

Daniel Graves: Steward of Humanist Art

by M. Stephen Doherty

Many of the important realists of the 20th century were profiled in *American Artist*, and those feature articles had a strong influence on painters who were hungry for information that might inform and instruct their creative efforts. **Daniel Graves** was fortunate to study with several of those influential artists, including Joseph Sheppard, Frank Russell, Richard Serrin, Richard Lack, Pietro Annigoni, and Nerina Simi; and he was profiled in the December 1988 cover story. Since then, Graves has continued to pass on the great training he received to new generations of artists, and the magazine has featured a number of his former students, some of whom now teach in the United States and Europe.

Because Graves is one of the important links between the past and the present, we believe it is appropriate to visit him once again during this anniversary year. Fortunately, he has written extensively about the current state of representational arts, his own background, and the mission that continues to drive him as an artist and teacher. The following is an excerpt from the essay Graves wrote that helps explain the tradition he carries on, and the methodology he uses to connect new generations of artists to that tradition.

Having devoted much of my life, as both an artist and a teacher, to the representational arts, I am very pleased to see that, once again, a growing number of people are finding more traditionally rendered images meaningful to them. The tradition I refer to is that of the humanist spirit in Western art.



The Groom

2005, oil, 48 x 32. Courtesy Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, New York.

An exhibition of Graves' work will be on view at the Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, in New York City, beginning March 8, 2007. For more information on Graves, visit his website at <http://www.danielgraves.com/>. To read the full text of his essay or to learn more about The Florence Academy of Art, visit the school's website at <http://www.florenceacademyofart.com/>. For a listing of other art schools maintaining the tradition Graves describes, visit the website of the [Art Renewal Center](#).

When I began my studies in 1968 with Joseph Sheppard and Frank Russell at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, most, if not all, of the worthy traditions of art education were linked to the 19th-century ateliers of Europe. The information students received had been passed down since the Renaissance, first through individual artists who took on apprentices, and then through the academies whose function it was to educate artists and maintain a tradition of craftsmanship. Because there were few such institutions in the United States, most American painters traveled to these European ateliers to learn the principles and techniques critical to their vocations.

Some of the Americans attempting to emulate the European academies, such as R.H. Ives Gammell and Richard Lack, opened their own academies. Gammell trained Lack in his Boston atelier, and Lack then opened The Atelier Lack [now The Atelier] in Minneapolis, which continues to operate under the guidance of his students. Other ateliers, past and present, with links to Gammell or one of his students, include those directed by Allan Banks, Charles Cecil, James Childs, Robert Cormier, Stephen Gjertson, Gary Hoffman, Don Koestner, Robert Douglas Hunter, Richard Whitney, Andrea Smith, Ryan S. Brown, and Juliette Aristides.

My own desire to be connected to the tradition at a time when it was no longer whole, when it was considered passé to want to do so, and when its language was being forgotten, is what brought me to Florence in 1978. Having studied with Lack, I decided to open an art school with Cecil in 1982 (which continued until 1990 as the Cecil-Graves studio), and then I founded The Florence Academy of Art in 1991, and I continue to serve as its director. My aim was to blend Lack's teachings with those of other artists/teachers who greatly influenced me. That educational program and the tradition on which it is based are what have brought hundreds of students to The Florence Academy of Art, several of whom have subsequently founded their own ateliers.

To say that we are all working in this academic tradition does not mean that our subject matter and artistic interests are the same. As I hope is evident from the drawings and paintings created by the artists I just mentioned and their students, each of us is attempting to create a unique body of work based on his or her individual artistic path. However, we all speak with the same visual "language." That is, we have all learned, to the extent that we can, the language of the tradition, which we use to express our visions. I like to believe that our mission is to fit together fragments of the humanistic tradition so that we might contribute meaningful images that will inspire future generations.

My Early Pursuit of the Tradition

My own artistic path, as I've explained, began at the Maryland Institute College of Art and continued with my graduate studies in Florence at the Villa Schifanoia, where I met Richard Serrin, one of the great influences on my life. He taught me how to "read" a painting, thereby opening a door that is crucial to developing a deep and ongoing dialogue with past masters. He demonstrated a profound technical understanding of Rembrandt and 17th-century painting but, just as important, he "communed" with the world of painting and talked to me about the significance of what he saw.

Later, I went to Minneapolis with Serrin to help him with a mural project, and it was there that I met Richard Lack, with whom I studied for almost a year. From Lack I learned many of the academic traditions of the Boston School, which had been passed on to him by Gammell, and the sight-size method of drawing and painting that was used by many of the portrait painters of the 19th century, including John Singer Sargent. I then returned to Florence and studied with Nerina Simi, or "Signorina Simi," as we called her. The daughter of Filadelfo Simi—a Florentine painter in the Macchiaioli style, who had studied with Jean-Léon Gérôme—Signorina Simi maintained her father's atelier from his death in 1923 until her own in 1987 at the age of 97. I returned to Florence to study with her because the work coming out of her studio had strengths that I wanted to acquire.

