

THE RAINBOW

Box Art Group Newsletter - Tuesday 27th February
2024

Written by and for the members of Box Art Group (No. 95)

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Drawing Portraits

Our live “portrait” sessions are one of the features of our art group. I do not know of any other local art group that consistently offers the chance to draw from life, so I sometimes feel that it is a shame that more members do not exploit the opportunity to develop their skills in this direction.

No-one says that it is going to be easy! Drawing people from life is a challenge that requires a certain amount of bravery as well as technique: if you draw a tree from life, you can get away with representing the general feel of the object, without including every branch or twig or even put them in approximately the right places. Your oak can probably be recognised as an oak (or at least a tree) even if it is far from a photo-realist image. Furthermore, the oak does not complain if your drawing is less than perfect.

Faces are different: our human brains are hard-wired to make sense of faces (even new-born babies are fascinated by anything that vaguely resembles a face). We recognise individuals through the smallest of physical variations, so capturing a good likeness requires both excellent observation and the ability to represent what we have seen on the paper. In fact, our in-built face recognition capabilities may be a real disadvantage to the aspiring artist because we can immediately see that one face is different from another without knowing why. Our focus on the importance of faces is also at the root of the most common mistake made by the early-days portraitist: the face tends to be drawn too large with respect to the rest of the head. Many non-artists can look at such a picture and know that it is somehow



wrong, but be unable to say why it is wrong. Furthermore, this type of error is much more likely when drawing from life than when copying a photograph because we are primed to read live faces for emotions and find it difficult to take our attention away from this area. This communication channel is much less attention grabbing in photographs.

Fear is another problem: having achieved a reasonable degree of competence when painting other types of subject, you try a portrait and it seems that you are back at square one, with a mountain to climb. There are new observational and manipulative skills to acquire and these take time. It is much easier to stick with what you know. Furthermore, neither the tree nor the landscape is going to get up at the end of a session and complain that you have made them look too old, or too gloomy. (Few people can keep smiling through a long sitting so mouth corners droop and a lot of portraits often do look grim.) Almost everyone, artist or not, can readily recognise when a portrait does not come off, so portraitists constantly open themselves to severe judgement. There is no hiding place: your observational skills are constantly tested and success or failure is clear to all - not least yourself. (Successful commercial portraitists do of course learn the skill of catching fleeting expressions and, to some extent, painting what their subjects want to see in themselves. The truly great ones add their own insights that become apparent mainly to people other than the subject.)

There is, nevertheless, considerable satisfaction in achieving a reasonably good portrait: it is a high-wire act requiring a fair amount of technique that all has to come together over an extended period of time, where a short lapse of concentration can ruin the whole thing. It feels to me very much like playing a difficult piece of music, which can go horribly wrong at any time until the last note. If, however, you do hone your observational skills in this school or harsh judgements, it will have an impact on your other artistic endeavours: nothing else teaches you to be so self-critical. The awareness of your own errors is the key to the learning cycle that leads to improvement so this is a transferable lesson that will benefit other things you want to do in art.

