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# THE MARTINEZ ACADEMY OF ARMS

20-26 minutes



In selecting the first school to be featured on this website, it is fitting that MartialArtsNewYork would focus on a martial art with roots older than any other in New York City: the tradition of [classical and historical fencing](#).

Although many people today associate the word “fencing” with the modern Olympic sport, the differences between the latter style and the older, traditional fencing methods are profound. Although it would take a lengthy book to enumerate the many differences, suffice it to say that the fencing of past centuries was a martial art

concerned with the preservation of life and body, as well as the self-development of the individual. Modern fencing, on the other hand, has changed and evolved greatly over the last century, and is concerned with scoring points to win at a game. Not only is the mentality, objective, form, technique, and approach of the older art vastly different, but originally, it included in its repertoire a wide variety of weapons beyond the standard staples of foil, épée (dueling sword), and saber. For instance, in its entry on “Fencing” (written by Curtis Guild), the *Boston Athletic Association Year Book of 1890* stated,

“Properly speaking, fencing applies to every method of self-defense with any weapon...It includes the use of the quarter-staff, the cane, the single stick, the bayonet, the dagger, the sabre, the rapier, the dueling sword, and the foil.”

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The tradition of fencing in New York City dates as far back as the seventeenth century, to the Dutch founding of the City. During the 1700s, New York became the fencing Mecca of North America, with at least fourteen fencing schools total, mostly located in lower Manhattan. Fencing skills were often applied in earnest, as duels were fought more frequently during this time in New York than in any other American metropolis. Throughout the ages, combats were fought by men as well as women, using weapons such as the small-sword, broadsword, dueling sword, saber, and stiletto knife.

Traditional fencing continued to be taught and practiced in New York throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, when celebrated masters of French, German, Italian, and Danish origin trained New Yorkers in the noble art and science of defense, still

sometimes for the purpose of fighting duels. Occasionally these masters would gather to test and display their skills before the public, and contest with weapons such as the foil, épée, saber, rapier, dagger, cane, knife, buckler, and others.

Presently, however, only one school in the city remains to teach this traditional art:

## THE MARTINEZ ACADEMY OF ARMS

This unique school is the inheritor of a distinguished fencing lineage. The two masters who run the academy, **Maestros** [Ramon Martinez](#) and [Jeanette Acosta-Martinez](#), trained with [Frederick Rohdes](#), a German fencing master born in 1897, who immigrated to New York City where he continued to teach the art in the traditional manner until his death in 1984. Rohdes was one of the last fencing masters of his generation to still teach fencing as a martial art. Rohdes himself trained with both French and Italian fencing masters, eventually becoming a master under the tutelage of *Maitre d'Armes* [Marcel Cabijos](#) (1893 – 1964), a veteran of the First World War who immigrated to New York City in the 1920s. Notably, Cabijos had achieved international renown by challenging and defeating the saber and epee champion of the United States (Leo Nunes) with only a twelve inch dagger (against Nunes's dueling sword) in a [well-publicized contest held in 1926](#).





Maître d'Armes Frederick Rohdes, pictured with a schlaeger, one of the weapons taught at his academy, during the late 1970s.

The Martinez Academy's [website](#) describes the school thus:

“The structure of the Academy reflects the ideals of 19th Century classical fencing academies. Entering the Academy, one steps into another era where students not only exhibit a serious dedication to the practice of fencing as both an art and science but also carry themselves with a polished level of etiquette and sensibility.

Training remains focused on personal combat, as if one were preparing for a serious encounter. In this formally rigorous environment, students receive instruction in classical and historical fencing systems from dedicated professionals of a traditional fencing lineage... Training remains focused on personal combat, as if one were preparing for a serious encounter.”





Maestro Ramón Martínez



Maestro Jeannette Acosta-Martínez

The Martinez Academy offers instruction in a wide variety of styles. The primary weapons taught include foil, stick, dueling sword, dueling sabre, small-sword, and rapier and dagger; most of these are also taught in the various French, Italian and Spanish styles. However, other classical and historical weapons are also taught on request, or within specialized courses, such as the cane, quarterstaff, single dagger, bayonet, military sabre, sidesword, sword and buckler, rapier and cloak, and others. Many of these

styles are not taught anywhere else in the world.

To shed additional light on the training, history, and nature of the Martinez Academy, we posed a series of questions to Maestro Ramon Martinez, who graciously agreed to answer them.

