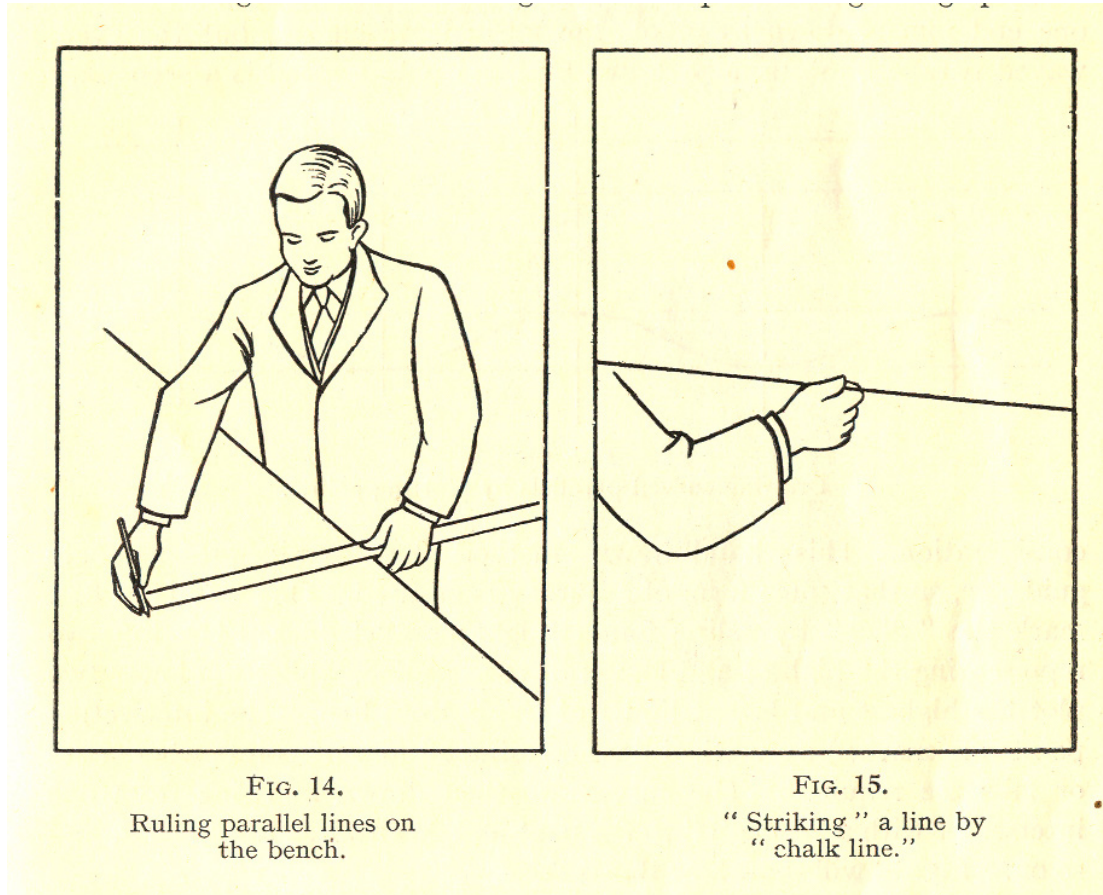


## LEARNING TO DRAW FROM FORGOTTEN MANUALS

James Faure Walker



Ruling Lines, from Clemence, W., 1939. 'Manual of Postercraft'. P. 19.

### THE EXPANDED FIELD

At the University of the Arts in London drawing has become a popular subject among some 250 PhD students. But what the term 'drawing' now embraces is far removed from what past generations might have understood by that term. Over the past twenty years anthologies, conferences, blogs, M.A. Drawing courses, have proliferated. They speak of the 'expanded field' of drawing, expanded not only in what can be counted in as drawing, but also in how we can think about drawing. Drawing research has become a proper discipline, here and there touching on science and philosophy. All to the good we may think.

But when it comes to what we call 'drawing practice' there are unwritten rules. The definitions push outwards: drawings are events, performances, traces on the wall, trails of sand in the park, sounds; they are private murmurings on paper, made in a ritual of repetition, usually tastefully hand-made and monochrome. Drawing, it appears, is at its most

authentic when it is live, or lived through as subjective experience. It is self-consciously drawing and not anything else, not painting, sculpture, installation or performance. As the subject expands, much of what previously made up the centre receives less attention: objective drawing, realism, illustration, graphic art, become classified under technical skill. Nor do you find much close analysis of actual drawings, or straightforward criticism. Drawing is an activity we witness. What is written in support tends to be phrased as vapid generalisations, maintaining that drawing comes from primal impulses that are human and universal, and perhaps outside art history. In her stimulating essay, 'Drawing is the New Painting', Karen Kurczynski compiled an exhaustive list of contemporary clichés, many of which contradict each other, but which are endlessly recycled in drawing anthologies. For those of us writing on drawing it may be an embarrassing read. She begins:

"Drawing is the new Painting. Drawing reveals processes that painting hides. Drawing in paint enlivens painting. Drawing is marginal. Drawing is handmade and expressive without being outmoded or too commercial. Drawing defies mass mediation and the digital. Drawing is free from convention and therefore it is the ultimate expression of freedom. Drawing is unpretentious and partial. It is a fragment of a new world, or it is a partial memory of the past. It captures a moment in time. Drawing never died. But drawing is threatened: there is no more life drawing... Drawing is the newest oldest medium. Drawing is impossible to define".

She concludes:

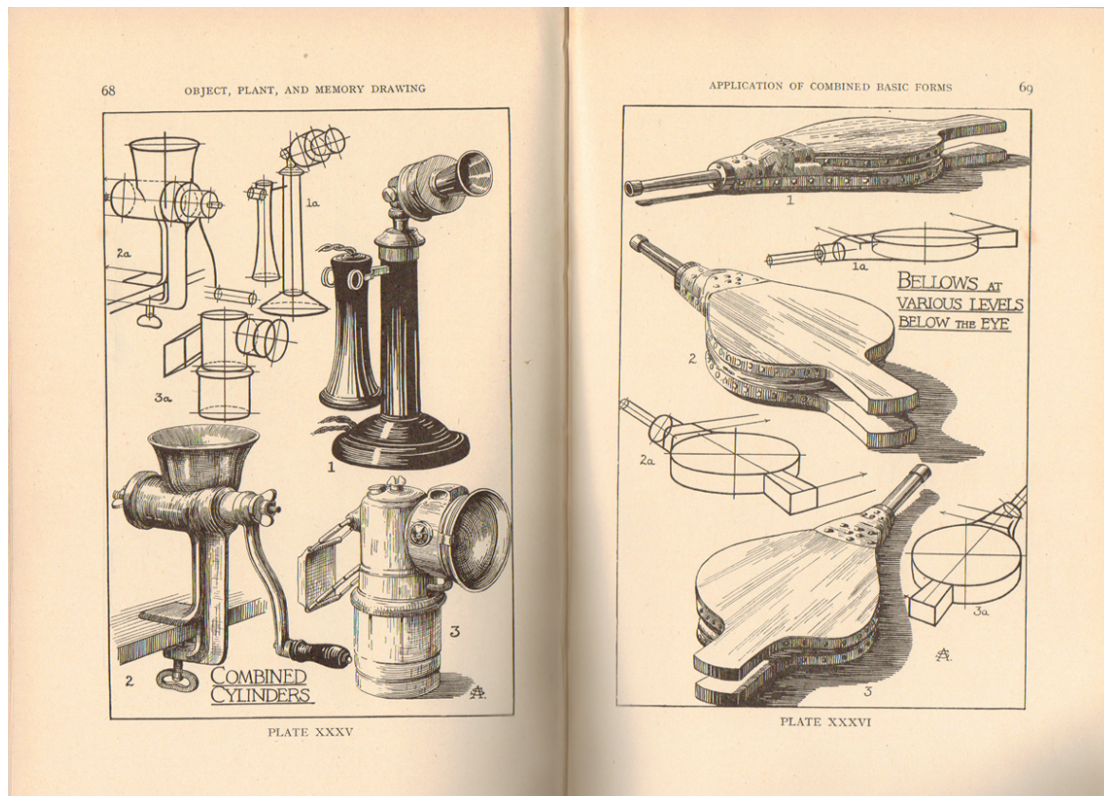
"Writing about drawing is plagued by truisms. If these sound like your grandfather's art criticism, it is because they can be found in both texts from the 1950s and writing from the 2000s..."

