

Drawing

This is quite different from the later process of painting a ‘finished’ canvas or carving a statue. Here you do not pass through your subject, but try to re-create it and house yourself in it. Each brush-mark or chisel-stroke is no longer a stepping-stone, but a stone to be fitted into a planned edifice. A drawing is an autobiographical record of one’s discovery of an event – seen, remembered or imagined. A ‘finished’ work is an attempt to construct an event in itself. It is significant in this respect that only when the artist gained a relatively high standard of individual ‘autobiographical’ freedom, did drawings, as we now understand them, begin to exist. In a hieratic, anonymous tradition they are unnecessary. (I should perhaps point out here that I am talking about

working drawings – although a working drawing need not necessarily be made for a specific project. I do not mean linear designs, illustrations, caricatures, certain portraits or graphic works which may be ‘finished’ productions in their own right.)

A number of technical factors often enlarge this distinction between a working drawing and a ‘finished’ work: the longer time needed to paint a canvas or carve a block: the larger scale of the job: the problem of simultaneously managing colour, quality of pigment, tone, texture, grain, and so on – the ‘shorthand’ of drawing is relatively simple and direct. But nevertheless the fundamental distinction is in the working of the artist’s mind. A drawing is essentially a private work, related only to the artist’s own needs; a ‘finished’ statue or canvas is essentially a public, *presented* work – related far more directly to the demands of communication.

It follows from this that there is an equal distinction from the point of view of the spectator. In front of a painting or statue he tends to identify himself with the subject, to interpret the images for their own sake; in front of a drawing he identifies himself with the artist, using the images to gain the conscious experience of seeing as though through the artist’s own eyes.

As I looked down at the clean page in my sketchbook I was more conscious of its height than its breadth. The top and bottom edges were the critical ones, for between them I had to reconstruct the way he rose up from the floor, or, thinking in the opposite direction, the way that he was held down to the floor. The energy of the pose was primarily vertical. All the small lateral movements of the arms, the twisted neck, the leg which was not supporting his weight, were related to that vertical force, as the trailing and overhanging branches of a tree are related to the vertical shaft of the trunk. My first lines had to express that; had to make him stand like a skittle, but at the same time had to imply that, unlike a skittle, he was capable of movement, capable of readjusting his balance if the floor tilted, capable for a few seconds of leaping up into the air against the vertical force of gravity. This capability of movement, this irregular and temporary rather than uniform and permanent tension of his body, would have to be expressed in relation to the side edges of the paper, to the variations on either side of the straight line between the pit of his neck and the heel of his weight-bearing leg.

I looked for the variations. His left leg supported his weight and therefore the left, far side of his body was tense, either straight or angular; the near, right side was comparatively relaxed and flowing. Arbitrary lateral lines taken across his body ran from curves to sharp points – as streams flow from hills to sharp, compressed gulleys in the cliff-face. But of course it was not as simple as that. On his near, relaxed side his fist was clenched and the hardness of his knuckles recalled the

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hard line of his ribs on the other side – like a cairn on the hills recalling the cliffs.

I now began to see the white surface of the paper, on which I was going to draw, in a different way. From being a clean flat page it became an empty space. Its whiteness became an area of limitless, opaque light, possible to move through but not to see through. I knew that when I drew a line on it – or *through* it – I should have to control the line, not like the driver of a car, on one plane: but like a pilot in the air; movement in all three dimensions being possible.

Yet, when I made a mark, somewhere beneath the near ribs, the nature of the page changed again. The area of opaque light suddenly ceased to be limitless. The whole page was changed by what I had drawn just as the water in a glass tank is changed immediately you put a fish in it. It is then only the fish that you look at. The water merely becomes the condition of its life and the area in which it can swim.

Then, when I crossed the body to mark the outline of the far shoulder, yet another change occurred. It was not simply like putting another fish into the tank. The second line altered the nature of the first. Whereas before the first line had been aimless, now its meaning was fixed and made certain by the second line. Together they held down the edges of the area between them, and the area, straining under the force which had once given the whole page the potentiality of depth, heaved itself up into a suggestion of solid form. The drawing had begun.