Following are the questions and his responses:

### **How long have you been practicing martial arts?**

I have been involved in martial arts in one form or another for about 42 years.

### **Why did you pursue teaching martial arts?**

I pursued teaching martial arts for many reasons but mainly to insure the survival of my fencing lineage for future generations.

### **Why did you pursue Western martial arts instead of the Eastern martial arts?**

I was a dilettante in systems of Asian martial arts, which for the most part was Tai Chi Chuan. The fact remains that western martial arts spoke to me more intensely on an internal basis than the Asian. Furthermore as a point of distinction and clarification I use the term “Western Martial Arts” because the meaning encompasses more than European. There have been many combat systems that have developed and practiced in the New World.

### **How long has your school been running?**

MAA has been running since 1983.

### **What distinguishes classical and historical fencing from other martial arts?**

Classical and historical fencing are unique martial arts because

they can be practiced in real time and distance with real penetrating power, as no modifications have to be made to the technique. All techniques are executed exactly the same as they would be with sharp weapons during a combative situation. It certainly is not “touch- fencing”, as it has been referred to by those ignorant of the art. Anyone who has an understanding of edged weapons knows that it does not take very much force to cause a severe wound by puncture or cut.



Above: Spanish rapier demonstration in Madrid, Spain, for the History Channel’s Museum Secrets.

### **What are some of the unique aspects of the instruction imparted at the Martinez Academy?**

What is unique about MAA is that it is the last of a bastion of a tradition that goes back several generations. The majority of the weapons and systems that are taught have not been reconstructed. These combat systems have been passed down to us from master to disciple in an unbroken chain of transmission.

Myself and Maestro Acosta-Martinez have trained the teachers at MAA as professional teachers of the art. The type of training that they have undergone has been intense and severe. MAA certified teachers have progressed within the strict, ancient apprenticeship method. They must constantly hone their abilities by sweating on the training floor, weapon in hand. Each and every one of those certified has had to prove themselves first as strong fencers in a variety of weapons and schools, secondly they must have acquired the utmost in their knowledge of theory and pedagogy. Finally, they must possess the moral character and inner strength that is required of an educator in lethal martial science. There can be no compromise in this type of program. This is a school where fencers and teachers of fencing are trained to the best of their ability.

**A question for the uninitiated: what sort of benefits can a beginner expect or hope to gain in training at the academy?**

Physical awareness and development is an obvious benefit. However, what is more important is that they will gain strength of character, ethics and spiritual awareness. This is achieved slowly and methodically. One of the prerequisites of our type of training is that the student must see himself completely and come know who they really are. This can be a fearful undertaking by those who have grown up in our distracted and negatively self-absorbed modern society. The first thing that must be learned is; "Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself" which is a Chinese Proverb.

If a student follows this path they will become a strong person internally as well as externally. They will be solid citizens who have empathy for others, respect for human life and accept nothing but



the truth.



### **Is the Martinez Academy more of a school or a club, and what is the difference?**

MAA is an academy where fencers and teachers of fencing are prepared. An academy is an establishment or institution that trains not only fencers, but teachers of fencing. A school is solely an establishment where people go to learn how to fence (not to be trained as teachers). MAA is not a club/group. The difference is that a club is more of a social environment where enthusiasts gather to participate in fencing. A club or a group may or may not hire a professional teacher for their services, indefinitely. In a school, the teacher is the school, and it is operated according to that individual's vision and direction. The students come and pay the teacher, and the teacher is the first and last word in that establishment. In a club or group, the teacher must conform to the needs of that club or group. In a school, the student must conform to the structure of that school. This is the traditional way that fencing establishments have always been operated and

designated.

### **What are some of the factors that determine how quickly a new student is able to progress at the Martinez Academy?**

The main factor is the student's willingness to dedicate himself to his training. Some students, according to their lifestyle, are able to dedicate themselves more fully than others. It also depends on what the student wants to get out of his training. The person's personality, character and psychological makeup are also factors. In order for someone to really succeed at this, they must have or develop faith, patience, and trust in the school, the master, the art and science, and in themselves. Through their own volition they must put in whatever it takes to achieve their goal. They must have a "non-quit" spirit. A student must realize that it's about working on yourself. Through decades of experience, it has been proven time and time again, that in order for any student to progress in a martial art, whatever that martial art that is—fencing, or otherwise—it requires deep self-examination and reflection. We have seen that in order for the student to progress and reach different levels, there's always something that he has to work on or change about himself before any further progress can be made. This requires a lot of internal examination of the self, and that can be extremely daunting, but extremely rewarding in turn. It's not an easy path, but it's not insurmountable either. All traditional martial arts—all of them—are about mind, body, and spirit. Each person finds his own level, and then continues to work from there.





