

Artists Are Discovering the Advantages of Online Education

For years, decorative artists have recognized the importance of educating themselves about the techniques and finishes they need to make their livelihood. And for years, there was really only one option for learning an assortment of techniques from an experienced instructor. You packed your bags, gassed up your car (or for those longer trips, headed to the airport) and made the trek to a decorative painting studio or training facility.

Video technology and the Internet have changed all that, giving artists another option for furthering their

education. It doesn't involve jumping in your car but instead clicking on a mouse. Instead of visiting a nearby city, you can visit a nearby website.

The people hosting educational websites include many recognizable "name" instructors who have been teaching decorative painting classes for years. They continue to host classes at their studios and teach at industry events, but they see online education as an important, convenient and economical way for understands to enhance their skills. Here is a look at several of those who have embraced the concept of online education.

Vertical Artisans

Nathan Giffin, owner of the Chicago area business Creative Rock Forming, has pioneered several concepts of online education specifically for the discipline of decorative vertical concrete. His site, Vertical Artisans, launched January 2008 at www.verticalartisans.com and now contains hundreds of videos. There is a yearly subscription fee that gives subscribers access to the videos as well as a Vertical Artisans Channel, which features additional videos from artisans available on a fee basis.

"About three years ago, I decided to explore what I considered to be an up and coming trend—online education," Giffin reports. "A lot of colleges over the last decade have been offering online courses. And about that time, I had gotten a speeding ticket and was allowed to complete my traffic school course online. Those experiences, along with the popularity of Facebook, My Space and the like, convinced me that online educa-

tion was going to become more and more popular."

If there is a downside to online education, Giffin conceded that it doesn't give the student the full experience. "I had to consider if this was something that would work with a craft that is so hands-on, but I decided that it could. One of the advantages of online education is repetition. If you can see a video and then play it over and over again, you're going to retain the information. The other key is savings. If you go to a class, it could be as much as \$1,500 as well as travel expenses."

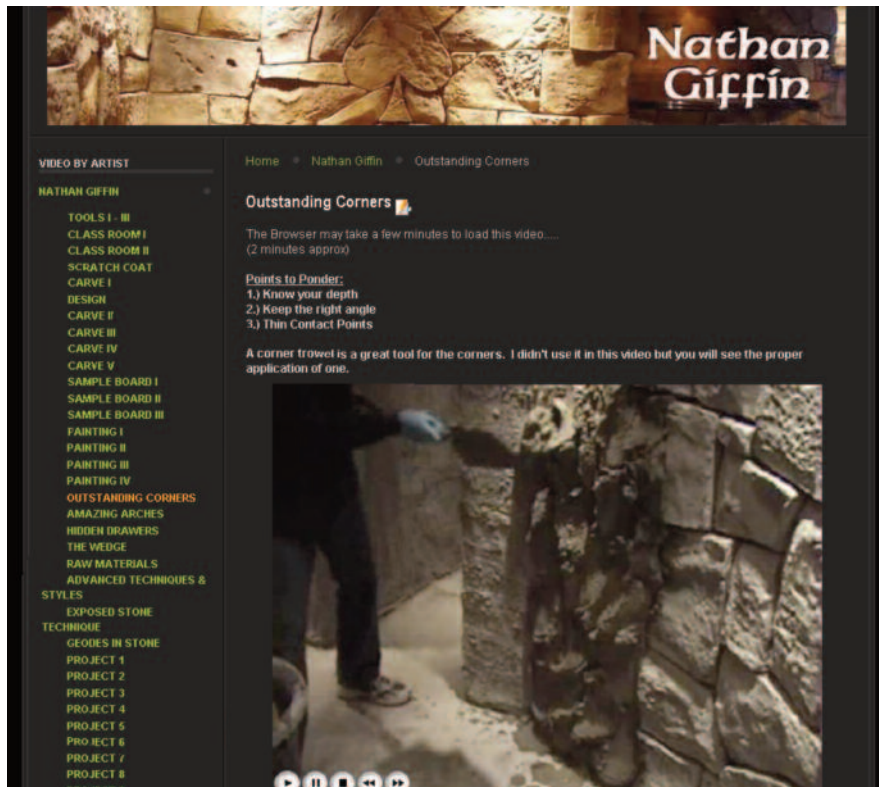
As a hands-on artisan, Giffin designed a site that had practical usage for people in his profession. "I designed a site that I wished I had had when I started in the business," he reported. "When I was getting my start, there wasn't anything like this."

