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PENCIL SKETCH DRAWING LESSONS

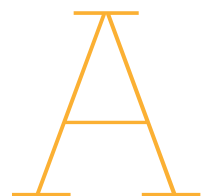
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Sketching Techniques to
Learn How to Sketch with
Expression and Power

Action & Gesture

EXPRESS THE MODEL'S GESTURE WITH VIGOROUS STROKES AND LET IT BE THE GUIDE FOR YOUR DRAWING. HERE'S HOW.

by Dan Gheno



A good, expressive gesture drawing is at the core of every effective figurative image, whether it's a loose three-minute drawing, a tight three-hour drawing, a highly resolved three-week drawing, or an obsessively observed and reworked three-year painting.

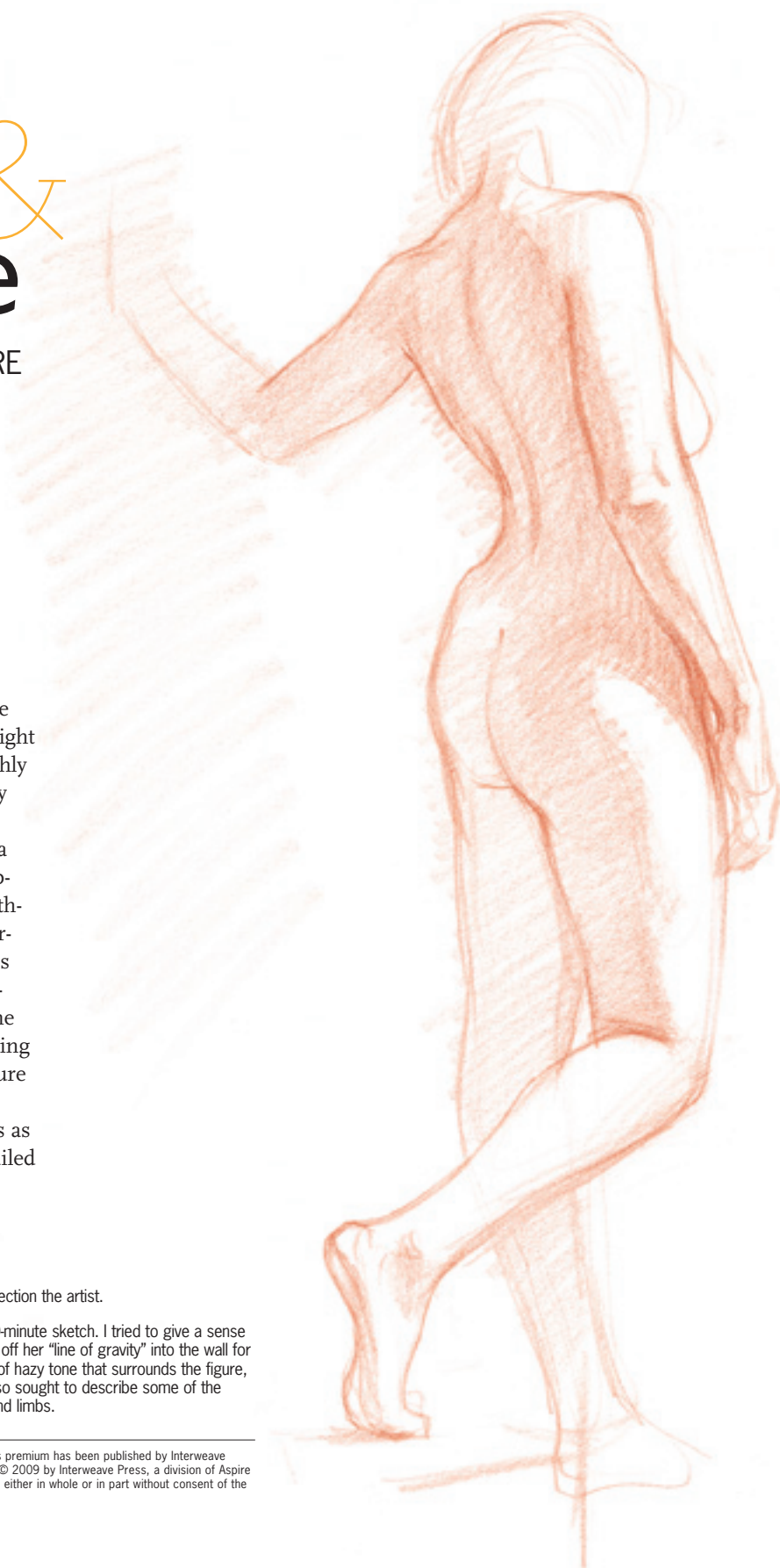
Many people, especially nonartists, think a gesture drawing is nothing more than a scribbled quick sketch. Some drawings can be nothing more than this. But in the hands of observant artists, the initial gesture drawing means much more. It establishes the overall proportion of the figure, quickly fixing the mood, the sweeping action of the pose, and the underlying rhythms that give animation and life to a figure drawing. To artists, a good gesture drawing swings like a Duke Ellington song and serves as a foundation that keeps all of their later, detailed observations vital and alive.

