



Daniel Greene in his studio. Opposite page: Robert Beverly Hale (detail), pastel on wood, 50 x 36" (127 x 91 cm)

Representing THE REAL

Insights on the career, techniques and new traveling retrospective of prolific artist Daniel E. Greene

By John O'Hern

I had set out to talk with Daniel E. Greene about his traveling retrospective exhibition and a new book about his life and work. Among the files of the paintings he sent to us was one of Robert Beverly Hale, a large pastel portrait on panel. Hale (1901-1985) was an artist, a renowned teacher and lecturer on anatomy at the Art Students League and was founder of the

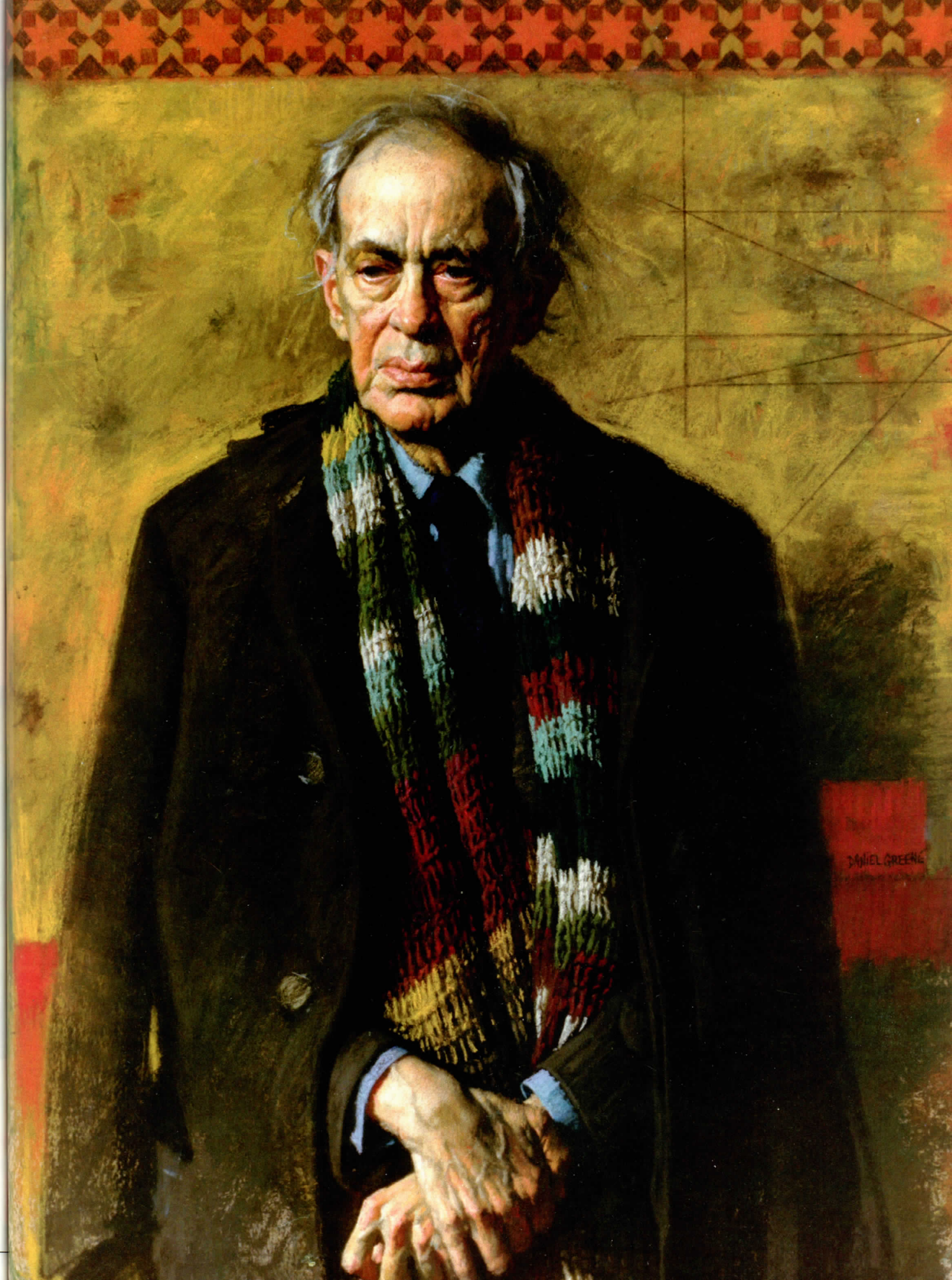
department of contemporary American art at the Metropolitan Museum. Greene is considered the foremost pastel artist in the country. The combination of artist and model resulted in an extraordinary portrait that I had to know more about.

