DEMONSTRATION

Drawing a Portrait on Toned Paper

In a revealing step-by-step tutorial, **Costa Vavagiakis** explains his process of drawing a bust using graphite and white chalk.

BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

Rainbow XII
2005, graphite, 12½ x 9¼. Private collection.

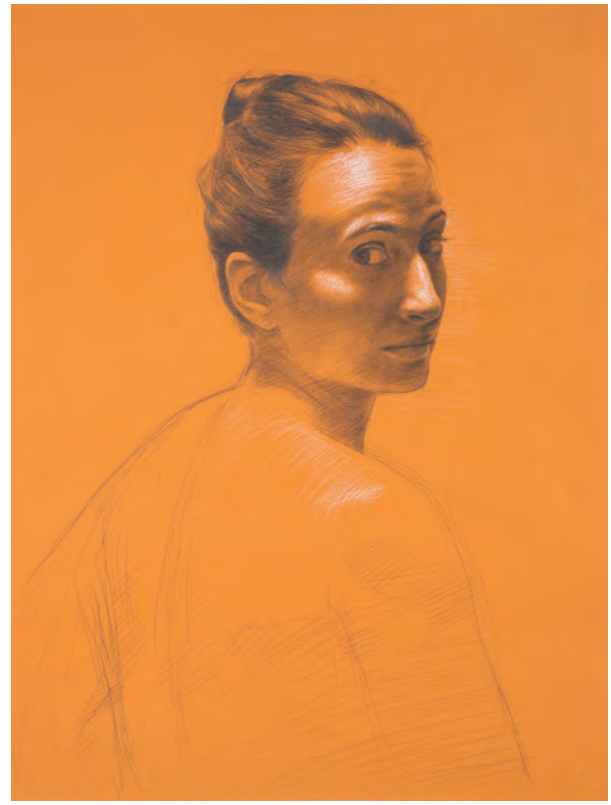
Costa Vavagiakis is a leading contemporary figurative artist whose paintings and drawings are remarkable for their lifelike appearance, their sculptural solidity, and their striking emotional depth. Recently, the artist sat with *Drawing* to explain his process of creating a portrait on toned paper in graphite and white chalk. The demonstration presented on the following pages follows the progress of *Peter IV,* which the artist drew over the course of three three-hour sessions.

SETTING UP

"Peter is a professional model I've known for five years or so," Vavagiakis says. "I haven't produced any finished paintings of him, but we've worked together on a number of drawings. I generally work with people over long periods of time—several years, sometimes more. So in addition to the symbiotic relationship between model and artist, a connection and friendship also develops."

The artist explains that in preparation for a long-pose drawing he will often ask his model to move around for a while and assume different positions that he will sketch until he settles on a pose. In this case, however, Vavagiakis knew what he was looking for from previous sessions with the model. He had Peter strike a slightly heroic pose, his head a little bit turned and above the artist's (and viewer's) eye level.

Vavagiakis set up his easel at an



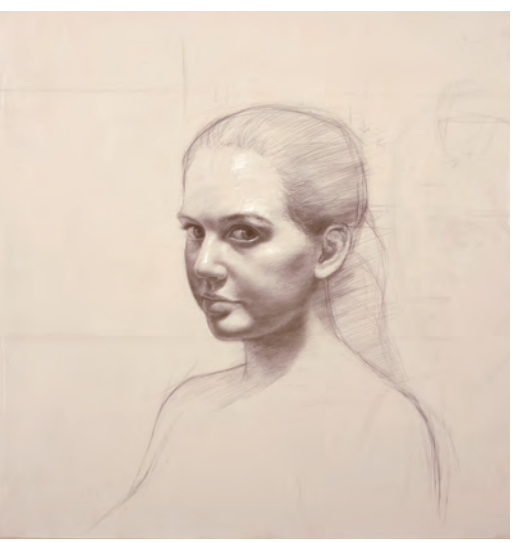
LEFT
Rainbow XXXIII
2008, graphite and white chalk on toned paper, 20 x 15½. Collection the artist.

BELOW LEFT
Miranda X (Study No. 3)
2007, graphite and white chalk on toned paper, 22 x 23. Private collection.

SEE MORE ONLINE >> For additional images of finished work from Vavagiakis, visit TheDrawingMagazine.com.

angle so that it was not quite parallel to the subject. "I sit in the middle of my easel and the model, which opens up my view so that I can simultaneously see the subject and paper side by side," he says. "When I draw, I don't move my head. I use my peripheral vision and always have my sight on both my drawing and my subject. I don't want to blink, to pause, or to look away."

The artist lit the model using a five-bulb setup from Impact. "In my work, I want to create a drawing and painting equivalent to sculpture—I want these works to be highly illusionistic and dimensional," he says. "So I always light the model from above, because top-lighting emphasizes form the most. Commercial portraiture generally uses frontal or side lighting, which is more flattering, but that's not what I want. In this drawing, I set up the light to come from above and from the audience's left." He lit his drawing using a Daylight Professional Artist lamp.



