**Pride, Prejudice and the Pencil**

James Faure Walker

**1. Is Your Pencil British?**

The most practical sketching appliance we have seen. I have run after animals with it, and walked miles with it slung over my shoulders without in any way feeling it too heavy. [[1]](#endnote-1) (fig i)

By a stroke of luck I came into the possession of a collection of The Studio magazines from the 1900s to its demise in the 1980s.[[2]](#endnote-2) The advertisements for pencils, pens, drawing appliances, correspondence courses began to invade my waking hours. The Autolycus, an early laptop, went on being advertised throughout the twenties. Here too was Percy Bradshaw’s ‘Press Art School’ of Forest Hill, with eager testimonials from satisfied pupils who, as promised earned a living from drawing.

Assuming that Drawing as a Career appeals to you, in a more than passing way… I am quite sincere when I say that, for the trained artist who can do the work, there are plenty of jobs waiting today. If you post me an original drawing I will criticize it helpfully and send you my Prospectus without charge.[[3]](#endnote-3) (fig ii)

This was a correspondence college based initially in New Cross, London. Percy Bradshaw himself, who wrote three drawing books published by The Studio, appears in the advertisements from 1905, ageing gracefully, ever imploring ‘Don’t you wish you could draw?’ Sometimes the Press Art School itself is pictured; sometimes there are sketchers at work, perhaps drawing the school itself; and sometimes caricatures. In 1928 he would have to contend with forty other local art schools on neighbouring pages, not including rival correspondence courses. Aspiring draughtsmen had a choice of animal drawing schools. One was run by Beatrice Flower, and one by Miss Grant Gordon (NDD): the Animal Studio in Albert Place, Kensington, London W.8. The 1949 advertisement announces dog models 10.30 to 12.30 on Mondays, horse models 10.30 to 12.30 on Fridays.[[4]](#endnote-4) Here is a lost world of drawing, with amateurs, professionals, specialised skills, exams, and strict timetables – art schools had ‘headmasters’.

The pencil and pen market was competitive. In 1928 Koh-I-Noor claimed that:

Famous Artists have gone hungry rather than use any but the best materials. For the Artist the ‘best materials’, as far as the pencil is concerned, mean the Koh-I-Noor, ‘the perfect pencil’. (fig iii)

These pencils may have been magnificent, but they were made in Czechoslovakia. Whether because of patriotism, anti-German feeling after the First World War, or because of a lack of any other selling point, Wolff’s Royal Sovereign pencil’s slogan in 1925 was ‘Is your Pencil British?’ Symbols of Britishness – the lion, Trafalgar Square, Romney – accompany the image of the pencil. The Royal Sovereign’s other competitors were American (Venus, Turquoise), and Faber-Castell (German).

In wartime, pencils could be recruited for the nation. The American Eagle Company (makers of the Turquoise) produced the ‘Stars and Stripes’, ‘Patrol’, and the ‘Ensign’ models. Sovereign’s theme came to be ‘Construction starts with a pencil’. The pencil is in the foreground, hovering over the drawn plans, with the shipyard in the background. Venus commissioned the most inventive drawings, first in1940 with ‘Pencilebrities’, like A. Games, depicting a row of the different helmet styles of the allies to show what could be done with a 2B; and then in 1944 with pencils shouldered like rifles in ‘Weapons of War’:

*More and more pencils are needed every day to design the weapons that are still the key to victory – tanks, ships, aeroplanes. That is why pencils made by the Venus Pencil Company are in such heavy demand for vital war industry. Branded lines, extra grades, fine finish and luxury workmanship – these must give way temporarily to the needs of war – but the traditional standard of Venus quality still remains. The public can still obtain, and depend upon the standardised ‘War Drawing’ (in 7 grades) and Utility (Blacklead, Copying and Coloured) Pencils now produced by the Venus Pencil Co.[[5]](#endnote-5)* (fig iv)

It is not till 1952 that the full range was restored, and Venus, Turquoise, Reeves and others made much of the extra tones again available.

After the war everything changed. In 1930 the Venus had been ‘The Pencil round which the World of Art Revolves’, but now art and the world were different. The Press Art School maintained its impressive record in training cartoonists, including Ralph Steadman, but by the sixties the Forest Hill college had ceased advertising. Percy Bradshaw died in 1965. The postman no longer delivered the rolled up drawings. Instead they were being sent to Paris:

Learn to Draw Direct from Paris Under famous French artists….. Don’t you wish you could draw and paint? Haven’t you envied the pleasure of your friends who can – and the money some make? Now you can learn to be a real artist in a few months, in your own home, through the world famous Paris A.B.C. School of Art. The secret is you reap all the benefit of studying under famous French artists by post. Your lessons come (in English, of course) direct from Paris; your drawings go to Paris and your particular teacher in Paris sends his criticisms and suggestions direct to you.[[6]](#endnote-6) (fig v)

A line drawing shows a couple of naked pubescent children, kneeling and drinking from a flask. In today’s watchful climate this image might not be accepted as an innocent demonstration of penmanship. Even pencil advertisements, unwittingly, reveal the ethos of their time – or the inhibitions of our time. An advertisement for the Turquoise pencil of the same period is a textbook case of ‘the male gaze’. A firm hand holds the Turquoise pencil up to the viewer’s eye to measure the soft-focus nude.

