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# DRAWING THE LINE

Reflections on the importance of drawing by hand in an increasingly digital age

BY STEPHEN ALCORN

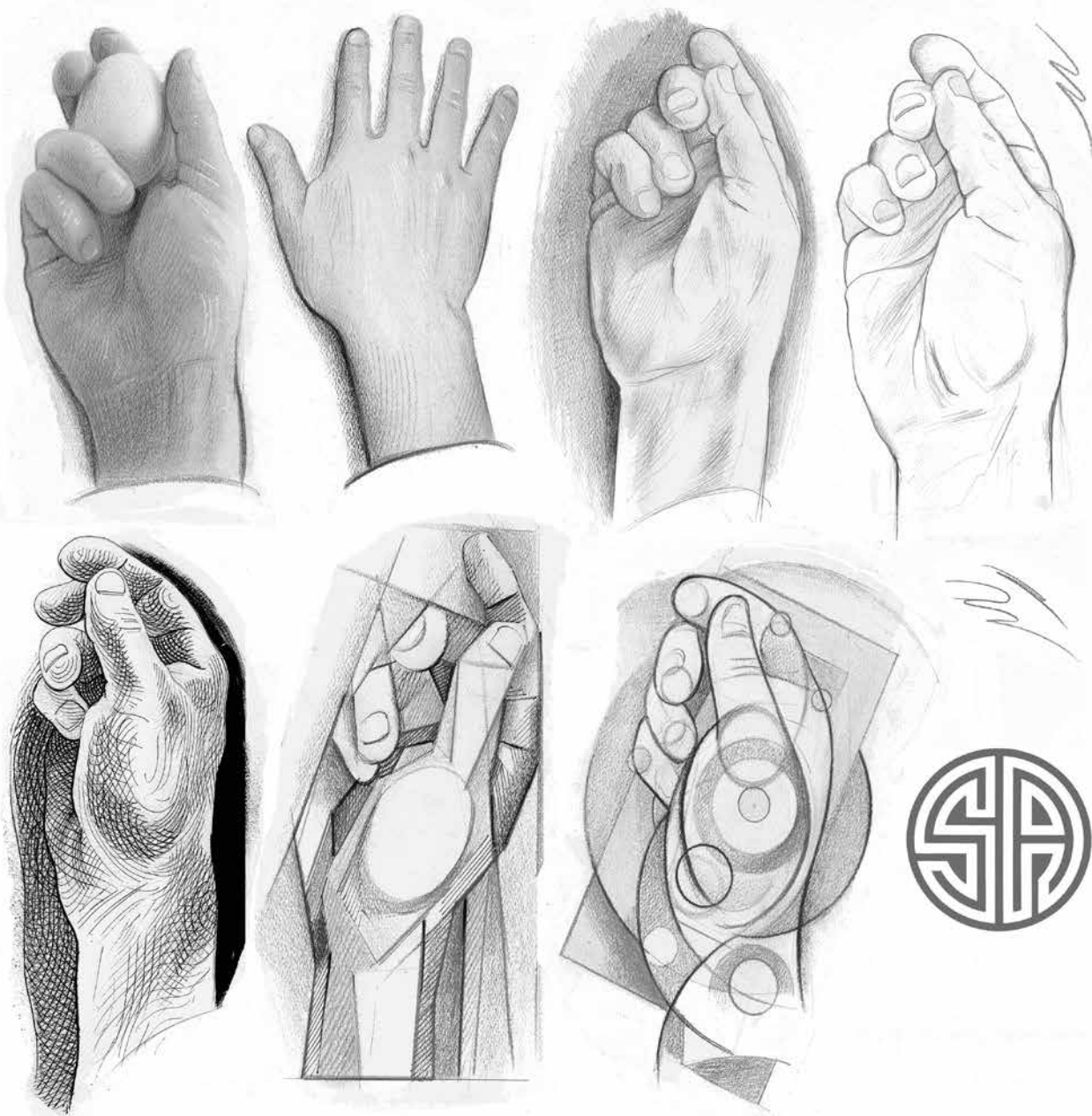
For over 2,000 years, the noun “digit” (from the Latin *digitus*) has signified “finger,” but now in its adjectival form “digital” relates to technology that generates, stores, and processes data. This lexical shift is emblematic of a larger change within our culture, and more specifically, the practice of drawing. With a new millennium quickly unfolding before us, I cannot think of a better time to look at the past to reconsider the essential role that tactile values have played in the practice of drawing since time immemorial. Are our hands becoming obsolete as creative tools? Are our hands being replaced by machines? And where does that leave the creative process?

These questions were first raised by my entry into the realm of academe in the fall of 2010, when I became a member of the faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of the Arts in Richmond, VA. Charged with teaching, among other things, the fundamentals of drawing, I was required to analyze and articulate, in a concise manner, the processes that as a draftsman, I had developed and employed over the years—and which had become mysteriously instinctual and intuitive. This development in my professional life soon led to a renewed interest on my part in the practice of observational drawing. Perhaps inevitably, this led to a rediscovery of the lessons learned while attending the *Istituto Statale d’Arte* in Florence, Italy.

