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# Analysis and Intuition:

## Reflections on the Mystic Union of Measure and Abandon in the Art of Figure Drawing

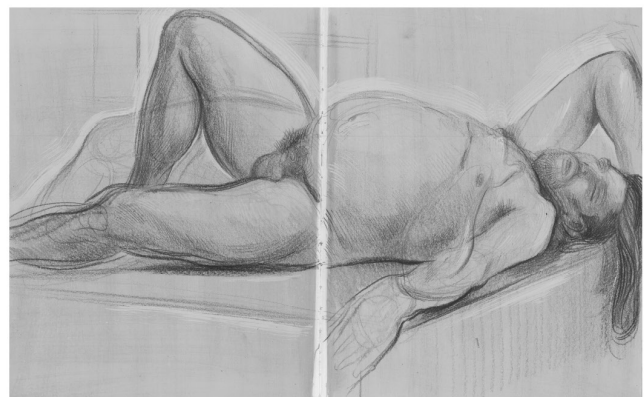
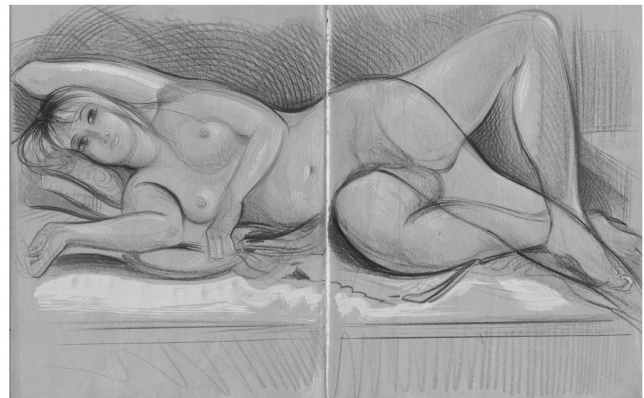
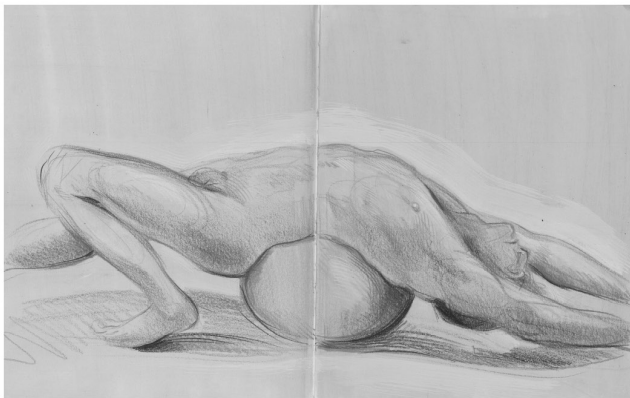
BY STEPHEN ALCORN

Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps the first artist in the *modern* sense, was by inclination a scientist. He wanted to discover how things worked. He loved to collect data and filled the notebooks he kept through a spell-binding marriage of calligraphic notation and an unrivaled drawing prowess. He was especially fond of drawing diagrams. And many of the drawings and diagrams concerned mechanical subjects and themes—the action of crossbows and catapults, or the movement

of air and water. Many of these investigations revolved, however, around what we call art; the way light strikes a sphere, the way in which an image is conveyed to the human eye. Leonardo made no distinction between the various forms of knowledge. He believed that what we call science and what we call art are *one*. Art was a branch of knowledge in which a permanent record of natural appearances was considered valuable, both for its own sake and because it would supply

man's imagination with convincing images of important things. Leonardo was too much an artist, in our modern sense, not to realize that the imagination could operate in a diametrically opposed manner. This awareness is beautifully expressed in the passage in the *Treatise on Painting*, in which he explains this contrary mode of operation:

I shall not refrain (he says) from including among these precepts a new and



Four figure studies; Drawn from life. In-class demos; Department of Communication Arts, VCU/SOTA. Mixed media on paper; 11 in. x 14 in. Sketchbook. Full color (reproduced as grayscale). © Stephen Alcorn 2018.

speculative idea, which although it may seem trivial and almost laughable, is nonetheless of great value in quickening the spirit of invention. It is this: that you should look at certain walls stained with damp or at stones of uneven color. If you have to invent some setting you will be able to see in these the likeness of divine landscapes, adorned with mountains, ruins, rocks, woods, great plains, hills and valleys in great variety; and then again you will see their battles and strange figures in violent action, expressions of faces, and clothes, and an infinity of things which you will be able to reduce to their complete and proper forms. In such walls, the same thing happens as in the sound of bells, in whose strokes you may find every named word you can imagine. (Clark 1959, 82)

