THE ART OF DRAWING

The Nude

UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF LIFE DRAWING

GIOVANNI CIVARDI



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Giovanni Civardi was born in Milan in 1947. After first dedicating himself to illustration and sculpture, the author turned to anatomy for the artist and has been running courses in figure drawing for many years.

Lack of life is mainly revealed
by lack of dialogue.
Aldo Carotenuto

Part of our lives – even those barely worthy of consideration – is spent searching for reasons to exist, starting points and sources.
Marguerite Yourcenar

Half open and half hid;
the less she shows, the lovelier she.
Torquato Tasso

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SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

But when something bores you, leave it alone.
Eugène Delacroix

FINDING MODELS

Figures are usually drawn from life during leisure or educational courses at art schools or colleges, located in most towns and cities. You can contact these institutions to find out about courses and get in touch with both male and female models. If there are no art schools near you, you can still arrange 'nude' sittings, perhaps by getting together with other artists and posing for each other. Always ensure you choose premises with enough room to accommodate both artists and models comfortably. Whatever the circumstances, models must be treated correctly; remember to check legal requirements regarding age, and reach clear agreements about fees, the place and the length of the sitting, the purpose of the drawings, confidentiality, and so on.

WHICH MODELS?

It is not necessary to always look for professional models, i.e. people who normally model at art schools or are sent by employment agencies. Nor does the model have to be young or have an 'ideal' body shape which meets current aesthetic standards. 'Normal' individuals are much more interesting and full of character: quite often the most suitable and willing models can be found at dance, physical training or acting schools. However, studying 'nude' figures does not always require full nudity: modern-day swimming costumes are more than enough to safeguard the subject's modesty and allow extensive bodily expression. The key qualities for a model are friendliness, patience and willingness to participate. Usually, the spontaneity of the pose, working together in harmony and being 'involved' in a project compensate in full for any lack of 'experience at posing'.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The area intended for nude sittings must have: a separate corner where the model can undress and get dressed again; sufficient heating; and a set of props for assuming the various poses. It is preferable to have natural light or daylight (not direct sunlight), if possible coming from a large window (old masters used to choose the light from the north). Artificial light is also suitable, provided it is not emitted from multiple sources, which would cancel out the shadows on the model or create complicated ones. If this happens, you should add some medium-intensity lamps aimed directly and appropriately at the model, in such a way that they do not bother him or her, or produce unpleasant shadowy effects. A sitting normally lasts upwards of a couple of hours, with quarter-hour breaks every hour or so, depending on the pose. Some soft music can make the time pass pleasantly for both artists and models.







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DISTANCE FROM THE MODEL

The optimum distance from the model is 2–3 metres (80–120in), so that you can see the whole body without having to move your eyes or head too much. Not all working environments allow every artist to work at the right distance: it is important, therefore, not to alter the perspective too much (unless this is what you are trying to achieve) and to be able to change your viewpoint by going around the model, sitting on the floor or standing on a raised surface.

TECHNIQUES TO USE

Nude studies are seen as exercises in *observing* the model and are therefore usually carried out using 'graphic' techniques, which are simple and immediate (pencil, charcoal, pen and ink, pastels, coloured pencils, etc.). In some cases, however, they can be preparatory drawings for more complex works (paintings or sculptures), which was common practice in the past. It is useful to rest the paper on an easel, so the paper remains vertical and, therefore, parallel to the model. If you are sitting down, however, it is often easier to hold the paper in place on a medium-sized (30 × 40cm or 40 × 50cm [12 × 16in or 16 × 20in]), for example) lightweight board, which you can rest on your lap.

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Studying nude figures from life can become more rewarding if combined with studying anatomy, history of art, philosophy or psychology. These 'cultural' combinations can help to inform your drawing; their influence can vary in strength and direction according to each individual. They should, however, be subordinate to direct and careful *observation* of the human body; your aesthetic impulses should be primarily your own. The combination of in-depth knowledge and complementary sources of inspiration should be aimed at bringing out and developing each artist's personal expressive style, according to the following sequence: observing, understanding and interpreting.

WORKING IN A GROUP

Drawing alone is essential for furthering the creative process, but drawing in the company of other artists offers many advantages, especially when the group is small (ten members at most) and is made up of people with varied artistic experiences. Before the sitting, you could make some group decisions, such as deciding on the pose, which position to draw from, the type of lighting and so on. During the sitting you could look over each other's shoulders and find ideas for new technical solutions or new styles of drawing. At the end of the sitting, you could compare and criticise each other's drawings, exchange opinions, suggest projects or alternative ways of studying. The greatest advantage of group work is sharing the cost of the model and the mutual encouragement it brings.

The sketches reproduced here show one of the possible sequences for portraying the human body in drawings and sum up the main successive phases of observing and analysing the figure: from perceiving the overall form and its character, to examining the structural components, to modulating tonal planes and surface peculiarities.







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THE MAIN FORM

Simple and expressive
Giuseppe Verdi

The most spontaneous and immediate drawings, known as *gestural* drawings, are rapid sketches based mainly on careful observation, which are intended to record as much 'information' as possible in a short time. The need (whether imposed or preferred) to produce a quick 'portrait' of the figure prompts the artist to be alert (almost as if in a 'state of emergency') and encourages him to capture, in an intuitive, but accurate, way, the most important characteristics, including the form and posture, of the body being studied.

This results in a synthetic drawing in which the aesthetic outcome is entirely secondary: its purpose is to show the artist's intention to express in full the structure, posture or action of the subject being portrayed. After all, to draw well, it is essential to learn to see.
A gestural drawing is not a goal in itself, but is a way of learning, of practising careful observation and co-ordinating what your eyes perceive with what your hand draws on the paper. In short, it is a way of acquiring experience and a 'freshness' that is inevitably reflected in even the most elaborate and complex final drawings.





For a gestural drawing to become a useful exercise, some of the following practical issues need to be considered:

- The model should pose for 2–5 minutes.
- Carefully observe the 'character' of the entire figure, in terms of posture and form, and focus on the model rather than the drawing.
- Assess the axes of the trunk and limbs (i.e. the internal structure 'lines' originating especially from the position of the pelvis and spine); the areas of 'tension' between the various body segments; the equilibrium of the body and the direction of the movement or gesture; the contours of the forms.
- Use ordinary sheets of paper of average size (for example: 25 × 35cm or 35 × 50cm (10 × 13¾in or 13¾ × 20in), resting on a solid board, and tools that make it

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Giovanni Civardi explains how to draw the human figure, building from the first principles of proportion, structure, posture and volume to more complex ideas such as rhythm and composition. This approach provides all artists, from beginner to expert, with a comprehensive basis for every aspect of drawing the nude. The book also includes advice and suggestions for all the practical aspects of drawing from life.



