

THE RAINBOW

Box Art Group Newsletter - Friday 22nd December
2023

Written by and for the members of Box Art Group (No. 93)

Contents

- The Snow Maiden
- Measuring tricks when drawing from life
- Peekaboo!
- Dragonfly Pond
- Pastel Painting 1
- Malthouse Collection
- Nearby Events/Final Session

The Snow Maiden

Last snowfall my son Aidan took a photo of his 2 year old daughter Eliza discovering snow for the first time. When I saw the picture, I thought: 'This will be my next Christmas card design'.

During September I painted my design on A4 thick watercolour paper based on the photo and called it "Eliza, Snow Maiden." I printed out small A5 copies and started to make my Christmas cards. (I've made 35 so far). The original design I'll frame and give to my son and his family at Christmas.

Imagine my surprise a few weeks ago when my son Aidan (an opera singer) rang and said he'd been offered a major part to sing in the Tiroler Opera House Austria, in

THE SNOW MAIDEN!

Since Brexit and Covid musicians have really struggled to perform in Europe.

The cost of visas and other strict boundaries have made it almost impossible to work abroad. Many musicians have given up and found other jobs as funding and opportunities in the UK have dwindled. Orchestras and Opera companies are now struggling to survive. Aidan was contacted because he can sing well in Russian. His part is Grandfather Frost, (Father Christmas) a huge undertaking to learn the part and be away from his family in Cheltenham for several weeks, especially over the Christmas period.

As I write this, Aidan has been in Austria for 2 weeks rehearsing at top level. Unfortunately he is the only musician from the UK. and language has been in German & Russian, the chorus are all from Belarus with an interpreter who



speaks English which has helped. He has a great opportunity to sing in an amazing space. I'm also thinking the building would make a great abstract painting!

In the meantime I've been busy travelling to and from Cheltenham to help my daughter in law with the children, Joshua age 6, and Eliza (the snow maiden) aged 3, doing what grandmas do and finding it fun but EXHAUSTING!

Merry Christmas to all my Box Art Group friends!

The Tiroler

Mary Davis Smith

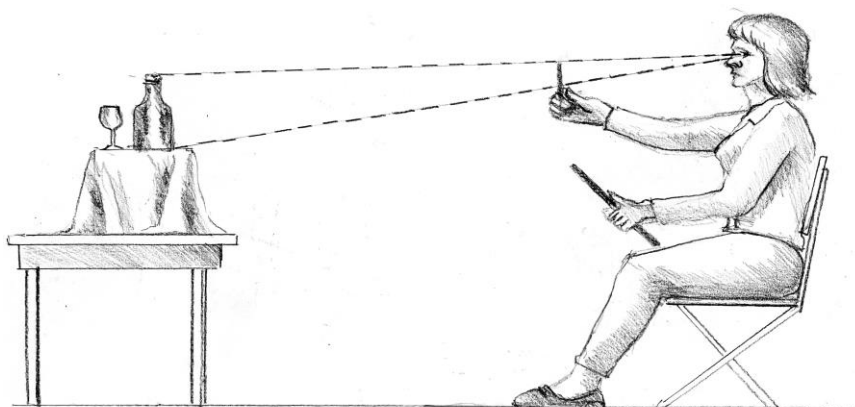
Tricks of Measuring When Drawing from Life

If you attend a Life Drawing class, one of the first tricks you will learn from a good tutor is how to use your pencil to measure the relative sizes and angles of features on the model.

First attempts at life drawing are often a sad experience (as I know from my own struggles): you produce art where different parts of the body seem to have incompatible proportions and they do not seem to meet at the right angles. Fear not! We can fix this! The solution is not particularly difficult to learn and apply, it just takes a bit of care. The main problem is that aspiring artists just don't do it as often as they should and therefore do not educate their eyes to actually see what is in front of them.

Surely we can all (at least those of us with normal vision) actually see what is there? Unfortunately, experience and experiment shows that this is not true. The human visual system is highly selective and much of the time it sees only what it needs to see (or thinks it needs to see) to satisfy immediate concerns, and for the rest of the scene we "see" only what we expect. (If you are being chased by a large carnivore you do not need to register the play of evening light on clouds.) When drawing people in particular, we tend to focus on facial expressions and impressions gained from body language because they tell us whether we are interacting with friend, foe, someone who must be given respect or someone we can dominate. That is what we remember. The exact angle at which they are holding their head may be conveying important information, but we do not need to be consciously aware of the angle - only that it may imply a threat or just curiosity. Even with inanimate objects we usually need an awareness of things like *inferred* size, shape and distance, and the precise projected angle of a roof line is not generally a matter of significance.

