

A Brief View of Drawing by Paul Weingarten

Lecture given at the National Academy School of Fine Art, New York City

Good afternoon and thank you for being here.

The premise upon which this thesis is predicated is that fine art, at its best, is a conduit of deeply felt experiences from the artist to his would be audience. Without this intimate connection, a picture would be like a statement without proof.

Today I wish to put forth a proposition that drawing because of its enormous influence, is the second most important invention of all time and demonstrate not only its near supreme importance but to explore some of its essential values, for all of us and suggest some ways in which it has been employed by great artists throughout history.

Our most important invention is our gods. The most important inventions of all time are surely the ones that shaped cultures, advanced civilization, created social harmony and cohesiveness. They provide direction for people while invigorating our historical march from simple survival towards understanding, enlightenment and the capability to actualize our aspirations, to make concrete that which was imagination, to explore and accept both the mystical and the material. To some extent this requires seeing the material infused with the mystical.

There are those who would say the wheel is our greatest invention. But the wheel seems to suggest that mechanics are civilization's prime mover. I believe we would be nothing without our sense of mystery and the desire to search beyond mechanics. We are the creatures that have the power to observe and then seek out the significance of our observations not just to invent tools and apply them.

There is a wheel however that surpasses the importance of that mechanical device. It is the zero. When humanity discovered the concept of nothing we were on the precipice of discovering infinity. If there is a vast oblivion then there is a vastness that does not end. It is a small but significant step from the concept of infinity to that of eternity, that which will endure forever. From this our ancestors could then offer gods which bestow life everlasting. In Egypt, the god on earth, Pharaoh, would be eternal. In Christianity eternity is a fait accompli for all; some in bliss and others in damnation. All civilizations have been shaped and unified by their conceptions of the ideals expressed in their gods. It is through drawing, painting and

sculpture that our gods are made concrete and serve as convincing proof that their belief system is absolutely true. Thus the seminal invention after our gods is drawing, the ultimate progenitor of painting and sculpture.

In virtually every major culture there have been powerful visual symbols demonstrating society's values. They play the central role in validating the underlying faith that is required from each member for a society to stay cohesive. Visual art provides the proof needed to coalesce the population around their values and, for better or for worse, around the leaders that are charged with translating and actualizing a practical application of these values. Presumably this is for the benefit of all.

As we know, it has never really worked for everyone. Societies have more often been stratified and the ones at the bottom suffer mightily to sustain themselves while those at the top reap benefits way out of proportion to their contribution. But for the purpose of this inquiry what is important is the use of gods and the powerfully expressed artistic symbols that historically are the underlying framework of virtually all major cultures.

The creation of recognizable images that can provide a kind of living proof that the central philosophy and mystical force of the gods that control us actually exists, in a form in which we can all agree, is due to the expressive ability of the drawings, paintings and sculpture that portray them. Drawing in and of itself and as the basis of painting and sculpture, is and seems to have been for tens of thousands of years, a language beyond words. It is more accessible than writing and more convincing than other means. For a people to transfer its authority to a priesthood as a governing agent required potent proof. Art by inspired artists provided that proof.

For example Abu Simbel the great, enormous and stoic 40 foot statues of ancient Egypt made it clear that Pharaoh was all powerful, eternal and permanently in command and that the significance of his subjects paled by comparison. He was a part of a static society that, for the most part, de-emphasized the individual.

In contrast the sculpture of the Greek god Zeus by Praxiteles, done in the golden age, is larger than a very tall man, but unlike the Pharaoh of Abu Simbel, not so tall as to be out of human possibility. He embodies the ideals of strength, intelligence and beauty in a way that appears almost reachable. It mirrors the Greek revolution because the sculpture of Zeus is animated and free standing in contrast to the much earlier Egyptian god-king which is austere and immobile. Praxiteles is part of an esthetic that glorifies a culture of intellectual inquiry,

creativity, relative freedom and individuality. Pablo Casals, the great cellist, said when discussing freedom in his musicianship: “freedom yes, but freedom with order”. This could also be the credo for the Greek esthetic.

It is the fine artists who stand at the center of history. Through all of human history, people have seen their gods through the creations of inspired artists. So if the gods are humanities greatest invention, it is drawing that ultimately empowered them by endowing them with life.

Drawing is the foundation upon which painting and sculpture rests. Like an armature we come to understand, form, space, characterization, animation, atmosphere, light, dark, mass weight, psychology and more through living drawings. Matisse said one can even tell a great colorist through his drawings.

So the first thing a student must know who wishes to study fine art is that drawing is at the center of this study and that esthetics is the center of drawing. Drawing in fine art is no light matter and must be undertaken with the utmost seriousness. Historically it is way more important than nuclear physics.

This discussion and the ensuing classes in the winter are about fine art drawing, not to be confused with illustration, cartooning or the academic cerebral rationalizations for the marks one may put onto a piece of paper. Fine art drawing, at its best, is nothing less than magic, a living experience put onto a piece of paper that can be felt by a receptive observer. Fine artists wish to animate our drawings with the intimate and vital living experience that is at once unique and universal. Ingre’ said: “Drawing is seven eighths of painting”.