(Karen Kurczynski 2011)

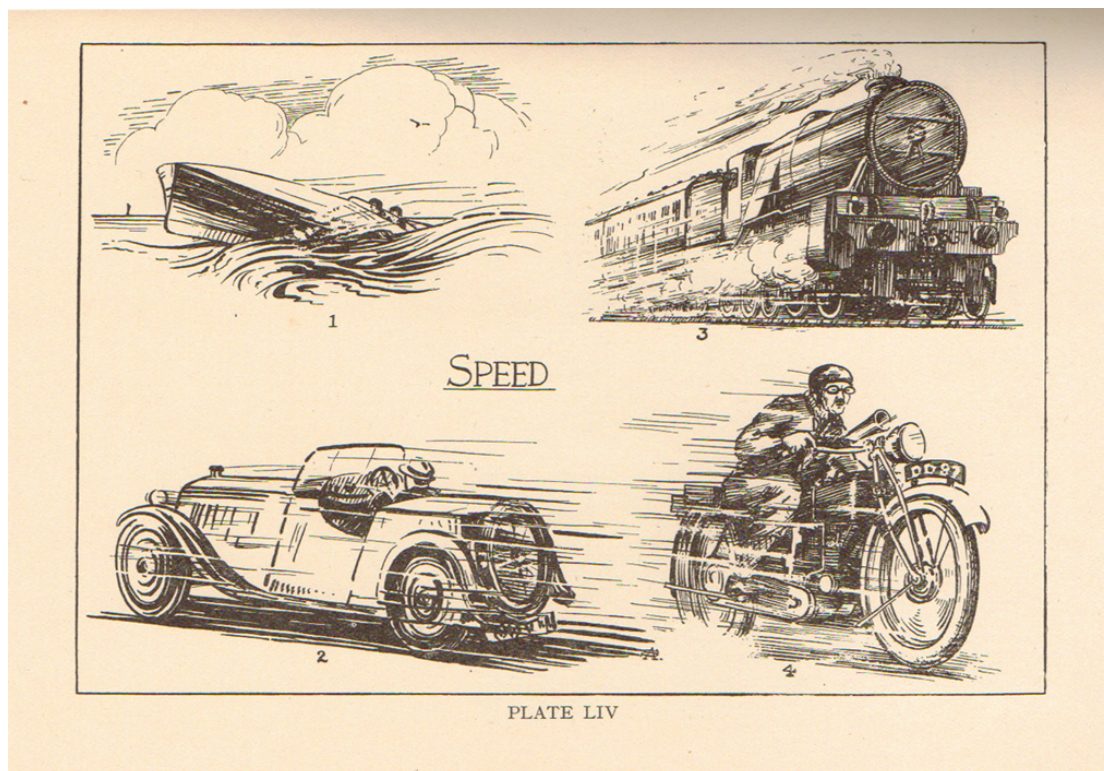
## EVIL INSTRUCTION

My subject here is the how-to-draw book of the early twentieth century, what I think of as the strange and unfamiliar world of the drawing book. I have collected over a hundred books dating from the 1900's to the 1980's. Here previous generations describe what they thought lay at that centre of drawing. The illustrations tell their own story: vintage telephones, church spires; Spitfires, dogs, dancers, swimmers; chapter headings like 'other vases in difficult positions'.



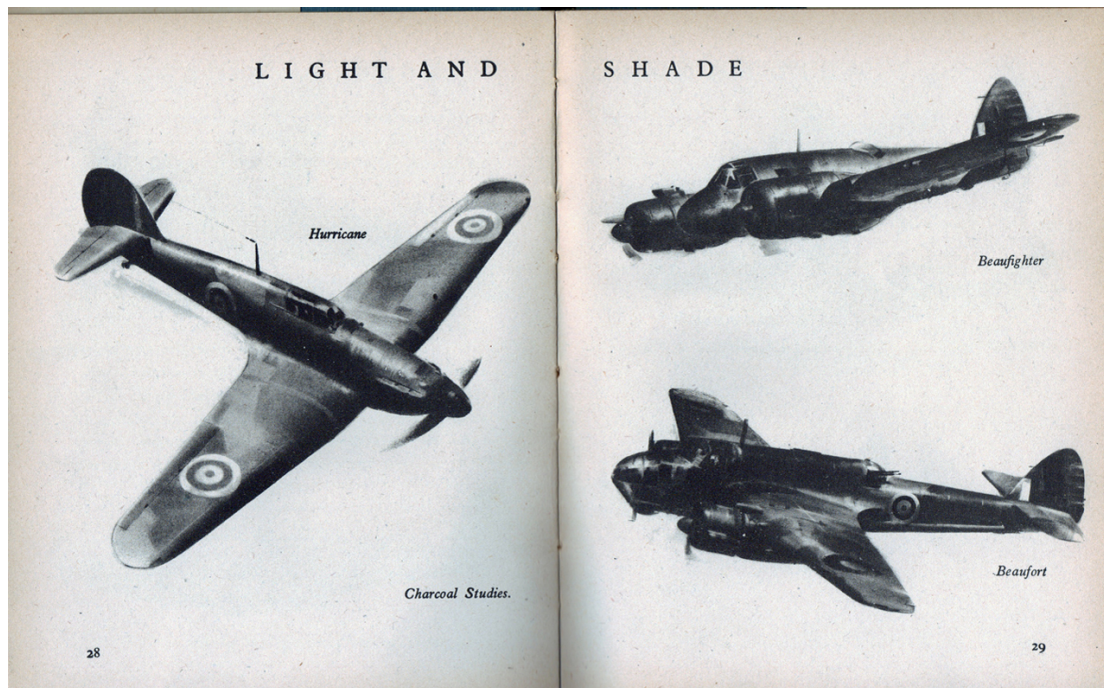


'Application of combined basic forms', from Smith 1935, 'Object, Plant and Memory Drawing'. P. 68,69.