The artist, however, wishes to represent on a two dimensional surface a representation of a three dimensional object with a definite fixed position and orientation in space. We have to teach ourselves to see the world as a camera sees it, and for most people this is not easy. But neither is it beyond the reach of most aspiring artists: it is a skill that can be acquired with systematic practice. My wife claims that she is not a



Our principal tool is our pencil - or any other straight edged object we can hold at arms length.

natural musician, but she regularly plays through Beethoven sonatas on the piano. "Just very well taught!" (and practice) is her explanation. The techniques of accurate drawing have, indeed, been understood and taught for several hundred years to apprentices in artists' *ateliers*. I am not claiming that we can all learn to draw like Michelangelo, anymore than my wife expects to achieve virtuoso status. I do, however, guarantee that we can all improve our current levels of skill with consistent practice.

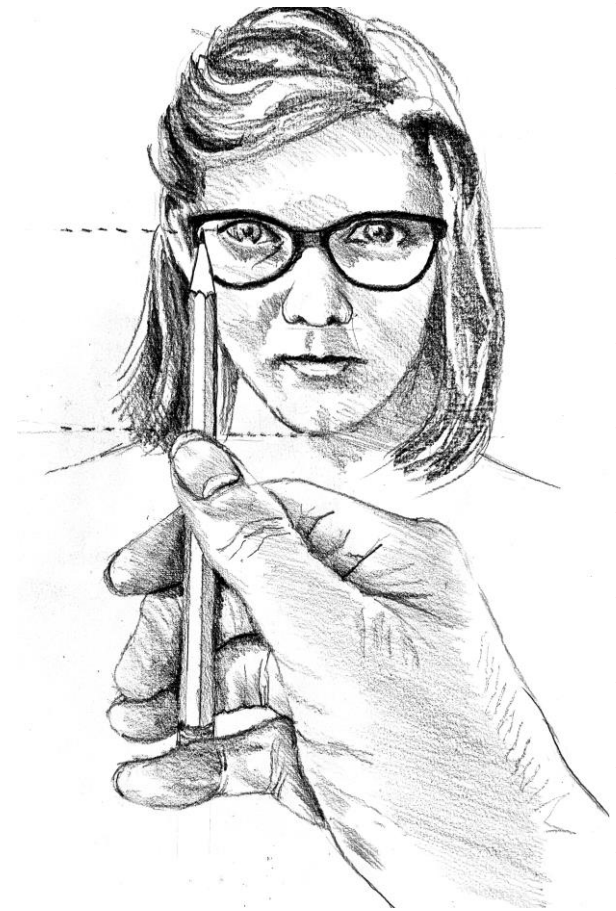
Our principle tool is our pencil (or any other straight edged object that we can hold at arms length. The "arms length" is important because we are going to use the appearance of the pencil as a length standard. If, sometimes, you hold it closer then it will appear larger to your eyes and against the subject and any measurements you make will not be comparable with other measurements when it is held at the different distance.

Now we place the point of the pencil at one point on the subject (for example, the pupil of an eye) and move our thumb down the pencil till it aligns with another well defined feature (such as the bottom of the chin). Maintaining the thumb in the same position we can then move the pencil around (still at arm's length) in order to judge the relative length of other features on the model (for example, the distance from the eyes to the top of the head).

If you are drawing on paper at a modest scale (such as A4 or a little larger) you may perhaps then directly transfer that measurement to the paper (using very light marks). Alternatively, if you wish to work, for example, at a larger scale (perhaps x2) you will need to make marks separated by two point-to-thumb distances.

In practice, of course, we rarely have things working out so neatly. If I am drawing a full figure the chances are that I will need to reduce the scale on the paper, and since I want to get the whole figure on the paper, but mostly just filling it, the reduction factor will usually not be something easy to define. In cases like this, I first use my pencil to measure the height of the head, from chin to top of the hair, and then move it down, on the sitter, to see how many "heads" I can fit into the full length of the figure. For someone standing this is often about seven heads, for someone sitting, probably closer to four. (But you *do* need to measure, because different people do indeed have different proportions and the way that stand or sit affects their appearance.) I then divide up my paper roughly. with perhaps, for example, four horizontal light marks equally spaced down the page when drawing a sitting figure. All other measurements I make on the figure I refer back to the distance between top and bottom of the head. (E.g. the size of an outstretched hand from wrist to finger tips is often about $\frac{2}{3}$ the height of a head - it usually just about covers the face - but foreshortening can of course make a big difference.)

