

Extracts from: **Pride, Prejudice and the Pencil**

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1. Is Your Pencil British?

*The most practical sketching appliance we have seen. I have run after animals with it, and walked miles with it slung over my shoulders without in any way feeling it too heavy.*¹

By a stroke of luck I came into the possession of a collection of *The Studio* magazines from the 1900s to its demise in the 1980s.² The advertisements for pencils, pens, drawing appliances, correspondence courses began to invade my waking hours. The Autolycus, an early laptop, went on being advertised throughout the twenties. Here too was Percy Bradshaw's 'Press Art School' of Forest Hill, with eager testimonials from satisfied pupils who, as promised earned a living from drawing.



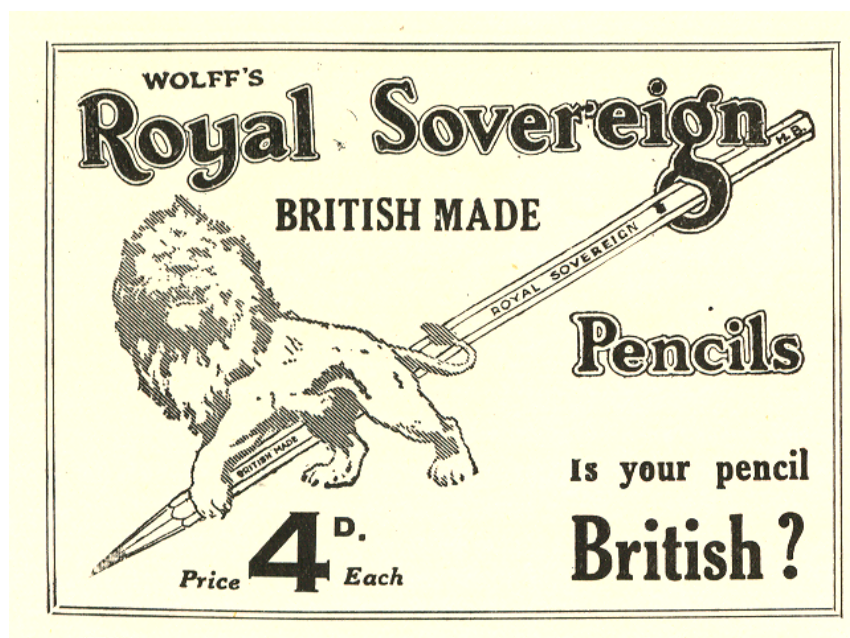
*Assuming that Drawing as a Career appeals to you, in a more than passing way... I am quite sincere when I say that, for the trained artist who can do the work, there are plenty of jobs waiting today. If you post me an original drawing I will criticize it helpfully and send you my Prospectus without charge.*³

This was a correspondence college based initially in New Cross, London. Percy Bradshaw himself, who wrote three drawing books published by *The Studio*, appears in the advertisements from 1905, ageing gracefully, ever imploring 'Don't you wish you could draw?' Sometimes the Press Art School

itself is pictured; sometimes there are sketchers at work, perhaps drawing the school itself; and sometimes caricatures. In 1928 he would have to contend with forty other local art schools on neighbouring pages, not including rival correspondence courses. Aspiring draughtsmen had a choice of animal drawing schools. One was run by Beatrice Flower, and one by Miss Grant Gordon (NDD): the Animal Studio in Albert Place, Kensington, London W.8. The 1949 advertisement announces dog models 10.30 to 12.30 on Mondays, horse models 10.30 to 12.30 on Fridays.⁴ Here is a lost world of drawing, with amateurs, professionals, specialised skills, exams, and strict timetables – art schools had ‘headmasters’.

The pencil and pen market was competitive. In 1928 Koh-I-Noor claimed that:

Famous Artists have gone hungry rather than use any but the best materials. For the Artist the ‘best materials’, as far as the pencil is concerned, mean the Koh-I-Noor, ‘the perfect pencil’.



