

# Caput Mundi (Capital of the World)

By D. JEFFREY MIMS



**Editor's Note:** Born in North Carolina in 1954, D. Jeffrey Mims attended the Rhode Island School of Design and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. After using a grant from the Elizabeth T. Greenshields Foundation to copy masterworks in European museums, he studied in Florence with the muralist Benjamin F. Long IV. For more than a decade, Mims maintained studios in Italy and North Carolina, undertaking such major projects as a fresco for Holy Trinity Episcopal Church (Glendale Springs, NC), an altarpiece for St. David's Episcopal Church (Baltimore), and murals for Samford University in Birmingham. In 2000, he opened Mims Studios in Southern Pines, NC, offering a multi-year course in the methods and values of classical realist drawing, easel painting, and mural painting.

*If I could have my way in the training of young artists, I should insist upon their spending a good deal of time in the study and designing of pure ornament that they might learn how independent fine design is of its content and how slight may be the connection between art and nature.*

— Kenyon Cox (1856-1919)

*The Classic Point of View: Six Lectures on Painting* (1911)

What artist can visit Rome and not be impressed, if not overwhelmed, by the magnificent monumentality of the Eternal City? It was here that the Renaissance matured and defined itself, demonstrating the fertility of the classical tradition and setting the model for centuries of elaborations. In 1666, when King Louis XIV decided to found an academy for talented Frenchmen to study art and architecture, Rome was the obvious place to establish it, and that institution remains in the Villa Medici there today. It was faith in the artistic continuum represented by Rome that shaped much of the United States' architectural heritage, and indeed much of its visual arts before World War II.

Last year, I was awarded the second Alma Schapiro Prize, presented by New York's Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America. The centerpiece of this honor is a three-month residency at the American Academy in Rome (AAR), an experience intended to underscore the continuity of the classical tradition as a vital aspect of contemporary culture.



THE FAÇADE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME



D. JEFFREY MIMS PAINTING A FRESCO FOR HOLY TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH (GLENDALE SPRINGS, NC) IN 1984



### AN EXTRAORDINARY DESTINATION

The AAR is the premier American center for independent study in the arts and humanities located overseas. It actually began in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, where a small group, including architects Charles Follen McKim and Daniel Burnham, painters John La Farge and Francis Millet, and sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French, resolved to create a center for Americans to study Rome's "architectural and sculptural monuments and mural paintings" and "galleries filled with the *chef d'oeuvres* of every epoch." A year later, McKim founded in Rome the American School of Architecture, and a year after that, the American School of Classical Studies was established there. In 1913, these schools merged to become the AAR, which now occupies 10 buildings and 11 acres of gardens atop Rome's highest hill.

Today, the AAR is home to the 30 artists and scholars who have been awarded the Rome Prize fellowships, which range in duration from one to three years. The winners are chosen by juries of U.S. experts in archeology, architecture, classical studies, design arts, historic preservation and conservation, history of art, landscape architecture, literature, modern Italian studies, musical composition, post-classical humanities studies, and visual arts. In addition, the AAR invites artists and scholars, such as myself, to stay for periods of two to four months.

### A HOMECOMING OF SORTS

As director of an atelier devoted to mural painting, I was especially grateful for the opportunity to spend three months in Rome last autumn. In a certain sense, this was a homecoming for me. Many years earlier, I had made my way to Europe following a rather disappointing experience with art schools in America. That was a time when atelier training was all but impossible to find, so for 12 years I studied independently by copying great artworks in the museum collections of London, Paris, Florence, and Rome.

Along the way, I was fortunate to meet other artists also pursuing a classical heritage that was in very real danger of becoming lost. When it seemed like tradition was being buried in the rubble of two world wars, we poured our youth and energy into learning the fundamentals of realism, based on a vision of the Old Masters. It has been rewarding to watch many of these same artists — including Charles Cecil, Daniel Graves, Benjamin Long, and Edward Schmidt — establish their own successful and distinguished schools of art in response to the swell of younger people seeking an education not available at universities. The past several decades have seen significant, even heroic,