Both Lack and Simi offered a connection to Gérôme me that was meaningful to me. Lack inherited his through Gammell's lineage, while Signorina Simi gleaned hers through working in the studio with her father. Both going back to Gerome, they had many similarities in what they taught but quite a few differences as well.

Italy—with its museums, churches, and natural beauty, and as a place where the arts have traditionally flourished—has always been a magnet for artists. The presence of Signorina Simi and Pietro Annigoni in Florence attracted



Self-portrait

2005, oil, 15 3/4 x
19 3/4. Private
collection.



The Explorer

2003, oil, 35½ x
27½. All artwork
this article
collection the artist
unless otherwise
indicated.

many young painters (including me) who were looking for the frayed threads of the realist tradition. We desperately wanted to feel connected to the tradition, and it seemed that nowhere else were artists working as they had in the past—with an attention to craft even at the most basic material level. In Florence, one did not call oneself an artist but a painter; and when one earned the respect of others, as Annigoni had, one was given the title "maestro."□□ These things made us feel that painting was a noble profession, deeply rooted in craft, culture, and community. Some of those who came stayed for only a few months; others, like me, remained because Florence captivated them with its beauty and culture.

Although I did not study with Annigoni, who died in 1988 at the age of 78, I came to know him quite well. He was, as some called him, "the Patriarch of Realism."□□ Setting the standard for draftsmanship, he gave us hope because he could draw and paint as artists had in previous centuries.

I visited his studio many times to show him my paintings; he was always encouraging but never gave much praise. Not much for small talk, he enjoyed discussing the deeper meanings of life. Of course, art was always in the forefront of our discussions. As I would leave the studio after visiting with him, he would always encourage me. "Buon lavoro. Forza e coraggio"□□ ("Work hard and well. Strength and courage"), he would say, in the tone, I imagine, of a Roman warrior.



Hans

2005, oil, 27½ x
23¼.

Teaching Methodology at The Florence Academy of Art

"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's words, printed on our brochure, are the closest we come to articulating a mission statement at The Florence Academy of Art. With Flandrin—and so many others we could quote—as our guides, we teach the craft of working in the realist tradition similar to how it was taught in the 19th-century ateliers of Western Europe—not necessarily to produce 19th-century work but, as I mentioned earlier, because our most direct link to the traditional values and teachings of the past, which are known to have produced professional-level artists in the realist tradition, are through those studios. Because I picked up pieces of the tradition from many different people, what we teach at The Florence Academy of Art is a blend of what I received from many of those I mentioned earlier, interpreted in my own way.

In looking to the atelier system of training as a model, The Florence Academy of Art is different from most other art schools, where students go to a variety of classes and are often taught by many people. When students walk in the door of The Florence Academy, they are assigned a studio space and settle into a rhythm of working that will remain constant throughout their years of study. Urging them to become, as John Constable said, "patient pupil[s] of nature,"□ half the day is spent working from the figure and the other half of the day in their studios, working on specific exercises. We demystify the training of an artist and break the vastly complex task of learning to draw, paint, and sculpt from life into gradual steps. In the most general terms, students spend their days trying to see and put down exactly what is in front of them, for, as Leonardo said, "The painter will produce pictures of little merit if he takes the works of others as his standard; but if he will apply himself to learn from the objects of nature he will produce good results."



Cloud Study

2006, oil, 35½ x
51¼.

To do this, however, is not easy: a step-by-step progression through the school's curriculum, from learning to draw accurately to learning to use precise color values in oil—or, for the sculpture students, learning to use correct structure in clay—generally

takes students four to five years. With few exceptions, students focus exclusively on drawing their first year. Once they have gained confidence in their ability to be accurate, they are asked to develop, in preparation to become a painter, a sophisticated understanding of gradations of value—hence, the use of charcoal, whose range makes it an effective medium for exploring light and dark. Intermediate students achieve a strong foundation in drawing, both in graphite and charcoal, and, usually by the beginning of their second year, they begin to draw with charcoal and white chalk on toned paper, a step closer to painting. The students' cast drawings begin to look like the actual casts, and their figure drawings have the weight and balance of a living person. With these drawing skills well in-hand, the first painting projects are assigned.

Gaining control over this new medium takes time and experience and, as with drawing, we move step by step. We soften the transition from drawing by starting students with painting *en grisaille*—that is, with painting in gray. This gives students a chance to become familiar with using paint to study values without the added complexity of color. Only a few projects are given *en grisaille* (usually two casts and one five-week figure painting) before a project in limited color is assigned. We start students with three colors, not including white: yellow ochre, English red, and black. This is the most traditional and basic palette there is—students have started with it for centuries, and many great painters, such as Titian, are thought to have used it to produce some of their finest work. Once students have discovered the potential of these basic colors, others are added as they are needed: Naples yellow, vermilion, cobalt blue, etc.

