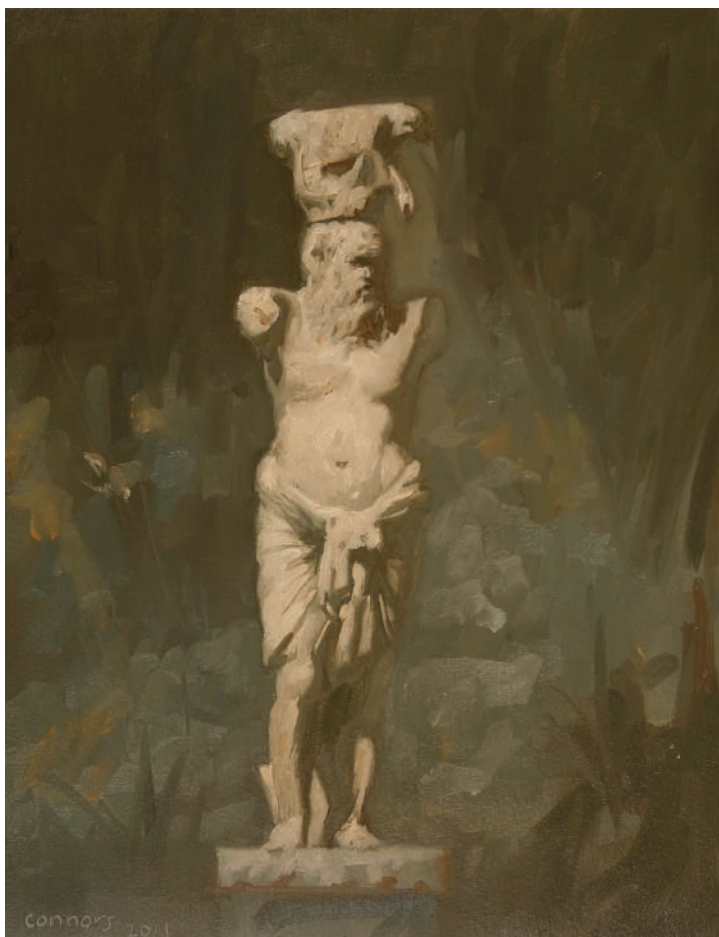


PAINTING AS THE ROMANS PAINT

**Male Caryatid,
Hadrian's Villa**

2011, oil on prepared
paper, 12 x 9½.
All artwork this article
collection the artist.

The recent program "Rome Through the Eyes of Piranesi" took artists and architects on a drawing and painting tour of Rome, under the auspices of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art (ICAA). We recently spoke with instructor **Patrick Connors** about the program and about how Renaissance-inspired theories of perspective and proportion inform his own paintings.



**Approaching
Storm With
Coliseum**

2011, oil on
prepared paper,
9½ x 12.



AMERICAN ARTIST: *What are the overall aims and objectives of the Rome program?*

PATRICK CONNORS: The ICAA's Rome curriculum harks back to a roughly 500-year tradition of painters, sculptors, and architects coming to the Eternal City to learn the lessons of the past. Aesthetically, their shared interest was to make original works of art inspired by the legacy of Greco-Roman thought. In this tour, as in many of its other pursuits, the ICAA's aim is to restore critical thinking—not to be confused with the contemporary literary conceit of critical theory—to the visual arts. This is revealed in its Rome curriculum in which students, faculty, and other participants have an opportunity to engage with a continuum of thought upon which two great periods of the West, the Greco-Roman and the Renaissance, were founded.

The curriculum includes drawing, painting, reading, visiting sites, and lectures taught by three ICAA instructors: Richard Cameron, Michael Djordjevitch, and myself. Most lectures are given on-site, at locations such as

the Pantheon, and during that time the group also draws or paints, and the instructors critique the drawings for spatial depiction, composition, construction, accuracy, chromatic development, and significance.

This teaching model is based on sound reasoning and strong historical precedent. The Renaissance, after all, was not fueled by university-educated scholars but rather by artisans of the workshop: Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. For those of us reared in the Modernist tradition—which dogmatically eschews influence, especially that of the Renaissance—it comes as a bit of a shock when we first realize that these men were active visual scholars measuring, copying, and attempting to preserve the fruits of antiquity. All of them lamented the paucity of the present and the richness of the past.

