

Renowned for his figures, an artist turns to the geometric bodies of cities and nighttime shadows.

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN



# FROM FIGURES TO CITYSCAPES AND NOCTURNES: The *Other* Costa Vavagiakis



**C**OSTA VAVAGIAKIS IS RENOWNED for his paintings and drawings of the nude figure, which he often works on for years—in some cases even decades. These iconic, deeply sculpted personages seen against a white background come to mind immediately upon hearing the artist's name; but there is another Costa Vavagiakis, an artist who paints cityscapes, landscapes and nocturnes who is not as rigorously classicizing as the artist you know. The interface between these two personas is of tremendous interest. It not only

**LEFT:** When Vavagiakis moved, the interruption gave him a moment to see the roof and get the lay of the land—inspiration for *Rooftop I* (oil on panel, 10x15).

rounds out our knowledge of this important artist's oeuvre, but also sheds light on his artistic process and on the creative endeavor in general.

When Vavagiakis moved his studio to Long Island City, Queens in 1992, the artist started dedicating his time to working on figure paintings and drawings. At any given time, he juggled a dozen different painting and drawing projects. There are practical reasons for this; his various models are all available at different times; sometimes the layers in a painting require time to dry; occasionally a piece is wanted for an exhibition or a collector wants to buy it, and he turns his attention toward it, but there are deeper, more emotional reasons at work for this juggling of projects: "I am, by nature, impulsive and impatient," the artist admits, "but my vision has made me disciplined."

## **Moving Toward the Light: The Big City**

Vavagiakis's studio has been witness to the comings and goings of dozens of models, all of whom have been scrutinized with profound intensity for lengthy periods of time. Many artists working on paintings of such protracted

length find it necessary to break up the long-term paintings with shorter projects. Those artists find it nearly impossible to maintain the necessary focus and intensity without periodically reinvigorating themselves. “Because I take a very long time to complete a work,” says Vavagiakis, “it is sometimes left unfinished while I move on to a new project. Then, years later, when the opportunity presents itself, I might pick up the work again.” In Vavagiakis’s case, this reinvigoration includes switching genres for a period and turning his attention to his first artistic love, cityscape painting.

In fact, Vavagiakis began his career as a cityscape painter. “Since my teens I have been recording my impressions of the city—its buildings and skylines,” he says. “In fact, I

learned how to paint out of doors, and New York City has been a constant source of inspiration for me.” Of particular interest to Vavagiakis is the city at night.

As a teenager, he would go to sleep early so he could rise at 3 a.m. and paint in the dark before school started. There has always been a nocturnal aspect to his work, a love of darkness and of things shrouded in mystery. Considered in this manner, even the intense light on his figures makes deep shadows on the body for him to explore.

These city nocturnes constitute an artistic other, a persona with a distinctly nocturnal sensibility. When I look at paintings like *Night Street I* (below), I feel as if I am seeing the world as an alley cat, wandering the streets at

night gliding from shadow to shadow, climbing through fence railings, slipping between cars to root around garbage cans, answerable to no one.

### The Romance of the Nocturne

There is an adventurous spirit at work here, one that has not subscribed to the classical language of Raphael and Ingres, two of Vavagiakis’s heroes for his figure work. In fact, there is something quite anticlassical that emerges in his nocturnal cityscapes. In these paintings, he expresses a love of deep, obfuscating shadows and off-balanced composition—something more like Adolph Menzel than Ingres. It is as if everything that had been eliminated from the rigorous requirements of the classical schema had to be stored somewhere and became an underground current that bubbled up through the cracks to the surface.

Our artistic lives are a puzzling mixture of conscious decisions and unconscious urges that can well up to the surface and commandeer the ship. For instance, when Vavagiakis first moved to Long Island City, his first thought upon seeing his new

*Text continued on page XX*

**OPPOSITE TOP:**  
*Long Island City II*  
(oil on panel, 6x9)

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM:**  
*Subway Car* (oil on  
canvas, 18x28)

**BELOW: *Night Street I*** (oil on  
panel, 20x16)





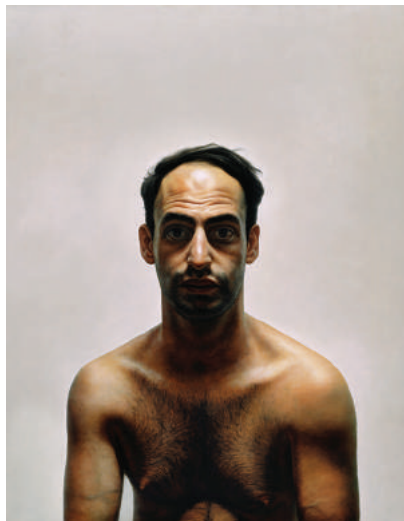
# Figure and Landscape Palettes Compared

