



This issue we present the thoughts of **Daniel Graves — Founder and Director of The Florence Academy of Art**, who believes that what keeps him on track and enjoying his art is the classic tradition handed down through the centuries. It is the long road to fine painting. This feature was produced with the assistance of A'Dora Phillips.

# Uncontested truths

## Solving problems through the classical tradition.

*“In a school of fine arts, it is one’s duty to teach only uncontested truths, or at least those that rest upon the finest examples accepted for centuries.”*

— H. Flandrin

**L**et me just say by way of introduction that it has taken me my entire life to paint as I do. Painting in the tradition of the masters is no small undertaking, and it is a reality that learning to do so takes a long time. Most of the paintings hanging in museums represent years of tireless work on the part of the artists who painted them — beginning with a solid foundation in atelier-style

training, and followed by a lifetime of experimentation. I point this out in order to bring attention to something that may not be obvious and can therefore be discouraging to people who would like to paint in a traditional way, but haven’t had years of training and experience to support their efforts.

Painting should be fun, but it is a serious pursuit, and requires devotion, perseverance and hard

work. In the midst of that, part of the joy for me (and sometimes the pain) in painting is the process. What keeps me on track is the tradition in which I first began training when studying with Joseph Shepard as an undergraduate at the Maryland Institute of Art. This tradition provides a language with which to speak to others and it also gives a framework within which to solve problems. And the sooner you grow accustomed to being a problem solver as a painter, the stronger your paintings will be.

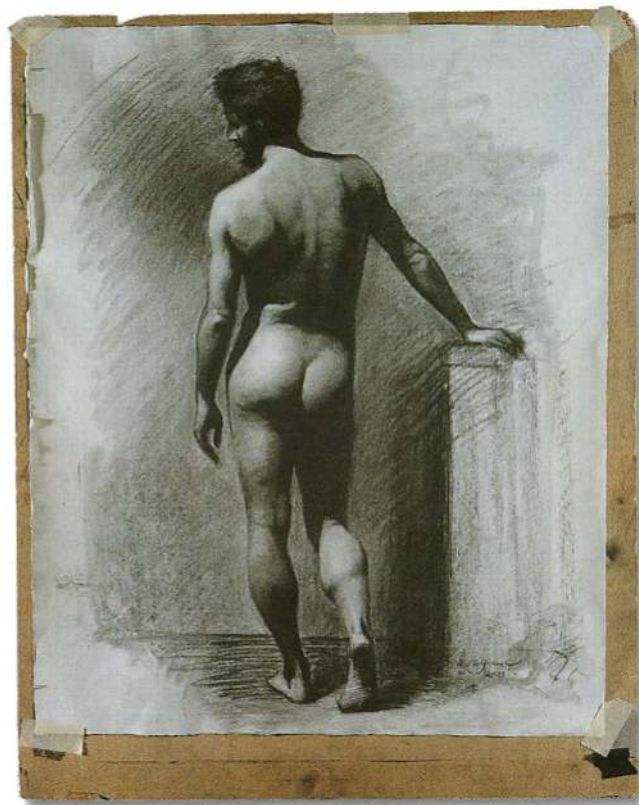
Although I have already been painting for decades, the process of learning and experimenting continues every day. Every painting presents a new challenge and I find I have to stretch myself in some new way in order to finish it. Sometimes I have to deepen my emotional connection to what I am painting; other times, I have to deepen my intellectual understanding of the subject matter or degree of technical expertise. Every painting is also in some way the sum total of my life’s experience and of all the paintings that have preceded it.



