

Figure Drawing for the Twenty First Century

Presentation to Pratt Foundation Faculty, December 1, 2004-5177

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This lecture began as a title, the idea popping into my mind - Figure Drawing for the Twenty First Century. It is inspired in part by Italo Calvino's beautiful book, Six Memo's for the Next Millennium, in which he proposes six values for literature that he feels should be carried into the next century. I ask the following questions, what will figure drawing be, how will it differ, should it differ, what can it be, can we know, and so on. To be of one's own time is held out as an imperative, but what does that mean for us? Is it an imperative in the classroom as well as the studio?

So here is as stab at addressing these questions, perhaps helpful to us as teachers, perhaps in our studios, or simply as a provocation, to raise questions, stimulate debate or to inspire violent opposition. It is the throwing out of ideas that perhaps will end up being thrown out-

My idea is this- as succinctly as I can put it- *to try to identify values for figure drawing of the twenty first century*. Values are surrounded by, or contained in ideas, ideas of order, or what we call ideals. - Closely related to ideals is what is call the "numen", which is the divinity, or in secular terms, the presiding spirit of the time. Ideas, numens, presiding spirits, ideals all determine form, and determine what and how we teach.

We draw the figure is to express a relationship to nature or to the divine. So, historically, our idea or vision of the human figure has been shaped by the numen, ore presiding spirit of the time. We can't discuss the figure without recognizing this relation to an ideal. (1)

I propose, being an historical type, that we look to the past, to different ideas and ideals -, - and see which ones fit, what we might use and what we might throw out

Looking back in time is to me like the drawing back of a bowstring. The farther back we are able to pull it, the farther our arrow might fly, and the more it may penetrate the target. There are many targets. This is the first point of Figure drawing in the twenty first century. It will be many things.

Therefore, I will pull the bowstring back as far as possible, all the way back to the beginning, to the first figure drawings. I am speaking of the cave paintings, so called, those fantastic images made by people in the dawn of time, before written language. Their power is so great that they communicate clearly to us today. Picasso having just seen the caves at Lascaux when they were first discovered remarked, "We have learned nothing new in 17, 000 years".

An interesting remark, and true, up to a point. These figures possess what is the most important quality in figure drawing; they express life, animation, and movement. We have two names for the activity we are considering here, figure drawing, and life drawing. Both are useful. The figure is an abstract form or shape. Life is animation, rhythm, and movement.

Without it, figure drawing is dead. The figure is not a piece of wood, nor is it cold stone. Figure drawing of the twenty first century must take, as it's first and foremost quality the undeniable affirmation of life.

When speaking of figure drawing the qualifier human is assumed. - Figure drawing for the twenty first century assumes nothing. - It takes nothing for granted. We cannot afford to. It asks where is the human element? Is it in a representational likeness, or is it in the organizing and empathetic mind of the creator? The latter is distinctly present in the cave art. To see the human element as not a likeness, but a presence in the drawing expands what we might think of as figure drawing. . From here on, will however speak of the human figure.

I believe that we can identify as constant two qualities in all great figure drawing. I call them energy and grace. These are present in the caves and in this, Picasso was right; we still have not done better. However, throughout the centuries, opposing tendencies have coexisted and they have been treated in new and different ways. In the East, these forces are often seen as complementary. In the West, they tend to exist in some tension. Definitions in art are often set in terms of some resolution of opposing forces. Energy and grace are two such forces. Or states of being. Baudelaire defined art as "half of which is the fleeting, the contingent, the other half bring the immutable and the eternal. Other opposing tendencies would be confidence and doubt, nature and the museum, (as seen in Cézanne's letters) perception and knowledge, or a kind of weightless atomization as opposed to dense, concrete bodies.

Parallel to these opposing tendencies in art are the relation of humans to the divine and the relation of humans to nature. The ideal or the numen can be found in how different ages situate themselves, adjust themselves to these tensions- which side is dominant, which subordinate; or, how close together or how far away are the opposing poles? Drawing is the pursuit of some resolution to this tension, or perhaps the maintenance of this tension; in any case, the resolution comes through a perpetual adjustment of opposing elements to the infinite variety of form.