AA: *How do Rome and your artworks featured here tie in with your theories and practice concerning perspective and construction of pictorial space?*

PC: When I first came to Rome, it was overwhelming. It is only slightly less so with each visit, but in turn, each is a richer experience. Rome's allure is largely due to the light that bathes the region and overpowers the senses. This light is not constant; it changes throughout the day, so just when you think you have “got it,” it has already shifted. This, of course, happens everywhere, but in Rome the light is especially distinctive in temperature and color as it moves from early to late morning or from early to late evening. It is difficult to articulate verbally, but in my painting I strive to convey this singular visual phenomenon.

Light is the primary medium through which I approach an understanding of classical and modern pictorial space. The structure of my paintings reflects that appreciation of light: rarely do I resort to linear expression. Rather, I employ a tonal one; the physicality of the paint as revealed in the surface further enhances the painting's illusionistic aims, and the chromatic effects are derived from a limited palette.

RIGHT

The Arch of Titus

2011, oil on prepared paper, 12 x 9½.

BELOW

Santa Maria Della Pace

2011, oil on prepared paper, 12 x 9½.

There are many paths to personal expression, but I am interested in those that lead to creating poems about light. When one depicts light, he or she simultaneously depicts space, and it is through this pictorial space that I as a poet am best able to reveal the aim of the heart. The depiction of light—rather than just “painting what one sees”—is important to achieving this.

The basis for much of my pictorial space evolved from my knowledge of linear perspective. There was much work that I did in perspectival projection over the past 35 years that prepared me for these paintings. But in the end, the critical awareness of space and form in my Rome paintings permitted me a confidence, a feeling of assurance that I would be able to not only get the desired image but, more important, lucidly and fully relate my experience to others. For example, in my painting of the *Arch of Titus*, the splash of sunlight against the stone was impossible to resist—I hope that the viewer understands that. And that moment of twined understanding may lead to reflections or musings on life—things that are removed from the everyday hurly-burly and allow us a moment to be ourselves.

Rome is full of moments like that splash of light against the ancient stone of Arch of Titus. I am

still excited by the prospect of capturing this with each returning year.

AA: *How are light and perspective related to each other?*

PC: These concepts are intimately related. For starters, linear perspective and *chiaroscuro* are the two great innovations of the Quattrocento. They were instrumental in producing a visual revolution that would last more than 500 years. What do they both have in common? They are both a means to analyze and depict light.