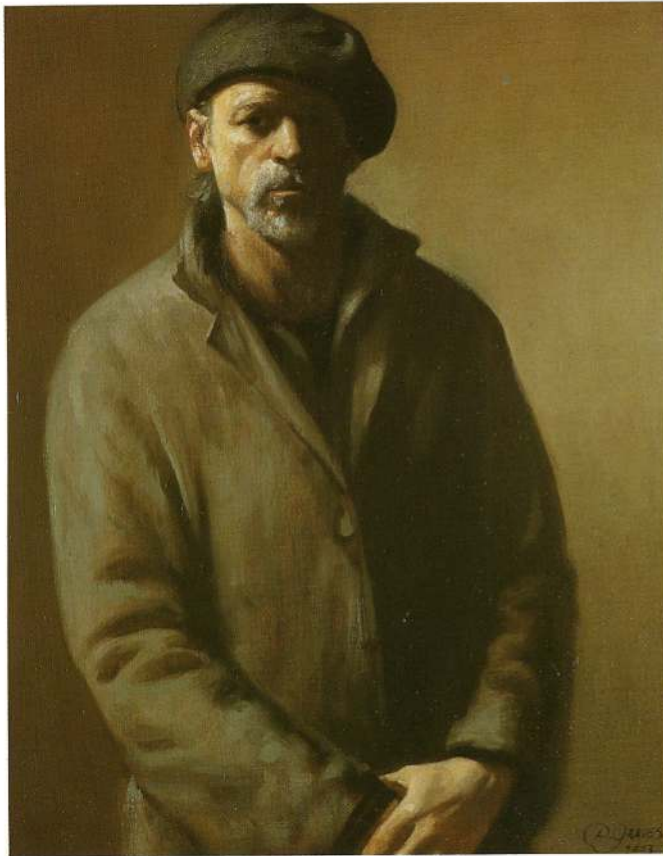
**Anki's Pond, oil on canvas,  
35 x 50cm (13¾ x 19¾"), 2002**

### **A traditional procedure**

One of the things I learned in my years of training and now teach my students is that to capture the complexities of nature on a piece of paper or on a canvas — be it portrait, figure, still life, or landscape — there has to be some kind of procedure. The demonstration on pages 45-47, which compresses a vast number of decisions into steps, will give you an idea of one of the many traditional frameworks with which you can work. Once you have worked with a traditional method for a few years, chances are you will want to take liberties with the procedure(s) you've learned, but having it there, even subconsciously, when you want or



**Study of Male Nude, charcoal on paper,  
40 x 50cm (15½ x 19½"), 2003**



**Self Portrait/Beret, oil on canvas,  
95 x 65cm (37½ x 25½"), 2003**



**Detail**

need something to help you build a painting is invaluable.

If I had to sum up a working methodology, I would say that, in the simplest terms, you move from big and simple to smaller and more complex. If your big shapes are correct, you can push as much detail into them as you want later on.

### **Choosing a subject**

If you are doing a study from life, you can just record facts, but if you are making a painting, you must have a premise. The premise of a painting is what guides you in setting up the pose and should guide every other decision you make as well, from the color of the imprimatura to the type of brushstroke you put down. Perhaps you are inspired to paint someone's portrait then you must understand what that person represents to you, what you feel you need or want to express about life through them.

You have to answer those questions for yourself — in whatever way you can. Sometimes, talking about your ideas may diminish them. It is not about something that can be put into words, perhaps — we are painters, after all — but you must nonetheless know at some level within yourself what it is all about.

In the demonstration painting of Raz, I wanted to explore the feeling of hope. Raz has been studying at The Florence Academy for a few years and has recently left to seek his own way as an artist. He is a very positive young man, excited about the next stage of his life, and to me he embodied the great hope that is so often the hallmark of youth.

### **Setting up**

I learned the sight-size method of working from Richard Lack back in the early seventies and still use it when setting up figures, portraits,

and still lifes in my studio. Working "sight-size" means drawing and painting at the exact same scale at which an object is seen. The reason why it is such a helpful tool for artists is because it helps us to achieve accurate proportions more easily, as well as to create a more exact visual impression of the subject on paper or canvas.

Before settling on a pose for Raz, I spent three or four hours trying to find the position, gesture, and light effect that would be most expressive of my ideas. The 2 x 2' north-facing skylight in my studio ensures a concentrated source of light, and I finally settled on a spotlight effect.

### **Drawing**

Drawing is the bedrock of all great realistic art. Its importance cannot be overestimated.

