

Chapter 1

A different way of seeing

'The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, without consciousness of what they signify – as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.'
(Ruskin: *The Elements of Drawing*)

Miles on Paper

A friend of mine once asked her art tutor the secret of his success, how he was able to draw so accurately and elegantly with a few strokes of the pencil. His reply was simple: 'Miles on paper'.

Drawing is like any other skill – the more you do it, the better you get. We learn through repetition. It's how we learn a language, play a musical instrument, train for a marathon, drive a car, bake a cake. Strangely, art is considered different to other skills, something you either can or can't do, but it really isn't. It's exactly like learning a musical instrument. You need information and then you need practice; loads and loads of practice. It sounds like a hard journey and in some ways it is, but it also extremely rewarding.

The first stages of learning any new skill are hardest because we don't like failure. We like to be able to do things straight away, but with a few rare exceptions that's not how life works. So hold back your inner critic while you wobble your way through a few sketchbooks and put in those miles on paper.



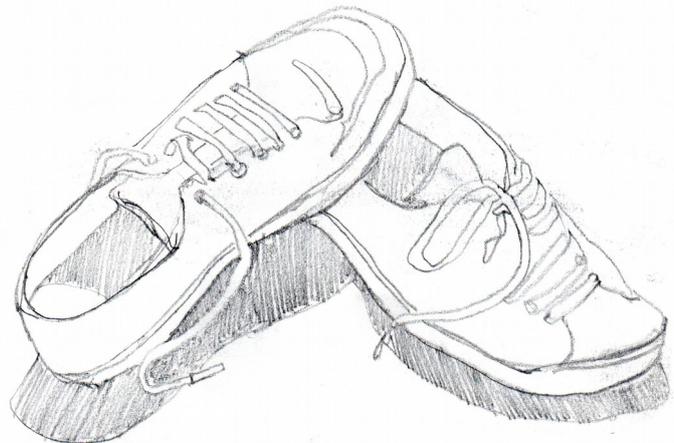
Where do you start?

Draw from life wherever possible. It's tempting to copy from photos all the time as drawing real things seems more difficult, but drawing 'real' is the only way to make progress and develop your artist's eye. Photos are very useful and I use them a great deal for reference, but if that's all you do then you're limiting your possibilities enormously (more on this later).

Draw real things

Start at home. Draw your feet, your partner, your mug of coffee, your lunch, your garden. When you're waiting for something, get out a little sketchbook and draw. Don't wait for a beautiful scene; don't spend all day on holiday looking for the perfect view. Everything becomes interesting when you treat it as a series of shapes and tones.

Once you start drawing anything and everything rather than waiting until you are sitting in front of a pretty scene, your skills will improve rapidly. You will start to look at everything as potential material, a fascinating arrangement of interconnected shapes.



Now before we learn any new techniques, let's start from where you are. Pick up your sketchbook and a pencil and draw for fifteen minutes. If you're at home, draw whatever is in front of you – a mug of tea, chair, corner of the room, the cat, your feet... anything.

Expect the results to be wobbly and inaccurate because you're at the beginning of the journey and you haven't learnt how to draw yet. Write the date, and make a note on the page of what you found interesting and enjoyable about the process, and also what you found frustrating or particularly difficult.

It's tempting to use an eraser but try not to – leave the wrong lines in and keep going on top. If you keep rubbing out you end up with a hole in the paper!



Trust your eyes not your brain

When we first start trying to draw what we see, the results are usually disappointing, almost embarrassing. We can see the shape we're trying to follow but our drawing of it looks nothing like! Why is it so hard? A pencil is not a difficult tool to use – the way we hold a pen is no different and we have no trouble writing.

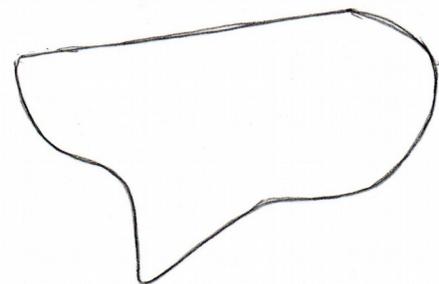
The problem is not with our eyes or hand, but with the brain which interferes with how we see. It makes all kinds of decisions on our behalf about perspective, proportion and distance so that we can move around the world safely. It matches what we see with what we know to make sense of everything.