"When I was teaching at the Art Students League in the mid-'70s, the League commissioned me to do the

portrait," he recounts. "Bob lived across the street from me on West 67th Street. We were casual friends, and he came over to the studio to pose. By then he was elderly, weak and frail. I selected a pose where he was seated, holding his hands up. He had beautiful hands. Unfortunately he was too weak to hold the pose. I decided, then, to do a standing pose in which his arms could drop naturally.

"The painting was coming along quite well when Bob came in one day wearing a beautiful scarf his wife had knitted for him. Ironically, I had just received a new set of Sennelier pastels, all 524 colors arranged in perfect order and gradations of value. I was able to match each of the colors of the yarn his wife had used in the scarf.

"The portrait is on a 50-by-36-inch panel," he continues. "Pastel papers and surfaces don't come that big. A student of mine had a sign shop, and we bought Masonite panels and sprayed them with



DANIEL GREENE



116TH STR



Wall St., Williams St. Exit, oil on linen, 43 x 50" (109 x 127 cm). Opposite page: *Waiting – 116th St.*, oil on linen, 52 x 40" (132 x 102 cm)

a mixture of rabbit skin glue and quartz crystals to give the surface a tooth to hold the pastel."

I was curious about the background of the portrait and the border at the top. He explains, "At the time, I was interested in pre-Renaissance, Gothic art and the background is meant to simulate gold leaf in pastel. The border reflects my interest in the repetitive patterns found in 15th-century Flemish art, which were usually painted with sharp edges using egg tempera. It was much more difficult with pastel. I was trying out new things. Paintings are always vehicles for learning."

He attended the Art Students League from 1953 to 1955 where he "learned the fundamentals," says Greene. "I decided a long time ago when I knew I was going to be an artist that I would do something original. I made a deliberate decision not to be influenced consciously by other artists. When I finished at the League, I decided to eliminate all evidence of my instructor's technique. I concluded it was anathema to developing my own style. I must have my own voice."

Ironically, in a 1968 oral history interview with the Archives of American Art, Robert Hale said, "Naturally I think an artist who is vitally alive feels

that his job is a creative job and not a repetition of clichés."

Perhaps Greene's best-known paintings are of the New York City subways. Riding the train from his home on Long Island into the city for his day job and to study at the Art Students League at night, "I couldn't help observing," he says. "I saw people sitting on a bench under a mosaic and thought, 'That would make an interesting painting.' Thirty years later, visiting Pompeii on my honeymoon with my wife, Wende Caporale, we were intrigued by the mosaics. I became intent on painting that scene I had seen years earlier.

"The subway opened in 1904," he explains. "Every station had a different design. There were a great many immigrants at the time, some of whom were illiterate or didn't understand English. The different mosaic designs and color combinations helped them distinguish which stop was theirs. I started riding the subway to gather material. I responded to the color combinations and geometric shapes, the kinds of light reflecting off the white tiles. Eventually I began to include people." He also tried painting on site but had to move when the trains disgorged their passengers, had to be careful not to fall onto the tracks and found he couldn't get large panels through the turnstiles. "I know ahead of time what I'm going to paint," he replies to my

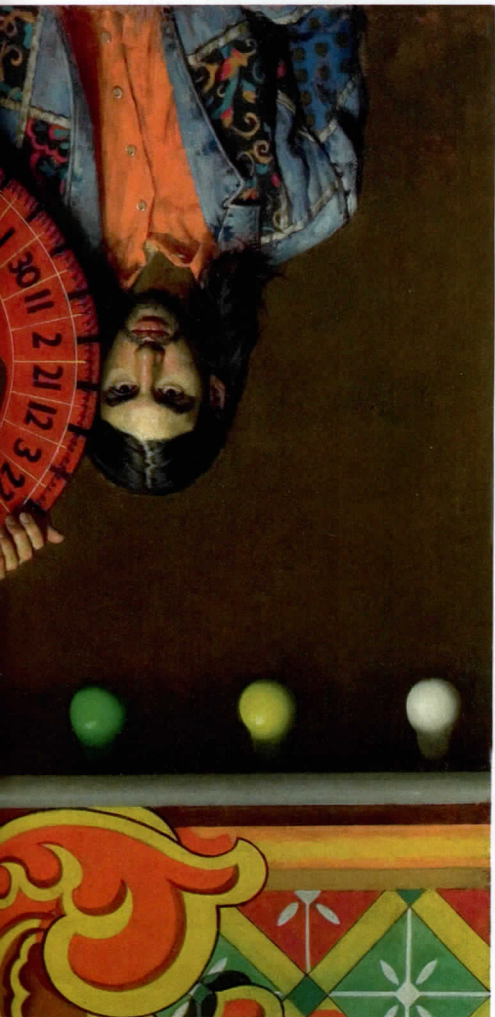
question about his process. "Sometimes I do rough sketches on paper. I often visualize what kind of model and what kind of background it's going to need. "The painting may start as a drawing, but I rarely make a painting study. That relates to my fondness for working out challenges as I proceed," he continues. "I want the opportunity to have the painting evolve and to have problems come up to be solved. There is a certain asymmetrical design that I prefer, and I enjoy figuring out shapes and the sizes of abstract shapes within a painting." *Young Girl-42nd St.*, oil on linen, is from his subway series and illustrates his command of lighting from the overhead light source to the glare on the tiles, the intense color of the mosaic and the subtle tones of the girl's skin.