However, Giffin acknowledges that hands-on courses provides a value to the student commiserate with the cost. He teaches vertical concrete

techniques in person as well as online and believes in this two-tiered educational approach. "Everybody who is trained by me gets a one-year subscription to Vertical Artisans. The online videos help them keep the information fresh in their minds. How much critical information are you going to be able to retain in 60 to 90 days after you take a course? The online videos allow you to continually refresh yourself."

Another advantage of the online videos is that they can even be played on the job. "DVDs are bound to the DVD player," Giffin says. "A lot of people enjoy the ease of accessing information on the Internet. Most people have laptops and WiFi, so they can look at the videos wherever they are."

One of the additional advantages of Vertical Artisans is that it can reach students from literally all over the world. "I've had students from Japan, China, South America, Europe as well as the United States and Canada," Giffin reported. "Some of them



Nathan Giffin's Vertical Artisans is an online educational resource.

don't even speak English, but they learn because it's visual."

Giffin is also having great success with webinars, which are sponsored by manufacturers and have as many as 50 to 60 students participating. Using the GoToMeeting® website (www.GoToMeeting.com), the webinars allow participants to see the on-screen presentation and communica-

tion with the presenter through their computer's microphone and speakers. This makes it possible to have Q&A sessions, and the presenter is also able to freeze-frame a video or use online tools to "draw" on a visual or write notes directly on the screen.

As the technology continues to advance and artisans recognize the advantages, Giffin expects even more

growth in online education in the future. "If a person is willing to learn, they have the tools to succeed in their own home," he said. "There are always going to be brick and mortar schools, but the day is coming when the Internet is king."

Learn Faux Now

Kathy Carroll of the Chicago Institute of Fine Finishes. Carroll, who recently celebrated her 20th year in the industry, has operated one of the most successful schools for students of all skill levels. Yet, she recognized several years ago the advantages of the web as a means of delivering education. Her "Learn Faux Now" classes, which began in October 2007, tap into those advantages. There are currently two "Learn Faux Now" classes: "You Got Waxed" and "Old World Textures," with a third course expected soon. Artists can access the classes at www.learnfauxnow.com.

In conjunction with the online class, registrants receive supplies that allow them to complete a total of three finishes and six sample boards. Once they receive their kits, students receive a user name and password that allows them to access the course for 14 days. "Our courses are different from other faux-finishing e-learning classes because they're set up like chapters that include step-by-step instructions, still photos and video to instruct the learner in the correct technique," Carroll explained. "In addition to the class materials, you also have access to us at the studio to answer any questions that you may have while working through the course."

Carroll explained that the chapter structure easily allows the artist to stop at any point and pick up again when they have the time. There is no need to fast forward through video to find where you left off. "This being said, the length of each course is totally driven by the user," she said.



Learn Faux Now is the online learning program from Kathy Carroll of Chicago Institute of Fine Finishes.

Online courses provide artists the opportunity to add on to the knowledge that they receive from in-person classes and are so thorough that Carroll contends that they can be an alternative for those who are unable to make it to a class. “These courses readily fit into the artisan’s busy schedule, they are more economical since there is no travel involved, they are less expensive than an in-person class, and they are a great value in product since most participants have plenty product left over to experiment with the finish on their own,” she said.

It’s Faux Easy

Another renowned industry instructor who has made a seamless transition into online education is Gary Lord. Last year, Lord launched ItsFauxEasy.com, a website featuring a comprehensive library of faux painting techniques presented in videos that can be downloaded to your computer, smart phone, iPod Touch or iPhone. The site was launched with classic finishes from Lord’s DVDs and VHS videos as well as many new techniques presented in high-definition video. New videos and products are introduced monthly to keep the site fresh and current with the advances in the field.

“It’s very exciting to be able to deliver content in such an easy-to-use way,” said Lord, adding that online education is proving to be a viable option for the consumer much like it is for universities that have online curriculum. “It allows them to study at home, at their own pace. Students can download the videos and watch them at their convenience. They can decide to watch them during the evening, or during other non-income-producing hours.”