Leaning Figure

by Dan Gheno, 2003, oil sanguine on bond paper, 24 x 18. Collection the artist.

Here, I tried to focus on many goals while drawing this quick, 20-minute sketch. I tried to give a sense of physical and psychological weight to the figure as she leaned off her "line of gravity" into the wall for support; I aimed to create a feeling of atmosphere with my use of hazy tone that surrounds the figure, implies the supporting wall, and obscures the receding arm. I also sought to describe some of the alternating rhythms that seem to crisscross through her torso and limbs.

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Process Drawing, Gestures (detail)

by Dan Gheno, 2004,
sanguine on bond paper,
13 x 24. Collection the
artist.

Some artists create an implied activity when linking multiple images of the same model across the page. Many artists use this simple grouping, called a process drawing, to create a pleasing pattern of shapes, but more often, they use it to suggest a sequential action in the figure, as if the model were moving. For this drawing, the model took a series of progressively evolving action positions, holding each pose for no more than five minutes.

As I mentioned in one of my first articles on drawing for *American Artist* (January 2000), I feel that the “line of action” is the most important aspect of a figure drawing and certainly at the core of a well-observed gesture. **First, you want to establish the general action of the figure with a sweeping line—or**

line of action—that runs through the big shape of the figure, capturing the overall tilt of the pose. Then, you add further lines, looking for the individual slants of each limb. You can imagine these action lines in your head, or you can lightly draw them on the page. When drawn, the initial sketch can often look

like a loose stick figure. It sounds simple enough—but it can get needlessly complicated if you don’t develop strategies to systematically observe, record, and retain the subtleties of gesture as you delve further into the detail of form and value. Below, I suggest some methods for achieving a successful gesture drawing.



**Past and Present
(studies and
underpainting)**

by Harvey Dinnerstein, studio photograph of several studies and detail of underpainting. The full, complete painting is a very large, multi-figure composition (9614 x 17214), depicting a psychologically, historically, and socially evocative street scene.

Speed

Move quickly when you first begin your drawing and don't worry about making mistakes. You need to get something on the paper before you can start making adjustments. Notice how the sculptor Don Gale moves his line randomly through the forms, crisscrossing all over the figure and wandering around the volumes of the torso and limbs like wire wrapping around a form. Most people know Harvey Dinnerstein for his intensely observed, delicate imagery, but notice the brevity of his sketch, an initial study for his painting *Past and Present*. Look at the musician's limbs—you can still see an example of the long sweeping lines that he used to

underpin the action of the pose and his initial observation of detail that would later appear in a more elaborate manner in the finished painting.

