DRAWING UNDER THE INFLUENCE:

19th CENTURY METHODS FOR 21st CENTURY DRAWING

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By

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ABSTRACT

DRAWING UNDER THE INFLUENCE:

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Ira Korman

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Drawing is among the most primal and natural ways of expressing ideas and is at least 15,000 years older than the written alphabet. It communicates with no language barrier and is the essential building block of all creative endeavors. It is a skill that can be acquired and developed with dedication, persistence and patience. Lots of practice, not theory, will develop good drawing skills. The process of learning to draw is really the process of improving one’s powers of observation. The drawing studio is not necessarily a place to make “Art.” It is, however, a place to learn the relatively few and straightforward techniques and concepts that will benefit the making of art. Creating “Art” can be very mysterious – learning to draw is not.

“Drawing under the Influence” is a foundation course in figure-drawing that I have developed for universities and art schools. It emphasizes classical traditions and practice
and incorporates the most useful training methods culled from the history of drawing instruction with a particular focus on the 19th Century French Academy. It includes classical exercises such as copying master drawings and drawing from casts as well as contemporary concepts such as gesture drawing and figure abstraction. My goal has been to create a hybrid curriculum designed to teach students the timeless concepts and skills necessary to develop a personal artistic vision.

Lack of serious instruction in the basic skills of drawing is an unfortunate and enduring trend in the art departments of many universities and colleges. Accurate drawing is often disregarded; its importance minimized and in some cases even considered a hindrance to self-expression.

Not many universities have faculties that can actually draw with any ability or knowledge. Faculty members who are products of Modernism simply don’t know how to draw and since one doesn’t teach what one doesn’t know, the old ways are lost. This tendency has even spread to many professional art schools where in many cases vital components are no longer properly understood or taught. (Bill Whitaker, as cited in Art Renewal Center, 2013)

As a student in the 1980s at The Rhode Island School of Design, a “traditional” art school, I experienced a lack of direct instruction on basic drawing techniques and methods in foundation life-drawing classes. I desperately wanted to improve my drawing skills but the prevailing attitude was “keep drawing and it will come.” This kind of
indirect, hands-off instruction left others and me struggling to advance. It was only after graduation and many years of constant drawing as a fine artist that I discovered the concepts that helped me become a better draughtsman.

The frustration I felt in those life-drawing classes at RISD motivated me to develop a life-drawing curriculum to teach students the relatively few, but absolutely essential drawing skills with a deliberate, hands-on approach. The original student that this program was developed for was me.

In the preface to “The Cabinet of Fine Arts: Being a New and Universal Drawing Book”, written at the beginning of the 19th century, the authors state “So many works have been published, and so many schemes have been formed with the purpose of instructing youth in the principles and practice of Drawing and Painting, that one would imagine any addition to the stock to now be superfluous.” (Hodson & Dougall, 1805, p.4)

While it may be true that there is nothing new to be written about the craft of drawing, my recent experience teaching life-drawing has made it clear to me that many art students lack the basic technical and historical knowledge to draw well.

I hand out a questionnaire to students at the first meeting of every class I teach. It poses several questions related to their professional and artistic goals, both long term and for the semester ahead. One of the questions is “What would you most like to improve in your drawing?” “I want to draw more realistically” is a frequent answer.
Life-drawing class can be intimidating and overwhelming, thus many students tend to fall back on familiar methods that continually reinforce bad habits. Therefore, it’s important that students develop patience and persistence. Just as a musician must first learn scales and the writer must learn grammar and punctuation, the draughtsman must first learn the basic building blocks of drawing.

In order to achieve accuracy and believability in life-drawing, several important technical skills and concepts must be learned. When mastered, they provide the student the necessary tools to faithfully render any form whether from direct observation or the imagination. Hand-eye coordination must first be developed as well as a proficiency in handling drawing materials, from the basic technique of holding a pencil to the complex skill of creating subtle value shifts with hatching and cross hatching.

**Light, Value and Form**

Students must learn how the appearance of three-dimensional form is affected when light and shadow acts upon its surface and edges. They must learn how value transforms a “shape” into a “volume” creating the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.

**Foreshortening and Perspective**

In order to analyze the foreshortened figure, students must first understand the principles of perspective and its effects on geometric solids. Correct proportions are critical in figure-drawing and the ability to render foreshortened forms is a fundamental skill needed to draw a naturalistic figure.
Anatomy

Knowledge of anatomy is essential for students to understand how internal structures affect the outer contours of the human body and make sense of its myriad surface undulations.