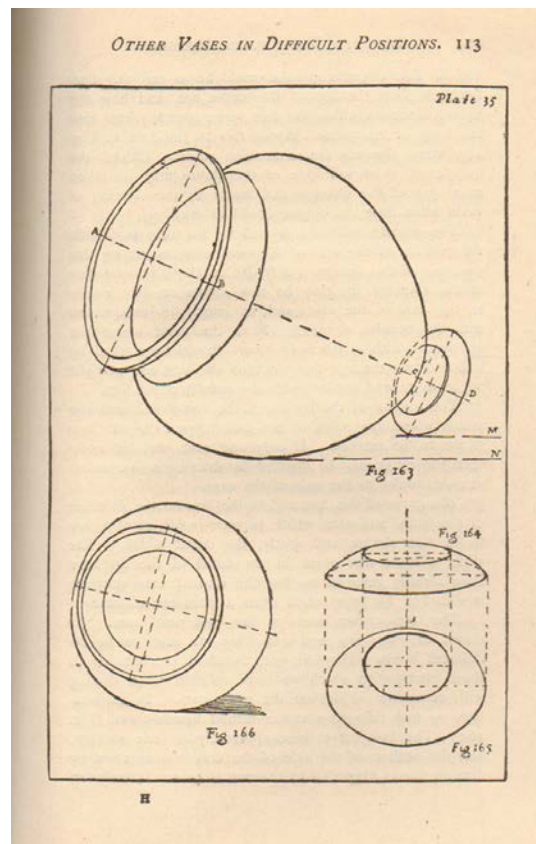


'Speed', from Smith 1935, 'Object, Plant and Memory Drawing'. Plate LIV





Frank A. Wootton (1941), *How to Draw Planes*, The Studio (1942)



'Other Vases in Difficult Positions', from Sparkes, 1919, 'How to Draw from Models and Common Objects'. P. 113.

The tone of the writing ranges from thoughtful to prescriptive, to the outspoken - sometimes scorching the page. There may be platitudes here too, about learning to draw by learning to look, but the flashes of anger make a welcome change from bland academic papers. Here are some tasters:

"Ugliness, deliberate ugliness, has momentarily occupied the throne of beauty. Eccentric accentuation of the hideous has been the device of recent art; and in ways we have never seen before, unless it be in some of the more degraded manifestations of savage output..... I have no hesitation in saying that the greater part of so-called art instruction is worse than useless; it engages the student in an evil way." (Blake 1926, p. 7 and p. 269.)

"Digging the pencil in ought to be rigidly prohibited, just as much as indiscriminate thumping on a piano." (Rankin 1924, p.12.)

Artists... "are revolted by the degradation to which the art of formal drawing has been brought by photographic 'process' reproduction." (Eric Gill, in the introduction to Beedham 1940, p.7.)

"Sometimes in a painting, buildings also are sketched in with the aid of ruler and protractor. But many artists are enraged at the mere mention of the ruler" (Bodo W. Jaxtheimer, 1962, p. 34.)

I have taken these remarks away from their contexts. Artists and writers then, as now, were often preoccupied with denouncing each other, and denouncing the art world, if not always so publicly. But ideas about teaching drawing have changed with the times. We now have universities with intellectual aspirations where before we just had art schools and studio tuition. The tutors at that time would here and there pour scorn on modern art. Humiliated students, discipline and firm judgements were to be expected. A tutor would erase your efforts with a despairing sigh. I recall the tension of the life-room of the 1960's, and hope that the teaching I have done has been more user-friendly. In a 'student-centred' climate, value judgements have to be delivered with tact; every remark counts as if it is just one person's view. We don't talk about rules, or about good and bad drawing.

Some art teachers today do talk of the decline of drawing; of impatient students, of the disappearance of accepted standards. They will find common cause in the introductions to these treatises. Despair at the state of contemporary drawing, and of the modern world, has a long history.

"At the present time there is too much of this 'everything in a hurry', and beginning in this way leads only to failure and disappointment." (Storey 1910, p. 1,2.)

"What we need rather is a tightening up of discipline in this matter, after the kindergarten stage, I have met students who had originally been trained on what I will call the "go-as-you-please" lines. They have told me later when it came to the test of real work and its result, they suffered from a lack of power to concentrate on the real difficulties." (Hartrick 1921, p. 7.)

"Painters ignore the possibilities of such careful planning in these hurried days; but such foresight contributes in no small measure to the subtlety of Holbein." (Hubbard 1938, p. 18.)

"The Need for Drawing. I cannot stress this point too strongly. I have known many students who want to dodge the discipline of drawing and go straight on to painting." (Bradshaw 1945, p. 9.)

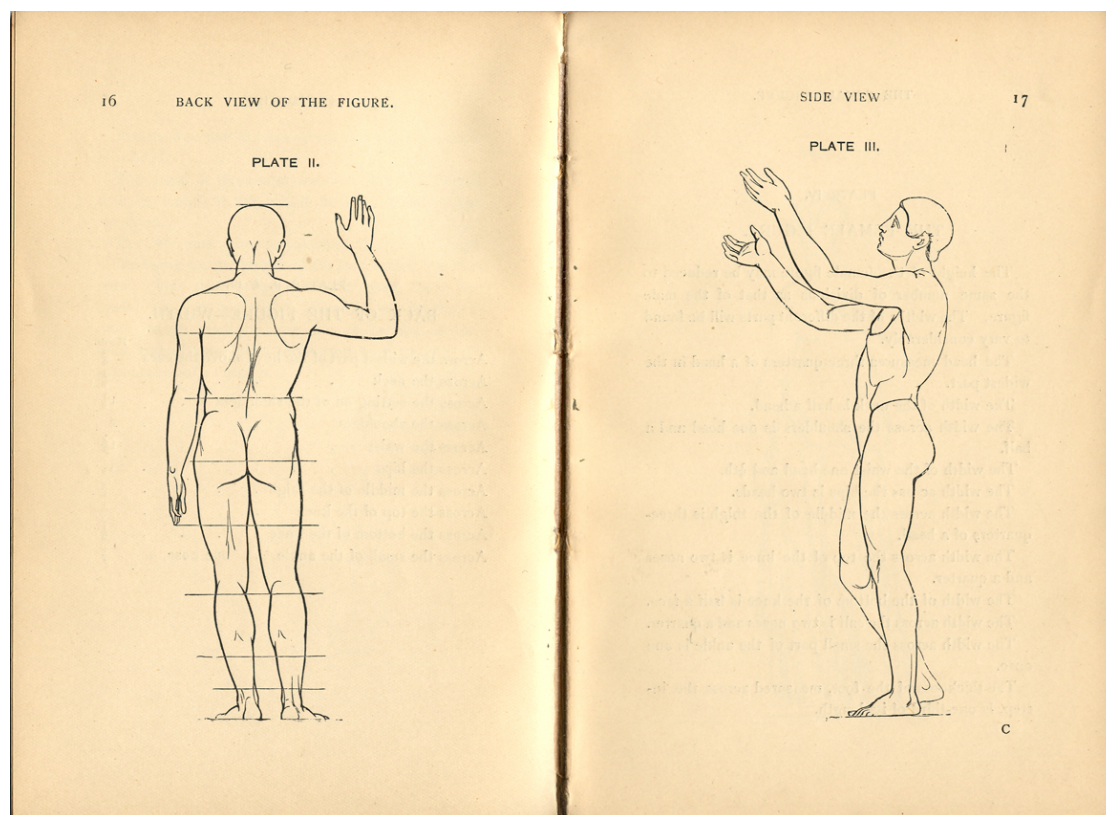
If you do stand still too long, or try to reprint the 1920 pictures of 'speed' in the 1930 edition, you get caught out. The 'modern world' is always moving on. What works for one generation may not work for the next. The laws of drawing may not be as immutable as they seem. Here they are also talking about the impatient student, the student who is not prepared to go through the necessary preliminary stages, and acquire the proper technical foundation. Here and there they lay the blame on the current fads in art – what some called the 'Anarchists of Art in Paris'.

