A Definition

Responsive drawing is the ability to choose from an observed or envisioned subject those characteristics that hold meaning for us and to be able to set them down in concise and (to us) attractive visual terms. It is the ability to join percept to concept, that is, to merge what we see in the subject with what we want to see in the drawing, and to show this integration of inquiry and intent in the completed work.

To do this we must consider one of the most compelling features of any subject – its fundamental visual and emotive nature. The French painter Paul Cezanne gave sound advice when he urged artists to “get to the heart of what is before you and continue to express yourself as logically as possible.” An important aspect of “what is at the heart” of any subject is the arrangement of its parts. And seeing this arrangement is the necessary first step.

To often, however, beginners start at the other end of what there is to see. Instead of establishing a subject’s overall configuration and character, they start by recording a host of small facts. Usually, they are soon bogged down among these details and, like the person who could not see the forest for the trees, they fail to see just those general conditions that would enable them to draw the subject in a more responsive and telling way.

No wonder, then, that when confronted by any subject, whether a figure, landscape, or still life, most beginners ask, “How shall I start?” The complexity of a subject’s volumes, values, and textures, and the difficulty of judging the relative sizes and the positions of its parts, seems overwhelming. There appears to be no logical point of entry, no clues on how to proceed. If the subject is a figure, many students, knowing no other way, begin by drawing the head, followed by the neck, followed by the torso, and so on. Such a sequential approach inevitably results in a stilted assembly of parts having little affinity for each other as segments of the whole figure. Regardless of the subject, the process of collecting parts in sequence, which should add up to a figure, a tree, a bridge, or whatever, is bound to fail.

It will fail in the same way that the construction of a house will fail if we begin with the roof or the doorknobs, or, realizing this is impossible, if we finish and furnish one room at a time. Such a structure must collapse because no supportive framework holds the independently built rooms together. Without an overall structural design in place, none of the systems common to various rooms, such as wiring or heating, can be installed without tearing apart each room. Without such an overall design none of the relationships of size or location can be fully anticipated. Every building process must begin with a general design framework, its
development advanced by progressive stages until the specifics of various nonstructural details are added to complete the project. So it is with drawing.

But even before the measurements and layout of a building harden into a blueprint, there is the architect’s idea: a conviction that certain forms and spaces, and their scale, location, texture, and material will convey a certain \textit{expressive order}. An architectural structure, like any work of art, really begins as a state of excitation about certain form relationships.

Similarly, \textit{all drawings should begin with a sense of excitation about certain energies and patterns beneath the surface of the subject’s forms}. Seeing these possibilities in the raw material of a subject, the responsive artist establishes a basis for interpretation. The “answer” to the question, \textit{“How shall I start?”} is provided by the general arrangement of the subject’s forms. Seeing the harmonies and contrasts of large masses, the patterns of movement suggested by their various directions in space, and their differing shapes, values, and sizes, gives the artist vital facts about the subject’s essential visual and emotive nature – what we call its \textit{gesture}.

\textit{Gesture drawing is more about the rhythmic movements and energies coursing through a subject’s parts than about the parts themselves}. That is why such drawings \textit{emphasize the essential arrangement and form characteristics of the parts rather than their edges, or contours}. In gesture drawing, \textit{contour is secondary to urgings of motion among broadly stated forms}. \textit{Such drawings tell about the actions, tensions, and pulsations that issue from the general condition of a subject’s masses and their alignments in space} – they are about essence, attitude, motivating force, \textit{quintessence, vivacity, energy, dynamism, spirit} rather than \textit{specifics}. 
STUDENT GESTURE DRAWINGS

*Draw not what the thing looks like, not even what it is, but WHAT IT IS DOING.*
To draw a subject’s gestural expression then is to draw the major moving actions and general form character of its parts rather than their specific physical characteristics. Like the example of the building put up without an overall supportive framework, a drawing begun without the search for a cohesive gestural pattern “collapses.” Likewise, to introduce gestural considerations after a drawing is underway would require undoing and reworking nearly all of it.

That is why experienced artists, even before they ask themselves, “What does the subject look like?” ask the more important question, “What is the subject doing?”
That is, how does the arrangement of the main parts of the figure, the flower, the lamp, or the landscape allude to movement? What suggestions are there in the subject of directed energies coursing through its forms? For virtually everything we see implies some kind and degree of moving action. Such actions are inherent in the subject’s formation and structure (constructional, volumetric nature of a subject). The gentle curve of a tree limb or a human one, the forceful thrust of a church spire or a schooner mast, the graceful spiral of a staircase or a seashell – all these suggest moving actions – types of animated behavior; in other words, they all disclose some kind of gestural expression.