To be able to draw, we need to step aside from the busy, analytical brain and see the world as our eyes see it. To draw an object, we have to look at it afresh, as if we have never seen it before (Ruskin's 'innocence of the eye'). We have to study the shape in front of us *as it is from where we are standing*, not as we know or remember it, and this takes intense concentration. Here's an example:

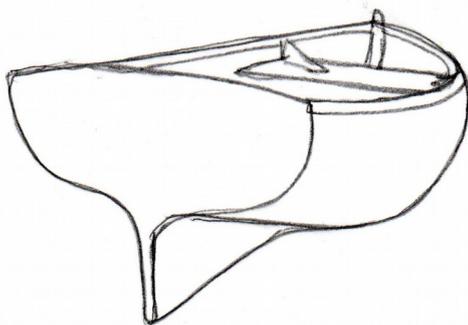


What does a small boat look like? From your memory it might look something like this:

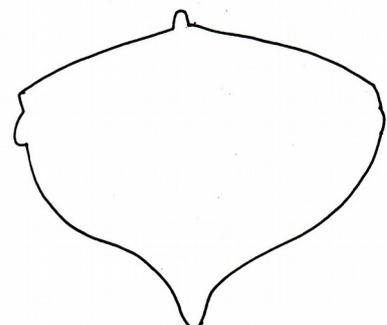
But from where you are standing it is likely to be a different shape entirely. It's outline could be something like this – not particularly boat shaped at all.....



. and it's only the shapes within the shape that enable you to 'read' what it is:

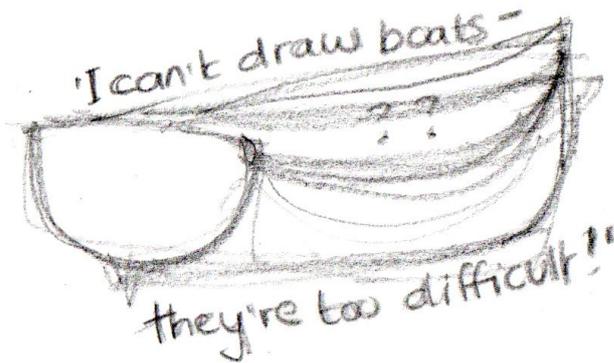


Now move round and change your viewpoint. You know from experience that it's the same object, but that's no help when you come to draw it. Pay attention to your eyes which are telling you it's a completely different shape.



Our heads are full of remembered images and references which cause us to 'look' inwards rather than outwards. We use the phrase 'I see' to mean 'I understand'. This is not a problem until we want to switch off this mental filter that supplies lots of information about the object we are looking at.

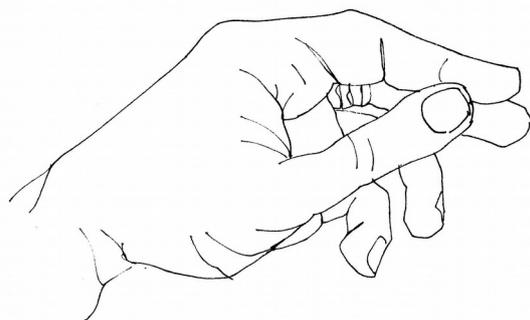
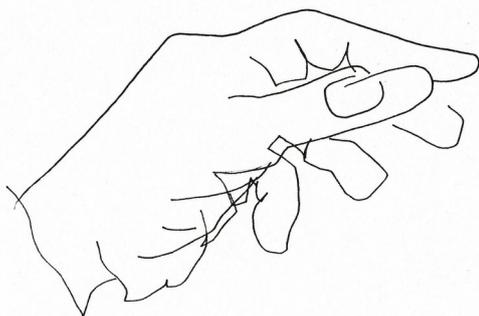
It is not easy to switch this inner censor off and focus on the basic shapes in front of you. The brain will try and interfere: 'You don't need to look at that, it's a boat. I already know what one of those looks like. Here are lots of images already on file to help you identify it from every angle....' The jumble of images in your head will clash with the image on your retina and the result will be an uneasy mix of the two that leaves you thoroughly dissatisfied.



When a sketch goes wrong, it is partly because you've not spent enough time looking carefully at the subject. We are used to only needing to give something a glance, long enough to recognise it. It's the difference between LOOKING and SEEING. Looking is a different from seeing as listening is from hearing – it's a positive, concentrated action.

When you try and draw, to begin with you're too busy looking at and correcting what's on the page. Of course you need to check what you are putting onto paper, flick your eye between page and scene to make sure there is a match between what you are drawing and what you are seeing, but the focus should be on that intense link between hand and eye which completely bypasses the censor inside your head. You are training your visual memory to hang onto an image in that second between looking at the object and looking at the page.

Try this: draw an object – your hand, a mug, a bunch of keys, a shoe – without looking at the paper at all. Just move your eye slowly around every line and edge of the object and move your pencil at the same speed as your eye. Don't be tempted to look at the page every time you need to lift and reposition the pencil! The result will be a mess but the process, however frustrating, will take you much closer to the way of thinking you need to draw what you see.