1925

These pencils may have been magnificent, but they were made in Czechoslovakia. Whether because of patriotism, anti-German feeling after the First World War, or because of a lack of any other selling point, Wolff's Royal Sovereign pencil's slogan in 1925 was 'Is your Pencil British?' Symbols of

Britishness – the lion, Trafalgar Square, Romney – accompany the image of the pencil. The Royal Sovereign's other competitors were American (Venus, Turquoise), and Faber-Castell (German).

2. A Better Job in Half the Time

Each 'drawing' generation likes to think it is more enlightened, more tolerant, more advanced in every respect than its predecessors. For one generation the argument may be line versus tone, precision versus atmosphere⁵. The issue that divides one art world – the Whistler versus Ruskin libel case of 1878 – may be of little interest to the succeeding one. Why should the time taken to make a work affect its merit as art? But the idea that drawing should be about showing good hard work did linger for a long time; right up to the fifties, you can sense some suspicion of the Impressionists; after all, they painted directly without drawing first. But there were other complexes at work.

Being 'modern' in the thirties and forties might well involve a vitriolic hatred for anything studio-bound, anything mock medieval, heavy with Victorian 'fancy dress'. In 1944 the new President of the Royal Academy, Alfred Munnings – now remembered as much for suggesting that Picasso needed a good kicking as for his sporting pictures - was praised as a modernist because he was a 'plein air' landscapist.⁶ His only rival, in the painting of horses, was considered to be Velazquez. In a 1953 review of late nineteenth century painting, William Powell Frith's *Derby Day* is described as 'exasperating', a complete waste of time. The same article reflects on the recent death of Raoul Dufy, regarded by Alexander Watt as among the leading six painters of the twentieth century (the others being Bonnard, Braque, Matisse, Picasso and Rouault).⁷

4. This word 'Drawing'

This word 'drawing' seems in these days to have lost so much of its meaning; surely, above all, it stands for sound construction and a thorough searching for form, based upon a profound knowledge of things seen with a sensitive eye. It is this very knowledge of the structure of things, both animate and inanimate, which appears to be

lacking in so much modern work. One sees so many drawings executed in a loose, scribbling technique that certainly do not portray any, or at least very little, knowledge of the bones of the matter.

‘A Plea for Tradition in English Water-Colour Drawing’ by Alban F.T. Atkins, Art Master, Burford Grammar School, Oxon, 1944.⁸

The experiments of Picasso and others have so far as I can see failed to find a direction for real development yet. The schools of painting working in the way suggested by the original experiments are producing nothing of consequence....

I think that good abstract painting must be a natural development through a sound academic knowledge if it is to have any real value. It is useless for students with only a few years painting behind them to just ‘go abstract’ one week-end. They may fool themselves and others for a time, standards of assessment for this kind of painting are very difficult, but there can be no future in it.

‘The Student Speaks’ by Arthur H. Taylor, 1953.⁹

When you look in detail at what was actually taught in the small local art schools - where there really were ‘lessons’ - you come across distinctions and polarised views that are now forgotten. At Kingston the preferred method was ‘Florentine’ drawing, which meant that in outlining any turning point of a form, such as the clothed shoulder, your line had to suggest the underlying flow of muscle. This was quite different from the Coldstream approach, based on Cezanne, on the precise positioning of, say, the end of the shoulder in relation to the electric fire.¹⁰ You did not use a continuous line, but a series of points. You measured. There were also methods that were entirely tonal, using charcoal, or fine gradations of pencil; or pen drawing for illustration. In the sixties I was taught by followers of Vivian Pitchforth, the guru of figure drawing often featured in *The Studio*, who once they had erased your drawing would draw a little geometric anatomical sketch showing how the thorax fitted to the pelvis to help you out¹¹. The next tutor might say you should use cross-hatching, the next would say don’t use cross-hatching but do include eyelids, and so on. At St. Martins there was also a dissident class run on Bomberg’s principles by Leon Kossoff, where I was ticked off for bringing an

H pencil into the class rather than charcoal – there are no lines there, Kossoff would say, looking at the model. He directed you towards the emotional whole: you were to empathise with the model, ‘be her’, feel what she felt; the opposite of the optical, or surgical approach developed from Henry Tonks at the Slade in the 1900s.

