

Michelangelo to Matisse—Drawing the figure

A look at 500 years of figure drawing

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A collection of 242 rarely seen figure drawings—from the Renaissance through to the 1940s—was on show earlier in the year at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. Some of the 136 artists represented include Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea Boscoli, Raphael of Urbino, Hans Holbein, Peter Paul Rubens, Henry Fuseli, Jean-Auguste Ingres as well as Jean-Francoise Millet, Edouard Claude Manet, Pablo Picasso, Percy Wyndham Lewis, Jean Dubuffet and Lucian Freud.

The drawings were grouped in eight themes: Ideal Bodies, Anatomies, The Christian body, Drawn from Life, The Gaze and the Mask, Drapery and Display, Intimacy and Disfiguration. It is debatable whether this kind of arrangement is entirely successful. Perhaps the material could be better studied if placed in chronological order. In any case, the exhibition, which provided the opportunity to study drawings by some of humanity's greatest artists, was an exhilarating experience.

To draw, according to one dictionary definition, is to outline, delineate, or represent a form or shape through the use of a pen, chalk, charcoal, ink, pencil or any other medium. This dry technical description, however, does not explain the unique qualities of the genre—its intimate and spontaneous character that allows the artist to quickly, and with precision, examine his or her subject.

The first recorded discussions on drawing, beyond its role as a tool of trade, took place in the 15th century. Cennino Cennini in his 1437 book on art method described drawing as “the foundation of art”.

Centuries later, perhaps the best explanation of the power and emotional intensity of drawing was provided by the painter Max Klinger (1857-1920). In his 1891 book, *Drawing and Painting*, Klinger compared drawing to piano music and poetry.

“In both cases,” he said, “the artist is released from the strict demands of scenery and orchestra, is capable of giving free artistic rein to his own innermost joys and pains, to his most fleeting and profoundly felt emotions in a spontaneous sequence and structure dictated solely by the force and power of the former.”

Naturally enough, *Michelangelo to Matisse* is dominated by the powerful and technically astounding drawings from the Renaissance period. Works produced by Michelangelo, da Vinci, Raphael, Cambiaso and Guercino, only some of which were included in the exhibition, reflected the tremendous development of mankind's knowledge that took place at the time.

The then recent excavations of Greek and Roman sculptures produced a qualitative development in the visual arts. For the first time since classical antiquity the nude and portrait became subjects for art. Artists reworked ancient themes elevating the human figure to the level of gods. In contrast to the flat and decorative works of medieval Europe, the Renaissance figure became larger than life itself as artists attempted to recreate through art, the ideal human—the harmonised whole.

The Renaissance, or rebirth, was not limited to the arts but reflected developments in all spheres of scientific and intellectual life. It not only produced great painters and sculptors but masters in many

fields—architecture, mathematics, biology, anatomy, physics, engineering and military technology.

Drawing played a foundational role in all these fields. Prior to the 16th century drawing was mainly done on vellum (animal skin) and it was limited to preparation for other artistic works. The first art school to insist on drawing as a basic component of its curriculum was established in the 16th century by the artist Giorgio Vasari, one of the most famous early art historians.

The wider availability of paper after 1550 meant that drawings could be produced more easily and this saw the emergence of many avid collectors. Vasari, in fact, was a great collector of drawings as was Leopold de Medici, a member of Italy's new wealthy bourgeois class. By 1689 Medici had amassed a collection of over 12,000 drawings.

Although inspired by the study of classical sculpture Renaissance artists also recognised that they had to probe deeper. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) were among those who took up the surgeon's scalpel to probe beneath the skin and study muscle structure, circulation and other body functions. It was this intimate knowledge of the human body that gave their work such dynamic vitality.

Leonardo da Vinci was convinced that the human body reflected the order of the cosmos, and like the earth, the body had its rivers and seas that gave it life. Leonardo's *The surface muscles of the neck and shoulder* (1510-11), which is included in the exhibition, is a meticulous study of the body's anatomy.

One of the most significant Renaissance drawings in the collection is Michelangelo's *Tityus*. While many early Renaissance drawings were studies for paintings or sculptures, *Tityus* was a gift and is one of the first drawings regarded as a work of art in its own right.

Tityus has its source in ancient mythology. According to ancient Greek myth, the giant Tityus had attempted to rape Leto, the mother of Apollo and Diana. These gods ordered retribution and so Tityus was punished for his crime. The punishment consisted of Tityus being attacked by two birds of prey, which would devour his liver. Believed to be the seat of passion, the liver would regenerate over night, thus Tityus would suffer for eternity.

In Michelangelo's small chalk drawing, which was produced in 1532, Tityus, who is portrayed as a symbol of base passion and lust, is laying on a rock, tense and ready to repel the giant bird of prey above him. The black chalk used to produce the image almost seems to feel its way around the figure accentuating the muscles and creating a strong and powerful figure. Firm lines and shading also assist in giving a sensuous, sculptured depth to the body.

