How to Draw & Observe Like an Artist

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INTRODUCTION

By now, you've already labelled yourself as someone who can, or someone who can't draw. And since you're reading this there's a good chance it's the latter!

Why is it that some people are naturally gifted with a pencil and others aren't?

And why are those gifted few able to turn their hand to any form of visual art quickly and effortlessly?

While no one is born with artistic ability, it is true that for some people drawing comes naturally and for most of us, it doesn't.

But more importantly, it's also true is that ANYONE can learn how to draw.

Actually, I'll re-phrase that slightly...

*Anyone can learn how to draw so long as they are willing to learn some key principles and practice in the right way.*

Practice is important part of learning any skill but practice only makes permanent, not perfect.

So if you've spent years trying to learn how to draw to a good standard, without success, it's only because you've been using the wrong strategy NOT because there's something inherently lacking in the way your brain, eyes and hands work.
YOU’RE DRAWING BLIND

If I asked you to draw an object without looking at your paper (an exercise called 'blind drawing') you'd expect the resulting image to be pretty poor.

It's obvious why... without being able to see your hand on the page, all you can do is make a guess as to the shape, size and position of the pencil marks you make.

Yet when you allow yourself to look at your drawing hand and paper, it's not that much easier and the results are only marginally better!

That's because you're still essentially just making guesses. You're still drawing 'blind'.

You look at the object in front of you, pick out a line, look back at your paper and think "that line is about this long and at this angle and curves about this much".

And more often than not your judgement will be off, sometimes by quite a lot.

The marks you make, the shapes you draw and the size and position you draw them won't be what you're actually seeing.

Why is this?

You don't intentionally make inaccurate marks, so what's stopping you from seeing things how they really are?
LEARN TO OBSERVE LIKE AN ARTIST

At every moment in time, we are bombarded with sensory information - external sights, sounds, smells and physical sensations, as well as internal thought processes.

Most of that sensory information is filtered out of your conscious awareness. You can only focus on a small amount of it at any one time.

Try this quick test as an example:

OBSERVATIONAL TEST

Look around the room for 10 seconds and notice everything that is red.

Make a mental note of the red objects.

Do not read ahead! This test will become pointless otherwise. Stop reading now and look for red stuff.

Now close your eyes and mentally list all of the green objects in the room.

Keep your eyes closed until you can't list any more green objects.

With your eyes now open, look around and notice how many green objects you missed from your mental list.

You probably missed a lot of green objects. The point is, you saw them the first time but your brain filtered them out.

When you begin to draw something, you are trying to reduce that 3-dimensional object to a series of simple lines and shapes.

Study of Two Feet by Albrecht Dürer. Circa 1508
Those lines and shapes are there but to the untrained eye (or brain), they are really hard to decipher. You’re looking at red when you need to look for green.

And then of course your brain realises your struggling and tries to help you out:

"I know what this object you're drawing is, it's a face and a face has 2 eyes which are oval, a nose with dark holes for nostrils, and a mouth which is kind of banana shaped. It should look like this".

It fills in the blank lines that you are unable to observe correctly.

Unfortunately, your brain is making it up based on a best guess from memory.

To help you decipher and observe what is really there, you need the help of some visual aides. At least at first.
WHAT ARE VISUAL AIDES?

The simplest form of visual aide is tracing.

When you trace the outline of a photograph, you can often be surprised at the lines and shapes you're left with.

For example, if you think about a human leg, you know the lower leg below the knee, is about the same length as the upper leg or thigh. So your brain will want to resist drawing one dramatically shorter than the other - even when that's how it appears in reality (see the image to the left).

Many beginners would fail to 'see' how short the lower legs are when drawing this image. This illusion is called 'foreshortening'.

While tracing isn't cheating, it teaches you very little observational awareness.

Other visual aides, used in the right context, are more useful for training your brain and learning how to draw a variety of subject matter. Examples include:

- Grid lines
- Using basic shapes
- Measuring
- Construction and contour lines
- Negative space
- Value scale

Some of these will seem quite mechanical to use and like tracing, you might even feel like you're somehow fudging the system.