Above: Butt strike with the bayonet.

**Today, swords, knives, and staff weapons are not carried by the average person for self-defense. Taking this fact into consideration, how is classical and historical fencing still relevant or practical for personal self-defense?**

Universal fencing theory—which could also be designated as universal martial arts theory—does not change. The skills, such as knowledge of timing, distance, proportion, and controlling the weapon, the time and the distance—this is universal, whether it be a blade or a fist. In the past, fencing theory and technique was applied to a wide variety of armed and unarmed combat. On the banner of this website, for instance, you can see the lunge-punch, and the same technique applied to the cane, by masters training at the school at Joinville-le-Pont in France. You can also see French fencing technique in the photograph of the bayonet fencers.

Fencing techniques can be modified and adapted to empty hand, a cane, knife, or any other improvised weapon, without much difficulty. This being with the proviso that the person who is a fencer has totally internalized the art and science of fencing. Bruce Lee, in the creation of his magnum opus, the Tao of Jeet Kun Do, based a very large percentage of his combat theory on fencing

theory. Anyone who understands fencing, who peruses the pages of Lee's book, can quickly observe this. Any astute martial artist can quickly discern the value and the importance of classical and historical fencing.

**I understand that in fencing, there is what is called the “assault,” “free assault,” “formal assault,” and simply “fencing.” What are these and how do they differ?**

“Fencing” is a term that refers to the overall art and science, not the activity. In the twentieth century, the term “fencing” has come to mean the activity. This is why we use the traditional term “assault,” so that the student fully comprehends what he is engaging in, and we want them to understand that the term “fencing” applies to something much more vast than just the activity.

Alfred Hutton, a nineteenth century career military officer, antiquarian, author, and teacher of swordsmanship, defined the “assault” as follows: “The exercise with blunt weapons, representing in every respect a combat with sharps, in which we execute at will all the maneuvers of the fencing lessons.”



Maestro Ramón Martínez, in the midst of a riposte with the Northern Italian dueling saber.

A “formal assault” is when two fencers engage in the assault underneath the supervision of a director and judges, where a score is kept, and is bound by strict etiquette and formality, like a duel. In this situation, the fencers can use all their skills to defeat their adversary in a fair encounter.

A “free assault” is a situation in which the fencers face each other in the assault with minimal supervision, and the fencers can decide whether or not they wish to keep score. Typically they do not keep score, because it is about the exchange, it is about studying the adversary. Free assault is a time when the fencer can choose to work on specific tactics, specific techniques—however, the adversary may not be a party to that, as they may be working on their own tactics and techniques. It is about the experience of engaging with many different fencers at many different levels. If the fencer is engaging in the free assault with the sole objective of “beating” the adversary, then he is wasting his opportunity and time.

In order for fencers at MAA to practice, hone and perfect their skills, they must engage in free assault and formal assault, the latter being the most important. Students are meticulously introduced to the assault by the masters and instructors in a step-by-step process, and then they are brought to the formal assault through various steps as well. Until they show competence in the formal assault, they will not be allowed to engage in free assault. This is the most crucial time in the fencer’s training, because any mistakes that are allowed, uncorrected, in the fencer, will plague that fencer for the rest of his life. This is the time is when the

fencer must show self-restraint, and self-discipline, to follow his teacher's directives implicitly. Of course we cannot force a person to do this, but if any imperfections occur, they then bear the responsibility. A beginning student is not going to be engaging in this type of activity until they have developed the proper skill. Doing otherwise would retard the student's progress. Nineteenth century masters had a term for this, namely, "premature assaults." At MAA, we will not permit the student to indulge in this.



Cane fencer (facing) executes double handed parry of blow to the head by adversary.

**I have heard or have read others use the term “sparring.” How is that different?**

The term “sparring” was never used in traditional fencing.

In the Badminton Library's 1893 volume on “Fencing, Boxing and Wrestling,” in the chapter entitled “Boxing and Sparring,” the author distinguishes between the two activities. The latter is done with protective gloves, and the former is done bare knuckle, which, the author states, is true boxing. It can be observed from this that it

is clear that there is specific meaning to the word “spar,” which was accepted and understood in that era.