The third dimension, the solidity of the chair, the body, the tree, is, at least as far as our senses are concerned, the very proof of our existence. It constitutes the difference between the word and the world. As I looked at the model I marvelled at the simple fact that he *was* solid, that he occupied space, that he was more than the sum total of ten thousand visions of him from ten thousand different viewpoints. In my drawing, which was inevitably a vision from just one point of view, I hoped eventually to imply this limitless number of other facets. But now it was simply a question of building and refining forms until their tensions began to be like those I could see in the model. It would of course be easy by some mistaken over-emphasis to burst the whole thing like a balloon; or it might collapse like too-thin clay on a potter's wheel; or it might become irrevocably misshapen and lose its centre of gravity. Nevertheless, the thing was there. The infinite, opaque possibilities of the blank page had been made particular and lucid. My task now was to coordinate and measure: not to measure by inches as one might measure an ounce of sultanas by counting them, but to measure by rhythm, mass and displacement: to gauge distances and angles as a bird flying through a trellis of branches; to visualize the ground plan like an architect; to feel the pressure of my lines and scribbles towards the uttermost surface of

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the paper, as a sailor feels the slackness or tautness of his sail in order to
tack close or far from the surface of the wind.

I judged the height of the ear in relation to the eyes, the angles of the
crooked triangle of the two nipples and the navel, the lateral lines of the
shoulders and hips – sloping towards each other so that they would
eventually meet, the relative position of the knuckles of the far hand
directly above the toes of the far foot. I looked, however, not only for
these linear proportions, the angles and lengths of these imaginary
pieces of string stretched from one point to another, but also for the
relationships of planes, of receding and advancing surfaces.

Just as looking over the haphazard roofs of an unplanned city you find
identical angles of recession in the gables and dormer-windows of quite
different houses – so that if you extended any particular plane through
all the intermediary ones, it would eventually coincide perfectly with
another; in exactly the same way you find extensions of identical planes
in different parts of the body. The plane, falling away from the summit of
the stomach to the groin, coincided with that which led backwards from
the near knee to the sharp, outside edge of the calf. One of the gentle,
inside planes, high up on the thigh of the same leg, coincided with a
small plane leading away and around the outline of the far pectoral
muscle.

And so, as some sort of unity was shaped and the lines accumulated on
the paper, I again became aware of the real tensions of the pose. But this
time more subtly. It was no longer a question of just realizing the main,
vertical stance. I had become involved more intimately with the figure.
Even the smaller facts had acquired an urgency and I had to resist the
temptation to make every line over-emphatic. I entered into the reced-
ing spaces and yielded to the oncoming forms. Also, I was correcting:
drawing over and across the earlier lines to reestablish proportions or to
find a way of expressing less obvious discoveries. I saw that the line down
the centre of the torso, from the pit of the neck, between the nipples,
over the navel and between the legs, was like the keel of a boat, that the
ribs formed a hull and that the near, relaxed leg dragged on its forward
movement like a trailing oar. I saw that the arms hanging either side were
like the shafts of a cart, and that the outside curve of the weight-bearing
thigh was like the ironed rim of a figure on a crucifix. Yet such images,
although I have chosen them carefully, distort what I am trying to
describe. I saw and recognized quite ordinary anatomical facts; but I
also felt them physically – as if, in a sense, *my* nervous system inhabited *his*
body.

A few of the things I recognized I can describe more directly. I noticed
how at the foot of the hard, clenched, weight-bearing leg, there was clear
space beneath the arch of the instep. I noticed how subtly the straight
under-wall of the stomach elided into the attenuated, joining planes of

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thigh and hip. I noticed the contrast between the hardness of the elbow and the vulnerable tenderness of the inside of the arm at the same level.

Then, quite soon, the drawing reached its point of crisis. Which is to say that what I had drawn began to interest me as much as what I could still discover. There is a stage in every drawing when this happens. And I call it a point of crisis because at that moment the success or failure of the drawing has really been decided. One now begins to draw according to the demands, the needs, of the drawing. If the drawing is already in some small way true, then these demands will probably correspond to what one might still discover by actual searching. If the drawing is basically false, they will accentuate its wrongness.

I looked at my drawing trying to see what had been distorted; which lines or scribbles of tones had lost their original and necessary emphasis, as others had surrounded them; which spontaneous gestures had evaded a problem, and which had been instinctively right. Yet even this process was only partly conscious. In some places I could clearly see that a passage was clumsy and needed checking; in others, I allowed my pencil to hover around – rather like the stick of a water-diviner. One form would pull, forcing the pencil to make a scribble of tone which could re-emphasize its recession; another would jab the pencil into restressing a line which could bring it further forward.

Now when I looked at the model to check a form, I looked in a different way. I looked, as it were, with more connivance: to find only what I wanted to find.

Then the end. Simultaneously ambition and disillusion. Even as in my mind's eye I saw my drawing and the actual man coincide – so that, for a moment, he was no longer a man posing but an inhabitant of my half-created world, a unique expression of my experience – even as I saw this in my mind's eye, I saw in fact how inadequate, fragmentary, clumsy my small drawing was.

I turned over the page and began another drawing, starting from where the last one had left off. A man standing, his weight rather more on one leg than the other . . .

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