I had the good fortune to come of age in a culture that fostered a holistic,



“Self-portrait” by Stephen Alcorn. Brush and India ink on paper; 22” x 17”



"My Right Hand" by Stephen Alcorn. Mixed media on paper; 17" x 22"

humanistic approach to art education. A seminal influence for me at this stage of my life was my instructor of *disegno dal vero* (life drawing), the sculptor and painter Marco Lukolic. A kind and thoughtful man, he reveled in the eye-mind-hand coordination that makes drawing possible, and fostered an appreciation for the art of translation, namely those processes of thought and perception that permit an artist to transcend

the prosaic and embrace the poetic. His work is at once modern, ancient, sophisticated, and naïf—in short, it lends itself to being appreciated on multiple levels. He valued the organic over the clinical, and the imaginative over the literal. Perhaps most importantly, he taught me to value tradition and to recognize that tradition is not nostalgia, but knowledge passed on from one generation to another. For his example I

am grateful, for it encouraged me to see my artistic development as a microcosm of the larger history of art, and thus have a sense of belonging to a larger whole.

### **Maintaining a daily diet of drawing**

The challenges I have faced as a printmaker, illustrator, and painter over the years led me to work more and more from



memory, and in a manner and style perhaps more indebted to the advent of synthetic cubism than to the figure drawing lessons of my youth, which revolved around the discovery and exploration of such extraordinary draftsmen as Pisanello, Watteau, Ingres, the youthful Degas, and Kollwitz. This distancing from the academic drawing practices of my youth was pushed further by my lifelong fascination with the relief-block print, a medium that imposes unforgiving constraints and necessitates a high degree of formal stylization.

Still, I never completely abandoned the practice of drawing from life. Over the years, my work has come to embody a sort of dichotomy comprised of two comple-

mentary approaches to image making: one inspired by anonymous Italian folk art of the 15th and 16th centuries, and 18th- and 19th-century American folk art; and a second inspired by the aforementioned European tradition of master draftsmanship. My “Daily Drawing” series of mixed-media studies is a testament to my commitment to the practice of drawing remaining an integral part of my daily life.

### A firm foundation

The things that shaped my experience in school—a love for artist’s materials, a hands-on approach to the image-making processes, etc.—no longer apply to the art student of today. The contrast between the

inherently artisanal character of my experience in art school and the technology-driven ethos of today could not be more marked. As I seek to impart the skills I was fortunate to learn in my youth, I am made increasingly aware of how removed today’s students have become from the tools, materials, and art historical references that I took for granted—the very things that made my evolution and career as a printmaker, illustrator, and painter possible. I am finding that students often rely on only one medium of communicating and visualizing their ideas, and don’t explore other craft-based media. What has emerged from the predominance of the computer in the generation of art is the



Composite of studies featuring the artist’s muse (composite of 6 individual works) by Stephen Alcorn. Mixed media on paper; 22” x 17”





Composite of a deliberately eclectic selection of works executed in a variety of physical media by Stephen Alcorn.

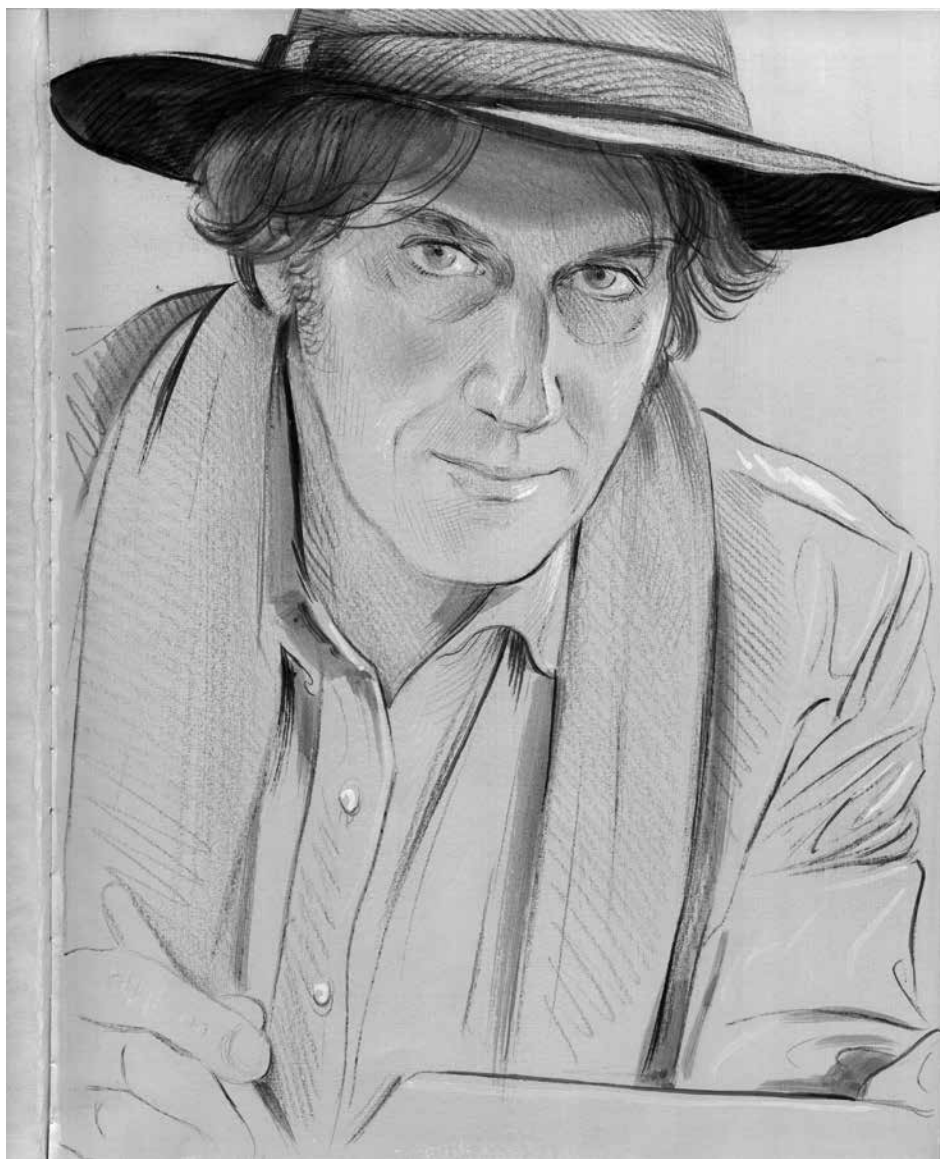
domination of the tool over the aesthetic judgment of the user. The computer is an extremely powerful instrument, and like all tools, it alters our perception of reality. Because of this, one's consciousness of form, color, shape, and meaning can risk the danger of being eclipsed by increasingly technological extensions of our faculties.

