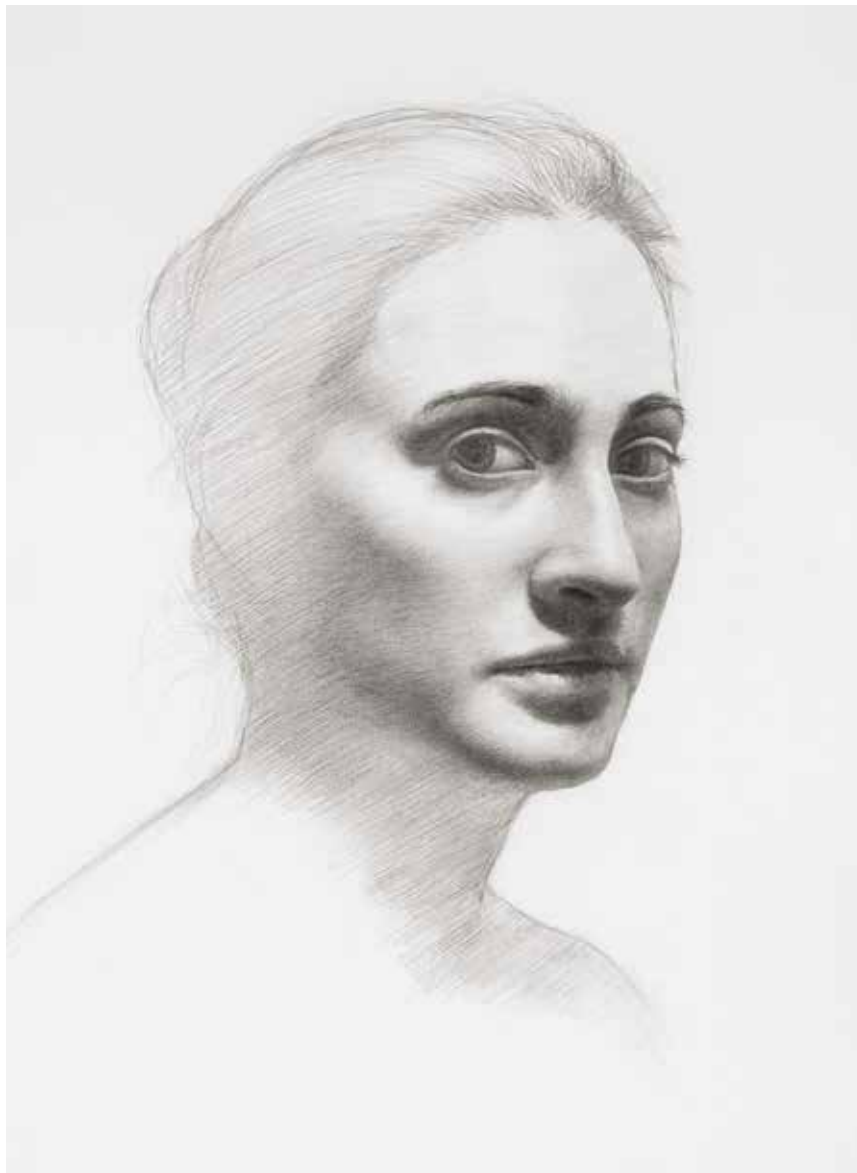


DEMONSTRATION

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

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.

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.

“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