent, Ivan Meštrović, and Sawyer Falk himself. I have selected the four not only because they are intrinsically interesting people (which is not a requirement for great teaching) and are from fields in which I have some competence, but also because their careers reflected local manifestations of changes that occurred in the professoriate nationwide at four points in its history. Though each represents a different generation, they share a few things: great learning grounded in the classical tradition; exceptional success as teachers; a national reputation—international in the case of Meštrović—achieved through work

2. A few of the retirees were library staff.

3. Sawyer Falk's address was later published. See footnote 27.

outside university teaching; and enough strength of character to discomfort some colleagues.

George Fisk Comfort came to Syracuse in 1871, when the institution began its second year. He came just as American higher education entered a period of wholesale reform of its curriculum. Comfort's chief contribution to that reform was to bring the study of the fine arts—art, architecture, and music—into the curriculum. Professional education in these fields had previously been the province of academies, conservatories, and apprenticeships. Comfort made that preparation also the business of universities. He sustained the growing belief of his times that the fine arts constituted a moral force for the good, but he now also cast them in more topical terms as indispensable to the creation of the national high culture that Americans hoped would dawn in the post-Civil War years. More than a little boosterism bolstered Comfort's argument at this level, but the genuineness of his belief in the future greatness of American society in general, and of its art and architecture in particular, is beyond question. At the level of curricular innovation, Comfort, as much as anyone, introduced the systematic study of the history and theory of the arts to American college classrooms, and he did this without textbooks or slides.⁴

Comfort brought an interesting background to Syracuse. He had earned degrees in classical philology in the 1850s, then spent five years in the 1860s, poor as a church mouse, traveling throughout Europe to see at first hand the major monuments of art and architecture of Western civilization. In Berlin he studied with the historian Leopold von Ranke, among others, and in both Berlin and London he absorbed the thought that had arisen in those cities to redefine for the modern world what an art museum should be and do. These new ideas, grounded in philology, organized art objects systematically on objective "scientific principles," classifying them geographically and chronologically, and working out their historical significance. Museums guided by this new thought began to build comprehensive collections of objects judged by connoisseurs

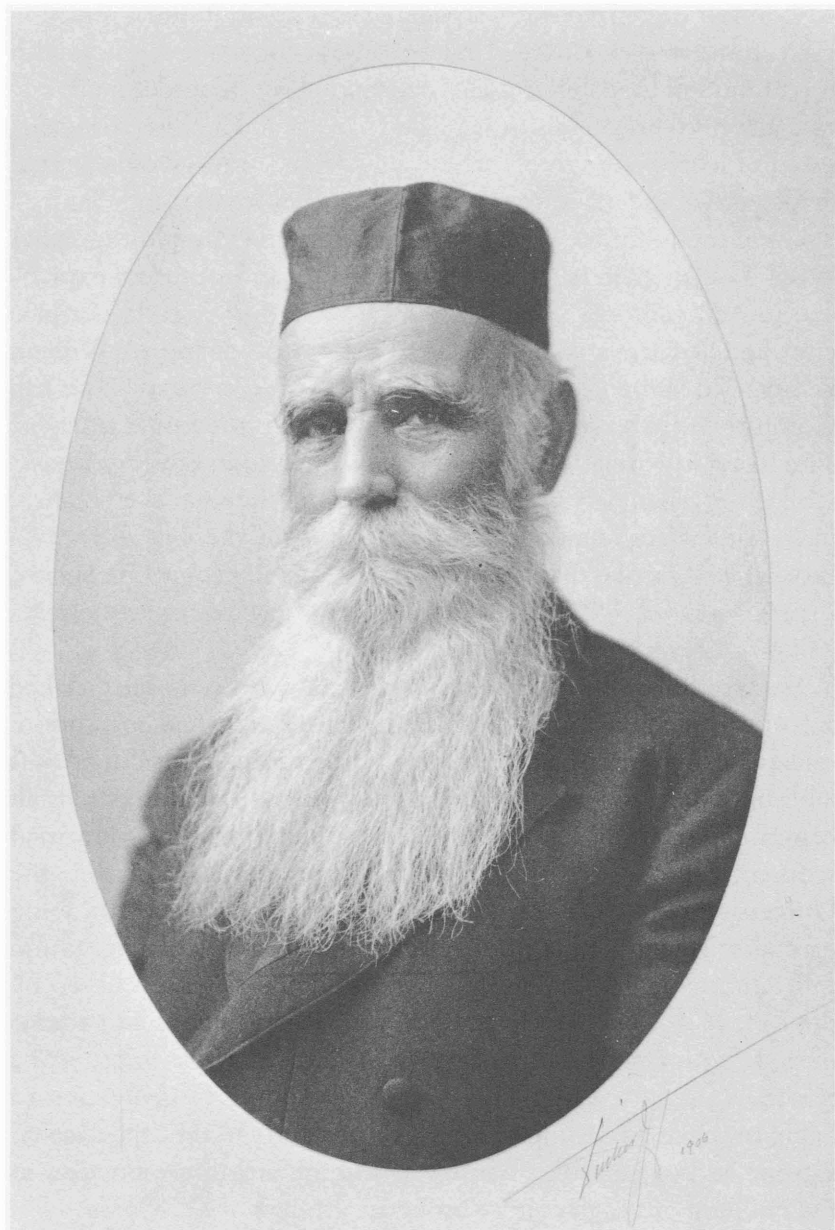
4. I have drawn Comfort's biographical history from the Comfort Family Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

