ADELE CHATFIELD-TAYLOR: 
MASTERING THE ART OF CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

It was a typical afternoon at the American Academy in Rome, one recent April day. The denizens of the artistic and intellectual mecca set in a verdant 10-acre campus atop the Janiculum, Rome’s highest hill, put down their paintbrushes, books and other tools of their trades and broke for lunch, assembling at communal tables in the dining room. So there was Nobel Laureate poet Derek Walcott chatting with a group of art historians, recapping the world premiere of his new play, Moon-Child (Ti Jean in Concert), held on the premises the night before. At an adjacent table, artist Chuck Close, who had just arrived for a month-long residency, sat with director Christopher Celenza and a group of young fellows of the Academy, including a composer and a scholar of ancient studies, who was describing his research in the Vatican archives.

Across the Atlantic, just a few evenings later, at the Academy’s annual benefit at The Plaza Hotel in New York, more cultural luminaries such as Renzo Piano, Calvin Trillin and Joel Shapiro mingled with the Academy’s A-list patrons, including Annette de la Renta, Henry Kissinger, Donald Marron, and Dinner Chairman Mr and Mrs Sid R. Bass. They toasted the evening’s honorees, architect Frank O. Gehry and New York Public Library President Paul LeClerc, and the announcement that the organization had reached its capital campaign goal of $70 million.

Orchestrating the activities on both continents is the Academy’s president, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, a woman who is as well connected to high culture as she is to high society. During her 23-year tenure, she has rejuvenated the venerable Academy, founded in 1894, and made it one of the liveliest centres today where artists, scholars and patrons can congregate. She has inspired devotion from all these groups, and has continued to make the organization a favourite cause of people who are able to write big checks even in these challenging times.

“Our approach is to mix it up,” says the elegant and charming Chatfield-Taylor, during a conversation in her office. “In our age of specialization, this is one of the few places where people from different disciplines can really engage one another. The poet ends up talking to the archaeologist, the painter to the composer, the architect to the scholar.”

And the cross-fertilization continues on the Academy’s impressive and prestigious fifty-member board. Artists such as Bruce Nauman, Cy Twombly and Laurie Simmons serve along with leaders of philanthropy and business, including Drue Heinz, Barbara Goldsmith and Mercedes Bass, who is Vice Chairman.

“They all love sitting side by side,” says the Virginia-born Chatfield-Taylor, who received an M.S. from the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, and is married to playwright John Guare.
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"All our strengths are represented on our board. It's a microcosm of the community."

One of Chatfield-Taylor's most successful recruits has been Bass, who, during her almost 20 years on the board, has been an especially effective trustee, not only through her sizable financial contributions, but her acumen with bricks and mortar. "She's a great builder," says Chatfield-Taylor. "She chaired the restoration of our 17th-century Villa Aurelia. She understood exactly how to restore it and turn it into something for the present day. She's phenomenal at everything she touches."

"It has been a pleasure to be part of the Academy, and to help an important organization I feel strongly about to move forward," says Bass. "My role there has allowed me to put my love of architecture and garden design into practice and enabled me to engage with exceptionally talented artists and scholars."

The beginnings of the Academy date to 1894, when famed architect Charles Follen McKim established the American School of Architecture. Though it was located in Rome, it was America's first graduate school of architecture. Originally housed in a few rented rooms in the Palazzo Torlonia on the Via Condotti, the organization quickly grew. McKim enlisted the support of the major artists and patrons of his day, from Daniel Chester French, Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Burnham to J.P. Morgan, Charles Frick and William Vanderbilt.

Exactly 100 years ago, the Academy took its present form when it merged with another organization, the American School of Classical Studies, and began serving artists and scholars. (Hence Chatfield-Taylor's idea to honour at this year's gala a paragon of each discipline, Gehry and LeClerc.) After moving into the Villa Aurelia the same year — a gift of Philadelphia heiress Clara Jessup Heyland — the organization, led by Morgan, bought a neighbouring parcel of land. The financier then saw to the organization and construction of the 130-room main building, designed by McKim Mead & White, the only building the firm would build in Europe.

The Academy has become best known for the Rome Prize fellowships it awards every year to approximately thirty Americans for periods ranging from six months to two years. Selected by juries made up of distinguished artists..."
and scholars, prize winners receive stipends, room and board, and, for visual artists, studios.

In addition, six to eight distinguished artists and scholars are annually invited to live as Residents of the Academy for periods of several weeks to a few months. Past Residents have included Roy Lichtenstein, Philip Guston, Paul Manship and Ross Bleckner.

According to Close, who has been a Resident twice before, the experience is precious. “I’m always very productive here,” he says. “I enjoy the cross-fertilization of ideas from people in so many different disciplines.” The time-zone change is helpful, too, he says: “I get up and answer my email, then I have hours with no interruption.”

A relatively recent development on the campus has made things even better, he adds. In 2007, Chatfield-Taylor invited Alice Waters to visit, in the hopes of rectifying one of the Academy’s longest-running weaknesses. “For 100 years, we had terrible food,” says Chatfield-Taylor bluntly. “Alice changed all that. She recruited Mona Talbott, one of her chefs from Chez Panisse, to be our resident chef, and together they designed menus that use local, sustainable food, which is bought directly from farms. This has totally changed our sense of community. Everyone looks forward to having lunch and dinner together now.”

Chatfield-Taylor will be especially busy this May, traditionally the Academy’s most frenetic month. Trustees arrive for their annual visit, highlights of which include an exhibition of art works created by its fellows, as well as “Open Studios,” when Resident artists throw open the doors of their work places not just to the Academy community but the public. “It’s a big event in Rome,” says Chatfield-Taylor.

Earlier this year, the Academy organized – with independent curator Peter Benson Miller – a highly praised Philip Guston retrospective at Rome’s Museo Bilotti, which subsequently traveled to The Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C.

“Increasingly, we are doing things all over town, and beyond. There is a lot more flow between the Academy and downtown.”

This dovetails nicely with Rome’s recent emergence as a centre for contemporary art, with the opening of the Zaha Hadid-designed MAXXI Museum, and the city’s Gagosian outpost, among others. “Zaha drops into the Academy for lunch when she’s here. Larry has had a huge impact here, as he has everywhere. When he opened, it was a sign this is an important place for contemporary art. I’m happy to say he’s gotten interested in the Academy since he’s been here,” (Gagosian was one of the honorees at the Academy’s 2010 gala.)

“Twenty years ago when I was just starting here, I had a lunch with Leo Castelli. He said to me, ‘Rome is going to be a hotbed of contemporary art.’ I couldn’t believe it! Well, it happened.”

As anyone who has seen her accomplishments would agree, it might well not have happened without Adele Chatfield-Taylor.

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