Third-year students are given time to absorb and practice the material given to them in the second year, along with a greater degree of difficulty in subject matter. Portraiture is introduced, first in drawing, then in painting. Many students begin to show a proclivity toward certain subject matter and may begin spending more time developing their skills in the area that most fascinates them.

By the fourth year, students have mastered drawing in two media and are familiar with the methods and materials of oil painting, the latter as important in the studies of a painter as the former. Now is the time to refine skills, to identify and tackle lingering weaknesses, and to begin to put technical knowledge to the test. One of the most beneficial policies we have instituted in the past 10 years is the final critique. At the end of each trimester, students individually bring all the work they have produced before their assembled teachers. The purpose of the critique is to let students know if they are on course, to give them a clear indication of what we feel their strengths and weaknesses are, and to give them personalized suggestions on how to improve. They are given a pass/fail grade based on how they have done in five different categories: progress, performance, attitude, effort, and attendance.

I suspect that for some students, the days sometimes seem slow and tedious, but when they leave after having been here for a few years, they know how to follow a procedure that works. Every art is about control: If you cannot follow specified movements of ballet, you cannot dance ballet; you cannot play classical music unless you have control over all the scales and your fingering. You cannot paint and sculpt in a traditional manner unless you have learned the necessary principles and techniques, such as movement, gesture, and proportion.



Study for The Gift

2006, charcoal and

white chalk, 53½ x

47½.

There are generally two types of students: those who seem to have a special gift for seeing and then translating quickly and fluidly from three dimensions into two, and those who struggle for each new skill they acquire. Both make excellent painters and sculptors, as well as excellent teachers, for different reasons. The former are often admired role models; they quickly perceive the students' mistakes and the reason they have made them. On the other hand, those who have struggled have a keen grasp of the difficulties; they serve as examples of progress and can sympathize with the frustration of those who are struggling.



Study for The Gift

2006, charcoal and white chalk, 52¼ x 50.

What seems to be common in those who are successful, the ones who survive, is their passion and hard work. I believe anyone can achieve success, no matter what his or her level of talent, if he or she is totally passionate, involved, and assiduous. As Michelangelo said, "If people knew how hard I worked, they wouldn't like what I do."□□

A Personal Statement

Although pieces of the tradition were saved and passed down, I worry about the current state of this body of knowledge, which is one of the reasons I have devoted part of my time over the years to teaching. When developing the program at The Florence Academy of Art, I chose to emphasize those aspects of the tradition that seemed vital to me. In doing so, it was not my desire to manipulate the tradition to fit my personal vision, but to strengthen it, build on it, and give a generation of students the tools they need to devote themselves to what I consider one of the greatest and most challenging occupations of all: the creation of images that have emotional resonance and technical skill and that, in their truthfulness and beauty, convey ideas of great significance. To this end, as I mentioned earlier, I blended what I learned from the influential artists/teachers I met during the course of my own studies. I have necessarily interpreted their teachings in my own way, fitting the pieces together as seemed most right. In the spirit of passing on to students that which is "pure"□□ or "true"□—that is, to ensure that we are teaching principles and not imposing styles, mannerisms, or techniques—we focus on practicalities of craft at the school.

To learn these classical techniques of drawing, painting and sculpting, one needs to know the language so that they can "speak"□ in a way that will be understood. I want to pass this language on to students not so that they will then go into their studios and produce work that is an imitation of the past but so they can go into the world and create works of art in a language that has long been used by artists, and that has long been understood by people of all levels of society—be they working artists or otherwise. All that being said, I am most aware that the tradition is much greater than the sum of all the elements of craft. We are indeed standing on the shoulders of giants.



The Gift

2006, oil, each panel 51½ x 53½.

John Ruskin pointed out that we have generations of people behind us helping us to make works of art. I would add that those generations of artists have raised the technical and psychological significance of painting to such a high level that anyone taking the baton faces the toughest competition there is. "Why can't we produce Leonardos today?"□□ one might ask. I do not believe it is only because we lack technical knowledge and expertise. I believe it is because there is something *in addition* to the technique that is also part of the tradition. I hope that by having the school in Florence, by exposing students to its great

masterpieces and culture, that they will pick up more of the essence of the tradition, that they will have more than technique behind them to motivate them.

Given that we do not want to just repeat the work of past centuries, I think one of the great challenges we face is that of discovering what we are going to paint and sculpt. To merely record the surface appearance of "reality" has never been the province of painting, whose language is far deeper. From the beginning, artists have painted, sculpted, and drawn things that had meaning for them, and the images they have left behind are a living testament, a record of their consciousness on earth.

To continue the testimony of what humans have seen, believed, felt, and thought, we must have the courage to ask ourselves what we really care about, because if we do not know we cannot express it. We must develop our capacity for deep feeling, for what we know with our minds is only part of what we have to give to our art—we also have our hearts to give. Today many of us are adults in our minds but children in our hearts. We must grow wise in our hearts, in tandem with honing our craft, in order to express ourselves in a way that will both touch and be meaningful to others. To seek beauty and meaning in our lives is to bring it into our art.