BY COSTA VAVAGIAKIS

I use all kinds of palettes, from rectangular and oval wooden ones, to rectangular glass palettes, as well as gray and white disposable paper palettes. I favor a glass palette for its transparency, smoothness and ease of cleaning. I have a board underneath the glass that has a white and a gray side. When I'm working on a white ground, I use the white side; when I'm working on a toned surface, I switch to the gray. I do my initial mixtures on the large rectangular one laid flat on a taboret. During the painting session I'll transfer the mixed paint to my oval palette, which I then hold in my hand to get closer to the painting, sometimes working at an angle. Occasionally, I'll transfer the paint to my disposable paper palette and tape it to the easel or even to the painting itself. This process brings the mixed paint progressively closer to the painting.

I experiment extensively with different brands of pigments in order to find the properties of each color that best suit my techniques. Because I paint in many layers, I have to be concerned with the drying properties of each pigment. I work with faster-drying colors in the beginning and then slower-drying ones for the later layers. I also work with mediums in sequence from faster- to slower-drying—linseed oil with drying accelerators like lead or alkyd in the earlier layers to walnut oil in later layers.

My color arrangements have evolved over the years as well. I use different arrangements of colors for my figure and my landscape palettes, which I set up so I can mix in the most versatile and economic way. My figure palette is set up with colors right to left in a color wheel sequence and includes a warm and cool pairing for each hue. Since I'm right-handed and white is my most-often-used pigment, I place white on the far right, closest to my canvas, where it's easiest to reach. I place earth yellows below the white from lightest to darkest (i.e. Naples yellow, Mars yellow, raw sienna). I find this arrangement



## FIGURE PAINTING PALETTE

(colors from right to left): raw sienna (Michael Harding), Mars yellow (Williamsburg), genuine Naples yellow light (Michael Harding), lead white no. 2 (Rublev), titanium opaque white (Mussini), cadmium lemon (Winsor & Newton), cadmium orange (Winsor & Newton), cadmium red light (Williamsburg), cadmium barium red deep (Grumbacher), Mars orange (Holbein), burnt sienna (Old Holland), Venetian red (Michael Harding), Indian red (Holbein), permanent rose (Winsor & Newton), Florentine red (Mussini), cobalt blue (Old Holland), ultramarine blue (Williamsburg), cerulean blue (Williamsburg), mesa verde (Vasari), viridian (Sennelier), burnt umber (Old Holland), raw umber (Old Holland), Davy's gray (Holbein), Mars black (Old Holland)

LEFT TOP: *Rainbow XXXVI* (oil on panel, 24x18)

LEFT BOTTOM: *Craig* (oil on panel, 32x25)

best for mixing skin tones. I mix most of my base skin tones with earth yellows, white, cadmiums or burnt sienna, dulled down with Davy's gray and various umbers, greens or blues. I also mix a more pink-based skin tone using cadmium yellow and Florentine red or permanent rose.

## Painting Outside

When I paint landscapes outside, I value expediency. I tend to work on a small scale, usually no larger than 9x12. I work with a variety of field easels (French,

pochade, Soltex) and, in order to lighten my load, I transfer my 35 ml paint tubes to 15 ml tubes, or I buy paint from manufacturers that sell 15 ml tubes (Mussini, Charvin, Holbein).

Here, I place white in the middle of my palette with warm and cool, light and dark pairings of blues and greens to the right of the white. I arrange the rest of my pigments in a color wheel sequence to the left of my white. This arrangement allows me to mix sky colors quickly and keep them bright and light.