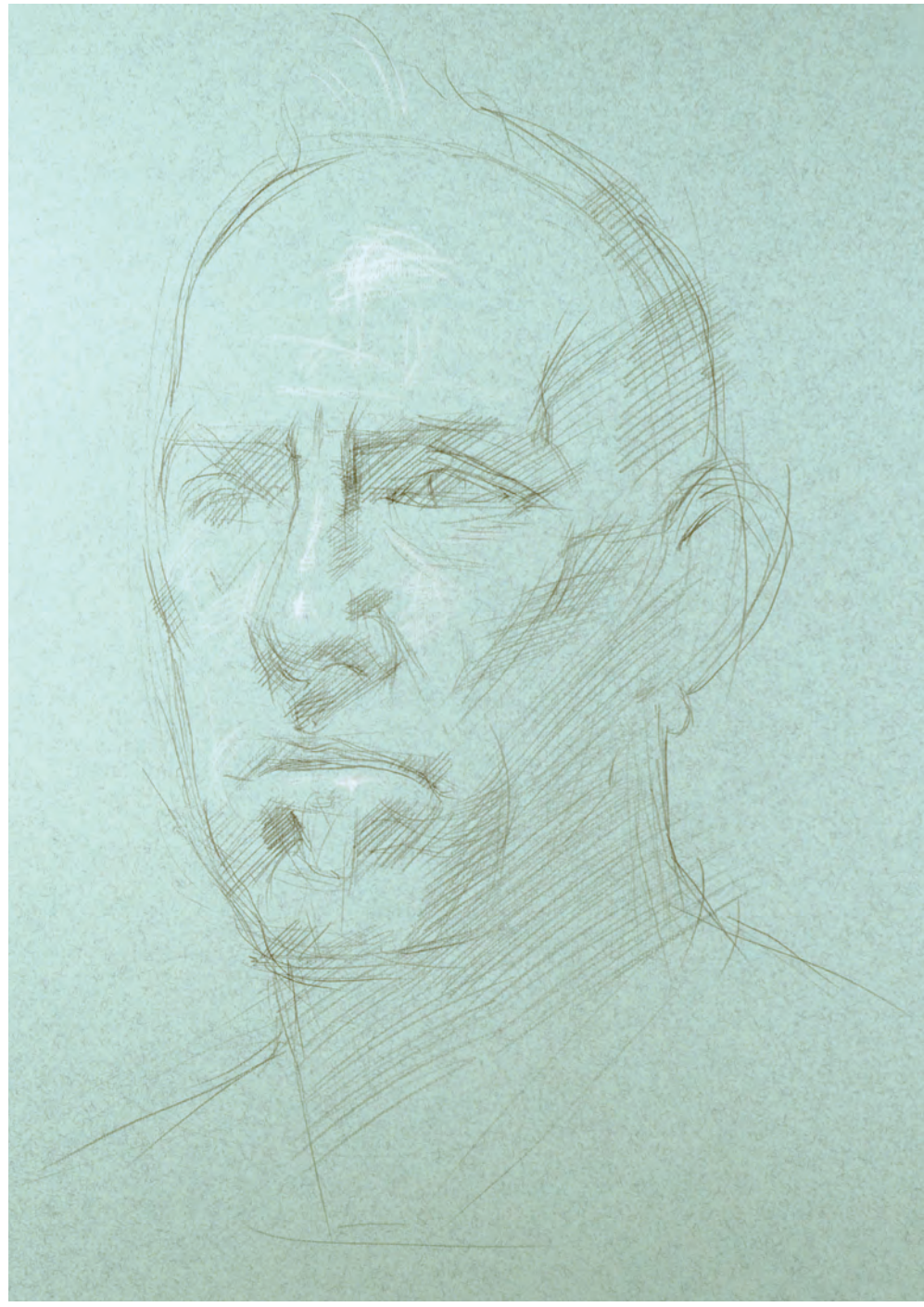
MATERIALS

"Toned paper allows for fast results—much faster than working with graphite on white paper," Vavagiakis explains. "The tone of the paper falls in the middle of the value range and acts as a bridge tone supporting both the darks and the lights. The texture of the paper is also important. Usually artists who work with graphite prefer smoother surfaces, and for years this was a problem for me, because the only toned papers had rough surfaces intended for charcoal or pastel. But lately manufacturers have been producing smoother toned papers, and I drew this demonstration on Fabriano Tiziano paper, which I've used a lot. It does have some texture, but the bumps are subtle. It also holds up well to erasing.

"For a drawing on toned paper, I work with two instruments: graphite, for darks and darker lights, and white chalk, for the highlights and lighter lights," he continues. "For graphite I prefer mechanical pencils because you don't have to sharpen them, which causes you to break your rhythm of looking and drawing. I mostly usually use pencils with a medium hardness, around HB—sometimes going as hard as 4H or as dark as 2B. It's a matter of trying a pencil and seeing how it feels and how it grabs onto the surface. In this demonstration, I primarily used a 0.9mm HB.

"For the strong highlights and lighter highlights I used soft white chalk pencils. I like whites such as General's and Faber-Castell's Pitt series. These pencils are dry and soft—not waxy—which lets me get lighter marks and gives more range in the values. A lot of artists use white chalk late in the process, but I like to establish the white early, for two reasons. First, it helps with proportions—it makes for shorter distances that are easier to measure. Second, it starts the value bridging. When you add white, it darkens whatever is next to it, so you then don't have to develop the darker half tones yourself because the white brings them out."

TURN THE PAGE FOR A STEP-BY-STEP DEMO



Step 1

Vavagiakis began his drawing by focusing on the subject's major shapes. "I use free-flowing, open-ended lines to establish the relationship of the masses and the ratio of the positive and negative shapes," he says. "When I feel comfortable with the placement, I proceed to identify the masses of the head, neck, and shoulder girdle. As I draw I hold the pencil at a 45-degree angle, almost parallel to the paper. I use my wrist to pivot my hand and move around the paper with ease. This lets me cover the most ground without smudging the paper and also allows for the most variety of line and tone."