The pencil can also be used to estimate angles. Without using some kind of reference, it often surprisingly difficult to estimate the angle at which a particular line on our sitter runs across our visual field: our interpretation is again fooled by the brain's expectations, and novices may even draw lines that should be tilting in one direction from the vertical in entirely the opposite way. It is, however, usually natural for most people to be able to hold a pencil vertical (you can always check with a line you know should be vertical, like the edge of a window). You can then immediately see the correct tilt of a line and estimate the angle from



Pick a well defined distance as a standard of length. relative to which we can judge all other distances on the model.

that line to the vertical (or the horizontal, if that is smaller). I personally like to *physically* rotate my pencil from the vertical (or horizontal) into the direction of the line of interest and then move it back: the feeling of that twist is something that I can then take onto the paper when I need to draw the line at the correct angle.

We also use the pencil to establish the relative horizontal or vertical positions of specially separated points, especially those where the position is critical to the overall accuracy of the drawing (for example, the position of the top and bottom the the ears relative to the face, or the position of an elbow or knee, which - if they are incorrectly located - will throw out the angles of limbs and that in turn will throw out the positions of other joints. Just hold the pencil so that the edge touches a reference point and note what else lies on the same line - or to one side or the other.

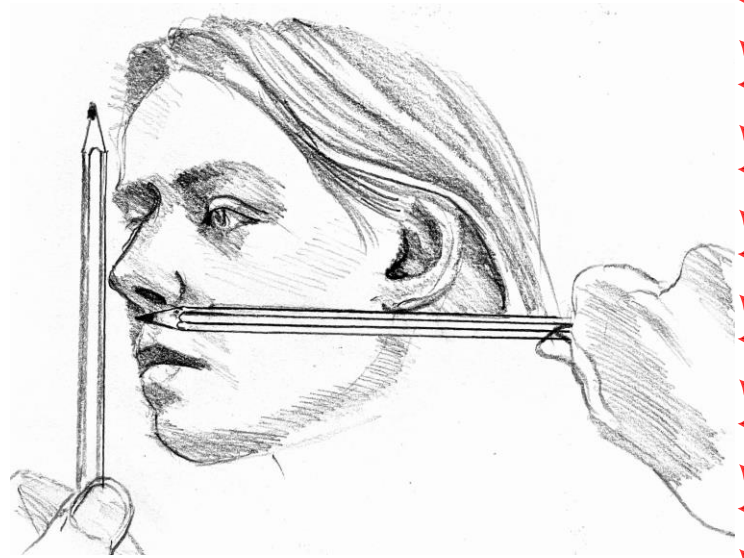
One can take this to an extreme lengths: there are indeed modern atelier-style art classes where you can learn to produce highly accurate drawings and painting from life, where you will be trained to use plumb lines to establish verticals and even rulers instead of pencil to accurately measure the visual distances. (There are workshops at Raw Umber studios in Stroud where you can learn some of these techniques under the eye of a tutor.) It is a technique that works and one that can be learned. Renaissance artists did not scorn to use artificial aids, such as a "camera obscura" which projected an image onto paper. Modern portraits artists sometimes take photographs of a subject and then project that image onto a canvas in order to guide the initial drawing, or some may use a small hand-held device with a half-silvered mirror that allows the artist to "see" the scene they wish to paint overlain on the drawing surface. It is them just a matter of following outlines. Many of us, however, simply enjoy the challenge of educating our eyes to do this type of estimation using the simplest of tools.

Don't be embarrassed to do this when drawing still life, or even buildings and landscapes: it is the trade sign of an artist who is starting to take their technique seriously. All well trained artists do this systematically, and it becomes so natural that sometimes you do it without even thinking about it.

Michael



Estimating the angle of a roof line.