The principles of linear perspective

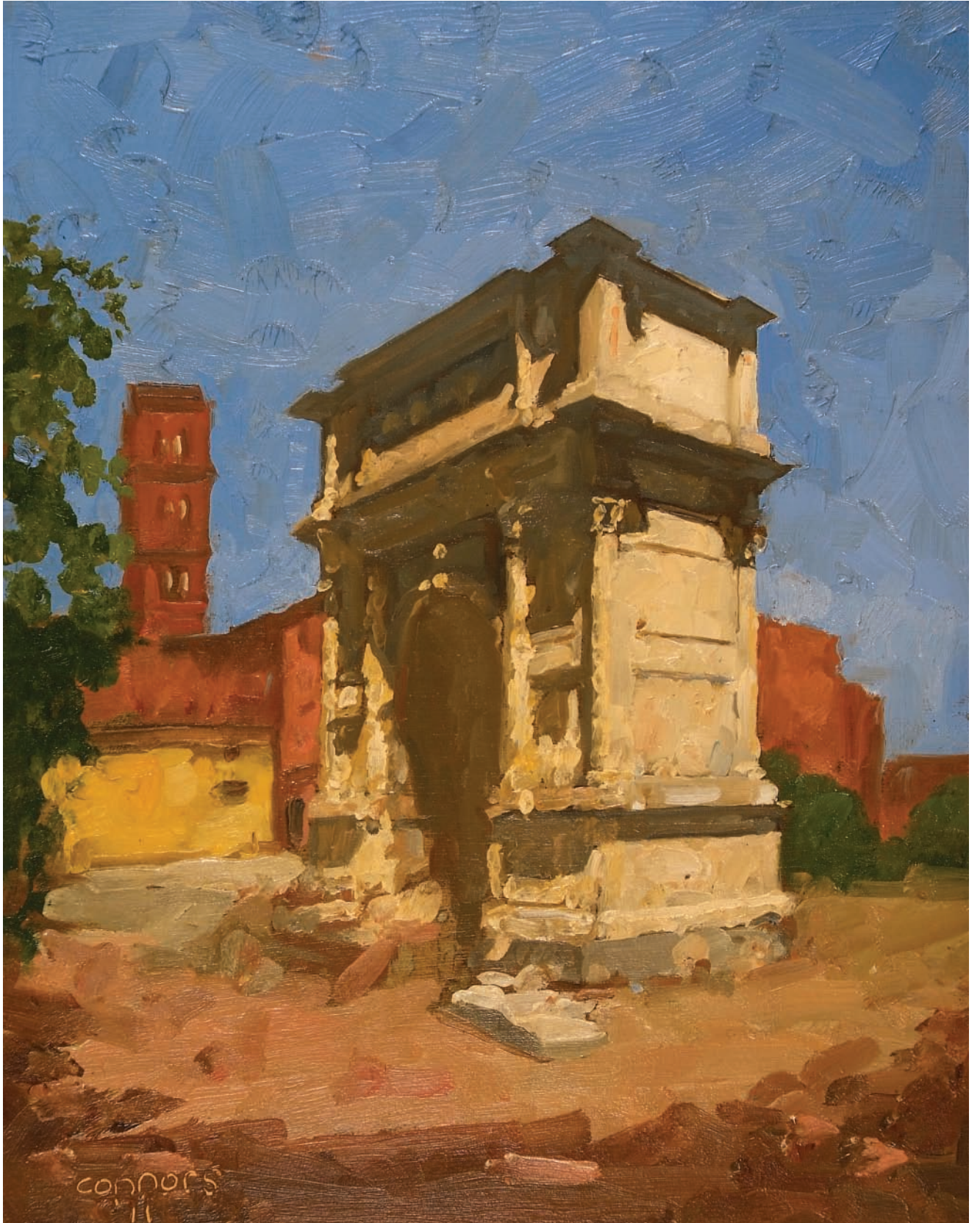
are based on classic optics and the principles of vision informed by the work of Alhazen, in the 11th century. Early Renaissance artists who worked in perspective studied and hypothesized about the ways that we perceive, and from their studies came one of the most conceptual ideas in all of Western art: the picture plane. On this imaginary plane are the imaginary moments of the vanishing point, the measure point, vanishing traces, and cone of vision.

More technically, the science of linear perspective concerns the relationship among the eye, the picture plane, and the

model. Linear perspective can be considered in three ways: first, as an aesthetic, the primary intellectual foundation for Western art. Second, it is an agent of transmission for ideas pertaining to the depiction of space. And finally, it is a studio practice, a means to express oneself through the universal intimacy of depicted light. The critical deduction from all of this is that light and pictorial space are considered the primary subject matter. As I mentioned before, when you depict light you simultaneously depict space, and, as Rodin noted, space or depth is the beauty of architecture and landscape.

Leonardo was fascinated with the study of light, and this in turn began and sustained my fascination. According to Leonardo





Temples of Saturn and Vespasian, Evening

2011, oil on prepared paper, 9½ x 12.





RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

DRAWING MATERIALS

Connors travels with several small sketchbooks and a pad of middle-toned paper. He draws with blackboard chalk, red chalk, Pitt pastel sanguine and white pencils, a Lamy fountain pen, a Crow Quill pen, and pens fashioned from marsh reeds. He uses walnut drawing ink and Pelikan ink, primarily in burnt sienna.

WATERCOLORS

"Winsor & Newton's Cotman Field Box is a favorite," Connors says. "It is small and light and has everything you need but the paper itself." He recommends a variety of pigment manufacturers, including Winsor & Newton, Daler-Rowney, Sennelier, and Rembrandt. Connors uses both watercolors and gouache. He prefers cakes, which fit into his field box.

