

Drawing Today

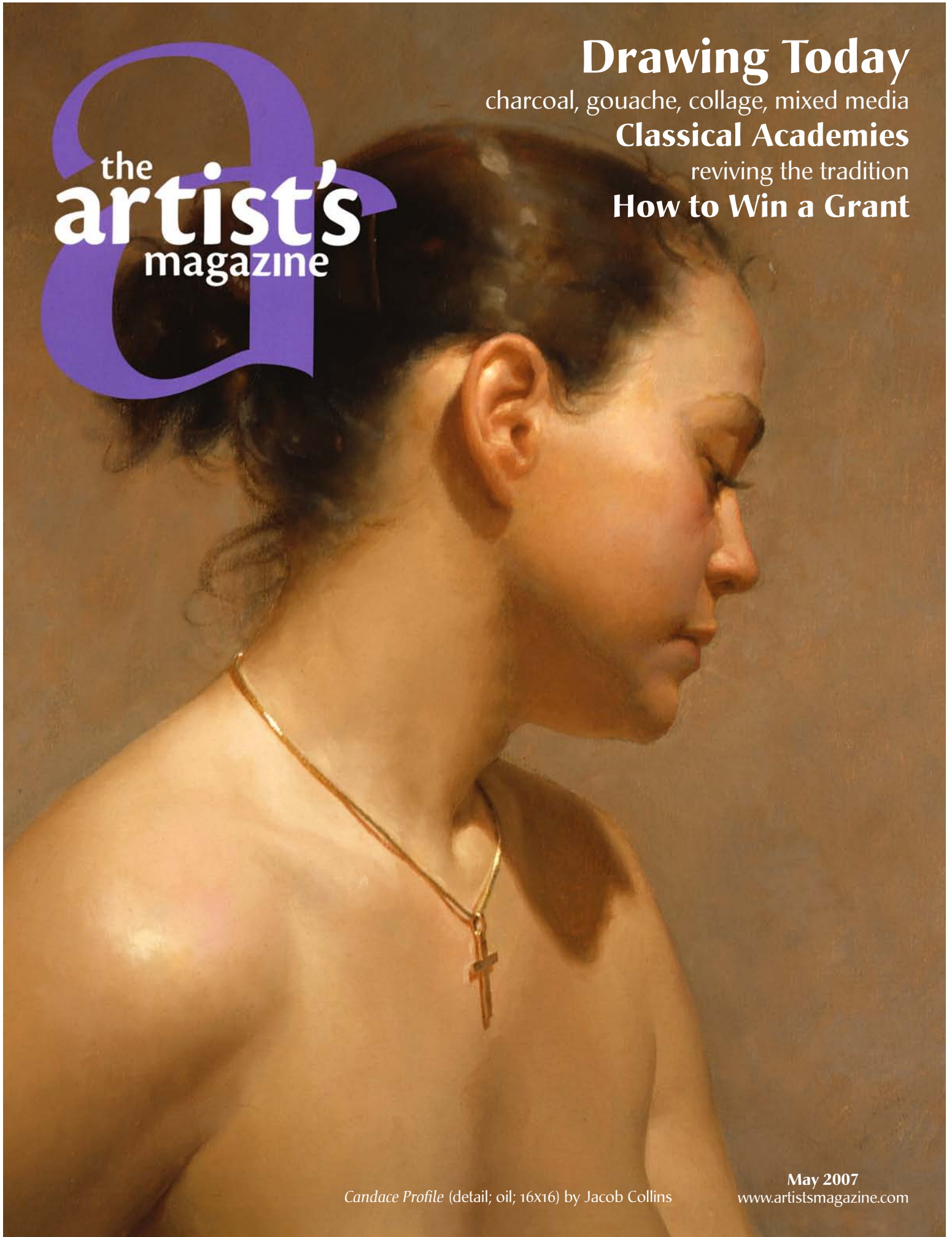
charcoal, gouache, collage, mixed media

Classical Academies

reviving the tradition

How to Win a Grant

the
artist's
magazine



Candace Profile (detail; oil; 16x16) by Jacob Collins

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Process of Illumination

In his classical approach to creating and instructing, **Jacob Collins** believes in taking things slow.