How important is drawing to you as a student? First of all what is the difference between a student and a fine artist? One might say that a fine artist is always a student of nature, of his or her craft and always growing. That is all well and good but let’s be honest: students transfer their authority to an authority figure. They follow the example and advice of authority figures while fine artists, in contrast, sense and experience directly and by the conviction born of direct experience actively seek and ultimately become one’s own authority. When we see and feel the unique living impulse of a great artist and know that experience in nature as well, no one can by position or stature convince us otherwise. The aim of a student must be to ultimately not be a student; to seek that conviction born of personal experience that is reinforced by the great artists in the museums. The academies will preoccupy you with mechanics. This is important and should be attended to. But the underlying force of human expression in art is not mechanics. A fine artist first and foremost is passionate and has a personal vision, born of conviction. What

we learn from the past are the many paths taken to this one conclusion; that we may share in the bounty of art history, exploit this deep reservoir of experience and knowledge to our own ends so as to become a part of the extraordinary continuum or, at very least, to respect those that have. This is what Cezanne meant when he said “I will add my little blue link to the chain of history”.

When students find the need to express ones most personal feelings in their responses to life, it is a breakout moment. This requires taking risks and facing a challenge far greater than making a picture that objectifies the motif. Why, in effect, make a photographic likeness? We are not unfeeling machines. Why measure our results by objective observation and comparison with the motif? This is not the work of fine art. It is rather the craft of illustration.

With this in mind, it is helpful to observe, feel and then analyze the methodologies of great artists when studying drawing. We can see both innovations and repetitions of elements employed by artists from the deep past to the near present. For example, when looking at the 15th century artist Antonio Pollaiuolo we see a very linear portrayal of the human form with somewhat exaggerated gestures that create a tension for the viewer. This is not unlike the early 20th century Austrian artists Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka. Raphael, a 16th century Florentine, considered the paragon of artists among many of the French in the 19th century created a serene quality emphasizing large volumes when drawing the human form. This method was used by Renoir and later by Gauguin and still later by the 20th century sculptor Aristide Maillol. Calligraphic shorthand employed by Rembrandt in the 16th century, in his pen or brush and ink drawings is at times revitalized by Nolde and Rouault in the 20th century. This method emphasizes animation and expresses the essential qualities visualized by the artist. This list of methods and influences goes on seemingly forever as influence and tradition is the rule rather than the exception. Even the methods of Raphael can be seen in the frescos of the Etruscans and Rembrandt’s calligraphic approach in the art of the Ancient Chinese. Artists methodologies tend to exploit line or mass, animation or a classic stillness, the sense of weight and volume or light and atmosphere. It is valuable for a student of drawing to see the great exponents of all of these predispositions and to sense the expressive power in each. There are many more examples than I can present here and one should explore many avenues to great drawing and how to best utilize this knowledge for one’s own ends.

Let me suggest examples of exercises that allow one to see both the expressive forces of nature as some of our inspired artists saw them and the means to capture them. Before drawing trees go out at night as did Ralph Blakelock and see your trees in silhouette and without details.

You will see the gesture of the trees more clearly. Feel them like human forms posing, arms outstretched like pagans dancing in the moonlight. In this way their life and essential character is revealed. Then draw the trees taking care to make all of their elements that you include, enhance rather than obscure the central pictorial truth you have discovered. There are those who would say this method only seeks to simplify but it is rather that we simplify in order to create clarity.

Bonnard, when painting the model, would set her up in another room. He would go back and forth from the model in one room to painting in another. This allowed him to paint an after image that more closely resembled his sensations. It allowed him to focus on his sensations rather than on the elements that would obscure them.

Another method involves characterization. When doing a portrait, Soutine did not draw or paint until he looked at the model for a very long time. Try to sense what you feel about her. You may not like the person because he is ugly or for some other secret reason that you dare not share openly. On the other hand you might find the person extraordinarily attractive and perhaps dare not advertise this as well. You may find her wise or noble, stupid or evil, clumsy and heavy or graceful and sensual. She or he may be nothing more than an animal to you. Get a sense of the model as you alone in your secret heart feel him. Now try to sustain that feeling with the intention of revealing her in your drawing. Remember that gesture and characterization will realize the revelation but not without energy and enthusiasm. Look for oddities in the face when exploring character. Faces are not symmetrical. Each eye, each side of the lips is different and revealing. Don't be afraid to accentuate characteristics that affect you.

Objectivity, when it is cold and analytical is the death of fine art. We do not copy nature so much as absorb the response we receive and then find a way to share that response. Avoid the superficial outer appearance for its own sake. Edvard Munch said that "a photograph will not be art until it has been taken in heaven or in hell". He spoke of the extreme joy, anguish, the awe or repulsion that is at the core of great art. This however does not mean one need not know how to capture form, light, air, weight, tactility, color, line, etc. You must be the master of your craft, but only as the servant of your vision.

For an expressive fine artist the purpose is not to be objective. The purpose is to share, through your art, the experience you encounter before the motif. Everything else is a subset. There are other things we can do to emphasize our personal relationship to the world as fine artists. But we must always lead with our passion because what it means to be a fine artist

rather than just a student is to be able to say, “I was here, I am alive and this is what I feel, this is who I am”. Your unique honesty, conviction, enthusiasm, your passion is what motivates you. It is what makes your pictures interesting and moving to others because then your pictures are you. As the museum and nature light the way for you, you can light the way for others.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you.