There are many, many different ways to go about drawing. I usually



**Penelope (Waiting for Explorer),**  
oil on canvas, 100 x 80cm (39½ x 31½"), 2003



**Detail**

begin by drawing the largest shape first, which I then break down into smaller and smaller ones. In the case of a portrait, for instance, I begin by drawing the big shape of the head, then break it down into its component shadow, light, and hair shapes. Once the structure of the head has been established, I draw the features (not thinking of them as noses, mouths and eyes but once again as shapes, which helps to give the kind of objectivity needed order to be accurate), then the half-tone planes that describe form, and so on, all the way down to the specific shape of the highlights in the eyes. I know it is tempting when working on a portrait to get involved in drawing the features before the shape of the head is accurate. But the shape of the head, believe it or not, is a much more powerful tool for establishing likeness than the features. If you had black and



**Tree in Denmark, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm (15½ x 19½"), 2002**



*Glen, The Poet*, oil on canvas,  
95 x 65cm (37½ x 25½"), 1995



Detail of *Glen, The Poet*

white photographs of the profiles of friends, for example, and photographs of any single feature, you would easily recognize them from the profiles but probably wouldn't from the features.

In almost any painting I do, I make hundreds of adjustments to the drawing, from the beginning all the way through to the end. You will see this clearly in the following

demonstration, as throughout the process of painting I came up against inaccuracies in the drawing that had to be corrected — more than usual, in fact, perhaps because the tilts of the head were particularly difficult for the model to hold and at any given time I was drawing subtly different positions which had to be accurately, believably, and harmoniously

blended. One of the complex challenges of working from life!

### **Techniques for applying paint**

One of the things that most painters will probably tell you they love when they look at works by any of the major painters is their control over the rich application of paint.

I particularly admire the application effects of artists such as Rembrandt, Velazquez, and Ribera, and I am motivated, as they were, to use the body of paint as part of the medium of expression. They pushed the envelope of technique, maximizing the descriptive potential of oil paint to the ultimate degree. Transparencies, luminosities, glazings, scumbles, solid painting, rich impastos with brushstrokes describing form and

**“If I had to sum up a working methodology, I would say that, in the simplest terms, you move from big and simple to smaller and more complex. If your big shapes are correct, you can push as much detail into them as you want later on.”**

## Art in the making Solving problems using the classical tradition “A Portrait of Raz”

texture — their work displays a wealth of understanding, variety and beauty in the application of paint.

Creating transparent shadows and thick textural effects in the lights was standard practice in the 17th century, and still makes good working sense today. Transparent shadows unify the forms and, like a darkroom, give your eyes somewhere to rest. Textured lights, on the other hand, describe form and give your eyes something to hold on to. Rest and action. Air and form. Yin and yang. Light and dark. Texture and smooth. Colorful and noncolorful. The human eye senses, and is interested, in the play of visual dichotomies, and it is your job as a painter to draw people into your paintings by creating a rich and varied tapestry upon which the eye can feast.

Controlling the textural effect of heavier paint is very difficult, and, quite honestly, there is no quick or easy way of coming by the knowledge and expertise that will allow you to gain control. You've just got to experiment, put down lots of deliberate brushstrokes, and get to know the character of all your materials.

I find that one of the biggest challenges of painting with this kind of textural effect is that when you go back over it, you diminish the energy of your brushstroke. You must therefore cultivate decisiveness in the way you put down paint, and, when the brushstrokes are not right, must have the courage to scrape it down and start over again. Your intent should always be to put down a precise mark and leave it, not approximate and refine. →

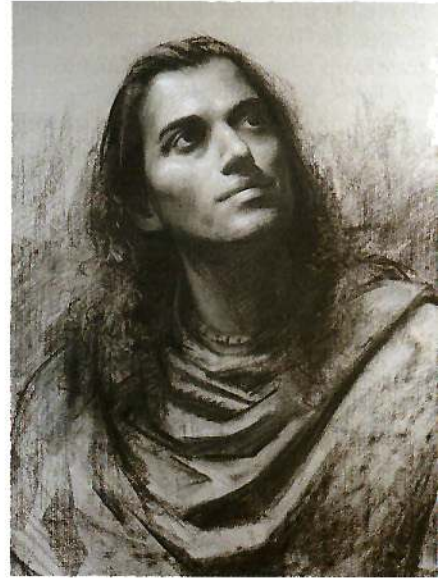
### STAGE 1

#### Drawing and transferring to canvas using tracing paper

This charcoal drawing took 6 hours. It was a tool not only for establishing an accurate relationship of shapes but also as a way of fine-tuning the pose and composition before the painting was underway when making changes becomes more difficult.