To block out the main masses of the head, Vavagiakis used a combination of five types of construction lines and alternated between them as he drew. *Mass lines* are drawn from point to point along the contours of the body. *Medial lines* are drawn through the halfway positions of the body's masses, such as the hairline, the middle of the nose, and the cleft of the chin. *Lateral lines* describe the sides of individual masses, such as the top of the ears, the edges of the eyebrows, or the pupils. The *crest shadow* is a line running through the form indicating the dominant plane brake where light ends and shadow begins (sometimes referred to as the *terminator*). Finally, there are *envelope lines,* which connect the outer points of the body's positive shapes. Vavagiakis notes, however, that envelope lines are less important when drawing a bust than when drawing a whole figure, for which envelope lines are used to connect distant points—from finger to toe, for instance. "Having all these lines gives me options to get it right," he says.

These construction lines combined to produce a rough but convincing view of Peter's head and its position in space. "At this point the overall mass of the head is described—it's broad, but it's there," Vavagiakis says. The drawing then became a refining process. "My initial lines are an approximation, then I start fixing as I go.

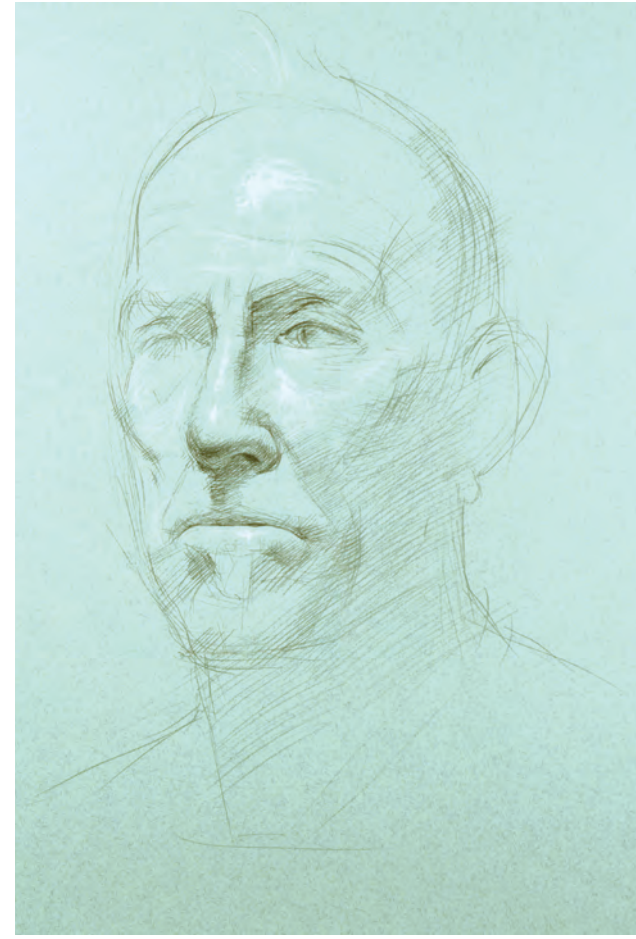
"Seeing is an act of constant motion, so the drawing system I use is one of constant movement," he continues. "I work in a loop, not staying in one area." He notes that this approach is based on the drawing system pioneered during the Renaissance by artists such as Leonardo and Luca Signorelli, who argued that the human gaze is itself in constant motion, even when observing a small object. "Those artists found a way to simulate not only how nature appears but how we perceive nature," Vavagiakis says. "Following that system, I want my lines to be fluid, continual, and sequential. I don't bunny hop between areas. If I'm drawing down on the chin and want to work on the head, I'll find a 'road' to the top of the head by drawing along a lateral line, a plumb line, or a medial line. This nomadic approach ensures good protocol for the shapes and tones and prevents me from getting bogged down. It allows me to maintain the proper relationship of the elements to the whole picture. And by working sequentially and organically, you get a better sense of life in the person."

Using this method, the artist began refining his initial construction lines and establishing values. "I started developing the forms with an open-ended, overlapping hatching system, using 45-degree lines from top-right to bottom-left," he says. "When drawing these marks, I always start where the light ends and the shadow begins. Since the crest shadow is the darkest of the form, I start my shading there, darkening in stages as I travel through my drawing. I use crosshatching marks along the lightest forms, as well, using white chalk starting at the lightest parts of the subject. As I do with graphite, I first use gentle pressure, and then I press harder with subsequent strokes to make the light stronger."

Step 2

Having established the overall mass of the head and laid in some initial values, Vavagiakis was ready to begin refining and modeling parts of the head. To do this, he first needed to decide where to start. "You cannot measure or problem solve unless you establish a home base, or fulcrum, on the figure—somewhere to drop your anchor that you can then relate other things to," he says. "This point creates a landmark to begin the navigational path and to measure the features and spaces between them. The point is usually one of the eye sockets or the base of the nose, and in this drawing, I was looking upward to Peter, so I chose the bottom of the nose, which was about at my eye level."

Vavagiakis began his modeling at the base of the nose, then worked his way up to the model's left eye, nearer the viewer. "The far eye is the more foreshortened eye, and because Peter's head is rotating away from me, the far eye will be lower than the near eye," he observes. "This relationship gives a dynamic sense of the turn of his head, so I developed that perspective right away. Any kind of subtle movement in that area is noticeable."



