Académie Julian: Coming of Age in 1960s Paris - Art, Culture, and Self-Discovery

A fifteen-year-old's immersive experience at Paris's Académie Julian art school transforms her understanding of art, culture, and French life.

Alden Mellor Heck, from *Life and Art,* Chestnut Hill Press, November 2025

Part of my aesthetic education was a year in France when I'd just turned fifteen. Thinking about that year, I realize it provided an explosive growth in my awareness, both aesthetic and social. I arrived in June and spent the summer with the Verios and their daughter, Catherine, who was my age. Our families were not related but we hosted one another's children for educational purposes. Catherine had not yet come to the United States. She would leave in September to attend GFS with my older sister Ann.

Our grandfathers had been business associates. My grandfather made bearings, and her grandfather invented a special kind of brake used in French cars. There were trips back and forth. Before the Second World War Jean Verio spent three years in Philadelphia attending Germantown Friends School with my father. During the war, when my father's plane was shot down over occupied France, he contacted the Verios, who helped him escape to a resistance group.

My grandfather and grandmother went to Paris and stayed with them. The Verios came to Philadelphia and stayed with my grandparents. I imagine my grandmother must have been the one who forged those relationships. She was a relational person. The men did the business.

We left Paris soon after I arrived, to the Varios' summer place in Ardèche, where Jeanine's mother Bruna owned an intriguing house. Quite long, it straddled a stream. The ground floor had been a silk mill, the two top stories the family living area. It was strange and beautiful. Bruna, Catherine's grandmother, was in her sixties. Her husband, gassed in the First World War, returned damaged and died not much later. So she grew up in this unique mill house and had lived there as a widow for four decades.

Bruna is my archetypal French peasant woman, tough as nails. The husband died, she survived. She likely had a pension. She lived in a family home built on top of what had been a family enterprise centuries ago: an old silk mill. They put cocoons on spindles and unspooled them into silk thread using water power to run wheels. I never found the way down into the silk factory but I always knew it was there. You could see it architecturally. If you walked by on the street, the canal from the Ardèche river was down at the bottom. The mill was built on the canal, and the house above the mill. A bridge let from the street to the top floor.

At the back of the Ardèche house was a terrace, the entire length of the house, made of stone, with a southern exposure. You could sit there and watch water diverted from the river flow to power the mill below, although the mill had been silent for a century.

This terrace was some 20 feet deep and 100 feet long. It went on and on and on. Two stone staircases led down to a walled garden. In the walled garden was a network of mini canals entering through the wall, passing through the garden, then returning through the wall on the other side to rejoin the mother stream. One fed into a wide basin, a fish pond, then back out. Others streams led to the vegetables, the orchard, the chicken pens, or the wash house.

The canals off the river provided water for power, water for growing vegetables, water for a fish pond, water for their fruit trees, and water for their chickens, rabbits and ducks. The entire environment was centered around the use of water for family-sized industry and family-sized agriculture. When I traveled in China I saw similar family farms with a vegetable garden and a pond for carp and ducks. Fish and poultry provide great nitrates for vegetables and fruit trees, so the entire system is a virtuous circle.

To one side were barns that once must have had animals, perhaps cows or goats. And then behind the garden was a rabbit hutch. The entire complex of structures was built out of the environment. Local stone, local wood, set by the stream, all with the patina of hundreds of years of age, I could imagine the farm emerged from the earth itself. The whole thing was completely magical. Adding to the mystique, we were at the base of Aubenas, a medieval hilltop town towering above the silk mill where we slept.

This brought back all of my stories from my grandmother, the memory of illustrations in Grimms' fairy tales, and here I was in the the middle of one. Behind the walled garden was a sloping hill down to the main river, the Ardèche itself, from which all canal water flowed. About a dozen cherry trees and apple trees populated a little orchard, which was open down to the river. I was there in June when cherries ripened. Catherine and I would climb up into the cherry trees and eat hundreds of cherries. A pig fest of cherries. We'd just sit up in the trees, eat cherries and chat away. Catherine spoke English well. She had spent two summers in England. I had ninth grade French, but by the end of the summer I was pretty good. Others in the household did not speak English well. I had the foundation and was embedded in a French family.

The kitchen at Bruna's house was similar to my grandmother's kitchen. It was the heart of the house, with an enormous coal stove. In a sense, it was like a homecoming for me to be there. What we ate came out of the garden, out of the rabbit hutch, out of

the chicken coop. Bruna was an astounding cook, as was her daughter Jeanine, Catherine's mother. The whole food thing in France was overwhelming to me, a flood of aromas, tastes, and textures. Again, a real echo of my grandmother. Catherine's father Jean was at work in Paris, so it was just Jeanine, Catherine, and me with Bruna, in a feminist Eden. Catherine and I were totally unsupervised. I wouldn't call it neglect. I'd call it "Do whatever you want. It's summer!"

