FIGURE DRAWING BASICS

Brenda Hoddinott

H-17 BEGINNER: FOCUS ON PEOPLE

How many times have you tried to draw a person, and finally given up in frustration saying "I can't get this right"? Be patient with yourself and don't give up! Mastering figure drawing may take several years; however, with practice, your skills gradually improve and your drawings of people begin to look better and better.

This article walks you through the very basics of figure drawing, and is divided into the following parts:

- **RESPECTING HUMAN BODIES:** You examine simple line drawings of male and female bodies, with an emphasis on respect for diversity.
- **EXPLORING SKETCHES:** You explore various sketches of people with the goal of developing a basic understanding of the process of sketching.
- **TRYING OUT SOME SKETCHING TECHNIQUES:** You are introduced to a few different ways to sketch with simple step by step instructions.
- **EXAMINING DRAWINGS OF FIGURES:** Artists often use a sketch as a preliminary study for a more detailed drawing. In this section, I discuss a few drawings that were inspired by or began as a sketch.
- **ARMS AND HANDS:** Artists, who want to include people in their drawings, need to become skilled at sketching the various parts of people.
- **PERSPECTIVES ON FIGURES:** Accurately rendering perspective is an integral aspect of correctly representing a human figure in a sketch.
- **TIPS FOR SKETCHING FROM A LIVE MODEL:** With the cooperation of an actual person, you can draw standing, sitting, and laying down poses from several different perspectives.

Suggested supplies include 2H, HB, 2B, 4B and 6B pencils, vinyl and kneaded erasers, a pencil sharpener, a sandpaper block, and good quality drawing paper.

17 PAGES - 40 ILLUSTRATIONS

Both nude and clothed figures are illustrated in this lesson; hence, the content is recommended for mature artists. Artists under the age of 18 need permission from an adult before viewing. The curriculum is easily implemented into instructional programs for home schooling, academic and recreational learning environments.

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RESPECTING HUMAN BODIES

For centuries, diverse cultures and societies have defined the various attributes of physical beauty in terms of their own concepts of ideal. For example, during the 1500's, full-bodied women were sought by artists as wonderful examples of how a female body should look. Throughout most of the 20th century, robust and voluptuous women continued to be artists' favorite models, and were considered the most beautiful as actresses and models; for instance, Marilyn Monroe was considered full-bodied. During the past four decades mostly thin women have become celebrated as ideal models.

Leading a physically active and healthy lifestyle with a well-balanced diet is a great deal more important than what an individual body looks like. Today, medical professionals advocate heath concerns as the primary reason for maintaining a body that is neither too thin nor too heavy. However, this does not mean that thin and heavy individuals are unattractive. In fact, in the eyes of mature, accomplished artists, all human bodies are considered beautiful.

Women and men come in various sizes, primarily determined by their genetics and life styles. Even persons of the same age and gender can have extremely different body shapes, heights and weights. To believe that one specific adult body type or size is ideal would be to under-appreciate the vast natural beauty of all human bodies.

Figure 1701 shows several different adult bodies. Explore their outlines in terms of shape and form, as you would a collection of priceless sculptures or vases.

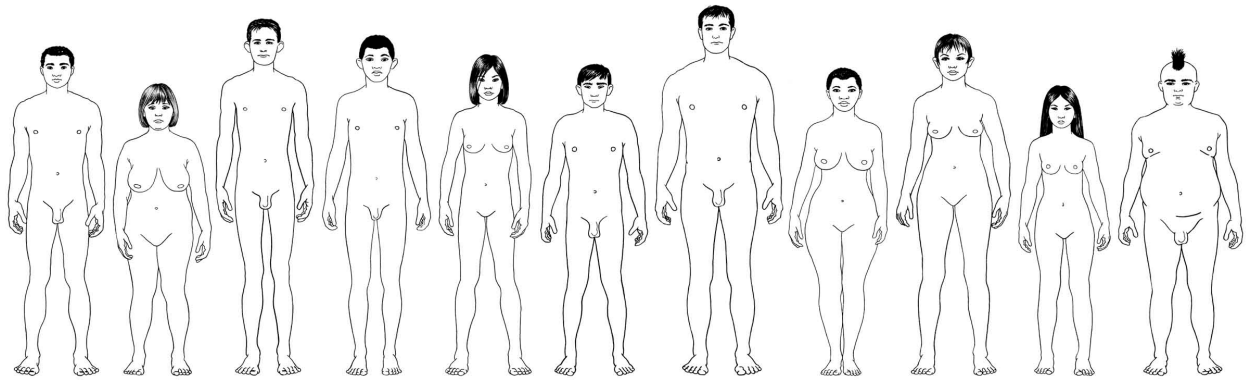


Figure 1701: Eleven adults of approximately the same age, with equally beautiful bodies

Male figures come in many shapes and sizes, from the tiny body of a male infant, to a big tall adult man. Adult males are generally inclined to have a larger bone structure, and be bigger overall than women.

In addition, men have a tendency to be more muscular and often don't have as much body fat as women; hence, the forms of the various components of their bodies, such as bones and muscles, are sometimes more noticeable.

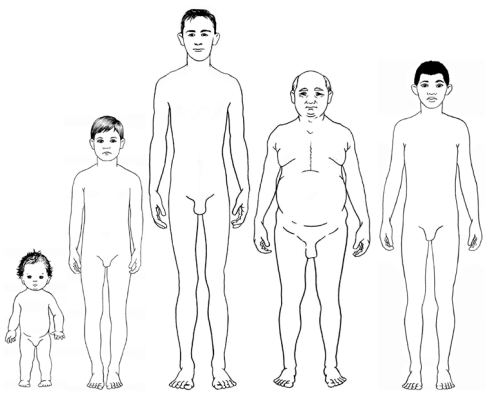


Figure 1702: Five very different male bodies

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Overall, female bodies are generally smaller than those of men. Women tend to have more body fat, giving a rounder, softer appearance to their bodies.

Extra body fat often obscures the surface forms of smaller bones and muscles, and creates more obvious independent forms. Muscles in females generally tend to be less developed than in males.

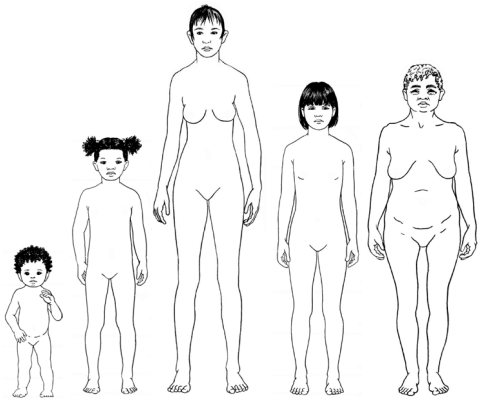


Figure 1703: Five equally beautiful female bodies

The shapes of children's bodies are very different from one another. Infants, children, and adolescents have different rates of growth, and their body proportions change at various stages of development. Observe any group of children of approximately the same age, and take note of their completely different body structures and shapes.

As athletes proudly wear their medals to show their achievements, so too, should older people respect their bodies as beautiful trophies of noble lives long lived. Every wrinkle, sag, and scar proudly identifies their victories of overcoming personal adversities and successfully navigating a long journey through several decades.

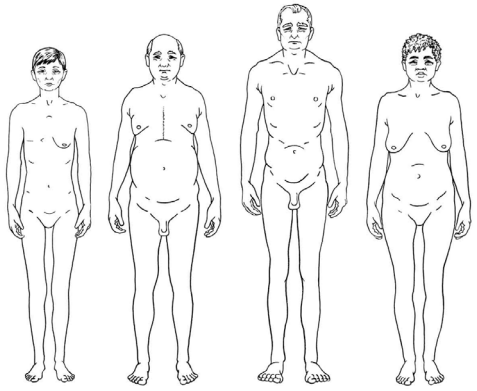


Figure 1704: Four mature bodies demonstrate the physical beauty of a long life

Art-Speak

Drawing (also called *sketching*): (verb) is the application of an art medium to a surface so as to produce a visual image, which visually defines an artist's choice of drawing subjects from his or her own unique perspective.

Form: as applied to drawing, is the illusion of the three-dimensional structure of a shape, such as a circle, square or triangle, created in a drawing with shading and/or perspective.