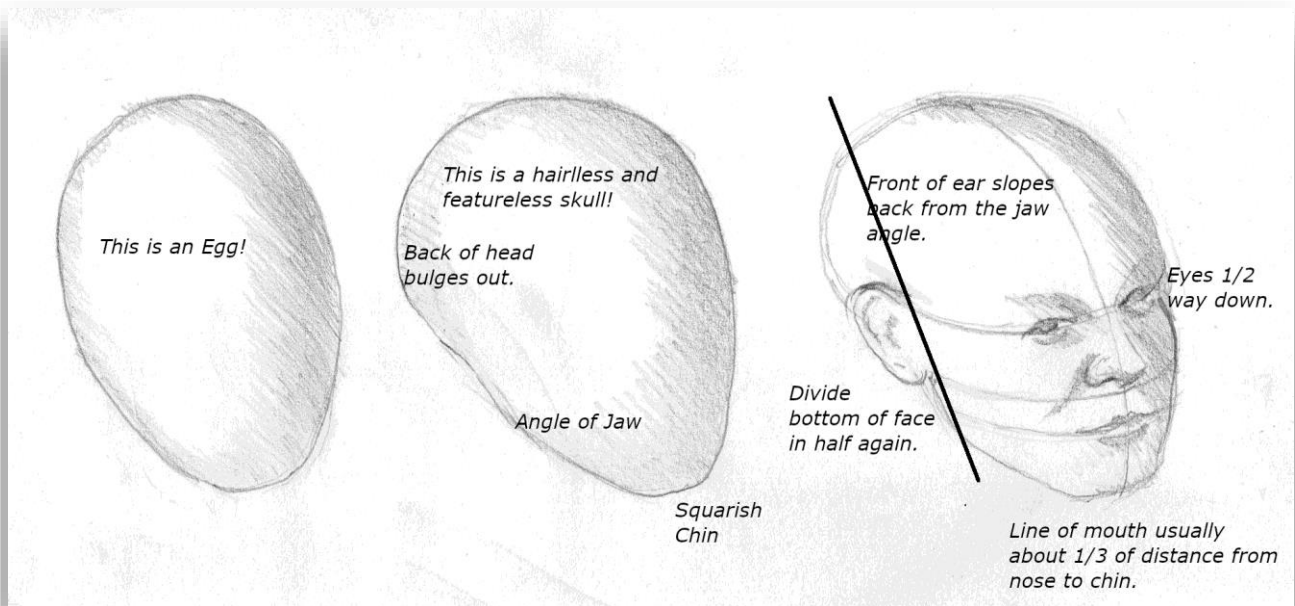
The good news is that the technical skills are entirely learnable. I do not claim that anyone can become a Michelangelo or a Raphael, just as I do not claim that anyone choosing to take up the piano could become a Rubinstein or an Elton John, but everyone can indeed improve their execution skills, both on the keyboard and on the drawing paper, by going about things in the right way. Furthermore, the skills of the portraitist are not in principle any different from those needed to draw any other object: they just need to be executed with a higher degree of precision.

I do not, by the way, despise drawing portraits from photographs, as long as you do not do it all the time: I do it myself quite a lot because it can give me time to understand the detailed structure (and the variations) of complex features like ears, eyes, noses and the mouth. You can call on this understanding when drawing from life, but converting my understanding of a three dimensional live model into a two-dimensional representation requires additional skill that can only be achieved by live practice. 19th Century artists in France did not have photographs but many worked their way through the "Barque Drawing Course"¹ - a series of plates often drawn from classical statues and busts. They were widely used and are still used, for example as part of some courses taught by *Raw Umber Studios*, down in Stroud.

So, let's go back to basics, and I will start by telling you things you probably already know, but in order to draw something that is alive we first need to learn to abstract away the liveness and see what is in front of us as three-dimensional objects, which need to show their solidity.

https://ia802907.us.archive.org/17/items/CharlesBargueDrawingCourse/Charles_Bargue_Drawing_Course_text.pdf

We can start with an egg, where I have used light and shade to indicate the three dimensional curved shape. Now, a real skull (hairless) is in fact not very much like an egg, but we can still see that the use of light and shade will allow us to represent its three dimensional shape on a two-dimensional surface.



¹ The shape of the skull is only superficially like that of an egg - but thinking of it this way can help you to manage light and shade on a real head.