Rodin is a sculptor of great physical and psychological nuance, but notice how he blasts into a figure with a broad watercolor wash, establishing all of the essential action and movement of the figure with a very basic but vital silhouette that he reinforces with minimum line. Speed forces you to observe reality with your gut, making observations that have vitality, fed by the passion of discovery or maybe even some fleeting anxiety. You can later stop and look at the drawing in a more rational,

calm manner, making revisions if you intend to push the drawing toward greater embellishment. Or, you can leave it as is, to live as an example of a moment in time or as an expression of energy.

Many 20th-century artist-educators, such as Robert Henri and Kimon Nicolaides, were great proponents of speedy gesture drawings, and they felt that one- or two-minute poses were an essential and ongoing part of an artist's training. I practice quick gesture drawing almost every day, using it to maintain my sense of proportion and keep my skill level sharpened, much like a musician plays scales to keep his hand in shape.



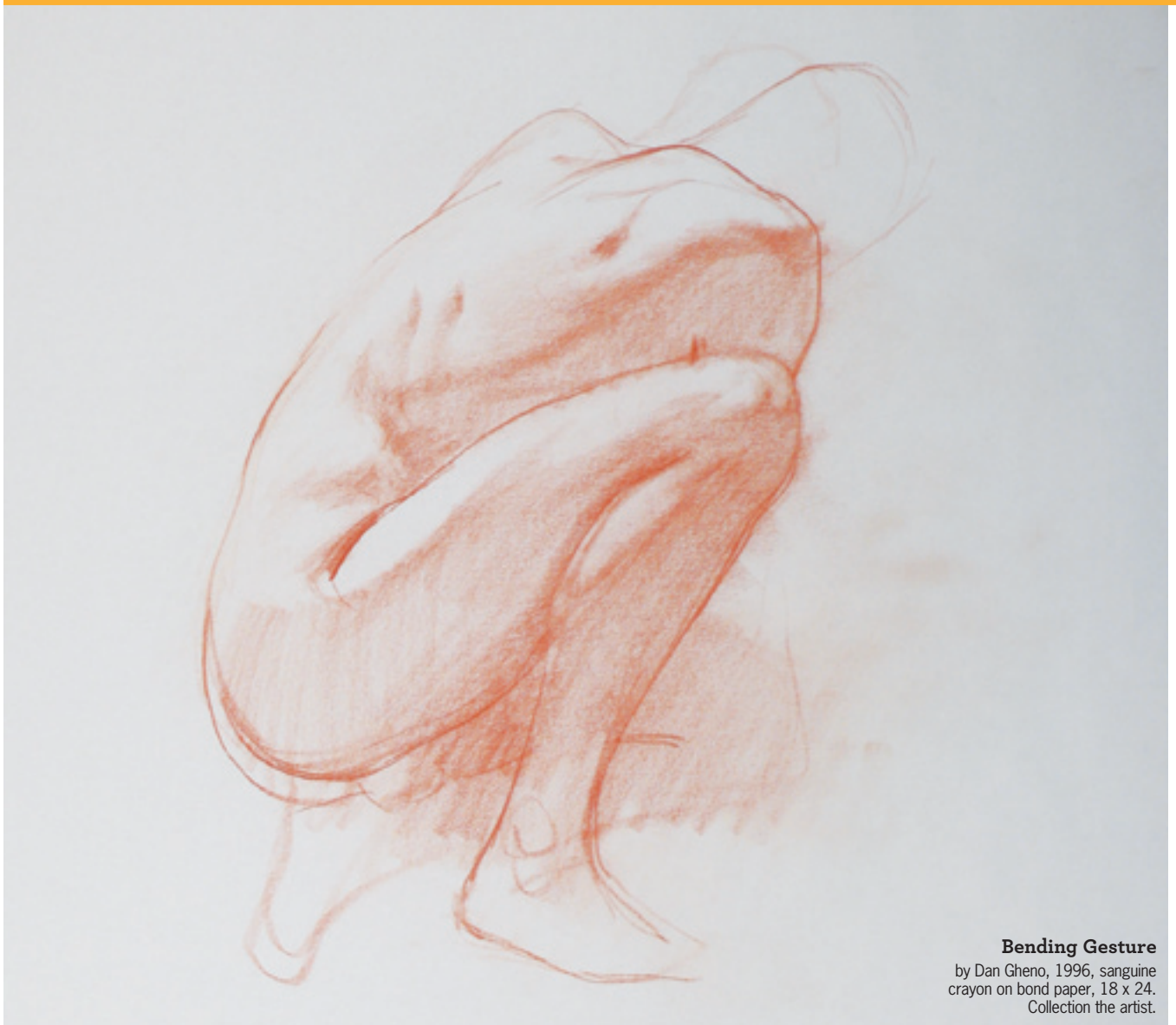
Contrapposto

Many artists look to the torso to establish a sense of action in their figures, especially the contrasting tilts of the chest and pelvis. Italian artists called this effect **contrapposto**. We take this concept for granted these days. For thousands of years, the early Egyptian cultures never did grasp the concept or rarely moved beyond thinking of the torso as one solid, straight form. Likewise, it took the Greeks many generations to move beyond the elegantly beautiful but static forms of the Archaic period, in which they perceived the torso as one solid and straight form instead of two contrasting forms. Finally, they discovered their own form of contrapposto, and they used it with great gusto, but it disappeared with the death of the Roman Empire. It was nearly another thousand years before Western civilization rediscovered this simple and seemingly obvious principle.