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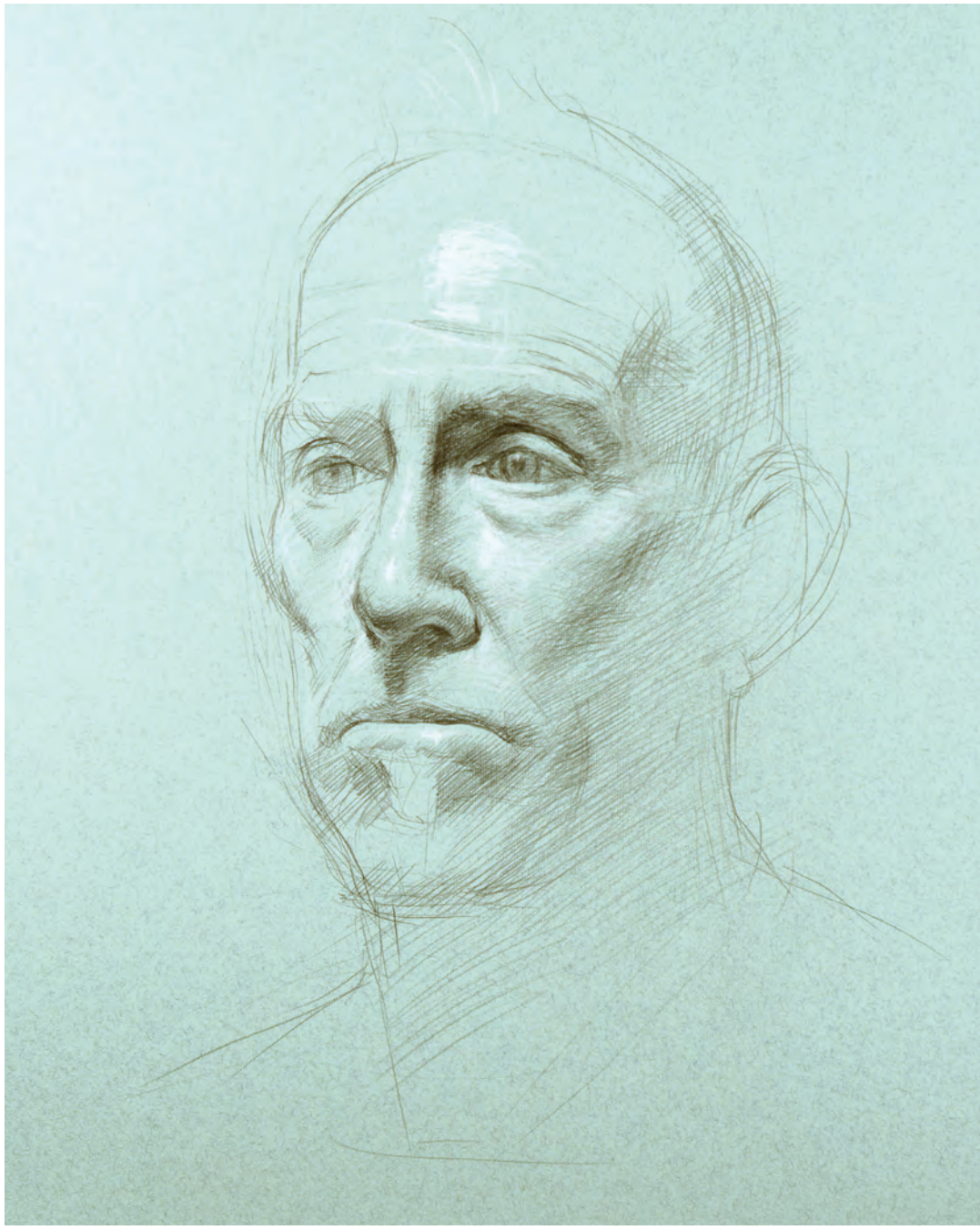
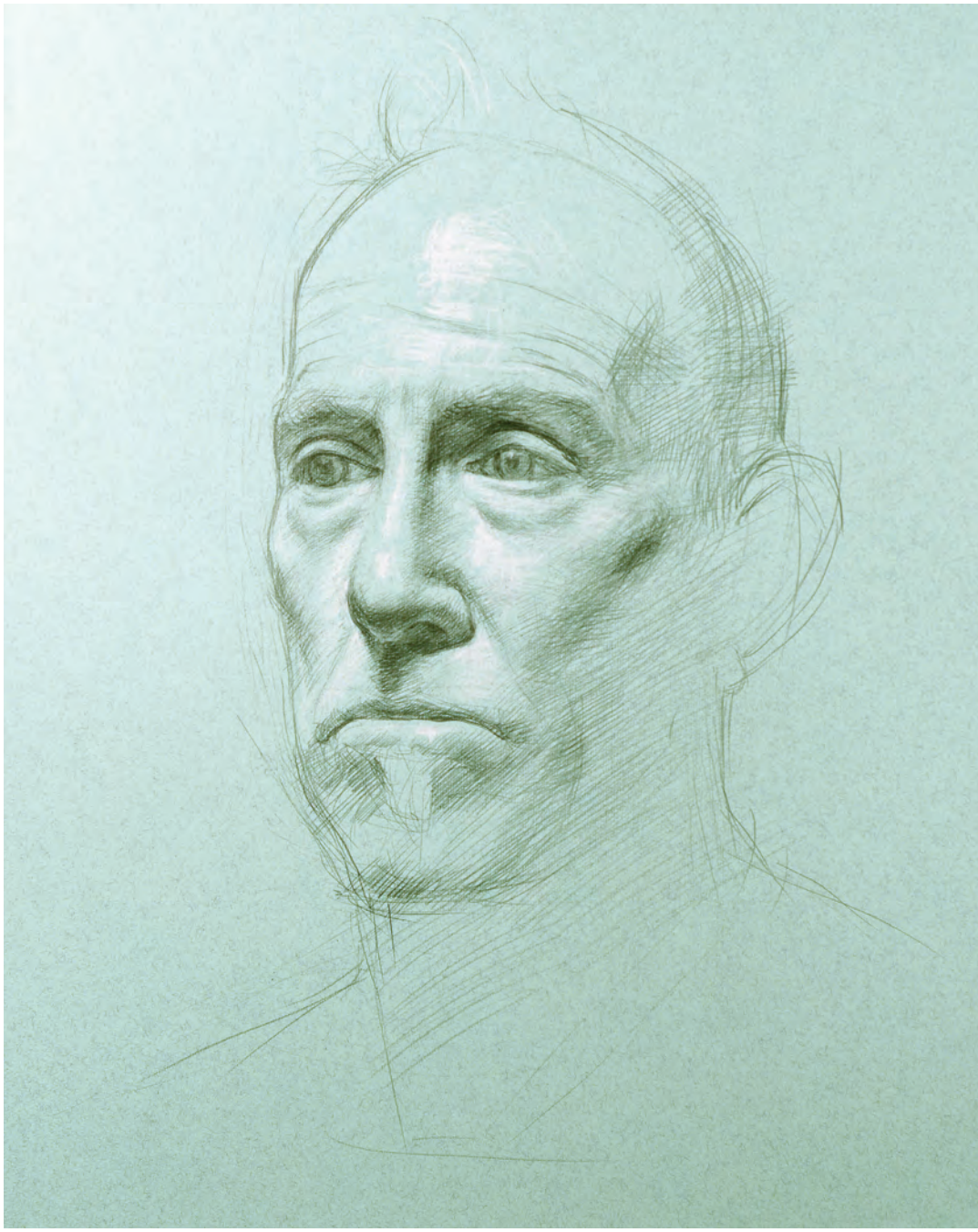


