

LIFE AFTER LIFE DRAWING

Life drawing is traditionally an academic activity which develops seeing and drawing skills. The concentration needed and the intensity of the experience often means that people learn quickly. Life drawing is essentially about the quality of observation and the sensitivity of the response, the vitality of the mark making that takes you that one step beyond simple accuracy.

Many people understandably simply enjoy the life drawing process as an isolated experience and are content to develop the work no further. However it is good to be aware of possible ways in which you can develop your work if you choose to do so.

- Artists over centuries have painted the nude figure for quite specific reasons and it is useful to look at the different genres to be aware of your own preferences.
- Focusing on the formal elements of colour and composition etc is a logical and practical line of enquiry which helps you clarify what interests you. It leads to basic understanding of the elements and possible further development of your work on a sound basis.
- Being open to experiment as opposed to being too conservative in your drawing can be exciting and productive. Simply trying different media or combinations of techniques can lead to a fresh area of investigation which in turn can suggest further development. At the very least it will expand your repertoire and improve your life drawing.

ARTISTIC GENRES

Romantic

Many artists choose to draw and paint the figure because of its beauty. This has been the case for many centuries and there has been nothing happened that has changed this basic perception of the human form. Some painters have idealised and others have romanticised the figure. There are many examples.

Leonardo Da Vinci – high Renaissance accurately observed but ultimately idealised beauty often depicting themes from mythology.

Rubens – High Baroque, extravagant sumptuous nudes

Ingre - classic beautiful and idealised interpretations mainly of the female figure

Lord Leighton – Grand master of high Victorian Neo classicism

Realism

Realistic images, as opposed to romantic or idealised, can be found in the realism of *Velasquez, Delacroix* or the gritty realism and social statements of the kitchen sink painters of the 1950's like *John Bratby* or they can be very direct objective observational studies like in the work of *Lucien Freud*.

MODERNISM

Throughout the 20th century there has been a series of Art movements from impressionism to abstraction. Certainly in the early part of the century, paintings were still based on traditional subject matter like landscape, still life and the figure. Consequently we have many examples of the nude interpreted through these different modern art movements. This is a great source of information on the very diverse approaches to interpreting the human figure and understanding the original thinking behind them.

Impressionism

Impressionism represents the break with academic painting marked by the use of colour theory, painting in the open air and a search for a new way of expressing reality. The understanding of their rationale and use of their varied techniques is accessible and useful.

Manet, Degas, Gauguin, Toulouse Lautrec,

Fauvism

A post Impressionist movement that pushed the boundaries of colour beyond observed natural colour and particularly in the work of Matisse the relationship between shapes and colours.

Matisse, Bonnard

Expressionism

The person you are painting is a real person with a character, emotions and a history. Your reaction could reflect your own emotional response to the subject as in the work of *Van Gogh, Kokoshka, Otto Dix, Egon Schiele*.

Cubism

A short lived movement but which still influences many painters work 100 years later. It is basically about the reduction and fragmentation of natural forms into abstract, often geometric structures. They believed that the reality of an object is not accurately expressed by only one view and the artist is responsible for selecting and representing a new arrangement of shapes that better describe the subject.

Picasso, Braque...

Surrealism

An attempt to record images of the subconscious and characterized by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter. The actual movement was influenced by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and consequently often sexual in its interpretation of the figure. The term surreal can now be used to loosely describe images generated by the subconscious.

Dali, Magritte

Abstraction

When we observe the figure there are other visual possibilities to apart from the challenge of realistically representing the human form. We actually see a complex collection of shapes and forms and there are a number of starting points that can logically lead to semi abstract images and possibly total abstraction.

We might decide that we want to be selective or even rearrange the shapes to produce something totally new.

Picasso, Braque, Giacometti, Francis Bacon...

The figure could be moving and we would have the challenge of trying to represent this.

Marcel Duchamp – Figure descending stairs.

Conceptual

For more than forty years now we have moved on from the 'isms' of modernism into the post modernist period. Artists have gone freestyle and always on a search for the individual approach characterized very much by the *Brit-artists like Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin*. It can be a wonderful thing to throw away the rule book and look for new ground. *Jenny Saville and Ron Mueck* are perhaps the artists that are most closely related to the figure.

THE FORMAL ELEMENTS

It is no coincidence that the experimental art movements of the 20th century first of all investigated the basic elements of colour, composition and techniques.

Colour

It is wonderful to be free of the restrictions of representing exactly the natural colours we see in the figure. It was over a hundred years ago in the work of the Impressionists that we see whole new palette of possibilities and the complete liberation that took place with *Matisse and the Fauves*. We can use the knowledge we have as painters to find new exciting colour combinations either suggested by what we see in the model and the surroundings or completely from our imaginations. *Bonnard* is a wonderful example of a celebration of colour.

Composition

In a life class with the usual time restrictions the drawing often takes place in the centre of the paper with little thought to the relationship of the shapes of the figure with the sides of the paper. The figure itself is made up of shapes and angles with endless combinations. Considering how they fit into the rectangle is the starting point of composition. Moving in and selecting only a part of the body can be interesting and forces you to make decisions about the composition. In a studio there are often a many interesting lines and shapes, colours and tones which can be used to compliment the shape of the figure. You can be selective and move these lines around so that they work well with the figure. *Freud makes good use of the simple lines and proportions found in his studio.*

Form

The practice of life drawing is naturally focused on form. To develop this idea further one might logically tend towards sculpture and there are many superb examples.

Michelangelo, Bernini, Rodin, Frink, Henry Moore. However there are many painters for whom form is an important element if not the main focus. *Cezanne, Picasso, Lempica's slick stylized figures which owe much to the cubists...*

Classic life drawing

Life drawing has become an academic activity with its own traditions and disciplines. The degree of observation is usually intense so the results tend towards realism rather than idealism or romanticism. It is the process of recording with the hand what is seen by the eye. As a result elements of this process can become central to the artist's intentions; the actual act of drawing or mark making or maybe the interpretation of form

Euan Uglow – a 20th century, English academic painter who focuses on the precision and accuracy of measuring during the drawing process. The result has the beauty and simplicity of mathematics rather than a depiction of a photographic or expressive reality.

TECHNIQUE

The techniques from oil painting to charcoal to etching to sculpture can be central to the reason for producing the work for some artists. Different techniques can certainly help determine the character of a piece. As a logical step forward from life drawing, varying your media can have very positive results and alone help you find a new direction.

Pastels - *Degas*

Pencil, pastel plus watercolour wash – *Rodin, Egon Schiele*

Wax resist and watercolour – *Henry Moore*

Collage – *Picasso, Muñoz, Valdēs*

Photography – *Cindy Sherman*

Video – *Bruce Nauman*

Varnish, charcoal, wire brush and basically anything that was in his dad's garage – *young Philip Brown.....*