The Figure’s Gesture, the Artist’s Hand

**Kinesthesia** is a term that refers to our ability to perceive and empathize with a body’s position, presence, and movement. When doing a quickly executed gesture drawing, the artist has no time for lengthy analysis or for dwelling on details. Responding intuitively and through the kinesthetic act of drawing, the artist internalizes the pose and transcribes its movement and presence into lines. These lines not only follow along with the body’s movement but capture and hold that movement in time. As Matisse once said, “Drawing is like making an expressive gesture with the advantage of permanence.”

As is often the case with gesture drawing, the artist’s eye looks at the subject rather than at the surface of the drawing. The hand moves blindly over the drawing surface, following the movement of the artist’s eyes as they scan the pose, and in the process creates what is often referred to as a blind gesture sketch.

Auguste Rodin often made blind gesture sketches of his models, encouraging them to move about the studio. Describing his process, he once said, “What is a drawing? Not once in describing the shape of that mass did I shift my eyes from the model. Why? Because I wanted to be sure that nothing evaded my grasp of it. . . . My objective is to test to what extent my hands already feel what my eyes see.” With this statement, Rodin points out the kinesthetic and intuitive nature of his sketching method. Rodin’s sketches are to a great extent an attempt to be guided by a subconscious knowing rather than an analytic thought process.
The same approach is evident in both Rodin’s *Woman Dancing* and John Singer Sargent’s dancer. Both sketches serve as memory aids that the artists can refer to later to trigger the imagination and inspire further creativity.

**Gesture sketches** – quick sketches or *action drawings*, whatever the term – are concerned with expressing the dynamics of the body’s life forces and capturing the gestural action implied in the body’s visual presentation. These drawings respond to the body’s kinetic energy and the dynamics of the pose, its physical force, whether the body is at rest or in motion.

The mobility of thought and hand collaborate to give gesture sketches their characteristic vitality. These sketches, often described as action drawings, are said to possess a lot of movement and energy. This is certainly conveyed in Sargent’s sketch of a dancer, which was made on site and became the genesis for one of his major canvases. There is nothing static about the flamenco dancer, and the sketch serves as a facsimile of the dance, capturing its spirit of energy and movement. His line moves with the dancer’s body rather than around its edge. Typical of gesture sketches, the drawing becomes a record of both the dynamics of the subject’s action and the artist’s lively mark making during the drawing process.

In large measure, gesture drawing is as tactile as it is visual. The artist traces the flow of form through the body’s gesture – as the eye quickly scans the model’s pose, the artist’s hand moves over the surface of the drawing paper. This rhythmic, flowing movement of the hand gave much of Oriental art its calligraphic line quality. In Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi’s work, we see that the mark making that created this drawing was fleeting, the ink that documents the action gives it permanence. Kuniyoshi’s gestural line sweeps over the page as a record of movement, tracing the body seemingly unchecked by any inhibiting desire to present a detailed representation, which would inevitably halt or diminish the spontaneous fluidity of line.

Similarly, in Raphael’s sketch of a woman, line records the energetic choreography of Raphael’s drawing action. The multiple layers of line seem to
suggest not only the movement of the body but, once again, the artist's search for the most expressive sense of the form. Notice that the hand once held a book, and that the book itself has changed size. These changes, or *pentimenti*, are not mistakes but very much a part of the natural drawing process, the image-conjuring process. A drawing can never be the subject it represents; it must always be something new that has to be invented and constructed as a graphic metaphor. Metaphor literally means “to carry over.” The artist searches for the line, the movement, the form with which to capture, hold, and carry over the visual representation of an image.

When doing a gesture sketch, the artist attempts to see the body as a whole, seeing the *gestalt* rather than its isolated units. An initial overview is essential, enabling the artist to see the body’s larger relationships, thereby creating a stronger foundation and cohesiveness for the finished work. Gesture sketches respond quickly and intuitively to the impetus of a pose as a whole; they describe how the figure’s energy and action move through the interior of the form. Line is not relegated to the edge of the figure but often flows over and through the form.

Honore Daumier was a master at exploiting the suggestive power of the sketch. He would let his hand move freely, conjuring the figure as he scribbled. His drawing evolved naturally from evocative impulses into more concrete and discernible forms, yet they always retained the sense of energy and movement found in his gestural sketches. In *A Study of Female Dancers*, you can see this progressive development, taken in two different directions. To draw the right-hand figure, Daumier used a strong singular line that overrides lighter ones and confirms and encloses the body’s edges. Daumier recasts and intensifies the original lines of the left figure through repetition to build value that seems to fill out the body from within. A third figure, barely visible in the center of the drawing, suggest how Daumier began, using light marks to coax his figures into being. As the figures evolve, they become increasingly volumetric.
Expressing Volume, Weight, and Mass

In addition to expressing the dynamic energy of the body’s gesture, a sketch can begin to express a sense of the body as an object of substance. The human body exists in three dimensions. It has **volume**. Volume adds **depth to length** and **width**. The body is also a solid, with a density of matter much greater than its surrounding atmosphere. It has **weight**, due to the billions of molecules contained with its volume. Mass is the combination of volume and weight expressed in terms of energy.

To more fully comprehend a body’s mass, imagine that you put your arms around a body and lift it. You have to exert a great deal of energy to counter the energy of the body’s mass pressing down toward the ground.

In the Daumier drawing, *A Study of Female Dancers*, the build-up of lines on the left figure starts to suggest the body’s mass as well as its gesture. What Daumier’s drawing begins to hint at, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes takes a step further in his *Study of a Man Carrying a Log*. Although the massing of lines is similar, the lines themselves are heavier, more forceful, containing the mass of the figure in motion. Notice how the heaviness of the lines suggests forward momentum. The weight of the figure is further augmented by the load he labors to carry, and together the weight and force of his movement drive the figure onward.

The body’s volume, weight, and mass are all related to energy, but these elements can be expressed whether the figure is at rest or in motion. Although **line** can be used to suggest volume, weight, and mass, for many artists it is **value** that gives the figure a firmer sense of presence and solidity. For Degas’s quick but forceful sketch of a standing nude, line was not enough. Degas started the drawing with lightly drawn lines, but he rapidly built them into broad value areas. Through this process, Degas adjusted the contours and proportions of the figure, while more fully establishing the body’s volume and mass. Degas
achieves this effect in his sketch by simply laying his charcoal stick on its side as a more efficient tool for creating value.

In addition to implying shadows and rounding the form, the grainy opacity begins to suggest that the body contains a denser molecular mass than its surroundings. Intellectually, we understand that the human body is a form that now only exists in space but also is a solid, dense, and opaque object, distinct from its invisible surrounding atmosphere. The broad areas of pigmentation help to communicate both the weight and energy of the body as it moves in space.

For many artists, the most efficient medium to use when sketching the figure’s mass is liquid – either ink or watercolor washes applied with a brush. Thomas Eakins often encouraged his students to use this more painterly approach to sketching. “The brush is a more powerful and rapid tool than the point or the stump…the main thing that the brush secures is the instant grasp of the grand construction of a figure.” This grasp of the “grand construction” is immediately evident in an ink sketch by Francesco de Goya. Here, the very opaque black ink gives the figure both physical and psychological heaviness. Goya once scorned those “who always [talk] about line, never about masses. But where does one see lines in nature? I see only mass in light and masses in shadow, planes that come forward and planes into recession.”