



COSTA

VAVAGIAKIS

Costa Vavagiakis is featured in publications such as *Portrait Painting Atelier* and *Curve: The Female Nude Now*, and in articles in *American Artist*, *American Artist Drawing*, and *The Artists' Magazine*, among others. He has been the recipient of many distinguished awards, including the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and the Gregory Millard Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts. His work has appeared in exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution, the Museum of the City of New York, and the Frye Art Museum in Seattle; at ACA Galleries, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, and Hirschl & Adler Modern in New York; and at Hackett-Freedman Gallery in San Francisco, among other venues.

Costa Vavagiakis
Night Street V
2014, oil on panel, 54 x 40 in.

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A Painter's Equivalent of a Sculpture

On a childhood trip to Greece, my homeland, I experienced what would become a seminal artistic inspiration: seeing the *Charioteer of Delphi*. Seeing art so powerful and realistic at an early age had a profound effect on me. This began my fascination with Greek sculpture, leading to the exploration of the human form, which has been the unerring subject of my painting and drawing for over forty years. I didn't realize until much later that through my art I have been attempting to recreate the intensity of that moment.

Ever since then, I have been drawing. I can recall that the first drawings I ever made were inspired by the many icons in my family's house. Later, when I was attending parochial elementary school, I did renderings of the pictures of sculpture busts that opened every new chapter in our Greek history books. From my early teens on, I drew all the time. I doodled compulsively. Always with a pad in hand, I drew from my surroundings and I drew from my imagination.

My very first art teacher at the High School of Art and Design was Max Ginsburg. In drawing class, Max would set up a model and ask us to draw what was in front of us. It was a wonderful initiation to drawing from life. Both Max and fellow teacher Irwin Greenberg held a painting group at the school before classes officially began. I joined the group and was immediately hooked.

Up at dawn, I would take my painting box and set out for school excited to attend the painting group. Replicating the atelier system, the teachers would paint alongside the students with a live model posing. Once or twice during a session they would go around, student to student, sit down and critique our work. Occasionally we would stand behind them while they were painting to see how they developed their paintings.

We learned commitment and discipline. We learned how to organize our materials and workstations in

order to concentrate fully on the task of effectively representing the models posing before us. Many of the principles that I now teach my students come from what I learned in those early hours long ago. Max and Irwin lit the lantern and showed us the way. They inspired and motivated us, and gave us the push to be independent and have the will necessary for the lifelong pursuit of art.

These days I say that I am mostly self-taught, because I didn't go to college and by the age of twenty I was not in the classroom, but painting on my own. However, I don't think that I would have possessed the courage or wherewithal to have done it on my own if it had not been for Max Ginsberg and Irwin Greenberg.

After high school I studied for one year with Harvey Dinnerstein at the National Academy of Art and with Burt Silverman privately in his studio. They helped me further my skills and encouraged me to develop my own personal vision. But most important, I studied on my own. I never studied for studying's sake; I always had to be making something I felt strongly about. Essentially, I have learned from the experience of doing.

I have the great fortune of having grown up in New York City and was able to take advantage of the wealth of art collections in its museums. I went to the Metropolitan Museum of art every week to study the drawings in its collection. The three months I spent copying Velázquez's painting *Juan de Pareja* was a major breakthrough in my understanding of oil painting. But I seemed to strongly respond to sculpture, which I attribute to my childhood experience in Delphi. I made drawings of Greco-Roman sculpture and drawings of the works of modernist sculptors Jacques Lipchitz, Henry Moore, and David Smith. I was fascinated by the sensation of volume the sculptures had and the space they inhabited. In retrospect, I've realized all these years I have been attempting to do a painter's equivalent of a sculpture.

The art that I came to love and study shared an aspiration of capturing the timelessness of the human spirit through the combination of formal beauty and an expression of emotion. I aspire to achieve these concerns in my work. I draw the sitter straight on and objectively, stripped of narrative content. Often, I paint my figures slightly larger than life size and place them in a shallow space isolated against a white background to increase their sculptural presence. They are lit from above to capture and record the specific qualities of the skin, hair, and vascular posture. I scrutinize my subject's physiognomy intensely, transcribing a detailed road map of the sitter. My artistic aim is to create works that come alive — as if the people might step out of the picture plane. I want the viewer to have the sensation of encountering a living, breathing human being with unique spiritual dimensions.

I don't choose to try to please everybody. If one out of ten people respond to my work in a positive way, that is enough for me to measure success. What matters most is that one person is really moved. I had to make my philosophy and my stance clear-cut, and patiently maintain that stance no matter what.

My oil painting technique is labor-intensive. I build up wet-on-wet layers. Applying layer upon layer, scraping and sanding between layers, results in a smooth, built-up surface. I want the brushstrokes to be indiscernible so that the volume of the form and the translucency of the skin win out. The process of slowly building and layering is analogous to penetrating more deeply into what I am seeing. I am constantly researching and investigating the form and sculptural reality of the figure. Applying many paint layers is the most powerful approach toward that end.