### Striking a balance

As a 21st-century artist, I rely on the most advanced digital technologies as tools that enhance my ability to be more human. These labor-saving devices grant me time to work by hand. In turn, those hand-made drawings can be scanned with a fidelity unknown to previous generations, and the results can then be disseminated to

an increasingly larger audience. The power of the computer lies not in its ability to imitate human actions, but in the facility with which it allows people to communicate fully as human beings. Paradoxically, digital technology enhances my humanity and allows me to keep everything alive—a tradition that began 30,000 years ago with the prehistoric cave painters. Technology





"Self-portrait" by Stephen Alcorn. Sketchbook entry; Mixed media on paper, 14" x 11"

exists to serve humanity. Humanity does not exist to serve technology. As such, the laptop is a brilliant labor-saving tool. It is not, however, a substitute for life anymore than as Flaubert pointed out, literature can substitute for life. In other words, any escape that takes us out of the realm of the living is a shortcut to the demise of the senses.

One of my tasks each fall is to review the portfolios of prospective incoming students. Over the past four years, I have noticed a curious pattern: with each passing year the amount of handmade imagery presented diminishes, while the amount of digitally manipulated photographs

culled from the Internet increases, resulting in a marked depersonalization of the portfolios. Although this does not reflect poorly on the potential of the students, it does reflect the extent to which K–12 art education has abandoned any semblance of a time-tested curriculum. The majority of incoming students do not possess an understanding of the fundamental basics of artist's materials. Without knowledge, for example, of the difference between acrylics and gouache paint, watercolors and oils, cotton and linen canvas, hot press and cold press paper, sable and nylon brushes, can students really hope to render the marks they need to make in order to realize their

full potential as aspiring artists? The art instruction establishment has turned its back on the established curriculum, which gave beauty and craft top priority. One of my primary goals as an instructor is to restore the age-old connection between the two.

### Falling prey

The website for the (George) Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in Chicago proclaims the following:

Current software gives artists tools capable of mimicking almost any medium. With practice, charcoal, oil, airbrush, acrylic, and collage can be replicated. Time-consuming traditional techniques, such as the creation of multiple layers of transparent glazes, can now be accomplished in minutes with no anxiety, no mess and no harmful solvent fumes. This flexible toolbox gives artists the time and the freedom to create unique work for print, games, television, Internet outlets, and feature films.

The affordability of graphic-arts software is one of its greatest virtues, but the digital medium also boasts convenience and practicality. A corner desk can serve as a complete studio, and a computer can substitute for an entire art supply store. Gone are the days of rushing out to buy a tube of cerulean blue. The digital illustrator's color palette is unlimited, his brush collection infinite, and it's all completely portable. (<http://www.lucasmuseum.org/collection/category/digital-illustration-202.html>)

This is a disingenuous attempt to sanitize the creative process and to obliterate the cumulative knowledge gained over the course of 30,000 years of mark-making history. It is, in effect, a thinly veiled advertisement, at the expense of students, from an industry intent on dominating a field in order to exploit a gullible, unwitting audience. Pedagogically, students have little to gain by mimicking the effects of any given medium, if first they don't experience the real thing. Equally problematic are the suggestions that the creative process should somehow be "anxiety free," that there is something wrong with wanting a physical