Michelangelo also traced the figure of Tityus on the other side of the paper. The figure is in reverse and held upright becomes *The Risen Christ*. In a flight of imagination the condemned Tityus is transformed into the resurrected Christ emerging from his tomb.

As well as Michelangelo's extraordinary skills, the drawing also demonstrates how the Renaissance had changed humanity's view of

itself—from the sinner and miserable wretch of medieval times as perpetrated by the church, to a resurrected man, the image of god, able to comprehend the laws of nature and at the centre stage of all life.

Michelangelo's *Male nude with proportions indicated* (1516) is an interesting figure study that traces out intricate muscular formation. So precise were Michelangelo's drawings, as well as his paintings and sculptures, that they were used as models by other artists of this period. One such study is *Back view of Michelangelo's statue of David*, (1504) by Raphael of Urbino (1483-1520). This graceful drawing emphasises David's strength and agility. Although a back view, the drawing conveys all the dynamic exuberance and youthfulness of Michelangelo's great sculpture.

Together with the study of classical sculpture, life drawing became an essential part of artistic education. The figure, in a variety of poses, was used to portray a complex array of human emotions.

Seated nude, turned to the left (1529-30) by Jacopo Pontormo's (1494-1556) is an important example from this period. Pontormo, a deeply religious man, is considered one of the most original and eccentric artists of his time. Strongly influenced by Michelangelo, Pontormo's dramatic drawings of often contorted bodies are characterised by a sense of tension and agitation.

Seated nude, which was produced with black chalk, has an inner anxiety uncharacteristic of early Renaissance work. The body is elongated to emphasise a twisted head and an outstretched forceful arm. The arm almost beckons you to enter its world—an unknown place beyond the seated man.

The expansion of capitalism to northern Europe and the Protestant Reformation of 1517 to 1579 produced a further development in drawing and the visual arts. The Protestant conception that manual labour and the activities of daily life were virtuous saw a secularisation of the arts. This was accentuated by the emergence of a market for art works outside the direct control of the church.

A significant section of *Michelangelo to Matisse* is dedicated to portraiture, whose development began to assume importance in the Renaissance after an absence of about a thousand years. While saints previously had their images painted, changes in the economic and political superstructure saw portraiture become more widespread. Kings and queens, then wealthy merchants and traders and their families, and later craftsmen had their portraits painted. Portrait drawings included in the exhibition provide startling insights into the character and times of the sitters.

Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543), the last great German painter of the Renaissance, had an exceptional ability to express the human character. Born in Augsburg from a family of painters, he travelled widely throughout Europe with most of his artistic work carried out in Basel, where he met the scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam who recommended him to Sir Thomas More, and London. On his second trip to England in 1538 he was appointed court painter to Henry VIII. He produced many paintings of Henry VIII, his wives and family as well as courtiers and German merchants.

There are two drawings by Holbein—*An unidentified gentleman* (1535) and *William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury* (c.1526-27). The latter, a black and coloured chalk drawing was carried out in preparation for a painting. The thin tight lips, accentuated by a dark sharp line between them, expose a man who is far from pious but, instead, worldly and powerful. In fact Warham was, for a period, the Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, one of the three most powerful offices in the kingdom.

One of the most significant artists of the 17th century was Rembrandt Van Rijn (1606-1669), whose work provides many examples of the secular nature of art at the time. As the greatest painter of 17th century Holland, Rembrandt is said to have produced more than a thousand drawings in his lifetime, many of these portraits. Unfortunately only one

drawing—*An artist in a studio* (1632)—is included in the exhibition.

Rembrandt's drawing, a plan for a painting, is a simple sketch of the artist alone with his easel. There is a freedom in his lines as they portray the painter leaning on a chair, brushes in hand, concentrating on studying his work.

There are, however, two drawings from the School of Rembrandt—a pen and brown ink drawing, *Mary and Joseph* (1650) and *Seated Female Nude*, done with black chalk.

The drawing *Mary and Joseph* is characteristic of Dutch artists; it is a religious subject presented as a scene from everyday life. In contrast to the complex work of the Italian Renaissance masters, the drawing is extraordinarily simple with few lines, little shading and no background detail. The two figures face each other in a bare room, probably a workshop. The male has an axe in his hand ready to cut wood. Mary, who is seated, is spinning yarn.

The outbreak of revolution in France in 1789, which overthrew the old feudal order and brought the bourgeoisie to power, was supported by painter Jacques-Louis David (1748-1824). David emerged as the artist who politically embraced and visually described the underlying aspirations of the French Revolution. He had worked in Rome and studied and celebrated the austere qualities of republican Rome, which he equated with the struggle to overthrow the old and corrupt society and replace its frivolities with a new and revolutionary approach to life. Contemporary battle scenes were of men and women, dressed in classical attire. The neo-classicism of revolutionary France was not confined to the arts, but influenced all sphere of existence, even the dress of ordinary men and women.