I paint on panels (usually paper mounted on wood). The paper is a heavyweight watercolor paper sized with either shellac or animal-hide glue. I then apply many layers of oil paint primer using rollers. I smooth out the surface by sanding in between each applied layer.

I work on toned or white grounds. On the white grounds I usually do and underpainting grisaille. I work

with quick-drying pigments (synthetic iron oxide) on the underlying layers and then slower-drying pigments (cadmiums) on the superficial layers. I oil out and then apply many layers of paint, sanding in between the layers. The sessions usually last eight to twenty hours (three to six hours with the model). During this time the paint starts closing. This allows for a dense, sculptural modeling of the form. The mediums I use consist of linseed oil with small amounts of a siccative (lead, cobalt, or alkyd) on the early layers to walnut oil on the latter layers. My painting process is slow and painstaking; a painting could take several years to complete.

Drawing has always played a prominent role in my life and remains an integral part of my process. I sketch for research and development, and the highly realized drawings that portray the individual's physical presence are important preludes to a painting. Often, my drawings are independent finished works with no relationship to another work.

One of the major technical challenges of constructing a highly rendered drawing of a human being is how to maintain the life spirit of the sitter captured at the initial impression. To keep the figure breathing, I sharpen my focus and develop the forms as I continually move my gaze from reference point to reference point and back again. Every note, spot, and area on the page are points of arrival and departure that I call passages. This is the basis of my drawing methodology. I teach students how to visually navigate and not stay in one area too long so that they don't get myopic, trapped, and bogged down. This helps with mass recognition and mass coordination as a drawing is developed.

At the same time, I try not to teach style. I feel self-expression is a given; one cannot help but to express oneself. My task as a teacher is to help clear the perceptive channels of the students in order for them to be open conduits, to help clarify their vision externally and internally, to draw with hand and heart.





Costa Vavagiakis

Craig II

2010, oil on panel, 32 x 25 in.

Opposite

Costa Vavagiakis

Rainbow XXXVI

2012, oil on panel, 24 x 18 in.





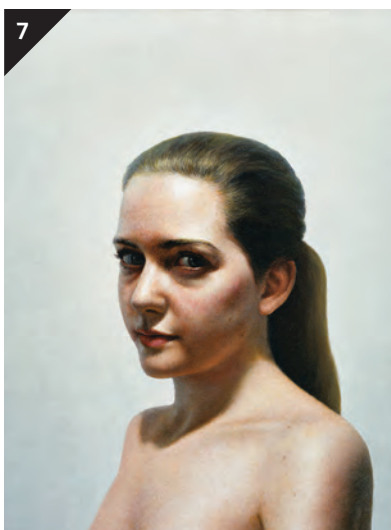
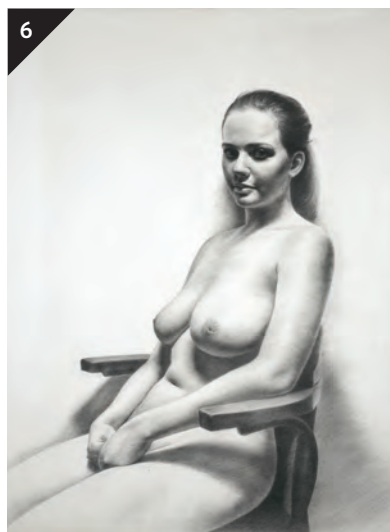
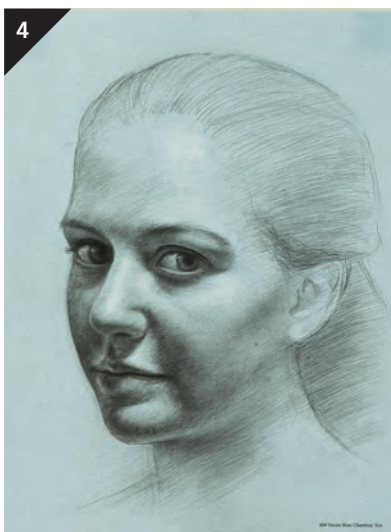
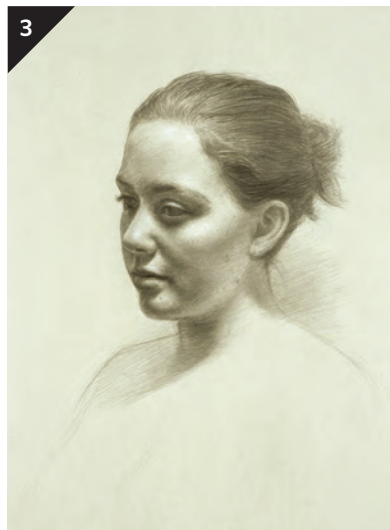
Costa Vavagiakis
Rooftop I
2007, oil on panel, 10 x 15 in.

Costa Vavagiakis
Gioia VIII
2010, oil on panel,
56 x 35 in.

Opposite
Costa Vavagiakis
Connie V
2004, oil on panel,
14 x 12 in.







