

The Art of Drawing Part 1:

Learn How to See, Learn How to Draw

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Can anybody learn how to draw? In one word ... Yes.

The only prerequisite to your success is a deep-rooted desire to learn. Beyond that it is simply a case of determined practice. And really what you are learning ... *is learning to see*. What you will find is that *drawing is easy ... but seeing is difficult*. At the end of the day, if you can see it, you can draw it. And equally as important, if you can see mistakes in your work, you can correct them (that is why God made erasers).

The analogy I like to use for improving your drawing skills is the game of golf, and the need for constant practice in order to improve your play. But it's not the practice in itself that is important. It is the type of practice that is important. You can practice your golf swing forever and a day, but if you don't practice with the correct grip and stance for example, you are only reinforcing flaws in your game. You will never improve (I speak from experience).

And the same holds true with drawing. You must change your thinking. One of the first things you must do is give yourself a "whack to the side of the head" ... shift your thinking ... and try to see things differently. You must consciously change the way that you look at things. You must put aside the rules that you have learned through school ... those rules of logic that reinforced your need to see pattern and symmetry and order ... those rules that forced you to look for the "right" answer. Life is random and you need to avoid subconsciously imposing order when in fact it may not exist.

My goal (passion may be a better choice of words) has been to achieve a level of photorealism with my drawing. This applies to the use of both line and value in a drawing. Both skill sets are fundamentals of drawing, and are essential to achieving photorealism.

Here are some of the techniques that I use to see things clearly with respect to line and value.

If one is Good ... Two is Better

I work with photographs. I do not draw from life ... I am far too slow ... and life goes on. The subject would age and the lighting would change, before I complete any project. So photographs are the basis for my work. One of the first things that I do is acquire more than one photograph of the subject. I find that photographs often distort information, and worse still, may omit information. While my photographic reference solves one problem, and is consistent over time, I find that a single photograph doesn't always reveal the whole story. Each and every additional photograph of the subject will reveal more information, and help me to piece together bits of information that may be missing from a single photograph. In this case, less is not more.

To See or not to See ... That is the Question

So how do I deal with things that I cannot see in the photograph? Well, the first

thing that I do is enlarge the photograph so that small detail becomes visible and easier to read. In this electronic age, a photograph can be scanned and manipulated, but I choose to use the simple photocopier to enlarge the image. At this point, it almost becomes an exercise of "join the dots" ... if I can see information on either side of a visibly "muddy" area ... I can intuitively map out what is missing. This enlargement also helps me to visualize the relationship between various drawing entities in the subject ... I can see what is interconnected, and I can see what is receding and what is overlapping. And once I can understand what I am seeing, I can draw it. In other words, once it makes sense and I understand it, I can draw it.

Upside Down becomes Rightside Up

I am always amazed at how our mind can trick us into seeing things that don't exist (marriage counselors are familiar with this phenomenon). One way to give yourself a "whack to the side of the head" is to shift the visual reference. If you are bogged down and cannot see the flaw in your drawing ... if you know something is wrong, but you can't quite figure out what it may be ... turn both your drawing and your reference photo upside down. In doing so, you will lose the visual reference points that have subconsciously blocked your assessment ... and you are free once again to see things clearly. Some people look at their work reflected in a mirror with the same objective in mind.

I have seen the Light

I believe that realism is the reward for bold use of value. Don't be afraid to use black. And photorealism comes with identifying the gradation of value, within those bold values. Look for subtle changes within shadow and darkness, and look for the gradual changes in areas that are lit with light. One way to pickup detail in the dark areas of your reference photo is to back light it ... you will be surprised to see all kinds of detail that wasn't initially obvious.

Frame It

I think we are all familiar with perceptual illusion where the same value will appear to change when it is surrounded first by black, and then by white. This phenomenon can affect how you perceive value in your reference photo, and your work. One way to shake this perception is to create a paper frame with a 1" square opening, which is then placed on the problem area of the reference image and the corresponding area of the work. The frame helps to block out any visual distractions and forces you to focus on the problem area alone.

Procrastinate Until You Get it Right

And finally, if nothing seems to be working and your frustration level is rising ... walk away. Clear your mind. When you return and look at your work with a fresh set of eyes, you may be surprised at how quickly you will resolve the problem that at one point, appeared insurmountable.

The Bottom Line

One last thing ... I work on a drawing board and I work standing up ... that way I can step back from the project and assess my progress from a distance. I find this helps me to see the work more objectively, and with an element of detachment ... something I find hard to do with my nose hovering over the working surface.

Drawing Conclusions

Mankind has drawn images of interest from the age of the cave dweller to the age of digital information. This need to draw is part of our psyche. We seem to have this internal need to capture what we have seen. So your aspirations to draw are noble

and natural. And here is what I know ... If you can train yourself to observe everything closely, as if you were looking at it for the very first time, you will be able to draw.