

# Jacob Collins

*by Adam Gopnik*

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“Drawing,” Ingres once said, in words that were for a century pinned up in every studio in the world, “is the probity of art.” The pinned-up labels are doubtless as extinct as that word, ‘probity’, has become obscure. Probity in Ingres’ context has a delicate meaning — something just more than mere technical foundation, something just less than hard moral proof. That’s what drawing is for Jacob Collins: a hard-won craft that still has in it the feel of an ethical activity. I know Jacob Collins as a father, a husband, and I know him very well as a teacher — a teacher of amazing patience and point — but I know him first of all as a man who draws, and who thinks in drawing, that fine, lost, dying art of drawing.

To watch Jacob draw is to see the act in its pure, high form, a matter not of a thing registered with a quick dash, or stylized with a signature gesture — gestures and dashes are not, ahem, his time of day — but patiently, tirelessly, wooed and won, hour after hour and day after day, from the dim ambiguous white noise of the visual world. His is not the happy act of a man in love with his own handwriting; it is the sober act of a man decrypting messages from the world. Each touch, each line is considered...and each thing argued and reargued on the page. The wizardry apparent at the end — how did you do that? — is balanced by the artisanal pursuit that got it done: it just takes time, the method answers. Collins believes in the dignity of drawing, and to look at his drawings, or the paintings they derive from, is to see a man in full possession of the dignity — call it the probity — of a tradition.

Yet it would be wrong to see Collins as merely reactionary, narrowly revivalist. An unapologetic lover of the old traditions of learning and drawing — his studio is mobbed by the familiar old plaster heads and bodies of the Greeks and Romans — he is no more nostalgic for an imaginary past as he draws from the model than, say, a Richard Wilbur

or a John Hollander is when using rhyme. It’s what can be won by tradition, not what tradition has already won for itself, that moves him. He is uncomfortable with the label realist, because he does not want to be seen a reporter on the passing scene of life. Instead, he sees himself as a representational artist in a much older, Renaissance sense — a man who delves deep for the secrets of why things look the way they do, and who makes an unapologetic commitment to his own idea of beauty. Yet where so many of his fellows in the revivalist corner — a corner that seems now about to claim its own larger space in an art world no longer driven by an idea of progress (or, rather, driven off a cliff by that idea) — seem to end with a rear-view mirror idea of what beauty is, Collins’ ideal of beauty remains idiosyncratic. He’s got his own things. He is drawn to “Biblical” heads, to wizened faces, to Atlantic coast houses, to women’s bodies that are neither too elongated nor too plaintively aged — but above all his sense of beauty is rooted in what one can only call fidelity. Fidelity not only in the sense of faithfulness, but also the other way we use it, in the slightly ironic sense we use it when we speak of “high fidelity” in recordings: the patient reproduction of all the true facts about a sound, or sight, with all its overtones, ambiguities, half notes, dynamics, as perfectly mirrored in the reproduction as it can be. And fidelity in the sense, too, that we use about marriages — fidelity meaning sticking to it, and sticking it out.

Ingres went on to say, in words quoted less often even back when Ingres was quoted: “To draw does not mean simply to reproduce contours; drawing does not consist merely of line: drawing is also expression, the inner form, the plane, modeling. See what remains after that.” See what remains...A thing that fascinates me, at least, in Collins’ art is the way that the sober mastery of drawing in his works somehow becomes, as he transforms them into paintings, for all their virtuosity — and one

looks at his transparent glass, his gray approaching storm clouds, with astonishment at the sheer stubborn skill — turns into something austere and, for the most part, strangely sad. His painting has the earnest morality and melancholia that descends from the tradition of Thomas Eakins. It makes me ask, as I look at it, if there is some inherently bitter-sweet tone in the act of being faithful — if fidelity, in painting as in marriage, enforces a melancholy of its own, as pleasure is submitted to time, and the comfortable, mutable world we know suddenly passes into the frozen world of things made and fixed for good. His paintings don’t look archaic; but they do often look aged, as wine or womens’ faces age.

Such subtler questions are ones that a mere appraisal of Collins as a die-hard won’t help us answer. His is, of course, and no denying, an enterprise that time and trend both have banished for a long time to the margins of art. Why draw so perfectly in the age of the iPhone camera? Well, when computers can reproduce the sound of strings what point in learning the viola? Or, rather, what point in the string quartet played at home, in the artisanal, the crafted, the traditional, the handmade? Why make art this way — ask just as well, perhaps, why we eat as we do. In that more modest world of achievement, after all, we don’t ask why a chef would chop by hand when the Cuisinart sits on the counter. The chef’s knife isn’t a forerunner of the machine; its flexibility and variety is a constant reproach to it. The assertion of the artisanal is as much a response to a particular time as the acceptance of the artificial. In some ways, Collins’ assertion of the old-fashioned is his way of arguing with, and out of, his own time. One might even say — with a taste for art-paradox more post-modern than Collins’ own — that he is drawing on the probity of art in order to make drawing back into its probity. No small ambition for a man armed only with the four unchanging artist’s tools: a pencil, a model, a paint box and a purpose.

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