•Interview by Lisa Wurster

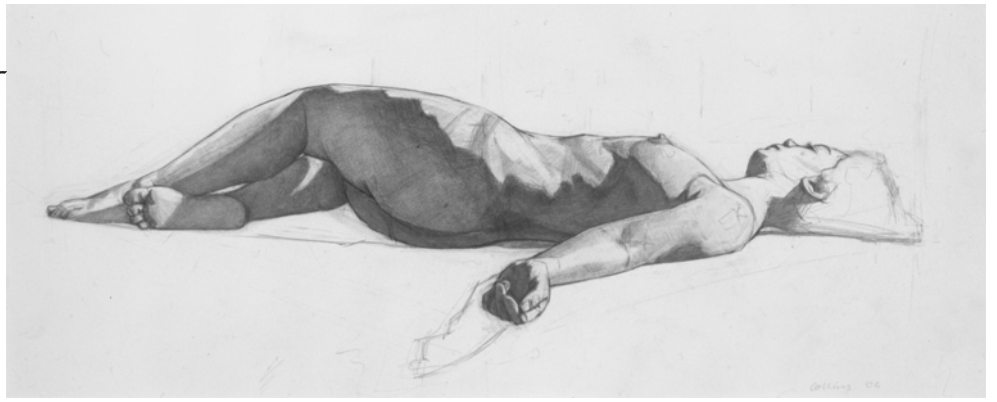
While perhaps best known for his paintings of the figure, mainly of the female in repose, Jacob Collins is equally adept at still life and landscape. In fact, one quality all of his paintings share is a signature breath of light. This delicate illumination, accompanied by equally powerful darkness, caresses either skin, object or sky. Collins's style is frequently compared to that of the 19th-century painters, and although his paintings are certainly classical in approach, they have a decidedly contemporary look. Friend and former student Juliette Aristides says of his work, "Jacob's paintings have a sublime tonal quality and his paint handling has the fluidity of an old master's."

An instructor at the Grand Central Academy of Art, a school he founded with several former students, Collins also runs the Water Street Atelier out of the ground floor of a Manhattan carriage house. It's a home he shares with his wife, Ann Brashares—the bestselling author of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and their three children. While hesitant to divulge painting techniques in the pages of a magazine ("A little learning is a dangerous thing..."), in this interview Collins opens up about some of his artistic influences and shares with readers a drawing demonstration.

•Lisa Wurster is associate editor for *The Artist's Magazine*.



Study for Lise
(at right; graphite,
16x23^{1/2}) and
Lise (below; oil,
36x46)



When did you decide to begin a life in art?

I had a clear feeling from early on that I wanted to do this. Also, my grandmother was an artist and my parents were very encouraging; they saw how excited and driven I was and would buy me art books. As a young man, I tried to draw accurately and expressively, though not in a particularly artistic way. To a certain extent, I was looking to the dynamic muscular figures in, say, Marvel comics. That natural segue from copying comics to looking at Michelangelo or Rubens happens for an awful lot of young artists, especially young boys. It's coming from a similar place—the desire to make these expressive, dynamic figures. So I found myself stepping from a childhood idiom to a slightly more grown-up one.

You mentioned Marvel comics as a childhood influence. Did you have a preferred comic book character?

I really liked Spiderman—the way he could shoot his web out of his wrists, and he was agile and powerful. I guess that would be an early iteration of my passion for both the lyrical and the monumental.

With your wife an author and you an artist, it must be a very creative household. Have your three children expressed any interest in art?

Yeah, Ann is upstairs and I'm downstairs (laughs). The children are still a little young: Sam is 12, Nate is 8 and Susannah is 5. They're very creative and imaginative kids, but we're certainly not putting any pressure on them.

For a long time, you copied the old masters in several museums. Do you recommend this to other artists?

Yes, very much. When I was a teenager, I would go to the Met and copy from Rembrandt, Gustave Courbet and others, which I did for a number of years. Most of the time when I copied, I did so in oil, watercolor or pencil, and although I wasn't employed as an official copyist, I learned a great deal.

I also copied from art books. It's harder to copy a painting than a drawing out of a book, because with a painting, the texture and degrees of transparency are



The Water Street Atelier, Grand Central Academy and the Hudson River School for Landscape

Collins started the **Water Street Atelier** on Water Street in Brooklyn in 1994 as a small and private atelier. The atelier is now located on the ground floor of Collins's Manhattan home and serves a group of 15 students who work with the artist in a loosely structured program over the course of several years. Generally, the students begin with drawing, progress to painting plaster casts of sculptures, and *grisaille* (a painting or drawing done in shades of gray), then finally, students begin painting the figure.