Contrapposto literally means contrast or counterpoint. We see this all the time in the torso: **If the chest tilts backward as it usually does when standing, the pelvis shifts forward. When seated, the pelvis tends to shift backward, while the rib cage of more posture-challenged people tends to slump forward. When you stand with most of your weight on one leg, the hip on the supporting leg angles up, while the shoulders angle down in opposition.** The Renaissance and Baroque artists saw the beauty of this physical principle and put it to great artistic use. They frequently placed limbs in contrapposto to each other as Raphael did in his drawing *Back View of Michelangelo's David*. Here, he draws one arm up and out, while putting the other arm back and down; likewise, he draws one leg back and straight, while placing the other leg forward and bent.

Back View of Michelangelo's David

by Raphael, 1507–1508, pen and brown ink, 281/3 x 151/2. Collection The British Museum, London, England.



Bending Gesture

by Dan Gheno, 1996, sanguine
crayon on bond paper, 18 x 24.
Collection the artist.

The Line of Gravity

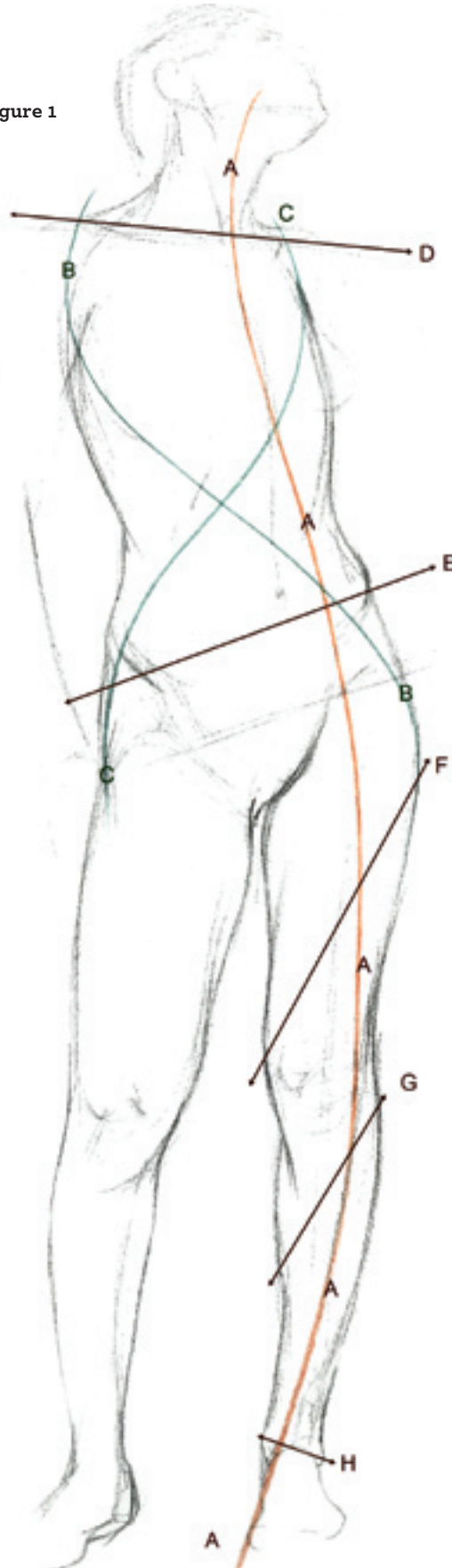
The line of gravity is nothing more than a straight line, showing the perpendicular power of the Earth that pulls us to its surface, but this deceptively unpretentious line plays an enormous role in planning your gesture drawing. You've probably seen drawings with an ill-considered or crooked line of gravity at their gesture base. They feature standing figures that seem to hang listlessly off hooks. **Look closely—every pose, no matter how simple or bland, has a distinctive but subtle gesture and line of gravity. On a neutral, well-balanced**

