

*Nina VII* (oil on panel, 40x30)





# Truth is Beauty

Whether drawing in graphite or painting layer after layer in oil, **Costa Vavagiakis** renders the human form in its idiosyncracies and imperfections that are made beautiful by the intense attention of the artist's gaze.

■ By Maureen Bloomfield

Portraiture is like friendship in that it's not only capable of making absent people present but also of bringing those who have been dead for centuries back to life"—so wrote Leon Battista Alberti in the 15th century. The portraits of Costa Vavagiakis have that kind of resonance, yet they stand apart from the Renaissance tradition. The intent behind many portraits—now and in the past—is to convey a sense of presence, but also of power. In contrast, this artist's subjects are stripped of any trappings of accomplishment or class. While the ancient Greek *kouros* represented ideal youth, Vavagiakis's paintings and drawings, more in line with the Roman manner, show actual people, young and old. Revealed in their true state—with scars and wrinkles—they are beautiful without partaking of the artifice

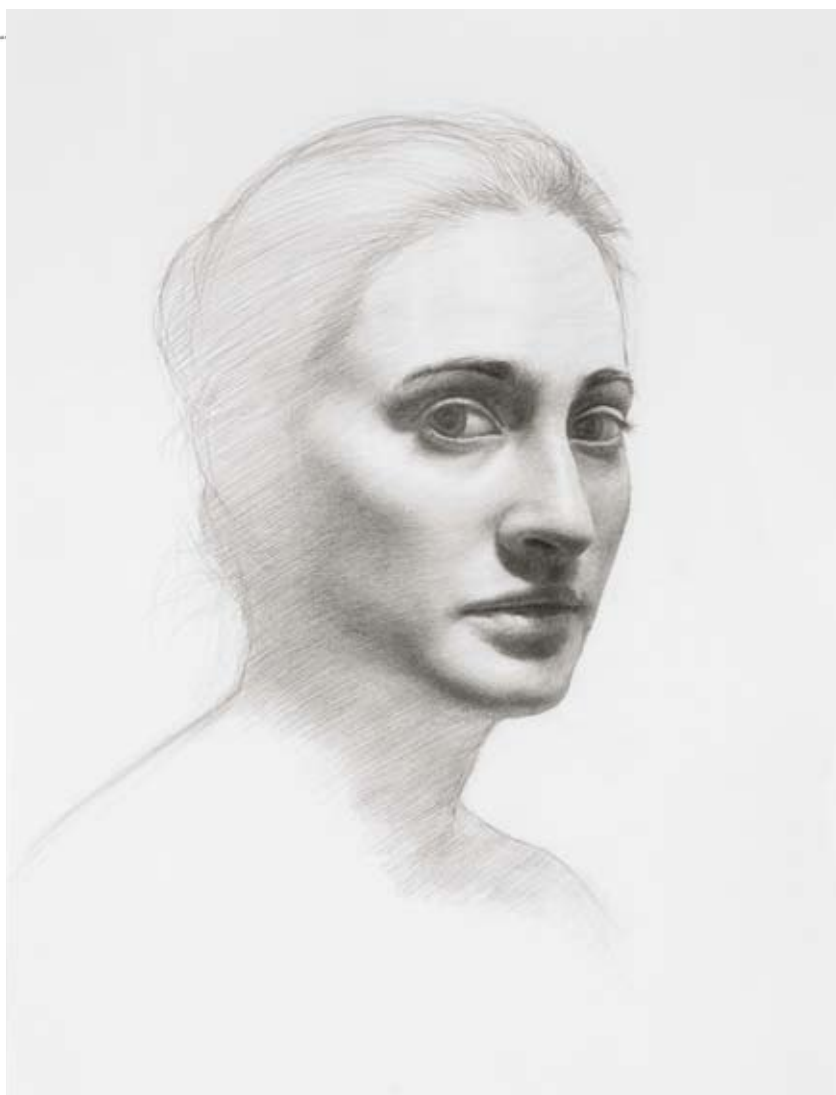
that's commonly associated with beauty. The peculiarities that distinguish them as individuals are recorded but neither emphasized nor covered up.

The figure inhabits the white panel as if it were a sculpture in a niche. The artist is as close to the model as a writer is to a computer screen. The resultant illusion is vivid and palpable; the viewer has the sensation that she's not looking at a picture as much as encountering a person. "The space is a narrow relief," explains the artist. "If you think of Caravaggio's paintings—for example, *The Calling of St. Matthew* ([www.abcgallery.com/C/caravaggio/caravaggio024.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/C/caravaggio/caravaggio024.html)) or *The Conversion of St. Paul* ([www.abcgallery.com/C/caravaggio/caravaggio025.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/C/caravaggio/caravaggio025.html)), the stage is narrow, with no escape." That the subject seems to come forward from the rectangle is the result of many, many layers of paint. Vavagiakis characterizes that layering process as "building a painting." While he's working, he's "thinking optically, of course, but also of the tactile quality. I want the figure to be both naturalistic and sculptural." Accordingly, a viewer in front of a work will see a dense pigment load (paint built up). "I'm laying paint on top and then sculpting," says Vavagiakis. "When the figures are finished, they're like effigies."