"The atelier is wonderful, but New York has so many artists who really care and love this approach to art, and it seemed that group was underserved," Collins says. So he founded the **Grand Central Academy of Art** to offer highly focused training in drawing, painting and sculpture. The academy runs on a three-year program, the first year of which is almost exclusively drawing studies. Currently, the school accepts 15 students a year into the program, and this year the program will be accepting its second group of first-year students. The school also offers intensive night classes and summer workshops.

Collins is currently working on his newest venture, the **Hudson River School for Landscape**, situated in the Catskills. Rather than a standard art class, this school may become a permanent fixture, much like an artist's colony. "Some colonies are located in beautiful places, with artists who aren't interested in making beautiful paintings out of the landscape," he says. "This school would, I hope, bring together the reawakening love of the old American painters, the vigorous but unfocused scene of contemporary landscape painting, and the urgent need for renewed reverence for the land." Classes begin this summer.



Drawing off the path

"I begin some drawings loosely, while others I start very carefully, drawing slow, crisp lines. When painting, I might start out with a transferred drawing or with a lot of messy paint and hope for the best," says Collins. "This demonstration for *Marc* (on page 35; graphite, 24x18), covers a few of the ideas that I think of when drawing the figure. I don't want to give the impression that these stages represent a set of drawing rules. There are many ways to draw beautifully. It's important to let the drawing be an investigation and sometimes, in order to investigate, you need to go off the path."



I begin drawing the simplest visual shapes. I'm looking for overall axes and directions. My main interest is getting the particular spirit of the middle of the pose, in this case the pelvis, torso and thigh. (1 minute)



I refine the central shape while dividing it into subshapes, trying to see every tilt and shape as truly as I can. (10 minutes)

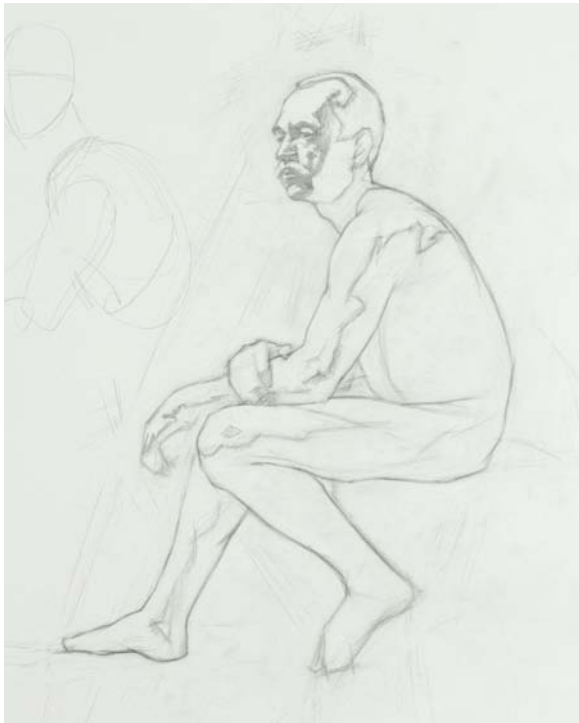
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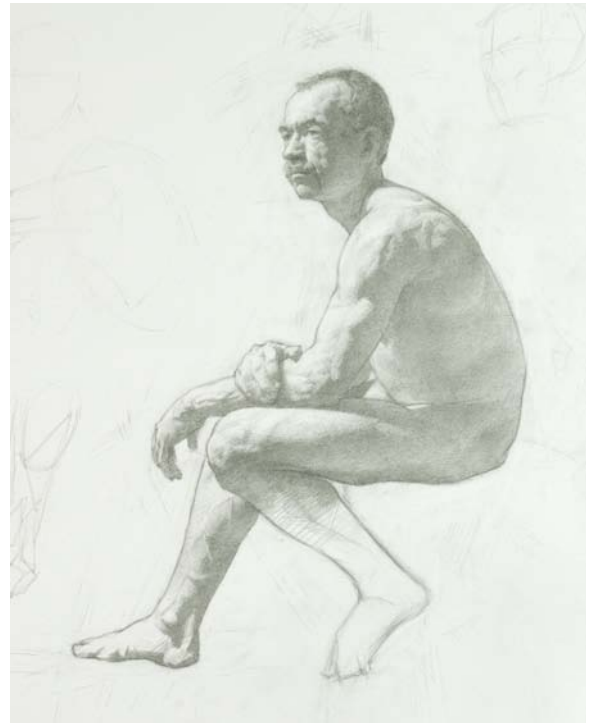
As the middle becomes truer, I build the outer parts onto it. So far, I've mostly measured ratios by eye, but now I start to loosely check a few measurements: halves, quarters, plumbs, horizontals. (25 minutes)