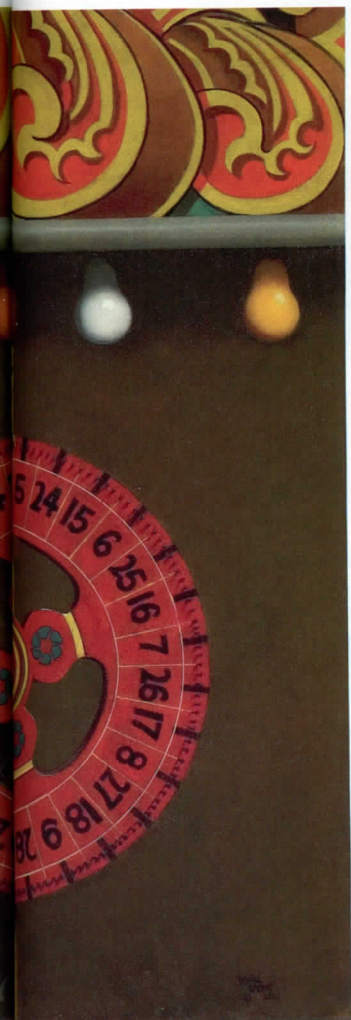
Her placement off center and low in the composition satishes his penchant for asymmetry as well as balance. The painting is the cover of the new book *Daniel F. Greene: Studios and Subways—An American Master, His Life and Art*, by Greene and Maureen Bloomfield. He chooses between pastel and oil paint based on a number of factors. "First, I observe the values that will be included in the artwork and consider whether or not I have the right values from light to dark in my pastel array. Frequently, there is a lack of dark enough values in pastel series. In oil there is no such restriction, and with 15 or 17 colors on the palette I can replicate any color and value. "Second is size," he continues. "If I do a large pastel, I have to make or

Man with Deer, oil on cardboard, 26 x 21" (66 x 53 cm)



Wheel of Fortune, oil on wood, 54 x 54" (137 x 137 cm)





Antiques Dealer with Folk Art, oil on linen, 62 x 52" (157 x 132 cm)

seek a large surface, and there will be a heavy piece of glass and heavy frame. There is no such problem in oil because canvas is light, easily transportable, and can be un-stretched and rolled up. With pastel I have to be sure I have a door or a window I can get a rigid board through.

"Next is available lighting. Pastel is completely matte and even in low lighting one can easily see it so it can be done in a low light situation. Oil is often glossy and attracts a glare or shine.

"Then," he says, "there is the time that can be given. Pastel is completely dry and can be done rapidly. Oil is wet and requires time to dry. Fleeting effects are easier in pastel."

Greene chose early on to devote himself to representational painting, resisting the attraction of

abstraction and expressionism. Yet, he acknowledges the contributions of modernism to contemporary representation. As a teacher for many years, he has seen "so many young men and women coming back to study representational and classical art skills. There is a definite movement to acquire skills it was not necessary to acquire during the time of abstraction."

His portrait sitters have ranged from Ayn Rand to Eleanor Roosevelt, and his subjects range from the subways of New York to its rarefied auctions of fine art. Although, at 84, he has retired from teaching and finds painting "physically more demanding," he still has the passion "to paint all the things I find interesting to paint."

The exhibition *Daniel Greene*

Retrospective can be seen at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut, through November 18. [LA](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John O'Hern retired to Santa Fe, New Mexico, after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, in Elmira, New York. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on *Art Market Insights* in *American Art Collector* and *Western Art Collector* magazines.