Let us go back a few thousand years to one of its earlier expressions, turn the back machine back to the Greek geometric period from around 900 to 700 BCE.

Conjure up- a vase, a great example is in the Met- What we see on this vase is repeated geometric designs in horizontal bands around the pots. At certain points, the regular geometric pattern is interrupted by the geometric forms that combine to create the symbol of human form. We then return to the pattern.

A number of things operate here; the first is the clear, direct use of shape to *symbolize* the human figure. Second, the whole figure is divided into parts, each having its' own symbol. Third, the figures have gestures, again symbolic. Then we have the relation of the geometry of the figure to the geometry of the pattern, and the pattern to the vase as a whole.

I read this pot in the following way. The pattern is the rhythm of life, of nature. The pot is the world. The human form partakes of this pattern, which is to say shares elements of it, yet is distinct from it. As the figures themselves are broken down into parts and a whole, so is the figure related to the greater whole that is both the pattern and the world. What separates us from the world- is a change in the pattern, this change represents our consciousness. This is a great Greek discovery. The figures are mourning, they are aware of both death and grief.

The later black figure and red figure vases develop the parts of the human form to more natural proportions. While awareness of the negative shape is a prime operative force in the drawing, the figure is less embedded. The figures remain essentially flat and do not, except in a few cases, seem to occupy a volume of space.

Here the opposing themes are present in the distinction literally between figure and ground. The figure, importantly, has always a relation to its environment. The relation moves, however from, more harmonious to less. The ideal moves from a near equal emphasis of the figure and its environment, to one more centered on the figure itself. The idea of order shifts from one of the figure as a small part in a large whole, to one more centered on the human presence.

Values we can identify here are geometry, symbolic structures, pattern, rhythm, measure and measuring, relationship of the parts to the whole, - or proportioning, - including *the relation of the figure to its environment*. Underlying all these qualities is number. The Pythagoreans saw numbers the substratum of nature. All is number. Number leads to measure, measure to ratio, and ratio to harmony.

The Greek obsession with number eventually leads to the invention of the Greek ideal. While the Egyptians had idealized forms, it is not yet a single perfect form as Plato describes. Polyclitus the sculptor, in 450-440 BCE arrives at an idea of *symmetria*, the commensurability of parts. In the middle of the Fifth century he wrote down his Canon, a system he had developed for representing the relations of the parts and whole of the human body. A composition always consists of clearly definable parts, related to a whole, but this had an important difference. Polyclitus attached a philosophical component to his system that he called *to eu*, or the perfect, the good. In other words, he linked his system to an ideal or to the ideal.

The moment of Polyclitus was the classical moment, a frozen moment time, a split second of equipoise only known to a handful of people. It was a moment when the world seemed under control. The ideal has been located in the here and now, in the system. The expression of this is found in the *Doryphoros*, *Spear Bearer*, or *The Canon*, the Roman copy of the sculpture by Polyclitus. The system is self-contained and it is located wholly in the figure. There is no longer a relation to the exterior world. The rhythms are found the figure itself and are no longer connected to the outside. The human and the numen become one. Man is the measure of all things and he has been measured with confidence.

Given the opposing poles of confidence or doubt, I will take doubt anytime, any day. The system as ideal in itself, that declaims perfection is both arrogant and anti life. Remember that hubris is a word invented by the Greeks, for the Greeks. To suggest that you have the one true way is to eliminate the most vital question of life and art, what if- what if the finch's beak were a little wider, what if I paint the grass red, what if the head is three times the size of the torso? The important process is proportioning, measuring *or* finding order, not the fixed ideal. There is no energy, no contingency. It posits a stabile universe, with man in the center as the carrier of the fixed ideal.

The relation of ideals to systems is important. Many systems have been proposed. The Golden Section is one, Polyclitus another, Durer, perspective and on and on. The ideal will always generate, some would say degenerate into, a system. I say it is ok for the ideal to generate a system, so long as the system does not become the ideal.