I continue to make my shapes and tilts true. Measuring more now as I shift intervals and ratios, I divide the shadow and light shapes. I refine the middle first and then work my way out. (1 hour)



I patiently adjust the shapes and tilts. Up to this point, I've had anatomy and construction ideas on the back burner. Now I begin to engage the dimensional reality of the figure. (about 6 hours)



In this first pass of modeling, I develop my values by conceptualizing the surfaces and the direction of the light. (about 12 hours)

such important factors. When you're copying from a book, you have a limited idea of what the painting really looks like, but you can learn the tonal range and color relationships. The colors are usually going to be a little off, but at least you can learn the organization of values in the composition.

You work in still life, landscape and figure. Which subject or genre brings you the greatest satisfaction?

Each genre satisfies different needs. I just spent the last three years painting figures with the idea that they're the hardest, certainly the most taxing genre, and you have to be the most on your game. If you have significant drawing problems, the figure will fall apart and it will read wrong emotionally.

Now I'm turning my attention back to painting landscapes and still lifes. My next show is going to be comprised of still lifes. They aren't aspiring to be monumental works in any way, but ideally they're nuanced and sensitive little paintings. I love painting them because there's a feeling of musical, flowing experience. The drawing doesn't matter as much—what you're really after is a feeling of clarity and beauty.

Switching to landscape painting, which is my next big project, is so exciting because I get to be out of the studio. I spend so much time in my studio, which can be very dark, so it can begin to feel as if I'm a mole underground. To be outside and spending time in the sun and wind—and painting things that are changing and moving—that's difficult, but also invigorating.

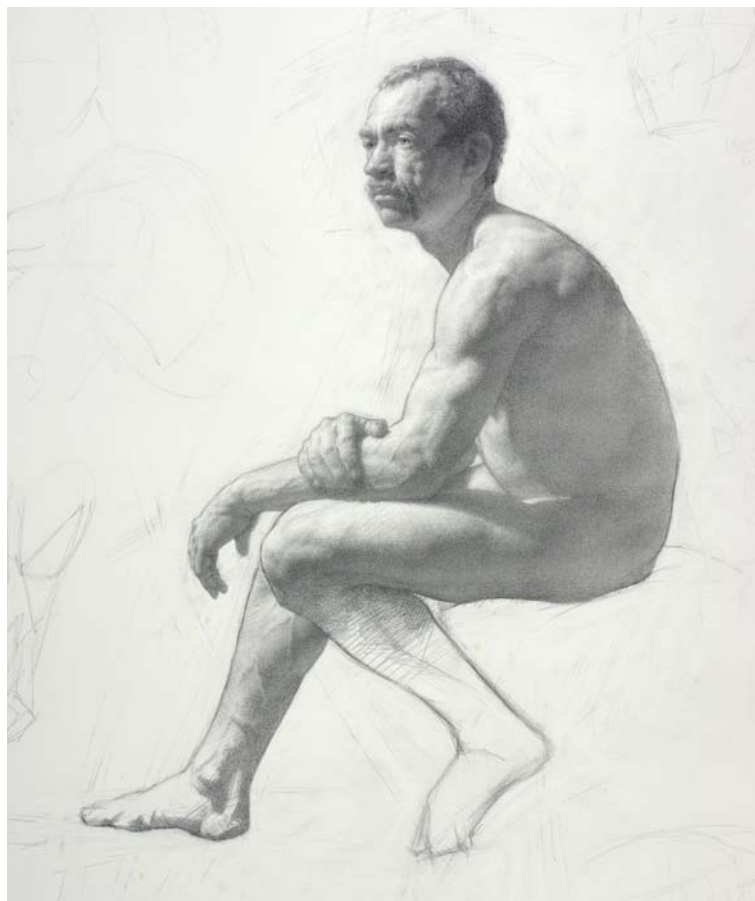
Your figures seem so lifelike, as if the flesh has weight. Is it important that you paint the figure from life?