When we returned to Paris, Catherine went off to the United States to stay with my family. She loved it. American culture, she thought, was just great. Driving around in cars, smoking cigarettes, parties. She fit right in with Ann and GFS.

Back in Paris, I was sent to the girls Lycée in Neuilly. I should have been in 10th grade, but I was in eighth because I was struggling with French, et cetera, et cetera. I lasted a week. We wore uniforms, and we had to march in between classes through doors that were locked behind us by matrons. It was a prison. I had a uniform. All I remember doing there was *dictées*. Get out your *cahiers* and your *stylos*. It was probably pretty good for my French. But I came home after a week of this and said, "I'm going home. I can't do this. I have to go home. This is not what I came for, to be in prison." I may not have used those exact words, but I know that's how I felt.

So Jean and Jeanine put their heads together and, within a few days, came up with an alternative plan for me for the year: go to Alliance Française for three hours every morning. It was a French language school for foreign students on a junior year or semester in France, across the Seine to the west, about three blocks from Saint-Germain.

Everybody at the Alliance was in their late teens, 20s, even 30s, and I'd just turned fifteen. It was fabulous. We used the same textbooks I had used in ninth grade at GFS, so I just kept going. It was a brilliant solution because I learned the written language while speaking it in class and on the street. Then I would go home to speak French at a two-hour lunch with wine. I began to think France was the best thing that ever happened to me.

The second part of the Verios' academic plan for me began after lunch. I would walk to the metro to go to the Académie Julian open studio in the afternoons. The Varios lived in the 17th arrondissement, on the other side of Seine, so I'd change subways each way. I spent a lot of time on the subway. I loved the subway.

I'd emerge and walk to the Académie Julian where I had a locker. Jean had taken me to the little art store near the Académie where we acquired the list of supplies needed for open studio. I had sketchbooks and canvases and a wonderful wooden box with all the different oil paints and brushes that I needed to go to the academy.

The top floor of Académie Julian was an enormous atelier. A wood stove for heat, big glass wall of windows, skylights, an archetypal art studio. It was where many famous French artists have worked and learned. There were a lot of ghosts. It was splendid.

Every afternoon, fifteen or so people showed up to paint or sketch a nude model. The model sat right next to the wood stove because it was cold. We positioned easels so each of us had an angle, and you could either draw or paint.

The art teacher was an old professor with a white mustache and a pipe. He'd come around and give you a critique of whatever you were doing. The Académie Julian traditionally has been the place to go if you couldn't get into the the École des Beaux-Arts, thus it has attracted many foreign artists. In 1880, women—not allowed to enroll in École des Beaux-Arts—were accepted by the new Académie Julian. Foreign applicants stymied by a rigorous French language examination were welcome at the Académie Julian. In the early days, men and women were trained separately, but from the beginning women participated in the same studies as men, including drawing and painting male and female nude models. The common purpose was to study art. The people I met at Académie Julian offered a richness of life reminiscent of being in my grandmother's house. I was the baby, fifteen, when everybody else was in their 20s and early 30s. I met astounding people. They adopted me. I was their pet.

As a result of finding my niche at the Académie, the Verios stopped paying attention to me. I was just a fifteen-year-old friend living in their apartment, not their child, not someone they felt they had to monitor or control. I came and went as I wanted. There were no boundaries. I was a good girl. That was lucky because now and then I'd go out with friends, drink too much, and I'd have to spend the night somewhere and come home in the morning. "Oh, hi. How are you?" I suppose I called if I saw that I wasn't going to make it home. It never occurred to them to worry about me.

I remember one morning getting up very early to go home to change so I could go to school, coming out of the metro, and bumping into a man who had no nose. This surreal encounter matched the life I was living. Everything was meta, self-referential, as I did not have the background to understand or contextualize. I was creating a new universe of experience. I was completely innocent of what I was experiencing, but completely enmeshed in a French world of taste, color, texture, unusual people, and deep cultural history, all new to me. It was a dream, and the guy with no nose was a part of the dream.

Of the people I knew at the academy, two of my favorites were Julian and Bob, also dreamlike. Bob was a light-skinned African American, Marian Anderson's great-nephew, an artist in his early 20s. He had gone to University of the Arts, then the Philadelphia College of Art. He was a pistol, wonderful, and his lover was Julian, also from Philadelphia, and from a family at the apex of Philly society. Julian was 30. They took me under wing. We went to Fontainebleau for the day, toured the chateau and had a picnic in the Foret de Fontainebleau. Then we missed our train, so we stayed at the Aigle Noir. They slept on the floor, and I got the bed. I must have called Jean and Jeanine, and let them know. We returned to Paris on the morning train.

We used to go painting in the Bois de Boulogne. One day we were painting away on our easels when I had to pee badly. We were right by the lake. I thought quickly, "Well, okay, here's what I have to do." I went down to the edge of the lake and I fell in. I actually jumped in the lake so I could pee. I'm standing there thinking, "Oh, I have to get out of the lake now." But, of course, I'm still peeing.