Gesture sketch: uses simple sketching methods to capture the past, present, or potential movements of living beings.

EXPLORING SKETCHES

The goal of sketching (sometimes called drawing) is to quickly and efficiently capture information about your subject, such as the gesture, proportions, forms, shapes, textures, and/or values. With comprehensive visual examinations of your subjects and tons of practice, sketches become quick and easy.

Sketching figures from life (clothed or unclothed) usually requires willing and cooperative subjects to pose for you. You may discover human models for sketching while you are at home, strolling in your neighborhood, enjoying a noisy pool party with many people, or sitting in a friend's home on a quiet, peaceful afternoon. When asked to be the focus of an artist's sketch, most individuals, especially your family and friends, usually feel quite honored.

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Art-Speak

Proportion: is the relationship in size of one component of a drawing to another or others.

Rough sketch: is quickly rendered and illustrates important elements of a subject with very few details.

Shape: refers to the outward outline of a form. Basic shapes include circles, squares and triangles.

Sketch: (noun) is a simple drawing that captures the integral aspects of a subject quickly and efficiently; (verb) refers to the process of rendering a sketch (or drawing).

Texture: is the surface detail of an object, as defined in a drawing with various shading techniques. The senses of touch and sight help identify the surface texture of drawing subject.

Values: are the different shades of gray created when you draw by varying both the density of the shading lines, and the pressure used in holding your pencils.

The rough sketch in Figure 1705 captured the essence of the model's pose in only a few minutes.

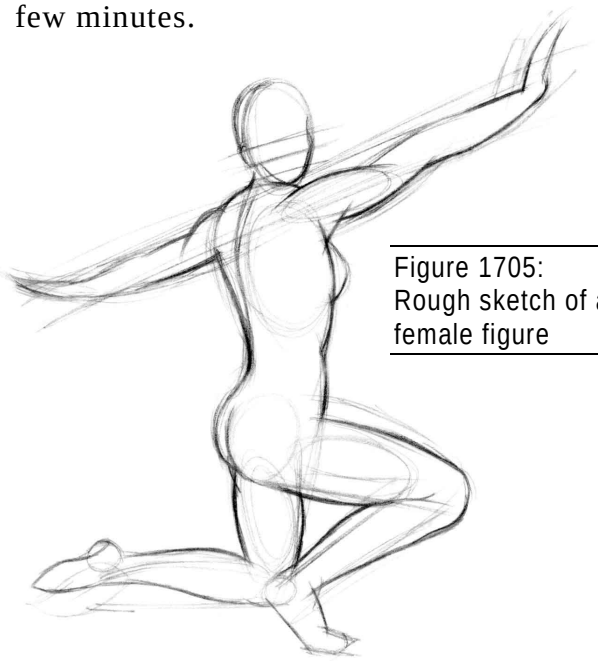


Figure 1705: Rough sketch of a female figure

A lot more information can be illustrated by adding a few contour lines on top of a rough sketch. In Figure 1706, Simple contour drawings capture my grandson, Brandon, in motion and/or about to move.

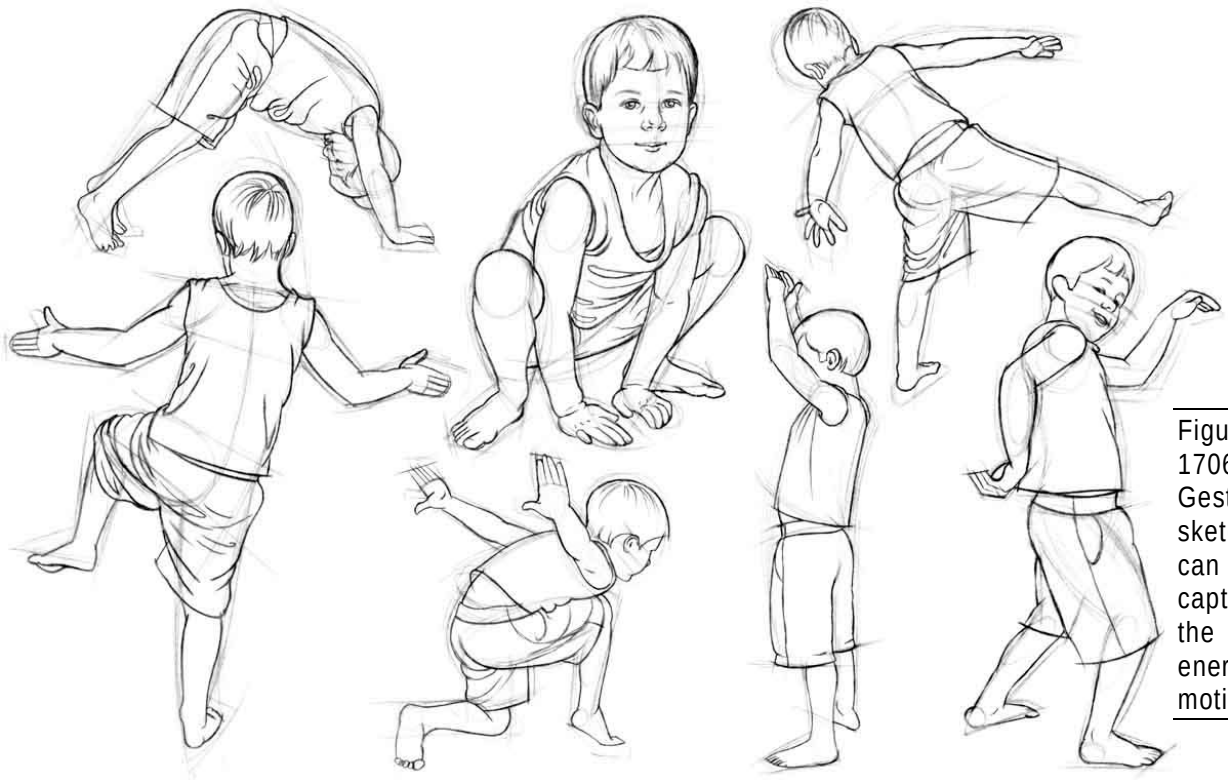
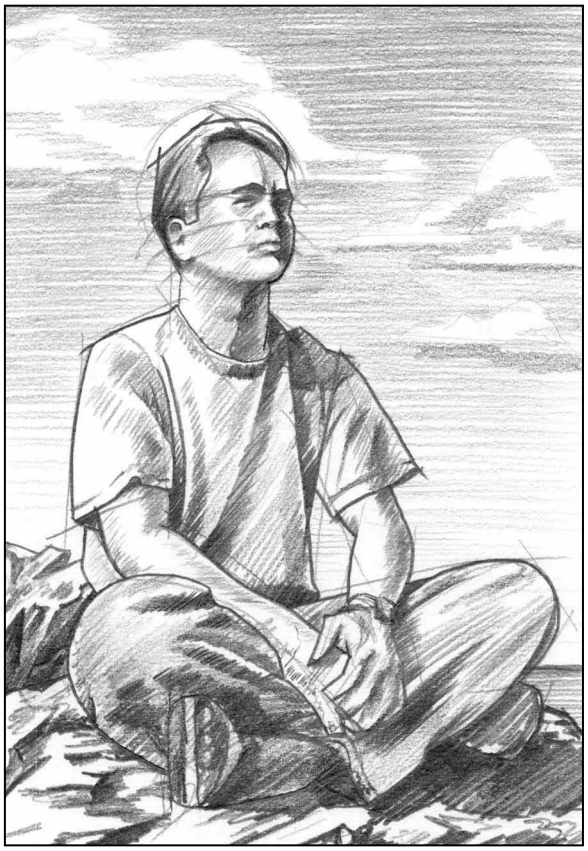