### THE GOLDEN AGE

Though the call for a 'return to the life room' is not heard as much as it was a decade ago, in London discontented voices complain that students are no longer being taught 'to draw'. Behind this complaint lurks the assumption that there once was a golden age of drawing, with obedient students and commonly agreed principles, where everyone had enough time to learn the 'proper' way. It is a complicated issue. On the one hand I am at a loss to explain what 'being able to draw' really involves. On the other, I have been perplexed by M.A. Drawing students who could not draw a table from memory. Does that matter? Like others, I am struck by the contrast between the regime of 'drawing classes' undertaken by students in China, and the open approach of our universities. I have mainly studied English and American manuals. From these, an arbitrary and incomplete sample, it would be hard to derive a commonly held view of the best way to teach. They suggest all kinds of methods, many of them quite incompatible, and some argue – curiously – that you could never learn from a book in the first place. Today we are used to the adage that to learn to draw you have to learn to look, to see 'the world'. That was reiterated back then. But it would not necessarily mean drawing directly from the model. 'Training' the eye and hand could involve tracing letters or geometric figures, copying drawings, learning complex perspective, studying anatomy, botany, plenty of still-life, and learning to draw from memory. Instead of a consensus about the best way of teaching, experts were divided as to whether it was better to measure or to express, Euston Road or the fluency of the Florentine method. And what of the creativity of children's art? Should we even attempt to teach drawing in the first place? Reading these earnest messages from the past it comes as a relief to come across familiar

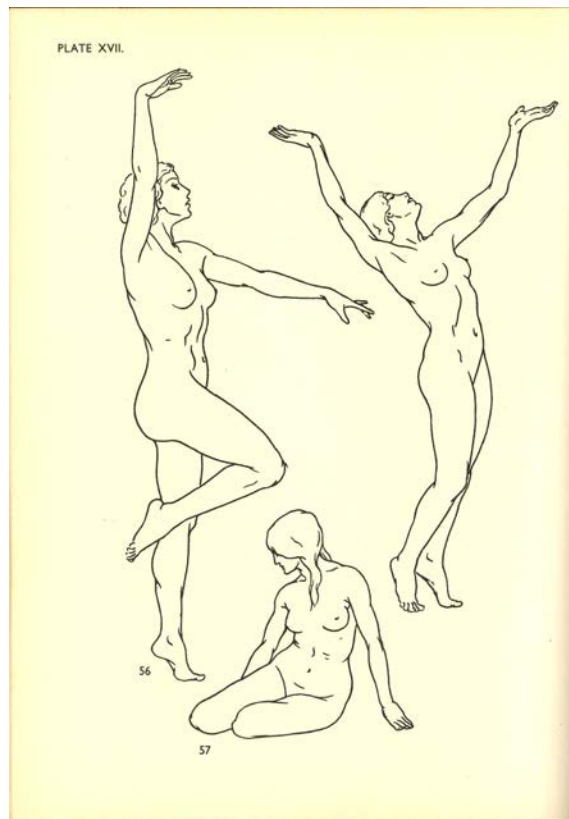
anxieties; each generation reacting, rejecting, starting from scratch again, or re-inventing a tradition.

I call this world of drawing strange because in other respects it is remote from us. Alternatively, I sometimes wonder whether our ideas are the strange ones. It is possible to track step by step the stages by which these books evolved, swinging this way and that between rigid and liberal methods, from the classicism of the academy to the 'creative' nursery, from the D.I.Y. culture of the forties to the beards of the fifties, from the lounges of the seventies to the abstract 'discourse' of the present day. What can also be disconcerting is the detachment, the sheer oddness of the subject matter - a nun's profile used to demonstrate facial expression, battle scenes from the first and second world wars being titled 'studies in charcoal'. An almost erotic nude is described as a pen study. Then as now, there was talk of drawing as a universal language, and the human figure - or in contemporary parlance, the body - was fundamental. But which version of the nude do we take as the universal one for all times and places: the Grecian, the dancer, the fitness instructor, or the high-heeled temptress? Here are also illustrations from a contemporary Egyptian drawing book by my colleague Dr. Marwa Ezzat, suitably adjusted. Different cultures have different conceptions of permissible nudity. The same is true of drawings of the hand: there is no standard drawing of the hand for all times and for all places. In these instances the hand is showing you how to hold the pencil, measure proportion, apply watercolour, or hold that dreaded ruler.

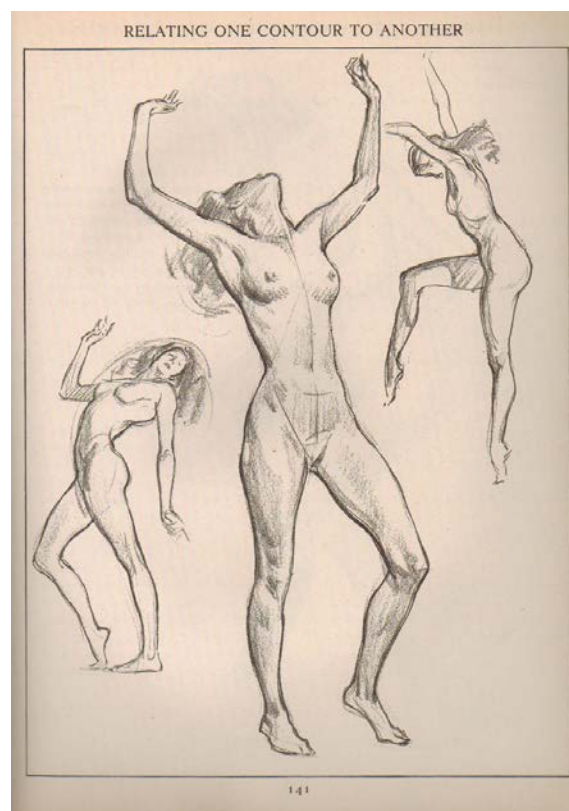


Charles H. Weigall (1911), *The Art of Figure Drawing, (Practical Instructions for a course of Study in this branch of Art)*, 'Back and Side Views of the Figure', from Weigall 1852. P. 16,17.



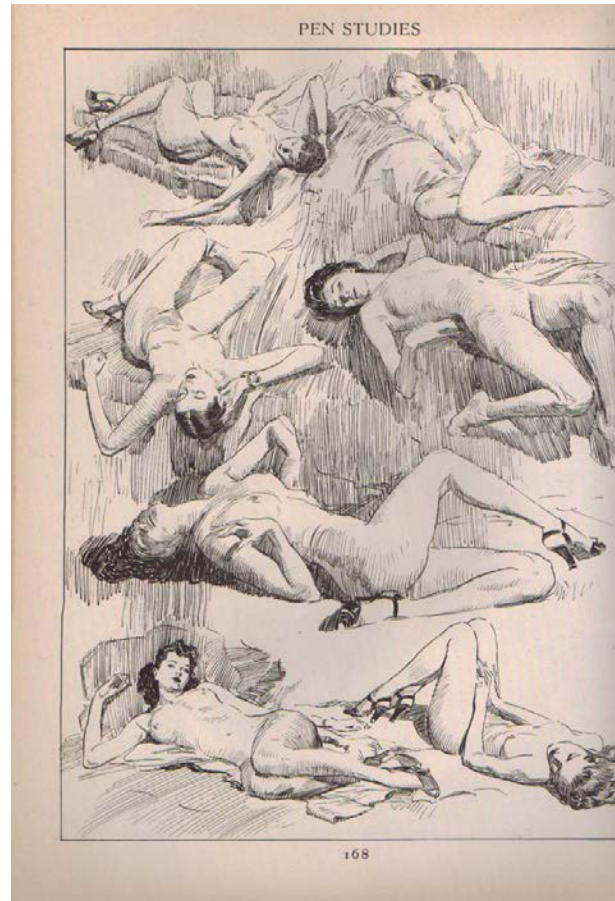


from Trew 1936, 'Drawing Without a Master'. Plate XVII.



