



DO THE OLD MASTERS PLAY A ROLE IN REPRESENTATIONAL AND FIGURATIVE ART TODAY?

Dr Xavier Bray, Assistant Curator at the National Gallery and 2010 Threadneedle Prize selector, reflects on the lessons that can be learned from the Old Masters.

'No hay reglas en la Pintura' / 'There are no rules in Painting'.

It was the Spanish painter, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828), who pronounced these powerful words in a speech he gave at the Royal Academy of San Fernando, Madrid, on 14 October 1792. As professor and member of the Royal Academy, Goya had been asked to express his thoughts on the teaching methods at the Academy, which were in the process of being reformed. His colleagues favoured a stricter curriculum with classes on geometry, perspective and drawing after plaster casts before working on the live model, all of which were to be rewarded with prizes. Goya feared that this approach would 'effeminate an Art as liberal and noble as Painting' and be detrimental to the development of young artists. In his opinion, everything possible should be done to encourage the individual of talent to develop his/her own particular skills and manner.

The most important lesson an artist could learn, Goya believed, was to study Nature and draw one's inspiration directly from it. The word 'Nature' with a capital 'N' is not a term much used today. It is often confused with its diminutive, 'nature', which refers to all directly observable phenomena of the 'physical' or material universe. The concept that art should imitate Nature

goes back to Antiquity when the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, defined Nature not as the outward world of created things, but as the creative force, the productive principle of the universe. Goya, like his predecessors such as Leonardo or Vasari believed that Nature was created by God and that an artist's ultimate task was to select the best from Nature in order to create the perfect work of art. The example often used to illustrate this notion is the story of the Greek painter, Zeuxis (born 464 BC) who could find no single model beautiful enough on which to base his image of Helen, and so selected the best features from five models to create a composite image of ideal beauty.

Without 'Divine Nature' as Goya called it, there would be 'nothing good in painting nor in any other branches of learning'. In other words, if an artist was taught to slavishly copy plaster casts without ever referring back to Nature itself – which inspired

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the plaster cast in the first place – the essence of the original would be lost. Instead of imposing strict rules on artists, Goya suggested his colleagues should look back to a small academy known as the Accademia degli Incamminati (Academy of 'those who are making progress') set up in the 1590s by the Carracci family of painters in Bologna. Comprising of two brothers, Agostino (1557-1602) and Annibale (1560-1609), and a cousin Ludovico (1555-1619), they were so 'mad for drawing' that they ate their meals pencil in hand. The main principle behind their teaching was to draw after live models and after having captured the essence of Nature, their intellect as artists – similar to a film editor at Hollywood – would construct and edit a composition

that, although based originally on Nature, was an improved man-made creation.

Annibale Carracci's *Christ appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way* at the National Gallery provides an excellent illustration to this approach. According to legend, Peter fled Rome during Nero's persecutions of the Christians. On the Appian Way, he encountered Christ bearing his cross. When asked by Peter 'Domine, Quo Vadis?' (Lord, where are you going?), Jesus replied that he was on his way to Rome to be crucified again. Peter turned back and suffered martyrdom. To bring out the drama and the emotional intensity of this rarely represented subject, Carracci drew on 'Divine Nature'. The monumentality of Christ's body as he strides towards us may at first appear to be based on a classical sculpture. Yet, the internal modelling of Christ's athletic body is subtly lifelike, rippling with the movement of muscles and the angle at which surfaces catch the light. Carracci has based his figure on a live model – his hands and lower legs are more sunburnt than his torso and thighs.

What Goya found particularly inspiring in Annibale Carracci's teaching was his 'generous and liberal disposition' to his students and the fact that 'he allowed each one to follow his own bent, not forcing anyone to accept his personal style or method'. As a result some of the finest painters of the Baroque age, such as Guido Reni, Guercino and Domenichino, each one with their own

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individual style, were to graduate from the Carracci academy. One could go on about Goya and Carracci but my reason for mentioning these artists is that they can offer guidance and clarity to the way we look, make and think about art today. The works we saw for The Threadneedle Prize varied greatly in quality. The majority were based on what I would consider 'secondary sources' – either a variant of a well established style of a celebrated painter, photographic images either taken by the artist or based on the tabloids, and in some cases, to my surprise, to paintings and sculptures recently exhibited in *The Sacred Made Real* exhibition at the National Gallery. What my fellow selectors and I were looking for was a unique way of looking and interpreting the world around us. The 38 pictures and 8 sculptures we finally selected differ from each other in many ways, but each one of them contains a strong instinctive quality that breaks the shackles imposed by rules which Goya was so determined to break.

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