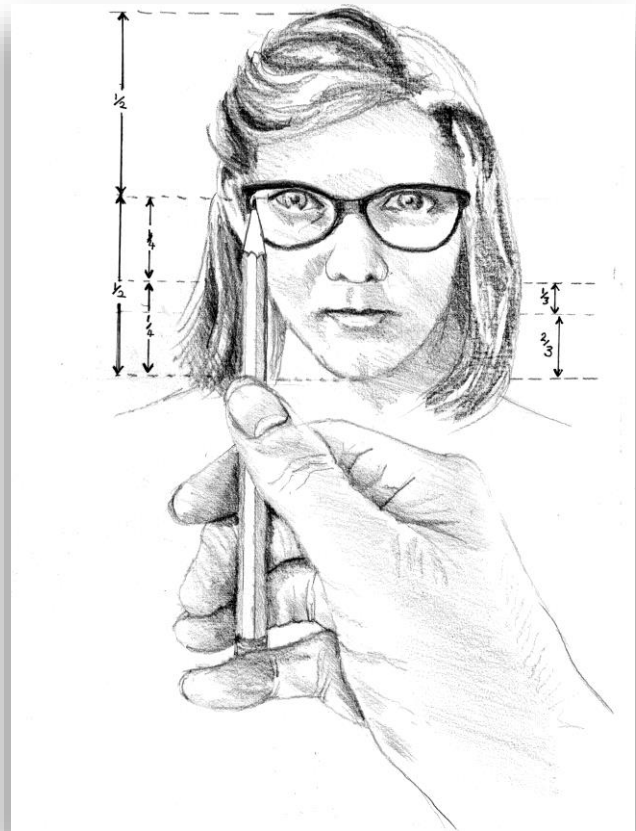
Real skulls are, of course, different in a number of ways from this smooth egg shape, even if we disregard the human features. More square in some parts, more pointed in others, and varying quite a lot in shape between different people and particularly between males and females. Nevertheless, the same shading techniques allow us to describe some of these variations. Note, however, one thing that is common to all: there is left-right symmetry (more of less: real people, it turns out are rarely *exactly* left/right symmetric).

Now let us take our somewhat average skull shape and add features. There are several rules-of-thumb that are a useful guide (always remembering that individual "likenesses" arise through the variations away from the general rules).

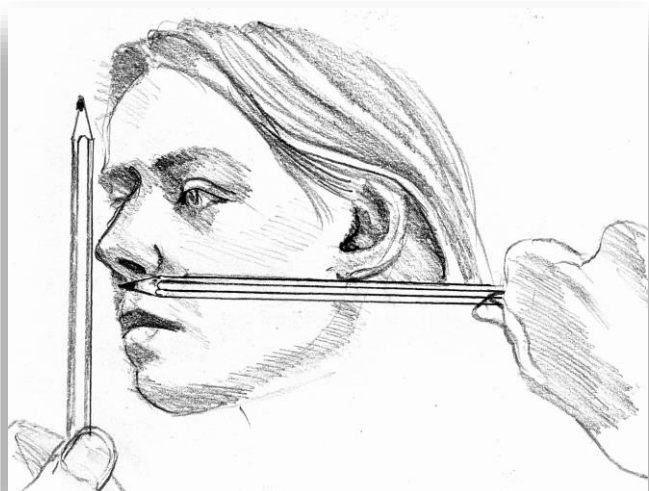
Some Tips:

- Remember to use light and shade to give a sense of the three dimensional shape of the head. When you add nose, mouth and eyelids, use shade rather than outlines to define their shape.
- The eyes are about half-way down the head. Real faces are almost always smaller than you at first think they should be.
- The line joining the eyes, and I really mean the centre of the pupils, is *exactly* perpendicular to the line of symmetry down the middle of the face. In my experience we tend to be extremely sensitive to departures from this rule, and it is often surprisingly difficult to it get *exactly* right.
- The inner corners of eyes tend to be separated by about the width on an eye.
- You normally do not see the entire cornea of the eye: often the upper part is hidden and the lower curve may just touch the lower eyelid.