to be fine or at least characteristic specimens of visual art from pre-history to the recent past. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century these ideas had begun to put an end to older ways of thinking about art objects merely as curiosities, as religious artifacts deserving veneration more than study, as badges of princely power or private wealth, or as objects whose beauty spoke for itself and required no explanation. The age of the public art museum had opened, and the explanation of art, based on “scientific principles,” now became a scholarly enterprise.

Museums guided by these ideas became symbols of civic stature. By the early 1870s, major American cities had moved decisively to establish public collections of art meant to rival those of Europe. Soon, artists themselves came for the first time to view the art museum, and a rapidly developing museum culture, as a factor in their own production. Beginning with Syracuse’s initiative in 1871, American colleges and universities increasingly measured their own stature by a commitment to the teaching of the fine arts, a realm that a decade earlier had no place whatever in their curricula.

Earlier, on his return to America in 1866, Comfort had taught briefly at Allegheny, Drew, and, probably, Princeton. Then, in 1869 he accepted the invitation of a group of civic leaders in New York City to instruct it in the principles underpinning this new age of museums and to develop a plan for a grand public art collection in New York. From this came the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1870. Comfort helped secure the museum’s Central Park site from Boss Tweed and served on the museum’s board for a year. Then, married and in need of a regular income, he accepted Syracuse University’s invitation to create an undergraduate degree program in the arts.

From the beginning his plan for Syracuse’s new college included departments of art, architecture, and music, but the meagerness of his resources required him to proceed by stages. Art got underway in 1873 with the opening of the Hall of Languages. Architecture soon followed; music began in 1877, all housed, along with the College of Liberal Arts, as well as the University library and chapel (both doing double duty as classrooms), in the same imposing building.



George F. Comfort in 1906 (Syracuse University Archives).

Comfort organized every aspect of these fields of study, planning each course in detail before finding someone to teach it. He had no useful models available to follow and no cadre of academics ready to teach his courses. His initial faculty in art and architecture consisted of local practitioners whom he persuaded to give their time gratis: these included the painters George Knapp and Sanford Thayer, the architect Archimedes Russell, and the photographer Ward Ranger (who had served on Smithsonian Institution expeditions). At Comfort's prompting, local musicians organized a glee club and did the spade work that led to the hiring of William Schultze to begin professional studies in music in 1877. With this Comfort began to assemble a paid faculty of professional teachers. The interactive relationship among the three units gave Syracuse's College of Fine Arts a distinct identity, one beyond the reach of independent academies and conservatories of the day and much broader in its scope than the historically more celebrated programs in arts, each very different from the other, that began in the mid-1840s at Harvard and Yale.

Why did Syracuse's pioneering program succeed? First, it had the enormous advantage of being launched at a new institution, one as yet unburdened by tradition but very much needing to establish a distinctive identity among the several colleges already in central New York. Then, too, from the start Syracuse welcomed women, a necessity for a proper music program. Moreover, the University served its students custodially, *in loco parentis*, and some parents of nascent artists, architects, and musicians must have found this a more salubrious arrangement than that typically offered by the boarding houses that served private conservatories and academies. But probably more important than any of these things was a readiness among cultivated Americans of Comfort's generation to begin to shake off feelings of cultural inferiority in the arts vis-à-vis Europe and to commit themselves through artistic production to the building of a high culture on home ground.

One measure of the new college's success was its new home, the John Crouse Memorial Building, opened in 1889 and named for its donor who, ironically, had no particular interest in the arts and

who harbored misgivings about coeducation.⁵ The building's auditorium served as the University's chapel for forty years, until the construction of Hendricks Chapel. Crouse included a spacious art exhibition room, the distant forebear of both the Syracuse University Art Collection and the Lowe Art Gallery. This building, growing enrollments, an ever larger faculty, and the acquisition of such treasures as the Wolff-Leavenworth collection of prints and the Audubon double-elephant-folio *Birds of America* attested to Comfort's success. He may also have played a role in the University's acquisition in the 1880s of the library of his celebrated teacher Leopold von Ranke.

