Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain
Chapter 1

Drawing and the Art of Bicycle Riding

Drawing is a curious process, so intertwined with seeing that the two can hardly be separated. The ability to draw depends on one’s ability to see the way an artist sees. This kind of seeing, for most people, requires teaching, because the artist’s way of seeing is very specific and very different from the ways we ordinarily use vision to navigate our lives.

Because of this unusual requirement, teaching someone to draw has some special problems. It is very much like teaching someone to ride a bicycle: both skills are difficult to explain in words. For bicycle riding, you might say, “Well, you just get on, push the pedals, balance yourself, and off you’ll go.” Of course, that doesn’t explain it at all, and you are likely finally to say, “I’ll get on the bike and show you how. Watch and see how I do it.”

And so it is with drawing. An art teacher may exhort students to “look more carefully,” or to “check the relationships,” or to “just keep trying and with practice, you will get it.” This does not help students to solve the problems of drawing. And it is fairly rare today for teachers to help by demonstrating a drawing, which is extremely effective. A well-kept secret of art education is that many art teachers, having come up through the same system that prevails today, where real skills in drawing are rarely taught, cannot themselves draw well enough to demonstrate the process to a group of students.

Drawing as a magical ability

As a result, few people are skilled at drawing in 21st century American culture. Since it is rare now, many people regard drawing as mysterious and even somewhat magical. Artists who can draw often do little to dispel the mystery. If you ask, “How do you draw something so that it looks real—say a portrait or a landscape?” an artist is likely to reply, “Well, it is hard to explain. I just look at the person or the landscape and I draw what I see.” That seems like a logical and straightforward answer, yet, on reflection, doesn’t explain the process at all, and the sense persists that drawing is a vaguely magical ability.

This attitude of wonder at drawing skill does little to encourage individuals to try to learn to draw. Often, in fact, people sometimes hesitate to take a drawing class because they don’t already know how to draw. That is like deciding that you shouldn’t take a Spanish class because you don’t already speak the language. Moreover, because of changes in the today’s art world, a person who has never learned to draw nevertheless can become a successful university art student or even a famous artist.

“Learning to draw is really a matter of learning to see—to see correctly—and that means a good deal more than merely looking with the eye.”

Kimon Nicolaides, The Natural Way to Draw, 1941
Drawing as a learnable, teachable skill

I firmly believe that given good instruction, drawing is a skill that can be learned by every normal person with average eyesight and average eye-hand coordination. Someone with sufficient ability, for example, to sign a receipt or to type out an e-mail or text message can learn to draw. Clearly, the long history of humans drawing pictures of their perceptions, from prehistoric times to now, demonstrates that drawing perceptions is an innate potential of our plastic, changeable brains.

And learning to draw, without doubt, causes new connections in the brain that can be useful over a lifetime for general thinking. Learning to see in a different way requires that you use your brain differently. At the same time, you will be learning something about how your individual brain handles visual information and about how to better control the process. One aspect of that control is learning to shift away from our more usual way of thinking—mainly in words.

Drawing attention to states of consciousness

I have designed the exercises and instructions in this book specifically for people who cannot draw at all, who may feel that they have little or no talent for drawing, and who may feel doubtful that they could ever learn but who think they might like to learn to draw.

Given proper instruction, drawing is not very difficult. It almost seems that your brain already knows how to draw. You just don’t realize it. Helping people move past the blocks to drawing is, however, the difficult part. The brain, it seems, doesn’t easily give up its accustomed way of seeing things. It helps, I think, to know that the slight change in awareness or consciousness that occurs in drawing is not that unusual. You may have observed in yourself other slightly altered states. For example, most people are aware that they occasionally slip from alert consciousness to a state of daydreaming. As another example, people often say that reading a good novel takes them “out of themselves.” Other kinds of activities which apparently produce a shift in consciousness are meditation, jogging, video games, sports of all varieties, and listening to music.

An interesting example of this slightly altered state, I believe, is driving on the freeway. In freeway driving, we deal with visual information, keeping track of relational, spatial changes, sensing complicated configurations of traffic. These visual mental operations may activate some of the same parts of the brain used in drawing. Many people find that they also do a lot of creative thinking while driving, often losing track of time. Of course, if driving conditions...
are difficult, if we are late for an appointment, or if someone sharing
the ride talks with us, the shift to an alternative state doesn’t occur.
And that nonverbal alternative state is the appropriate one for
driving. Verbal distractions, like cell phone conversation or texting
while driving, are proving to be so distracting and dangerous that
they are banned in some cities and states.

The shift to the drawing state, therefore, is not entirely unfamiliar, but
it is strikingly different in some ways from, say, daydreaming.
Drawing state is one of high alertness, engagement, and acute, focused
attention. It is also a state without a sense of time passing or
awareness of one’s surroundings. Because the state is fragile and
easily broken, an important key to learning to draw is learning how to
set up conditions that allow this mental shift that enables you to see
and draw. In addition to teaching you what and how to see, the
exercises and strategies in this book are designed specifically for that
purpose.

