



DRAWING: THE INTIMATE ART

It was an especially dreary winter day and I was complaining to my eighth-grade art teacher that the leafless trees outside were ugly and depressing. I remember very clearly her reaction, her finger wagging as she admonished me for my lack of appreciation. As she put it, the trees' leafless state revealed their anatomy, and therefore the beauty of their structural design. "Draw them," she said, "and you will understand. Draw, draw, draw — everything."

That statement and that moment changed my perception of drawing entirely. Before that day, it had simply been a childhood hobby, my private diversion from homework and family chores. The teacher's comments put drawing into a totally different context. It continued to be a secret indulgence, but it also became a legitimate means of studying virtually everything around me. I drew whenever I could, on old envelopes and scraps of typing paper, making notations of lighting effects, the graceful design I might find in a piece of dead wood or the distortions in an old piece of glass. Some drawings were sketchy hints or textured silhouettes; others were more thorough analyses of the forms of a face, a tree, a house — or the relationships between them.

Drawing also allowed me to approach larger projects with a certain calm, with a sense of the logical progression of stages toward completing a



Annissa, 1990, charcoal on paper, 17 x 17 in., collection of the artist



Bert Menco, 1996, charcoal on paper, 22 1/2 x 15 in., private collection

assistant, Francesco Melzi, preserved his master's drawings, largely because they were an integral part of the manuscripts on science, engineering, and Leonardo's other interests. Beyond documenting his research, clarifying his ideas, and paving the way for his paintings, the drawings also became a very private and pleasurable diversion for him.

Although we have many of Michelangelo's drawings, he had many more of them burned. His contemporary biographer Giorgio Vasari claimed that Michelangelo wanted them destroyed "so that no one should see the labors he endured and the ways he tested his genius, and lest he should appear less than perfect." It is very likely that he did not want people to see the menial labor involved in his creative process because it might spoil the magic and grandeur he wanted us to experience as we view his finished works.

We sense a similar attitude while studying the Baroque master Caravaggio. According to some historians, he made no preliminary drawings for his paintings, though that is unlikely given the complexity of many of his compositions. It is possible, however, that he saw no value in the preliminary drawings and therefore discarded them. Toward the end of his life, Caravaggio was accused of crimes and on the run, so it is very likely his drawings had become excess baggage not worth carrying.

With French artists like Watteau, Fragonard, Vernet, Greuze, and Prud'hon, however, attitudes changed dramatically. As Erwin Gradmann observes in his 2005 book *French Master Drawings of the Eighteenth Century*, drawing "was received with a special love that developed into a genuine passion for all its expressions. Drawings were produced by the thousands; amateurs and collectors were everywhere. That intimate art, formerly hidden in studio or workshop, now suddenly faced the full glare of publicity."

In fact, many of these artists were inspired by the drawings of their forerunners. Watteau, for example, enjoyed copying those of Rubens and Titian; he loved their spiritedness and judged them by his own contemporary standards. Still, though drawing attained a new appreciation in the 18th century, it continued to be primarily a tool for study.

complex composition — indispensable during my time as an illustrator and later as a painter of commissioned portraits. It opened a door to artistic accomplishments that had previously seemed beyond my reach.

LOOKING BACK

Renaissance artists considered preparation to be the primary purpose of drawing. It was a means rather than an end, a way to familiarize themselves with their subjects and to plan their often complicated projects. Their drawings were rarely thought of as works of art in themselves. They may have admired each other's drawings, and it's likely that friends and family members saved some as mementos. Yet they were rarely bought by patrons.

Consequently we have today a relatively small portion of the total number of drawings made during the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci's

LOOKING CLOSELY

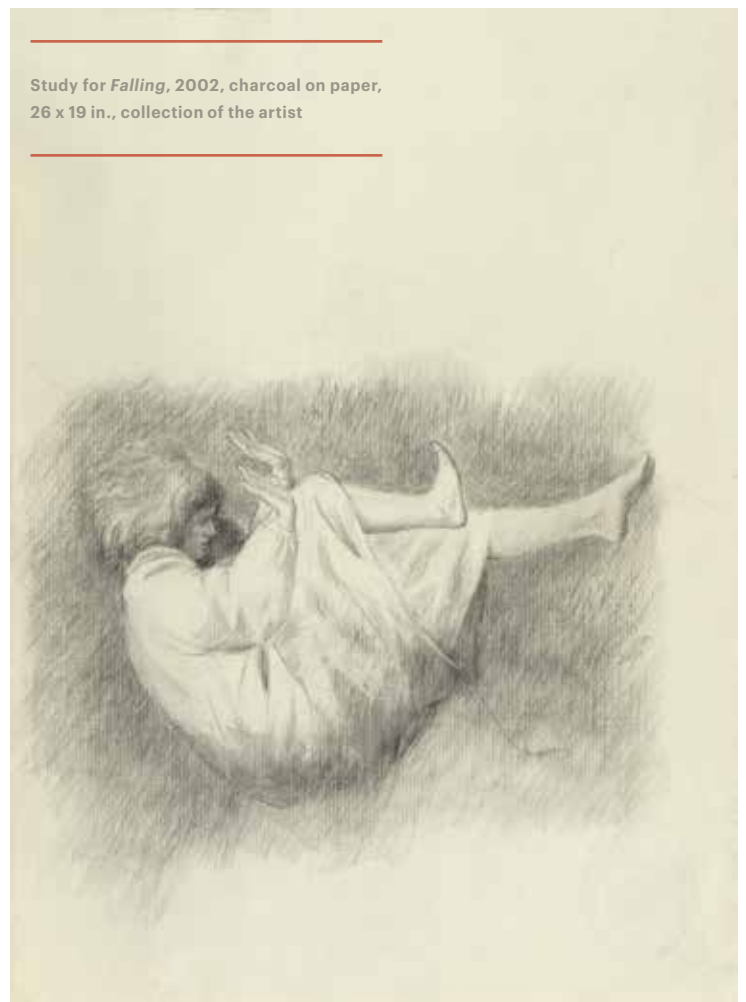
Like naturalists, people who draw are typically absorbed by the intricate nuances they discover through their studies. There is a love of life from the root up. Drawing is a poetic expression that comes from a sense that the world is too vast to ever be known in total, from a belief that its essence can best be grasped while we are on our knees studying individual aspects — the lichen at the base of a tree, the grace of a model's thigh, the feeling of a bird's movements, or the compelling mystery of a bony yet softly animated human face. Drawing, then, is very different from painting, which is often considered the pinnacle of visual art and generally takes in a whole scene, providing a sense of completeness.