In 1893 Comfort resigned to accept an offer to head a college of fine arts at an envisioned new university in Texas. The proposed institution did not materialize, leaving him at age sixty nearly penniless and without a job. He returned to Syracuse and attempted to regain a University appointment. Though the deanship he had left was once again vacant, and many of his colleagues and local citizens urged Chancellor James Roscoe Day to reappoint him, the strong feeling of John D. Archbold, chairman of the University's board of trustees, that anyone who willingly left the University "family" could never be welcomed back, prevailed.⁶ Comfort declared bankruptcy. He wrote to his son,

I have surrendered my library, though it has gone hard with my feelings. I somehow had hoped to keep it . . . but I have given it up. My intellectual life for over thirty years was locked up with that library. I bought the books here and there, in Europe and America, when I was a young man

5. Comfort's wife expressed grave disapproval of the broadened use of John Crouse's name when in 1904 it ceased to apply only to the building he had donated and became the name of the college housed in the building. Anna Manning Comfort to former Chancellor Charles N. Sims, 29 September 1904; to John D. Archbold, 7 June 1911; and to Frank Smalley, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Comfort's former colleague, 13 June 1911. Comfort Family Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

6. W. Freeman Galpin, *Syracuse University: The Growing Years* (Syracuse University Press, 1960), 60–61.

and when an older man. I have used them in writing my books and getting up my lectures. It was . . . hard to give it up, but it is done and my mind is calm. Let it go!⁷

His wife, Anna Manning Comfort, who had earned a medical degree in the 1860s, practiced in New York, and then set aside her career for a few years in Syracuse to raise her children, now returned to her profession to try to keep the wolf from the door. She had already served as the family's main source of income in the earliest years of her husband's deanship when the University found itself in financial distress and could not pay his modest salary for several months.⁸

Within a few years, Comfort rose from the ashes of his ruined career to repeat on a much smaller scale in the city of Syracuse what he had done in New York nearly thirty years earlier. He brought an art museum into being. After five years of planning, in 1900 the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, now the Everson Museum, opened its doors. From the evidence of the museum's first decade, a case can be made that, despite the meagerness of his resources, Comfort was perhaps the most innovative and visionary museum director in America in these years.⁹ The University, reflecting Chancellor Day's censorious stance, kept its distance. Paid little more than a subsistence salary, Comfort remained director of the Syracuse Museum until his death in 1910 at age seventy-seven.

The break that Comfort's College of Fine Arts had made with the old liberal arts curriculum in the 1870s signaled the spirit of the times. Within a generation, now following rather than establishing a national pattern, Syracuse instituted colleges of applied science, forestry, agriculture, and teaching, and planned others. The faculties of these colleges had little to share in their intellectual and

7. Comfort to Ralph Manning Comfort, 29 February 1896. Comfort Family Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

8. Comfort Family Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

9. His chief rival in innovative thinking about American museums in the first decade of the century was John Cotton Dana of the much better funded Newark Museum, a younger man who, unlike Comfort, was sympathetic to the early stirrings of modernism in America.

professional interests. When Chancellor Tolley instituted his annual retirement dinner in the 1940s, he meant to restore some sense of common ground to a now highly diversified faculty by honoring the then near-universal activity of undergraduate teaching.

Irene Sargent joined the faculty of the College of Fine Arts in 1895.¹⁰ She was but one of several notable women on the College of Fine Arts faculty. Jeanette Scott, who had attended the Pennsylvania Academy beginning in Thomas Eakins's last year of teaching at that institution, and then studied in Paris for five years, came to Syracuse directly from Paris as an instructor in 1895. Soon promoted to professor, she headed the department of painting from 1912 to 1927. Minnie Mason Beebe, widowed at an early age, joined the college as professor of history and French, reflecting Comfort's belief that since the arts held such intimate associations with languages and history, the college should have its own faculty in these fields. She taught for thirty-seven years; a University building once bore her name.¹¹ Belle Brewster, who had studied voice and choral conducting first in Germany and then in London at the Royal College of Music with Sir George Henschel and Alberto Randegger, taught for more than a quarter of a century. Rilla Jackman taught in the Teachers College rather than in the College of Fine Arts, but her once-standard text in the history of American art, published in the early 1920s, allied her with the College of Fine Arts.¹² During Sargent's long tenure, the faculty of the College of Fine Arts grew from twenty-five to forty, and during all this time women occupied a third or more of its positions. Not until recent

10. I thank Cleota Reed, who is preparing a monograph about Sargent, for unpublished biographical data. See Reed's preliminary studies, "Irene Sargent: Rediscovering a Lost Legend," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 16 (Summer 1979): 3-13; and "Irene Sargent: A Comprehensive Bibliography of Her Published Writings," *Courier* 18 (Spring 1981): 9-25. I also thank Bettina Chapman, former trustee of the University, for sharing with me her recollections of her classes with Sargent in 1931-32.