Step 3

With his fulcrum point established, Vavagiakis began moving more around the head and refining several areas. "I'm still traveling around, not just staying in one area," he says. "I developed the nose a little more, took a pathway down to the model's left cheek, did another loop down around the mouth region, and took a road up to the left. Every mark I make at this stage is still an approximation."

The artist began using a kneaded eraser to remove graphite from areas where he wanted to apply white chalk. "Kneaded erasers are extremely versatile, because you can shape them in any possible way," he says. "I twirled the eraser right in the plica of Peter's left eye to clear the paper. That area was going to be a highlight, and I didn't want the white chalk to mix with the graphite or they would gray out."

Throughout the drawing process, Vavagiakis stayed conscious of the appearance of lights and darks. "You want the viewer's eye to be drawn to the light," he says. "Darks are the means; lights are the ends. So in the darks, the spacing of lines is important. You want a hatching system that makes the darks look demure, quiet. If they're too open, they look like tracks and you notice them too much. And when you're turning the form, don't turn the crosshatches too much, or they will be too noticeable. Try to keep the darks flat."



Step 4

"I used the eraser to bring out the light a little more in several areas, such as on the bottom of the nose," the artist says. "I generally don't add white to reflected-light areas, because they would compete with the direct light. So I just use the eraser and let the paper come through.

"At this point, since I was now little more comfortable with the rotation of the head, I started developing the far eye," he continues. "Until now I hadn't developed it as quickly as the near eye, but I was always paying attention to it—not developing an area is different than not accounting for it. Around this time I also took an eraser and fixed lines along the cheek, the eye region, and the whole far contour of the head, so you now see fewer of those pentimenti lines. I also started establishing the massing of the hair on the near side."