Figure 1706: Gesture sketches can capture the energy of motion

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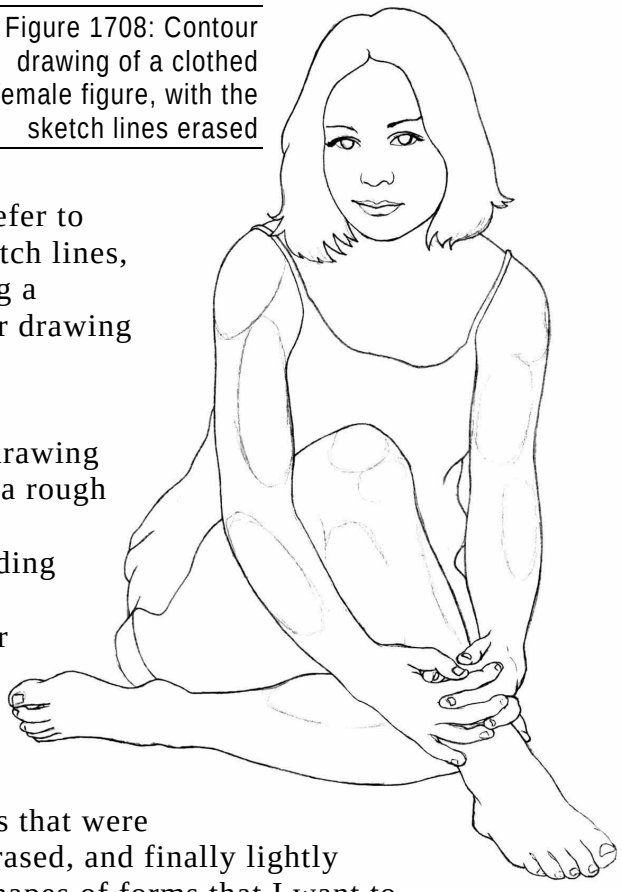
A detailed sketch (or drawing) is generally more comprehensive and takes longer to render than rough or gesture sketches. A sketch can be a completed work of art or simply a study for a more detailed drawing (or painting).

Figure 1707 shows a sketch rendered with both lines and shading. As you can tell by the locations of the shadows, the light source is from the upper left. Look closely and you can even see the lines from the initial rough sketch.

The process for doing this sketch was to: lightly sketch proportions, then outline shapes and forms (also see Figure 1710), and finally add shading.

Figure 1707: Detailed sketch of a young man sitting on a rocky cliff, with the ocean and sky behind him

Figure 1708: Contour drawing of a clothed female figure, with the sketch lines erased



Some artists prefer to erase rough sketch lines, after completing a detailed contour drawing (Figure 1708).

The process of rendering this drawing entailed: doing a rough sketch of the proportions, adding neat and more detailed contour lines, erasing the initial sketch lines, touching up the sections of lines that were inadvertently erased, and finally lightly sketching the shapes of forms that I want to later accentuate with shading.

Art-Speak

Contour drawings (also called *line drawings*): are comprised of lines which follow the contours of the various components of a drawing subject and define the outlines of its forms.

Contour lines: are created when the shared edges of spaces and/or objects meet. Contour lines can define complete objects or small sections or details within drawing subjects.

Light source: The direction from which a dominant light originates. The placement of this light source affects every aspect of a drawing. The light source tells you where to draw all the light values and shadows.

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TRYING OUT SOME SKETCHING TECHNIQUES

Artists are unique individuals and develop different ways of sketching based on their personal preferences. The method you choose for sketching is completely a matter of individual choice. Some artists prefer lines, more prefer only shading, and others (like me) prefer a combination of values and lines.

Before you begin drawing people from life, you need to improve your speed and accuracy! Keep in mind that some poses become uncomfortable for the model after only a couple of minutes. Practice lots of sketches from photos or non-living models until your observation and drawing skills become strong and your speed increases.

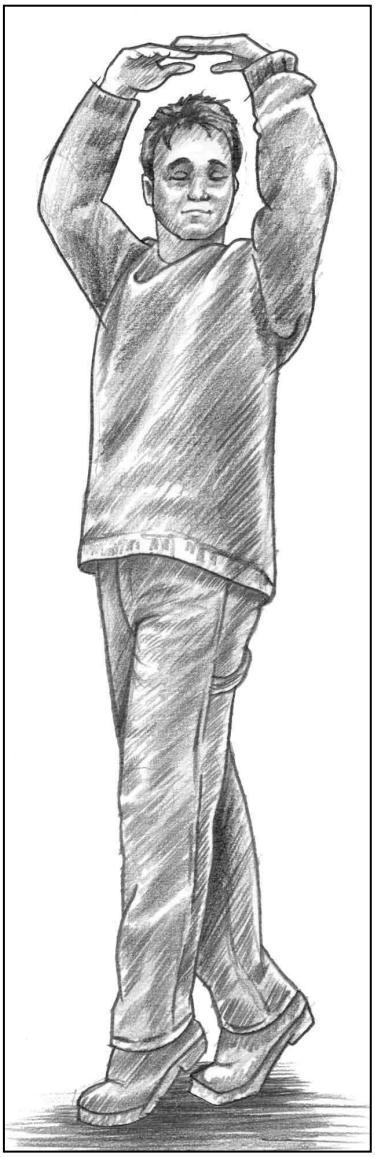
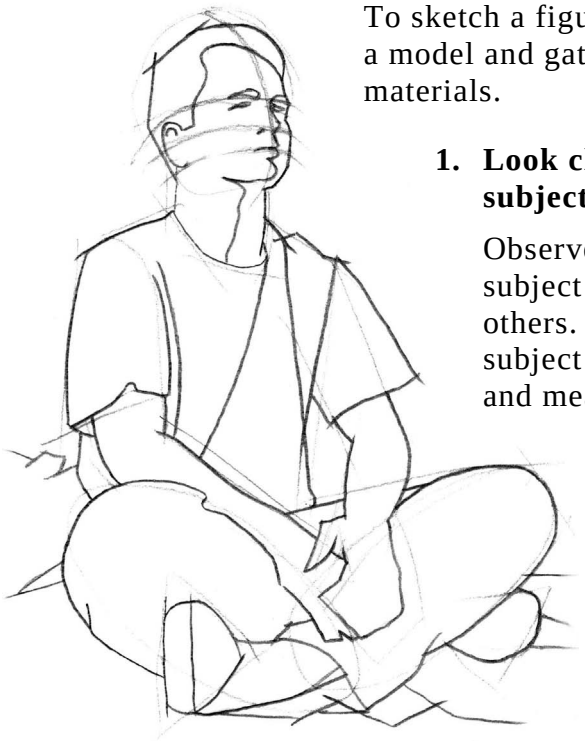


Figure 1709: Sketch rendered with contour lines and shading

Sketch with contour lines

To sketch a figure with lines, find a model and gather your drawing materials.



1. **Look closely at your subject.**

   Observe which parts of the subject are in front of others. Visually break the subject down into shapes and measure proportions.

2. **Draw what you see.**

   Draw slowly. Accuracy is more important than speed. Speed automatically improves with time and practice. Remember, capturing the overall essence of your subject is more important than trying to draw intricate details.

Figure 1710: Rough sketch of seated man rendered with contour lines

Sketch with spiral lines

Gesture sketching with spiral lines, lends itself perfectly to drawing the human figure. Find a drawing subject, preferably one with arms and legs. Examine the spiral drawing in Figure 1711 to get an idea of what a spiral drawing looks like.

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Take a few minutes and practice drawing spirals before you start sketching.

1. **Use a spiral (or circular) motion with your pencil to capture the three-dimensional forms of your subject.**

   Choose a section at the top or one end of your subject to begin your spiral sketching. Pretend you are simply wrapping a very long, thin ribbon around and around each section of your subject. Use smaller spirals for the small areas, such as hands, and larger ones for the bigger sections, such as the torso.