11. Beebe Cottage, a residence for women students at 119 Euclid Avenue, in the 1980s became the administrative center of the University's Division of International Programs Abroad.

12. Rilla Jackman, *American Arts* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1928).

years have women again begun to constitute an equivalently prominent part of the University's faculty in the arts.¹³

Sargent gained her advanced education in the history of art and architecture through studies with Charles Eliot Norton and others at Harvard in the late 1870s, presumably as an auditor, and then at universities in Rome and Paris. She traveled widely in Europe, taught privately, and published critical essays on literature before coming to Syracuse. In the College of Fine Arts she taught not only the history of art and architecture but also Romance languages. For advanced students she taught Gothic architecture in French and the High Renaissance in Italian.

Her teaching schedule, typical of its times, filled the day. In the spring semester of 1920, in her mid-seventies, she taught courses in the history of architecture, the history of world art, the history of American art, and the history of ornament, as well as first- and second-year Italian, third-year Latin, a tutorial in Dante, and technical French for architects. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, she taught in her classroom in Crouse College steadily from ten to five, with an hour off for lunch. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, she taught from nine to twelve.¹⁴ At the start of those courses in which she closed the classroom shutters to show lantern slides, she ritually intoned: "The gentlemen will kindly sit in the rear of the room, and the lady students will sit in the front. Gentlemen and ladies will not sit together, as the dark inspires men to evil deeds." No one laughed.

In after hours she found time to publish in journals a large body of historical and critical essays in the arts, more than a hundred over nearly thirty years, wide-ranging in their subjects and original in their observations. Some of her articles continue to be anthologized. Between 1900 and 1904 she served as de facto managing editor of Gustav Stickley's newly founded *Craftsman* magazine while con-

13. The expectation by the 1940s that faculty have advanced degrees tended to eliminate women in some fields, since they had little access to advanced study. Sargent was among the very few women teachers of architectural history in American universities, but she had no women students in this field.

14. Time Schedule of Classes for 1928–29. Class Schedules, Syracuse University Archives.



Irene Sargent (Syracuse University Archives).

tributing regularly to its monthly issues. In its first year she devoted entire issues to John Ruskin and William Morris. Sargent began her writing career before scholarly journals in the visual arts had come into being in America—they began to appear after the First World War. With Stickley's help, she in essence created a journal for herself and like-minded students of the fine and decorative arts. After Stickley moved from Syracuse to New York in 1904, Sargent gained a new outlet through *The Keystone*, a jeweller's trade journal in Philadelphia. Except for a few scattered pieces, Sargent's papers seem not to have survived; if they had, they would surely illuminate much about the emergence of scholarly publication in the arts in America in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Comfort and Sargent make an instructive contrast. Comfort's important publications, in philology and museum theory, came early, before he arrived in Syracuse. Thereafter, he invested his energies in creating a field of study, organizing a curriculum, and assembling the people to make it work; but he published little, other than pieces for the Syracuse newspapers that explained, in fascinating detail for present-day readers, the rationale for the new college and its courses. In contrast, Sargent's prolific activity as an author began when she joined the faculty, and went hand in hand with her long career as a teacher, the one endeavor reinforcing the other, and neither interrupted by deanly duties. Her writings were not pedagogical; they addressed the general educated public. She represented a new spirit in the professoriate, one that rewarded the teacher who went beyond the classroom to make an impact for the good on society at large.

She was a socialist of the William Morris stripe, no threat to the established political order but a devoted believer in the power of the arts and crafts—of handwork—to improve the social and aesthetic distress spawned by industrialization. In the 1870s, Comfort had seen the public museum and civic art as the best measures of a society's cultural maturity. Thirty years later Sargent looked as well to the arts of design and decoration in the domestic dwelling and the public schools. As much as anyone publishing in America, she strove to dissolve arbitrary distinctions between fine and decorative arts. Through her criticism she elevated discussion of the crafts to a

more serious level than had previously been known in America. Despite her years, she managed to accommodate the rapid changes that arrived with the new century. Notes taken from her lectures in the 1920s mention Picasso and Cubism.

Comfort and Sargent in succession taught the history of art and architecture for nearly sixty years to students preparing for careers as artists and architects. They did so in an era when university administration was much simpler and more personal than it would become by the middle decades of the twentieth century. We know the details of Sargent's teaching load in the late 1920s because one of Charles Wesley Flint's reforms after he assumed the Chancellorship in 1922 was to institute modern systems of record-keeping. Day's age of autocracy gave way to Flint's era of procedural fairness, with its growth of committees, forms, and administrative staff. This shift in the twenties probably underlay Sargent's response to a Saturday morning class in the autumn of 1931, when she learned from the students that in the afternoon they would be in Archbold Stadium watching the Syracuse football team play Michigan State. She said, "I am sorry to have to tell you that Syracuse University will be unable to prevail in this contest, since Michigan State University is a well run institution and Syracuse University is tied up in red tape."¹⁵