I paint the figure only from life—and from my imagination or previous experiences. The best way to say it is that I don't work from photographs. The over reliance on photography holds so many artists back

from realizing their potential. The photograph provides a perfectly flat, nonexperience to copy. If the artist's development is built up on a series of nonexperiences, his work will not be as rich as it could be. Working from photographs can prevent an artist from really connecting to this powerful humanist tradition.

What about when painting landscapes—do you work outside for those?

I utilize *plein air* painting as one of the important image gathering ways to develop a picture, so I do all of my



As I push the modeling, I make the form fuller and clearer in the lights and subtler and flatter in the shadows: active lights, passive shadows. At this stage, I make every effort to think spatially. Sometimes I try to imagine that my drawing is a little three-dimensional sculpture, and that my pencil is a sculptor's tool: I'm reaching my pencil through the paper and into an imaginary space to carve the figure. (2 weeks)



Green Onions (at top; oil, 14x20) and
Woman (Irma) (above; oil, 13x16)

studies (pencil and chalk drawings) outside, but I'm not a *plein air* painter per se. Generally, when I paint landscapes I'll do drawings of leaves, cliffs or branches, and all of that gets integrated along with the *plein air* color studies and compositional paintings. These works get folded into preparatory medium-size paintings, which then go into making a larger finished work.

Your work has been compared to Caravaggio's, with its strong contrasts of light and dark. Can you address your use of lighting and palette?

I love earth colors. If I can, I try to use only umbers, siennas, ochres, Naples yellow and flake white. When I'm composing, I try to remember that the first impact the picture will have—what draws you to it—is the big, simple value pattern. I think Caravaggio is an extraordinarily important artist in a significant way. His influence changed how painters thought about



Meet Jacob Collins

Born in New York in 1964, Jacob Collins studied art in Europe, at the Art Students League and the New York Academy of Art. He received a bachelor of arts degree from Columbia College in 1986. He is founder of the Water Street Atelier and cofounder of the Grand Central Academy of Art. Besides appearing in more than 15 group and solo exhibitions, Collins's work resides in several notable collections, including the Forbes Collection and at Harvard University's Fogg Museum. He's represented by Hirschl and Adler Modern in New York City. Visit www.jacobcollinspaintings.com to learn more.

paintings, with the dominant power of the single light source and with powerful areas of light and dark. He didn't invent those ideas, but he expressed them so powerfully. Over the course of my life, I've been very excited and still am about the Hudson River landscape painters. I love their reverence for the land, their tonal organization, draftsmanship, commitment to beauty and their use of the possibilities of oil paint: thick and thin, opaque and transparent, smooth and rough. I also love the way they studied nature so intently. That's why I decided to start the Hudson River School for Landscape (for more information, see the sidebar on page 32).

Are you trying to convey a specific idea to the viewer with your portraits? What about with the landscapes?

I've always loved beautifully drawn and rendered faces. When I paint a portrait, I try to make an excellently constructed head, clearly drawn and delicately realized.

At the same time, I want to express an interior beauty, to connect with the humanity of the sitter and the humanist tradition. Landscape paintings can capture and convey remembered moods. I think that the landscape painter is in a special position now. We all feel that we're approaching a crisis in how we've engaged with the land. We need to learn to love nature again, to study it and wonder over it.

Are there any ideas that you repeatedly stress to students?