Later, Leonardo “repeats this suggestion in a slightly different form, advising the painter to study not only marks on walls, but also ‘the embers of the fire, or clouds or mud, or other similar objects from which you will find most admirable ideas...because from a confusion of shapes the spirit is quickened to new inventions.’ ‘But,’ he adds, ‘first be sure you know all members of all the things you wish to depict, both the members of animals and the members of landscape, that is to say rocks, plants and so forth’” (Clark 1959, 82).

## Forging a Mystic Union

The Blot and the Schemata: these may be taken to express the opposite poles of our faculties, and it is arguable that the connection between the two has produced what we call art. This concept reflects the aesthetic ideas expressed in the writings of Benedetto Croce (1928) and, in particular, the belief that art is connected not with our rational, but with our *intuitive* faculties. This represents, in fact, a reversion to a very old idea, because long before Leonardo had advised the artist to draw inspiration from the stains on walls, men had admitted the Dionysian nature of art. They also had recognized that the frenzy of inspiration must be controlled by law and by the intellectual power of putting things into harmonious order. This general philosophic concept of art was supported by technical necessities. It was necessary to master certain laws and to use the intellect in order to build



Ten figure studies; Drawn from life. In-class demos; Department of Communication Arts, VCU/SOTA. Mixed media on paper; 11 in. x 14 in. sketchbook. Full color and grayscale (reproduced as grayscale). © Stephen Alcorn 2018.

the Gothic cathedrals or set up the stained-glass windows of Chartres or cast the bronze doors of the Florence Baptistery or build the dome of the cathedral. When this bracing element of craftsmanship ceased to define the artist’s outlook, as happened in Leonardo’s lifetime, new scientific disciplines had to be invented to maintain the intellectual element in art. Such were perspective and anatomy. From the purely artistic point of view, these disciplines were not necessary. The Chinese produced some of the finest landscapes ever painted without any systematic knowledge of perspective. Greek figure sculpture reached its highest point before the analytic study of anatomy. From the Renaissance onward,

however, painters felt that these two sciences made their art intellectually respectable and, therefore, honorable.

The act of drawing is a means to an end—but to what end depends not only on the individual artist, but also on the context in which he/she lives and operates. In the 19th century, for example, belief in art as a scientific activity declined. This happened for a number of reasons, but the end result was that science and technology withdrew into the realm of specialization. In spite of their belief in inspiration, the great Romantics of the day were aware of the impoverishment of the imagination, which would take place when science had drifted out of reach,





Twenty figure studies; Drawn from life. In-class demos; Department of Communication Arts, VCU/SOTA. Mixed media on paper; 11 in. x 14 in. sketchbook. Full color and grayscale (reproduced as grayscale). © Stephen Alcorn 2018.

thereby informing and shaping the works they created. The deflections from art to science are more serious, because these are not, as once supposed, two contrary activities but, in fact, draw on many of the same capacities of the human mind. Although, over the course of the past century, science may have absorbed many of the functions of art and deflected many potential artists, it obviously cannot be a *substitute* for art. Its mental processes may be similar, but its ends are different. The impure nature of art, the seemingly unnatural marriage of truth and beauty, has been the despair of metaphysicians and has only ceased to worry philosophers since they both agreed that words could be deconstructed to the point of rendering them

meaningless. Is it not the illogical totality, the mystic union of the blot and the blueprint, or the instinctive and the rational, which has given true art its significance? Can such a union ever be reestablished? Since being invited to teach at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts in the fall of 2010, this has been my primary objective.

### A Proverbial Fork in the Road

Aspiring fine artists entering today's *typical* art school move into a world in which they are encouraged to pursue specializations that prevent different disciplines from interacting in informative, meaningful ways—some would argue an escapist, post-Duchampian

world, in which theory is systematically divorced from praxis, and in which established standards of excellence are either evaded or refuted. The result can often be an art that is subjective and arcane to a fault—an art of accident rather than rule, of stains on walls (or of the unconscious mind), rather than of calculation, of *inscape* rather than *landscape*. In this newfangled Ivory Tower, new standards are being invented to accommodate a rising tide of mediocrity at the expense of irrefutable excellence; respect for tradition is dismissed as mere nostalgia; physical media are considered obsolete, and the practice of drawing from life has been all but abandoned. Fortunately, however, this is not the only track.