- Follow the line from the bridge of the nose to the edge of the chin and divide it into two. That is roughly where you find the bottom of the nose. There is a good deal of variation in this measurement: some people have distinctly longer noses and others have shorter noses. Furthermore, some have turned-up noses that look shorter, even if the point where they join the face is just the same, and other have rather “hooked” noses, which are likely to look longer.
- Divide the line between the bottom of the nose and the chin into thirds: the line separating the upper and lower lips is on the upper third. Again, there is a lot of individual variation: jaw shapes vary quite a lot and this is one of the features in which we recognise “likeness”. Females typically have more rounded and smaller lower jaws while males are often relatively larger and rather more square in shape.
- The line separating the upper and lower lip is in principle perpendicular to the symmetry line of the head, as with the line joining the eyes, but beware: individual expressions are often associated with asymmetric use of the muscles at the edges of the mouth. One corner may, indeed be held a little higher, or a little further out than the other. Lips can be very thin or very full and it is even possible for one to be thin and the other full. Shapes vary and can appear to be either turned up or turned down at the corners.
- The top of the ears if usually about the level of the eyebrows while the bottom is often at a level somewhere between the bottom of the nose and the top of the upper lip, but there are people with both unusually big and small ears and earlobes and ear shapes vary a lot. The opticians who fit spectacles will tell you that it is very common for ears to be at slightly different levels. (Nevertheless, draw them at the same level if you want to please the sitter.)
- Ears are usually further back than you think: the forward edge of the ear is pretty much a straight line which usually lies along the line projected upwards from the point where the jaw line changes its angle. (This is a matter of anatomy: the ear has to be above the articulated joint of the jaw.)
- Use the pencil held at arm’s length to measure alignments. (For example, where does the top and bottom of the ear, align with the eyes, mouth and nose? How far does the nose actually stick out?)



The distance between the point of the chin and the line joining the eyes is a good well-defined standard of length for measuring the relative size of everything else.



How does the bottom of the ear align with the nose and mouth? How far does that nose stick out?

Now “Don’ts”

- **Don’t** draw the eyes as almonds. We normally see the shadow under the

eyebrows, the shadow at the bottom of the upper eyelid and the shadow *below* the lower eyelid. As noted above, we would only see the full cornea when the subject is startled.

- **Don't** draw a line round the outsides of the lips: We normally see the shadow below the upper lip (often deeper at the edge of the mouth) and the shadow below the lower lip (usually just at the centre).
- **Don't** leave drawing any spectacles to the end. (Given the average age of our members, many of our sitters wear specs.) They can add complication but I find that they can also help. Spectacles have a regular symmetrical shape but if I leave drawing them till the end I find that fitting them to already-drawn nose, eyes and ears sometimes reveals that I have made the features lob-sided. Sketch them lightly at an early stage in the layout, get their regular shape right, and then use their outline to position the other features accurately.

Finally, I *know* all this, but I still make many of these mistakes. With practice, however, I have learned not to make them all at the same time. Very occasionally I manage to avoid very nearly all of them (and all the others I have not talked about). One day, I am convinced, I will achieve perfection; in the meantime being honestly self-critical is the key to improvement.

I shall do some future articles in which I will talk about drawing specific facial features. Until then, why not just spend a bit of time just looking hard at other people's faces. Note the proportions and study the detailed structure of the features. Then come along to one of the Group's portrait sessions and see if you can turn your new awareness into a drawing.

Michael



Wrong! Her left eye is too high (or the right too low) and the line of the eyes is just a little too high on the face. The face also appears to have a bend in the middle and is lob-sided...all amongst several other errors which I have not listed!