Julie Gordon, 2007, charcoal on paper, 13 x 11 in., private collection.



Nude in Conversation, 1994, charcoal on paper, 23 x 29 in., collection of the artist.



Study for Falling, 2002, charcoal on paper, 26 x 19 in., collection of the artist

The Canadian poet and carpenter John Terpstra puts this most eloquently when he writes, “What strikes me [about drawing] is the intimacy. Things your eye did not see while simply gazing upon the scene are slowly revealed under the pencil. It’s a kind of knowing that only comes with taking the time. Photographs can fool you that way. You think you have captured the landscape, and perhaps you have, but only in the prism of the ground lens. There is no relation.”

Beyond the advantages of helping us study and see more clearly, the marks themselves are important. Those who draw become conscious of the relationship between their drawing material (such as charcoal or ink) and their paper through the way lines and tones skim along on top of it. Ironically, this surface quality enhances the effect of three-dimensional illusion. A drawing material does not lift off the surface, as brushstrokes of oil paint often lift off a canvas. Instead, the objects and spaces created through lines and shading seem to draw us under the paper into the world of the artist’s imaginings — just as Lewis Carroll’s Alice steps through the looking glass. We’re aware of the flat surface of the mirror, but even more so of the mysterious depth beyond it. One aspect enhances the other.

For me, this sleight-of-hand effect is similar to how we experience poetry, dreams, or the casual half-thoughts that drift through our minds as we go about life. In this way, a drawing can balance us between the two-dimensional reality of marks on paper and the illusion of three-dimensional solidity, just as our thoughts move from the tangible world to our psyches and then back again.

For some draftsmen, the focus is more about the surface effects; for others, about the illusion that draws us beneath the surface. Picasso and Egon Schiele are prime examples of artists who drew recognizable figures while paying attention to the materials that move across the surface. In the drawings of Prud’hon and others trained in Paris’s *École des Beaux-Arts*, and also of Holbein and Adolph Menzel, there is more emphasis on creating an illusion of form and space. Others’ drawings are remarkably balanced, utilizing both approaches: think of Tintoretto and Parmigianino, or in the 20th century, of Käthe Kollwitz, Nicolai Fechin, and Pietro Annigoni.

LOOKING FURTHER

Artists who create drawings would continue doing so even if no one ever saw the results, and there are also people who, figuratively speaking, enjoy looking over the artist’s shoulder. Lovers of drawings are either connoisseurs who can discern the subtleties of an artist’s individual mind and hand, or — equally important — those who also draw and thus can identify with others’ efforts. These two groups are largely responsible for the survival of history’s most intriguing drawings.



Study for Portrait of Virginia, 1988, charcoal on paper, 10 x 9 1/4 in., collection of the artist

Although drawing comes from a personal place, when the results are especially successful, we all are taken beyond the everyday and sometimes find qualities within them that might mystify even the draftsman himself. Indeed, artists often feel their drawings come from somewhere outside themselves, or from a place deep within.

For me the act of drawing, and my later reflections on my finished drawings, are like taproots to rich remembrances, even imagined ones; they lift and ground me simultaneously. They provide a stabilizing factor in my day-to-day existence. Creating a feeling of life on a flat piece of paper with the simplest of implements makes the world seem more tangible, manageable, accessible. It gives me, in a psychological sense, a handle on so much that otherwise seems out of reach. In his book *Undressed Art: Why We Draw* (2005), Peter Steinhart writes that drawing “is a way of making connections with the things that surround us and with the forces that shape and animate and move them. It’s a way of taking in the world’s strangeness and power and finding comfort in it.”

As my middle school teacher showed me, drawing is a means to understanding. She meant that both in a technical and a spiritual way. She taught both science and art, which surely helped her understand that there are things in life that can be clearly defined and others that cannot be — things that affect us deeply yet often seem beyond our intellectual grasp, like our relationships with nature and with each other. When we are in our best drawing mode, we are unconscious of ourselves, totally absorbed in our effort. It is then that we enter another form of consciousness, which may begin with learned techniques and theories, but soon opens up into realms of awareness beyond anything cognitive skills can provide. We awaken from these sessions with only the drawing in hand to remind us that time has passed.

Although these experiences are necessarily private, draftsmen typically welcome opportunities to share them with others. Their drawings can connect viewers with vague memories — moments in their lives that are subtle and elusive, lying dormant, waiting to be reawakened.

Instinctively, some viewers seek out drawings in exhibitions, in artists’ studios, in friends’ collections, or in publications. When they discover a drawing that especially connects with them, they may follow it to the edge of the looking glass and, stepping through it, enter a world

that is familiar, yet distinctively new. They might then become more aware of mysteries they have known, if only fleetingly, and find themselves inside a private place — a secret haven from the passage of time. ●



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The Beach, 2012, sumi ink and charcoal on paper, 15 x 21 1/2 in., private collection