I came out dripping. They asked "What is going on?" At that age I was body embarrassed. Today, I'd say, "I gotta pee. I think I'll go stand in the lake." That's what I'd do now, but I couldn't talk about peeing to these two male friends. I couldn't do it. I didn't know how, so I had to fall in the lake.

I learned discrimination when Bob and Julian took me to art galleries. "Okay, here are two paintings, Den. Which is the best one?"

I'd always pick the wrong one.

"No. Not pretty, Den. Not pretty. Look for strong, dynamic. Not pretty. No more pretty!"

"Okay," I'd say meekly, looking carefully at the paintings once again to grasp what he meant.

Julien married at age 45 and went on to breed African gazelles and antelopes on a ranch in Arizona. I don't know what happened to Bob.

Ruby Hill was another artist at Académie Julian. She was an aesthete. She came from Leeds, England with an excellent stipend to spend a year on the continent painting. At the Académie Julian, she also took me under her wing. She'd sit and look at the model for ten minutes before picking up a pencil or a brush. I'd watch her watching the model and say, "Ruby, what are you doing?"

"I'm taking it in. I'm learning it," she'd reply.

Of course I now understand. But then I was just learning about the importance of careful, meticulous observation.

A French boyfriend, Alain de Lavoisier, once again made me terrified of the body thing. He was in his mid-20s, his father was a general wounded in Algeria, and his ancestor, also named Alain de Lavoisier, was a French general in Louisiana killed by the Iroquois confederacy in 1790, so he was from a prominent military family. I loved him dearly. Alain's right arm had been injured or paralyzed. He was at the Académie Julian to train his left hand.

We became friends, and he was a sweetheart. I suspect he had no idea how young I was, but he was horny. Here was this young American he was attracted to, and I liked him. We used to take walks, and we'd have little kisses. Then he invited me to his house for lunch, and I went to one of the most incredible apartments in Paris.

Lunch was served by maids in a vast dining room. I was floored. Then we went into his bedroom. He assumed I knew what sex was, which was not the case. I was terribly uncomfortable and told him I wasn't interested in sex. So we did a little necking, then he didn't come back to the academy. He was lovely, but he was fragile, and now he had been rejected by me. Of course, in his mind he'd been rejected because of his own body issues.

I was a blank slate walking into this, unable to connect the dots. All these different parts were a dream-like explosion of new reality. A French general? A maimed son? Maids serving a formal luncheon in a vast apartment? Who knew?

The Verios and a couple friends, the Franks, took me to the Foret de Fontainebleau almost every autumn weekend. The Franks had a little cabin in the Foret, and a son named Olivier a couple years younger than me. Olivier was a French child actor.

I had a guitar. I would sit out on a boulder in the sand and teach myself how to play the guitar while Jeanine and her friend Mme Frank would go into the woods to pick mushrooms. The two men would bicycle. We'd have a mushroom feast, then drive home. Almost every Sunday in good weather was a free day in the Foret de Fontainebleau. Everybody did what they wanted. I didn't want to go mushrooming or bicycle around. With a book and my guitar, I'd sit on a boulder in a quiet spot, completely content.

The Verio's small Paris apartment was perfect. Like my grandmother's house, everything was chosen for its beauty. John and Jeanine were well-off but not wealthy. Jeanine had an incredible aesthetic, which I learned to appreciate when we went to the Paris Flea Market together once or twice a month. She taught me about French antiques. This one is fake, this is good, pointing out details. She'd find something needing a little repair, and get the guy down in price.

I observed how she interacted with antiques. You touch and feel and observe closely. Wood, fabric, silver, china, everything in her home was carefully selected. Like my grandmother, Jeanine curated beauty. This applied to food as well. She was a world-class cook. I would go to the market with her, whether the flea market or the vegetable market, and watch how she navigated. Quality was her touchstone. Jeanine taught me how to observe closely to find quality. I'd learned to appreciate quality from my grandmother but Jeanine brought it up a level.

She had four or five outfits, all couturier fashions. She'd had them for years. She took care of them. She might have one altered or mended, carefully preserving her small quantity of absolutely the best you could have.

At the fishmonger, she'd peer at the fish's eyes. If they were clear and passed the visual test, she'd press an eye with her finger. The eye had to be firm for her to buy a fish. Finally, she would smell. She had to observe, touch, and smell a fish before she could determine its quality. She used all her senses.

Jeanine was educated but had what, for lack of a better term, I'll call a peasant savvy. She was by no means a peasant and that's not the right word, but what I mean is a deep French connection to the land, its fruits, and its history. I know exactly where this came from: her mother's place in the Ardèche where we stayed. Her mother Bruna was the Platonic ideal of this special kind of French sensibility.

Jean, unlike Jeanine, was not particularly aesthetic. He was urban bred. He'd spent three years in the United States attending school with my father. Unlike my father, he was even-tempered, considerate, even kind.