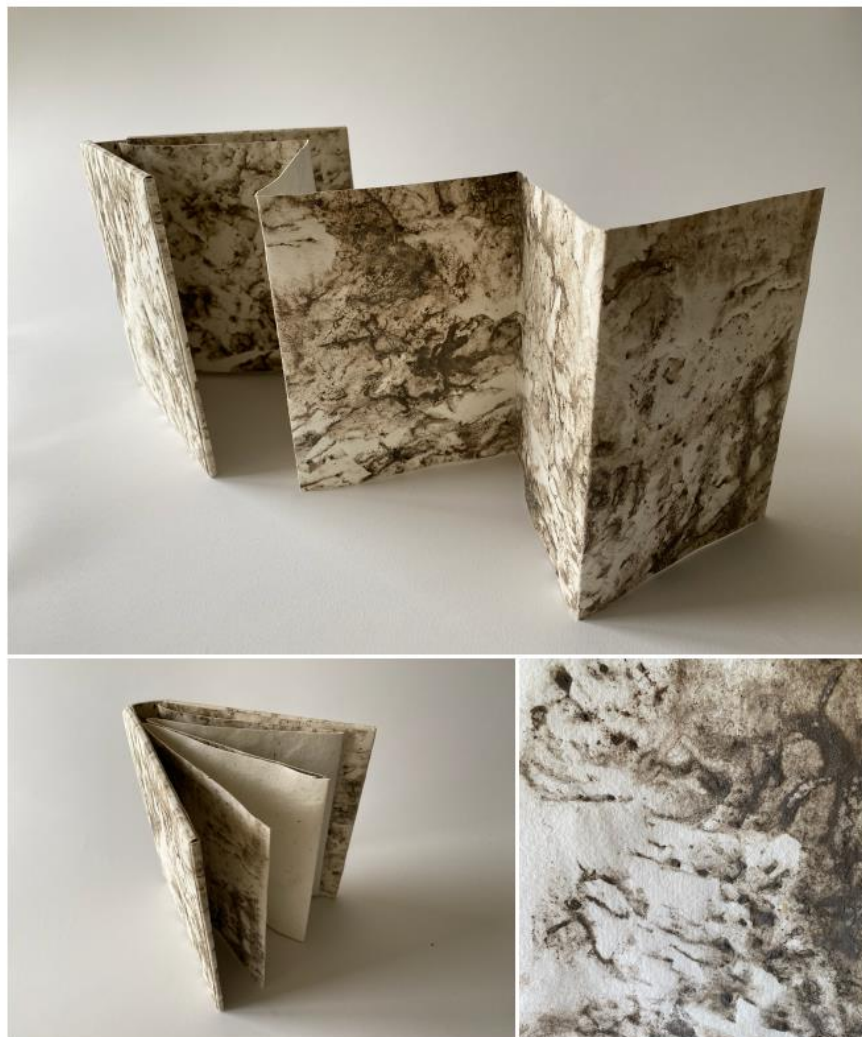
Yes, I used a "selfie" photograph to study an eye.

Following on from Michael's fascinating article above, the committee is looking at arranging a formal portrait sitter on a regular monthly basis, with advance notice of the date, to encourage this aspect of the art group, and so that more members can get involved in portrait drawing. We'll still have our informal sitters as well. We're also looking at arranging regular, monthly, still life sessions.

Pete

Atkinson Gallery, Sustainable Art Open

I'm delighted to share with you that 'Watchet', a piece of work that I made in 1996, has been selected for the Sustainable Art Open at the Atkinson Gallery in Street, Somerset. The exhibition is open from February 21st to March 21st.



This book contains information transferred from rocks on the beach at Watchet in Somerset. The materials used to make it are locally sourced rag paper produced at The Two Rivers Paper Mill on the River Washford in Somerset before it relocated to new premises at East Quay in Watchet, impregnated with naturally occurring pigments eroded from and deposited on the rocks by the the river as it flows out to sea.

It is a unique piece in an ongoing unlimited edition.

Roxy

Nearby Events in March

The Box Village Hall will be closed to the art group on 21st March for their village pantomime. So the suggestion is to visit the Nature in Art Museum and Art Gallery near Twigworth, 2 miles north of Gloucester. On the 21st, it will be showing the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition, and an exhibition to mark the 100th anniversary of the Gloucestershire Society of Artists. It's open from 10am to 5pm, and entry is £7.50 or £6.75 for concessions. I'll put up a sheet on the notice board and suggest that members arrange car sharing.

Other events:

Lansdown Gallery

Fully Booked – the art of the book

Wednesday 13th – Friday 22nd March 11.00am – 5.00pm

Museum in the Park

SCI-FI! Alternative Film Posters from Stroud Illustrators Collective

Saturday 10 February to Sunday 17 March (open 10 – 4:30, from 11am at weekends and closed Mondays)

Three Storeys

Paintings by Jan Petrie

Tuesday 27th February - Sunday 17th March

The Plot Café, Three Storeys, Nailsworth, GL6 0JE. Open weekdays 8.30am to 4pm, Saturday 10am to 4pm, Sunday 10am to 3pm.

Spring Competition

The spring term competition on the subject of 'Light' will be critiqued by Roxy on 14th March, so prepare your entry.

Pete

WhatsApp

There was a suggestion that we start a WhatsApp group, but I'm afraid I'm not up to this – my limit is emails. And before taking this further, should we not investigate the capabilities of the website set up by Michael. This may have the facility to inform members in a responsive manner.