

COSTA VAVAGIAKIS

REALIST PAINTER COSTA VAVAGIAKIS studied at Queens College, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League of New York. Close observation of nude male and female models guides his drawings. Vavagiakis has established himself with his unblinkingly specific nudes and portraits, insistent paintings and drawings that confront physical reality with startling honesty to explore the human condition. Employing classical academic methods, Vavagiakis places each of his subjects in an austere setting, lighting them from one side, and represents many of his subjects at life size. His subdued palette bows to form, while his direct approach to composition conveys a powerful sense of abstraction. Insisting on a high finish, Vavagiakis unflinchingly notes minute details of form and flesh. His teaching is always done in the presence of a posed model.

Drawing like any other skill, requires a person to do more than one thing simultaneously. An effective draftsman has to learn to use all perceptual and transcription tools continuously. In order to get the illusion of three-dimensional form the artist needs to have an understanding of the totality of the form in the round.

Vavagiakis's approach is formal and rigorous, stressing classical modes of observation, construction, and pictorial organization. Drawing for him is a process for visual investigation and experimentation—a way of planning future artworks or troubleshooting those in progress. He also regards drawings as an end in itself: not only preliminary, but equal to painting or sculpture. Working in graphite—a preferred medium—he develops drawings over long periods of time to achieve a highly refined sense of physical presence and detail. Proficiency in drawing is a necessity for students with professional aspirations. For students pursuing only the rewards of personal enrichment, Vavagiakis believes that competency in drawing will improve anyone's ability to understand and function in human environments. A solid working understanding of drawing reinforces and improves general problem - solving skills in many situations.

Vavagiakis offers beginners basic skills and knowledge: what a drawing is, how it can function as an idea, how different materials behave in concert with one another. His lectures explain concepts and methods used by historic masters, and he uses books and other visual media to provide examples. Technical demonstrations for the whole class can be compelling, but he finds that interacting with each student one at a time yields the best results. He believes that flexibility is the key to effective teaching.

I mainly teach students one to one, but I also do group critiques with the whole class. I might demonstrate schematic-drawing methods to an individual working at the easel or to the whole class.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Costa Vavagiakis,
Connie XX, 2009,
graphite and white
chalk on paper,
16½ x 11¾ inches.
Private collection.

Vavagiakis gives beginners basic organizational skills like page placement, measuring and proportion. He advises intermediate and advanced students to keep sketchbooks to take to museums and to draw constantly from observation: fleeting moments of everyday life found in streets, parks, and restaurants, images observed while waiting on a subway platform or riding the train.

Vavagiakis describes how he opens each class by warming students up with quick poses:

The class begins with ten two-minute drawings. It then proceeds with the model taking one pose for the remaining session and rotating that pose every twenty minutes. We do four to six rotations, depending on the allotted time of the class. This lesson plan comes from being a teacher going from student to student; experiencing the pose from 360 degrees. The aim is to fully understand the form in the round and to achieve a clearer understanding of the figure within the context of a space it inhabits. It is like when a sculptor works around the figure by rotating the model stand or when an architect lays out a concept in a plan view with elevations. Just as it is important to the sculptor or architect to understand and feel the total form, the draftsman needs to conceptualize the form in all its aspects in order to effectively construct the figure.

He encourages his students to develop an active silhouette, together with a sense of mass and movement:

In two-minute poses, the student must fully realize a representation of the essence of the figure. I stress the use of a preliminary system of construction lines to investigate and capture the silhouette, the proportions of the major volume-masses, and their relation to one another in terms of movement and thrust. Learning how to generalize, prioritize, and abbreviate what they behold, students begin to capture the underlying gesture of the figure. Students are taught to exploit their peripheral vision—allowing them to see the subject and the format while minimizing eye movement; exercising one's gaze to navigate rapidly over longer distances helps our empirical concentration for a more accurate description. We start with the whole concept and finish with the whole construction. In the course of two minutes, all necessary information needed to explain the action of the pose is described. The effect of gravity on positioning anchors the concept in time.

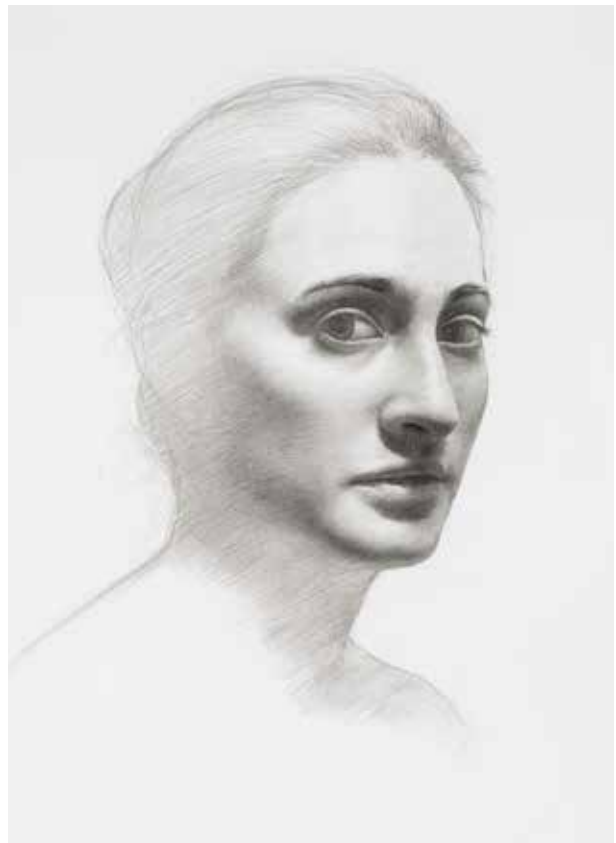
This system is used continuously throughout the duration of each pose. Twenty-minute poses can effectively be considered to be ten consecutive two-minute drawings, a continual loop of assessing the whole. I emphasize the importance of gravity on the forms of the body while the model is posing. A major challenge for students is dealing with changes. Just as change is inevitable in life, life-forms are always in motion. In order to successfully execute a drawing of a human being, we have to experience and understand how motion plays on the forms of the human body as we perceive them.

As with shifts in weight and positioning caused by gravity and time, understanding these forces as they accumulate while we draw a posed model is a process representing yet another kind of movement.

We learn to develop a plan of action based on knowledge or logical progression of gravity's effect on these forms—for example, starting a drawing by focusing on forms that are more fixed and static before progressing to those forms that exist in a state of flux. By continually assessing the gestalt [the whole] and by understanding the full aspect of forms in space, we are better able to construct an effective representation of life. ■



Costa Vavagiakis, *Yuko VII*, 2007, graphite and white chalk on paper, 16 x 11½ inches. Private collection



Costa Vavagiakis, *Rainbow XII*, 2005, graphite on paper, 12 x 9½ inches. Private collection.