'Relating one Contour to Another, from Loomis 1944, 'Figure Drawing for all it's Worth'.  
P.141.

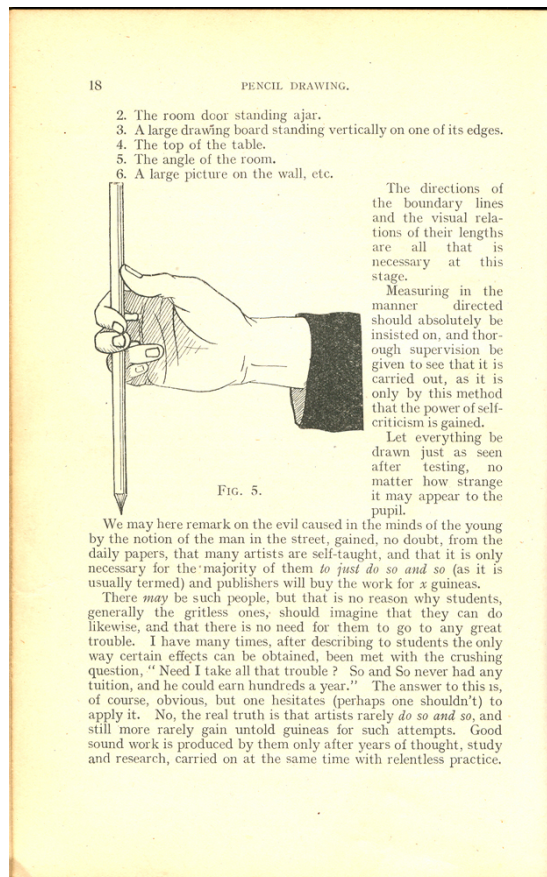




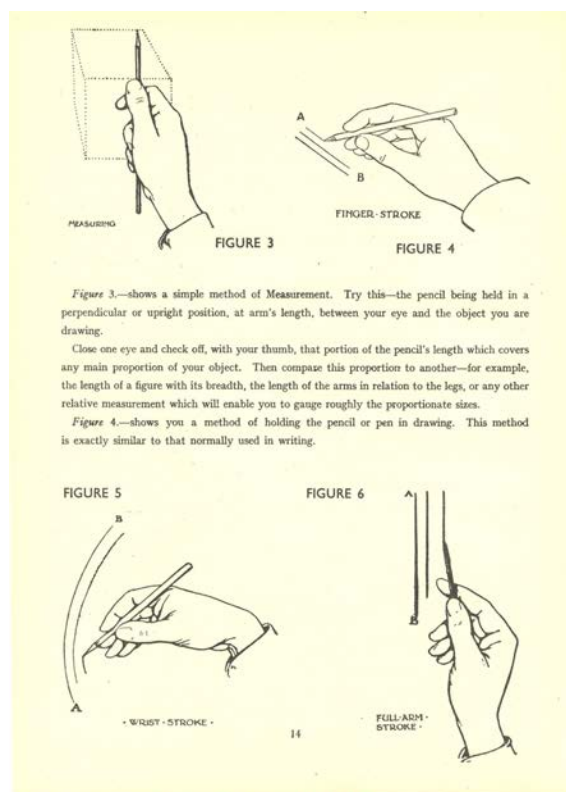
'Pen Studies', from Loomis 1944, 'Figure Drawing for all it's Worth'. P.168.



from Marwa Ezzat 2007, 'On Drawing'. P. 75.76

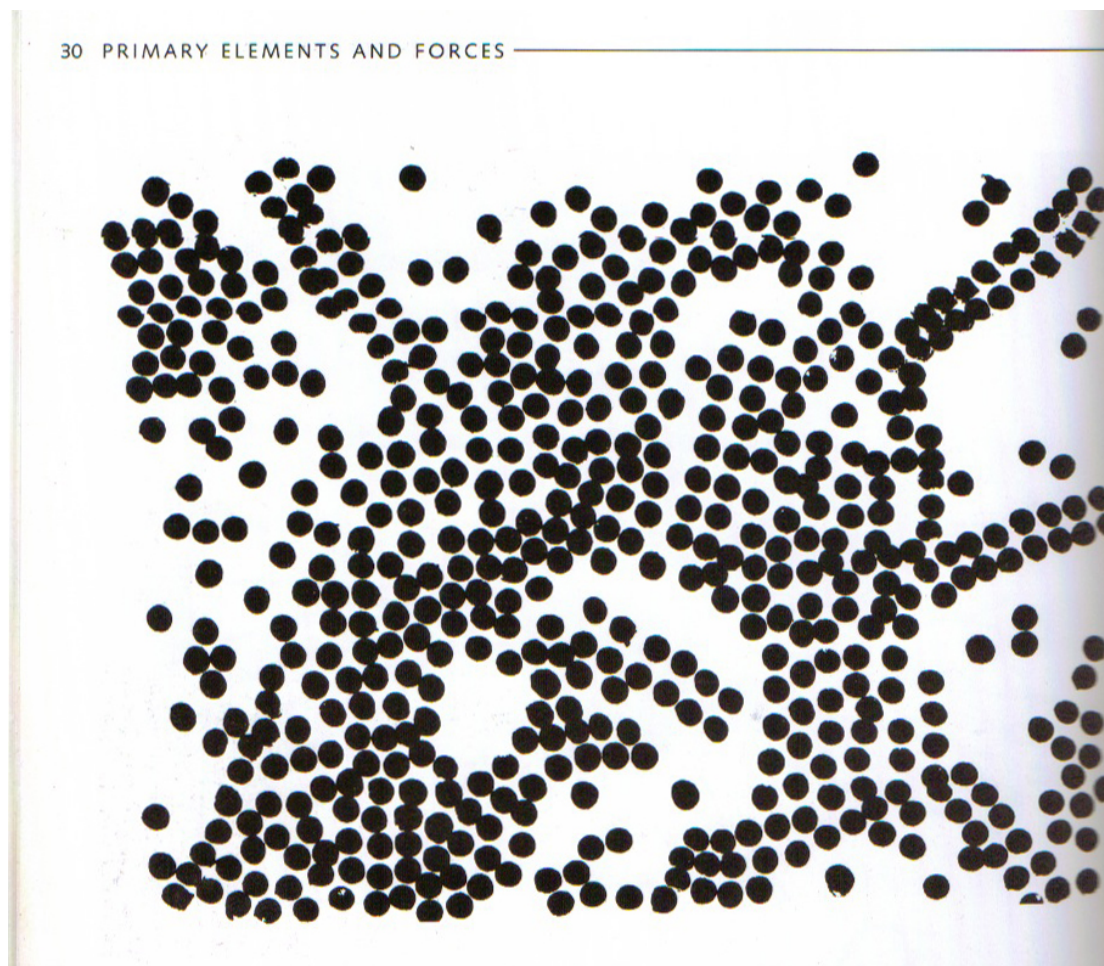


from Rankin 'Pencil Drawing' 1924, p. 18.