LESSON IN PRINT: THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT

I do countless drawings and oil sketches as I set out the concept for a painting. I draw from life — from direct observation and from experience. The eventual final painting is a synthesis of all these drawing and painting experiences. I do dozens of drawings and painting studies of the same sitter in very similar poses, exploring subtle shifts of axis and mood. A very important lesson for the student to experience is the evolutionary process, with its many subtle changes, modifications, and adjustments from its first idea to the final completed painting. It teaches the process on several levels and reveals how profound the experience of searching and arriving at the final painting can be. It is not just about the evolution of an image as a technical challenge but about how the subtlest adjustments of pose, light, and shadow are central to the psychological dimension of a work. I am searching for a union of pictorial harmony and emotional content where the spirit and the technique become the same single vehicle of expression.

On a trip to Berlin in 1990, I encountered Roger van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Young Woman*. I was struck by the human immediacy and presence of the painting, inspiring my interest in the three-quarter-portrait motif. This exploration led me to the *Miranda XI* painting, among many other works. In addition to the van der Weyden, this series recalls the tradition of Antonello da Messina, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Corot, and Ingres.

1. *Miranda I* was the first drawing that set forth the idea. I was working on a frontal portrait of Miranda. I asked her to turn her head and eyes toward me. I finished the drawings in the ninety minutes remaining in our session.

2. Then I did *Miranda III*, a more finished drawing in graphite focusing on her facial features. The tilt of the head is toward the viewer, suggesting openness and vulnerability.

3. I decided to give both the model and myself a break from the intensity of the pose. A pose where the model gazes back requires a high degree of energy and emotion. I had Miranda look away, and I raised my eye level. *Miranda V* suggests a pensive mood.

4. I was looking for a more immediate and intimate connection. I did several small-scale bust drawings on different colored papers implementing white chalk, including *Miranda VII*. This technique allows for a quicker execution that helps me explore the many subtle variations.

5. I usually work on several smaller paintings before the final painting, such as *Miranda VIII*. Sometimes I paint them concurrently with the final larger painting. They support and inform one another.

6. I executed *Miranda IX*, a mid-sized finished drawing, to serve as an information model for my final painting.

7. *Miranda X* is a bust I did before and during working on *Miranda XI*. The smaller scale helps to inform me of the color notes and transitions. It is my intention that the subtleties of emotion be contained in the expression of the sitter.

8. I gridded and scaled up the finished mid-sized drawing to create *Cartoon of Miranda XI*. I decided to include more space around the figure. I transferred it to a durable transparent Mylar so that I could continue to make adjustments before I transferred it to the prepared panel.

9. I was not satisfied with the expression and mood conveyed in the previous works. I wanted to heighten the tension and darken the mood. I worked on several drawings

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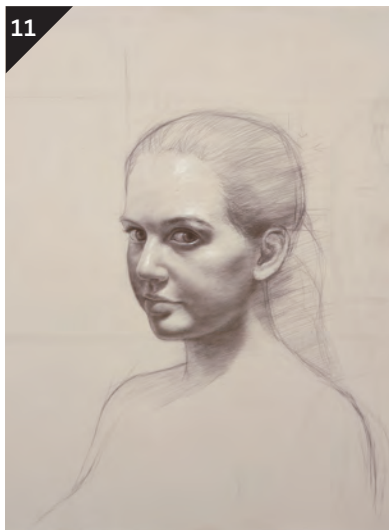


to see if I could capture what I was looking for, including Miranda XI Study I.

10. During the process of painting Miranda XI, I continued to make drawings to work things out, including the best placement of the hands.

11. I realized Miranda's expression was not subtle enough. I did several drawings to find the expression I was after. Miranda XI Study III struck the right balance of vulnerability and strength.

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12. This slight adjustment of the tilt and axis of the head and eyes in Miranda XI was necessary to express the subtle emotion and provocative mood I was seeking. After three and a half years and many revisions, I had finished the painting.

Page 158 (1)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda I
2002, graphite on paper, 16 x 13 in.

Page 158 (2)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda III
2003, graphite on paper, 26 x 23 in.

Page 158 (3)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda V
2003, graphite and white chalk on paper, 11 x 8.5 in.

Page 158 (4)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda VII
2004, graphite and white chalk on paper, 11 x 8.5 in.

Page 158 (5)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda VIII
2005, oil on panel, 17 x 14 in.

Page 158 (6)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda IX
2006, graphite on paper, 22 x 17 in.

Page 158 (7)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda X
2007, oil on panel, 13 x 11 1/4 in.

Page 158 (8)
Costa Vavagiakis
Cartoon of Miranda XI
2008, graphite on Mylar, 51 x 42 in.

Page 158 (9)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda XI Study I
2009, graphite on paper, 20.5 x 18 in.

Page 160 (10)
Costa Vavagiakis
Hand studies for Miranda XI
2009, graphite and white chalk on paper, 12 x 16 in.

Page 160 (11)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda XI Study III
2009, graphite on Mylar, 23 x 22 in.

Page 161 (12)
Costa Vavagiakis
Miranda XI
2010, oil on panel, 50 x 42 in.