There is a distinction to be made between kinds of systems. The Golden Section is an open system with infinite permutations the system of Polyclitus is closed. We should not be afraid of systems, or theories, so long as they are open and seen as tools, not ideals.

The pendulum swings back in the Romanesque and Gothic periods where rhythm and fantastic pattern, both abstract and Representational predominate. In murals, in manuscripts, and relief's fantastic images full of life, of vitality of expressive distortion abound. In the Gothic, we see again an idea of order placing of man within the larger structure of the cosmos; the Cathedral replaces the pot as form symbolic of a cosmic whole. In this, these ages relate to the early Greek vases. There is a cosmic scheme in which the figure plays a part, rhythmically knitted into the fabric of life. The part of the figure is however small and humble. The human figure is no longer identified closely with the divine.

The Renaissance follows. The Renaissance was many things; two principal concerns were the rediscovery and utilization of ancient virtues and the rebirth of man in the likeness of God. We have a rich written and visual record. Ideas about the figure abound and are tied to religious thought, philosophy, and concepts of appropriateness and new ideas of order. New forms are invented to express each distinct point of view. It is the time when figure drawing as we know it comes into its own. The term *disegno*, from Vasari's *Lives* – from Giotto to Michelangelo, drawing is seen as the key to the entire imaginative process, the medium of artistic thought as well as its concrete expression. (2)

The visualization of man in the image of god gives man a pride of place in the cosmos heretofore unseen. Two things needed to happen. The human form needed to be depicted as a solid body and it needs to exist in space. Geometry, or measuring the earth, creates this space, the space of perspective. The same space allowed Columbus and others to sail across the sea and get home again. The space gives room for the solid bodies as created by Giotto and Massacio, measured by Piero. Perspective acknowledges existence and importance of the viewer in relation to the space.

Alberti, a student of antiquity and a humanist was moved to set in writing his ideas on the appropriate way to dispose of the figure in painting and drawing. At around the same time Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola wrote his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Pico articulates the idea that man through the cultivation of his intelligence is capable of ascending toward the angels, that we are just below them in the cosmic scheme. We are also, however, capable of descending to our base and bestial nature; the brutish condition of our earthly existence. He is espousing the NeoPlatonic idea, a philosophy that sought in part to merge Plato with the Christian scriptures. In short, it can be described as the doctrine of two worlds, the one up there and the one down here, the ideal and the real, the heavenly and the earthly, and the spiraling movement in between. We will return to this.

The word *dignity* presents a new view of man, distinct from the preceding Romanesque and gothic worldviews. The word was important to Alberti. . For him, like the classical Greeks,

nothing in excess, especially movement. Too much, he says, removes the dignity of the figure and the painting. The waist, he says, is never twisted so much that the pit of the shoulder is perpendicular to it. Some depictions of the figure he notes are impossible, that we could not see both points at once. Picasso will, (as Leo Steinberg writes on so well), use this device to great effect. (Drawing as if to Possess)(3) Alberti is concerned not only with dignity, but also with decorum, or what is right. He cautions artists not to be “Troppo fervente e furioso” Not too much energy, thank you

Michelangelo takes as a principle and driving force that which Alberti warns against. He too is familiar with Neoplatonism having grown up with the Medici and the Platonic Academy of Marsilino Ficino. For Michelangelo the twisting figure, the turning, the torsion of the human form, or tortuosity, becomes a symbol for the human struggle to get up there, to escape our earthly bonds. Philosophy is behind the form of Michelangelo. Movement is a symbol. We are able to strive to be closer to god, but will never get there. The ideal exists, but it is up there, we are aware of it, but it exceeds our grasp. Image after image show this yearning this reaching, this turning, as the Libyan Sybil we all know so well, he shows her toe turning, her foot turning, leg, and torso turning, then hand and finger turning. She is turning toward the light, in a literal and figurative play. She faces, in the scheme of the Sistine chapel, the light side of God Separating the light from darkness. Lomazzo, a Renaissance theoretician, in 1584 gives a name to this figure type, the Figure Serpentinata. Movement is its value and its symbol. (4)