standing figure, the line of gravity falls from the pit of the neck to a point directly between the two supporting feet. If the model moves most of his weight to one leg, the individual body parts of the figure shift back and forth like a spring, until the pit of the neck and the line of gravity falls unswervingly over the supporting foot.

Even a slightly off-center line of gravity can destabilize the look of a calm, relaxed standing pose. Try to grab onto some of that dynamic instability when you draw action poses. **The more the**

figure leans over to one side, the more the line of gravity will deviate from the figure's point or points of support. The human body can hold these action poses for only a few minutes, so draw while you can before the model falls over. To hold an action pose for any length of time, the model has to grab onto something such as a stool or stick. This prop then becomes one of the model's points of support, with the line of gravity falling between the prop and the point where the model's feet or other body part touches the ground.

Figure 1



Rhythm

Composers struggle mightily to create rhythm in their music, looking for just the right combination of repetition and variation. Rhythm is equally important to a gesture drawing, but figurative artists don't need to look much beyond their subject to find direction. **The clothed and nude human body is filled with ready-made rhythms, its complex, intertwined forms offering inspiration for the artist's creative manipulation and interpretation.** With study, you will notice the emergence of dominating, repeating patterns. You will observe several major body parts or plane edges moving into and out of the overall figure at similar angles, alternating with other secondary, contrasting forms. **Although the specific rhythms change with each new pose, you will frequently notice that many of these rhythms have an S-shaped, flamelike quality to them.** I sometimes begin my gesture drawings with a sweeping S-like line of action (Fig. 1, A). Then, I often run another undulating line (B,C) from one side of the shoulder down to the opposite side of the hip. More often than not, I simply imagine these lines in my head, looking for clues that can help me unlock the music of the human form.

Even the individual body parts have their own pattern of underlying rhythms. As just one example of many, look at the leg. **The upper leg tends to swing outward toward the front, while the lower leg swings backward and inward in a classic S-shaped rhythm (Fig. 1).** Even smaller subforms crisscross musically throughout the legs: Notice that the upper leg is fuller toward the top on the outside and fuller toward the bottom on the inside (Fig. 1, D). You'll also find a similar pattern in the lower leg. You will see a fullness of form toward the top on the outside of the calf muscles, and a fuller form toward the bottom on the inside calf (Fig. 1, E). Move your eyes lower, and you will find a perfect counterpoint in the ankles, with the inner ankle higher and the outer ankle lower (Fig. 1, F).

The human body, particularly the nude human form, has enormous metaphorical and symbolic power. Don't squander its potential, and don't let your drawings—gestural or otherwise—become scholastic exercises.