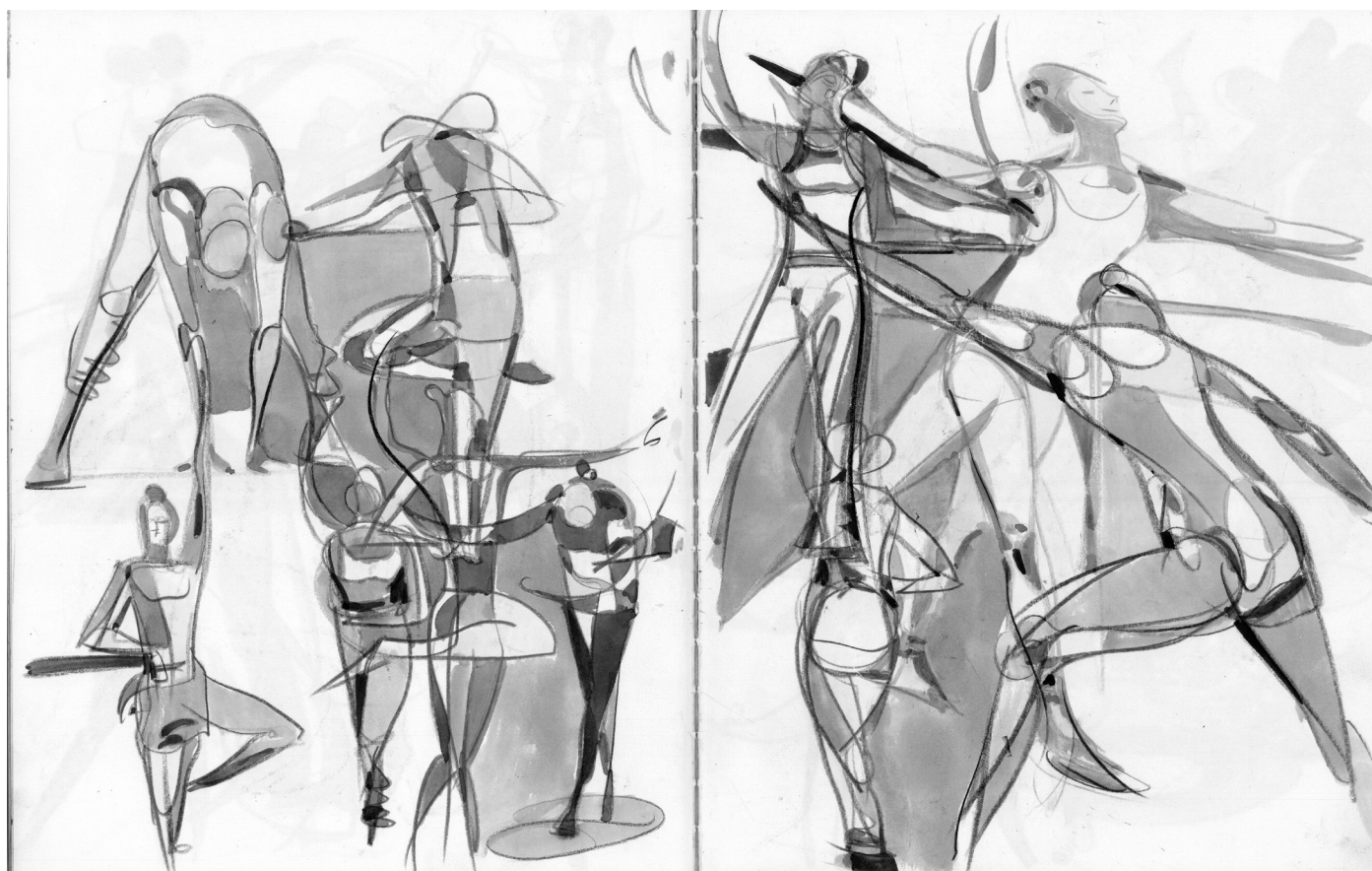
Alternative tracks await those who (by contrast) are interested in pursuing a more purposeful career within the realm of the applied arts, for example, as a scientific and medical illustrator. Students dedicated to drawing tend to fair better in this arena, especially in terms of the skill sets being imparted. Here, too, the technical instruction they receive can suffer from the ill effects of specialization. There are figure drawing programs that dictate that students concentrate on one sustained pose for an entire semester, forbid students from drawing the heads of the models, and finally, from using more than one quality of graphite—a dehumanizing, impersonal approach that necessitates that the models be treated as *inanimate* objects. Inevitably, the end result to this approach is an unduly formulaic and homogeneous, disconcertingly *gray* body of work devoid of any spark of life. Analysis requires time, due diligence, and patience. And inevitably, the process of gauging and the subsequent process of transcribing one's findings onto a two-dimensional surface