Holding the pencil, from Bradshaw, 1941. 'I wish I could Draw'. P. 14

I mentioned that commercial illustration, prominent in these publications, does not attract PhD researchers as much as 'performance' drawing. Another under-researched area is computer graphics. The web, and 'virtual' art get plenty of attention, as do technological demonstrations, but not drawings made digitally in the cause of art. The how-to-draw books turned a blind eye to modern art, hardly mentioning cubism, and only coming to terms with Klee's notebooks in the sixties. That was when 'Basic Design', the title of Maurice de Sausmarez's influential book of 1964, challenged the regime of the life-room. This put the emphasis on understanding visual grammar, mark-making, and improvisation with materials. Phrases like 'free spontaneous statement', or 'objective drawing exercises' describe what are predominantly abstract drawings, using collage and chance, an approach far removed from the life room, which by then was generally detested by students - I was one of them, and the opportunity to explore the grammar of 'abstract' art came as a revelation. But all was not what it seemed to be. A pattern of dots turns out to be the army controlling a riot.

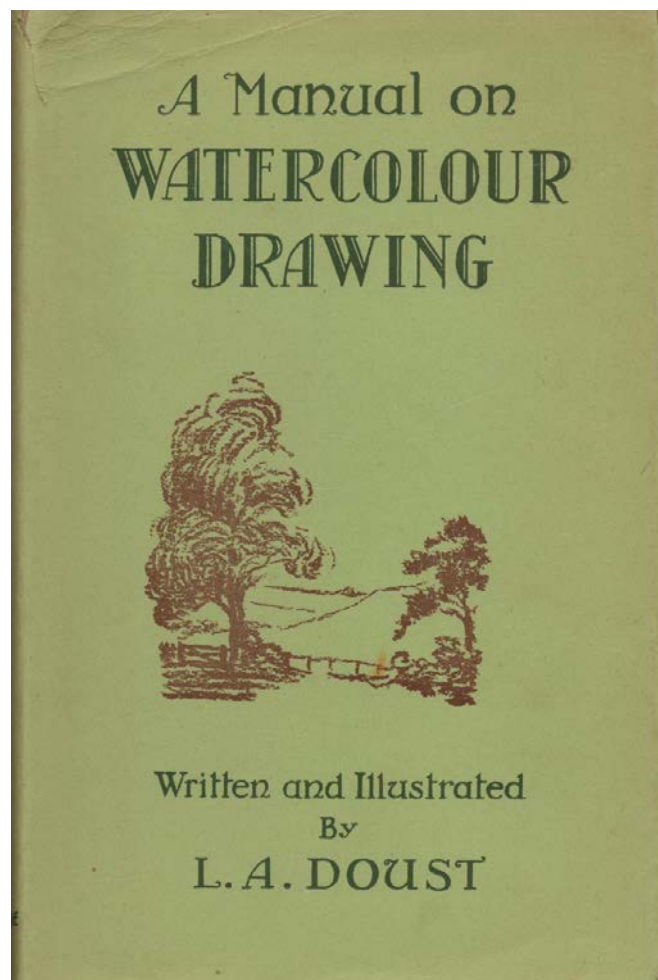


'A Riot Quelled by Soldiers', from de Sausmarez 1964, 'Basic Design'. P. 30.

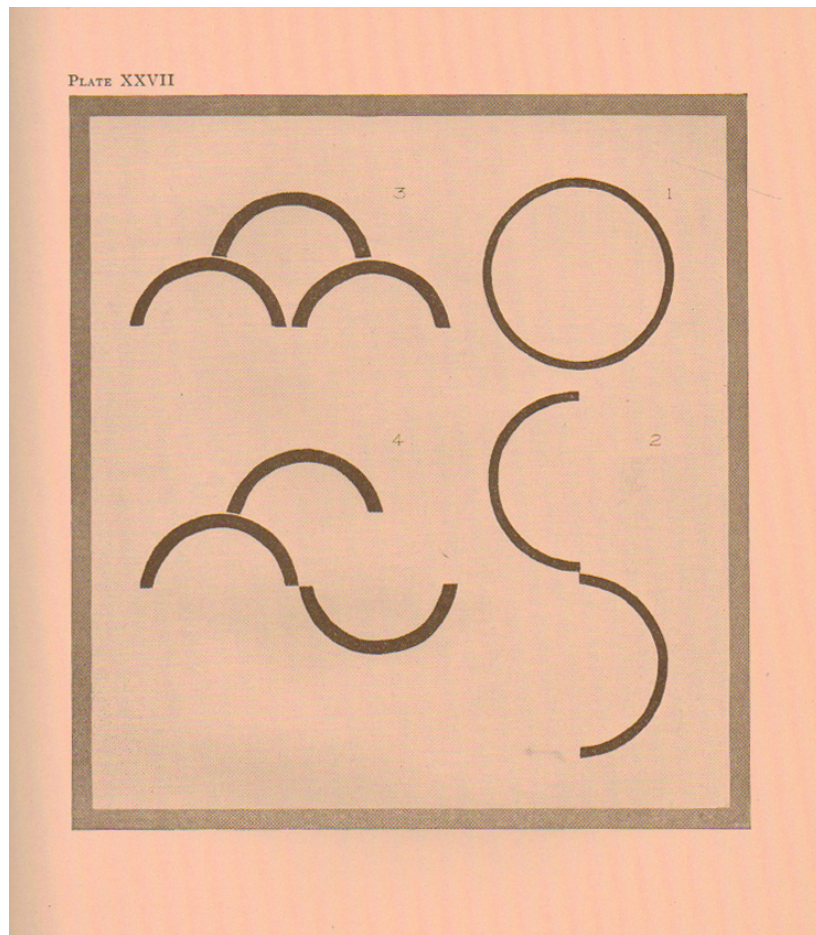
It is easy to forget that the history of modern art we take for granted today, when Duchamp is considered by some to be the major influence of the twentieth century, was not the same art



history of these earlier decades. For Vernon Blake, who had studied alongside Matisse in Paris, the greatest master was Eugene Carriere. In the fifties, Raoul Dufy was venerated. The readers of the manuals - amateur artists, students, retired solicitors - lived in a world without TV art documentaries, without powerful institutions like the Pompidou Centre, Tate Modern, or MoMA; without arts universities, such as Central St Martins in London, on the scale of shopping malls.



L.A. Doust (1933), *A Manual on Watercolour Drawing*, Frederick Warne (1949)



from Bowie, 1911, 'On the Laws of Japanese Painting'. Plate XXVII.