Line Quality

The quality of your line is very important and it can make or break a gesture drawing. **Emphasize the complex rhythms of the figure by alternating thick and thin strokes, saving your strongest lines for the dominant rhythms. You can also reinforce the interlocking, sculptural quality of the shapes by emphasizing the lines on forms that cross over and in front of other forms.** Arbitrarily varying the thick and thin quality of the line, as Taito II does in his study of *Men Hauling on a Rope*, imposes a cadenced, abstract line pattern upon your figures. **You can also draw your**

figure with a deadweight, unmodulated line, as Gustav Klimt and Ingres sometimes did, letting the shapes and attitude of the figures speak for themselves. Your line work can range from the angular, as in some of Egon Schiele's work, or the curvaceous, as in all of Rubens' work, but notice how straight and curved lines alternate throughout their work as forms do in reality on the live, human figure. Whatever you do, avoid stylized or predictable curves.

Although you may feel a great deal of pride in your ability to draw even, geometric curves, those kinds

of curves are too suggestive of the circle—they will have a self-contained quality, as if your figure were built out of separate, disjointed baubles. You want curves to evolve one into the other, not start and stop like a sputtering car.

Men Hauling on a Rope and Other Studies

by Taito II, 9 1/2 x 13. Collection Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.

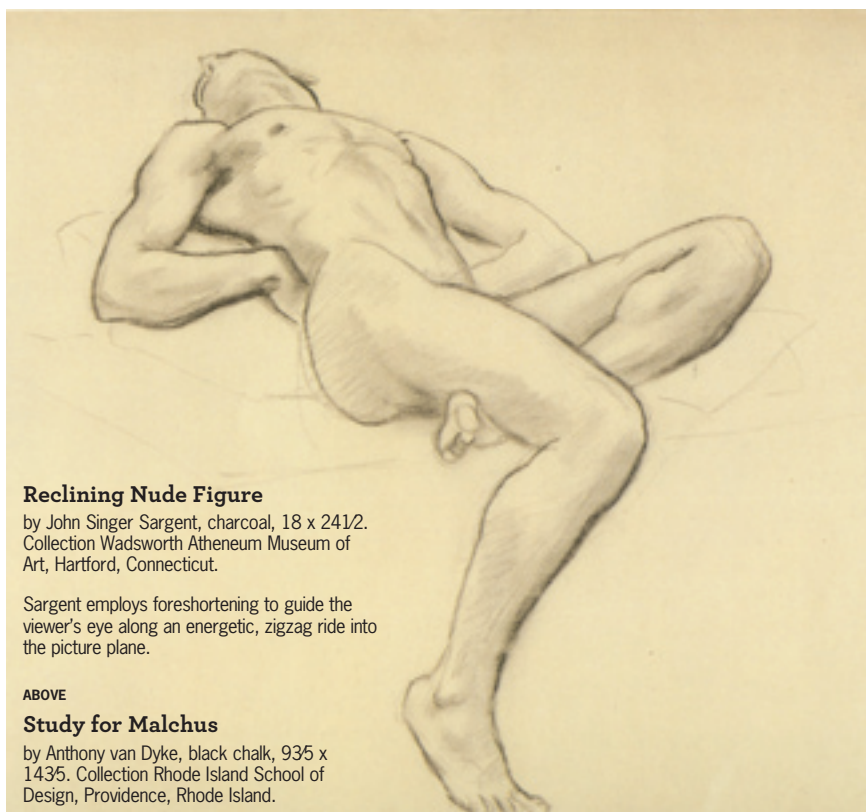
A master in his own right, Taito II's work is often misattributed to his teacher, Hokusai. It's no wonder—Taito II manipulates his line in a similar manner. In this drawing, notice the fluid use of alternating thick and thin lines.