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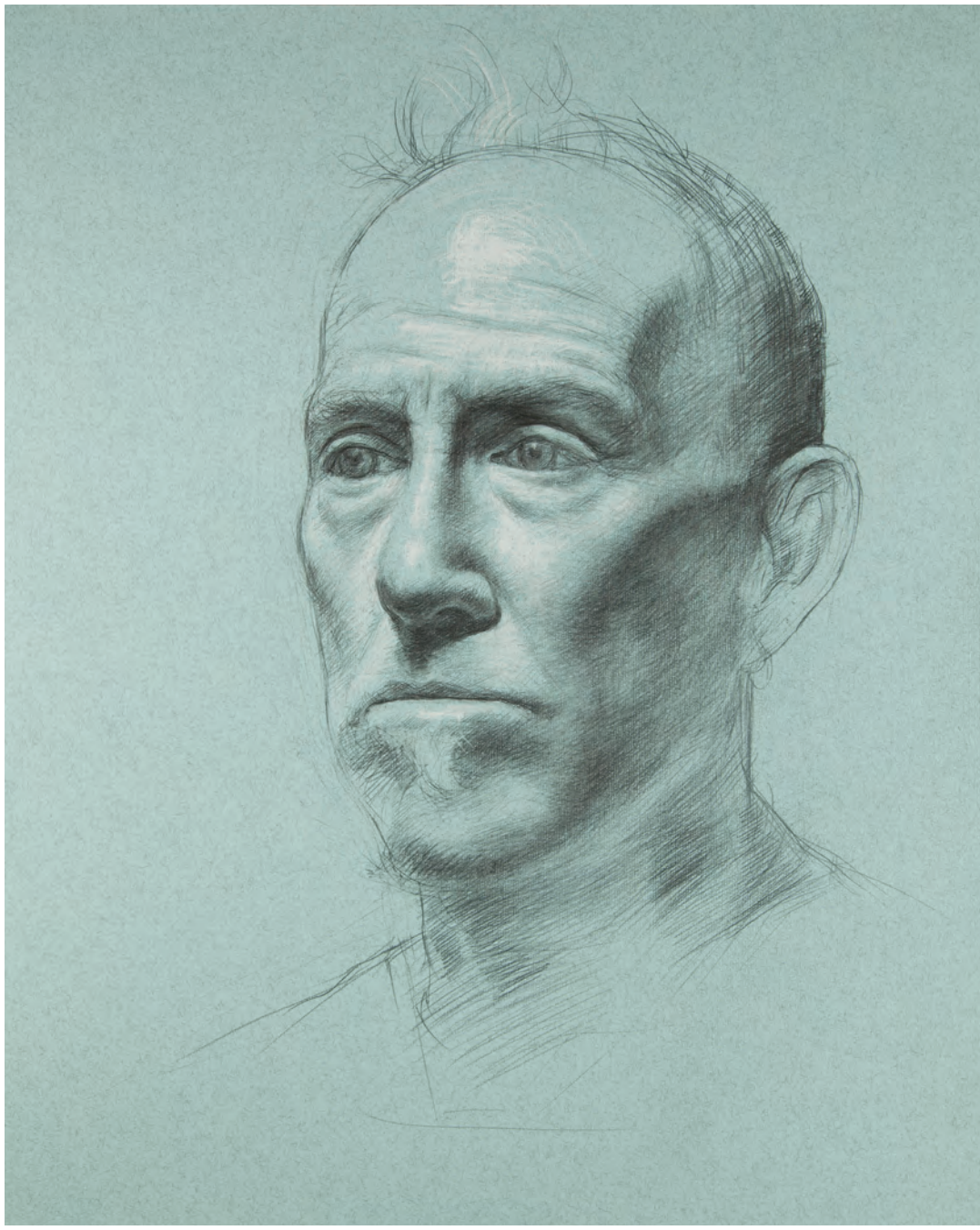

Step 5

"Now I started developing everything," Vavagiakis says. "I began really working the darks and smudging dark areas. I started firming the chin a little so that it would be less muzzle-like. I made the reflected light under the chin more prominent. As I moved up the head I started honing the lights more."

The ear was one area that puzzled the artist a bit. It was slightly illuminated, catching a highlight on the outer part, but Vavagiakis wasn't sure how much light to put there, knowing that a small light in a dark area can command too much attention. "So I hedged," he says. "I just laid the ear in, knowing I would come back to it."

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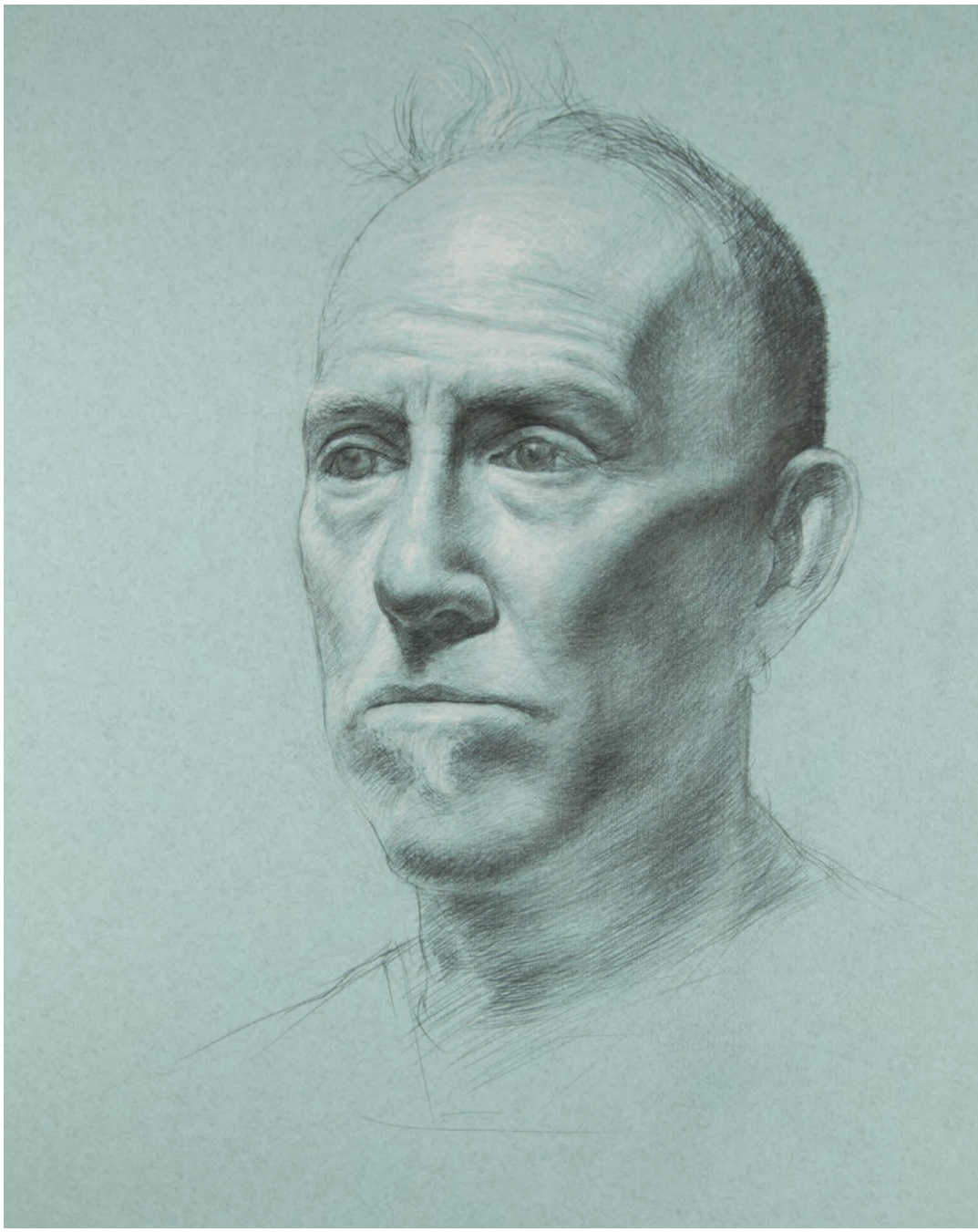

