
CHAPTER 1

Accuracy versus expression

The goal of providing practical help and useful insights to all who wish to explore the creative potential of drawing from observation is an ambitious one because different people have different ideas of what they want to achieve. *Figures 1-6* provide a small glimpse of the range of possibilities that artists of the past have explored. Most people would agree that, despite differing in many respects, the drawings by Michelangelo, Dürer and Degas can be taken as models of *literal accuracy*, while nobody would make the same claim for efforts of Toulouse-Lautrec, his friend Bonnard or their contemporary Matisse. And, these are just six examples of the multitude which could have been used not only to show the extraordinary variety in the drawing styles produced by artists over the centuries, but also how much they vary with respect to *literal accuracy*.

If we reflect further upon the nature of the division between accuracy and intentional departures from it, we can identify an historical watershed. This can be associated with the radical explorations of Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, and other mould-breaking artists of their generation. Although a degree of distortion and exaggeration is commonplace in work done before these two innovators came onto the scene in the 1880s, it is tame compared with what was to come after. As we will see in the following chapters, the exploitation of the virtues of *inaccuracy* was an aspect of the sea-change in artists' ideas known as the "Modernist" revolution.

If we had asked Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard and Matisse why they were exploring departures from criteria that were so important to their illustrious predecessors, they may have given a variety of answers, but central to them all would have been a *search for expressive power*. Yet, if we had asked Dürer, Michelangelo and Degas to say something about the importance of *expression* in their work, they would surely have assured us that it was no less of a priority for them.

