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TODAY'S  
MASTERS

# DANIEL GRAVES: MAKING THE PAST PRESENT

Some artists can be admired and understood almost entirely through their work, with scant reference to their training or worldview. This fact does not diminish their achievements, but it has not generally applied to Daniel Graves (b. 1949). Although he makes superb art and conducts a solo career, Graves cannot be considered apart from his life's work — founding and directing the Florence Academy of Art (FAA).

Situated in one of the world's most cultured cities, the FAA was founded by Graves in 1991 to train artists coming from around the

globe in the time-tested materials and techniques of figurative realism. He also wanted them to absorb the academic priorities of beauty, storytelling, and craftsmanship — taught in ateliers and academies throughout the West until the mid-20th century, and passed on to Graves (against all odds) by his own instructors.

This winter marks an exceptional moment, as Graves is about to launch his first solo exhibition in Florence since he arrived there 40 years ago. *Continuum: The Art of Daniel Graves* will be open to the public February 5–28 at the world's oldest academy, the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno. Founded by the artist (and first art historian) Giorgio Vasari 500 years ago, and the beloved home of such members as Michelangelo and Cellini, it is an ideal venue in which to survey Graves's art.

Graves says, “Having an exhibition at the Accademia reflects the story of my life: my deep connection to Florence and the artistic traditions upheld here for so many centuries. In fact, the Accademia's logo contains a symbol that celebrates drawing as a foundation of architecture, painting, and sculpture. This simple yet profound interconnection has always been at the core of my teaching and art.”

## A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

A native of Rochester, Graves graduated with honors in 1972 from Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art, where he studied anatomy and painting with Joseph Sheppard and Frank Russell. Although *laissez-faire* modernist art education was in full cry in the late '60s and early '70s, Baltimoreans have always made room for more traditional practice, and so Graves left the city well equipped to pursue history painting and etching with Richard Serrin at Florence's Villa Schifanoia Graduate School of Fine Art in 1972–73. Through Serrin's passion for Rembrandt, the young man learned to “read” a painting for both its technical characteristics and for what it reveals of its maker.

Graves moved on to Minneapolis, where a year in the atelier of Richard Lack (1975–76) connected him to the small and still-thriving circle of classical realists who trace their lineage — through Lack and his teacher Ives Gammell — back to Jean-Léon Gérôme and Paris's Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

The lure of Florence remained, however, so Graves returned there for good in 1978. He began working under Nerina Simi, whose own father had studied with Gérôme, and he soon became friendly



*The Power of Wisdom and Beauty*, 2013, oil on linen, 27 1/2 x 19 2/3 in., available from the artist





*Storm over Florence, 2018, oil on linen, 48 x 48 in., available from the artist*

with Pietro Annigoni, who had, among other accomplishments, astonished the world in 1954 and 1969 with the relative conservatism of his classically painted portraits of Queen Elizabeth II. By 33 Graves felt he knew enough to open, with his compatriot Charles H. Cecil (b. 1945), a Florentine teaching atelier, which they operated together until 1990.

In 1991, Graves created the Florence Academy of Art, the official name of which contains the phrase “for the Training of the Professional Realist Painter and Sculptor.” Today the Academy thrives in a large former

factory it has refurbished for its own use, and also operates branches in Jersey City (near New York City) and Mölndal, Sweden.

As a young man, Graves could see that the academic priorities of beauty, the human body, storytelling, and craftsmanship — once taught in ateliers and academies across the West — were passé. Thus he and his friends, as he puts it, “looked for the frayed threads of the realist tradition, desperately wanting to feel connected to it. Because I picked up pieces of the tradition from many different people, what we teach now is a blend of what I received myself. I have necessarily interpreted their teachings in my own way, fitting the pieces together as seemed most right.”

Graves believes that humanity and beauty have always been expressed through the very craft of painting, through the selection of specific materials that allow the artist to attain truly expressive



*Study for Sculptor*, 2018, charcoal and chalk on paper, 61 4/5 x 40 3/5 in., available from the artist

also from the live model. In Florence, where Renaissance humanists' prioritization of the body re-energized Western culture in the 15th century, to draw from the live model is a particularly thrilling act.

Painting students next learn to use precise values in charcoal, graphite, and chalk, then in oils (first in grisaille and then colors); their sculptor counterparts focus on creating correct structures in clay. In contrast to much art education today, where students may drift without meaningful guidance, Academy pupils are critiqued regularly to ensure they are on course, and to give them personalized suggestions on how to improve.

### THE BIGGER PICTURE

"The values of beauty and meaning are slipping away," Graves warns. "We need to be reminded that these things are still important. In the classical tradition, the Intellect, a sense of Justice, and the Heart develop within people as they mature. It is through these values that the artist strives to contribute his or her vision of the world in a way that elevates society. Being a part of the classical tradition is a calling to do something good for others."