Though she was a woman of great learning, Sargent had no academic degrees. Syracuse rectified this by awarding her an honorary M.A. in 1911 and an honorary D. Litt. in 1922. In 1926 she became the second woman in the nation inducted as an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects. She died in 1932, unretired at age eighty. In an era before Social Security, or TIAA/CREF, retirement from university teaching often meant poverty, genteel or worse. Sargent lies buried in Oakwood Cemetery in the now all-but-forgotten Syracuse University lot for indigent faculty, her grave marked by a stone donated by a devoted student.¹⁶ The deep-

15. Recalled by Bettina Chapman.

16. According to tradition, the former student was Mary Imogen Day, daughter of Chancellor Day, and for some years an instructor in music in the College of Fine Arts.

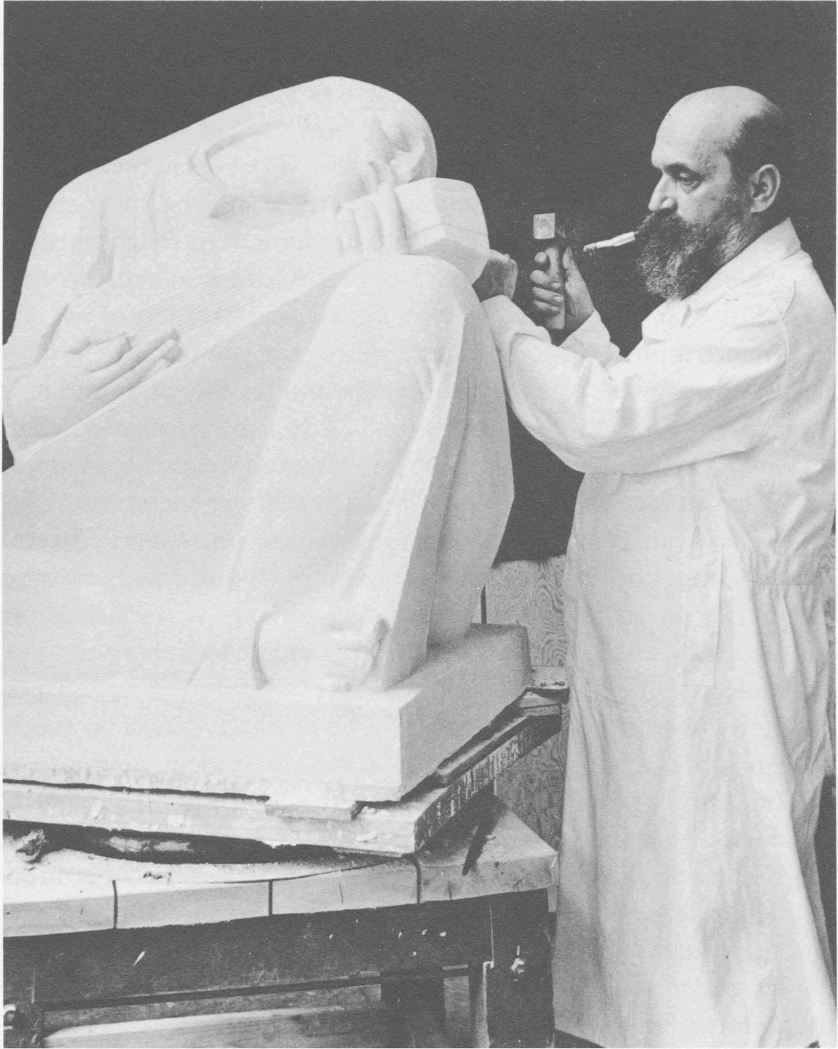
ening of the Depression prevented the appointment of a successor. As a stop-gap, a member of the music faculty was assigned to teach her courses in the history of the visual arts, which he did, with some success, by reading her lecture notes.¹⁷ The fact that as late as 1946 he was still doing so reflects the near-paralyzing effect of the Depression and the Second World War on the University.

Ivan Meštrović joined the faculty in 1947, at age 64, as an internationally celebrated sculptor.¹⁸ Though he liked to emphasize that he had emerged from peasant stock, he had in fact received a first-rate education in sculpture and architecture in Vienna early in the century amid the first stirrings of modernism. Rodin claimed him as his natural successor. Working in Yugoslavia, by 1920 he had become a major figure of world art. By 1927 his heroic equestrian statues of Indians were a commanding presence in Chicago's Grant Park. His refusal to return to his native Croatia after the Communists took power in 1946 left him, in a world only just beginning to heal after years of depression and war, in need of a haven. Through the intercession of the sculptor Malvina Hoffman, William Pearson Tolley created a professorship for Meštrović. By then, Comfort's College of Fine Arts had become three largely independent schools of art, architecture, and music. The College of Liberal Arts had begun its own program in art history and musicology for students not intending studio or performance careers.