Foreshortening

If you have ever seen a late Renaissance or Baroque painting in person, you know the power of foreshortening. Their dynamic figures lunge across the flat surface of the paintings, but their foreshortened body forms also seem to pulsate into and out of space, piercing the picture plane. These artists worked out their plans on paper in their preparatory drawings, using the powerful shorthand of line to indicate space. **When drawing gesturally, use the masters for inspiration.**

Look for cornering effects: For instance, in the arm, an elbow joint might jump out into space. Perhaps you could emphasize it with a heavy overcutting line. **Look for bones:** Sometimes you can use the shaft of the ulna in the lower arm or the thrust of the tibia in the lower leg to point the limbs back into space. Look for the separation of muscle functions: Chart lines through the valley where the flexors and the extensor muscle groups meet on the lower arm.



Reclining Nude Figure

by John Singer Sargent, charcoal, 18 x 24 1/2.
Collection Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut.

Sargent employs foreshortening to guide the viewer's eye along an energetic, zigzag ride into the picture plane.

ABOVE

Study for Malchus

by Anthony van Dyke, black chalk, 935 x 1435. Collection Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.



“If you want to know
about people, watch
their gestures. The
tongue is a greater
liar than the body.”
—Robert Henri

Foreshortened Figure
by Dan Gheno, 1995,
sanguine crayon on bond paper,
24 x 18. Collection the artist.

Positive Shapes vs. Negative Shapes

So far, we've been looking at gesture drawing from the "positive shape" standpoint. That is, we've been dealing with the human body as a solid form that exists volumetrically and pushes positively outward into space. But what about the surrounding or "negative space" that pushes back onto and surrounds the figure? **Negative space is a very useful and constructive force.** Artists often use background tones to establish the limits of figures. Shadow masses can seem to bump up against a figure, riding along the outside of the form.

You can also use negative space to catch flaws in your proportions or in the action of the figure. Imagine that you are drawing a model who is standing with one hand on a hip. Look at the length and width of the space between the arm and the torso. Do you have a similar space in your drawing? **If your negative shape is much bigger or much smaller, much wider or thinner, this is a sure warning sign that you need to reassess the proportions of your figure.**

As with all potent visual tools, don't use this approach casually or recklessly. Human beings aren't plaster casts, and while working from the live model, you will inevitably notice that the negative shapes shift one minute to the next. Sometimes this shift is subtle, but at other times, especially after the model takes a break and resumes the pose, the negative shapes might morph radically. I can't emphasize this warning too strongly! Quite often, the pose will look unchanged, but as you begin to zero in on the



A Woman Sleeping

by Rembrandt van Rijn, ca. 1655, brush drawing.
Collection The British Museum, London, England.

Ask yourself, Why are you drawing this body in front of you? Even if you are drawing someone for five minutes, the model's pose should suggest something to you. Perhaps the model suggests a sleepy, listless mood as in Rembrandt's expressive drawing of his companion, Hendrickje Stoffels.

details and look to the negative shapes for guidance, you may notice that there is now less space between the arm and the chest. You might be tempted to move the inner line of the arm toward the torso, but if you don't move the outer side of the arm along with it, you will end up with a humongous arm that would impress the Incredible Hulk. **Even if you take an expressive approach to drawing, you need to monitor the width and lengths**

of the positive figure forms as much, if not more than, the negative shapes. After all, the atmosphere between the arm and the torso can measure any size, and although the artist may be the last person to realize it, the viewer quickly knows when an arm is out of sync with the rest of the figure. **You also don't want to needlessly "chase the pose," redrawing a well-proportioned arm just because the negative space has changed slightly.** Even if you haven't finished the detail on the arm, you don't necessarily need to alter its position because it's now in a slightly different position or the negative shape has changed. **Instead, take the value structures on the model's new arm position and tilt them to fit the angle of your originally drawn arm.**

**Centaur Embracing
Two Women**

by Auguste Rodin, pen, wash,
and gouache. Collection
Musée Rodin, Paris, France.



