

# FAVORITE

## MARK ROBBINS

President & CEO  
American Academy  
in Rome

Photo: Gerardo  
Gaetani



### Shoe Tie

CHARLES RAY (b. 1953)  
2012, solid stainless steel,  
28 7/8 in. x 29 1/4 in. x 23 1/2 in.  
© Charles Ray, photo courtesy  
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



When most of us reach down to tie a shoe, we don't worry about a mountain lion attacking us from behind. But when the artist Charles Ray (b. 1953) was conceiving the idea for his stainless-steel sculpture *Shoe Tie*, he was keenly aware of that risk. In a video he made for the Art Institute of Chicago explaining the origin of this sculpture, Ray says that hikers in the Santa Monica Mountains, near his Los Angeles home, know it is unwise to bend down to tie a shoe because it could result in a bite on the neck. While tying his own sneaker on a mountainous trail one morning, Ray got the idea to make the sculpture, with himself as the subject.

A few years after it was completed in 2012, Mark Robbins, president and CEO of the American Academy in Rome, displayed the sculpture in an exhibition he curated, *American Classics*. When he first saw it, Robbins wrote, "Ray has made something wholly new, unsettling, and profoundly resonant."

Although *Shoe Tie* has left the Academy, where it received much attention from both Romans and foreign visitors, it continues to resonate with Robbins. "What amazes me about Ray and this piece is that he is so comfortable working in a minimalist mode while being so effective and affective in making figurative sculptures. *Shoe Tie* appears traditional, since it references the *Spinario*, the famous Greco-Roman sculpture depicting a boy removing a thorn from his foot, yet it's completely different from the classical Greek and Roman canons from which it's derived."

Robbins spent time examining not just the sculpture, but also the visitors examining it. "*Shoe Tie* is the kind of work that quickly

enters into a dialogue with those looking at it," he says from the Academy's administrative headquarters in New York, though Robbins travels frequently to its large complex atop Rome's Janiculum hill. "From some angles, it's all quite neutral, assuming the pose of the boy pulling out the thorn. But look closely enough, especially from the rear, and you see the actual

physiognomy. You realize this is not a youth, but an adult man with signs of aging. He's not a perfect muscular specimen, as you'd expect from something neoclassical or classical." In fact, like many other sculptures by Ray, some arrestingly bawdy, this self-portrait reflects the artist's awareness of his own middle age. And, also, like many of Ray's works, what appears to be an action is not always exactly that. The figure is barefoot, but he mimics the tying of a shoe; a dialogue is established between the real and the suggestive.

Another feature that signals this sculpture's ability to be both classically figurative and technologically in tune with its time is its materiality: "It looks absolutely neoclassical," Robbins notes, "but is made of shockingly high-gloss, machine-made metal."

Robbins was curator of architecture at the Wexner Center for the Arts, in Columbus, Ohio, during the 1990s when he first encountered Ray's art. "I saw then how his sculptures, which seem to bridge hard-edged neo-minimalism and figuration, described the whole arc of modernism, even the whole of art history. Years later, I could think of no better piece to exhibit in an American institution that is so engaged with the cultural life of Rome."