Graves continues, "John Ruskin once said, 'All great art is in praise of something we love.' This is one of the most important concepts for an artist to contemplate. It calls us to consider, wisely, the significance of why we are doing what we are doing — our intent. It is through our humanistic connection between the subject matter and what we paint that this intent is made visible. The painting then becomes an open dialogue between artist and viewer. When you connect with this tradition, your voice becomes part of the ongoing dialogue, which is the Continuum. Learning the classical techniques opens the door to express, through our chosen medium, what matters most to us. We reflect upon questions like, 'What is it to be human? What are our values? What makes us aspire to be a better person?'"

Graves is happy to cite a successful example of this approach: "When we look into the eyes of a Rembrandt self-portrait, how much closer can we get to knowing the soul of another human being? Rembrandt's hands mixed the paint we see, but what is actually before us is a blend of his image with ours and that of every human. There is no substitute for this experience."

Graves explains, "While I am painting, I continually ask myself if I have interpreted that little part in the painting in the most beautiful way possible. Does that gesture say what I want it to say? Does the composition create the sensation I want to share? Everything needs to be in perfect harmony

in order for that one little brushstroke to be heard. This is very similar to listening to classical music — all parts of the orchestra must be in perfect harmony with each other, almost fall away from the forefront, in order for that apex moment to be heard. This is the language of painting, the sharing of my view of the world with others."

### THIS WINTER'S EXHIBITION

The works on view at the Accademia will be wide-ranging in date (from 1983 through today) and also in medium. There will be paintings of still life, individual figures (including self-portraits), multi-figure compositions, and narratives, along with small studies in oils. Made in pencil, charcoal, and pastel, the drawings are mostly studies made in

qualities. For this reason, he uses traditional techniques such as grinding his own paints, cleaning his own linseed oils, making his own varnish, and stretching and preparing his own canvases.

The Academy's painting curriculum, with its intensive observation of nature and the Old Masters, reflects Graves's own artistic practice. Ideally, a talented matriculant will spend three or four years with Graves and his fellow teachers. (Thinking not only of art but also of culture, he notes that one must "give Europe some time to sink in.") Graves has broken "the vastly complex task of learning to draw, paint, and sculpt from life into gradual steps": students first draw from classical casts (three dozen of which were obtained from the Venetian studio of the 19th-century Spanish master Mariano Fortuny), and





*Spanish Sculptor*, 2014, oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 23 2/3 in., available from the artist

preparation for oil versions. Some of the works on view will be on loan from the Graves family's collection, and others from the personal collection of Ferruccio Ferragamo, president and chairman of the board of Salvatore Ferragamo.

*The Power of Wisdom and Beauty* (on this magazine's cover) is the kind of painting that can move viewers deeply, something that emerges from Graves's determination to work directly from life. The active engagement, in both physical and intellectual senses, between painter and subject — of his seeing the way light cascades over the form — ultimately builds layers of meaning in the final work. Graves recalls that "as this woman talked about her work rescuing injured owls, the words 'wisdom and beauty' became a quiet mantra in my head while I painted."

Visitors may not be aware of how well Graves captures light and color in nature, especially in his spectacular paintings of clouds and skies. Illustrated here, for example, is *Storm over Florence*, inspired by his study of J.M.W. Turner's paintings. Over many months he layered

the colors and played with the moodiness that Turner so aptly captured. It may also be a surprise to learn that Graves is a master etcher.

For many months now, Graves has been creating *Prodigy*, which measures approximately 102 by 134 inches. It depicts a young female prodigy assisting in the construction of a 21st-century monument to humanity. As she presents her drawing to a studio of master artists, they turn to acknowledge how accomplished it is. Graves chose this moment in the story to illustrate the continuum that extends from master to student.

*Prodigy* will not actually be complete when the exhibition opens, but visitors will surely enjoy the opportunity to glimpse the process Graves is pursuing to create this monumental piece. The unfinished work will be displayed alongside its preliminary sketches, concept drawings, value studies, and figure studies (such as *Study for Sculptor*, illustrated here).

A sign of the high regard in which Graves is held in Florence is the fact that his exhibition will be opened during a private reception on February 2 by no less a figure than Dr. Cristina Acidini, president of the Accademia and one of Italy's most influential art historians and arts administrators. Also on hand to welcome the crowd will be Andrea Granchi, who heads its painting department, as well as two

members of FAA's board of trustees: its president, David H. Spencer, and the art historian Gregory Hedberg. In its next issue, *Fine Art Connoisseur* will illustrate scenes from the opening celebrations. ●

**Information:** Daniel Graves can be reached via the Florence Academy of Art ([florenceacademyofart.com](http://florenceacademyofart.com)), which welcomes visitors to its gallery and studios by appointment. His art is represented by Jennifer Nash Kochevar ([jen@danielgravespaintings.com](mailto:jen@danielgravespaintings.com)). The Accademia ([aafi.it](http://aafi.it)) is located in central Florence at Via Ricasoli, 68 (on the corner of Piazza San Marco). All images illustrated here will appear in the exhibition.

**PETER TRIPPI** is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.