2. **Add a few more spiral or C-shaped lines, to darken the values in areas that are in shadow.**

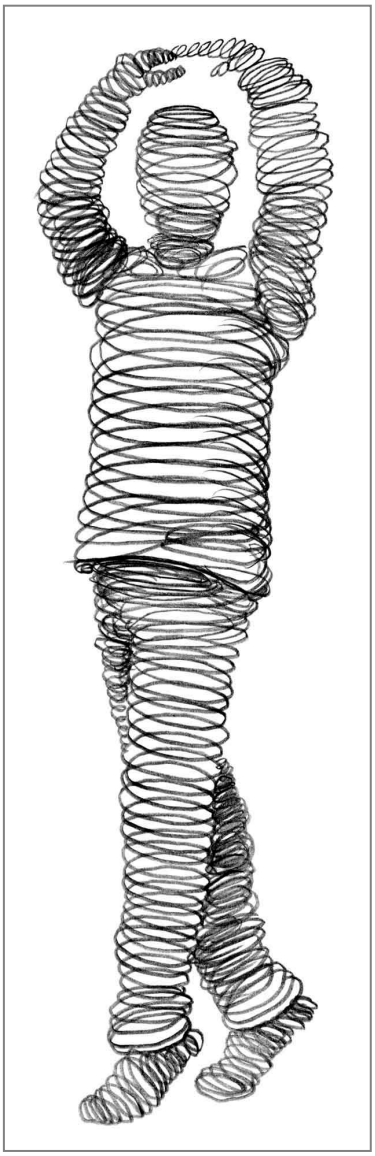


Figure 1711: Spiral lines are great for creating the illusion of three dimensions in this sketch of a figure

Sketch with shading

Some artists, who like to sketch with only values, find that sticks of charcoal or conté are much more efficient, and faster to work with than pencils. The wide ends and sides of sticks can define a great deal of information with a single stroke.

Find a subject with a strong light source, so you see lots of light and dark values. Use a stick of charcoal (or conté) to try your hand at sketching with shading. Squint your eyes to help see the different values.

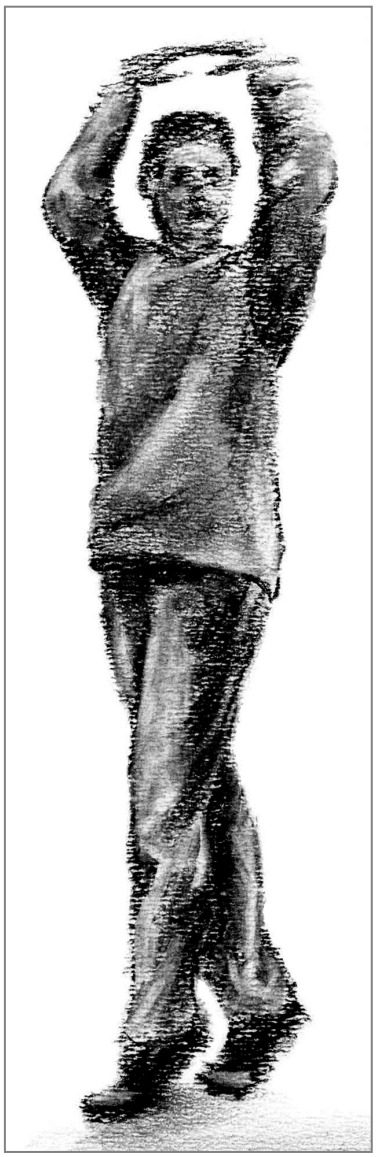


Figure 1712: A softly rendered sketch of a figure is defined by a strong contrast between the light sections and shadows, rather than lines

1. **Lightly block in the shape of your subject with the side of a stick of charcoal (or conté).**

   This shading represents your middle values, and defines the overall shape and size of your subject, as well as its position within your drawing space.

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2. **Use an end of a charcoal stick to add dark shading.**

   Look for the dark values in the shadow areas. Remember, to focus on only the shapes created by the different values. Stay away from lines as much as possible.

3. **Use a tissue (or paper towel) and a kneaded eraser to bring out medium and light values.**

   Use a tissue or piece of paper towel to gently smudge (or blend) the dark values, towards the areas you want to be lighter. Then, carefully observe your subject again to find the lightest values. Use your kneaded eraser molded to a wedge or point to gently pull out the light values from the medium.

EXAMINING DRAWINGS OF FIGURES

Sketches are sometimes considered completed works of art. However, artists often use a sketch (or sketches) as a preliminary study for a more detailed drawing. In this section, I discuss a few drawings that were inspired by or began as a sketch.

The sketch (Figure 1713) of a young man pretending to dance provides valuable information, such as the model's facial expression, the forms of his body and clothing, and the light and shadow areas.

The detailed drawing (Figure 1714) is the same pose, but took much longer to draw. It reveals more information than the sketch, such as the textures of his sweater, hair, and denim jeans.

A sketch (especially if it turns out well) can inspire the artist to continue working on it and adding additional information, until it becomes a detailed drawing.

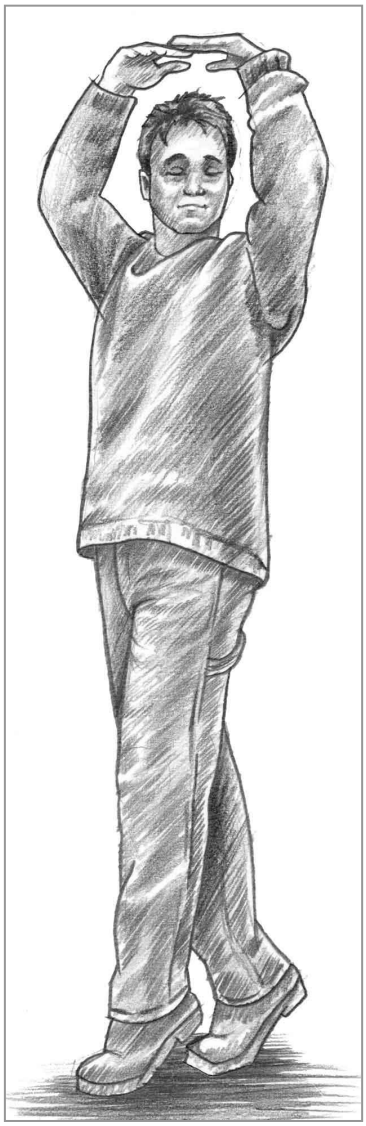


Figure 1713: Loosely rendered sketch with lines and shading

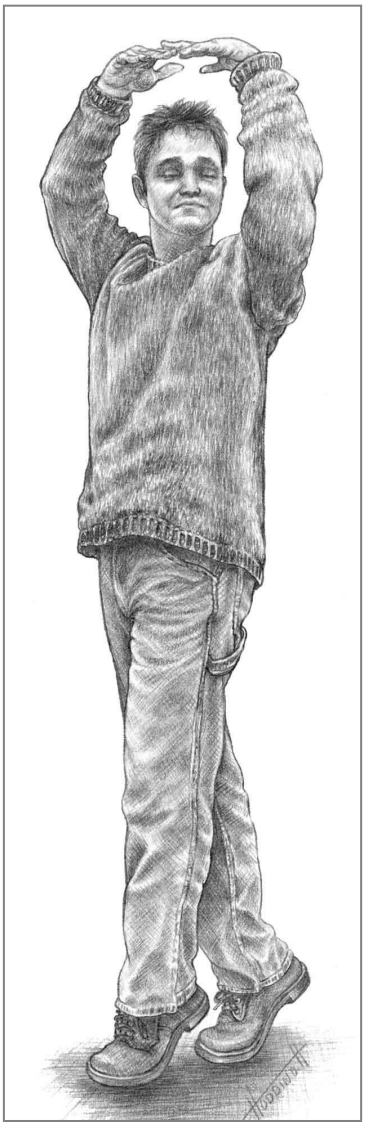
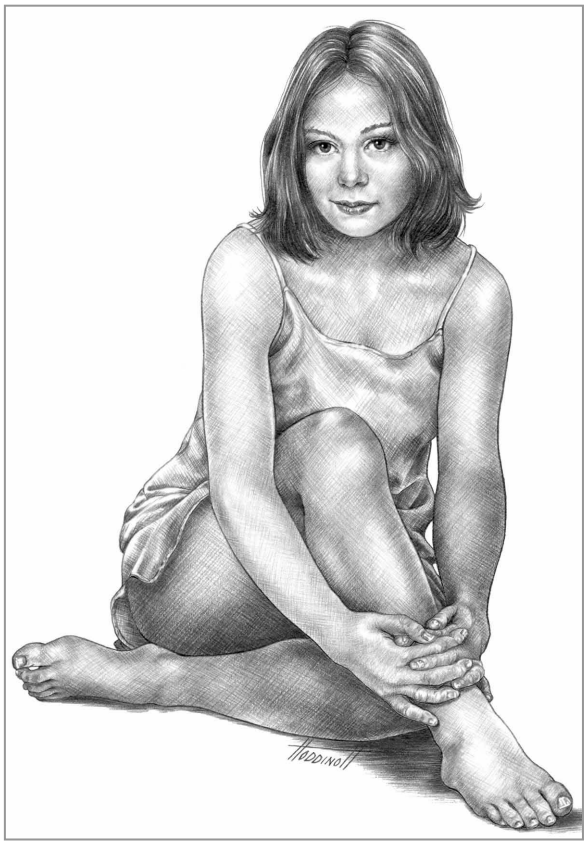


Figure 1714: Detailed drawing of a male figure that was inspired by a sketch

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A combination of lines and shading can provide the viewer with intricate facial details, the texture of hair and clothing, and the light and shadows as defined by the dominant light source.