The original 1979 edition of Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain
was based on my teaching experiences in the art departments of Venice
High School in West Los Angeles, Los Angeles Trade Technical
Community College, and California State University, Long Beach. Subsequent editions
benefitted from experiences teaching an intensive five-day, eight-hour-a-day workshop,
conducted in many locations across America, as well as in countries overseas. Workshop
students range widely in ages and occupations. Most of the participants begin a
workshop with low-level drawing skills and with high anxiety about their potential
drawing ability.

Almost without exception, workshop students achieve quite a high level of skill in
drawing and gain confidence to go on developing their skills in further art courses or by
practice on their own. One of the most intriguing findings of the Drawing on the Right
Side of the Brain five-day workshop is that people can actually achieve those high level
drawing skills in that 40-hour time period. It is hard work, for both students and teachers,
but it does reinforce my belief that our teaching and our instruction has more to do with
releasing inborn skills than teaching new skills.

To put it another way, it seems probable that you have all of the brain power needed for
drawing, but old habits of seeing interfere with that ability and block it. The exercises in
this book are designed to remove that interference and unblock it.

**Realism as a means to an end**

The drawing exercises focus on what is known in the art world as realism, the art of
realistically portraying actual things seen “out there” in the world. Unexpectedly,
perhaps, the subjects I have chosen for the exercises are usually considered in drawing
terms to be the most difficult: the human hand, a chair, a landscape or an interior of a building, a profile portrait, and a self-portrait.

I have not selected these drawing tasks to torture our students but rather to provide them with the satisfaction of being able to draw the really “hard” subjects. Famed psychologist, Abraham Maslow, once said, “The greatest satisfaction comes from mastering something that is truly difficult.” Another reason for my subject choices is that all drawing is the same, broadly speaking, always involving the same ways of seeing and the same skills, the basic components of drawing. You might use different mediums, different papers, large or small formats, but for drawing still-life setups, the figure, random objects, portrait drawings, and even imaginary subjects or drawing from memory, it is all the same task, always requiring the same basic component skills—just as it is in reading! Drawing requires that you see what is out there (imaginary subjects and images from memory are “seen” in the “mind’s eye”) and you draw what you see. Since it is all the same task, it seems to me that we might as well go for peak accomplishment. One subject is not “harder” than another, once you understand the basics of drawing.

Moreover, in the case of drawing a profile portrait or a self-portrait, students are highly motivated to see clearly and to draw correctly what they see. This high motivation might be lacking if the subject is a potted plant, where a viewer of the finished drawing might have a less critical eye for verisimilitude. Beginning students often think that portrait drawing must be the hardest of all kinds of subjects. Thus, when they see that they can successfully draw a portrait that actually looks like the sitter, their confidence soars and enhances progress.

A second important reason for using portraits as subject matter is that the right hemisphere of the human brain is specialized for recognition of faces. Since the right hemisphere is the one we are trying to access, it makes sense to choose a subject that fits the functions of the right brain. And third, faces are fascinating! In drawing a portrait, you see a face as you have never seen one before, in all of its complexity and expressive individuality. As one of my students said, “I don’t think I ever actually saw anyone’s face before I started drawing. Now, the oddest thing, I find I am really seeing people instead of just making verbal tags, and the unusual faces are the ones I find the most interesting.”

My approach: A path to creativity

I recognize that you may have no interest whatsoever in becoming a full-time working artist, but there are many reasons for learning to draw. I see you as an individual with creative potential for expressing yourself through drawing. My aim is to provide the means for releasing that potential, for gaining access at conscious level to your inventive, intuitive powers that may have been largely untapped by our verbal, technological culture and education system.

Creative persons from fields other than art who want to get their working skills under better control and learn to overcome blocks to creativity will benefit also from working
with the techniques presented here. Teachers and parents will find the theory and exercises useful in helping children to develop their creative abilities.

The exercises will also provide insights into the way your mind works—that is, your two minds—singly, cooperatively, or one against the other. A reasonable goal that you might pursue in learning to draw is simply to enhance confidence in your critical thinking ability and your decision making. With our new knowledge of brain plasticity, the possibilities seem almost limitless.

Learning to draw may uncover potentialities that are unknown to you right now. The German artist, Albrecht Durer said, “From this, the treasure secretly gathered in your heart will become evident through your creative work.”

**Summing up**

Drawing is a teachable, learnable skill that can provide a two-fold advantage. By gaining access to the part of your mind that works in a style conducive to creative, intuitive thought, you will learn a fundamental skill of the visual arts: how to put down on paper what you see in front of your eyes. Second, you will enhance your ability to think more creatively in other areas of your life.

How far you go with these skills will depend on your other traits, such as energy, curiosity, and discipline. But first things first! The potential is there. It is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that Shakespeare at some point learned to write a line of prose, Beethoven learned the musical scales, and, as you see in the margin quotation, Vincent Van Gogh learned how to draw.

In a letter to his brother, Theo, who had suggested that Vincent become a painter, Vincent van Gogh wrote:

“...at the time when you spoke of my becoming a painter, I thought it very impractical and would not hear of it. What made me stop doubting was reading a clear book on perspective, Cassange’s *Guide to the ABC of Drawing*, and a week later I drew the interior of a kitchen with stove, chair, table and window—in their places and on their legs—whereas before it had seemed to me that getting depth and the right perspective into a drawing was witchcraft or pure chance.”