The models recur, sometimes in the same or a similar pose. "I work with one person or several persons over the course of a year or years. It's an ongoing investigation," says Vavagiakis, "a dialogue between observer and observed, artist and model, person and person. Time is a prerequisite of my work; it intensifies the

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*Rainbow XXIX*, drawing in progress (below; graphite and white chalk, 16½x11½) and *Rainbow XII*, investigative drawing (at right; graphite, 12½x9½)



experience. Over time, the relationship between artist and model becomes symbiotic.” Indeed, as in all relationships, there’s a give-and-take. The artist gazes, and the model doesn’t look away but is active in gazing back.

Gazing back at the artist and viewer, these figures are vivid for another reason: They are larger than life. They seem to come forward from their spaces because the artist “scales up.” “I’m more comfortable if they’re slightly larger than life-size, so they’re in front of the viewer a little bit,” says Vavagiakis. Artists in the Renaissance used pinholes and pouncing to copy a drawing to another surface. Vavagiakis does many preparatory drawings in a smaller scale, chooses one, creates a grid on Mylar or Denril polymer, and then transfers the drawing to a big sheet of paper, which is mounted on a wood panel.

**Light coming from the side** in a studio can flatter the figure and also make it seem flat. Vavagiakis bathes his figures in light emanating from above; as a result they have a dimensionality, appearing volumetric. Top lighting also conveys a clinical effect, as if the subject

were being examined by a doctor or interrogated by a law officer—in either case, exposed. “It’s uncompromising,” says Vavagiakis. “The top light illuminates all the bumps and blemishes; it doesn’t hide anything.”

Though he places a fully realized figure against a white ground, he doesn’t want the figure to appear flat and cut out. “With a white background, it’s harder to get a sense of turn. It’s a technical problem. I’ve learned to use ambient light, in addition to the overhead light, so the effect is more naturalistic. What characterizes the greatest figure painting is a sense of life, the illusion that these people are breathing. And what marks the greatest draftsmanship is the sensation that the figure is a form inhabiting a space; there’s a kinetic quality, a sense that the figure could move.”

While he was fortunate to attend New York’s High School of Art and Design during the years Irwin Greenberg and Max Ginsburg were teaching before-school life drawing classes (requiring teachers and students to wake up at 4:30 each morning), Vavagiakis has, for the most part, taught himself. “Greenberg and Ginsburg gave me the nerve to say I’m going to do it on



*Arthur V* (at left; oil on panel, 13x11¼),  
*Connie X*, finished drawing (below; graphite  
and white chalk, 17½x14) and *Miranda X*  
(at bottom; oil on panel, 13x11¼)



my own. Why? Because I live in New York City; I have the great galleries and museums. And that's what I did: I made my own curriculum."

**On a typical painting day**, he gets up before 6 a.m., sets up the palette and starts working on the painting by laying a fresh bed of paint. At 12 noon the model comes in, and she or he poses until 6 p.m. When the model leaves, Vavagiakis keeps painting from memory. "By this time the paint is closing slightly, getting harder and oxidizing. I mix a lot of paint, and then I throw out most of the paint I mixed. I tell my students, "You're not wasting paint when you're mixing color. Think of your palette as your experimentation lab. Mixing is key."

Vavagiakis experiments with different brands of oil paint in order to achieve different effects. He likes Old Holland for its density; Winsor & Newton for the viscosity in certain colors; Vasari and Williamsburg for earth colors and transparent glazes. He lays out his colors in a consistent way, arranged by value and intensity, starting with the whites and the cadmiums (see sidebar on white paints on page 52).





*Gioia IV* (oil on panel, 13x13)



**“What characterizes the greatest figure painting is a sense of life, the illusion that these people are breathing.”** Costa Vavagiakis



To see more of Vavagiakis's work, visit [www.artistsnetwork.com/article/costa-vavagiakis](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/article/costa-vavagiakis).

**He prefers filberts** (like flats but with rounded corners), because they have length and more spring. Since the filberts taper at the end, they function “like a quill pen in the Renaissance; they give a more delicate, more varied stroke.” He also uses the shorter and stiffer brights, which “have more body and therefore give you more control, and when they get old, they become great drawing brushes.” Not surprisingly, the gold standard, for Vavagiakis, is the Winsor & Newton Series 7 kolinsky sable. He likes the miniature Series 7 because it has a shorter handle and hairs, so there's less spring. “When I'm painting over areas in layers, the layers get smoothed out. I don't want a mark to be left; I don't want the brushstroke to be visible.” Instead of a painterly effect, Vavagiakis wants one more akin to the surface of bronze.

**Encountering the bronze** *Charioteer of Delphi*, when as a 6-year-old he visited his ancestral homeland, was an epiphany. Almost 6 feet tall, the *Charioteer* is at once imposing and delicate, depicting an athlete humble in victory (visit [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charioteer\\_of\\_Delphi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charioteer_of_Delphi) to take a look). “I looked at the patina of the bronze,” Vavagiakis says, “the cleanliness of the pleats in the garment, the bronze eyelashes, the onyx eyes, the bronze wire for the eyelashes, the charioteer's reins that were broken off—it was like a fetish experience. I really had to be pried away. When I got back to New York City, I felt changed; I felt I'd been given something. It occurs to me that I was scrutinizing the *Charioteer*—and what am I doing now but scrutinizing my sitters, the people I paint, with that intense vigilance. What I am doing is trying to re-create that profound experience. It's walking that thin line or that edge—making an art that is immediate and yet could be a thousand years old.”

