

“Otis College of Art and Design: the First 88 Years”

by Barbara Isenberg

Even before Kerry James Marshall took a drawing class at Otis Art Institute, Otis teacher Charles White was one of his heroes. The Carver Junior High student had read about White in the book *Great Negroes Past and Present*, and was thrilled to learn that the painter had a studio right there at Otis. When White actually walked into his classroom, recalls Marshall, “That was it for me. It was a life-altering experience.”

Both Marshall and Otis have come a long way since that day back in the '60s. Marshall, who also took Otis classes in high school, is a 1978 Otis graduate whose own paintings are now in such collections as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. And today, as Otis College of Art and Design, Otis trains not just painters and sculptors but toy and fashion designers.

Although time has brought changes in location, curriculum, and affiliations, Otis continues to welcome and nurture homegrown talent like Marshall. Many students are from Los Angeles, as they always have been; Otis is also the most culturally diverse private art school in the country. Since its start in 1918, the city's first freestanding art school has been what longtime trustee Kathleen Ahmanson calls “an everyman's college,” a place where people of limited means could learn the visual arts. John Hench, Mickey Mouse's official portrait painter as well as a key designer of Disney theme parks, attended Otis on scholarship in the '20s. So did Tyrus Wong, subject of a 2004 retrospective at Los Angeles' Chinese American Museum, and the Japanese-American artists Hideo Date and Benji Okubo. And so did Oscar®-winning costume designer Dorothy Jeakins and George Maitland Stanley, the man who sculpted the “Oscar®.”

The key criterion for acceptance to Otis, of course, has been artistic potential, and as this exhibition of Otis Fine Arts alumni illustrates, the College's admission officers have been paying attention. Oklahoma-born Milford Zornes, now 98, was a key figure in California's early watercolor movement, while Robert Irwin, at Otis for two years in the '50s, is crucial to California's Light and Space movement. Philip Guston, Edith Head, John Altoon, and John Baldessari all studied at Otis, while degree holders have included post-minimalist Barry Le Va, assemblage artist Alison Saar, Los Four cofounder Carlos Almaraz, and printmaker Anthony Zepeda.

Otis alumni have drawn New Yorker cartoons and Christmas cards for movie stars. They have created murals for post offices, freeways, and financial institutions. Their work is in numerous exhibitions and in such permanent collections as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Museum of Contemporary Art, the Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution. Alumni have also won Oscars®, Guggenheims, Getty grants, and MacArthur Foundation “genius” grants.