Figure 1715 shows a realistic representation of a female figure that began as a quickly rendered rough sketch. The sketch was then transformed into a detailed contour drawing (see Figure 1708) before adding shading.

Figure 1715: Detailed drawing of clothed female figure, demonstrates how a sketch can be turned into a detailed drawing, in which shading creates the illusion of a three-dimensional reality

ARMS AND HANDS

Artists, who want to include people in their drawings, need to become skilled at sketching faces, hands, feet, legs, arms, and other parts of people.

After all, your creativity becomes very limited if you feel a need to draw all figures with their hands behind their backs, and no face or feet! In addition, when you can draw all parts of a person well, your creative options become more diverse because you can focus on the creative, without stressing and struggling with the technical.

Drawings are only as strong as their weakest parts. For example, poorly drawn arms (or hands) can spoil the overall appearance of a portrait, even if you draw the face and clothing well.

Check out the drawing in Figure 1716 and the close up view of his arms in Figure 1717. Observe the tension in the muscles and the indents in their forms where the arms press against one another.

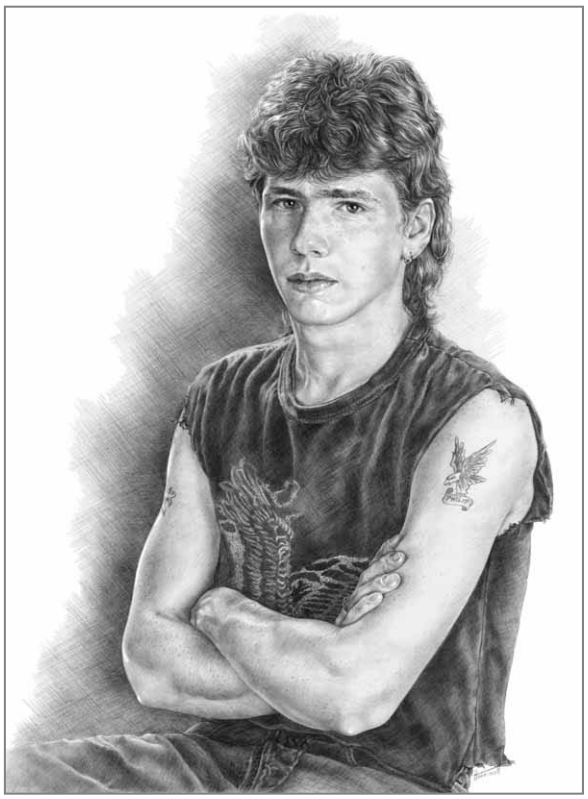
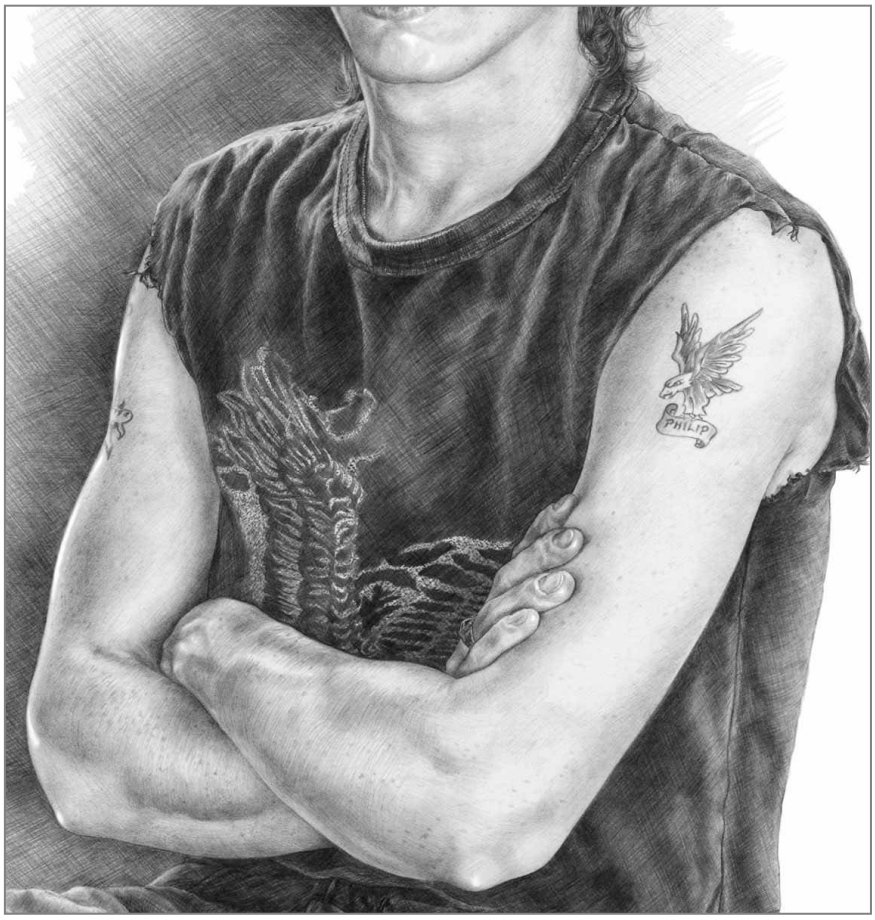


Figure 1716: A young man's gentle facial expression contrasts sharply against the tough guy facade created by the folded position of his arms

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Examine the section of his left arm where the fingers of his right hand indent the muscles.

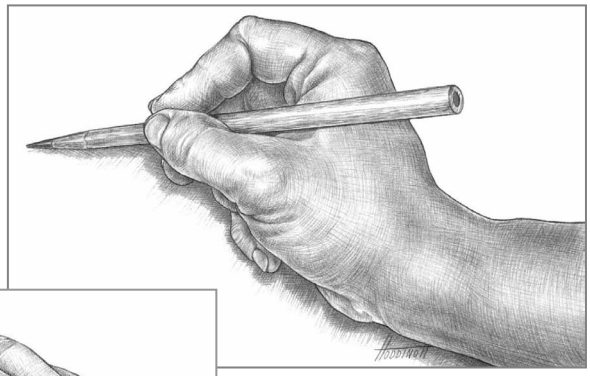
The defiant pose with the muscular folded arms and the tattered shirt were integral to achieving my artistic goal of creating an image of a very confident and tough-looking young man (he's really a sweetie!).

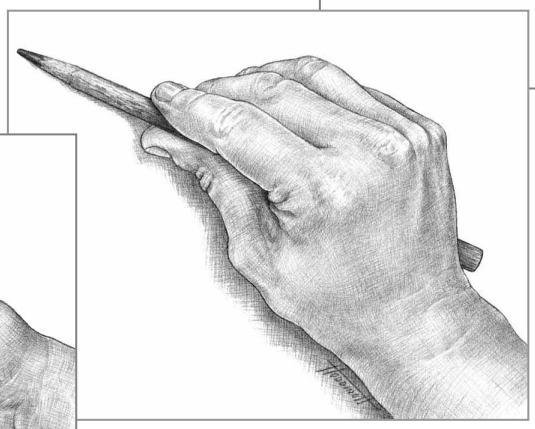
Also note the forms where his neck attaches to his body.

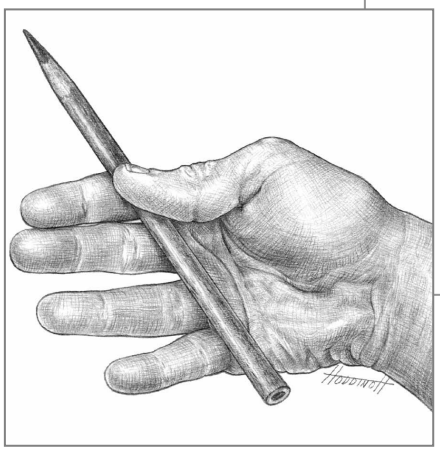
Figure 1717: A young man's neck and arms are clearly defined with shading

Sketching the various part of the body from life is the best possible way to develop an understanding of their anatomy.

