

PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES OF DRAWING THE FIGURE

The ability to draw the figure requires many skills ranging from the mechanics of actually drawing to the sensitivity employed in making marks and the using of materials.

The tips below are simply to do with the practical techniques of drawing and referring to them can increase confidence and fluency in your drawing. It is important to learn the technical skills without becoming dependent on them as an object in themselves.

Drawing the human form is about so much more.

The practical problems encountered when Life drawing are about translating a three dimensional object into a two dimensional representation.

- Half the battle of learning to draw is learning to see. You will need to trust what your eyes are seeing and resist what your memory and experience are trying to tell you.
- Move around and look at the model from different positions looking for interesting figure shapes and positions, unusual angles or challenging distributions of weight and balance etc. As part of this planning try to **develop the skill of visualizing**; taking mental photographs and projecting possible images onto your paper.
- Consider the **composition**; think how the figure shape fits within the four sides of your paper. Do you draw the whole figure or do you focus on one part? Resist the safe option of placing the figure always in centre of your paper. There is much to be gained by considering composition and establishing a relationship between the figure and the sides of the rectangle, possibly taking the image beyond the boundaries.
- If you can interpret the figure as one simple shape or combination of three dimensional shapes this can help visualize the figure on the paper prior to drawing.

- Sit in a position square to and facing the model so that you are only moving your eyes between the figure and the paper and not your head. This alone dramatically simplifies the amount of information being processed by the brain.
- Ideally have your paper upright and square to you, avoiding the distortion in your drawing due to parallax error which often occurs when drawing on a table.
- Look for vertical edges such as doors, walls or windows near your figure to use as a **vertical reference**. You can use this reference to estimate angles of arms and legs etc. Lines like these can also be an integral part of your composition interacting with the lines of your figure and creating a sense of place.
- Use the top of your board or sketch pad as a **horizontal reference** in the same way.
- Start by establishing main guidelines for the figure to anchor your vision. Every drawing is different but it can be useful to start with a line representing the shape of the backbone, the line of the shoulders and pelvic bone and then a simple representation of the shape and angle of the head.
- From the very beginning of a drawing consider the basic dynamics of the figure; the **balance and the weighting**; this is the essence of some drawings.
- **Think of the figure as a series of solid three-dimensional shapes**, even down to fingers and features on the face. It is a useful exercise to draw a figure as a collection of basic solid shapes to get you used to thinking in three dimensions.
- The preliminary lines of a drawing are better drawn faintly so that you can continuously adjust your drawing in these early stages. You can often leave some of them in as part of the final drawing because they usually have a spontaneous energy which balances the more considered detail that follows later.
- Do not think of the rubber as a tool for correcting mistakes but as part of the process. The rubber makes valid marks of its own and can be used to draw with directly.

- In the early stages when drawing arms and legs take time to work out the angles and estimate lengths. This stage of the drawing tends to be methodical but done correctly it will give you the freedom and confidence to be more free and expressive with your drawing later.
- It is useful to know some basic proportions of the body as a further check on the accuracy of your drawing eg. The shoulders are about two and a half times the width of the head, the length of the forearm is about one and a half times the length of the head....compare the size of a hand with the head and you are often surprised how big it is.
- Again trust your eyes. The proportions of any part of the body will change as a result of **foreshortening** and the only way to record this by making comparisons of lengths with other parts of the body. The tried and tested thumb and pencil technique can be useful here to overcome what your memory is trying to tell you. The head can be a useful unit of measure.
- The changes of curves on the body can be very complex and are a series of **convex and concave surfaces**. It can be useful to draw in a series of straight lines to describe these curves because it makes you very aware of the subtle changes in shape and also the degree of change in a curve.
- In some drawings try to say all you want to say using only **line** varying the weight and thickness of the mark to represent solid form; if you 'see it and think it' you will start to draw it. In early work shading can often confuse the issue hiding an inaccurate drawing. If you have said all you want to say using line this may be enough. If you choose to use tone to further describe form then use it in a minimal way 'Less is more...'
- In the same way pure tonal drawings with minimal or no line make you much more aware of how tone can represent form.
- George Stubbs the horse painter is known to have skinned a dead horse and draw a series of progressive anatomical studies as he gradually stripped it down to the bone. His understanding of the structure of horses became second to none. In the same way a knowledge of **human anatomy** is invaluable. Knowing what is underneath the skin allows the recording of form with much greater understanding and accuracy. Similarly when drawing the clothed figure it helps to be aware of the naked figure beneath.

- When drawing the **head** it is useful to draw a faint centre line down the front of the face and then a similar line for the eyes as a guide to the structure and position of the head. These lines are both likely to be curves unless the head is seen directly from the front. This again helps you think of the head as a three dimensional object. In the same way think of the features of the face as three dimensional not just detail on a flat surface. Often in life drawing you may choose to minimize information on the face because you want to emphasise the form of the whole figure.
- When drawing hands initially draw simple shapes that sum up the dynamic of the hand. If you choose to draw fingers in more detail then be aware of what is under the skin i.e. three bones with connecting joints, similarly with feet. The hands in particular can be a very important part of the figure expressing emotion as in the work of Egon Schiele.
- Stand back from your drawing often. This will give you a fresh look at your work and help you check it out more effectively. Similarly moving it to a different room or looking at your drawing through a mirror can be surprisingly enlightening if not a little scary.
- *The most common problem is that people find comfort in neatness and detail and in that process they lose freshness and spontaneity. Accuracy and mastery of technique do not mean neatness. Accurate observation and the fluency brought about by good technique allow an artist to be more focused with the freedom to choose how they wish to represent what they see.*
- Try drawing in a variety of different media or even directly in paint. Do not expect success immediately, you will have to work at getting to know your media and develop your techniques.
- *It is what you learn from making your drawing that is most important and is the way you will progress. A drawing full of construction lines and changes is much better than a poorly executed neat drawing.*
- As you get better you will be able to think more about other issues like the subtleties of weight, tension and balance plus you will gain the confidence to be more expressive in your drawings. You can give more time to thinking about your artistic intentions and what you want to achieve from your

drawing. You will hopefully understand the process of learning to draw and 'undraw' at the same time; searching for that all important freshness and honesty of vision.

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