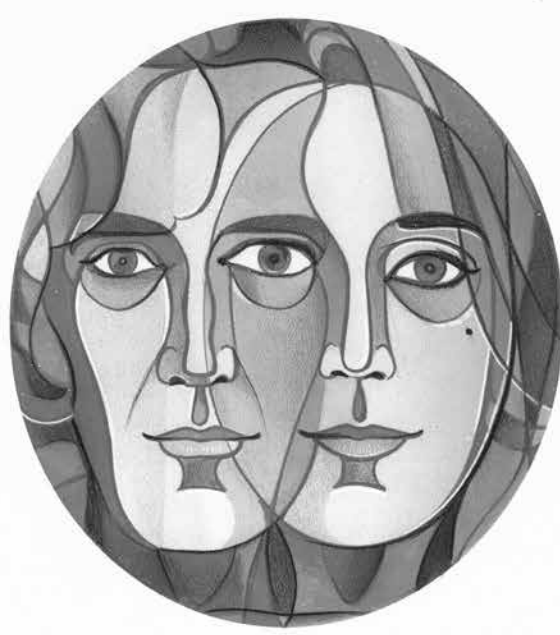
studio of one's own—a room with a view, if you will, one replete with the aroma of paint and (non-harmful) solvents and work-related detritus—and that “a computer can substitute for an entire art supply store.” Finally, why is the age-old, immensely satisfying ritual of preparing and mixing colors being presented as something unpleasant to be avoided at all costs? If the techno-evangelists advocating the abandonment of physical media have their way, an entire generation of art students will have graduated without ever having experienced the transformative process of mixing two colors in order to create a third.

The fetishization of technology is not a new phenomenon: the Victorians were enamored of the steam engine. Romantic painters such as Turner, and even Impressionists such as Monet, painted what they saw as progress through depictions of railroads and steamships. The difference lies in an understanding that never diminished the artist or made the life-experience subservient to the machine. The Industrial Revolution celebrated, in spite of its horrors, what it rightfully saw as an improvement in the standard of living. One of its unfortunate side effects was the bypassing of craft

and its accumulated traditions. The great English aesthete, William Morris, under the influence of John Ruskin, understood the link between poverty and the absence of aesthetics in the life of the working class. Unfortunately, Morris was not able to tap into the power of the Industrial Revolution to overcome the challenge in a way that made well-designed work available to the very masses that needed it most. The question was not one of craft vs. industrialization, but one of applying the highest principles of craft to industrial design. In short, the challenge was how to humanize industry, not to industrialize humanity.

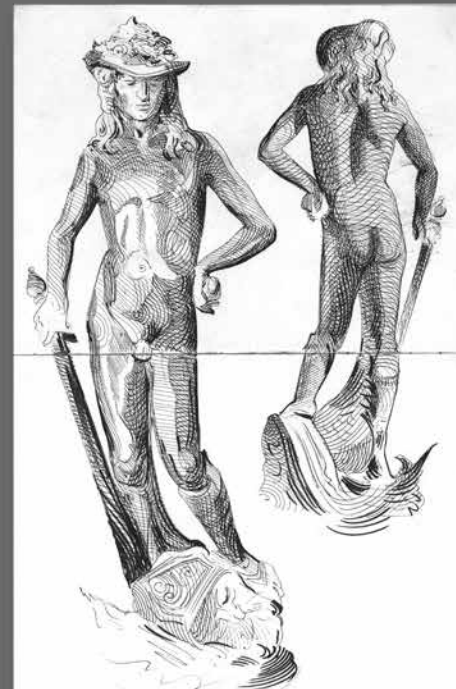
A similar precedent may be found in the Byrdcliffe Colony, also called the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony. Byrdcliffe, near Woodstock, NY, was created as an experiment in utopian living and was an outgrowth of the aforementioned 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement. To this day, it remains the oldest operating Arts and Crafts colony in America. Then, there was the Gloucester, Massachusetts-based consortium, Folly Cove Designers, which grew out of a design course taught by the celebrated children's book illustrator and author, Virginia Lee Burton. The genesis of this particular

grassroots initiative, which revolved around the art of the relief-block print, may also be traced to the Home Industries/Arts and Crafts movements of the 19th century. What is striking about all three “schools” is the organic warmth of the products they spawned, and their commitment to celebrating the ties that bind people to the very environments in which they live and work. All are expressions of the way in which artists, through an assertion of the basic human instinct to create things by hand, have been driven to rebel against the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects of the machine on the arts, and by extension, on the quality of life. Well over a century after Morris' noble experiment, humanity confronts another counter-intuitive challenge. Digital technology, and its accompanying automation, has the potential to liberate humanity and to return the hand to its rightful place in our lives. Unfortunately, the same shortcuts have proven so seductive that their users now dream of abandoning their humanity altogether, thus allowing their hands to atrophy, as if they were superfluous appendages. Yet that was never the intent of the founders of Apple or Microsoft.



Left: “Self-portrait.” Mixed media on paper; 22” x 17”. Middle: “La Sabina.” Mixed media on paper; 22” x 17”. Right: “La Simbiosi.” Mixed media on paper; 22” x 17.” All by Stephen Alcorn.