Step 6

"I was in the home stretch now, and the drawing had a completeness to it," Vavagiakis says. "I started throwing highlights on the ear to show it as bright as it really was. But, as I tell my students, you can always change your mind, and in this case I would change my mind later on.

"It's much harder, technically, to represent space on a light background than on a darker background," he adds. "With a lighter background, the edges on the skin can have a cutout feel. But a darker background such as this brings out the form."

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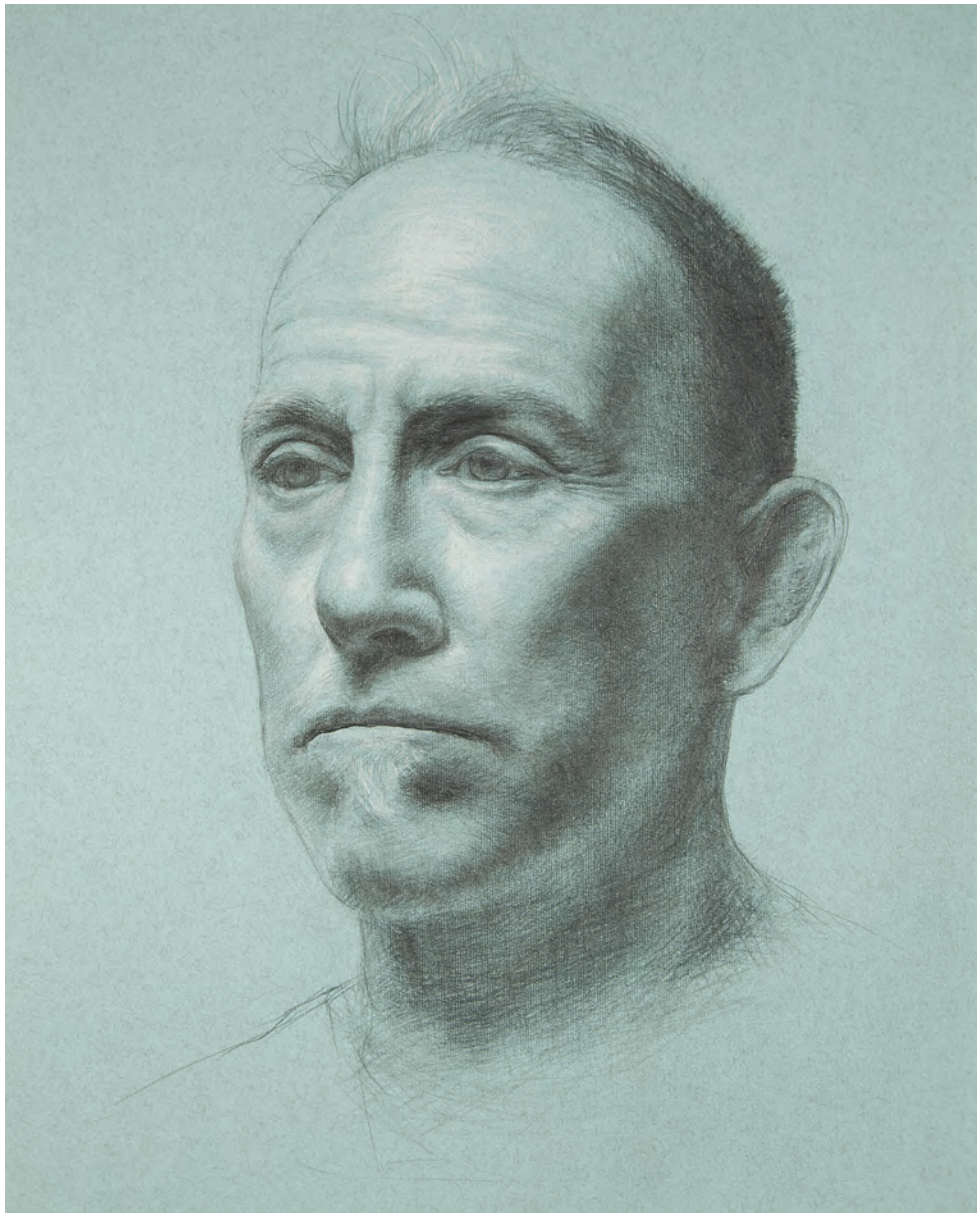
"PEOPLE SOMETIMES SAY THAT AN ARTIST WHO WORKS FROM PHOTOS HAS AN ADVANTAGE. THAT'S INCORRECT. WORKING FROM LIFE GIVES YOU OPPORTUNITIES TO SOLVE PROBLEMS. IT GIVES YOU A CHANCE FOR THE GESTALT."