## LANDSCAPE PALETTE

(colors from right to left): phthalo green (Michael Harding), permanent sap green (Michael Harding), permanent green light (Williamsburg), cinnabar green light (Williamsburg), ultramarine blue (Williamsburg), cobalt blue (Old Holland), Scheveningen blue light (Old Holland), lead white no. 2 (Rublev), titanium opaque white (Mussini), brilliant yellow light (Vasari), cadmium lemon (Winsor & Newton), Indian yellow (Winsor & Newton), cadmium orange (Winsor & Newton), cadmium red light (Williamsburg), burnt sienna (Old Holland), Florentine red (Mussini), raw umber (Old Holland), Davy's gray (Holbein), Payne's gray (Winsor & Newton)

## Painting Outside, continued

I mix colors with painting knives to see the mixed hue quickly and accurately; this also saves wear on my brushes and allows the mixing of large quantities of paint. I premix colors on my palette and set up light, middle and dark values of each color. It's important to remember that every premixed color is only a beginning; I further adjust a mixture—this time with a brush—in order to accurately match an observed color note. Typically, I start with the high chroma hues and then slowly dull them. This insures maximum brightness. I also consider the effect of a color's viscosity and its opacity or translucence when mixing colors. I use complementary hues to create neutrals, mixing them with white to make various grays. I further mix neutrals and tertiary colors, carefully calibrating them in terms of value and temperature. When I finally apply the color note to my canvas, I may even mix it some more on my painting in order to insure an exact result.



*Text continued from page XX*

apartment was what amazing views he had from the windows and what incredible cityscapes he could paint from them. And yet, it was this very move that initiated his deep, long-term commitment to painting the nude figure. Even though he fully intended to look out those windows and paint cityscapes, he very quickly sealed the windows off so that he could better control the light on the models that began posing in his new studio.

## From the Timeless to the Specific

Vavagiakis's figure paintings are timeless, universal—there is almost nothing that gives clues as to time or place—but his cityscapes are very specific, rooted in New York at the close of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. Occasionally there are paintings that bridge these two concerns, and it is here that we begin to see the intersection of Vavagiakis's two artistic lives. *Subway Car* (page xx) is one of them. This is not today's kinder, gentler New York City subway car, air-conditioned and antiseptic, purified with graffiti-free walls. This is the infernal Charon's barge of the 70s and 80s, stifling in its pressing humanity and lack of air. The piece is brilliantly composed; the viewer is confronted with the flat facade of the subway car, reiterating the flatness of the picture plane. If not for the irregularly opened windows, we would feel as if we were looking at some forsaken creatures in a strange aquarium. The grand rhythms of the graffiti are interrupted only by these small openings,

**ABOVE:**  
**Cityscape II**  
(oil on panel, 11x16)





## Meet Costa Vavagiakis

Winner of The Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in 2006, a Gregory Millard Fellowship, a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and many others, Costa Vavagiakis has taught at the Art Students League of New York and the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art. Vavagiakis has also been featured in *Drawing Magazine*. To see more of his work, visit his website at [costavavagiakis.com](http://costavavagiakis.com).

but our eye picks them back up again and continues the pattern. Within, Vavagiakis has arranged his riders with a beautiful combination and collection of gestures, some sitting, others standing, arms reaching for the straps or poles, going either to the left or the right; heads are seen from the front, from the back, turned to the right or left, bareheaded or hat-ted or scarved.

The painting is set-up like *Night Lights III* (opposite). The flat wall of the apartment building punctuated by the openings of the windows functions like the subway car, revealing a glimpse of the life within. Even though *Subway Car* exhibits many of the compositional and narrative strategies of his earlier works, there are premonitions of things to come. The tired but resolute man who stares out the window at us, offering one small moment of human contact, is the prototype for Vavagiakis's later figures. If we cut him out, with his intensely dramatic top lighting, remove him from his

tumultuous surroundings and put him against a plain white wall, we would see the beginnings of Vavagiakis's stark portraits (see *Craig*, page x).

Vavagiakis likes to point out that the nude figure and the cityscape go together more than you might think. The relationship of the body to architecture is quite profound, and both are connected by his interest in structure, form and space. It is what Michelangelo called *dipendenza*, and it had its origins in classical Greece. Both body and architecture combine certain structural necessities with a sense of beauty and design. They are both particularly meaningful for Vavagiakis, as both provide poignant metaphors for human existence; the weight of the ground symbolizes the mortal here and now, and the luminous sky, the infinite and eternal. ■

**EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN's** work can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Learn more at [ephraimrubenstein.com](http://ephraimrubenstein.com).

**ABOVE LEFT: *Night Street V*** (oil on panel, 54x40)

**OPPOSITE TOP: *Night Lights III*** (oil on canvas, 16x20)

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM: *Long Island City III*** (oil on panel, 9x12)