Don't worry if your drawings of hands and feet look all wrong at first. Just do your best and in time, you will get better!







Once you know how to draw hands well by doing sketches from life, you can easily transfer this skill into drawing from photos or instructional drawings.

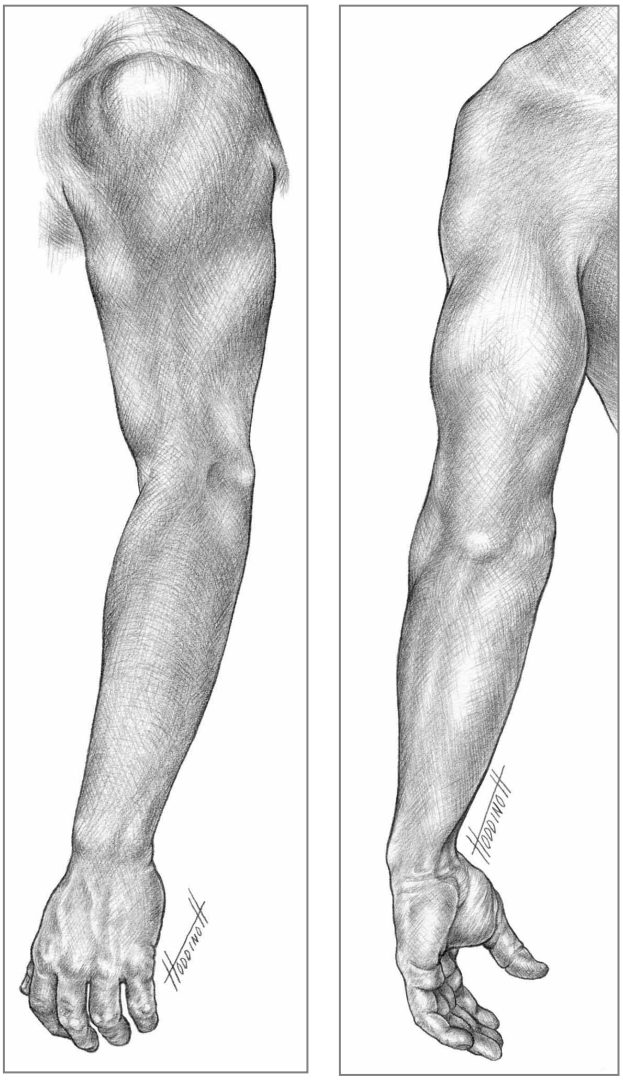
Figures 1718, 1719, and 1720: Three detailed drawings of a hand holding a pencil are the result of many years of doing sketches of hands from life

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Practice drawing individual parts of human anatomy from live models every chance you can.

If your friends and family begin running away when you approach them with your drawing supplies, you can always draw your own body parts! You need only one hand to draw, so the other one is just begging to be a model. Take off your shoes and you find two wonderful foot models. If your roommates don't object, put on your bathing suit (or birthday suit), set up your drawing materials in front of a large mirror, and draw your own legs, chest and arms.

Examine the forms created by bones and muscles in the two different views of a man's left arm (Figures 1721 and 1722).



Figures 1721 and 1722: Examine the sections where the hands are attached to arms and where the upper arms connect to the shoulders

Meet Christopher Church, (Figure 1723) who just happens to be the best violin player in the whole world. Of course, being that Chris is a long-time friend of mine, there's a very remote possibility that I may be a little biased.

Figures 1724 and 1725 are close-up views of Chris's expressive hands. His hands are as essential to the overall spirit of this drawing as his mischievous facial expression.

I used a high contrast between the light and dark values to help make the hands stand out.

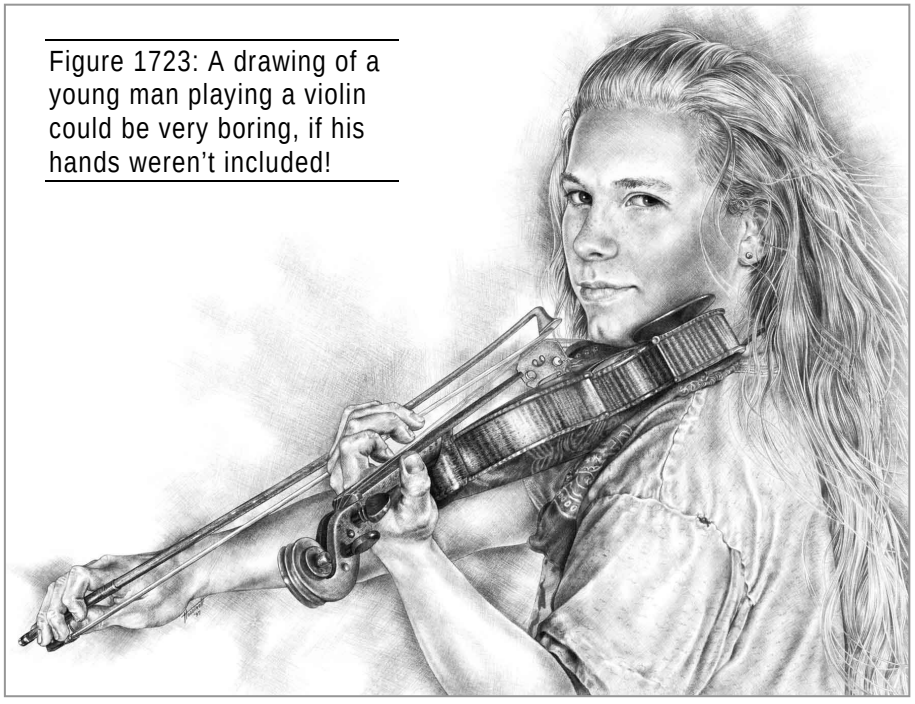
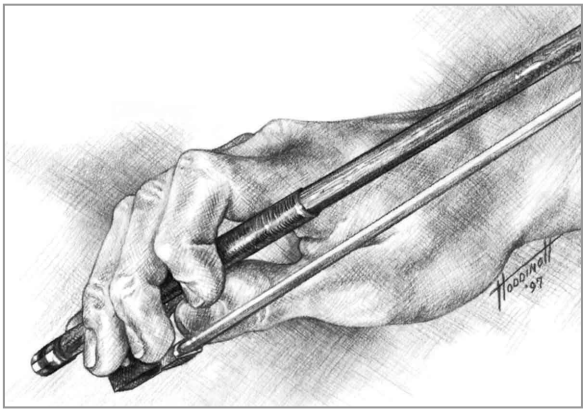
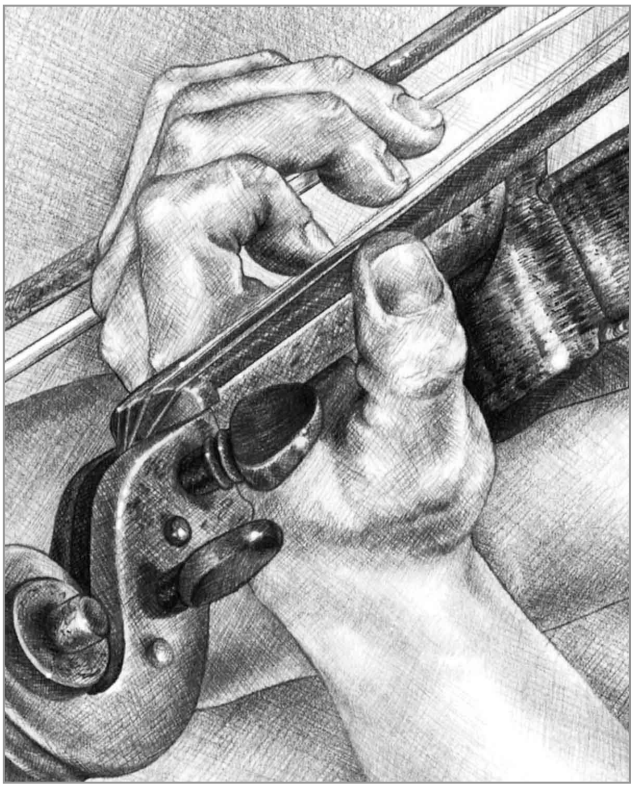


Figure 1723: A drawing of a young man playing a violin could be very boring, if his hands weren't included!

