

What is the Relevance of Realist Art in the 21st Century?

by Daniel Graves

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What is the relevance of realist art in the 21st century? As artists and teachers, we talk of the roots of our tradition and the masters who have inspired and influenced our work. We are indebted to classical ideals that have taught us to look at the great art of the past and to the real world equally.

Art based on the classical tradition does not result in an imitation of nature but the imitation of nature is the first step to making art – imitation, that is, in the sense of representing the world around us. The classically trained artist selects from and arranges reality to fit his idea, and leads the viewer to focus on a particular part of his work. He strives to create beauty so that his art might achieve a universal significance. The artist's reality becomes our reality, and his imagery enters the realm of our experience and becomes part of the humanist tradition.

When we stand looking into the eyes of a Rembrandt self portrait, how much closer can we get to knowing the soul of another marvelous 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. This type of painting speaks to us of beauty, craft, feelings and ideas in a way that no other art or media does, and its relevance is its enduring ability to move us to the core of our souls.

Students at The Florence Academy of Art learn the language of classical art by studying the Masters of this tradition from Greece to the present day. This is the point of departure for observing the images collected in this exhibition; it is the common language at the foundation of each alumnus's work. All of these young artists began by studying simple shapes and forms so that one day they might select from the real world of complex objects to give life to their inner worlds of ideas, feelings and experiences. It has at once allowed them to pursue their own unique visions, and has linked them to one another as artists, to the past, and to the future through the continued reinvestment in and evolution of a vital and ongoing tradition.

We who strive to create images of emotive significance are aware of how high the bar has been placed by our predecessors. To think we have no further goals in realist painting, or question its relevance, would be a mistake. Great art is testament to man's potential. Our time is unique because we have more information available to us than ever before, and more freedom to express whatever we hold true. I believe we are entering a new age of expansion for realist painting, an age that will change painting and the way we look at our world for many years to come.

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