A sampling of figure-related sketchbook entries by Stephen Alcorn; 11" x 8.5" and 14" x 11"

## Paths of least resistance

It is the tactile nature of the relationship between artists, the materials they used, and the surfaces they drew upon that give the history of art its fundamental variety and character. How a tool responds to the relative hardness, coarseness, absorbency, etc., of a given surface is as important to an artist's expression as the artist's response to said tools, and vice versa. However mastering the use of physical media is a difficult challenge. Many mediums are inherently unforgiving and do not permit the endless revisions that digital technologies offer. The opportunity to create innumerable versions of a digital file, without requiring a bona fide commitment on the part of the artist, is an attractive one to students, precisely because it is, in addition to being expedient, forgiving. This flexibility comes with a price, for beneath the buffed, slick surface can lurk a disheartening lack of substance. Students who lean unduly on the inherent flexibility of digital drawing mediums not only surrender the individuality of their mark-making practices, but also the ability to effectively edit their work.

To experience material resistance in one's work is desirable: whether it be in the form of a substance to be cut (as in the case of a

relief-block print), the drag of a sable brush on a sheet of cold-pressed paper, or, the challenge of manually mixing one's own pigments. To respond to such resistance is to build strength and character. Without said character Olympic athletes, concert pianists, or master printmakers could not hope to achieve their excellence. Tempting as it may be to abandon the realm of physical media, to do so can only lead to a gradual decline in effectiveness or vigor due to underuse or neglect. Ultimately, we have no choice but to use it or lose it, to borrow a phrase. By leading students to believe that they can, in a matter of minutes, "mimic" virtually any effect they choose, and in so doing, spare themselves the "anxiety" of having to actually learn a given technique, is to encourage them to follow a path of least resistance. The challenges that physical media have to offer are invigorating, precisely because they offer resistance. Does not the power of the genie depend upon the constraints imposed by the proverbial bottle?

No longer can an aspiring artist expect to serve an apprenticeship with an established artist, which until the second half of the 20th century, was a right of passage for craftsmen and artists alike. Today, art students must adapt to what amounts to a

series of systematic deprivations, and are left with little choice but to learn to *mimic* the effects they have not been taught to achieve otherwise. Proponents of the abandonment of physical media have not experienced firsthand the creation of an oil painting using oil glazes. Their relationship to the original work of art is vicarious, hence their inability to make a distinction between a real Rembrandt and a *faux* (digital) Rembrandt. Who knows what the ultimate effect of the deprivation will be on future generations of art students? What is certain is the adverse impact that the abandonment of physical media in favor of digital media has had on the mark-making sensibilities of aspiring artists.

## We are what we draw

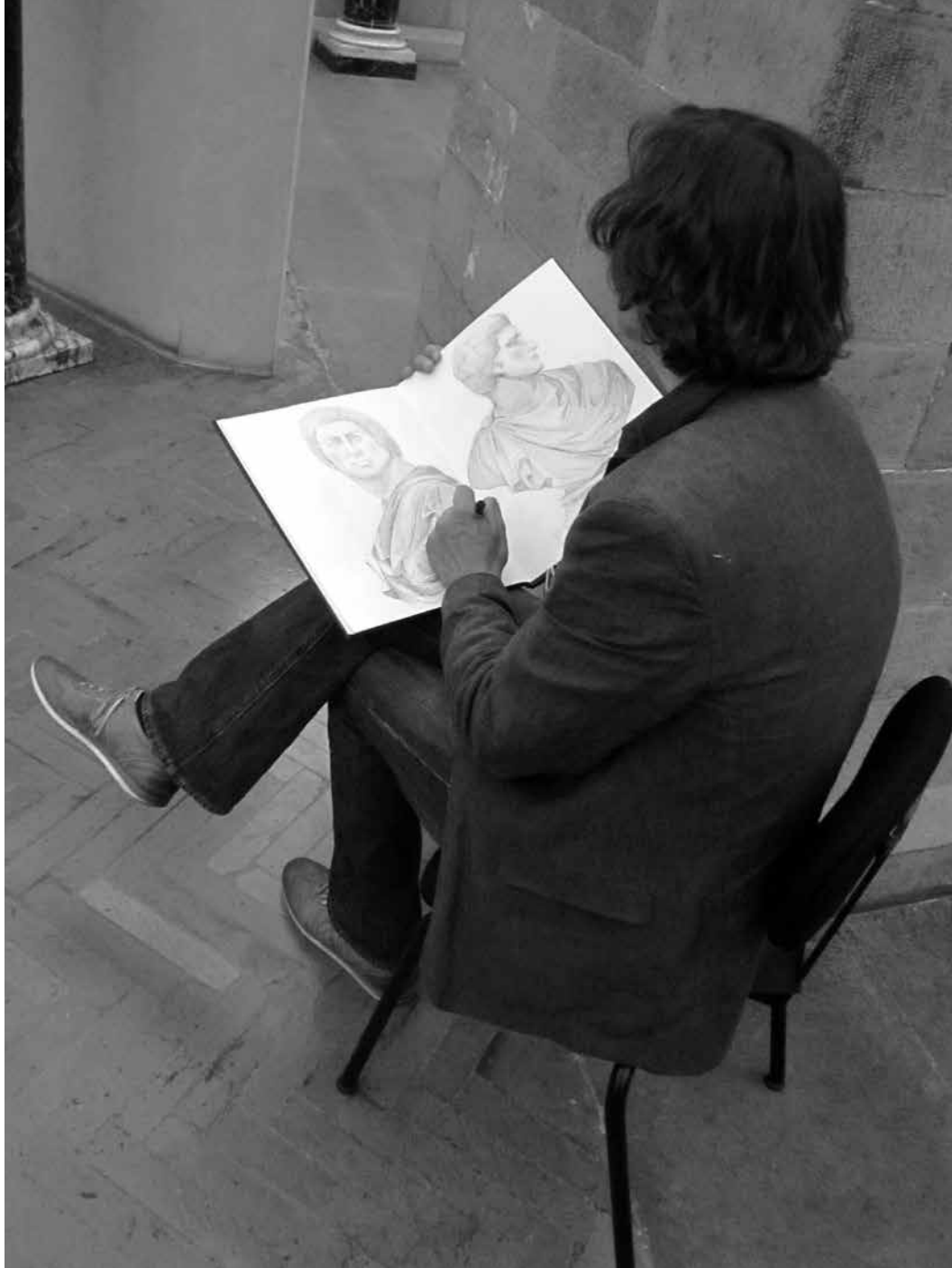
The ability to draw by hand was once seen as the first and most essential skill of any artist, but in today's age, drawing is widely perceived to be an unnecessary activity. Today aspiring artists are faced with a growing prejudice that it is not trendy to draw, and that those who do draw are remnants of something that used to be, quaint anachronisms rooted in a bygone past. Many art schools no longer emphasize drawing, preferring to equip their students