Lord also mentioned that advantage of mobility, since Internet access is essentially available anywhere. “Many people today have smart phones,” he commented, “so artists can re-watch a

whole video on their phone while on the jobsite to refresh themselves about how the technique is done.”

Pricing of the online techniques at It’s Faux Easy was made to be very affordable. “In a classroom setting, it can cost from \$90 to \$125 for a student to make one sample,” Lord stated, when you consider the cost of the class and the amount of samples you take home for that set price. “Online, at my site, some videos are free and others cost less than \$10 per technique and the brand new ones a slight bit more. Another great aspect of our site is we offer sample kits to go along with each video download. These kits range from \$20 to \$30 and once again are a big cost savings for the viewer. Historically, consumers were forced to purchase quarts of each product they required to do one sample, which again could easily cost between \$100 and \$200 to just make one sample. When you consider these samples kits may have up to six or eight different products included in them, they are a great cost saver.”

Though the cost is inexpensive, what online instructors have to overcome is the mindset from individuals that they shouldn’t have to pay for anything they read or view online. “People do have a tendency to assume Internet-based content is free,” Lord said. “But this is quickly changing, especially when it comes to video content where someone wants to purchase one TV show, for instance, instead of a whole season on

DVD. Apple, Amazon Video on Demand, Netflix, Hulu and many other companies are selling downloads or subscriptions for video or music. It can be done, and valuable content



Gary Lord’s website It’s Faux Easy features a wealth of downloadable videos.

shouldn’t necessarily be free. We’re offering high-quality videos, materials and instructions on how to complete a finish that you can access on your own time. It’s not unreasonable to expect people to pay for that, especially since it’s still a fraction of the cost of an actual class. I think you’ll see more and more of this model as people don’t want to plop down a bunch of money for a CD or DVD that has content they don’t necessarily want—people want to pay for the clips, shows or whatever they’re interested in and that’s it.”

For the future, Lord expects even more online educational opportunities to be available for the decorative artist. “The technology is going to improve, and artists will be able to take advantage of live, interactive training courses,” he stated.

Method Finishing

A subscription-based website that is catching on in a hurry is Method Finishing (www.methodfinishing.com). Method Finishing is an online resource that provides information and education for decorative painting in the form of streaming HD video.

“We put a new video out each week,” reported Anthony Pinkston, who founded the site along with fellow decorative artist Jason Lucas. “For \$35 a month, artists receive access to 12 videos upfront as well as four new videos per month.”

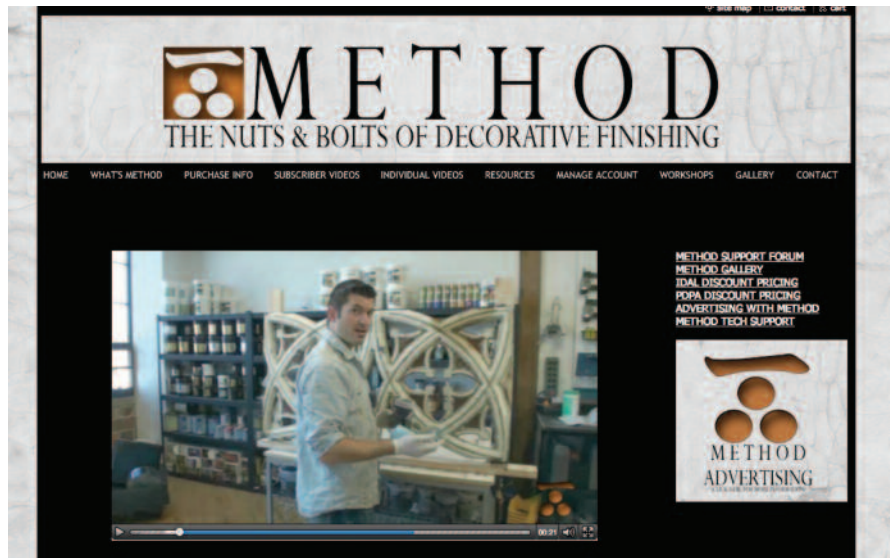
Though launched just a few months ago in mid-October, Method already has several hundred subscribers. “Every month, Method trains more students that most studios train in a whole year,” Pinkston reported. “We’re getting a lot of feedback through email, and what we’re hearing from artists is that they love it.”