So, too, today: My late father was a boxer (active in the late 1920s and early 1930s), and I have several acquaintances who have boxed and who continue to box. I have asked them just what is the exact meaning of “sparring.” All have answered in pretty much the same manner: In “sparring,” the boxer or fighter is not attempting to defeat his opponent, he but in fact working on perfecting a certain type(s) of technique(s) that is part of his overall repertoire. This is one of the reasons that prize fighters work with a variety of “sparring partners,” because each presents a difficulty that the fighter must learn to overcome by working a specific technique over and over again. In “sparring sessions,” both of the participants are not working at all-out speed or power, but on refined execution and honing of skills. These sessions are not “bouts” in which they called on all their accumulated skill.

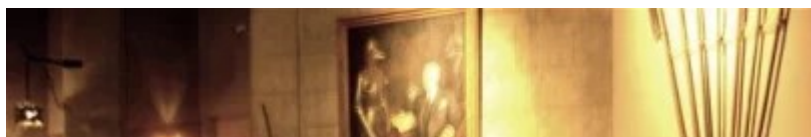
“Sparring” had always meant the practice of pugilism until the advent of the popularity of Oriental Martial Arts (OMA) that began in the 1960s and really came into their own with Bruce Lee’s celebrity in the 1970s. The OMA, not really having an equivalent term that translated well into English, borrowed the term “sparring” to describe the type of practice that Westerners following OMA engaged in, taking within its meaning not only pugilism but also the practices of many other of the OMA, including weapons practice. In this venue, somewhere along the way in the assimilation of the OMA into Western culture, the term “sparring” became misused and came to have the meaning of engaging in fighting sessions.

For further information on the use of the word “sparring,” as well as a history of the use of the term “assault,” refer to my article [“Notes](#)

[on the Incorrect Use of the Word 'Sparring' in Western Swordsmanship,"](#) which can be read on the Martinez Academy of Arms website.

### **Is classical fencing more of an internal or external martial art, or is it both?**

In our school, it's more internal-based, because we train from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. We train our students to direct what their body does by conscious thought, so that the mind directs the actions of the body and the weapon. Strength and speed are important, but that importance is secondary. Form and function work together; they are not mutually exclusive. Classical fencing, like other traditional martial arts, creates stylistic combatants, and the requirement is that those who train like this constantly work on their form to perfect the function. Muscular strength and speed fade with age, but form becomes more perfect, refined, and subtle, because an older martial artist cannot afford to squander any physical, mental, psychological, or spiritual energy. We train our fencers not to react, but to enact, during an assault or combative situation. My own fencing master, Maitre d'Armes Frederick Rohdes, always emphasized that it is not about power or speed, but it is about the internalization of what he was teaching. Bruce Lee talked about that. Yamaoka Tesshu, the nineteenth century Japanese master swordsman, spoke about it as well. Don Jeronimo de Carranza and Don Luis Pacheco de Narvaez, sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish fencing masters, spoke about the same thing. All high-level martial artists know this, or should know this.







Above: Spanish rapier demonstration at the Higgins Armory Museum.

**What are some of the aspects or benefits of training at the academy that might interest a more experienced martial arts practitioner?**

I've had high-ranking black belts and instructors in Jiu Jitsu, Aikido, Wing Chun, Taekwondo, Filipino martial arts, and other Asian martial arts, as well as golden gloves boxers, come in to train. They wanted to work not so much on speed and power, which they already had developed, but refinement of movement, timing, distance, proportion, and sensitivity to their opponent's energy both in attack and defense. Because fencing is really about fine motor skills, they put themselves in a situation using an extremely light weapon, such as the foil, which limited their reliance on power and speed. That helped them to acquire the ability to "listen", in the Chinese sense of the term, to what their adversary was giving them. They are using what they learn in fencing to refine what they already know.

**Any final words you would like to say?**

Traditional classical and historical fencing is an extremely sophisticated martial art, in which the student and practitioner has

to step up, rather than the martial art step down or be watered down.

**Many thanks to Maestro Ramón Martínez for participating in this interview.**

**The Martinez Academy of Arms offers classes three days a week at several Manhattan locations. For more information about the Academy, as well as class schedules, visit the website at: <http://www.martinez-destreza.com>**

**Or, visit the [MAA Facebook Page](#).**