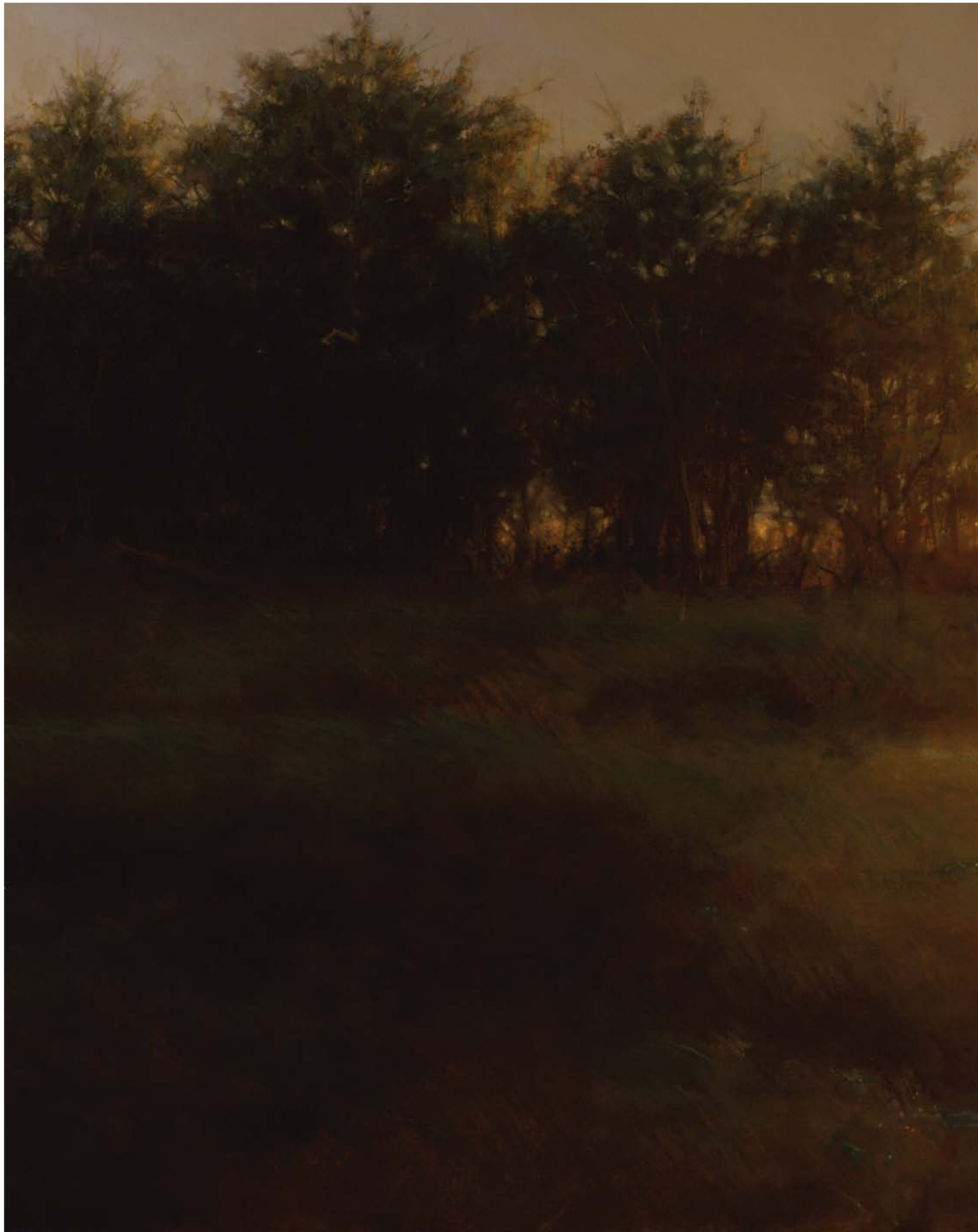
I think it's an important element to have consistency in your materials and consistency in your environment and studio. I tell students who are learning to paint the figure that the goal is to do a figure as well as you can. Then for the next figure, use the same tools, medium, paints and process. Each time you do a figure, you can adjust each of the component elements and improve each element a little bit, until the whole process overall improves. That's very important, even in my own work. It's a relatively gradual process, a smooth evolution.

What's your favorite part of the artistic process?

Each stage is infinitely vexing, but also thrilling. The start is intimidating. If you screw it up, your whole project will be miserable. But it's also the freest and most significant moment. Finishing is torture. The tendency to judge yourself must be resisted, but that's impossible. There's always some newly seen flaw. But the little glimpses of beauty between the anxiety make it worth it.

You work in the classical tradition, yet your paintings have a modern feel. Is there a technique for keeping a painting from looking dated?

I've found that one way to make paintings look dated is to try to make them look contemporary. Eventually, contemporary will be dated. If I work really hard to make my paintings look 2006, in 10 years they'll look 10 years old. But if I try to make them look honest and beautiful and have an emotional life to them, that emotional life will always have some currency.



Fire Island Sunset (oil, 24x38)