David and others had developed the neo-classical school prior to the revolution in large part in reaction to the highly ornamental and elaborate Rococo style so favoured by the French aristocracy. In an early studio drawing dated 1764, *Male nude academie*, a drawing in black chalk of a male figure, we can see the early neo-classic style. The thin lines and faint shading capture the firm and strong body of the model, but give the drawing an aura of aloofness and coldness.

Jean-August Ingres (1780-1867) a pupil of David continued in this style. *La Grand Odalisque* (c. 1813), is a fine pencil study of the female form, and shows Ingres' remarkable ability to create smooth, almost marble-like texture. Unlike David's *Male nude*, the reclining figure is deliberated elongated to express elegance and grace. The work suggests the exploration of artistic ideas rather than a precise observational drawing. Reinforced by the sensuous curves made graceful by the contrast of sweeping angles, shadows and incisive small dark lines bring out the beauty of the flowing form.

French-born Ingres had a major impact on Matisse, the post-Impressionists and early 20th century avant-garde artists. He once declared: "Drawing includes three and a half quarters of the content of painting. If I were asked to put a sign above my door it would read 'School of Drawing', and I am sure that I would produce painters."

Neo-classicism had become the "official" art of revolutionary France, expressing the heroism of the period especially in its paintings. Following the defeat of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, David was forced to flee. In artistic circles a reaction took place against both the forms of neo-classical expression and the ideals that had animated them. Artists began to look for other subjects and styles.

By 1835 there emerged in France a layer of artists who turned to nature as a source of expression. Known as the Barbizon group (the town in which they settled), they were influenced by the Dutch landscape painters of the 17th century. One such artist, Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875), was attracted to the toiling peasants and workers.

The washer women (1855), unlike Ingres' *Odalisque*, is devoid of any classical connotations. The drawing by Millet illustrates the hard labour of

two women who take in washing to make a living. They are by the river at night. The two women in the foreground stand dark against the moonlight. One is standing with one hand on her hip to hold a load of washing in place while the other stands on a rock to pile up the washing.

Expanding industry due to a growing world market, mining, agriculture and new colonial settlements, along with expanding cities saw a growth of the working class and socialist movement. From rural landscapes, artists more and more turned to the urban landscape for their subjects.

The economic growth and developments in science and technology increasingly dominated the lives of millions. By the 1890s Europe's wealth derived in large part from industrial and finance capital. The rapid social changes challenged previous conceptions of the nature of man and his relationship to the world and produced considerable ferment in artistic circles.

A fundamental turning point came with the production of *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1895 by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), which the Parisian art world reacted to with a mixture of surprise and revulsion. The painting heralded a new visual vocabulary and symbolism. It broke with the rules of perspective used by artists since the Renaissance. The artist here shows the many sides of the figure simultaneously. This method became known as Cubism due to the basic shapes that made up the composition.

Picasso's work had a profound impact on the arts, including graphic design, throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th century. *Figure (Cadaques, Summer)* 1910, a brush and ink drawing, is one of two drawings by Picasso. It is very difficult at first to distill the figure from this drawing. But, think in flat surfaces and geometric planes, allow the eye to move between the contrasting white and black areas, then the figure emerges.

Figure composition: Man and woman with two bulldogs (1912) by Percy Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), a prominent member of the British avant-garde, is another artist who followed the Cubist style. The drawing has strong dark lines carrying planes to meet at various angles, showing the multiple viewpoints of the figures. The play between the white and dark areas darkened by the use of green-blue colour, create endless movement and vitality.

Like Picasso, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) helped to break new ground. Matisse, initially trained in law, was a member of the circle of artists who burst onto the Parisian art scene in 1905 and became known as the "Fauves" because of their use of raw and brilliant colour. One of the more influential and enduring 20th century artists, Matisse's drawings are characterised by an intense clarity and harmony of line.

Matisse's aim was to create an art of "balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter". This is demonstrated in *Mademoiselle Yvonne Landsberg* (1914). The drawing simply outlines the young woman's face. There are no inner contours or shading giving the picture an eerie simplicity that envelops the viewer.

While it is impossible to deal with all the trends that developed in figure drawing and which are included in the exhibition it is worthwhile pointing out Alberto Giacometti's *Standing young woman* (1947). This is a pencil rendering with a rapid-fire sketch quality. In this drawing Giacometti (1901-1966) explores the relationship between the figure and space attempting to merge the figure into the empty space that surrounds it. Giacometti's figure has a surreal ghost-like quality, the figure swirling in and out of existence, like smoke or steam. The only solid elements in the image are where pencil lines overlap at some nodal points.

The *Michelangelo to Matisse* exhibition was an extraordinary collection of works spanning five centuries of European drawing and touching on many different periods and styles. One came away with a much deeper appreciation of the significance of drawing to the development of art through the centuries and of its richness as an art form in its own right.



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