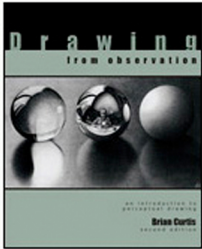


Drawing from Observation: An Introduction to Perceptual Drawing.

by Brian Curtis

McGraw-Hill, 2002.

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Brian Curtis' *Drawing from Observation* is distinctive in that it offers a detailed, in-depth explanation of perceptual drawing theory and practice. The approach outlined in this book is rooted in the Italian Renaissance, and while the author acknowledges more current approaches to drawing, he argues that the knowledge gained by observational drawing is of critical importance to any type of image making. Given the prominent role that observational analysis continues to play in many foundation curricula, this book is an important and useful resource.

Drawing from Observation is organized systematically. Each lesson builds upon preceding ones with increasing complexity, and the chapters present technical and theoretical information sequentially. This cumulative structure is reminiscent of the classic *The Natural Way to Draw* by Nicolaïdes, which also advocates a methodical approach. The straightforward, linear progression of the text is deliberately offset by the inclusion of lively anecdotes from sources as diverse as sacred texts, science fiction movies and classical mythology. The bibliography at the back of the book encourages further investigation of the artistic, cultural and philosophical references interspersed throughout the text.

While the structure of *Drawing from Observation* echoes other influential textbooks on drawing, the content of this book is uniquely focused. Preliminary exercises encourage students to develop greater awareness of and

sensitivity to tactile and visual experiences. After a brief introduction to basic drawing materials, the book covers drawing mechanics such as setting up an easel, maintaining good posture, holding drawing tools and making marks. These beginning chapters are unexpectedly inviting, perhaps because Curtis explains the importance of each step, rather than providing a simple list of rules. Curtis demonstrates that no matter how fundamental, every decision contributes to the larger goals of seeing, describing and understanding the visual world.

In subsequent chapters of the book, Curtis covers practical techniques meant to help students see and render proportional and spatial relationships. Using gesture, grids, shape relationships, chiaroscuro and foreshortened circles, students learn how to ground their intuitive understanding of form and space with analytical thinking. In particular, the challenging techniques of cross-contour and proportional measurement are clarified by Curtis' engaging and thorough explanations. As with other textbooks on drawing (namely, Claudia Betti and Teel Sale's *Drawing: A Contemporary Approach* and Daniel Mendelowitz's *A Guide to Drawing*), linear perspective is introduced only after students have learned how to measure proportions and angles. These practical lessons are punctuated by chapters that provide historical context and theoretical underpinnings of observational drawing. Approximately fifty additional exercises are provided in an appendix at the back of the book.

Perhaps the most surprising – and intriguing – lessons in this book are those in which students learn how to draw imaginary three-dimensional forms. Students create geometric armatures in the "Biomorphic Form" exercise, anthropomorphic contours in "The Great Pumpkin" assignment, and varied ellipses in the "Imaginary Birdhouse" project. While these lessons on visualization initially may seem out of place in a textbook on

perceptual drawing, their inclusion is arguably essential. They encourage conceptual, inventive thinking that is an important skill for any artist, designer, art educator, or historian to possess.

Approximately five hundred black-and-white illustrations are included in the book. Of these, nearly fifty are master works and two hundred are technical illustrations. The remainder are student projects produced in introductory drawing classes at the University of Miami. Curtis acknowledges that the book was conceived as a "portable slide show," based on his observation that students consistently produce better drawings after being shown successful projects from previous semesters (Curtis, vii) and indeed, the quality of the student work is impressive. Since the emphasis of the book is on diagrams and student work, instructors who adopt this text for classroom use are advised to expose students to more drawings by relevant artists. While including more reproductions of professional-level drawings would probably increase the cost of the book, it would make it a better resource.

Occasionally, the design of the textbook interferes with how the master works are interpreted – most notably in the examples of Kasimir Malevich's "Red Square" and Mondrian's "Composition in Blue, Yellow, and White," both of which are outlined by black rectangles. While this motif is consistent with the rest of the layout, introductory-level students who believe that the borders are an integral part of the art will have an inaccurate understanding of Suprematism and De Stijl.

One omission from this text is a discussion of sketchbooks. There are several lessons, particularly the conceptual drawings – in which preliminary studies such as thumbnail sketches could be introduced. Additionally, a glossary of defined words at the end of the text would be a helpful study tool (vocabulary words are defined within the body of the text).

Drawing from Observation provides a clear, detailed explanation of perceptual drawing that is unequaled in other introductory textbooks. If the primary goal of your foundation drawing class is to explore a broad range of traditional subject matter and materials, this is probably not the right textbook for you (neither landscape, figure, or wet media are covered). But if you want to provide students with theory, concept development, and skill-building within the context of perceptual drawing, this book is an excellent choice.