Estimating relative positions of critical point using horizontal and vertical references

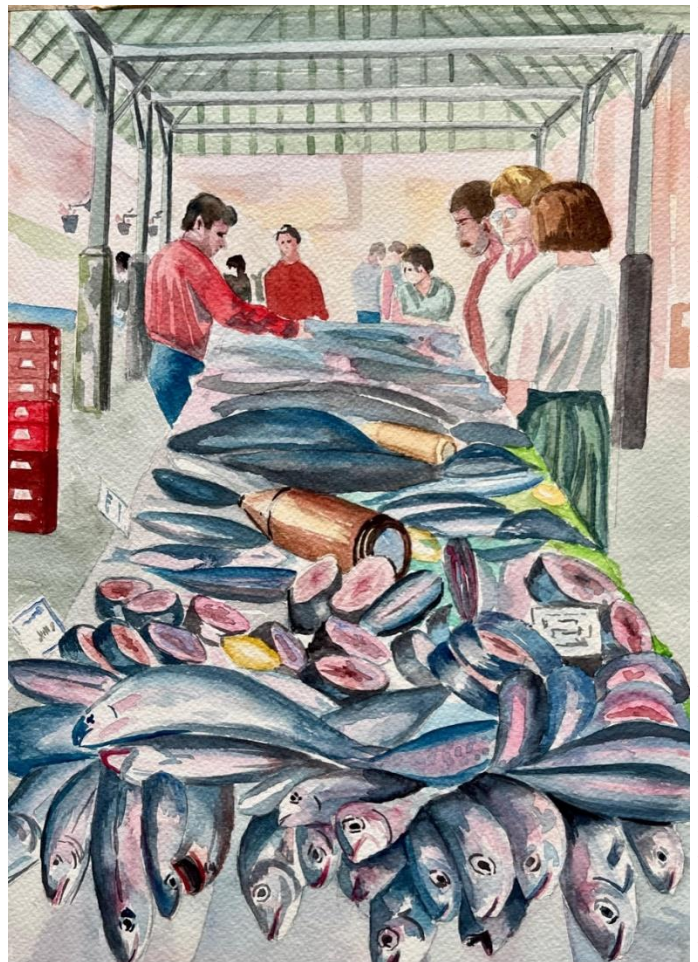


Peekaboo!!

Michael

Sarlat, Dordogne, a French fish stall in the market - memories of summer to get us through the bad weather.

Michael





Dragonfly Pond

Further to my exploration of dragonfly wings and their cell structure, my wife (Hilary) said 'Yes, but why don't you do a proper painting of dragonflies?' So here it is. Hope you like it. (Common Darter in watercolour)

Richard

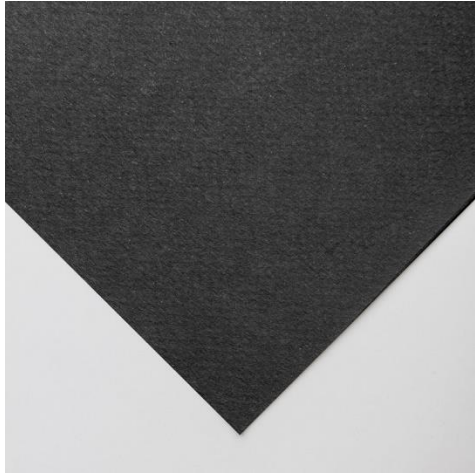
Pastels Painting No1

Over the next few Rainbows, I'll include some tips on pastel painting. This month is on the kinds of surfaces you can use.

Surfaces

There are a variety of surfaces you can use for painting with soft pastels. Here are just some examples but there are lots of variations of these. Most can also be used for charcoal, graphite etc. Most paper comes in a variety of colours, sizes and quantities.

- Sugar paper and scrap book paper: Cheap and good for a beginner. Sugar paper can be bought by the sheet so good for larger sketches.
- Pastel pads and sheets: The inexpensive pads are very good for sketching (especially for a portrait!). Pads are usually A4 but sheets are better for larger work. There is generally a grain in the paper which will show through the pastel. This provides a different effect, but it is not unpleasing. A sheet costs £2 upwards. Canson Mi-Teintes pastel sheets from £2.10 upwards are a good quality ground. These are shown below and the texture that is created with the pastel