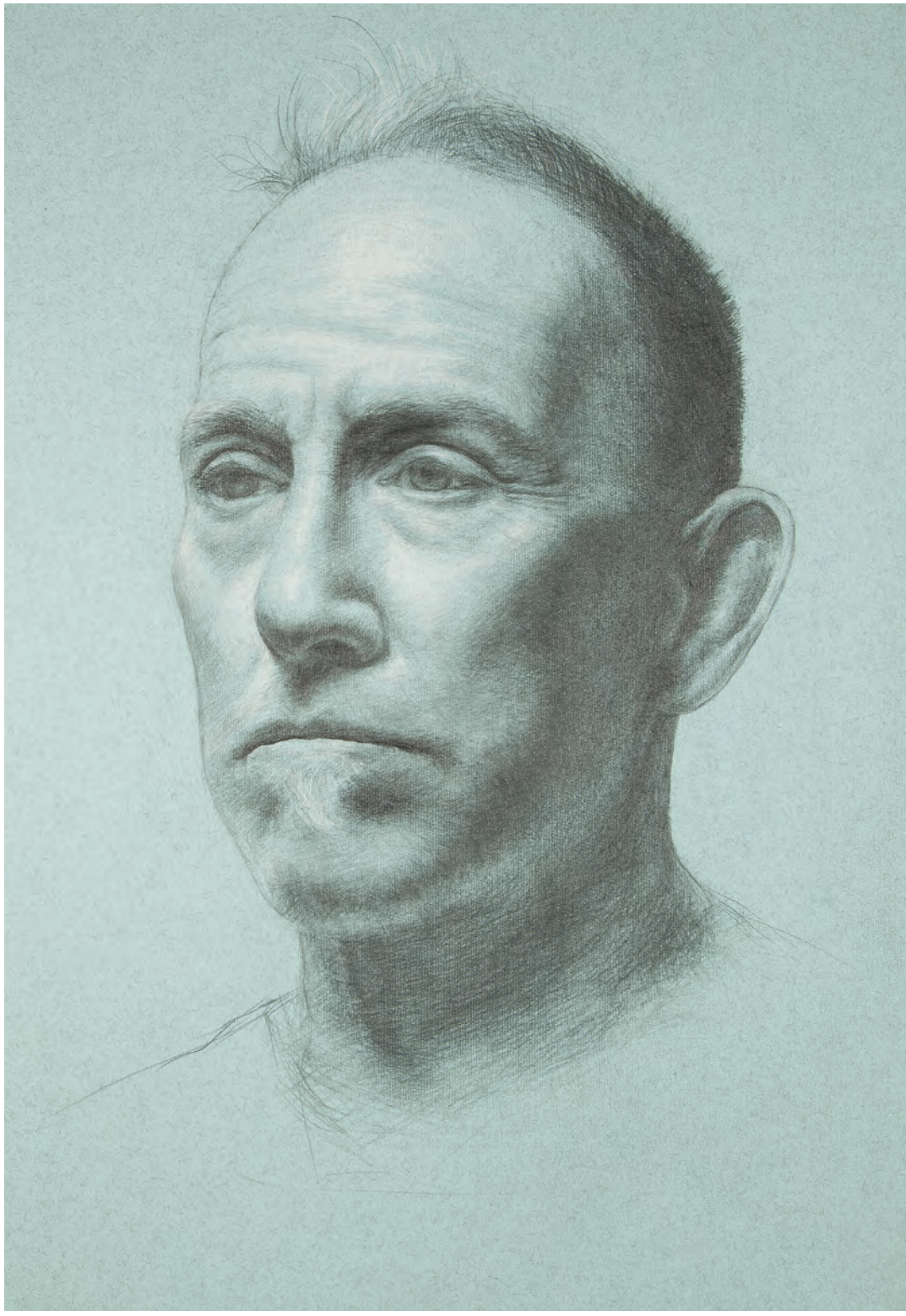


ABOUT THE ARTIST

Costa Vavagiakis has exhibited extensively throughout the United States. His work has shown at museums including the National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, DC, and the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; as well as at galleries including Hirschl & Adler and ACA, both in New York City, and Hackett-Freedman, in San Francisco. His work is held in numerous public and private collections including those of the Museum of the City of New York, the New-York Historical Society, and the Arkansas Arts Center. He has been the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and a Gregory Millard Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, among other honors. He currently teaches at the Art Students League of New York, and he is featured in several instructional DVDs available through the North Light Shop (www.northlightshop.com). An additional drawing demonstration by Vavagiakis can be seen on YouTube. For more information, visit www.costavavagiakis.com.

Step 7

"At this point I was going more into the textural mode, making sure smaller forms didn't look out of place proportionally or tonally," Vavagiakis says. "I got the small fleshy forms in the eye and nasal region into place. I decided the lights in the ear were too prominent, so I grayed that region out a little. I also started to build a little on the strands of the hair; I could make that more prominent now that I had the other information in place. The pattern is always like this, moving from primary shapes to secondary to tertiary, constantly relating the smaller forms to the bigger forms."



Peter IV
2013, graphite and white chalk on toned paper, 19 x 15. Collection the artist.

The Finished Drawing

"Even though the drawing has a finished quality, you still see remnants of lines and strokes," Vavagiakis says. "The first line of the nose is not totally erased, for example. And I want that—I want the sense of time and process to play into the work. That's why it's not a photograph. People sometimes say that an artist who works from photos has an advantage. That's incorrect. Working from life gives you opportunities to solve problems. It gives you a chance for the gestalt. That's how you can get life. Otherwise, it's going to be a stop-frame action. A photo is not an experience of time, but a drawing is a culmination of time and experiences." ❖

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