I traced on to tracing paper using a fine-tipped magic marker, which is better than a pencil or ball point pen, both of which can leave an impression on the drawing if you push too hard. I then smeared the back of the tracing paper with a slurry of paint the consistency of butter and just slightly lighter in tone than that of the imprimatura and traced over my lines with a 3H pencil.

Transferring a drawing rather than working directly on the canvas gives you the advantage of being able to move the tracing paper around to find out exactly where you want to place the image.



### STAGE 2

#### Refinding the drawing using paint

A lot of the drawing was lost when I transferred it, which is normal, and I therefore had to refind the drawing using paint. For drawing in the darker areas, I used Burnt Sienna and Ivory Black, which makes a warm brown.



### STAGE 3

#### Establishing big tonal shapes

Looking for the big shapes of lights and darks I drew in the lights with a pre-mixture of Lead White, Yellow Ochre, English Red, and a touch of Ivory Black. I worked broadly, re-establishing big shapes using bristle flats. I kept within a compressed value range — you will notice that there are no dark darks or light lights. Simplifying the values in this way makes it easier to focus on the larger shapes.

I found I had many drawing problems to work out. Looking very carefully, I made adjustments to the big shape of the head and the angles of the outline of the head, and of the nose, eyes, and mouth.



## STAGE 4

### Hitting specific color values

I began to paint in the light areas, mixing the colors that I saw in nature, adjusting shapes, and finding more subtleties in the transitions between shadows, half-tones, and lights. For the shadows, I painted very thinly with a mixture of Black and Vermilion over the dark imprimatura to maintain the transparency of the ground coming through.

Because this is a head study, I zeroed in on it. I was unsure at this point about whether I would finish the shoulders or put in the hands.

Further modifying/clarifying the drawing and big impression of lights and darks I blocked in the shapes of the highlights (in the forehead, for instance),

and darkened the deeper half-tones to get them to turn into the shadows (left cheek). But I was still working with the underpainting, preparing and unifying the lights. I was still struggling with the drawing, and felt I needed to make adjustments to the forehead and around the cheek on the right side. I left the value I established in the earlier stage for the shadows for the time being. I started to model and work the half-tones. I was still applying the paint fairly thinly as a base, for what was to come later. Since my intent was to work over this layer, I used a siccativ in the medium to speed the drying process.



## STAGE 5

### Looking at individual forms

It was time to go over each form individually. I completely repainted the eyes and nose with great attention to the application of paint, that is, to the surface texture, with the intent of leaving some parts as finished. I described the exact turn of the chin and the precise color of his beard and lips. I began experimenting with the values in the background. I also continued to modify the drawing, realizing that at various times I had three slightly different positions of his head. One of the challenges of portraiture is that the head is never in the same position, and you tend to make modifications based on what you are seeing, and that may not add up.

Although I was focused on refining individual forms, and often got up close to the model in order to analyze them,

I continually stood back to assess the impact of these observations on the painting as a whole. I used mirrors to provide perspective on the overall accuracy of the painting. Black mirrors help us see values, regular mirrors the accuracy of our drawing and color decisions. By looking into a black mirror, I discovered that the value of his lower jaw and beard was too light.

I began to work on the design, trying on variations of the same theme, so to speak, like rearranging the design of the hair and the abstract shape of his head and shoulders.

**Palette:** I added the last color I will use in this painting, Lead Tin Yellow, a magnificent pigment, similar to Naples Yellow.



## STAGE 6

### Evaluating

At this point, the painting really began to take on a life of its own. It began to demand, in a sense, that I pay attention to the fact that the head was not turning and that the bottom of the painting seemed unresolved.

I tried to begin concluding certain areas on the head. The smallest changes in the tilt and position of the eyes, nose, and mouth in relation to one another have an amazing impact on expression: if you miss placing a highlight in an eye by a millimetre, for instance, a sitter can go from looking like the most intelligent person in the world to the least. In many cases, you may not even be able to perceive the individual changes I have made, but you will notice that Raz's expression has

begun to evolve and develop.