necessitate innumerable interruptions of one's eye-mind-hand coordination—the very coordination upon which spontaneous artistic expression depends. Such are the mechanics of observational drawing. This methodical science of gauging and transcription, once championed in Beaux Arts schools around the world, can degenerate—if one is not vigilant—to the point of suffocating any intuitive impulses, in the name of precision and accuracy, that the students may experience in the process of drawing a live model. Consequently, and paradoxically, rather than engage in what has been known for centuries as the practice of *life drawing*, students can find themselves forced to engage in a sort of *death drawing*. That great intellectual achievement known as perspective, by which figures of a human scale can be related to one another in some plausible and measurable system, can also paralyze the intuitive faculty by which objects are seen with immediate vividness. Without a proper balance of analysis and intuition, there is the danger that

an impersonal, diagrammatic coldness will prevail at the expense of human tactility and warmth. By the same token, the iconoclastic abandonment of *figurative* drawing practices on the part of many fine art departments around the world today, in the name of introspective self-expression (real or imagined), has proven equally problematic. To this day, students and instructors alike continue to feel the aftershocks generated by the schism between analytical and Dionysian impulses that took place in the early and mid-20th century.

## Drawing At The Speed Of Sight

As an instructor, I strive to provide my students with a healthy alternative to this divisive dichotomy in the realm of art education. I do so by cultivating a learning environment, a creative greenhouse, if you will, in which my students can begin to experience firsthand the holistic and edifying marriage of (measured) deliberation and (intuitive) spontaneity that was all but abandoned by art schools in



"Perpetual Motion." Myriad figure studies; Drawn from life, at the speed of sight. In-class demos; Department of Dance & Choreography, VCU/SOTA. Mixed media on paper; 11 in. x 14 in. sketchbook. Full color and grayscale (reproduced as grayscale). © Stephen Alcorn 2018.





Six figure studies; Drawn from life. In-class demos; Department of Communication Arts, VCU/SOTA. Mixed media on paper; 11 in. x 14 in. sketchbook. Full color and grayscale (reproduced as grayscale). © Stephen Alcorn 2018.

the wake of the Second World War. By dedicating the beginning of each semester to the fundamentals of gauging and transcription, I provide students with a foundation that serves as a precursor to the more interpretive approaches that follow—the elements of space, light, and time. The semester-long, incremental transition from analytical processes of transcription to increasingly intuitive mark-making practices culminates with a visit to the Department of Dance and Choreography, where students are challenged to draw dance majors as they train and rehearse—in a word, to draw the human figure in *perpetual motion*. Thus, students experience the antithesis of the inanimate, static approach that has come to define the conventional figure drawing instruction and, in the process, are introduced to drawing at *the speed of sight*. Such a practice precludes an unwarranted interruption of the line-making process; and indeed, one of the means by which one can achieve a level of fluidity that is commensurate with the kinetic spirit of such subjects is via the use of a single, *continuous* line. By not lifting

the drawing tool, a calligraphic rhythm can be achieved, the result being the *embodiment* of a figure in motion. The inability to pause, and ponder the marks they make, encourages students to act swiftly and with decisiveness. The resultant economy of means of drawings executed in this manner fosters an awareness of the importance that the selection process plays in the realization of a compelling drawing, and of the value that lies in the creation of a graphic shorthand, capable of expressing in select few lines the essence of what is being drawn. From this newfound awareness, students come to realize that the creation of works of art is not a sort of obstacle race, in which the artist who wins has overcome the greatest number of arbitrary conceptual or technical difficulties. And perhaps, most importantly, they learn that finish is only of value when it is a true medium of expression. To bring every square inch to the conventional degree of finish risks destroying the unity of the whole. This is the case, especially, when a drawing is conceived in a spirit opposed to clear statement: as in an allegory, with an