But would this prepare you for the pranks of ‘avant garde art’? Even in 1963, the editor, G.S. Whittet, declared that:

Picasso, far from being a boon to modern art, has been its curse. Taken up by intellectuals with whom, let us face it, he had little in common, he became a status symbol of culture for the wealthy boor.... Young painters, labouring day after day to draw just right that complex play of curves in the neck, shoulder and thorax of a model on the throne, looked at later Picasso distortions and despaired.¹²

Are we any the wiser? Don’t believers in ‘traditional’ drawing feel a similar despair looking at a 3D animation - or even at a splashy brushmark masquerading as a finished drawing? Today pencil lovers agonize over the loss of territory to ‘new’ media or to installation art.

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Some observers speak of this as the cultural vacuum, a disregard for the visual and for art history bordering on the insane. It makes success or failure in drawing meaningless. Students, they say, are left to decide for themselves ‘what drawing is’. It could be a walk to their village each day, or crosses in a notebook. You take photos, keep an archive, ‘reflect’ on the practice, wrap a theory around it, and if the methodology fits, the job is done. This may be an exaggeration, but I have come across students who think of their work in autistic isolation. They are unaware of an ‘out there’ discipline called drawing. They may visit two exhibitions of contemporary drawing; one of life drawings; the other, featuring videos, maps drawn on the wall, photographed shadows presented as drawings. They see no contradiction. They just like or dislike each show. Passivity, you might say, is a bonus. It might be apathy, or it could be healthy post-modernism. Drawing can be whatever you want it to be. Better that than discipline for discipline’s sake.

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Drawing, we are told, should now be recognized as an art form in its own right. One argument put forward for its neglect in the past is that drawing hasn't had an independent history. There is no unbroken chain of movements and masterworks - such as sustains painting, and makes painters feel someone is looking over their shoulder. The 'drawing artist' is uninhibited. This is a half-truth. A casual scan through fifty years of pencil advertisements, a dip into the editorials, shows that drawing certainly does have a history, an unfortunate history of well-intentioned bigotry. The attitudes we hold today came from somewhere; they have plenty of echoes in the past. However much we universalize drawing as an expression of being 'human' - 'being in the world' - we are tied to our time, to our history. A future generation will pinpoint our trademark prejudices, smirk at our pretentious phrases, smirk at a portable gadget called a 'Powerbook'.

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Looking back, that exhibition and the idea of reviving drawing, were part of a broadside against 'modernism', against what was perceived to be its lack of human soul. Art, we were told, was in crisis. Exhibitions like 'Art for Society' sided with the Mexican Muralists, and implied that if you weren't painting figures you were probably 'against' your fellow creatures. Damning Modernism became respectable. Self-styled progressive critics sided with the tabloid press in 1976, when the Tate was ridiculed for purchasing the Carl Andre 'Bricks'. Being a 'modernist' meant a period in the wilderness, especially for architects. If you were abstract you were just painting about nothing, playing with paint, a 'formalist'. Whether such opinions were well-founded, or just prejudices, was not the point. The argument moved sideways. Previously marginalised groups felt vindicated, scores were settled; the 'modernisers' were blamed for alienating the public, blamed for neglecting the 'sound principles', blamed for depriving students of drawing lessons. Support was whipped up for bringing back life drawing, or at least going through the motions, something that had a figurative look to it. Without this noise, the Prince's Drawing School, founded in 2000, would probably never have happened.

The paradox is that what is being revived does not correspond to the way drawing was taught in the classes that petered out in the sixties; it is a diluted version: without the angst, the tensions, the contrasts and disputes necessary for a thriving culture. It is unlikely that creating institutions, competitions, courses, will of themselves reverse changes that are visible over decades, and that are symptoms of social and technological forces. It is fine to say, as many do, that drawing is good for you, but so is singing, and so is the Eurovision Song Contest.

