

“They learn, in the open air, to handle palette and brushes”

Twice a week, a group of students leaves the city with backpacks and easels in hand. They head into the countryside to paint landscapes directly from nature—to learn, with skill and artistry, how to handle palette and brushes. This traveling school, unique among French-Canadian communities, is a remarkable initiative by Professor Jacques Béchar, founder and director of the Studio d’Art Indépendant. It currently has around fifty students of all ages and backgrounds. Among them is even the director’s mother, Mrs. Vincent Béchar, who at 60 is learning to paint lovely landscapes.

When it rains, classes are held at the studio on Jean-Talon Street. When the weather is fair, students go on artistic excursions every Wednesday and Saturday. They explore the areas around Montreal, reaching places like Piedmont, Rawdon, Valleyfield, Berthier, and others to paint varied and distinctive scenery. In conversation with Mr. Béchar, we learn that Wednesdays mainly attract housewives, teachers, and students. Saturdays bring a different group—typically stenographers, office workers, laborers, seamstresses, and nurses.

“These people enjoy getting out into the countryside after a week of work,” says Mr. Béchar. “While resting in a pleasant setting, they learn to paint beautiful panoramas, charming scenes from nature, using oil paints, pastels, watercolors, or charcoal. Since early June, we’ve already completed seven such excursions, visiting the most picturesque corners. Each group includes about 15 to 20 students. Everyone must finish their work the same day, as we don’t revisit the same location.”

Hands-on lessons

Each student is free to interpret the landscape in their own style. They are supported, from time to time, by the expert advice of Professor Béchar, who attentively oversees everyone at work. These are truly hands-on lessons and very popular, all thanks to Mr. Béchar’s initiative. Serious, honest, and artistically rich work is done here. It’s by no means a racket—as so many are—but rather an effective and well-organized effort to foster local talent.

“Many of our students are painting for the first time,” says Mr. Béchar. “After three or four lessons, they’re already producing very interesting results. In our community—especially within the working class—there is an abundance of talent for

drawing and painting. You'll see for yourself at the end of the summer, when we'll hold an exhibition of all our students' works. You're sure to be surprised!"

This outdoor landscape course is designed to encourage amateur and commercial artists to sketch and study directly on location — capturing landscapes, animals, trees, flowers, and more. No prior experience is required. Any serious person with some talent can accumulate sketches and paintings, which they'll rework during the off-season.

Beyond these summer classes, Mr. Jacques Béchard also teaches year-round courses at his studio, specializing in drawing and painting for commercial illustration. These one-year courses involve working with models and cover advertising, commercial, and industrial drawing. Local industries and businesses can recruit excellent illustrators here; it's a true incubator for drawing experts (more on that another time).

Jacques Béchard brings a wealth of experience to local talent. Born in Montmagny, he graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal in 1935.

"I've drawn my whole life," he says. "I taught drawing in Victoriaville, but I mainly practiced it in the wartime industries."

During the Second World War, he worked in the factories of St-Paul-l'Ermitte, where he illustrated a "blue book" cataloging all the munitions and explosives produced there. He created over 300 drawings depicting detonators, cartridges, bombs, shells, depth charges, and more. He was also responsible for illustrating each department of the vast manufacturing complex.

After the war, Mr. Béchard worked for Canadian National's telegraph service and then for the Shawinigan Water & Power Company. He left the latter in 1951 to found his art school and support the development of local talent. He's already achieved notable success, with a promising future ahead. A conscientious and highly skilled artist, Mr. Béchard is on his way to nurturing a whole generation of artists who will bring pride to our region.

— *Dollard Morin*