

# SYA

MAGAZINE





# En plein air

In Rennes,  
and around the world



**Painter and architect** Jacob Higginbottom FR'89 grew up in a practical Maine family. His grandfather was an engineer; his parents expected him to attend an engineering school. While Higginbottom loved the art classes at Hall-Dale High School in Hallowell, Maine, most people in his life made it clear that art for pleasure was fine, but hardly a serious pursuit. Then, at age 17, Higginbottom arrived in Rennes.



“I had never been anywhere remotely like that,” Higginbottom, 38, says. “You couldn’t avoid art. It felt like creative space and design were so much a part of the built environment. Rennes feels like a mini Paris: so many fun corner galleries, a million churches and public buildings and squares. I spent a lot of time sketching in those places, and in the Parc du Thabor.”

Higginbottom dutifully continued to take math during his SYA year, and to apply to universities with engineering programs. But he thrilled to the art history instruction of Jean-Philippe Lemée, who created SYA’s Art History program in 1981 and has been teaching it ever since. A successful painter and sculptor, Lemée has exhibited in France and abroad.

“Lemée took us through the great art and architecture centers of France to the Louvre, Montmartre, the Loire Valley, Mont Saint Michel, and in the south to Arles and Per-

**It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college that I dared to call myself an artist. But it definitely started in France.**

pignan. This year solidified for me that despite my family’s encouragement towards engineering studies, art would always be my passion.

“Philippe was the first person I heard talk about art in a way that validated it,” Higginbottom says. “He made it sound important

in the context of a rigorous education. I came back with the confidence to say that this was something I believed in.”

Higginbottom enrolled at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The school’s strong engineering department pleased his family. At Lehigh, Higginbottom began to explore urban planning and architecture as a way to combine both art and science. He continued art history and formal drawing classes.

“It wasn’t until my sophomore year of college that I dared to call myself an artist,”

Higginbottom says. “But it definitely started in France.”

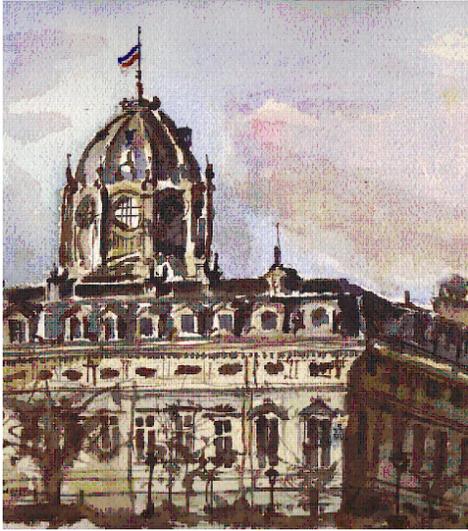
In his junior year of college, 1992, Higginbottom returned to do a year abroad studying urban planning with a Columbia University program. After graduating from Lehigh and studying architecture and urban



planning at the Boston Architectural Center, Higginbottom started work at Miller Dyer Spears, a Boston architectural firm that specializes in medical and educational buildings.

His work can be seen at institutions including the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Babson College, Northern Essex Community College and the United States Department of Labor’s Job Corps. One of his first projects, the planning and development of Boston’s Longwood Medical Area, received a national award for outstanding planning.

Despite this busy work life, Higginbottom continued to paint on during evenings and weekends, primarily in watercolors. While in high school, Higginbottom



initially found himself drawn to abstract modernists like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. After his year in Rennes, he became enamored of impressionists like Edgar Degas and Toulouse Lautrec, and of painting cityscapes outside, en plein air.

While artists have long painted outdoors, the idea of en plein air painting was revolutionary in the late 1800s when the invention of tube paints and the portable French box easel made it possible for painters to venture to out-of-the-way places. With these new tools, painters could quickly capture the different effects of natural sunlight and weather rather than laboring for weeks or months in a studio.

Higginbottom studied this style of watercolor with John Lovette, an Australian artist, and with Frank Constantino of Boston. He

teaches the technique at local art festivals and at the Fort Point Studio School. He says the key is to quickly find a center of interest, then to see and record the variations of city life, spontaneously and accurately. His art, which has been shown locally for at least a decade, explores the interplay between buildings and nature.

“I have always been drawn to the built environment and its ever-persistent decay at the hand of nature,” Higginbottom says.

Since his SYA year, he has traveled and painted in both America and Europe. These trips have resulted in series that depict Maine, Massachusetts, Chioggia, Italy; Greece’s Cycladic Islands and, of course, many places in France. A 2006 exhibit at Gulu-Gulu Café, a Boston coffee bar, performance space and gallery, featured “Paris Under Winter Skies.”

Higginbottom shows and sells his work from his loft at the Midway Studios in Boston’s funky Fort Point district, New England’s oldest artist community. He also exhibits on his Website, [www.jacobhigginbottom.com](http://www.jacobhigginbottom.com). “The art comes in fits and starts,” he says, estimating that he produces 10-12 paintings a year for sale.

“All my experiences in Europe have informed my style,” says Higginbottom, whose work critics have compared to the watercolors of John Singer Sargeant. “While I paint from real subjects I try to push what I see to exaggerate the forms and colors attempting to suggest life and personality in inanimate subjects.

“My ultimate goal is to express the passion for place and the love of the act of creating the piece. I attribute a large amount of my creativity and successes to the fact that the SYA experience opened my eyes to the enriching nature of embracing different lifestyles.”

Recently, Higginbottom has come full circle artistically: He has begun to explore the abstract styles that initially fired his imagination in high school, before his SYA year. A few abstract pieces have begun to show up on his Website.

“I’m taking kind of a hiatus from plein air painting, doing some abstract stuff,” he explains. “All the travel painting I’ve done informs what I’m doing now. When you’re painting outside, you have to work quickly. Some of the techniques I learned with plein air painting have helped with the abstract work I am doing now.”