The artists spoke of its' furia, or energy, which is certainly there. Lomazzo says that in the sinuous S-curve that the figure Serpentinata carves in two dimensions gives it grace. Energy and grace, again, fused, together with idea. This is the greatness of Michelangelo. There is no hubris in Michelangelo. In him we can watch confidence turn into doubt, in the late *non-finito*. That the treatment of form is driven by the idea, a conceptualization, is an important one for figure drawing. Michelangelo however had no system, and the theory of Lomazzo followed, not determined his drawing. What he had was attitude. Attitude is an important value for figure drawing of the twenty first century. The figure is a metaphor.

Figure drawing benefits from debate, then as now-

The artists who follow the Renaissance benefited tremendously by the extension and invention of tools to express stabile, solid, concrete forms or spiraling serpentine figures and everything in between.

A kind of golden age in drawing follows. A time when artists have at their disposal more tools than ever before. More if fact than are needed. They have a blank check at Home depot, fill your carts, whether you need it or not. They are picked up and discarded with great freedom because the tools are no longer attached to any philosophy or religious principle. Subject matter is opened up as well. Figures can be whatever they want, actors, vendors, farmers, Gods, or goddesses. Figures can float, they can stand firmly on the ground, they may twist or not, perspective if useful, but not as a philosophic or symbolic necessity

I think of first of Rembrandt. Rembrandt achieves without question the highest rank of draftsmen. As opposed to Michelangelo, he brings the divine back to earth, it lives with us in our everyday world. If one wanted to be convinced of the existence of angels among us, one

need not look farther than a drawing by Rembrandt. We love him for his religious imagery, but also for his cottages, his trees, and his elephant.

Expression of direction, volumes, oppositions of volume, variety we move through the picture and have the modern experience of recreating it's making as we go. He gives us the thrill of the responsive movement through the drawing. The absolute eloquence, and elegance in the use of language.

Watteau and Domenico Tiepolo (not to mention Fragonard) are other who displays this remarkable and enviable ease and precision of jugglers, in the fluent picking up and discarding of tools. There is a great comfort in both the art and artifice of drawing. Would that we lived in a world where art were so felicitously situated in the imagination of the culture.

The ideal or in this case the guiding spirit is the more appropriate term, is found in our world in its passions, pains and pleasures. I would like to stress the last as a value that we need to remember in the classroom- the pleasure of drawing. It too often gets lost.

In nineteenth century begins a schism arises, an antagonism between two opposing poles. The battle begins within Academy between the Rubenistes and the Poussinistes, the intellectual idealists for whom line was predominate, or those more Dionysian souls who saw color as the vehicle for expression. In drawing, it might be said to translate into closed or open form, strong geometry on the one hand and strong rhythm on the other, grace versus energy. The opposition played out in the rivalry of Delacroix and Ingres. The Academy went solidly for the Apollonian ideal, behind Ingres, its titular head in Rome. Figure drawing did not suffer. The debate perhaps drove the two to higher and clearer expressions of their respective positions. Delacroix, in the footsteps of Michelangelo, the furia, the rhythms extending energetically out from the image, Ingres containing his form with graceful line.

For the academy ideal was situated with the ancients, the marble statues of the past. The students, as we know in their life course were first made to draw from engravings, then from plasters casts, it is no surprise that their figures have the cold lifeless feel of stone. The course by Barque that many of us saw a few years back gives as examples lifeless figures, self contained, no relation or rhythms outside of themselves no relation to the outer world, except perhaps through the arcane and invisible medium of co-ordinate geometry.

This is a time and place where all was taken for granted. The drawing of the figure was the noblest subject. The ideals of the ancients (nature ennobled by reason, the noble simplicity and sedate grandeur that Winkelmann spoke of) are Enlightenment substitutes for a guiding religious faith. The lack of life in the drawing arises from this unquestioning faith in drawing the figure according to ancient values. Figure drawing in the twenty first century, as I have said takes nothing for granted. We must prove with every mark we make the continuing validity of our enterprise.