with the latest digital or video cameras and 3-D printers. With computer-based drawing and modeling tools becoming increasingly prevalent in schools, the core curriculum is moving further and further toward the integration of technology into the classroom at the expense of hand drawing. And with administrators, teachers, and students divided over the value of mastering script and flowing, calligraphic signatures, there is a growing trend—in an age dominated by keyboards, mobile devices, and touchpads—to eliminate cursive from elementary school curriculums. Some consider cursive to be counterproductive, an anachronism in a digitized society where even signatures are now electronic; I believe it remains an indispensable pedagogical tool, because its study can improve fine motor skills and foster greater literacy, as well as help students discover their identity.

I also believe that marks, signs, and symbols made on physical surfaces with a stylus, pencil, or brush have a way of restoring authenticity to the image, and can serve as a healthy antidote to the artificiality spawned by the unbridled simulacra of our age, whereby illusion becomes a substitute for reality. I encourage students to create drawings that are born of steadfast observation, and whose skill, care, and determination invite the viewer to feel and to think—drawings that are not merely sensational attempts to get a message across in a matter of seconds. In other words, drawings should invite repeated viewings, and link us to a profound instinct in our being, as distinct from the cursory superficiality of today's mass media communications.

It is important to note that computers do not to engage our bodies to the extent that traditional drawing processes do. The movement of a mouse is rudimentary compared with the handling of a pencil, and lacking in tactile gratification. The pressure-sensitive digital drawing tablet that is currently affordable may be an improvement, but the tactile feedback it offers cannot be compared to that provided by a drawing tool on paper. Because the hand is focused on the mouse and tablet, while



Drawing Michelangelo's *Brutus* in the Bargello National Museum; Florence, Italy. Photo by Iole Marie Rabor.

the eye is focused on the monitor, there is, inevitably, a disconnect between the hand and the eye. Compare this with the manner in which the eye follows and guides the motion of the hand in physical drawing, and you realize just how counterintuitive the process of digital drawing can be if you are not vigilant. Nothing could be further from the truth than the oft-heard cliché “the computer is just another pencil.” The steps involved in digital drawing processes can be overwhelmingly disjointed and can

stymie experimentation. On the other hand, knowledge of analog processes can inform the digital in meaningful ways. For example, knowledge of color theory allows us to understand the effects of color and blend modes in digital applications, just as experimenting with hand-made stencils can inform our use of digital masking layers.

### **A universal instinct**

Throughout history humans have responded to a profound need to translate



Participants in the Florence Revealed Program drawing in the Bargello National Museum and in the Giardino delle Rose, Florence, Italy. Photos by Stephen Alcorn and Shadiah Lahham, respectively.

provides the satisfying experience not only of exercising a well-honed skill, but also of giving eloquent form to a vision. In both cases, the coordinated activity of the eye, mind, and hand leads to an engagement that unifies body and soul. By restoring the haptic its rightful place in my daily existence, I find I am able to achieve a more mindful state of being. If I am drawing an object, I find myself irresistibly drawn to “wrapping my head” around it. If the drawing is of something that does not exist in the material sense, it provides me with the gratification of generating a tangible subject from an abstract idea. In drawing, form and content are co-dependent—to the point that one really cannot exist without the other. Consequently, drawing unites ideas and physicality together, and does so in a manner that requires a process both of translation and distillation. Indeed one of the virtues of drawing is the process of abstraction it demands. I find this experience to be immensely satisfying, precisely because it lends coherence to experience, and thus order to chaos.

