

The Art of Drawing

Meili Peterson, Southwestern University, Texas Alpha

No other discipline is quite like drawing. Nothing can replace that which drawing has bestowed upon mankind throughout history. Drawing is so distinctive that even the power of words cannot describe nor replace its graces. Leonardo da Vinci illustrates this phenomenal quality in elaborate notes that he collected throughout the years of his career as an artist, scientist, engineer, and botanist. He writes:

Writer, with what words can your descriptions equal the complete image here rendered by the drawing? For you give only a confused description and a weak idea of the true form of objects. You delude yourself if you believe you can fully satisfy the listener when it is a question of evoking solid forms enclosed by a surface. . . . I ask you not to encumber yourself with words unless you are speaking to blind men. (qtd. in Chastel 46)

These words of the master artist testify to the irreplaceable nature of the art of drawing. What is it that gives this medium of human expression such dynamism? The answer is unending, for the depth of drawing cannot ever be depleted. It is alternately scientific and artistic, creative and intellectual, sensory and perceptive. Drawing involves three basic functions: discipline, imagination, and utility (Hughes 91). My interest in this paper is especially on the areas of discipline and imagination, in which the glory of drawing can be found.

Drawing has continuously been a part of culture and development among mankind. The Paleolithic cave paintings are among the oldest extant examples of the practice of drawing. These drawings were presumably either hand drawn with charcoal or natural dyes from berry and flower extracts or engraved, as we see in ancient caves such as those at Lascaux, France, and Altamira, Spain. It was not until the Renaissance, however, that drawing became a seriously intellectual endeavor: a discipline. Leonardo is a classic Renaissance example of an artist who truly explored the rigor of drawing. He kept notebooks of studies on anatomy, proportion, and physics. The embodiment of academia, he probed and analyzed the world around him, recording his careful observations through the medium of drawing. He explored everything from the human figure to flowers, from flying machines to small cellular entities, all through his drawings. The genius of this artist is overwhelming, as is the body of knowledge he left behind. For artists today he serves as an excellent model of how one can take art to the level of rigorous academic discipline.

In truth, art students today are still encouraged to look to master artists like Leonardo. Copying masters' sketches and studying their drawings make it seem as if students are benefiting from personal drawing lessons from the artists themselves. Proportion is taught, techniques such as cross-hatching of lines are improved, and the hand-eye experience is unlike reading any instructional book on drawing. As critic Robert Hughes writes, "[T]o draw, to constitute a motif as a code of lines and tonal patches, is to think, and . . . such thought forms the root of all visual literacy" (91). It is through a process such as copying a master artist's work that one can tap into this very concept of a "code of lines and tonal patches," which in essence makes up the language of drawing. Upon this code, a learning artist is then able to form a foundation for visual literacy in which he or she can both read drawing fluently and produce drawings that communicate culturally encoded concepts to the viewer.

In drawing programs of the Renaissance, artists not only copied and studied master artists' works but also drew from three-dimensional figurative statues or sculptures and finally moved on to drawing from the human model. In the study of drawing alone, anatomy, geometry, and perspective were among the many technicalities that were engrained in the artist's mind and hand (Lambert 53-75). During the Renaissance the energy of drawing developed into a tool for gathering information, for making art as scientific analysis while searching for classical form: the

search for truth in science, observation, and nature. Leonardo encouraged young artists to “first learn perspective, then the proportions of all objects. Next copy work after the hand of a good Master to gain the habit of drawing parts of the body well, and then to work from nature; to confirm the lessons learned” (Lambert 57).

Not only students practiced copying of master artists’ works; in the Baroque period, artists like Rembrandt made such copies to train their own talented hands to be more expert in the art of drawing. During the Enlightenment, drawing flourished. Drawing books were published as manuals, and other aids were developed to teach the foundation discipline of drawing (Lambert 57). And yet, although Leonardo saw drawing as “a replica of all the visible works of God the highest” (Lambert 9), such veneration and love for drawing has declined in the academic world in modern times, perhaps because the artistic movements of our age have tended to reject tradition, emphasize technique, and prize innovation. Drawing is no longer so highly valued with the emergence of digital art and other such modern approaches to expression.

Despite the waning of the practice of drawing in contemporary culture, there are still some who adhere to this dynamic tradition founded in the Renaissance. Modern artists such as Kandinsky encouraged “analytical drawing”; Kandinsky taught such classes in the Bauhaus (Lambert 75). Some schools today still cling to the tradition of the disciplined approach to drawing. A late 20th-century teacher who is the equivalent of a Renaissance master instructor, Robert Beverly Hale delights, like Leonardo, in teaching anatomy, technique, practice, and the fundamentals of drawing. Hale excels in the academic discipline of drawing and inspires young artists to reach the high Renaissance goals of embracing thoroughly what it is to be an artist. He has shared the value of the Leonardo approach to drawing by producing widely available videos and books and lecturing on figure drawing and anatomy.