Another powerful encounter occurred during a trip to Berlin, where Vavagiakis saw Rogier van der Weyden's

*Connie XXI*, investigative drawing (below, left; graphite and white chalk, 16½x11½) and *Connie XXII*, finished drawing (below, right; graphite and white chalk, 16½x11½)



## On drawing with graphite

For preparatory or investigative drawings that are a form of research for a painting, Vavagiakis uses toned charcoal or pastel paper, because he can “get a finish more quickly, due to the ground's acting as a bridge tone.” This toned paper is heavyweight, like Fabriano Tiziano pastel paper or Fabriano Ingres drawing paper. For finished drawings that are more sculptural in effect, he uses Strathmore 500 Series drawing paper. He works with a range of hard pencils starting with an HB and moving to a 9H, “building the surfaces, working on them until the surface becomes a patina of graphite with clay and wax, but mainly clay, so the drawings have a texture and are more like paintings.”

*Portrait of a Young Woman* (take a look at [www.abcgallery.com/W/weyden/weyden43.html](http://www.abcgallery.com/W/weyden/weyden43.html)). “It's such a magical, powerful painting,” says Vavagiakis. “Van Eyck is a giant, but I think I like van der Weyden better because of that emotive quality, his Gothic intensity. People look at the work of a classicist like Ingres and say the work is cold, but Ingres's work is just as emotional as (the romantic) Delacroix's. It's a different aesthetic. ‘Classical’ is tagged as being nonemotional, but if you look at an Ingres or even at a Mondrian, you can see the labor. Wasn't it Job who said you labor for what you love, and you love for what you labor?”

Certainly, the artist's own paintings develop slowly, over months and years. At any moment, he has several



## Meet Costa Vavagiakis

"The first step is a great place to be, because it's the initiation," says Vavagiakis. "Then comes the process of finding the tools that will lead to a personal vision, if you keep yourself open." Lesley Heller Gallery in New York City and the Hackett-Freedman Gallery in San Francisco have shown his work; he teaches at Art Students League, National Academy of Design and Brooklyn College. To see more, visit [www.costavavagiakis.com](http://www.costavavagiakis.com).

## A word on white

The white background Vavagiakis characteristically places his figures against is not without color or nuance. "The problem in photographing my work is that the photographer has to compensate—in order to make the figures seem the way they are—volumetric—by overexposing the backgrounds so that they seem, in reproduction, completely white. The white background actually has a flickering quality," says Vavagiakis. He paints almost exclusively on paper, primed with either shellac and oil primer, shellac alone, or rabbit skin glue and oil primer, mounted to wood.

He uses flake white and lead white more in the beginning stages; titanium white later, because "titanium is a great blending white." He elaborates: "Artists who do a lot of glazing like zinc white because it's transparent and cool in temperature. Flake white dries well and creates a solid paint film. Titanium blends well and saturates colors, and it yellows the least. I like titanium white on the surface; by the end of my process, I'm using that and I'm lessening the amount of siccatives and adding walnut oil instead of linseed oil. The reason I use walnut oil in the later stages is that walnut and safflower oils are the least yellowing."

"Some of nature's paradoxes," he explains, "are that the oil that has the best properties for painting is linseed oil, but it yellows. The best varnish—the one with the most translucency, the one that's more like glass—is damar, but it yellows. As artists we just have to experiment and see. There's a certain restlessness that's part of the process. The metaphor is the tool box. We're making marks; we're using construction lines—we're using all our tools in order to convey a sense of life."



*Gioia VI (graphite, 52x41)*

paintings in various stages of completion, plus hundreds of drawings and dozens of paintings in racks. The romantic outburst—the spontaneous gesture—may seem quicker, but it's not necessarily more impassioned than a slow process that unfolds in time. "The interesting thing when you consider the personalities of Ingres and Delacroix," says Vavagiakis, "is that Ingres was the emotional wreck. He was so overwrought that he had to play his violin to calm down enough to paint. Accordingly, I say to my students, "Don't be deceived by the modern idea that an artist has to be crazy or mad. Vincent van Gogh was obviously disorganized in his personal life, but he was at peace when he was at work. To make art, you have to be relaxed; you have to escape to a place of peace."

**If Vavagiakis can compare** Ingres to Delacroix, surely we can compare Vavagiakis to Lucian Freud. Both artists address the corporeality of flesh, but Freud celebrates life on its way to deliquescence. Vavagiakis, in contrast, presents his figures formally, with sure outlines that confirm the figures' autonomy. Their dignity in its own way is just as suggestive of death, however. While Freud reminds us that the body will decay, Vavagiakis reminds us of what survives. Art exists in a place but also outside of place, in time—remembered because loved and thus, from memory, endlessly called forth. ♪