The issue of balance could have been addressed by cropping down the painting, perhaps, but I was more interested in trying to find a compositionally sound gesture for the hands, one that would further support the psychological dimensions of the portrait. As it turns out, this was no easy task. I spent two full painting sessions of three hours each blocking in hands and wiping them out before finally hitting upon a gesture that created a line that would return the eye back to the head, precisely what the painting needed. I left the hands sketched in and stopped working for the day, so as to assess the compositional integrity with fresh eyes the next day.





## STAGE 7

### Developing the composition

I liked the general composition and began developing the bottom of the painting more fully. It seemed only natural that Raz would be holding something, and I handed him the nearest thing in the studio — a paintbrush, of course. *Voilà!* It seemed both technically and thematically “right”. The palette and bundle of brushes in the background followed. It should be noted that the palette is more of a compositional prop than a journalistic detail. To have painted the palette with the kind of detail with which I painted

the head would have brought too much attention to it. The center of the story is the portrait. The hand gesture and palette are supporting characters whose roles are to strengthen the impact of the main drama, not take attention away from it.

I also continued the process of making small and more minute adjustments to the painting. I changed the shape of the nose one last time, lightened the value under his left eye, and put in the shirt as a tonal note — thus placing a “stepping stone” of sorts from face to hands and back again.



## STAGE 8

### Final adjustments and drapery

As regards the drawing of the head, I realized that in having reduced the size of the forehead at some point, Raz’s face had become disproportionately wide. As soon as I slimmed down the right side of the face, the painting of the head finally locked into place.

Using a mannequin, I designed the drapery based on what I had seen on Raz, also painting it from the mannequin, as is commonly done with clothed models.

In the final stage of the painting, I typically balance all the details. I modify or eliminate what detracts from the main theme and accentuate the important

points. As in the beginning, I spend a lot of time standing back, looking and squinting down to assess the big impact.

I simplified and darkened the background to give more contrast to the light on Raz’s face. I noticed the drapery was too strong a part of the composition and so I glazed it down slightly. I modified and resolved the shapes of the drapery so that they would support and give a sense of the bulk of Raz’s body beneath. I painted in his hair on the right hand side. And I made very small modifications to the features for purposes of expression.

**“...if you miss placing a highlight in an eye by a millimetre, for instance, a sitter can go from looking like the most intelligent person in the world to the least.”**



**Detail**





## About The Florence Academy of Art

The Academy is located in the centre of Florence, just behind the Church of Santa Croce, and a short walk from the Duomo, the Accademia and the Uffizi Gallery.

Its curriculum and teaching method derive from the classical Realist tradition, rooted in the Renaissance, and revived by the major Realist academic ateliers of the 19th century.

Programs include:

**Drawing:** Full time diploma, 1-year Intensive.

**Painting:** Full time diploma, 3 years.

**Sculpture:** Full time diploma, 3 years.

Students also enjoy lectures, special events, extra-curricular projects and international exhibitions of student and alumni works. Scholarships are available and the Academy's administrative staff can help find accommodation.

For more information contact  
The Florence Academy of Art,  
Via delle Casine, 21 R, 50122,  
Florence, Italy.  
Telephone +39 055 245444  
Fax +39 055 2343701  
e-mail [Florenceacademy@dada.it](mailto:Florenceacademy@dada.it).  
Or visit the website  
[www.florenceacademyofart.com](http://www.florenceacademyofart.com)

### → Materials

If you want to get the kind of effects the old masters did in their paintings, you have to be conscious of your materials because they were. I have spent the past 30 years reading about and experimenting with all the materials of oil



**Apple Blossoms & Tibetan jar, oil on canvas mounted on board, 40 x 50cm (15½ x 19½"), 2002**

painting, from supports and gessoes to mediums and pigments, from which I grind my own paints by hand.

It may sound obvious, but before starting a painting, you should have all your materials ready. If you prepare your own supports, as I do, you have to keep in mind that it not only takes time to prepare them but that you've also got to give them time to dry — a few months for an oil support, a week for a gesso support. I tend to take a few days every month to prepare supports and other materials.

You should have a wide selection of good brushes.

I recommend using bristle brushes. They are strong and have spring, which allows you to move paint around without using medium.