Drawing, however, does not merely stop on the disciplinary level. It can penetrate past the intellect and spark the imagination. The imagination of the artist can play, and often does play, an important role in his or her work. Imagination accesses the emotion, the psychology, all that is immaterial and not present in the scientific or academic approach to drawing. This is not to say that the two aspects of drawing cannot coexist, for they most certainly do. One can see this union of imagination, freely guiding the artist’s hand, and the rigor of academic discipline in Peter Paul Rubens’ drawings of arms (Lambert 75). Here one can note the anatomical accuracy, the result of meticulous study of the technicalities of drawing itself; but also suggested is the fluid role of the imagination, as the artist freely allows his hand to dance about the page. It seems as if Rubens is merely sketching without the intensity that one would find in the Renaissance classroom. He seems unconcerned with the finished product but only concerned with allowing the art form to come alive. Yet despite this affluence of imagination and creativity, Rubens does not abandon sophistication or quality. His knowledge of anatomy and formal art theory seems so engrained in his mind that it is second nature to him. Free to play, in essence he is liberated by his previously acquired knowledge. The fact that this drawing is a study for a tapestry demonstrates that Rubens subconsciously and carefully included anatomical knowledge even when he was merely brainstorming for his next masterpiece (Lambert 85).

Rubens was not the only artist to tap into this loose, liberated side of his talent. Other renowned artists used loose drawing, or sketching, as a method for solving problems. Susan Lambert in her book *Reading Drawings* writes, “The act of converting an idea into lines and other marks on paper often excites the mind and frees the imagination, encouraging the flow of creative thought” (88). This captures the essence of imagination and creativity within the artist, working through the vessel of the artist’s hand. There is something exhilarating about an artist’s allowing the mind, heart, and body to work together to create what one perceives both in reality and in the realm that lies outside reality, in the mind’s eye.

Sophia A. Gruzdys explores the novelty of drawing in her article “Drawing: The Creative Link.” She speaks of Robert Evans, who observes that “for any material object to obtain freedom, its handler has to lose control of it” (65). How beautifully this describes the creative role of drawing! For without this ability to give up control of the piece of charcoal or pencil, the

epitome of art is not discovered nor experienced. The peak of an artist's experience in drawing is that point at which she no longer has control over that which she creates. It is an enigmatic concept. Yet this enigma can be explained in the union between an artist's intellectual ability and access to her creativity. In this one word, *creativity*, one can reach a power beyond anything obtained through knowledge. The imagination can thrive beneath the hand of the artist and flow onto the paper. Then the artist can create what knowledge could never achieve on its own; nor could the imagination be so credibly and fluently expressed without the aid of knowledge the artist has stored in her brain.

Gruzdys goes on to describe the action of drawing as one of "searching, grappling and pushing the boundaries." She testifies to the importance of this probing process in that it "separates ideas caught in conventions from ideas that have been set free," and she adds, "Drawing is not just representation; it helps . . . [t]o think ideas through, allowing . . . independence from the tools that mold them" (65). In short, Gruzdys points to how innovative and how intimate the drawing experience becomes for the artist. She is no longer ruled by convention or rules of composition; but by knowing how to use all these tools in the discipline of drawing, the artist can set aside conformity and become sincere and convincing. She can produce freely without preoccupation with rules or formalities. This is when the artist becomes fluent in the language that expresses her innermost being. The process becomes, more or less, a dialogue between the artist and the subject she is drawing, a dialogue that explores the realm between reality and imagination as the artist observes the material world. However, it is not merely the reality of this world that is expressed. Rather, the artist has the liberty to transform the real world by also expressing her own subjectivity, hence creating the world as it is perceived by the artist. Immaterial truths then accumulate or overcome material actualities. What then becomes revealed is the artist's own interpretation of what she perceives—reality with a twist of the artist's own personality, soul, and world view that then permeates her work.

Lambert suggests that drawing gives both the artist and the viewer marks that serve as kindred spirits to human experience. The lines taper, move, swirl, and slice. There are verticals and horizontals, aggressive marks and soft, sweet marks. Darkness and light can be expressed as well as the quickness or slowness of the artist's touch. The possibilities for artistic expression through drawing are unending, just as the possible human emotions vary immensely. Such variety is expressed within the world of drawing, providing for the viewer an abundant supply of cathartic images, a store of shared emotions, and an incredible number of empathetic messages (Lambert 10). One could even venture to say that this empathetic and kindred mark can penetrate to the very depths of the viewer's being, just as it may express the profound insights and intimate thoughts of the artist.

According to Antoine Dezallier d'Argenville, an art collector, the great master drawings are "all spirit" (qtd. in Lambert 98). Similarly, historian Woldemar von Seidlitz believes that "drawings, more immediately than 'published' works, give an insight into the spiritual life of the artist" (109). Lambert adds to this notion the claim that drawing "is a means of visualizing thought, . . . bringing one close to [the] artist's process of creation" (109). How true it is that drawing is a visualization of thought, for that is exactly what the dialogue between imagination and intellect achieves. The artist's self, spirit, and thought processes are all made manifest for the world to see and interpret. Perhaps the viewer will never fully grasp the entirety of the artist's "process of creation," but if he is an educated viewer he will most certainly be presented a gift full of knowledge and delights.