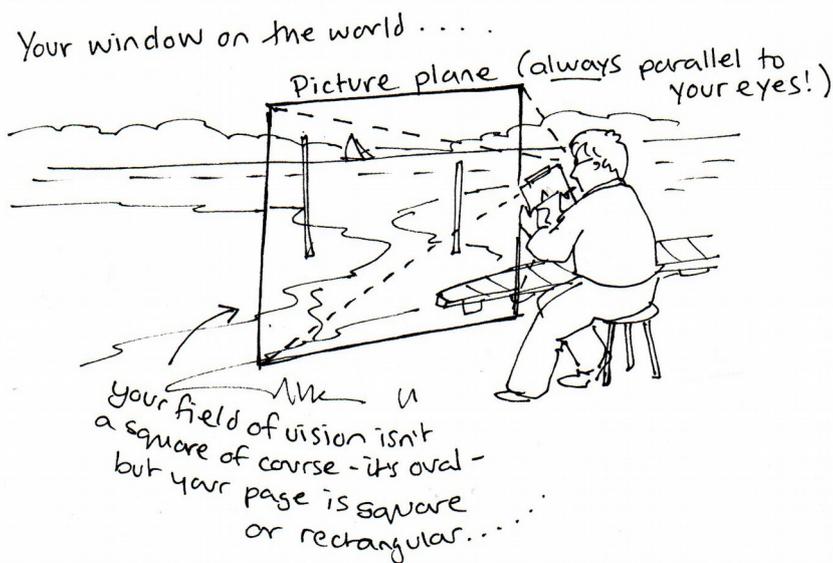


The first drawing was done without looking at the page at all.... Just linking hand and eye with no attempt to reposition the pencil accurately. The second was done in the same way, but glancing at the paper every time I needed to lift the pencil and place it down again for crossover lines. Try it – it's very good for making you start to look intensely rather than making assumptions about what you are drawing. (There is more about this technique, called 'blind contour drawing' in a book by Betty Edwards called 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain' - a bit of a classic and well worth getting)

Switch off your 3-D vision

You've already started to experience how the brain is an interfering nuisance when it comes to drawing. Not only does it make assumptions about what you see, it makes you wear 3D glasses, so that when your eyes take in the image of a person with a tree coming out his shoulder, experience tells you that in fact they are actually standing at some distance from it. This ability to read in three dimensions is made possible because of our binocular vision (though the fact that people with vision in only one eye still read the world as 3D shows that the process happens in the brain)

This is very useful when you want to make sense of the world, but to translate what you see onto a two dimensional piece of paper, you need to enter a two dimensional world. It's wonderfully bonkers; it's a flat world with no perspective, where trees emerge from someone's shoulder and a large person at distance is tiny compared to a small person close by.



This is the key to seeing with an artist's eye. When you see everything as flat shapes with no perspective, no overlaps, no depth; when you can draw exactly what is there in front of you, the brain of the person looking at your drawing will be able to convert that information back into 3D in the theatre of their mind. If the information on the page is wrong, it can't do this.

So how do you take off your 3D glasses? Imagine there is a flat sheet of glass between you and what you want to draw. Now think of your piece of paper as this window on which you can draw exactly what you see, as you see it, as if your lines were going straight onto the glass.

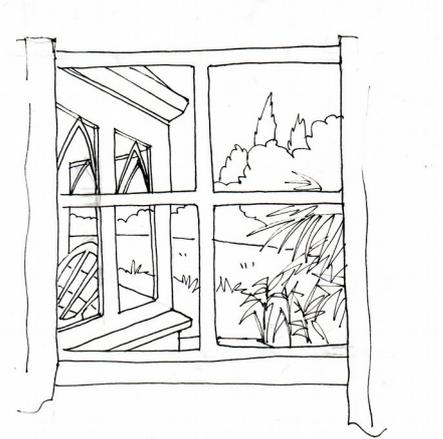
Classical painters called this sheet of invisible glass 'the picture plane', and it will always be right there in front of you, parallel to your eyes.

You can buy or make from card a rectangular 'viewfinder' to replicate the picture plane and select a scene. There will be more about this in the next chapter, but in the meantime here's an exercise using a readily available picture plane.

Find a window with an interesting (not necessarily beautiful) view. The more complex the view, the better – overlapping roofs and buildings at odd angles are more useful than blobs of foliage.

Firstly, draw the outline of the window shape onto the paper and then draw everything you see, using the rectangle of the window as your frame and reference. It can help to use internal monologue to follow the shapes and relationships.

'This line starts about halfway up and stops here, then this one comes across at a shallow angle and dips down to the corner; this one starts near the top and meets the other line here....'



This technique helps you to focus purely on the shapes and angles of what you are seeing. It helps if you don't name what you're seeing. This sounds odd, but once you name something your helpful brain will jump in and say 'Aha! I know what that is! This is what it looks like from all different viewpoints...'

But you are drawing only what you can see, from where you are sitting, and nothing else. If you can't see it, don't draw it (*even if you know it's there!*). Don't peer round corners. If it's an odd angle, then that's what you draw. There will be more about this way of thinking and looking in the next chapters, as it's the key to developing your artist's 'eye'.



Now have another go at the object or scene you sketched at the beginning of this chapter. Imagine that sheet of glass parallel to your eyes and see if helps you to begin to see everything as a series of flat shapes and relationships of line.

REMEMBER.... Draw what you see, even if it contradicts what you know!