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By emphasizing the complex parts of his hands that characterize movement, such as his knuckles and the tips of his fingers, the hands become important points of interest in this drawing.





Figures 1724 and 1725: Close-up views of the forms of Chris's hands playing his violin, as defined by bones and muscles

PERSPECTIVES ON FIGURES

Artists use perspective to create the illusion of individual figures (or parts of figures) receding into distant space.

Accurately rendering perspective is an integral aspect of representing a human figure in a sketch. With the proper use of perspective, your figures become visually correct and more realistic.

Objects seem to disappear when they get close to the vanishing point, but not like disappearing into the Bermuda triangle! Because an object is too far away to still be in your line of vision doesn't mean it has actually disappeared.

Art-Speak

Perspective: (sometimes called *geometric perspective* or *linear perspective*): is a method of representing three dimensional beings, objects, or spaces within a two dimensional drawing space, so they seem to recede into distant space, and appear smaller the farther they are away.

Overlapping: refers to the position of an object when it visually appears to be in front of another object.

Horizon line: is an imaginary horizontal line, sometimes referred to as eye level, which divides your line of vision when you look straight ahead. Objects below this line are below your eye level, and objects above this line are above your eye level. Wherever you move, from the top of the highest mountain, to the lowest valley, your eye level always stays with you.

Vanishing Point (VP): The point on the horizon line where the straight lines of an object converge and the object seems to disappear. Lines of objects, that are parallel or perpendicular (at a right angle) to the horizon line, don't appear to go back in space and therefore don't meet the vanishing point.

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Most beginners to drawing tend to draw figures as they perceive them to be, rather than as they actually are. To draw figures accurately and believably you need to teach yourself to draw what you are actually seeing. For many artists, this means unlearning some of what your brain currently knows about what it sees, and readjusting its perceptions to the rules of perspective.

Figure 1726 illustrates how people appear to become smaller the closer they are to the vanishing point (and finally seem to disappear). Find examples of each of the following elements of perspective in this drawing:

- **Size differences:** Figures and individual parts of bodies appear to become smaller the farther they are away from you.
- **Overlapping:** You create the illusion of three-dimensional reality when you draw some parts of a body in front of others.
- **Arrangement:** Depending on your line of vision, objects that are closer to you are usually near the bottom of your visual space.

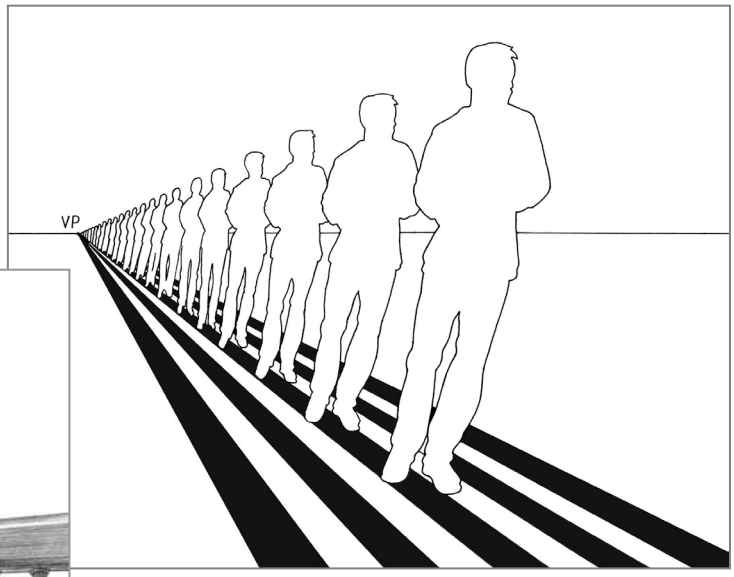
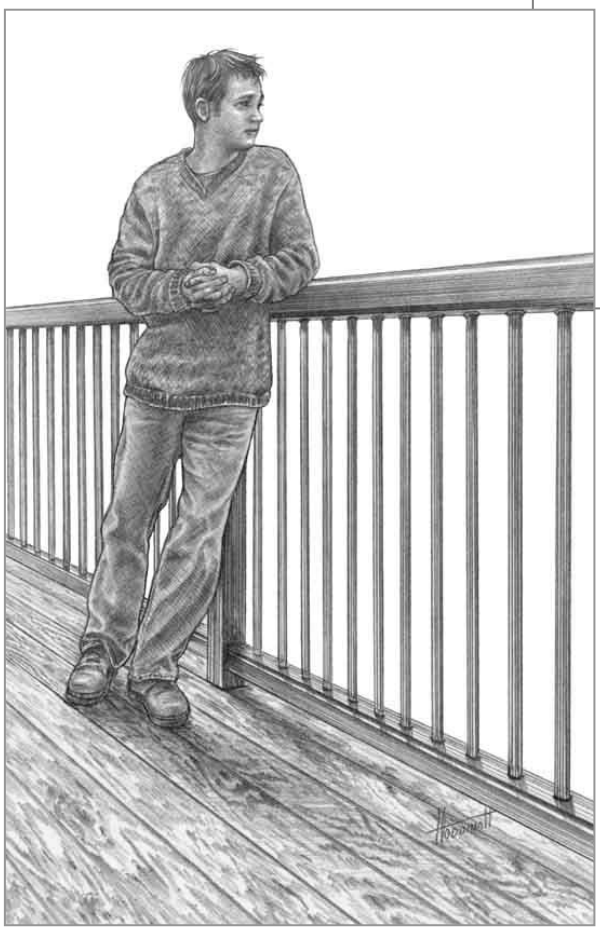


Figure 1726: Outlines of identical figures become smaller the closer they are to the vanishing point (VP)



The illusion of depth in a drawing of a figure can be created by accurately drawing the background and foreground elements with geometric perspective (Figure 1727).

The horizontal lines on the edge of the railing and the wooden planks in the deck are drawn with geometric perspective, creating the illusion that they are receding into distant space.

Figure 1727: A young man leans against a railing as the railing and the planks of the deck recede into distant space

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Foreshortening is the process in which perspective creates the illusion that a figure is shorter when viewed from an extreme angle. The foreshortened qualities of parts of bodies, such as legs and arms, become more noticeable when viewed from an end.

Check out the fun drawing of my friend, Rob in Figure 1728. Are you tempted to turn this page upside down or turn your head to look at it the other way around?

Art-Speak

Foreshortening: refers to the visual distortion of a person or object, when viewed at extreme angles. As the angle of viewing becomes more extreme the level of distortion becomes more pronounced.

This fun gesture shows a realistic perspective on foreshortening. Foreshortening creates visual distortions to his body, even though he is actually a well proportioned young man of average height. I couldn't render this pose realistically without drawing the distortions I actually see. Only his left arm and head appear to be their actual lengths.

Take note of the following visual illusions created by overlapping and foreshortening:

- His right foot looks very tiny when compared to his right hand.
- His right leg appears shorter than the width of his face.
- His lower left leg, right arm, torso, and right hand look very short.