I tube most of my colors but grind white lead every few days and keep it under water — which keeps the paint short and prevents it from separating.

I have been doing a lot of research these days on the Spanish painter Ribera and, having discovered that he often used jute as a support for his paintings, I prepared some canvases several months ago in order to try it out myself, one of which I used for the demonstration painting. Like



**Still Life/Figs, oil on canvas mounted on board, 40 x 50cm (15½ x 19½"), 1997**

linen, jute is not hydroscopic, meaning that it does not absorb water from the atmosphere. It looks a little like a burlap bag and has a soft open weave, undulating, very organic. To prepare it as a support, I applied two coats of rabbit skin glue and two coats of emulsion gesso ground — using a palette knife for the first coat and a brush for the second. I applied a layer of damar varnish to seal the surface.

When I took it out to use for this portrait, I applied a dark brown imprimatura mixed from Black, English Red and Yellow Ochre, rubbing it onto the surface with a linen cloth. The cloth acts like fine sandpaper, and softens the imperfections of the surface.

### **Empowering the technical possibilities of paint with meaning**

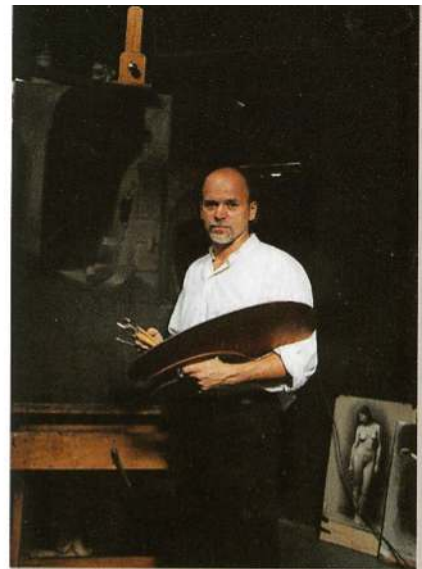
For me, the emotional complexities and impact of a painting cannot in the end be separated from technique. The marks that great painters have left behind are spiritual, technical, psychological. I could look at a Ribera, a Velasquez, or a Rembrandt painting every day of my life and find something new in it every one of those days,

whether a brushstroke or a psychological element that is left unresolved. In painting, you can't separate the message from the medium. You can't have the significance of Rembrandt painted in the style of Bougereau. You can't have the beauty and simplicity of Bougereau painted in the style of Rembrandt.

### **Conclusion**

As you can imagine, students sometimes ask me what they can do to become great painters. I always tell them that it is different for everyone, but high on the list of priorities is needing to study the craft and understand the technical aspects of drawing and painting thoroughly. Then you actually have to have a life, I tell them. You have to laugh your laughs, cry your tears, and get out into the world and, yes, experience life because, otherwise, what are you going to paint?

I know I keep coming back to this idea of experience, but I really cannot emphasize it enough. Experience gives and teaches you everything as a painter, not least of all that drawing and painting requires a lot of concentrated work. □



### **About the artist**

Daniel Graves, was born in Rochester, New York in 1949. He is an oil painter, etcher, and Director of The Florence Academy of Art, which he founded in 1991. He lives and works in Florence, Italy, which has been his home for the better part of the past 30 years.

He has had numerous successful solo and group shows in Europe and in the United States, and his portraits, interiors, still lifes, and etchings are part of private and public collections world wide.

In his painting and teaching he blends a broad array of training and experience. He studied with Joseph Sheppard and Frank Russell at the Maryland Art Institute, with Richard Serrin at the Villa Schifanoia Graduate School of Fine Art in Florence, with Richard Lack at the Atelier Lack in Minneapolis, and with Nerina Simi at her classical studio in Florence. As a young painter living in Florence, he also associated with and was influenced by Pietro Annigoni.

About his work he says, "As an American painter living in Florence for almost 30 years, I am continually inspired by my surroundings. Florence permeates my existence both professionally and personally. This city gave birth to the Renaissance and its spirit of extraordinary culture and craftsmanship continues to infuse the place today, visible in the bottegas run for generations. The craft of fine painting, the harmonic architecture, the wondrous Tuscan landscape, challenge and inspire my work."