In the School of Art Meštrović became, in effect, an artist-in-residence, that is, someone whose career has been in the arts rather than in university teaching, and who continues that career while assuming a new one. In the decades following the war many universities began to add luster to their faculty rosters by appointing painters, novelists, dancers, singers, poets, and others as artists-in-residence. Meštrović stands among the earliest and the most successful of this new species of teacher.

17. Recalled by former students and faculty of the 1940s. The lecture notes seem not to have survived.

18. For Meštrović's biography, see Laurence Schmeckebier, *Ivan Meštrović: Sculptor and Patriot* (Syracuse University Press, 1959), and the Ivan Meštrović clipping file, Syracuse University Archives.



Ivan Meštrović at work on *Croatian Rhapsody* (Syracuse University Archives).

For his eight years at Syracuse, during which time he worked steadily on his own commissions, his students, who were chiefly at the graduate level, revered him. He had arrived at a time when the University, like others nationwide, had begun to put a new emphasis on graduate programs. By the time he left, in 1955, to accept a professorship at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, distinctions between undergraduate and graduate teaching, long-established in the nation's premier institutions, had begun to appear everywhere. I recall that in the 1950s most younger faculty members of my acquaintance aspired to a condition of pure graduate teaching, a state few ever achieved. A belief had arisen within the professoriate's younger generation that undergraduate teaching offered lesser challenges and brought lesser rewards. This belief dominated much of American higher education for the succeeding generation.

The University converted a carriage house on Marshall Street, east of University Avenue, into a sculpture studio; but Meštrović did much of his teaching of graduate students at his home on Livingston Avenue, where the University erected a military surplus prefabricated building as an annex to his own studio. A newspaper clipping shows him standing by one of his works in that facility with visitors (not students) at a reception. Graduate student-apprentices in sculpture began most days with a three-hour life drawing class conducted by Meštrović in his studio, following which he retired to his house for lunch and a siesta while they turned their attention to their projects. He emerged at two, critiqued each student's efforts, and then went to his own work in his adjoining studio, encouraging his students to observe him. They left at five; he continued into the evening. His limited command of the English language proved no impediment to communication.¹⁹

The degree of independence relative to the rest of the faculty enjoyed by artists-in-residence becomes clear in a recollection published by Professor Jim Ridlon. As a student, he sought to be admitted to one of the master's classes. Meštrović looked at his work and said no. Ridlon asked the dean of the School of Art to inter-

19. I am grateful to Professor Emerita Luise Meyers Kaish of Columbia University for her recollections of study with Meštrović.

cede. Knowing that the young man had notable talents, Dean Schmeckebier gave him a memo to carry to the sculptor, requesting that he be admitted to the class. Meštrović took the memo from Ridlon, read it, held it to his ever-present cigar, and watched it burn.²⁰ It is hard to imagine an “ordinary” member of the faculty of the arts at that time responding quite this way to a message from the dean, even though some of them, such as Arthur Poister, the School of Music’s nationally acclaimed teacher of organ, were of near-equivalent stature in their fields.

Like Comfort, Sargent, and Falk, Meštrović possessed a degree of creative energy that seemed phenomenal to others. In his eight years at Syracuse he fulfilled numerous commissions for patrons in the United States and Europe, including some for Syracuse University, including a bust of Chancellor Tolley now in Lubin House. One Syracuse commission was never begun. At the request of the Chancellor, but without consultation with the artist, a large block of limestone was set into the second story of the north wall of the Women’s Building in the hope that Meštrović would agree to carve it. Sculptural architectural decoration is a product of studios, however, and not of open-air carving on scaffolds, and the project came to naught. By the time he left for South Bend, a move rationalized too simply at the time by the claim that he preferred to conclude his career at a Catholic school rather than at a Methodist one, Syracuse University owned more than two dozen of his works. Any institution must count itself fortunate when an artist-in-residence proves to be not only a passionately committed teacher but also a richly productive artist. Teachers pass from memory; art survives, tended by the muses, daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory) and Zeus (Power).

Of my quartet of major figures in the arts at Syracuse, only Sawyer Falk determined as a student to make a profession of university teaching.²¹ He committed himself to drama, a field that had been omitted at Syracuse, and elsewhere throughout the nation,

20. Stars Magazine, Syracuse *Herald American*, 15 April 1984, p. 5. Ridlon persisted and later became one of Meštrović’s most distinguished students.