But they are serving a purpose and that's to expose visual information that, right now, you're struggling to see clearly. It won't take too long before you no longer need to rely on them.
LEARN TO DRAW A STILL LIFE

I've created a drawing exercise that will give your first hand experience of using different visual aides and how your brain tries to trick you.

You're going to draw an outline picture of this simple still life arrangement:

You can download a larger version of this image here
We're going to cover measuring, basic shapes, construction lines and negative space.

Give it a go. You need nothing more than pencil, eraser and paper and a spare half hour!

DRAWING #1

When you download and print the photo, it won't fill your paper. That's how it's supposed to be so don't resize it.

Create an outline drawing on one of your blank sheets of paper by copying the photograph. However, make your drawing bigger than the photo. Try to fill as much of your paper as possible.

Don't add any shading. Just draw the major lines that define the crate, bottle, glass and grapes. Spend 10-20 minutes on your drawing.

Don't concern yourself with whether your drawing is any good or not. Just do the best you can.

DRAWING #2

PART 1 - EXAMPLE OF MEASURING

On your other sheet of blank paper, you're going to have a second go.

This time, look at the crate and gauge roughly how wide the side in shadow is in comparison to the photo as a whole. Would you say it's half the width of the photo? More like a third?

To help you see this more clearly, screw your eyes up so your squinting quite hard. This takes a lot of the detail away and helps you see major shapes and their sizes.
The shadow side of the box is about one third the width of the photo as a whole.

On your blank paper, make a small mark along the bottom edge, about a third the way along.

Now compare the width of the left side of the crate (with the grapes hanging over) to the shadow side of the crate. You can use a ruler if you want but you don't need to be that accurate. You can use your finger and thumb like this:

At first glance, you might think this side is going to be shorter because your brain is telling you it's the shorter side of what looks like a long, rectangular crate. But when you measure you'll see the lengths are actually very similar, and in fact the left side is a bit longer in this photo.

On your paper, make another mark that's about distance away as the first mark you made.

You can now draw in the 2 verticals of the crate from the 2 marks you've made. Draw them lightly and extend them higher than you think. Make sure these lines are vertical by checking they are parallel to the edges of your paper but try to draw them freehand rather than using a ruler.

Take your pencil and lay it along the top-left edge of the crate (just underneath the wine bottle). Notice the angle of your pencil?
Carefully pick up your pencil and use it as gauge before drawing the top edge on your paper.

The quickest way to do this is to lightly draw a line at the angle you think, and then check with your pencil by comparing it to the photo. You can erase if you need to.

Repeat this for the other top edge so that you end up with the 2 sides of the crate.

PART 2 - EXAMPLE OF CONSTRUCTION LINES (SIMPLE GRID)

You're now going to add in the wine bottle. Nothing kills a still life more than a lob-sided bottle and you'll see a lot of them on your way!

Start by making an horizontal line to mark the top of the wine bottle, and then one for the bottom of the wine bottle.

Now make 2 vertical lines to represent the width of the bottle. How do you know where to place the first vertical? If you're asking that question, you're starting to think more carefully about what's in front of you, which is great! Find a reference point... how about the left side of the bottle and how it lines up with the corner of the box?

To gauge the width, gauge how many wine bottles would fit into the left side of the crate (the shadow side). It's about 3.

Make your second vertical mark and see if the width of your bottle would fit about 3 times into the shadow side.
Now draw a rectangle using your markers. You can do this with a ruler but try and do it freehand (the lines will have more character). Don’t worry about getting super straight lines, but your verticals should be vertical, not sloping to one side. Again, compare that they are parallel to the edges of your paper.

Lightly draw a line across your rectangle to represent where the neck of the bottle meets the shoulders. How high up should you make this line? Well, compare the size of the neck on the photo to the size of the bottle overall. Use that as your gauge.

Do the same for the bottom of the shoulders.