D. JEFFREY MIMS (b. 1954)

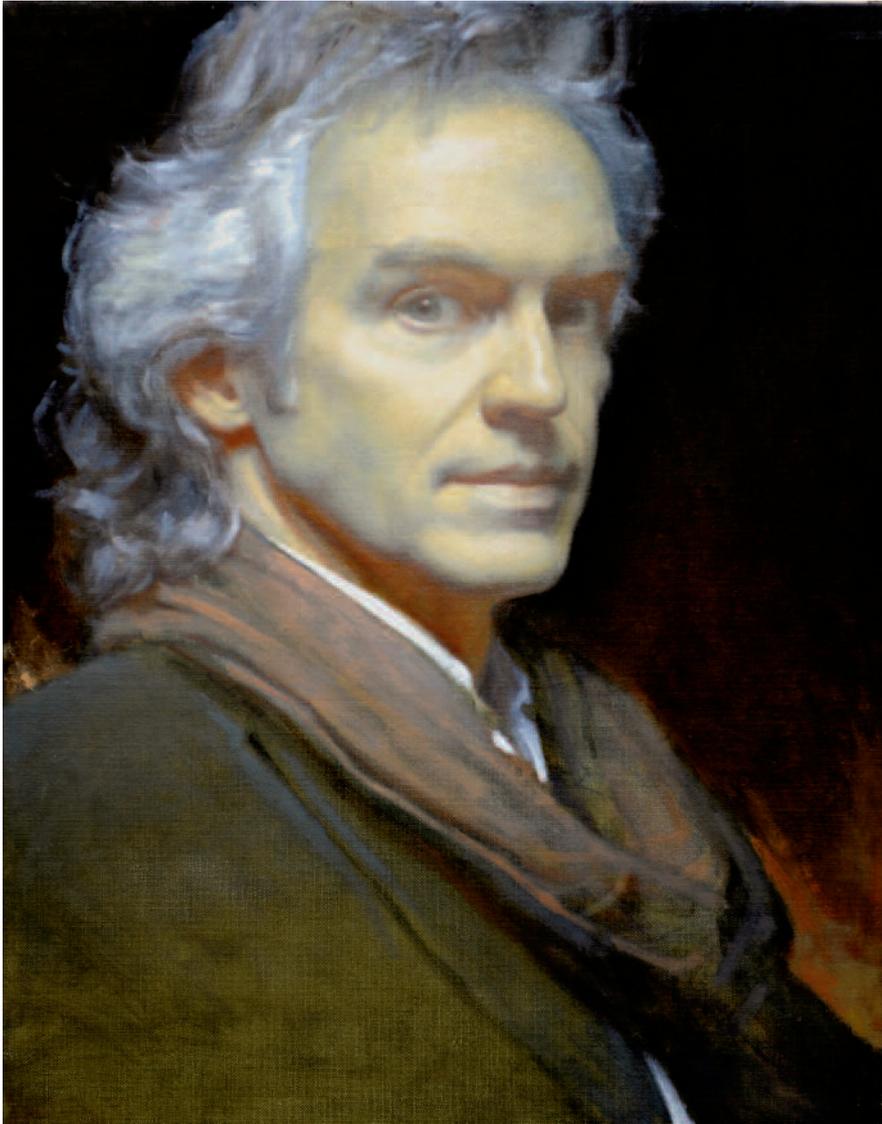
*LION FOUNTAIN IN THE MAIN BUILDING OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME*

2009, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 6 x 13 1/2 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



D. JEFFREY MIMS DRAWING THE *LION FOUNTAIN* IN THE ACADEMY'S MAIN BUILDING



D. JEFFREY MIMS (b. 1954)  
*UNDERPAINTING FOR A SELF-PORTRAIT*  
2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 16 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

progress toward recapturing the ability to imitate nature, and in particular the human figure. The question remains, however: What are we to do with this ability?

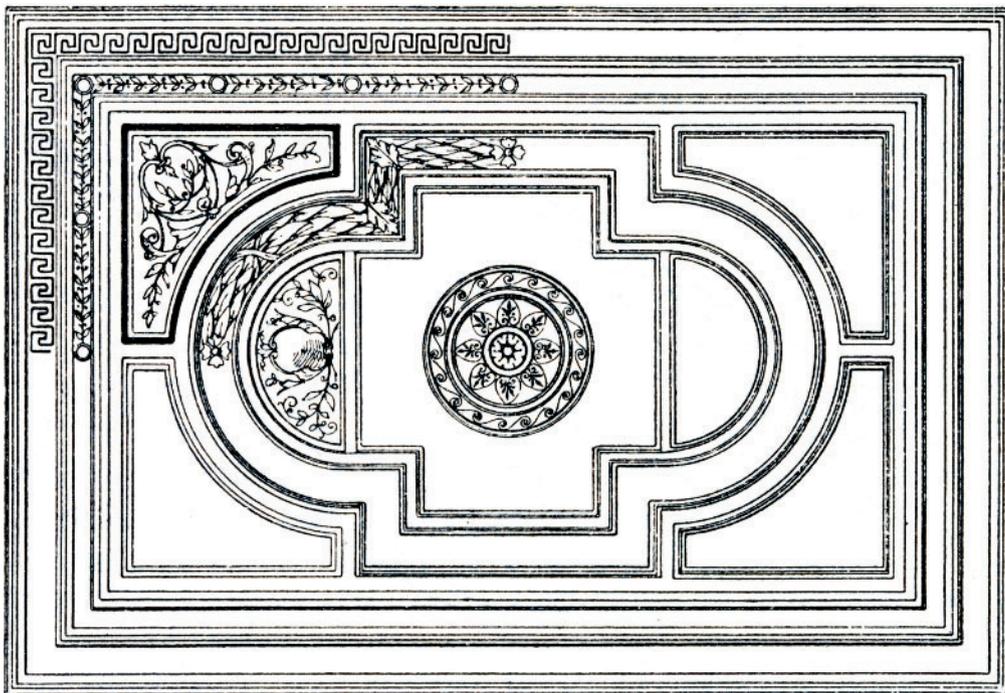
Preserved in museums around the world are a variety of role models that might offer answers to this question. Yet to study an artwork in a museum is a very different experience from seeing it in the specific context and environment for which it was created. It was Italy, and especially Rome, that began to open my eyes, like those of so many earlier artists, to the connections between art and architecture, between the decoration of public spaces and the endless possibilities of design. Last autumn, seeing Rome's sites again through the eyes of my subsequent experiences as a mural painter, I marveled at the orchestrations of overall effect, of which I had been only dimly aware as a student.