allegory's equivocations—a dream in which the protagonists are dissolved. In drawings such as these, it is imperative that those passages stemming from half-formed thoughts remain inarticulate, unless they are expressed by a hint, a suggestion, or a cadence, that gives remote intuitions visible shape. Tintoretto, El Greco, Degas, Cezanne, Picasso, and Käthe Kollwitz have shown how the greatest artists could achieve a complete and coherent manner of drawing with a degree of definition no greater than that of a prehistoric cave painting. In the wake of the advent of photography, we have learned that all the knowledge of anatomy, botany, and geology with which Da Vinci enriched his art could have been suggested, rather than described and could, perhaps, have found as vivid expression in a few spontaneous hints, as in an accumulation of careful statements.

### A Means To An End

I believe that, although the practice of learning to draw the human figure in this way is neither the beginning nor the end of art,

it is a means for my students—perhaps, the most reliable means—of uniting their analytical and intuitive mental faculties. By reminding my students of the original meaning of the word “art”—it signifies a certain level of skill and discipline—and by treating the model as a living, breathing individual while introducing the element of time (and the passage thereof) into the drawing process, I find it possible to restore to the learning process an appreciation for the ties that bind the seemingly disparate, yet mutually inclusive, mental faculties of analysis and intuition. The result is a process, predicated upon the recognition of and trust in the eye–mind–hand coordination, a process in which the *flow* of consciousness—rather than its interruption—is celebrated and fostered. The need to bridge these complementary mental faculties and the mechanics of drawing with the greater spiritual dimension would not be so urgent were it not for the incremental reduction of focus on the practice of figure drawing over the course of a typical art school academic career.

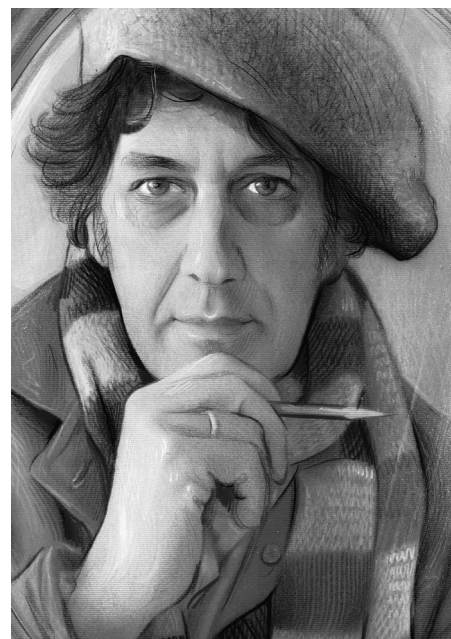
## Cultivating A Garden Of Experiential Learning

The courses I teach require students to draw and build their sketchbooks on a daily basis. My participation in this daily

assignment serves to present the professor not as a “fount of all knowledge,” but as a facilitator and participant in the humble activity of learning. Thus, teaching becomes learning. The result of this pedagogical strategy is twofold. First, students come to respect professors who adhere to daily standards of behavior fundamental to their field. Second, the professor comes to have a great deal more respect for the challenges that students face as they complete their rigorous assignments. The drawings featured in this article are emblematic of the variety of techniques and approaches I have developed as an instructor, and of my participation in the daily drawing lessons I have had the privilege to conduct within the Department of Communication Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University: a corner of the world in which the practice of figure drawing continues to play a defining role in the development of aspiring artists. ▼

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Self-Portrait: “Through the Looking Glass” (Detail of self-portrait by Stephen Alcorn). Mixed media on tinted paper; 22 in. x 17 in. Full color (reproduced as grayscale). ©Stephen Alcorn 2018.



Stephen Alcorn is an Associate Professor, Department of Communication Arts, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Stephen’s work at VCU is described in the March 7, 2018, *Richmond Times-Dispatch* profile titled “Drawn from real life:

Stephen Alcorn uses his global education to lift VCU art programs”: [http://www.richmond.com/entertainment/art/drawn-from-real-life-stephen-alcorn-uses-his-global-education/article\\_58931156-b84d-5b7c-87c8-abcec916e3b0.html](http://www.richmond.com/entertainment/art/drawn-from-real-life-stephen-alcorn-uses-his-global-education/article_58931156-b84d-5b7c-87c8-abcec916e3b0.html).

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