

The interior of
Daniel Chester
French's studio
at Chesterwood,
in Stockbridge,
Massachusetts.

Artist residencies, such as those at Chesterwood and Vytlačil, allow contemporary artists to honor the past while also handing down traditions and concepts to a new generation.

by **JAMES DUNCAN**



Welcome Home

The Artist as Resident

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liver Wendell Holmes, Sr. once said, "Where we love is home; Home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts." As sculptor Marc Mellon stands in the formal garden surrounding Chesterwood—the studio and home of Daniel Chester French (1850–1931)—and marvels at its beauty, it dawns on me that in a way, Mellon is home. The artist comments that this is his "dream studio," and his statement comes with no sense of hyperbole. Chesterwood sits just outside of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, nestled in a lush New England forest

crisscrossed with trails, statues, gardens, and splendid views of the countryside. The studio itself contains high windows to obtain natural light from all angles, a platform mounted on railroad tracks that allowed the artist to work on larger sculptures outside, and walls filled with French's plaster models—hands, faces, reliefs, and more. It contains the original six-foot final plaster model of his world-famous *Abraham Lincoln* sculpture—the 19-foot marble version resides in the

Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. For Mellon, Chesterwood is indeed a “dream studio” as well as a thrilling opportunity to be a part of history.

“It’s important to understand the complexities of sculpting and the many choices an artist must make throughout the process,” Mellon says as he examines French’s tools. “And to work in his studio ... I’m very conscious of the tradition involved. It’s very special just to be here.” Mellon plans to do much more than “just be” at Chesterwood.

As the site’s current resident artist, Mellon will work in French’s renowned studio over a series of weekends this summer, as visitors pass through to view his progress. The task is twofold: creating sculptures worthy of French’s studio space while also discussing French’s work, the history of sculpting, and the importance of passing on the fundamentals of this crucial tradition to the next generation. “Sculpture depicts societies’ larger views and values,” Mellon explains. “And sculptors working in French’s tradition hope to create images that will inspire us to remember these values and ideas.”



ABOVE
Artist Marc Mellon holds one of French’s sculpting tools while standing before a plaster model of *Abraham Lincoln* at Chesterwood.

LEFT
French standing in front of the full-size clay model of the Melvin Memorial, also known as “Mourning Victory,” inside the Chesterwood Studio, 1907.



While examining a replica of French’s statue *Minute Man*, Mellon notes that the patriot is stepping forward with conviction, his rifle in hand, and yet his other hand remains on the arm of his plow, slightly behind him. “It’s symbolic of how the common man, the farmer and laborer, was the one stepping forward,” says Mellon. “He had a lot to lose but he chose to fight.” French summed up the core value of Americans in that era while also creating an image reminding us that we have a lot to live up to as a people. And to have created the statue at the age of 24 is a masterful feat. “It’s a true mark of his genius,” Mellon says. “To have the



ABOVE: French's studio and formal gardens. **BELOW:** French's six-foot plaster model of Abraham Lincoln is a popular attraction at the artist's studio.

talent to create this perfect sculpture without advanced formal training is both remarkable and rare."

Indeed, Mellon has a lot to live up to as Chesterwood's resident artist, and he hopes he isn't the last. "There is a lot that Chesterwood has to offer this part of the country," Mellon says, "And this place was always intended to be a dwelling for artists to live and work." French's only daughter, Margaret French Cresson, donated the 122-acre estate to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1968, and it was her mother's wish that sculptors would return to live and work at Chesterwood.

These dreams are now on the cusp of realization. As Mellon says,

Chesterwood needs just one or two "transformational donors" to allow the estate to reach its fullest potential and host a wider spectrum of artists and sculptors. This is a familiar sentiment with numerous historic artist studios



and residencies across the nation. Many famed working-retreats are in constant need of support as they continue to enrich our nation's artistic fabric.

Located in Sparkill, New York, a charming town just outside of New York City and west of the Hudson River, the Art Students League's Vytlačil Campus serves as the school's studio-based, live-in atelier program for working artists, outstanding League students, and invited guests from around the world. It is an essential element of the League's educational program, allowing burgeoning students to work hand-in-hand with instructors and artists-in-residence in a bucolic atmosphere. "Creating an appropriate

environment is at the core of the program, one that provides camaraderie and understanding of the complexities and implications of art making,” says Gary Lawrence Sussman, an instructor and the director of the Vytlacil Campus. Student residents experience critique sessions, workshops, exhibitions, lectures, and are afforded expert guidance as they hone their skills and work to accomplish their creative aspirations.

“My desire was to experiment and explore my art,” says Valerie Aune, a painter from Florida and a former Vytlacil resident. “I was thrilled with the freedom for self-direction ... and I have been overwhelmed by the care

and attention the staff provided—it exceeded all expectations.” Instructors at the campus include Sussman, James Garvey, Mark Safan, Grace Knowlton, and Hans Witschi, and the list of Vytlacil alumni is as talented as it is extensive. Testimonials from former students reveal inspired artists who experienced a re-awakening of their passion and a powerful desire to return to their daily lives and share what they have learned. This desire is key to their development, as well as to the betterment of art in general. As Marc Mellon states, it is vital for artists to pass on our artistic traditions and experiences. It’s what connects us to our past, and it

is a bridge we must continue to forge with the artists of the future. **W**

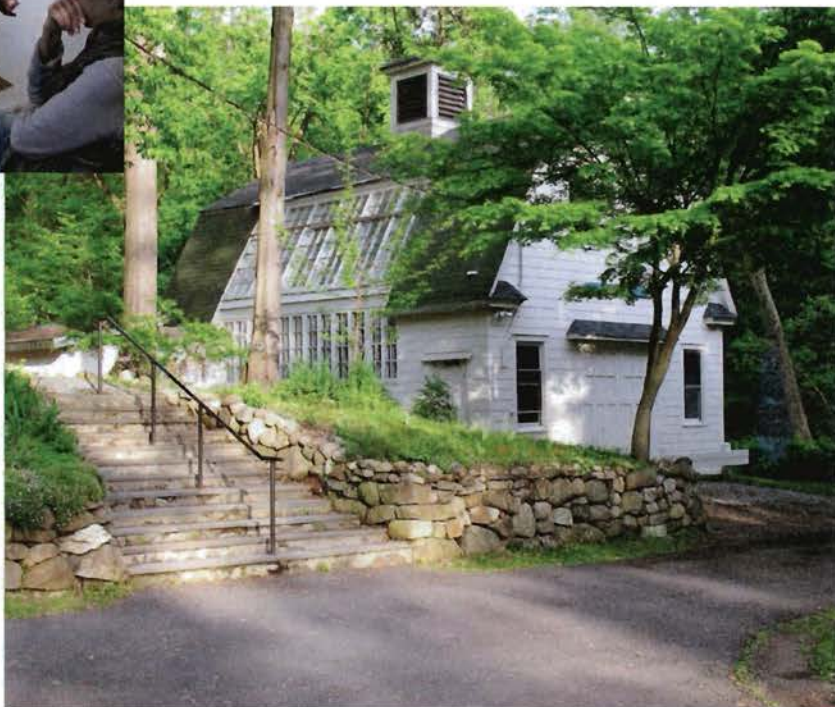
James Duncan is the assistant editor of American Artist.



ABOVE
Artwork by Vytlacil resident Jojo Austria.

LEFT
A critique session with artist-instructors Mark Safan and Hans Witschi at Vytlacil.

BELOW
The painting studio on the Vytlacil Campus, in Sparkill, New York.



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