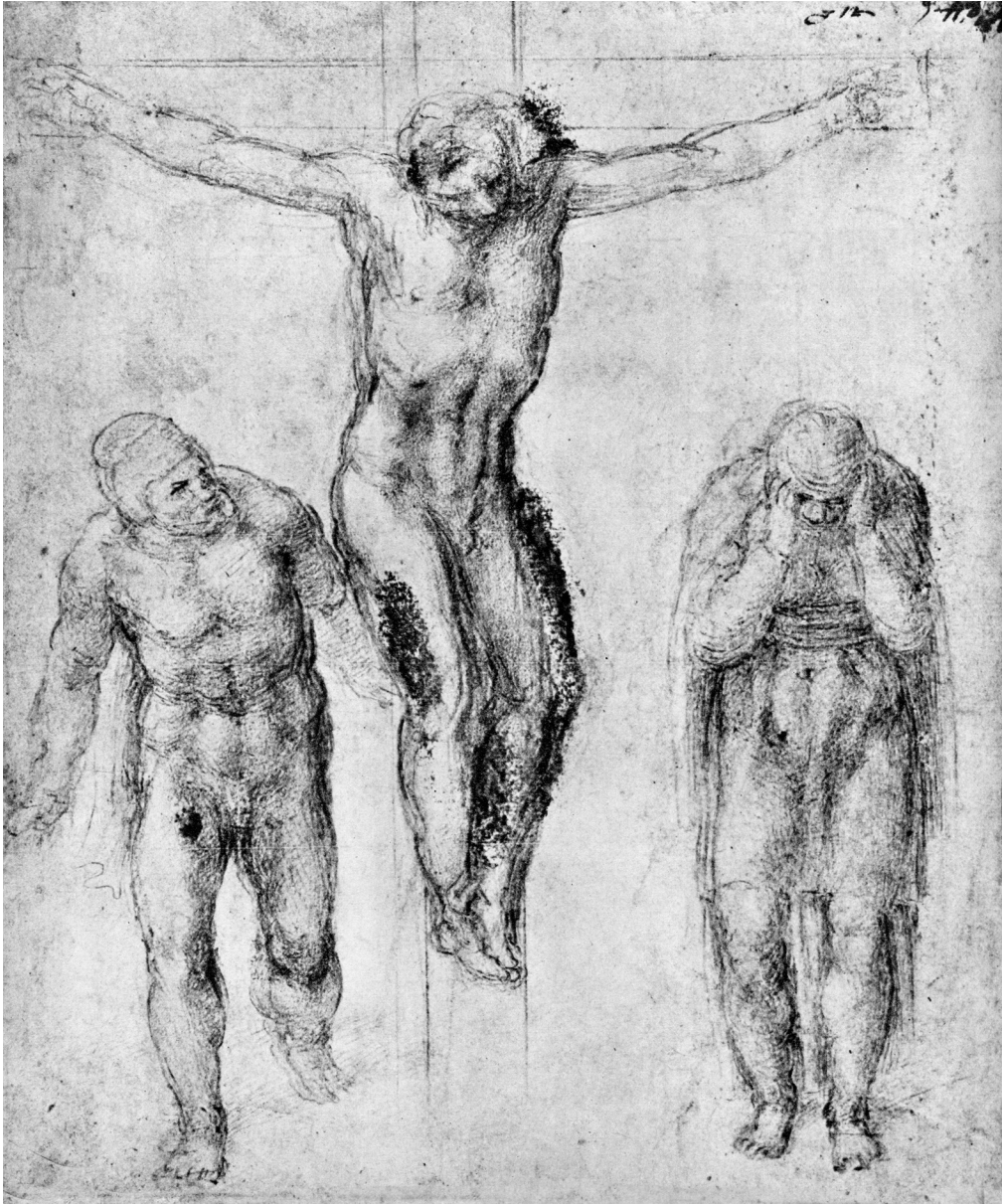


Figure 1 - Michelangelo



Figure 2 - Dürer: His Mother



Figure 3 - Degas



Figure 4 - Toulouse-Lautrec



Figure 5 - Bonnard



Figure 6 - Matisse

As already suggested, a fundamental discovery that emerges from a comparison between *Figures 1-3* and *Figures 4-6* is that the more accurate ones are quite as *expressive* as are the intentionally inaccurate ones. Clearly there is nothing incompatible between *accuracy* and *expression*. If we consider the analogy of concert pianists keeping faithfully to musical scores, we find that, no matter how rigorously accurate their performance, the rendering of each individual sounds different to that of all the others. Moreover, if we compare two equally rigorous performances, we may well find that while one of them seems dull and uninspiring, the other may profoundly stir the emotions. What this tells us is that the minutest variations in accuracy can reflect significant differences not only in personal style but also in personal expression. The situation is the same for the three artists who subjected themselves to the *accuracy constraint*. Few would disagree that Michelangelo, Dürer and Degas found approaches to drawing that reflect and express their personalities and their feelings. This is why their productions are capable of moving us so deeply.

In contrast and although we should hardly need reminding, the drawings by Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard and Matisse make it clear that accuracy is not a necessary part of expression. They provide us with three examples of ways in which deviations from accuracy, due to *exaggeration*, *distortion* and *selection*, can be harnessed in the interest of giving expressive force. But before thinking of these as ways of escaping the rigours of accuracy, we should remember that it is logically impossible to exaggerate, distort or select unless we know what it is we are dealing with. The requirement to make something half (or any other fraction or multiple) of something else makes no sense in the absence of information about the dimensions of the whole. It is no surprise, either that Matisse always preceded his paintings with accurate studies of his subject matter or that both Toulouse-Lautrec and Bonnard were masters of accurate drawing based on the kind of rigorous analysis that can be achieved by all who follow the ideas proposed in this book.

The main point of making the comparison between the two groups of drawings is to show that all six have something important in common. Whether aspiring to accuracy or exploring deviations from it, they all manage to find a *personal language of expression*. What this conclusion makes clear is that there is something of prime importance that exists at a deeper level than the issue of accuracy versus expression. It is a primary objective of this book to keep this “*something*” firmly in mind.

Implications

Anyone who follows the practical chapters in this book will find that they provide a wealth of very effective help with approaching literal accuracy in their drawings from observation. Less obvious is what it will do for those interested in developing expression, exaggeration, distortion, abstraction and finding a personal way of doing things. It is therefore important to emphasise (possibly despite first appearances) that one of the main aims of this book is to free people from the idea that accuracy is a straitjacket. Instead, it should be seen as a tool for opening up expressive possibilities.

How can this be? How can the search for accuracy facilitate creative departures from it? There are two kinds of answers to this question. The first is that the search for literal accuracy can help people to both “look” and “see” in new ways and, consequently, to arrive at a deeper knowledge of the subject matter of their drawings. More specifically, they can learn to identify significant relations and discover which of them must be preserved and which can be exaggerated, distorted or omitted altogether. Also, the process of getting to know something is certain to engage the feelings in some way or another, even if only because every new realisation is accompanied by a buzz of excitement.

The second kind of answer relates to the particular battery of methods for obtaining accuracy which will be advocated. These include:

- *The development of the feelings-based line production.*
- *The progressively rapid pick-up of more and more complex information.*
- *The structured development of the capacity for drawing from memory.*

All have well tried potentials for providing fruitful contexts for creative endeavours.

In summary, the ideas and suggestions given in the following pages will not only serve all who aspire to the highest levels of literal accuracy, but also provide an ideal foundation for those who are motivated to go beyond it in the interests of personal expression.¹

¹ See in particular “*Fresh Perspectives on Creativity*” which is dedicated to the issue of personal creativity.