One of its appeals is the affordability. Students signing up for monthly or quarterly subscriptions receive great value for their money. “If you stay with Method an entire year, you’ll receive 64 videos for \$420,” Pinkston stated. And for members of IDAL or PDDA, there are discounts that make it all the more affordable.

Both Pinkston and Lucas are featured in the videos doing a wide variety of finishes from sandstone plasters and carved stone effects to trowelled Lusterstone and elaborate ornamentation. While the videos identify products used, there is no allegiance to any one system or brand name.

The online education provided by Method places the emphasis on what Pinkston calls “sellable finishes.” Everything you see online is something that Jason or I have actually sold to a client.”

While Method Finishing was founded as an online resource, the Method brand is now being extended to hands-on classes conducted by Pinkston and/or Lucas. Pinkston re-



In just a few months, Method Finishing has attracted hundreds of subscribers for its online videos.

cently opened a Method studio in Boise, Idaho, and Lucas also added a space for Method next to his existing studios in Denver.

“We’ll be doing classes out of both studios as well as continue to do traveling instruction at other studios,” Pinkston reported. “Method isn’t designed to replace hands-on instruction. It’s designed to enhance it. We believe hands-on instruction is important to give a person basic skills and skill sets, but once you know how to hold a trowel and glaze a wall, online education can pass on new ideas and concepts.”

Pinkston added that people often attend classes not only for technique but primarily to learn sample and design concepts. “Method offers both at a fraction of the cost of a class. In addition, in a class, you’ll only see these ideas presented once. Online, you can watch them over and over again. With the affordability of Method, you can have both online and hands-on classes.”

Virtual Workshops

Melanie Royals of Royal Design Studios is moving beyond the concept of streaming videos with the use of a webinar format that allows more interaction with participants. She pro-

vides this education under the Virtual Workshops banner and has so far introduced two topics: Foilin’ Around and Stencil Impressions. For 2010, Royals already has plans to add three more workshops: Patterned Mirror and Glass; Marquetry Effects on Walls, Wood, and More; and Skim-Stone Surfaces. Information can be found at www.modelloidesigns.com.

“I strongly believe that Internet training is ideal for our times and our industry, and I am proud and happy to be paving the way,” she said.

Royals reported that the advantage of the webinar format is that it incorporates the four main ways of learning that have been associated with hands-on workshops: seeing, hearing, reading and replicating. The webinars also share a similar advantage with hands-on workshops: the opportunity for students to ask questions of the instructor as well as interact and share experiences with the other students while the course is taking place.

In addition to the virtual workshop, students have access to extensive pre-recorded videos as well as a detailed written handout that outlines the steps for each individual finish covered in the class. “Every-



FOILIN AROUND WORKSHOP



STENCIL IMPRESSIONS WORKSHOP

The Virtual Workshops from Melanie Royals include Foilin' Around and Stencil Impressions.

thing we offer—the video lessons, the printed material, even the online meeting—is recorded and able for review at any time,” Royals reported. “We have also set up a private forum where students can continue to get support and share information. You don’t get that kind of support or ability to review what was shown or said in a hands-on workshop at a later time.”

The “replicating” portion, or the actual making of the samples, is done on the student’s own time. “We have tried to make this as easy and economical as possible by providing all of the tools, patterns, and ‘sample-size’ portions of the products used for them to purchase at a discounted price,” Royals said.

The “virtual” workshop itself lasts about 2-1/2 to three hours, which includes a review of the basic techniques, going over each finish in a step-by-step format, and a live Q&A session. “Another thing that is

working very well is to bring in outside ‘experts’ that can add to the information exchange,” Royals said. “For instance, in the Stencil Impressions Virtual Workshop, I use Vella Venetian Plasters on two of the finishes. We have a representative from Vella join in on the workshop each time to expand on the specifics of using that product and answer questions.”

Royal Design Studios has offered video training through its 11 instructional videos, but Royals sees the Virtual Workshops as an exciting new direction for the industry. “To my knowledge, Virtual Workshops are unique at this time as they go far beyond basic video downloading,” she said. “The goal is to offer a complete training experience in a way that is cost-effective and maintains a personal connection between myself and my students.”