For experienced artists this is the case even when the subject is an envisioned one. Picasso's *Guernica* is a visual protest against one of the first instances of saturation bombing of a civilian population, carried out in Spain by German forces in support of the Spanish fascists during the Spanish Civil War. Yet this arresting masterpiece had its origins in a hasty gestural sketch that captured the essentials of the artist's intended image.
Gestural expression should not be understood as residing only in the rhythmic arrangement of a subject’s parts, although such action is always a key part of a subject’s gestural expression. It is not to be found in any one of the subject’s visual properties of shape, value, or position, nor in its type or class, or even in its “mood,” but rather in the sum of all these conditions. The moving, emotive energy of gesture cannot be seen until it is experienced – it must be felt. Empathy – the ability to identify and to feel with a person, place, or thing – is needed to give expressive meaning to our drawings.

In part, such empathic responses result from our kinetic sensibilities - our ability to identify through our senses with the various tension, movements, and weights among the things we see. The golfer, after hitting the ball, who leans to one side in the hope that the golf ball will do the same and make it to the hole, is experiencing a strong kinetic identity with the ball. It is such sensory identification that helps us feel the tension in the bending action of the woman (Lynn Trunelle’s student drawing) and the energy of the great arc that runs from the figure’s hands through to the feet.
In part, too, we identify with the behavior of our subjects in a psychological way. We attribute human attitudes and feelings to a subject’s condition in verbal expressions such as “an angry sea” or “a cheerful fire.” In the same way, an artist responding to a subject’s gestural expression feels a drape as “limp,” a cave opening as “yawning,” and a tree as “stately” or “sheltering.” The response to a subject’s gestural expression, then, is the understanding of the essential nature of its total behavior.

Not until we experience a subject’s gestural expression do we really understand why (and how) its parts carry those visual and emotive meanings that attract us to it in the first place. For no matter what else about the subject excites our interest moving energies are always one of the most attracting features.

The beginner who starts a drawing convinced that if only enough effort is put into the careful rendering of each part’s surface details, the subject’s form and spirit will somehow emerge, is sure to be disappointed. Good drawings do not result from the accumulation of details; they arise from an underlying “armature” that suggests the subject’s basic design and structure. The essential form and spirit of any subject must be first considerations in a work if they are to be found more fully realized in
its completed state. Good drawing, then, is deductive, not inductive. It requires relational, comparative seeing. That is, seeing similarities and differences between a subject’s parts.

In Rembrandt’s studies of Saskia asleep, he uses gestural means to convey the tired, resting figure of his wife, Saskia. Rembrandt feels (and consequently we do too) the essence of her pose as an expression of limp weight. What Saskia is doing and feeling is as important to Rembrandt as the delineation of specific forms and textures. His felt perception of her relaxed body pressing into the pliant bedding is intensified by the forceful speed of the lines in the pillow. Those lines *enact* as well as describe the action. And directed movements are the chief means for expressing the action in any drawing, even where, as here, the subject is one of repose.

When the subject itself is in action, a gestural approach can intensify that action further, as demonstrated in the dancing figure, where the artist’s attention goes past the subject’s surface state to extract the figure’s essential action and form character.
That the enlivening energy of gesture drawing can animate drawings of subjects other than the figure is evident in Claes Oldenburg's Bicycle on Ground. Note that the gesture drawings we have been looking at show little concentration on contour – the beginner’s trusted device for drawing anything.
GESTURE AND DIRECTION

Closely related to the search for a subject’s gesture, and usually running parallel with it in a drawing’s development, is the inquiry into each part’s axial direction – the actual tilt of its long axis – relative to a true vertical or horizontal direction. Learning to see a part’s exact orientation as it would appear on a two-dimensional surface is one of the most important skills the beginner must acquire. Just as we cannot give our drawings enlivening gestural qualities unless we respond to them at the outset of a drawing, so we cannot draw any form in relation to any other without consciously discovering its exact position in space.

Virtually every form, whether a leaf or a leg, a head or a house, has a length and width of differing dimensions. Most form then can be imagined as having a straight or curved centerline or long axis running in the direction of its longer dimension. Additionally, the edges of all forms are made up of segments oriented at various angles. Seeing a part’s directions means seeing both its long axis and the various turnings of its edges. The search for a subject’s inner and outer directions
generally accompanies or is a natural outgrowth of the search for its gestural expression, and that the need for seeing these two related conditions in our subjects is necessary to any responsive drawing’s further development.