You can now add a thinner rectangle to represent the bottle neck. And you can add 2 diagonal lines for the shoulders. Don’t draw curved lines yet - you’re looking for symmetry and it’s easier to see that with straight lines first.

Look at the negative and positive space made by each diagonal line. I’ve hatched this in on the image below. Those 2 shaded triangles should be mirror images of each other.

If they’re not, adjust your diagonals so they are. This will probably mean adjusting your bottle neck slight as well, left of right.

The shaded areas on the left are not symmetrical to each other. They’re better on the right
Now let's add some refinements. You might want to erase your lines slightly (but not completely) or you can just draw more heavily over them.

Start by adding curves lightly over the diagonals. Keep looking at the negative space and if it helps draw (or scratch) in some lines on your photo so you have a direct comparison.

Add some detailing to the bottle top without any further measuring. Should find that you're starting to observe more keenly now and can add those details with more confidence.

On to the label. This is a great example of how lazy observation and leaving it up to your brain gets your drawing in trouble. I think it's fair to say that most people would draw the top and bottom of the label as curved edges. It makes sense because the bottle is curved. But hold your pencil over those edges and you'll see the label edges are almost completely straight lines!

To prove this to yourself, grab a pen or marker and draw over your photograph.

The illusion of the curve is actually created by the context (it's on a bottle!) and some shadow on the right edge of the label.

Draw in your label with straight lines first. Check they are parallel to the bottom of the paper and when you're happy add the slightest of curves to them.

Quickly check the curves on the bottle top and make sure your lines are only slightly curved upwards too.
PART 3 - EXAMPLE OF BASIC SHAPES

You should now have part of your box drawn in and a solid-looking bottle. Stand back from your paper and double check you are happy with the shape and symmetry of the bottle neck.

To the grapes. Here, I want you to draw a light oval to represent the overhanging grapes. If it helps, draw and oval over your photo first, but only if you need to.

Think about the approximate size of your oval in comparison to the crate.

Now draw an rectangle to represent the grapes on the top of the crate.

What this gives me is a boundary within which to work so that the overall bunch of grapes is going to be in proportion to the bottle.

I then pick one grape to draw. Any will do but I choose the one closest to the wine bottle so I could compare the size more easily. When I'm happy with the size of this first grape, drawing the rest is easy because I have a measure of scale.
It took me literally 2 minutes to draw every grape.

The placements, shapes and sizes aren't exact but for a still life sketch it doesn't matter.

PART 4 - COMPLETE THE DRAWING

There are lots of lines going on within the crate. It's easy to get confused and this is where an understanding of perspective and geometry in drawing helps.

When you can draw geometric shapes it really helps you look past the detail and see the underlying structure. You draw that in first and then add the detail.

We'll look at drawing geometric shapes and perspective in another lesson, but for now see if you can use careful observation to add the crate detail.

Make a small mark for the top and bottom of the glass and for the top of the stem. With just those marks try to draw the glass freehand by looking at the shapes enclosed against the side of the bottle.

TIPS:

• Make reference marks on your paper before adding lines. This will help you get the widths of the wooden structures correct before you start making heavier marks.
• Use your pencil to measure angles.
• Don't add detail (like rough edges, bolts and screws) until you're completely happy with basic structure.
• Take your time and don't be afraid to erase marks and lines you're not happy with.
ADDING FORM WITH SHADING

This exercise will help you achieve a sold line or contour drawing. Creating form (making the image look 3-dimensional) with shading, is the next part that we'll cover in separate lessons.

This is not an easy piece to shade if you're a beginner. The bottle and glass are especially tricky. But if you want to have a go at shading now, by all means do so and some fun!

Just remember that creating form with shading comes back to careful observation. Look for shapes in the bottle reflections. Squint your eyes to see areas of dark and light more easily.

And take your time!

The drawing below took me an hour to shade and that was rushed! The more time you spend observing your subject matter before you make a mark, the more satisfied you'll be with the final result!