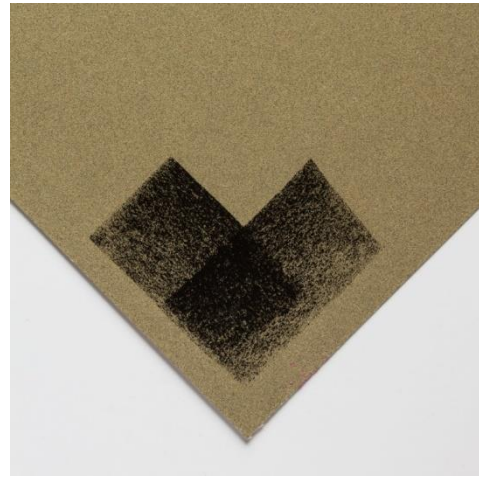
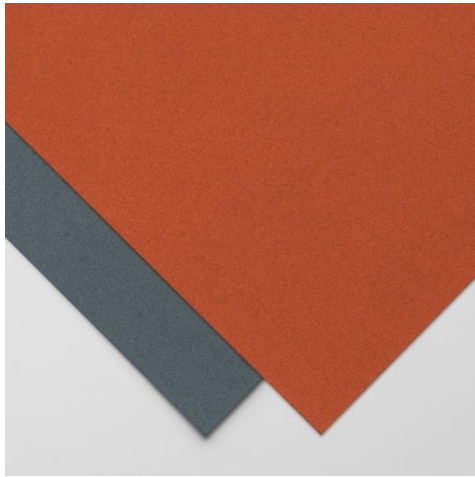


- Ground with a 'bite' - this is what I use for my pastel paintings. It has a rough surface for the layers of pastels to 'cling' to. There are various makes, with some rougher than others, and is personal preference what you use. Some examples are
 - Art Spectrum Colourfix Pastel Paper 50x70, from £3.50 per sheet.
 - Sennelier Soft Pastel card 50-65, from £9.90 per sheet
 - Canson Mi-Teintes Touch Pastel Paper, from £5.60 per sheet

I use Art Spectrum 50x70 sheets for my paintings, cut into 2. I find they have a slightly rougher surface which I prefer for my paintings, compared with the other 2 examples. Pastels can be applied in multiple layers, building up as you paint. Apparently, the sheets can be washed and scrubbed for reuse but I have never tried this! I like to use a mid-tone colour, often grey or sand. I have used a bright salmon, for a 'hot' painting though!



Art Spectrum Colourfix Pastel Paper



Sennelier Soft Pastel card

I'm sure there are lots of other surfaces to use, but these are the ones I have experience of. There will more pastel tips in future months, covering makes of pastels, painting with pastels and fixing, mounting and framing.

Jill

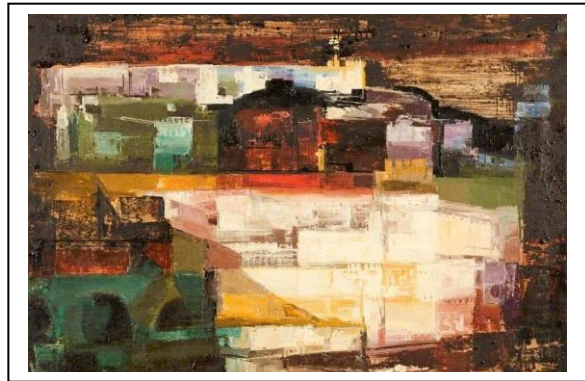
Malthouse Collection

I don't know how many of you go to The Malthouse Collective at Salmon Springs from time to time but, if you do, you will probably know that there is an eclectic collection of paintings upstairs.

One painting that I often look at when I visit is a surrealist oil painting from the 1930's by Sushila Singh (1904-99). I am surprised that it hasn't yet sold.



She taught in Sheffield and Poole and moved to Italy in the 1970's after the death of her husband, continuing with her painting. Here is some more of her work. Image acknowledgement: Images-acknowledgement: <https://inexpensiveprogress.com/5791/sushila-singh/>



Rosemary

Nearby Events in January

Life Lines Jane Garbett presents an exhibition of her work at the Aleph Contemporary until January 31st 2024. The Aleph Contemporary is in the New Imperial House on Station Road, Stroud.

Final Session

Thanks to all who donated items for the Bring and Buy, and thanks to Tracy and Mimi for organising it. It raised £112.50 for the group, so an excellent effort all round. Thanks also to Hilary and David for the splendid quiz. Thanks also to Roxy and Emma for their advice and enthusiasm this term. Beth will be back next term, but I hope we haven't seen the last of Emma.

We re-start on Thursday 11th January with Beth's Lazy Summer Afternoon competition.

A Merry and Peaceful Christmas to all.

Thanks to *Hilary T* for the greeting below.

