



THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME, PAST AND PRESENT: Fellows Alfred Blaustein in 1957 (top left) and composer Lukas Foss in 1951 (top right); Miuccia Prada receiving the McKim Medal from academy president Adele Chatfield-Taylor in June 2010.

The Academy Rewards

The American Academy in Rome promotes scholarship and offers a creative haven. **PATRICIA MORRISROE** spends a heady week where ivory tower meets Eternal City.

The gods may not be wearing Prada, but they are certainly smiling down on Janiculum Hill, where the designer herself is being honored at the American Academy in Rome's annual McKim Gala. After a long rainy spell, the weather has cleared, the sunset equal to the setting. Perched on the highest spot within Rome's ancient city walls, Villa Aurelia is the jewel in the academy's 11-acre, ten-building compound. The 17th-century Baroque palazzo is set on four acres of classical gardens with rows of lemon trees, a grove of umbrella pines and a long entry drive lined with blue and white African daisies.

Three hundred sixty guests mingle in the lemon gardens in the main courtyard, the crowd a fascinating blend of worlds that rarely collide: art and fashion stars alongside archaeologists, historic preservationists, landscape architects and classical studies scholars. There's Zaha Hadid, the Pritzker prize-winning architect who designed Rome's new MAXXI museum; Franca Sozzani, editor in chief of Italian *Vogue*; art dealer Larry Gagosian; Carla Fendi; and Sid and Mercedes Bass, who have made the academy one of their philanthropic pet projects.

After dinner in the secluded Secret Garden, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, the academy's president, presents Miuccia Prada with

the McKim Medal for her innovative fashion work and her promotion of the visual arts through Fondazione Prada. Past recipients include architect Renzo Piano, writer Umberto Eco and painter Cy Twombly, who designed the gold medal that was then crafted by the

The medal was named for Charles Follen McKim, the prominent 19th-century architect who wanted America to have its own national school in Rome the way France was represented by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In 1884 he founded the American School of Architecture, which

architecture, historic preservation, design, literature, music composition and visual arts. Prizewinners receive a stipend of \$13,000 to \$26,000 and can stay at the academy for six or 11 months, drawing on all its resources, including its well-connected staff. "They can get you into

"Who needs sleep?" says a fellow. **"I love my work, so being awake means more time for it."**

Italian jeweler Vhernier. It dangles from a bright scarlet and orange ribbon and clashes with the designer's fuchsia silk top in a very Prada way. "We would have never thought she'd stay this long," whispers one of the party organizers at the end of the evening. "But look at her—she's beaming!"

in 1911 merged with the American School of Classical Studies. They became the American Academy in Rome, a center for independent study in the arts and humanities. Every year, through a national, juried competition, the school awards approximately 30 Rome Prize fellowships in 18 disciplines, including

places you'd never dream you'd be able to gain access to," says Drew Beattie, a painter and a Harvard lecturer who was a visual arts fellow in 1995 and is currently president of the Society of Fellows.

Throughout the year the fellows are joined by visiting scholars and artists, fulfilling McKim's dream of a collaborative



The lush entryway of the American Academy in Rome



MEETING OF THE MINDS

Every year the academy has a gala to award its McKim Medal (crafted by Vhernier and named for its founder, Charles Follen McKim). Designer Miuccia Prada (bottom right) was this year's recipient, and the crowd of 360 that swept into the lemon gardens of the school's Villa Aurelia included academy president Adele Chatfield-Taylor (top left), art dealer Larry Gagosian (bottom left) and architect Zaha Hadid (top center).

haven where the community is inspired not only by Rome but also by the daily exchange of ideas. Chatfield-Taylor, who has been the academy's president since 1988, was once a design arts fellow and describes that experience as the greatest of her life. A historic preservationist by training, she was drawn to Rome by what she calls "a wonderful layering effect."

"Few cities in the world offer such an opportunity to see that kind of complex evolution," she explains. "That's what the fellows are responding to—the richness and depth." When she took over the academy, it was falling apart and looked as if it might close down. "It was a preservation project writ large," she says. "We spent twenty years and \$35 million renovating ten major buildings and all the gardens. Having benefited from the academy, I knew why it had to be protected."

The McKim Gala is just one of the many highlights of the annual Trustees Trip, which takes place every spring to coincide with the fellows' year-end events. The offerings are incredibly rich and varied, from an exclusive preview of the MAXXI (the National Museum of the 21st Century Arts) to a tour of "Galileo's Rome." In addition, fellows give readings and concerts and open their studios to show what they've been working on during the year. Stephen Westfall, who teaches at Bard College and Rutgers University, did a series of abstract paintings in reaction to Rome's "layered urban environment." Robert Hammond, one of the people responsible for New York's High Line, turned his sights to the Tiber River. He transformed a section of a walkway into an event—"Chance Encounter on the Tiber"—that combined movable seating and music performance.