Fortunately, the academy found an articulate and persuasive opponent in the person of Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, who is always right, had the good sense to stick it to the academy right in its heart, right in its ideal- the ideal he said, is not "that vague thing, that

boring and intangible dream floating on the ceiling of academies: an ideal is the individual modified by the individual, rebuilt and restored by brush or chisel to the dazzling truth of its essential harmony.”(4) Beautiful. He resituates the ideal in the modern world, to within the individual consciousness, which is the modern idea of the discovery of the self. But, as with Michelangelo, it is proposed as a struggle. (In the same essay, *The Salon of 1896* he also resituates the idea of both decorum and dignity. Veronese in the Renaissance learned that dignity in the renaissance was not a virtue open to all. The inquisitors demanded he remove dwarfs, dogs, the injured, Germans and other undesirables from his Last Supper. Baudelaire proposes in a section titled the Heroism of Modern Life a dignity for all, those who wear a frock coat, rich and poor, it becomes the dignity of the *Modern Olympia*, the dignity of the *Barmaid at the Follies Bergere*. Dignity is open and available to all- this is an essential attitude to figure drawing in the twenty first century.)

The twentieth century, I think, essentially continues Baudelaire’s placement of the ideal as the struggle, the search for the real within our consciousness. The figure becomes subject to the Four D’s. Deformation, Dislocation, Dematerialization, all under the sign of Distortion; Expressionism, Surrealism and Cubism. Deformations are used to express the twentieth century human conditions and concerns. A distortion in the figure is immediately noticed, so powerful is our mental image of the figure. They can be disturbing as in Expressionism, humorous as In Paul Klee. Distortions can be used to create tension, space, movement as in Matisse or Giacometti. More often that not distortion makes something feel more real, if not look more real. Distortion does not denote freakish features or forms. Selection is itself a distortion. This is the recognition of the twentieth century.

Drawing is a distortion, is a dislocation in the same way that any translation is. Dislocation means that we *re-present* the figure, which the drawing is apart from reality and creates a new reality. But dislocation also describes the sense of disconnectedness that the surrealist juxtaposition creates. - It derives in part from the brutality of the First World War and the sense that technology has intervened irrevocably between man and nature- we cannot go back. - The past is irretrievable, like a dream. Dislocation is the age of anxiety. Alienation. The modern condition. For many a similar break occurs with the concept of the divine.

Drawing becomes s the activity of creating of structures that are analogous to our experience of life. Modernism does not hide process or language.

How do we make analogies to our experience? What are the analogies? Take this apple. (prop) I want this apple. I reach out and grab it. Do we have form in a drawing that feels like we can reach out and grab it? Yes or no? This is an analogy; it feels like life.

More complex would be analogies of the spirit. - Does the drawing feel like a stable world with a clear idea of order that seems to say, all is well, and we are in control. Or does it does it allude to the precariousness of the processes behind all things, the miracle of how nearly humans nearly missed being human, life being life, the world the world? (Calvino)

(The tumultuous chaos of life)

My sentiment is with the latter. It feels more like the world that I inhabit.

So let’s us sum up the values I pull from history for drawing in the twenty-first century;

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Values form the past that we can use in Foundation Drawing:

- 1) Energy- the Life Force, affirmative conviction
- 2) Grace- the spirit, the sensuous
- 3) Empathy- the human element
- 4) Relation of the Parts to the Whole
- 5) Relation of the Figure to its Environment
- 6) Solid Three Dimensional Form- Drawing as if to Possess
- 7) Movement- Direction, the figure is not Still Life
- 8) Metaphor, idea about the figure, the figure as-
- 9) Distortion – for expression, for clarity
- 10) Pleasure, the wondrous and miraculous in life

Regarding two of these values, I offer the following quotes: The parts to the whole I would like to quote from a lecture that Meyer Shapiro gave at the New York Studio School in 1967. The Lecture was called *Drawing from the Figure*;