### INDEFINITE DEFINITIONS

It would be a mistake to think of the manuals as representing one classifiable tradition. Deciding how to organise such a collection has its problems. What should count as a drawing manual? What of 'Postercraft'? Before 1950 watercolour was included as drawing. Now we think of it as distinct. Guides to drawing led on seamlessly to guides to painting, so do we include painting books? What of all the sub-categories, such as how to paint sailing ships, tanks, horses? Or draw in the Chinese style? And how universal is universal? What of less familiar cultures? What of Bowie's 1911 'Laws of Japanese Painting', much of which consists of abstract drawing? The chronology can confuse, as some manuals remain in print for fifty years or more; some topics ring out as contemporary, but turn out to have been written a hundred years ago. The first part here could be about the internet:

"I would submit that drawing is a universal language and can no longer be confined within parochial or even national limits as some would have it. Our artistic ideas in these days of photography and easy international intercourse are drawn from the whole world, and their secondary application becomes worldwide also.

Certain people, conscience stricken or ultra clever, seem suddenly to become aware of waves of crass stupidity about them, noting which they easily persuade themselves that a clean slate is the one thing necessary; and that therefore there is much to be learnt from the innocence of babes."

(Hartrick 1921, p. 7.)

But his argument, is that no, despite the mistakes of the academies, we should not throw out traditional methods in their entirety, but learn the hard way.

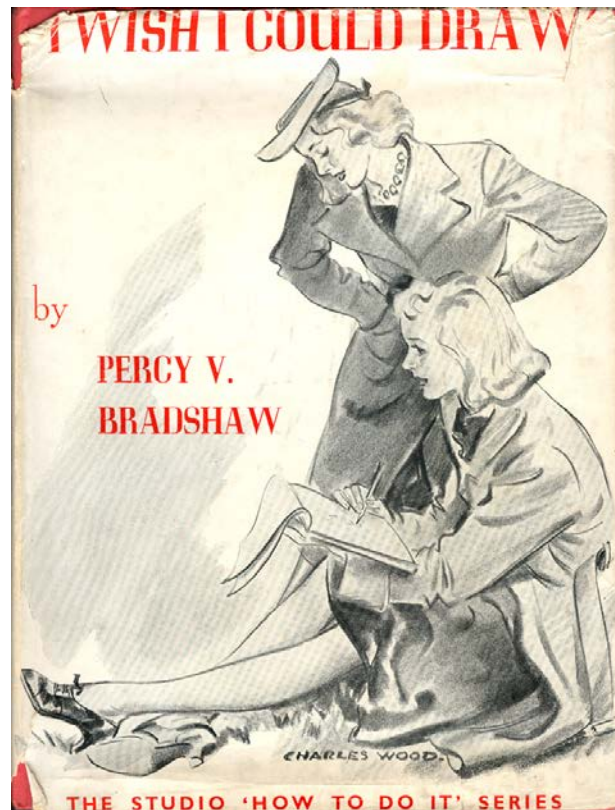
There are repeated calls for drawing to become more ambitious, intellectually. This must sound familiar to anyone working in a university, having to defend drawing as being about more than skill:

"Whilst preparing these sheets for the press I received a letter from a drawing master in an important college who complained that the educational value of drawing was so little appreciated, and he asked me if I could not write some plain statement of the reasons why drawing is desirable as a part of general education... Drawing is known to be valuable as a training for the eye, nobody disputes that, the doubt concerns its value to the mind." (Hamerton 1892, p. x, xi.)

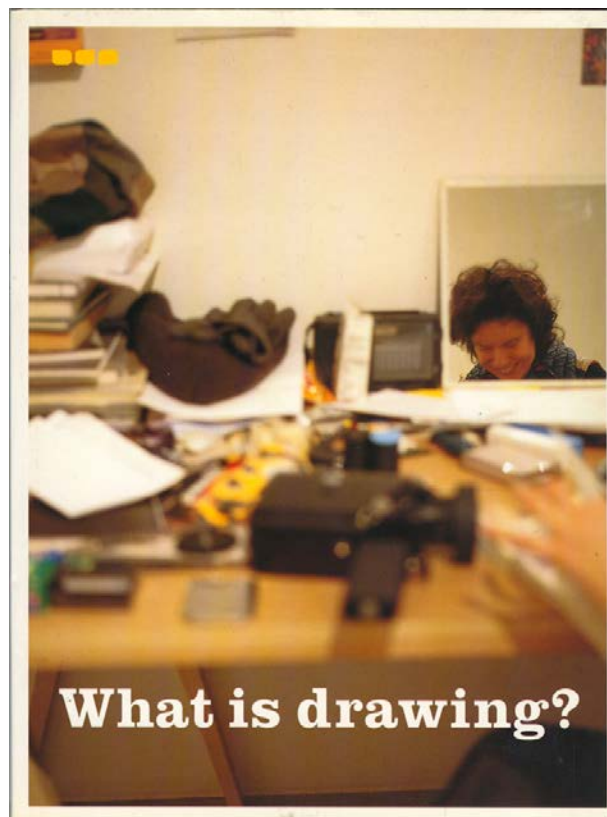
With such a range of topics – wood engraving, calligraphy, flowers, architecture, caricature, engineering – it is misleading to expect too much wisdom. If you search for some common denominator of 'what drawing is' – the elusive particle from which all drawing is derived – you just chase your tail. Drawing never was just 'one thing'. There were always distinct genres and purposes, distinct schools of thought, from the academic to the amateur, from the functional to the recreational, and nowhere could you point and say this is the definitive drawing of that time, this is the definitive how-to publication of that decade.

Some of the recommended methods – which you might have thought were extinct – do survive on the web. The Famous Artists School, founded in 1947 by Norman Rockwell and colleagues, is still going: experts draw corrections on cellophane over your harbour scene; they even take a digital photo with a vintage digital camera. Since the fifties fine art and graphic art have become separated. Commercial art has been swept aside by photography, and now by digital media. Readers might have gathered in a sketch club, to draw for pleasure, and also probably for profit. They would have been baffled by the idea of drawing as 'research'. Loomis's book has the subtitle 'a book of fundamentals for an artistic career' and Percy Bradshaw's Press Art School advertised itself as drawing for profit. Book titles and anthologies now speak of drawing as embracing the whole of drawing, past and present: maps, and generalized motifs fill the cover. Books for the amateur continue, but without tips on conceptual art. Across a divide 'serious' books search out for a unifying principle of 'Drawing', or simply ask, with implied scepticism, 'what is drawing? They may appear open-minded, but their tone of voice also serves to exclude; so they may be tipping the balance in favour of the academy.





Cover of Bradshaw 1941, 'I wish I could Draw'



Cover of Kingston 2003, 'What is Drawing?'