Art History

Familiarity with great art and artists of the past is essential, so discussing and viewing great works of art plays a significant role in my program. Students become noticeably inspired by the images of master drawings, and are fascinated to see how artists have used the same techniques and principles throughout the centuries. However, most students, when first arriving in my class, display only a minimal knowledge of 20th century art and are almost completely ignorant of the great masters of past centuries. This lack of connection to the artistic tradition and visual language of the past leaves the art student at a distinct disadvantage and with the detrimental belief that original works of art appear magically from deep within and fully formed out of whole cloth.

Students must learn that art comes from what preceded it, and that they are continuing on the paths travelled by the artists who came before them. This knowledge gives the student a feeling of camaraderie with artists of the past who also had to work hard to master the same skills.

After many decades in decline, figurative realism and traditional methods have recently enjoyed a revival and renewed interest. This has led to the establishment of many private
atelier academies offering a thorough, systematic method of instruction based on the classical realist tradition. The typical multi-year curriculum begins with a year of intensive drawing in which the students copy 19th century prints by Charles Bargue, draw from plaster casts as well as the live model, advancing only when they’ve mastered each skill. (Pototschnik, 2012)

“The atelier movement attempts to rebuild the links between masterpieces of the past and our artistic future” and provides an alternative to contemporary art education by giving “the next generations of artists the tools that have been lost or discarded over that last 150 years.” (Aristides, 2006, p. xi)

“Drawing under the Influence” offers an alternative to the private atelier alternative to contemporary art schools and universities by providing students with the most essential concepts and techniques of the classical multi-year course in a 15 week semester.

My project consists of an exhibition in the CSUN art gallery that reflects a life-drawing curriculum that I created for myself to the fill the gaps in my own training. The primary focus of the exhibition is a large figurative drawing approximately 3.5’x5’ that I created. It is a contemporary iteration of a classical, biblical theme, presented in a modern setting, using traditional methods. The combination of these three elements is the basis upon which “Drawing under the Influence” is founded. The drawing is executed using the technical skills and foundational concepts that are at the heart of my drawing course including light and shade, perspective, foreshortening and others. It also relates a deeply
personal story, which, like the classical teaching method I advocate, is about learning from the past and growing with that knowledge and wisdom.

As Juliette Aristides (2006) writes:

“By studying these artistic principles and their applications, we can appreciate the unique qualities embodied in the masterpieces of the ages. This in turn can help us recognize historical innovations in drawing . . . and suggest ways in which these innovations can be used in contemporary art.” (p. xi)

My drawing depicts several figures engaged in a bar fight inside a dark room. A female patron swoops in to grab the hand of the assailant before he can plunge his knife into his struggling victim lying on the floor. It is based on the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac in which a father, Abraham, commanded only by a “voice”, is asked to do the unthinkable, sacrifice his son Isaac. It is a test of his faith and one Abraham plans to pass at any cost. Fortunately, an angel intervenes and provides salvation for both father and son.

The concept addresses the theme of parenting in general, and the relationship between father and son in particular. It is about my father and me. As a father, my dad was also commanded by a voice, that of his god and the generations before him. It commanded that love not be displayed, for discipline to be administered with a firm hand, and that the role of children was only to benefit their elders. So when I became a father, I also faced a
crucial test. Would I continue as a child in my father’s eyes or fight for my manhood and seek salvation for my sons and me? This image represents that struggle.

In addition to the central, large drawing, samples of several tutorials, chosen from the curriculum, are also displayed on the gallery walls. A brief description, worksheet of exercises and a small drawing relating to the lesson accompanies each one. The small drawings in turn function as studies used to develop various elements of the large drawing.

The combination of written concepts, lesson exemplars and finished drawings demonstrates the marriage of the “Academic” approach with contemporary issues and validates the benefit of each classical lesson to contemporary draftsmanship.
References


Appendix: Selected Tutorials

Light & Shade

“It has often been said that light is the true subject of art.” Light not only enables us to perceive three-dimensional forms but also the essential qualities of those forms and the differences between them.” (Aristides, 2006, p.54)

In nature, light delineates all forms by the varying degree in which it illuminates the surfaces in its path. Surfaces, which recede or turn away from the light source fall into shadow.

While an object can be represented by accurate contour lines, in order to depict its volume, solidity and surface, light and shade must be used.