21. I have drawn biographical information from the Sawyer Falk Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

when degree programs in fine arts began to appear in the 1870s. As late as the early 1920s, drama as an independent field of study still had no place in academe. Dramatic literature remained the province of classics and modern language departments. Dramatic production remained an extracurricular activity. Falk essentially accomplished for drama what Comfort had accomplished for art and music more than fifty years earlier: he gained it acceptance into the university curriculum. He was not alone in this effort in the 1920s to elevate drama above the status of entertainment on American campuses, but he soon became and long remained a national leader of the movement to gain academic respectability for a field long viewed as unworthy of it.

When Falk established drama as a field of study at Syracuse in 1927 it did not become a component of the College of Fine Arts. As happened at many other institutions, drama found a place in the school of Speech and Dramatic Arts. This left it in an ever-awkward operational relationship to the fields of art and music, whose students drama needed for its productions, as well as to the Department of English, with whom drama now competed in the field of dramatic literature. Even within the University's School of Speech the Department of Drama's intimate relationship with other arts distinguished it from the normative and therapeutic goals of the rest of the school. As professor of drama, Falk wore two hats. He was at once a classroom teacher (who headed a department) and the director of university dramatic activities. The latter responsibility embraced not only those productions that served Department of Drama students as professional training for the "living theatre," but also other productions open to students campus-wide as an extracurricular activity. When a colleague described Falk as uncommonly rigorous in the standards he demanded of his students, and sometimes gruff and testy in his relations with others at the University, he merely described the manner of a person determined to pilot a new and still vulnerable field of study through rough waters.²²

22. William Pearson Tolley's reference to Falk as a "prima donna" in Tolley's *At the Fountain of Youth: Memories of a College President* (Syracuse, 1989), 96, doubtless reflects Falk's necessary independence of spirit. A more considered

After studies at Columbia and New York University, and teaching at Hillsdale College in Michigan, Falk at age twenty-nine received an invitation from Chancellor Flint to develop an academic program in drama. In accepting the appointment in the spring of 1927, he wrote:

My fundamental opinion of the study of Drama is that it must stress two points of view: the cultural, whereby it merits inclusion in a college curriculum, and the practical, whereby it justifies, as it must, its relation to a living theatre, . . . [and] implies art to be done rather than art to be talked about.²³

In a news release announcing his appointment, which it described as the most important in its field in the nation, the University made clear what it had promised Falk:

Erection of a new theatre building to house two complete stages, classroom, workshops, and equipment comparable to the best playhouses in New York City. The Chancellor has promised that this will be completed within two years. Professor Falk is already at work on it. . . .²⁴

In the event, Falk was left to make bricks without straw. The Crash of 1929, a decade-long Depression, and the Second World War and its aftermath prevented him from even seeing a purpose-built facility for his program, or for that matter, any facility worthy of his goals. He improvised, using such spaces as the lobby of Slocum Hall and the downtown Civic Theatre until, after the war, he gained for his program part of Machinery Hall when it was emptied of obsolete engineering apparatus. Into this he built, to his own design, the Boar's Head and Coronet theatres, scarcely adequate to the purposes, but from which came a continuing series of

opinion, and one shared widely, was reflected in Vice Chancellor Frank Piskor's note to Falk the morning following his address at the 1960 faculty dinner: "Last night's performance and paper were magnificent. I am proud to know you." Sawyer Falk Papers, Syracuse University Archives.

23. Falk to Hugh Massey Tilroe, dean of the School of Speech, Sawyer Falk Papers, University Correspondence, 1927-29, Syracuse University Archives.

24. Syracuse University press release, n.d., Sawyer Falk Papers, University Correspondence, 1927-29, Syracuse University Archives.



Sawyer Falk (© 1939 Bachrach).

admirable productions, many of which are remembered decades later by Syracuse theatre-goers of wide experience for moments, scenes, and individual performances, scarcely surpassed on the professional stage.

Falk's curriculum and teaching moved ahead largely undeterred by the inadequacy of his facilities. His emphasis on acting as the "rock foundation" of studies in drama gave his program distinction, and so did his teaching in other areas. He and his students made films before 1930. He provided, through articles, correspondence, and national discussion, the first body of principled thought on film censorship. On censorship itself in any realm he became an early and powerful voice in support of intellectual freedom. He taught script-writing and wrote plays himself. His work as a director in the professional theatre in New York, and his leadership in national theatre organizations over many years, added to his reputation as a man who could do anything well.