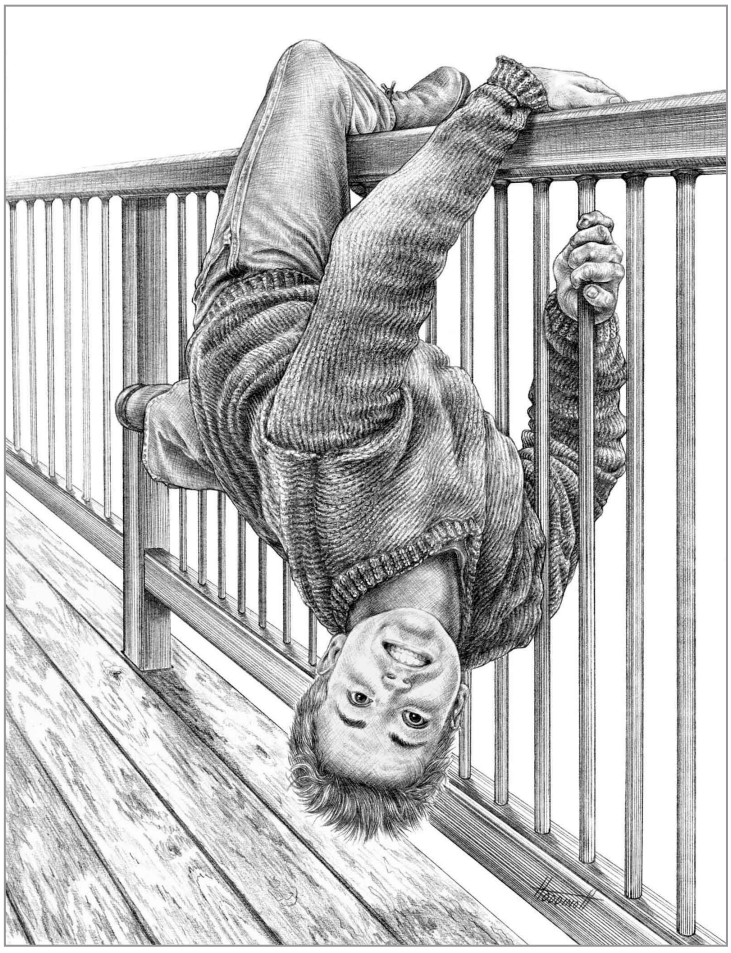


Figure 1728: Don't worry – Rob didn't hold this pose for several hours – this drawing is done from a photo

Perspective is complex. Don't expect to master all components right away. Be patient with yourself. Careful observation of objects around you expands your understanding of perspective. Your skills at rendering perspective, improve with practice.

TIPS FOR SKETCHING FROM A LIVE MODEL

You can draw a human figure in oodles of different ways, such as drawing just the light and shadow areas, simply accentuating the various forms, using only lines, or focusing on only one specific area of interest. With the cooperation of an actual person, you can draw standing, sitting, and laying down poses from several different perspectives.

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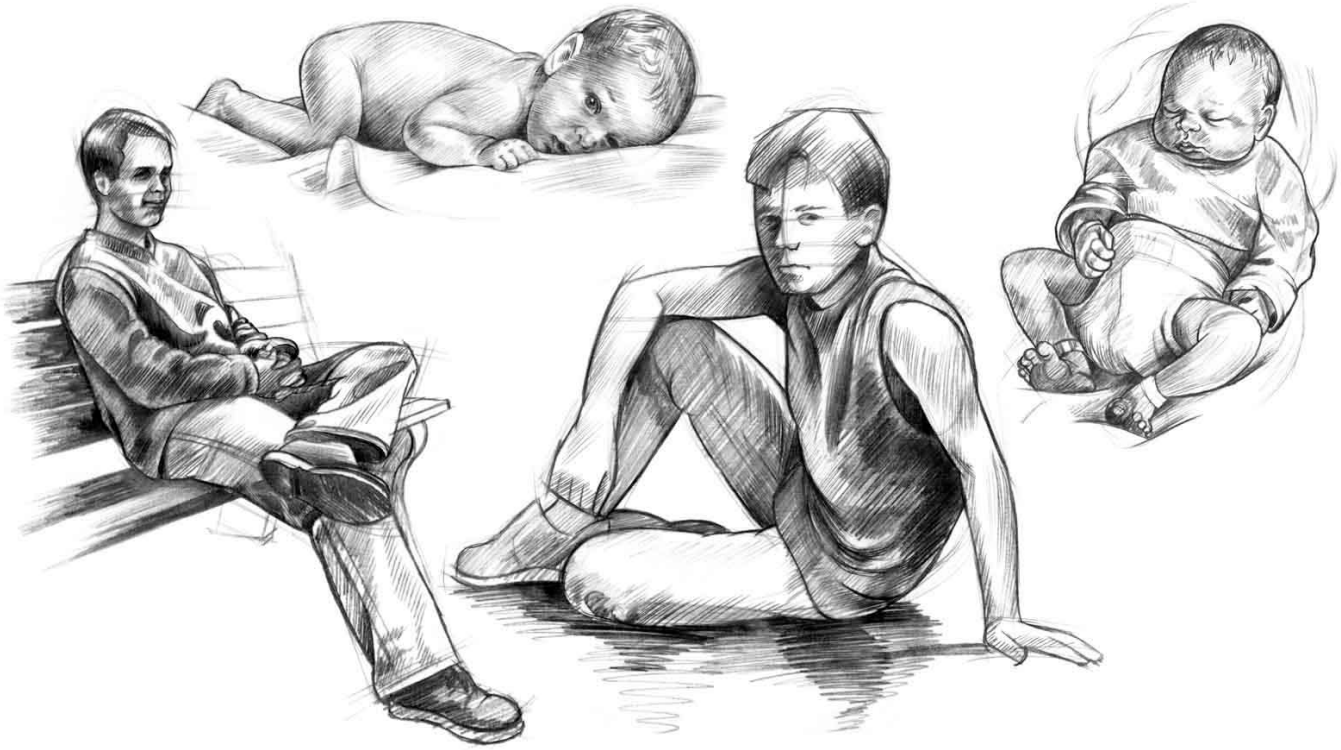
Modeling is very difficult, so please keep the following in mind:

- If your model is unclothed or partially clothed, make sure the room is warm, private, and comfortable.
- Have snacks and beverages handy and assure your model that she or he can take a break anytime.
- Choose poses that are expressive, artistically pleasing, and comfortable for your model.
- Use tape or chalk to mark the placement of his or her body on the surface on which he or she is sitting, standing, or lying. For example, by marking the outline of the model's feet in a standing pose, he or she can easily find the correct pose again after a break.
- Experiment with different drawing media such as conté, charcoal, or graphite sticks and use large sheets of paper.

In closing, I'd like to stress that there's nothing wrong with occasionally working from photographs. However, you can't accurately draw the three-dimensional forms of a human body without having carefully observed and done drawings from real people.

CHALLENGE

Sketch three figures or parts of figures every day for the next month from life (unfortunately actual models aren't included with my lessons). To help you with ideas examine the 12 sketches on this page and the next.



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Use different ways of sketching including those discussed in this lesson.





In addition, you can also come up with some sketching styles of your own, or research sketching and try to duplicate the styles of other artists, including the masters of the Renaissance.







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Brenda Hoddinott

As a self-educated teacher, visual artist, portraitist, forensic artist, and illustrator, Brenda utilizes diverse art media including graphite, technical pen, colored pencil, chalk pastel, charcoal, conté crayon, and oil paints.

My philosophy on teaching art is to focus primarily on the enjoyment aspects while gently introducing the technical and academic. Hence, in creating a passion for the subject matter, the quest for knowledge also becomes enjoyable.

Biography

Born in St. John's, Newfoundland, Brenda grew up in the small town of Corner Brook. She developed strong technical competencies with a personal commitment to self directed learning, and the aid of assorted "Learn to Draw" books. During Brenda's twenty-five year career as a self-educated civilian forensic artist, numerous criminal investigation departments have employed Brenda's skills, including Royal Canadian Mounted Police and municipal police departments. In 1992, Brenda was honored with a commendation from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and in 1994, she was awarded a Certificate of Membership from "Forensic Artists International".

Her home-based art career included graphic design, and teaching recreational drawing and painting classes. As supervisor of her community's recreational art department, Brenda hired and trained teachers, and designed curriculum for several children's art programs. In 1998, Brenda chose to end her eighteen-year career as an art educator in order to devote more time to writing, drawing, painting, and developing her websites.

Drawspace http://www.drawspace.com incorporates her unique style and innovative approach to curriculum development. This site offers downloadable and printable drawing classes for students of all abilities from the age of eight through adult. Students of all ages, levels and abilities have praised the simple step-by-step instructional approach. This site is respected as a resource for fine art educators, home schooling programs, and educational facilities throughout the world.

Learn-to-draw books

Drawing for Dummies: Wiley Publishing, Inc., New, York, NY, this 336 page book is available on various websites and in major bookstores internationally.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Drawing People: Winner of the Alpha-Penguin Book of the Year Award 2004, Alpha - Pearson Education – Macmillan, Indianapolis, IN, this 360 page book is available on various websites and in major bookstores internationally.

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