As Catherine Dunton has written, "Art is a conversation, a visual conversation whose outcome cannot be predicted, and which responds spontaneously to both the object and the lines on the page" (343). The artist, like Leonardo da Vinci in his "woman's arms" study, is involved in a world of dialogue between his eye, his hand, and the marks he makes. Yet this dialogue is not controlled, governed by rules, nor restrained in any way. Rather, as in this image, the fluid relationship between the artist's knowledge of the human body and his imagination testifies to the capability of the artist to submit to his creative intuition while not retaining faithful execution

of the subject. As Dunton observes, this image of Leonardo's is a collection of both quietly existing intellect and a natural ability to express artistically something that lies deeper than the intellect. Separate yet so intricately bound together, the intellect and the imagination work hand in hand. Because all knowledge of the human figure is intertwined into the artist's being, Leonardo is able to free himself from the reins of the tool he uses and can reside in his inventive mind. As a result, a seemingly effortless masterpiece exists centuries later, evoking awe in viewers.

One cannot successfully separate the realm of drawing into exclusive qualities without robbing this medium of its essence. Rather, drawing is composed of a rich, profound foundation that goes deep into the immaterial and remains so intact with the material that it becomes an awe-inspiring phenomenon. The ability to draw is a talent that must be rigorously developed by discipline as well as set free from convention to live as innovative and creative expression. This bipolar nature of drawing gives this medium its limitless potential and its mystical nature. It can touch the soul and express the spirit. Drawing can meticulously describe nature while simultaneously touching the deepest of human feelings. The realm of drawing is not finite, but infinite, as the artist brings it to life with every stroke, every mark. Drawing serves as the foundation of other art forms such as sculpture, architecture, painting, and even theater set design. The medium can be the foresight of ideas, notions, advertisements, commercials, inventions, and more. There is no limit to the power of drawing's ability to express the genius and the creativity of the artist in a fluent, distinctive language.

On a Personal Note

As a student I have discovered the importance of the role of drawing and have delighted in its shaping me into the artist that I aspire to become. Not only has drawing served as an ideal foundation for painting, but it has also exposed me to a more intricate and academic study of the human figure in my drawing classes. Anatomy has become a love of mine. In learning the skeletal structure of the human form, I have acquired scientific knowledge that has aided me immensely in executing the figure in drawing. Beyond the mere skeleton and the proportions of the human figure shown by masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, I have discovered the muscular structure that makes up a figure, including the insertions, origins, and functions of muscles. This knowledge has helped me immeasurably in executing the figure in life drawing sessions and in using knowledge to apply to the aesthetic nature of the creative process.

With such a detailed foundation in anatomical structure, I have learned many drawing techniques that extend beyond the art of figure drawing. For instance, I have learned to imagine what exists on the other side of the view I am drawing and to depict the three-dimensionality of its form expressed through stereoscopic vision. This knowledge can be applied to other objects I may draw as an artist. To the knowledge I am gaining as a student, I hope to be able to develop an intuitive, second-nature way in order to express with clarity and precision both discipline and imagination. As I have learned artistic techniques and skills, I have also become more alert to the world around me, taking it in, studying it, and translating it into artistic interpretation.

Of particular value to me has been copying from master drawings. In looking to Michelangelo and Leonardo, I have been inspired by their genius and taught by their skill. Michelangelo has shaped my love for the language of cross-hatching, and Leonardo has fed my fascination with human anatomy. Furthermore, I have found that if I draw from a master drawing prior to going to class, my figure drawing session is much more successful than if I had not.

If I look back on my four semesters of drawing, I can see that I gradually freed myself from the weight of conscious concentration on burdensome technicalities. The knowledge surfaced without my having to dig for it, and I could work in an subconscious, natural fashion. As a result, my creative side could surface. I began to understand the union between the disciplined nature of drawing and the imagination of the artist. It was a breakthrough for me, making all the prior study worthwhile. Now, more than ever, I can express what my hand desires and I can interpret

what I see. My immaterial thoughts throughout the process of drawing can emerge, and my material expression of the figure can be executed.

Still, I realize my career has only barely begun, and I certainly have not reached a satisfactory level of performance. In fact, I do not believe an artist ever feels totally satisfied, for as Leonardo so explicitly demonstrates in his meticulous notebooks, there is no limit to knowledge, no end to discovering the many secrets hidden beneath the nature of drawing. I am more ready than ever to achieve my dream of being an artist. I hope one day to be able to execute my artistic expressions in such a way that the discipline will be so truly an innate part of me that my imagination will thrive and live to its fullest.

Works Cited

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