He had been told in 1927 to form a department, and that the department would be his. For more than a third of a century he ruled it, much as a stage director rules a production. He did not suffer fools gladly and he wasted no words when it came to protecting his department's interests and reputation. A single instance points up his recurrent need to work across administrative boundaries from his relatively isolated position in the School of Speech. In 1947 Ernst Bacon, a distinguished musician indeed, served as dean of the School of Music. The school's students were essential to the success of many of the activities overseen by the Department of Drama. Bacon, perhaps reflecting a current of thought within the music faculty, wrote to Falk in a memo on 8 January, between semesters, sounding rather like Pooh-Bah:

In order to facilitate all our cooperative arrangements, we suggest that when you wish to use any of the music students in music shows of your undertaking, you give us a list of the persons desired and we will clear the matter of their availability and the desirability of their participation with their respective voice teachers.²⁵

25. Sawyer Falk Papers, Correspondence with Ernst Bacon, Syracuse University Archives.

The next day, Falk responded:

I have your note regarding the participation by students of the College of Fine Arts in the Dramatic Activities of Syracuse University. The only thing I have to say at this moment is that I don't intend to be bound by rules that you make up as you go along; nor do I intend to be beholden to you or to anybody else in your school. You cannot seem to understand that this is an extracurricular activity open to all students in terms of their choosing.²⁶

By the late 1950s, Falk's students from three decades as well as his colleagues in his field at Syracuse and other universities viewed him not only as a legendary teacher, but also as a heroic one, and this is perhaps why Chancellor Tolley invited him to address the retirement dinner in 1960. Falk titled his address "The Sons of Acastes," taking as his text that passage of the Aeneid in which four archers compete for honors by shooting at a dove tethered by a ribbon to a ship's mast. Falk used the archers as models for his four types of teachers.²⁷

The first shoots and hits the mast, no mean feat, and earns the cheers of the assembled onlookers, as a show of a high degree of competence should. None of the other three would hear cheers.

The second shoots and, reluctant to kill a tethered bird, hits instead the ribbon, breaks it, and sets the dove free. The third archer instantly raises his bow and sends his arrow directly to its mark, catching the bird in mid-flight and bringing it to the ground.

At which point the fourth, Acastes, having no target, raises his bow and shoots an arrow heavenward, toward the gods, and as it passes into the clouds it bursts into flame. Aeneas awards first place to Acastes, and Falk did the same to the rare type of teacher who succeeds in aiming beyond secure competence, who seeks to do more than to free his students from the ties of convention, who aspires to more, even, than to synthesize ideas in flight and bring

26. Ibid.

27. Falk, *The Sons of Acastes* (Syracuse University, 1960). Illustrated with drawings by Professor Robert Marx, and designed by Professor Peter Piening, the pamphlet publication of Falk's address was twice reprinted.

them to earth for close study. Falk's rare great teacher reaches for the gods and in doing so sets aflame his students' minds.

Falk elaborated richly on this story and its implications for teaching in his own time, and he held his audience in thrall. He was a performer, and at his best this evening. Surely one of the reasons why those gathered in Sims applauded him so enthusiastically, and he received so many congratulatory notes in the succeeding days, rested in his colleagues' pride of association with him. At least as much as the national football championship of the previous autumn, Falk gave the assembled faculty reason to believe that Syracuse was indeed a school of excellence.

But the applause also had something to do with a complex historical moment. In 1960 nearly everyone in Falk's audience understood to some degree that an era was ending, that a new epoch had arrived. Undergraduate teaching, which had been the mainstay of Syracuse's professoriate since 1871, and which had long been accepted as a noble enterprise, now seemed destined to assume a secondary status in the envisioned next phase of the University's development. In his address Falk quoted his good friend Brooks Atkinson, drama critic of the *New York Times*: "We sometimes forget that teaching is a great force in civilization. Great teaching is creative; given the raw materials of mind and spirit it can produce men [and women] who are awakened to the wonders of the universe." Hardly anyone in American higher education in 1960 would have disagreed with this sentiment, but at the same time it was not hard to see that universities were reordering their values.

The view from 1960 revealed a new order. Faculty appointments and faculty rewards in most fields at the university level would now come from research more than teaching, or at any event, from graduate rather than undergraduate teaching. Believing that heavy teaching loads lowered the quality of instruction (*pace* Comfort, Sargent, and Falk), university faculties would teach less, and shift a significant part of undergraduate instruction to teaching assistants. Increasing specialization would further diminish the common ground within the institution, and would find faculty often communicating more vitally with colleagues, agencies, and others in their specialty outside the university than with anyone

within. The interplay of faculty with public, locally and farther afield, so vital to Comfort, Sargent, Meštrović, and Falk's generations, would diminish sharply. The new age of higher education would have its own glories in ample quantity, including great teaching, but it would be a different age.

It seems clear that all but the youngest members of Falk's audience in Sims Dining Hall sensed that his address amounted to their last hurrah. In applauding him they applauded the values that had sustained them in the dark days of national distress and personal sacrifice. The new age opened around them rapidly. Chancellor Tolley oversaw a transition between the old order and the new that preserved, perhaps as much as any university of its time could, a human spirit and a hope that undergraduate teaching might still count as a "great force." But it was perhaps a measure of just how rapidly the new order took hold that in 1963, two years after Sawyer Falk's death, the Chancellor discontinued his annual retirement dinner for the faculty.