WATERCOLOR BRUSHES

To augment the small round brush included in his field box, Connors uses several large round travel brushes from DaVinci, Isabey, and Robert Simmons; and large flat wash brushes by Isabey and Simmons. "Mostly I prefer sable for my brushes," he says. "They are worth the expense—if taken care of, they'll last a long time and facilitate your brush calligraphy in a way no other bristle can. There are also some excellent brushes made of synthetic fibers mixed with sable."

PAPER

Connors uses paper in a variety of tones (including dark papers that are "of particular interest for those who work with gouache," he notes) by manufacturers including Fabriano, Canson, Daler-Rowney, Strathmore, and Arches.

OILS

The artist uses a Julian French Easel, generally traveling with the half-size box. He uses paints from numerous manufacturers and modifies his palette depending on whether he is painting a figure, landscape, or still life.

"Although my palettes vary, they are based on the same chromatic principles," Connors explains. "There is generally a lead and titanium mixed white, yellows, blues, and reds, but I am a tonalist by nature, so much of my palette is earth colors, with white as the primary color and black second."

OIL BRUSHES

Connors uses numerous brushes, including large synthetic mongoose rounds from Winsor & Newton; large flat boar bristle brushes from Princeton; and large synthetic rounds from the Blick Master Series.

OTHER

- linseed oil; alkyd resins, such as Liquin and Weber's Res-n-Gel; and stand oil
- Gamsol and occasionally turpentine

ON THE WEB >> *For more information about the ICAA, including future travel programs, visit www.classicist.org. For more information about Patrick Connors, visit www.connorsfinearts.com.*





there are three types of perspective: linear perspective, perspective of color, and atmospheric perspective. The first, linear, is the depiction of apparent diminution of a figure as it recedes from the eye. The second, color, is the apparent change in hue and temperature as a figure recedes from the eye and begins to appear cooler. The third type, atmospheric perspective, is the apparent loss of contrast and detail in a figure as it recedes from the eye. Leonardo deduced this from his knowledge of light and from his experience. In all three his utmost concern is depth, an illusionistic pictorial space.

AA: *What was the process for making the works reproduced here?*

PC: These Roman landscapes were essentially done in two three-hour sessions on prepared paper. I used two acrylic grounds, both toned. The first ground was a color akin to faded denim, and the second ground was similar to fallen autumn oak leaves. Both were placed on a heavy paper such as Rives-BFK or Arches. Next, I placed an oil imprimatura of ultramarine blue or a neutral tone made of burnt sienna and black. While the imprimatura was wet,

I placed the light mass, then the background, and finally the shadow mass.

Roman Forum, Evening
2011, oil
on prepared
paper,
9½ x 12.

The terms technique and craft are often used interchangeably, and this is not unusual because there is some overlap due to the nature of oil painting. The choice of toned ground, the imprimatura, the medium, and the palette are all in service to my aesthetic. In other words, the facilitation of means is not only to get the painting realized but to ensure it is of use to my aesthetic, even when the painting is not a success.

AA: *Can you offer any words of wisdom for artists aiming to improve their abilities?*

PC: Participate in the 2013 ICAA Rome Drawing Tour! But beyond that, I'll paraphrase Dali's advice to artists: Painter paint, drawer draw, and sculptor sculpt.

Other advice: Don't be too quick to discard your apparent failures; they can offer a great deal of information. Many so-called failures or unsuccessful ventures contain the germ of important ideas that you are unable to discern at that time. Generally, I place these things in a drawer and look at them occasionally over a period of years. If after a time, they still seem unsuccessful, I may discard them. Of course, there are also the paintings that at first glance give the impression of great success and then later seem to have lost their importance—this can be dispiriting, but it is the fate of the painter who critically evaluates his or her work. Remember that Michelangelo routinely burned groups of his drawings. I don't recommend everyone do this, but it is something on which to reflect.

Finally, the artist who wishes to work within the legacy of classicism has to do more than analysis and execution; he or she must contribute something. That the contribution is difficult to assess on one's own does not mean the painter is absolved of his or her duty. Perhaps the guiding force should be delight—those moments in which our fleeting vitality is most strongly felt. From such considerations I have derived something that seems to be essential to my work: the notion that one's insignificance in the cosmos is offset by the energy or passion of life with which all ephemeral creatures are imbued. **A**