Meaningful drawings put the conscious mind, and sometimes, perhaps more unsettling, the unconscious mind, in contact with the eye and mind of the proverbial beholder. That is one of greatest strengths of drawing: the way it makes the viewer experience what the artist is contemplating. It is, arguably, the medium that speaks more freshly, directly, and immediately about the mystery that goes on in the human mind. Indeed, if you want to get to know an artist, the drawings are the ideal place to start. Viewing a monumental painting or work of sculpture can be like attending a formal lecture or a public performance. But looking at an original drawing is another experience altogether, one more akin to having a conversation, for drawing is an inherently intimate activity where artists go to reflect on what engages them, and because of that, it is where they reveal their true temperament. A drawing can represent a map of the mind, or a labyrinth—something into which we are irresistibly drawn, and through which

the experience of life into marks, signs, and symbols onto an infinitely varied number of surfaces, using an equally varied number of tools and materials, ranging from compressed charcoal on a cave wall to a rod of gold on specially coated parchment. The medium of drawing has chronicled the history of humankind—a rich and

varied tapestry comprised of countless interwoven threads, each one bearing the mark of an individual in relation to a series of larger wholes. For the novice, the act of drawing can prove irresistible: give someone a pencil and a sheet of blank paper, and they will likely leave their “mark.” For the accomplished draftsman, drawing





A sampling of Florence Revealed-related sketchbook entries by Stephen Alcorn; 11" x 8.5" and 14" x 11"

we must find a way, but from which we emerge enriched and inspired. Drawings can provide a foothold to reality, or, take flight. The spirituality of a drawing is a spirituality predicated upon realizing, making real, what had in effect been imagined. Drawing in other words, gives substance to the imagination.

## Drawing from the wellspring of history

By and large the cultural and art historical references of the majority of art students today do not predate the advent of *Star Wars*. One of the ways in which I seek to counteract this lack of connection with the remote past is to conduct each summer an Education Abroad Program titled *Florence Revealed: Drawing From The Wellspring Of Renaissance Thought And Vision*. This program permits students to spend

the entire month of June in the heart of Florence, Italy. Through daily life-drawing sessions conducted *all'aperto* (in the open), students immerse themselves in the cultural heritage of the city. Excursions to venerable landmark *piazze*s, churches, and museums provide students with the essential primary source material for their city-based sketchbook entries, while providing an art historical foundation to the program at large. A second part of the program, titled *Beyond the Walls of Florence*, is dedicated to the creation of nature studies that range from (macro) views of the city itself to (micro) studies of Tuscan flora. Explorations of Florence's surrounding hills (Fiesole, Belosguardo, Piazzale Michelangelo, etc.) and visits to Florence's fabled Boboli Gardens and the *Orto Botanico* (Botanical Garden) provide students with primary source material from which to create their nature-

based sketchbook entries, while excursions to Siena, Pisa, and Venice serve to put the *Quattrocento Fiorentino* into the broader cultural context of its time. Students have the opportunity to learn about the masterpieces of the Florentine Renaissance by communing with them for extended periods of time. The drawings they make are the fruits of repeated, sustained efforts, through which they construct analyzed equivalents to reality and in which every inch of the surface has to be won, argued through, and bear witness to their curiosity and spirit of inquiry. In so doing students transcend the typical tourist's approach to art appreciation—a cursory approach that rarely has an observer spending more than a few fleeting moments before a work of art, and walking away with little more than a series of snapshots to show for their time spent in a museum. Conventional wisdom

would have us believe that photography and its related media, e.g., film and television, tell the most truth about what we see. This is not true: the camera may tell another truth about a subject, but not necessarily a more convincing one. Experience shows that the practice of drawing by hand can bring us into a deeper and more fully experienced connection to a given subject. It is often said that Leonardo drew so well because he knew about things; it is truer to say that he knew about things because he drew so well. The richly illuminated journals that the students create are a testament to the power of the sketchbook to chronicle the development of ideas through text, annotation, and drawing—just as the enthusiasm with which students respond to the challenge of working in the proverbial field is a testament to the sentient nature of their very being, and of their need to engage all their senses (touch, sight, taste, smell, sound) in conjunction with all their higher mental faculties (reason, memory, perception, will, intuition, imagination) in the creative process.

The Florentine Renaissance artists continue to amaze to this day with the freshness of their thought, their willingness to experiment, and their modernity. However, civilized culture depends not solely on innovation and modernity, but also on a critical and imaginative assimilation of the past. In Renaissance Florence, we can see the reintegration of the Classical worldview into Modern life in not only the erudition, the pagan humanism, but also the rich mythological themes of its pantheism and the profound psychological insights it has to offer. What we experience to this day in Florence is what was made of that tradition. A continued, renewed interpretation of this tradition is a necessity for the West, if it is to understand its own. This is why I believe it is important to introduce my students to the wonders of the history of art, and the wealth of physical media that gives it its form. If I speak of the Italian Renaissance with passion, it is only because I witnessed firsthand the power of that flowering. Yet, I have always understood that the brilliance

of the *quattrocento* was linked to a larger human brilliance that extends around the globe, and includes the unknown works of West African cultures, pre-Columbian Peruvians, and all the other ancient civilizations, which Europe only got to know in the last 500 years.