Royals observed that online education makes good use of two resources that are currently in short

supply for many professionals these days: time and money. “My main goal was to address that dual shortage while offering painters new skills and jolting their creativity,” she said. “I think we all need to find ways to stay motivated and excited in this economic downturn. The other thing I’ve noticed is that decorative painter’s schedules are so fluid due to project issues and deadlines that it is hard for people to commit a big chunk of their calendar weeks and even months in advance, which is what you need to do in order to schedule an out-of-town, hands-on workshop. With my Virtual Workshops, they can make a decision the day before because it’s a short time commitment that doesn’t require travel and a complete disruption of their home and work life.”

Royals doesn’t see online education as replacing in-person training. In fact, she has plans to integrate the two



Creative Entrepreneur University

WEBucating the Creative Entrepreneur forging a life and a business with the work of their hands...

Rebecca Parsons is launching Creative Entrepreneur University online.

approaches. “For instance, Modello Designs has just become an Aura stone distributor and we will be offering the three-day hands-on workshops that are necessary to become familiar with this unique product. As a supplemental enhancement to these classes, we are planning on offering online meetings with students both before and after the hands-on portion of the workshop. These will be used to introduce the products and terminology (before) and reinforce what was covered in class (after). This will give the students the opportunity to focus more on making the actual samples during their time in class, rather than worrying if they are taking enough notes, or 'missing something.’”

The studio also will soon be launching Design Your Success Seminars™ in 2010. These will further educate and facilitate professional decorative painters in dealing with the challenging business aspects of their profession. “These seminars, which will be held on a monthly basis, will feature presenters from both inside and outside our industry that have valuable and professional expertise to share with our industry,” Royals reported.

Creative Entrepreneur University

Longtime industry instructor Rebecca E. Parsons has rebranded her online workshops and mentoring programs under the comprehensive Cre-

ative Entrepreneur University (CEU). “I consider myself a ‘Webucator’ who empowers the creative entrepreneur with the necessary skills to sustain an independent arts practice in today’s world,” explained Parsons, who is the author of the popular “Faux Biz” column that has appeared in *The Faux Finisher* for nearly 11 years.

Launched in its new format in January 2010, Creative Entrepreneur University resides at www.CEU.professor.com (it is intentionally misspelled) and operates like a traditional university with seven integrated schools: Art, Business and e-Commerce, Communications, Design, Life, Marketing and Social Media. That is where tradition ends as CEU takes full advantage of online components such as video, teleconferencing, screencasting, webcasting and e-books to deliver its curriculum.

Parsons’ plans include growth beyond the decorative painting industry. “It is called Creative Entrepreneur University,” she said, “because it is geared to the Webucation of any creative business owner.” The tagline reads, “Webucation of the Creative Entrepreneur forging a life and a business with the work of their hands.”

According to Parsons, “The study at ‘your’ convenience concept allows the student to work at their own pace, in their timeframe and in their fuzzy bunny slippers if they so desire.” At 2 a.m. or 2 p.m., the Web student can choose from such classes as: Here Today-Blog Tomorrow where you will

build a blog; e-Commerce for Artists and Craftsmen; PhotoShop Tricks 1 & 2; Social Media Deconstructed; and a program for individuals transitioning from decorative painting into fine arts called “Come Down from the Ladder We’re Making Art Down Here.”

“All courses are developed within my mentoring approach to teaching,” Parsons said. “Some classes will include individual instruction as well as group instruction. Coaching and mentoring will be a part of it. What’s different about what I’m doing is that there will be some personal contact with me and some one-on-one time.”

Creative Entrepreneur University will feature a wide range of classes with Parsons and other world-class instructors. “The most unique offerings will be in the School of Life, where we will discover your core values, strengths and weaknesses and forge a business model based on your uniqueness,” Parsons stated. The range of pricing is from free to thousands, with some package pricing options available.

Parsons doesn’t believe that “Webucation’ will take the place of in-person classes. “It is an additional way to get education. These online courses are a low-cost alternative to classroom training and are a perfect solution for individuals or small companies who do not have the budget or time for an onsite class. You may have the time, but not that extra cash to travel, so you can go to the computer. Whenever you want, the technology is there.” TFF

Attention, Teachers: Are any of the rest of you using Internet technology to teach online? If so, we’d like to hear from you. Let us know what you are doing with the technology for our follow-up article in the Spring or Summer 2010 issue.