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Studio Craft: Five Tips for Mastering Scale and Proportion



Jef Leempoels "A confrater at work" ca. 1890-1935

Proportion is one of the hardest aspects of drawing to master, and one of the most important. Correct proportion gives balance to abstract compositions and makes representational renderings seem more realistic. When proportions in a work of art are inaccurate or poorly considered, the image looks “off” or clumsy. There are several key techniques which can significantly help develop, refine and maintain this skill.



Image: "Art Students" (detail) 1879, Edmond Eugène Valton

Visual Measurements: Artists are often depicted holding a thumb out at arm’s length. This is a method of measurement which helps compare dimensions of pictorial elements. By using a brush handle or pencil as a measuring tool, with the thumb sliding up and down, the artist can make rough judgments of scale, like how many heads tall a figure is. It’s important to execute this technique with the arm fully extended so the measurement is always taken at the same distance from the eye.

Compositional strategies: How pictorial elements are positioned has a strong influence over the impression of balance and scale. The viewer’s eye naturally seeks to compare each element to the rest of the composition, and uses these comparisons to understand overall scale. The artist can use this natural tendency to great advantage. By using juxtaposition (placing objects next to one another)

and overlap, it's possible to present subject matter in a way that lets the viewer know relative size and depth.

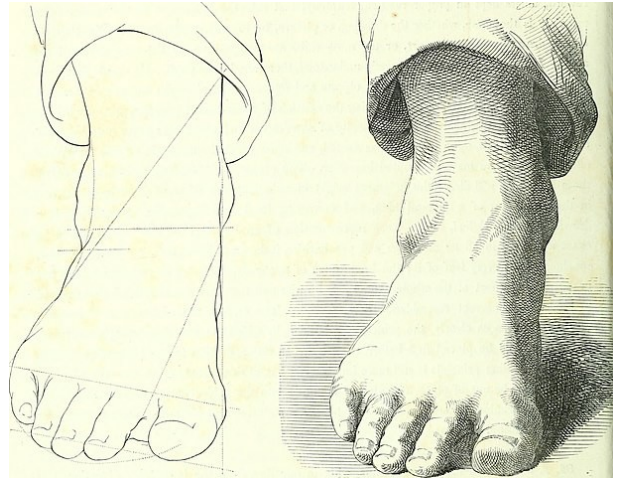


Detail, print by Albrecht Dürer showing artist using a mechanical aid with fixed eyepiece to ensure consistent point of view

Position at the easel: Especially when working from direct observation, it's important to keep a consistent position, to avoid altering the point of view in the image. Problems can develop if the artist begins work while sitting very straight, but gradually slumps during the course of the session. When this happens, the point of view can migrate by a foot or more. Some earlier instruments for accurate perspective drawing included a fixed sight to ensure that the artist's eye was placed consistently through the whole process. Few use such tools today, but a good awareness of position at the work station is a must for accurate rendering.

Page proportions: It's been said that, in drawing, the first line on the page is actually the fifth line, because the first drawn line creates a relationship with the four edges of the page. These proportions relate strongly to every element in the design, and using the four sides of the image as measuring tools can help organize and balance a composition. Pay close attention to the points at which design elements intersect the edges of the page or canvas, and use this information to refine relationships between other parts of the composition. When using a drawing or

photograph as visual reference, differences in proportion between the reference material and the artwork can be problematic, so make sure to account for this. If necessary, adjust the reference material by trimming, drawing, or taping off edges so they are consistent with the work of art.



Anatomical knowledge: Every physical body is different, but familiarity with human anatomy allows the artist to render the subject's proportions within a realistic, plausible range. Knowing anatomy can also help counteract biased assumptions about how a person should look, like eyes placed too close to the top of the head, or neck and shoulders running together. Every studio needs at least one good book on anatomy for the artist. Copy anatomical drawings for practice, and look for the same structures revealed through study when drawing from life.

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