Concepts and Composition

Art history shows us that the human body, particularly the nude human form, has enormous metaphorical and symbolic power. Don't squander its potential, and don't let your drawings—gestural or otherwise—become scholastic exercises. Ask yourself, Why are you drawing this body in front of you? Even if you are drawing someone for five minutes, the model's pose should suggest something to you. Perhaps it's an emotion such as happiness or melancholy that we sometimes find existing together in many of Egon Schiele's drawings; or perhaps the model suggests a sleepy, listless mood as in Rembrandt's expressive *A Woman Sleeping* or a somber, heavy mood as in Rodin's *Centaur Embracing Two Women*. I often look upon the quicker

gesture drawings as an opportunity to examine and draw the sheer beauty and emblematic power of muscles rarely seen in a more static pose. Place the germ of a concept in the back of your mind as you work.

It may not magically solve all of your drawing issues, but you will find yourself more excited and motivated when you deal with some added issues that go beyond the visual.

Even though you are working quickly, you should still think about composition or give some thought to placing the figure in an environment. Watch your energy level rise when you place your figures in the midst of doing something active, such as hanging clothes, washing a car, or stretching.

The activity is often inherent in the pose when the sketch is done as a study for a painting such as Tiepolo's drawing or the *Taito II* drawing. Some artists create an implied activity when they link multiple images of the same model across the page. Sometimes they use this simple grouping to create a pleasing pattern of shapes, but more often, they use it to suggest a sequential action in the figure, as if the model is turning, twisting, or moving back and forth through an implied space. **Whatever the model's activity, you can add vitality to your drawings if you always try to think of some underlying personal motivation as you work. However, stop when you've achieved your essential goals—don't overwork the drawing.**

Long-Term Drawing

There is nothing more exhilarating than getting a good start on a drawing. And, often there is nothing more terrifying than watching your drawing evaporate in front of your eyes as it turns into a stiff, brittle echo of your dynamic beginning gesture. It's very difficult to hold onto that initial gesture while working on a long-term drawing. I often turn my drawing upside down, or sideways, or hold it up to a mirror to check the gesture and proportions of the pose.

I also do a lot of squinting to better gauge the equally important light-and-dark value contrasts that give vitality to the drawing. I'll do anything to maintain my objectivity. On some occasions, I momentarily put aside the sustained drawing, grab another piece of paper, and quickly sketch the pose from an alternate viewpoint, trying to re-examine and reconfirm the gesture in my mind.

I often encourage my students to wait at least 20 minutes before beginning a long-term drawing or painting. Models usually settle into the pose during this time, sometimes slumping enough to radically change the underlying gesture. You can do many things in the meantime, such as work on compositional sketches or lay in a very flexible, rough placement of the figure or figures. Robert Henri put great emphasis on these early stages. He believed you couldn't get a good finish without a good start. Speaking to beginners, he told them that it was more important to do a lot of starts, eventually learning how to set up a useable foundation for the completed artwork, rather than spending a great deal of time practicing the finishes on failed images. For the more advanced artists, Henri reminded them that gesture was paramount, and he admonished them to maintain the



Gesture Drawing
by Don Gale, Conté,
11 x 8 1/2. Collection
the artist.

same level of liveliness and vigor of stroke from beginning to end.

You must remain sensitive to the underlying gesture throughout the drawing process, forcing yourself to scan the model from top to bottom even as you home in on the fine details. The big, basic gesture always reigns

supreme, but there are subtle gestures even in the details: the cant of an eye or the raising of an eyebrow, the pointing of a finger and the slope of a hat. According to Robert Henri, "If you want to know about people, watch their gestures. The tongue is a greater liar than the body."

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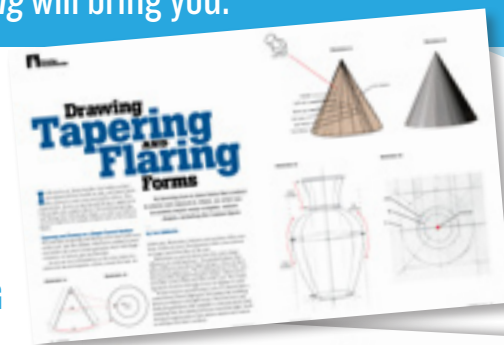


William Rose



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