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As with the supposed decline of morals among the young, the decline of drawing has been talked about for at least the last hundred years. For all I know it was the favourite topic of the cave painters when they met up to talk shop. Dismay at falling standards, regret that drawing is going 'modern', this goes with the territory. The expertise of one generation means little to the next. Gadgets that are great for drawing while running after animals are put away in the attic. Your favourite 'watercolour country' becomes Milton Keynes. The life room becomes a Mac room.

A hundred years ago, T. Martin Wood wrote of the pleasures of English Drawing – specifically the landscapes of Gainsborough, Constable and Cox. He identified this trait: "The true landscape art of England is homely, emotional; loving the village and the way open to it by the open plain."¹³ He preferred the innocent to the systematic:

The pleasure derived from the study of drawings lies in the appreciation of the draughtsman's sensitive vision as displayed in them and the responsiveness of his pencil. The touch of the artist in a fine drawing is a thing of nerves. This nervous quality was essentially the feature of drawing until these present times, for the reason that the art of line was insisted upon to such an extent that an easy skill in it was then looked upon as the first equipment in every artist. The modern tendency of training has meant the loss of those finely sympathetic qualities of drawing, which evolved from persistent training. This scholarship in drawing remains only with a remnant of artists today, a pure stream difficult to find uncontaminated by so-called systems invented in the schools.¹⁴

Who knows what he would make of the varieties of 'pencil practice' today? There is plenty of mark making with that nervous touch, but would that be enough? Surely the drawing should record the loved local environment? We can be sympathetic to our surroundings, but in most cases we live in cities, cities full of electronic screens, rushing this way and that. If we are not to follow the 'so-called systems' – these days that would probably mean art theory – or sketch shoppers in Oxford Street, or Midsomer Murders on TV, I am not too sure what we should do. Perhaps the days of the pencil are numbered, or perhaps not. It would be like asking whether any of those advertisements created the market for pencils, or merely reflected it. Drawing as an activity, whether hobby or profession, goes its own way regardless. Yes, it may 'go digital'. But whatever form it takes, it will still be buffeted here and there by world events, shortages, dogmas, fashions, and eccentric individuals.

¹ Herbert A. Oliver, on the Reeves 'Autolycus' colour box. *The Studio*, August 15 1901.

² A South London art school was discarding the magazines. This information was circulated amongst members of the London Group (the artists' group founded in 1913). As a member, I helped rescue them. All the illustrations are taken from these copies of *The Studio*. My thanks to David Redfern.

³ Percy V. Bradshaw, the Press Art School (founder and principal since 1905) *The Studio*, March 1926.

⁴ This address has long been the studio and home of Anthony Whishaw RA, who recalls the rings in the wall of the studio for tethering the horses.

⁵ Differences between Ruskin and Walter Crane are touched on in Faure Walker, J, 'Old manuals and New Pencils', *Drawing: The Process*, edited by Jo Davies and Leo Duff, Intellect, 2005, pp. 15 to 25.

⁶ Kaines Smith S.C., MBE, MA, FSA, 'The New PRA, 1944 Sir Alfred Munnings, *The Studio*, August 1944 pp. 44-49.

⁷ Alexander Watt, 'Paris Commentary', *The Studio*, July 1953, pp. 24-26.

⁸ *The Studio*, July 1944 p. 13.

⁹ *The Studio*, July 1953, p. 22. Taylor was a mature student at the Royal Academy Schools.

¹⁰ My thanks to John Carter for pointing this out.

¹¹ Tutors who erase any part of a student's drawing today risk receiving an official complaint, which in some cases has actually happened.

¹² *The Studio*, April 1963 p. 135.

¹³ T. Martin Wood, 'English Drawing – The Landscape and Figure Sketches of the Older Masters', p. 120, *The Studio*, November 1906.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 119.