#### FINDING THE BALANCE

If the capacity to imitate nature was our goal in those early days, it was certainly not without precedent. For centuries, nature had been the starting point; in many ways it animated the *development* of the early Renaissance. The *evolution* of the Renaissance, on the other hand, drew force from its emulation of antiquity, where nature was balanced with idealized form and artistic convention. In fact, one might go so far as to say that the entire history of European art has been a play of variations between these two themes: nature and design.

No one understood the importance of this balance better than the mural painter. Long before the use of canvas, the artist charged with decorating civic or sacred spaces worked in fresco on plaster. This situation required him to spend a great deal of time in the space to be decorated, designing the art in harmony with its architecture. To divide space, and then ornament it, is the underlying foundation of each of the fine arts. Understanding design in this way, an artist like Michelangelo was able to direct his genius to create variations of ornament, the decoration of a ceiling, the construction of a cupola, or even the arrangement of an entire public space.

An encouraging parallel to the current revival of classical painting and sculpture is the growing number of architects and urban designers redirecting the follies of modernism back toward a more sustainable future, carrying in their wake the logic and beauty of tradition. (The archi-



AN EXAMPLE OF HOW SPACE IS DIVIDED AND THEN ORNAMENTED



D. JEFFREY MIMS TEACHING AT MIMS STUDIOS EARLIER THIS YEAR

ture school at the University of Notre Dame has been a particular leader in this movement, and it is fitting that its students cannot graduate without having spent a year at its Rome campus.)

Like the ateliers that inspired it, Mims Studios requires its students to understand and create pure ornament (the conventions of which are rooted in geometry and classical design). This is valuable in its own right, and also strengthens the intellect and imagination needed to draw the figure. In turn, drawing from the figure has always enhanced form and subtlety in the modeling of ornament, even as it confirms the artist's ability to conceptualize geometric solids in space.

#### THE SHOCK OF THE OLD

Each visit to Rome brings new discoveries. Last autumn I had the good fortune to come across a collection of prints from an influential course taught in the 18th century by the director of the school of ornament at Milan's Brera Academy. These have now been added to our program in North Carolina, along with a collection of plaster casts from the same period. Both groups feature classical motifs, so that our students will become as familiar with the principles of an *acanthus rinceaux* as an *external oblique*, and will be even more fully prepared when beautiful spaces are again ready to be decorated.

The single greatest surprise of my visit came during an illustrated lecture on the AAR's history delivered by its New York-based president, Adele Chatfield-Taylor. Her inspiring narrative stimulated my own research into the institution's original purpose and subsequent development. Best known through his architectural firm, McKim Mead & White, Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909) felt that the most important creative element in the three-year Rome Prize fellowship was the requirement that artists and architects work side by side on a "Collaborative Problem." Alas, the Collaborative Problem *and* the three-year fellowship were discontinued after World War II, even though the efficacy of such collaborations had been proven by the success of Chicago's

COLLABORATIVE DRAWING FOR A SMALL LOGGIA IN A PRIVATE MUSEUM,  
PREPARED IN 1931 BY CECIL C. BRIGGS (ARCHITECT), WILLIAM M.  
SIMPSON (SCULPTOR), AND JOHN SITTON (PAINTER)



"White City" of 1893 and the resulting wave of impressive (and beloved) Beaux-Arts structures constructed across America, including the Boston Public Library and Library of Congress.

Monumental structures like these defined the period we now call the American Renaissance, and were realized by a generation of artists and architects who had adapted their training in Rome or Paris to the American scene. They established a national architectural style, simultaneously practical and representative of democracy's humanistic ideals — a theme we can trace back to the classicism of Jefferson.

For the artist called to this tradition, the ability to collaborate with an architect requires more than just an accurate or poetic description of something seen. In 1879, the Victorian painter-sculptor, Frederic Leighton, alluded to this necessity in his address to London's Royal Academy of Arts:

...an excessive absorption of the attention in the most superficial aspect of things tends to the over-development of the simply imitative faculty, which is the lowest gift of the artist, at the cost of his aesthetic faculty and of his imagination, which are the noblest, and tends therefore also to triviality and loss of that which gives to Art its high place amongst the elements of civilization. ■

