A DEFINITION

...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 artist to “get to the heart of what is before you and continue to express yourself as logically as possible.” (From a letter to Emile Bernard. Aix [Aix-in-Provence], May 26, 1904.) An important aspect of “what is at the heart” of any subject is the arrangement of its parts. And seeing these parts is the necessary first step.

Beginners often 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. The complexity of the 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. Many students, knowing no other way, begin by drawing the head, followed by the neck, followed by the torso, and so on. Such sequential approach inevitably results in a stilted assembly of parts having little affinity for each other as segments of the whole figure. The process of collecting parts in sequence 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 expressive order. An architectural structure, like any work of art, really begins as a state of excitation about certain form relationships.

Similarly, 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 figure establishes a basis for interpretation. 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 gesture.
Gesture drawing is more about the rhythmic movements and energies coursing through a subject’s (model’s) parts than about the parts themselves. That is why such drawings emphasize the essential arrangement and form characteristics of the parts rather than their edges, or contours. In gesture drawing, contour is secondary to urgings of motion among broadly stated forms. 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 spirit rather than specifics.

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.” To introduce gestural considerations after a drawing is underway would require undoing and reworking nearly all of it.

Experienced artist, before asking themselves, “What does the subject look like?” ask the more important question, “What is the subject (model) doing?” How does the arrangement of the main parts of the figure 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. A gentle curve in the model suggests moving action – some kind of gestural expression.

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 tensions, 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. ...The response to a subject’s gestural expression 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 attractive 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.
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.