”- the human figure, and particularly the nude figure, is the study of the most complex, the most articulated, the most subtle, the most interesting, and most difficult object in the world. Nothing Else begins to approach it.... The nude figure presents itself as a natural form which is self adjusting, so constituted that a shift in the head changes the neck, a raising of the arm does something to the shoulder muscles, all changes in it present themselves at once as changes within a finely constituted, organic whole which is self balancing, and self adjusting, and in which everything counts: that nothing that appears to the eye is superfluous. This aspect at once allies itself to a fundamental consideration in painting and sculpture, whether you make an abstraction or whether you make a landscape or still life. No matter what you paint, or even if you make an assembly, you want to make something which looks as if, in its rightness, everything belongs and each art has a certain individuality, and the whole has an indefinable individuality that can not be located in one part. The human figure therefore offers us a model of an aesthetic of nature in which these fundamental relationships are given to us but cannot be understood immediately. They can be grasped only gradually and through the persistent activity of fine looking and testing of your looking by drawing. Looking reveals much less than you imagine.”

Next, The relation of the figure to its environment, - Jean Dubuffet, an artist I have come to admire puts it plainly in his lecture of 1951 “Anti- Cultural Positions”:

” One of the principal characteristics of Western Man is to think that man is very different from the nature of other beings of the world. Custom has it that man cannot be identified or compared at least with elements such as winds, trees, and rivers, except s humorously, and for poetic rhetorical figures. The Western man has at last a great contempt for trees and rivers, and hates to be like them. On the contrary, the primitive man loves and admires trees and rivers; He has a strong sense of continuity with of all things and especially between man and the rest of the world. Those primitive societies have surely must more respect than Western man for every being in the world: they have a feeling that man is not the owner of being, but only one among others”

These qualities are present in drawing of all ages. What counts again, is how we choose to combine them, to treat them. We know what made a good drawing in the renaissance. We know what made a good drawing in the ninetieth century, and in the twentieth. What will

make a good drawing in the Twenty- first? What is our presiding spirit? We do not live in an age that is comfortable with art and artifice or with the idea of figure drawing and the creation of form. We do not have a world under control. We seem to be entering a time when faith is replacing reason as the guiding spirit. The lessons of the past teach us that there are dangers in confidence that leads to complacency or worse, with an ideal situated in the past or, in systems and known ideas of order. There are equally dangers in the twentieth century idea of the search, the constant overturning of past ideas of orders.

To go back to the analogy of the bow and arrow, a Netherlandish proverb warns against pr speaks of he who “shoots one arrow after another” It is the search, but perhaps we have to allow ourselves to find, which is why I think it best not even to ask what makes a good drawing in the twenty first century. To find is to be astonished. I do not want good drawing, I want drawing that astonish. Every once in a while in the studio and in the classroom, I get one.

- 1) See Kenneth Clark’s The Nude, subtitled “a study in Ideal Form” or Panofsky’s Idea; a Concept in Art Theory, to name just two.
- 2) David Rosand, Painting is Sixteenth Century Venice. See also, Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation
- 3) Leo Steinberg, “Drawing as if to Possess” from “*The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large*”, Other Criteria, Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art
- 4) Maniera and Movement: The Figure Serpentinata, David Summers *The Art Quarterly* Autumn 1972, Volume XXXV, #2 1972, and *Contrapasto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art*, Volume LIX, #3
- 5) Charles Baudelaire “*The Salon of 1846*” Baudelaire Selected Writings on Art. Penguin Classics, Translation P.E. Charvet, 1972
- 6) *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola. 1487 Gateway Edition, 0-89526-713-6 1999
- 7) Six Memo’s for the Next Millennium, Italo Calvino, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985-6, Vintage International 1988 0-679-74237-9
- 8) “*Drawing from the Figure*” Meyer Shapiro, reprinted in Meyer Shapiro; his *Painting, Drawing and Sculpture*, Harry N. Abrams Inc, 2000 0-8109-4392-1
- 9) “Anti- Cultural Positions”, Jean Dubuffet is reprinted in various exhibition catalogues.