Until recently, only trustees could participate in the activities, but the independently financed academy, which will celebrate its centenary in 2011, wanted to broaden its reach. It established the International Council and members can attend many of the events slated for Trustees Week, as well as lectures, concerts and parties in both New York and Rome, for an annual fee of \$5,000 (see "The People's Academy").

"It's really a great opportunity to enjoy some of the same insider experiences," says Suzanne Deal Booth, the council's chairwoman, when we meet on the run at the Caravaggio exhibit. I'd love to hear more about it, but Westfall is saying something fascinating about the angel in the *Annunciation*, while a few feet away Storr is talking about the painter's "strict geometry." Who to listen to? Where to look? There are too many choices. Should I go to

the Philip Guston show? Or on a walk to see five medieval churches? And what about the tour of the underground cult sites, including the lower levels of the Basilica of San Clemente which, Chatfield-Taylor says, represents Rome's "layering effect" to the max?

For a newcomer, all this can be a little dizzying. Perhaps it is the lofty setting or the academy's long history as an incubator of American creativity—Aaron Copland, Thornton Wilder, Michael Graves, William Styron and Frank Stella are just a few of the people who found inspiration here—but even lunch is a heady experience. It is served in the courtyard of the main building, a 130-room travertine palazzo where most of the fellows work and sleep. The building is one of only two structures outside North America designed by McKim, Mead and White. Even the food comes with a pedigree: In 2007, with help from Alice Waters, the academy instituted the Rome Sustainable Food Project, planting an organic garden and establishing direct relationships with local farmers. "The meals were pretty awful before," says Beattie. "But now the food is on par with the buildings and the level of scholarship and creativity."

At lunch one day I sit next to Matthew Bronski, a fellow in historic preservation who came to Rome with his wife and their infant daughter. Inspired by Vitruvius, the Roman architect and engineer, he has spent the past nine months observing ancient constructions to better understand sustainability issues in America's modern buildings.

At dinner I talk with Russell Maret, a New York-based private press printer who has been studying the lettering style in the catacombs. Like all the fellows in the arts, he was given a huge studio with 30-foot ceilings and massive north-facing windows. While his days were nearly perfect, his nights were a bit of a challenge, which raises the question

THE PEOPLE'S ACADEMY

Becoming a trustee at the American Academy in Rome requires selection by a nominating committee; however, the public can still participate in its events and programs through one of the school's councils. Members of the **International Council** (annual fee, \$5,000) make a yearly trip to the academy, where they meet with leaders and attend events that feature fellows' work. This year's events included the Fellows' Annual Year-End Concert, a viewing of a Roman sarcophagus, an archaeological study and guided visits to the MAXXI and MACRO museums. Members also attend the Academy's Annual Cabaret in New York, which features past fellows alongside widely recognized performers like Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson.

For those looking to get involved on a smaller scale, **Friends of the Academy** (annual fee, \$75–\$25,000) offers a variety of options. For a \$75 donation, members receive an invitation to the annual Janet and Arthur Ross Rome Prize ceremony as well as the yearly calendar of events at the academy. Membership at higher donation levels comes with invitations to academy events in the United States and Italy, like the annual gala dinner in New York, this year's Philip Guston exhibition at the Museo Carlo Bilotti and lunch for two at the Academy in Rome. For information about these and other memberships with the academy, go to aarome.org. —JORDAN KISNER

of what it's like to sleep in a Beaux-Arts "dorm" filled with the smartest, most talented kids at school. "It is intense," he says. "You can practically feel the energy through the walls. It makes it hard to sleep."

"Who needs sleep?" asks archaeologist Brian Rose. "I love my work so much that being awake just gives me more time for it." Rose, president of the Archaeological Institute of America and a professor of archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, was a fellow in 1992 and is now a trustee. For the past 30 years he has overseen Greek and Roman excavations in Turkey, where he unearthed a larger-than-life statue of Roman emperor Hadrian and a portrait head of the Roman emperor Augustus. In a few weeks he's off to Turkey again.

After several such conversations I slip into the building's main salon for a break. There I meet the Tony award-winning playwright John Guare, the author of *Six Degrees of Separation* and the husband of Chatfield-Taylor. He's sitting on one of the room's off-white chairs, reading a newspaper. "Sometimes I have to get away," he says. "It's a little, you know..."

"Intense?" I say.

A little later I'm standing in a cordoned-off excavation site at Piazza Venezia, where a major auditorium hall from the 11th century A.D. was uncovered while the city was digging in preparation for a new metro line. The auditorium is thought to be related to the Forum of Trajan. As I'm wondering how they'll balance preservation with the need for public transport, dozens of cars whiz by. Climbing the narrow stairs, I realize I literally have one step in the ancient world, one in the modern. It's another example of Chatfield-Taylor's "layering effect" of Rome. The sun is strong, but nobody in our group seems to mind. It's a privilege to be here, there and everywhere. ■

A lecture during the annual Trustees Trip at the academy, where lemon trees abound; architect and fellow Kiel Moe, working in a studio.