Three factors are responsible for how light affects a particular scene; the direction, amount, and quality of light. Each factor can vary greatly but in combination it is what creates the value structure used to depict three-dimensional forms in a composition.
Korman, I. (2013). *Sacrifice* [Drawing]. Detail of drawing showing the effects of light and shadow.

Korman, I. Notes concerning light and shade.
Value

The goal of form or tonal drawing is the depiction of mass in order to create the illusion of a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface.

Only with the addition of shading can the differences between a circle and sphere; a square and cube; triangle and cone; rectangle and cylinder be depicted. A line drawing can record contours but line alone cannot create the illusion of depth and volume without depicting the effects of light and shadow.

Value is the range of tones from white to black found within an image. It is determined by each specific lighting situation. The relationship of lights and darks, and the varying degrees of gray provides much of the basic information about a subject such as structure, mass, volume and weight.

A constant relationship between values relative to the light source is essential in creating the illusion of a sculptural, three-dimensional relief and revealing details such as surface texture, size and spatial relationships.
Korman, I. (2013). *Sacrifice* [Drawing]. Detail of drawing showing a full range of values.

Simultaneous contrast - middle gray strip appears lighter against dark background & darker against light background.

Abrupt value changes occur at sharp changes in direction of surface planes.

All round and curved surfaces are modeled with graduated values.

Hatching lines should follow the surface contour.

Outlines don't exist in nature - form is delineated by the meeting of areas of different value.

Korman, I. Notes concerning value.
Perspective

Knowledge of the basic principles of perspective gives the representational artist the tools to convey a convincing illusion of forms in space while avoiding unintended distortions.

Memorization of the complex rules of mechanical perspective isn’t necessary for the art student but a thorough knowledge of “freehand” perspective is essential in understanding how objects and scenes change appearance from different viewpoints. This knowledge enables artists to create the illusion of depth and space on a two-dimensional drawing surface.

“The knowledge of perspective should be used as a guide to drawing and not as a device to harden into stiff mechanics what might have been a beautiful loosely handled sketch.” (Norling, 1957, p.viii)

Perspective, more than any other discovery, changed the face of Western art. With perspective, Renaissance artists liberated the figure from the limitations of the static world of flat symbolism. In its stead, they gave us a three-dimensional world of drama and illusion . . . that made it possible to produce a convincing likeness of the human figure as three-dimensional volume in its physical surroundings. (Brown, McLean, 2004, p.49)
Korman, I. (2013). *Sacrifice* [Drawing]. Detail of drawing showing perspective.

Raphael. (ca. 1500). *Study for the Annunciation* [Drawing]. Paris, France: Musee du Louvre
Korman, I. Notes concerning perspective.
Foreshortening

Foreshortening is the distortion observed on any form or figure as a result of the effects of perspective. It occurs as the object, or any part of it, moves away from the viewer and is visually distorted.

Foreshortening follows the principles of linear perspective in which parallel lines appear to converge, and forms appear to become smaller as they recede in space away from the viewer. Consequently, the more the figure recedes in space away from the viewer, or the viewer’s eye level changes, the more the forms are compressed, and proportions altered.

Students typically struggle with accurately rendering the distorted views of the foreshortened figure due to a strong, subconscious desire to modify them to conform to their preconceived notions of the form in its natural state. So in order for them to create a convincing illusion of three-dimensional space, students must remain objective and draw what they see, not what they know.

The ability to visualize the geometric core shapes of the figure and to understand the effect of perspective on geometric solids, is essential for the student to be able to analyze and accurately render the foreshortened pose.

Notes concerning foreshortening

Korman, I. Notes concerning foreshortening.
Artistic anatomy involves the knowledge of the underlying anatomical structures and forms that influence the surface appearance of the figure. Understanding the relationship between major skeletal and muscular landmarks, and major proportional divisions, aids the student in correctly placing these structures in relation to the contours they influence.

“An artist can use the frame of reference that anatomical study provides to recognize small signs on the nude that can help him maintain his bearings within the grand structure” (Aristides, 2006, p.97)

As in the study of perspective, students need not memorize formulas or more anatomical information than is essential. This can lead to a reliance on them and keep students from carefully observing the model in front of them.

In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo Da Vinci cautioned:

. . . know their various movements and force, and which sinew or muscle occasions each movement, and paint only those distinct and thick, and not the others, as do many who, in order to appear to be great draughtsmen, make their nudes wooden and without grace, so that they seem a sack full of nuts rather than the surface of a human being, or indeed, a bundle of radishes rather than muscular nudes. (as cited in Pedretti, p. 135)

Korman, I. Notes concerning anatomy.