## Slow Art

When we take the time to look, there is no limit to the secrets that drawing may unlock and reveal about how we think, look at the world, tell stories, and communicate with ourselves through the timeless language of pictures. In order to fully appreciate these attributes, we must first learn to read drawings, much the way we read a poem, or a chapter in a book. Just as time is required to leave his/her marks on a given surface, time is required of the observer to study and fully absorb the implications of the marks made on a given surface. Regrettably, the fast pace of modern life, driven as it is by the quest for immediate gratification and time-saving expediency, discourages such acts of contemplation. But when the time is taken to permit a drawing to unfold incrementally before one's eyes, the experience can be revelatory, and permit the viewer to share in the creative process by following the different stages of a drawing: from the first tentative, underlying preparatory marks to the crowning, finishing touches. A sketchbook entry by Leonardo da Vinci is like a landscape with a history all its own, replete with peaks and valleys, and battle scars. Upon close inspection, one can detect a confluence of tentatively drawn underlying marks, followed by a series of more committed marks; these in turn are followed by a series of reworkings, scrapings, and burnishings that reveal the pulse of life. Such hand-made drawings are a testament to the passage of time, a record of the trajectory by the artist's train of thought, one that takes the viewer from one point to another in a tangible, though mysterious, way—the exact opposite of what one can hope to experience when viewing a digitally generated image that

offers no such topography, so sanitized and hidden from view are the intermediate stages of its evolution.

Just as the Slow Food movement is succeeding in counteracting the ill effects of the fast food culture, I believe that it is possible to counteract the ill effects of what is the visual equivalent of the fast food culture, namely the entertainment industry's influence on image-making practices. Like all industries, it fosters a belief that expediency is the ultimate goal, no matter what the price, in the way that the fast food industry champions quantity over quality. Tellingly, both McDonald's and The Walt Disney Company rely on their ability to mechanize and sanitize the products they sell: one sells processed foods, the other processed imagery; both industries share a similar goal, namely the selling of *units*. The belief that the timeless, human instinct to draw can and should somehow be rendered programmable through digital technology threatens the individuality of the *human* mark. As I work with my computer-savvy students today, I notice that something is lost when they draw exclusively on the computer. Software interfaces can lead one to do things in increasingly formulaic ways. This is not a new crisis, of course. It is in fact as old as Gutenberg. The difference lies not with the technology, but with the speed. And that speed has led to a mediated flattening of the visual world and our tactile connections to it. In the parlance of today, it "takes the edge off." To take the edge off is to smoothen; to smoothen is to flatten. Again, the question is nothing less than what it means to be human at a time when the faculties that define the species are subject to a mass-produced uniformity, filtered through a medium that denies the very reason for existence.

## In fine

With the computer, the gap between reality and fantasy has never been narrower. This is because computers can organize vast pools of knowledge and synthesize organic ideas with the speed of high technology. So will hand drawing be rendered obsolete





Flower studies by Sabina Fascione Alcorn; watercolor on paper (see <http://www.alcorngallery.com/botanicals/>).

as a result of the predominance of smart phones and laptops? I do not believe so. Just as the printed book did not eclipse the handwritten letter, and just as the television did not eliminate film, art never truly died, despite having being momentarily suffocated by qualitative relativism. Since time immemorial artisans, artists, architects, designers, and engineers of all kinds have expressed themselves first, and most intuitively, through the infinitely rich and varied medium of drawing. Indeed the relationship between the thinking mind and the draftsman's hand, or the link between the imagination and drawing, is a timeless continuum that has yet to be broken. And although the computer is an amazingly powerful tool, it is important to remember that even the most sophisticated machine is only as sophisticated as the mind that conceived it. Perhaps, it is the computer's capacity to mimic the hard-won visual effects of the past that has led people to perceive it as a substitute for physical media. But why must priority necessarily be given to digital technology? The physical and the digital are not mutually exclusive—so why consider them rivals? I believe in cultivating a

plurality of skills, and indeed I encourage students to cultivate their graphic abilities both on paper surfaces and drawing tablets. And because I believe in cultivating a plurality of skills, I also encourage students to cultivate their mark-making abilities both on analog surfaces and drawing tablets in the hope that the physical and the digital may stand side by side in their lives, like two doors of perception that open onto a single, unified space, a realm of infinite possibilities where there is a world waiting to be transformed through the timeless, persistent coordination of the draftsman's eye, mind, and hand. ▼



Stephen Alcorn is a left-handed printmaker, illustrator, painter, and musician. He spent his formative years in Florence, Italy. It was there that he attended the



*Istituto Statale d'Arte*, an experience that left an indelible impression upon him and infused his work with a passion for bold technical experimentation in a wide range of mediums. Mr. Alcorn's work hangs in numerous private and permanent collections, both in the United States and in Europe. Alcorn is the illustrator of over 45 books, including *Odetta: The Queen of Folk* (Scholastic Press), *Rembrandt's Beret* (William Morrow), and *I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry* (Houghton Mifflin), and his work has been the subject of numerous feature magazine articles appearing in *Print*, *Graphis*, *U&LC*, *Linea Grafica*, *Grafica & Disegno*, *Prometeo*, and *Abitare*. Stephen divides his time between Cambridge, NY, and Richmond, VA, where he is a professor of Visual Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. His work, along with that of his wife, botanical artist Sabina Fascione, may be viewed at their website, [www.alcorngallery.com](http://www.alcorngallery.com). "Self-portrait" by Stephen Alcorn. Pen and ink and gouache on tinted paper; 22" x 17".

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