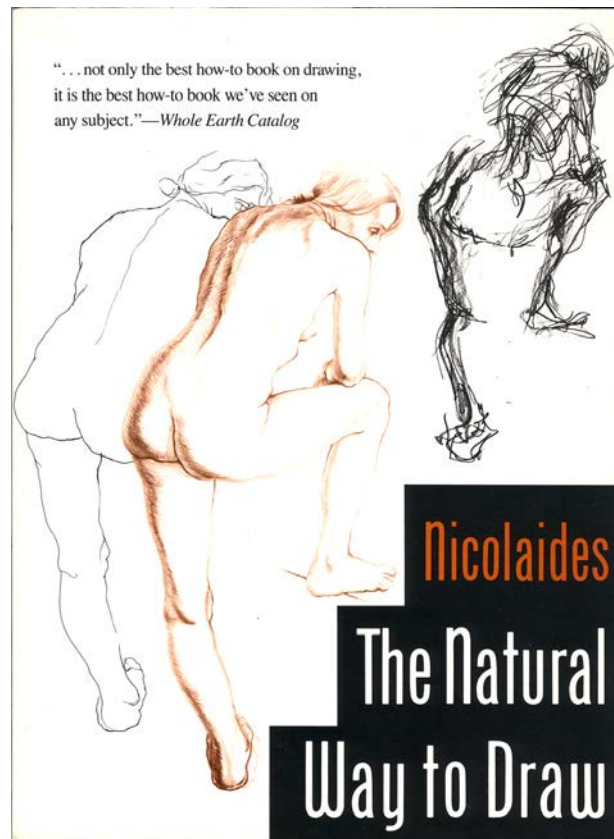
## NO DIGITAL DRAWING

Computer graphics represents the most innovative technology to hit the drawing community for generations, and it is surprising that there have been scarcely any chapters on this topic – or not so surprising given the long history of myopic conservatism. There are a few ambivalent asides. The earliest reference I have found is:

“A computer can be regarded as just another instrument which it is possible to use to create a work of art. On the other hand, there are those who feel that work resulting from a machine is denied expression and creative thought and that it is too clinical and cold in appearance.” (Capon 1984, p. 47.)

And scarce anything for the next thirty years. I mention this omission for a reason. The very idea of a how-to-draw book has its parallels in the layout of a drawing programme. The drawing book condenses the author’s expertise into simple formulae, rather like a recipe book; the drawing programme also has its menus, options and effects. There are books in the 1900’s where pages show different sizes and types of what was called the ‘lead’ pencil. For some years it was thought necessary to show the correct way of holding the pencil. Likewise, twenty years ago software manuals showed you brush size options, and how to hold the mouse. The Royal Academy banned how-to books for many years, and some of my favourite manuals come from what has been discarded from art school libraries. Fine art departments for years failed to take advantage of drawing and painting software. The same objections raised against the formulae presented for the amateur artist were raised against ‘ready-made’ paint programmes. They were said to condition what the user could do. To use the digital medium to the full, the argument went, the student has to learn to programme.

I take a different view. I admit that my infatuation with what are often called ‘drawing packages’ has led me to explore these earlier ‘packages’. Distinctions between drawing, painting, and photography do not make much sense within the workflow of Adobe’s Creative Suite. I am more a fan of Corel’s ‘Painter’. I stress that I do not use these programmes to replace conventional drawing. I have long continued using both side by side, integrating one with the other. I also find there is more continuity between old and new techniques than is generally understood. If you look carefully, you can find precedents for Photoshop filters within the pages of these guides, such as the trick of using bleach to turn a photo into a drawing. Many of the disapproving remarks I have heard in twenty-five years of using software cheats have their equivalents in those ‘rages’ against the ruler, or against any interference with the ‘natural’ processes of drawing. Once more there is a trail to follow in the use of that term ‘natural’, with some unlikely turnings. Nicolaides’ ‘Natural Way’ has remained in print for more than seventy years, yet the muddy sculptural drawings are not at all what I would consider unforced.



Cover of 2008 edition of Nicolaides 1941, 'The Natural Way to Draw'.

Finally, I want to return to that question of what it is to learn, and to be able to draw. I have taught on several M.A. Drawing courses. When I attempted a modest introduction to the delights of digital drawing I failed. Students attracted to drawing were not attracted to technology, of any kind. Students have become adept at producing a rationale for what they do, and understandably, they are less interested in technique for its own sake. This is not surprising, given what they might encounter at a drawing conference. More than once I have sat through a keynote speech, perhaps by an eminent philosopher, where not a single image was shown. Nor is a single drawing mentioned.

The combination of 'looking' and 'practice' in these drawing books was repeatedly advocated as the only way to learn, just as the only way you can improve your trumpet playing, dancing, or running, is by practising and practising repeatedly. The book, the tutor, can only advise, here and there pointing the way. That remains my view. I am all for 'practice-based' PhDs in drawing, but they have their limitations. I have heard students speak dismissively of 'skill'. They are more interested in conceptual kudos. Their interests coincide with those of universities, looking to raise the intellectual status of the visual arts, while competing for funds. Instead of the drawing manual they study and quote from approved philosophical texts. I worry about the seminar room replacing the studio. Without first-hand



experience of making drawings you are in the same position as those amateurs and part-timers who followed these cranky recipes.

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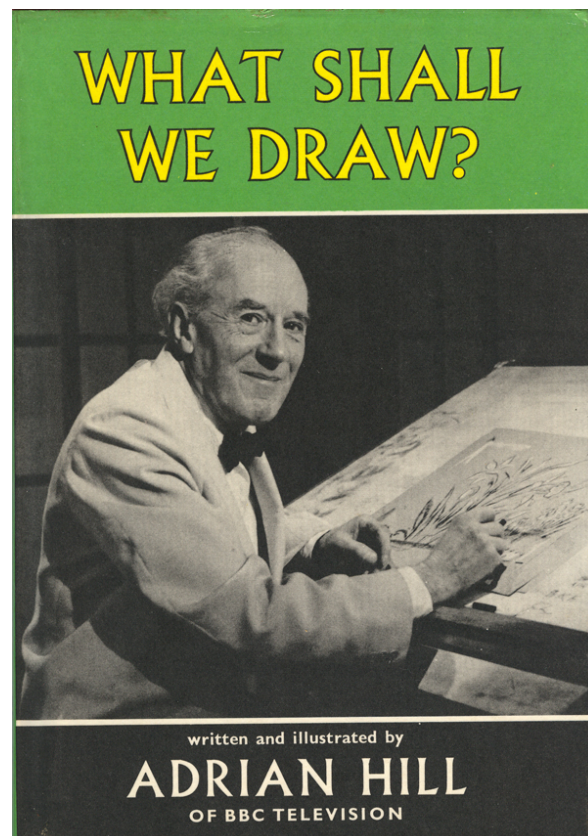
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<http://www.famous-artists-school.com/>



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Advertisement in Hoten, A., (1910), 'Object and Nature Drawing' (A Guide for teachers of drawing in elementary schools), McDougall's Educational Company Limited, London.

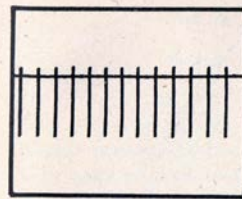


FIG. 1. BORING

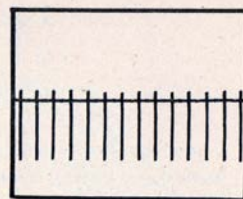


FIG. 2. A LITTLE BETTER: THE SPACES ABOVE AND BELOW THE FENCE ARE DIFFERENT

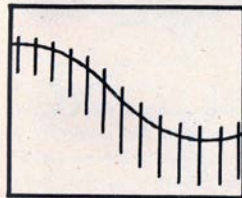


FIG. 3. BETTER STILL: INTEREST IS ADDED BY THE CHANGING DIRECTION

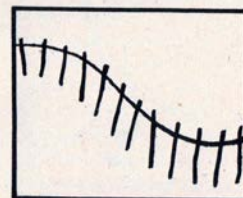


FIG. 4. BEST: STILL FURTHER INTEREST IS ADDED BY ALTERING THE DIRECTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL POSTS. THUS, EACH LINE HAS ITS OWN INTEREST WITHOUT INTERFERING WITH THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FENCE AS A WHOLE

Ramsey Wherrett, J., (1946), 'Composition', (How to Draw Series), The Studio, London.