There is no pencil to equal Turquoise. Turquoise leads are made from 100% electronic graphite for extra smoothness, and super-bonded in the wood for extra strength. They hold a point under great pressure and need less sharpening than ordinary pencils. Give smooth, clean, lines.[[7]](#endnote-7) (fig v)

1. **A Better Job in Half the Time**

Each ‘drawing’ generation likes to think it is more enlightened, more tolerant, more advanced in every respect than its predecessors. For one generation the argument may be line versus tone, precision versus atmosphere[[8]](#endnote-8). The issue that divides one art world – the Whistler versus Ruskin libel case of 1878 – may be of little interest to the succeeding one. Why should the time taken to make a work affect its merit as art? But the idea that drawing should be about showing good hard work did linger for a long time; right up to the fifties, you can sense some suspicion of the Impressionists; after all, they painted directly without drawing first. But there were other complexes at work.

Being ‘modern’ in the thirties and forties might well involve a vitriolic hatred for anything studio-bound, anything mock medieval, heavy with Victorian ‘fancy dress’. In 1944 the new President of the Royal Academy, Alfred Munnings – now remembered as much for suggesting that Picasso needed a good kicking as for his sporting pictures - was praised as a modernist because he was a ‘plein air’ landscapist.[[9]](#endnote-9) His only rival, in the painting of horses, was considered to be Velazquez. In a 1953 review of late nineteenth century painting, William Powell Frith’s Derby Day is described as ‘exasperating’, a complete waste of time. The same article reflects on the recent death of Raoul Dufy, regarded by Alexander Watt as among the leading six painters of the twentieth century (the others being Bonnard, Braque, Matisse, Picasso and Rouault).[[10]](#endnote-10)

We live in post-modern times. We are supposed to be above such squabbles, or at least we are supposed to tolerate the whole spectrum of styles, accepting the one-second drawing in the same spirit as the drawing that took ten years. The divisive issue of our time might be the use of the computer - what in 1900 would have been called ‘the drawing appliance’, or indeed ‘the perfect pencil’[[11]](#endnote-11). Digital lines, whether 3D or 2D, are seen as lacking the character of the line pressed across paper by the pencil. We value the raw and the gritty: crude charcoal, the leaky pen, anything low tech.

Should a pen, brush or pencil, have a character of its own? Or should it be designed to be anonymous, flawless, transmitting uninflected the artist’s ‘idea’? In my own case, I confess, I do keep special pens and brushes, which I treasure for their idiosyncrasies. My fondness for eccentric brushes has increased because of simultaneously drawing with paint software, where creating irregular and unpredictable brushes is part of the art. Of course, temperamental pens are only tolerable if you know you have the perfect pen – a gel pen no doubt – as a standby. I doubt whether many of us regret the passing of the constantly clogging Rapidograph – first advertised in 1955. But Illustrator lay well in the future when Gillott’s pens tackled that question of obedience.

In 1925 a finely detailed Pre-Raphaelite illustration, ‘The Arming of Joan of Arc’, demonstrates ‘The Magic Touch of Linley Sambourne’:

It reveals all Linley Sambourne`s command of line and tone, and that wizardry of light and shade that always lends distinction to any one of his compositions.[[12]](#endnote-12) (fig vi)

Sambourne had started out as a draughtsman in a marine engineering works, and is best known for his illustrations for Punch. He had a collection of 10,000 catalogued photographs. He had died in 1910. The medievalism of the image was hardly of its time, but presumably it was still for many readers a fine case of contemporary drawing.

In 1950 we are in the modern world, with a drawing that must have taken less than five seconds: a woman’s face in one continuous line:

The pen must grow out of the artist’s hand, taking his direction with the obedience of a guardsman and the grace of a premiere danseuse: Once a pen expresses its own personality it is doomed! It should grow old and tired imperceptibly and be discarded reluctantly. It has to be a Gillottt pen – every time and all the time.[[13]](#endnote-13) (fig vi)

The nib becomes less the slave for dutiful hard work, more the enabler of spontaneity – both claims made repeatedly in today’s ‘frictionless’ graphics software.

The skill of the artist flows freely through the Gillott pen and that which emerges in black and white is a true interpretation of what he has in mind.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The more ‘transparent’ and ‘intuitive’ the better. The artist does not work against a resistant material. There is simply the mental concept and the physical execution. But was the world speeding up? Certainly labour-saving devices were becoming attractive. This last advertisement shares the page with one for the Aerograph airbrush. As a product the Aerograph, like the Gillott`s pen, remained little modified over some seventy years of advertising. The real changes occur in the settings: the backdrops showing it at work.

Invented in Iowa in 1879, the airbrush came to be produced in Clerkenwell, London, as the Aerograph, and began life as essentially an ‘artistic’ way of saving time.

*He who saves time lengthens life.[[15]](#endnote-15)*

# Not a machine, not a process. An artist’s tool and a new and beautiful art.[[16]](#endnote-16)

An 1884 advertisement in Chicago celebrates a ‘special medal’ award for ‘the air brush and portraits’, and depicts artists at desks, like clerks, producing portraits but apparently without models. A clue to the process comes in an announcement in the Air Brush Journal that announces classes at the Illinois Art School in ‘Photo Copying of the highest and most artistic grades’. As with the printers who were to be replaced by the Epson a century later, there was presumably a trade, the photocopier, put out of business by the Xerox. A 1906 advertisement in The Studio for the Aerograph lists its uses:

The improved Air Brush is of great assistance to the Artist for Black-and-White and Water-Colour Drawings, Finishing Photographic Work for Process Engraving, and the like.[[17]](#endnote-17)

From the turn of the century through to the twenties the Aerograph is drawn in profile like a piece of plumbing, isolated from any context.

In 1925 the Aerograph appears with its compressor – “Equip your studio with the Aerograph electric motor driven compressor”. This advertisement is next to the ‘Diana Series Exhibition Camera Studies’ – “Comprising a New and Exclusive Series of Charming Photographic Out-Door Figure Studies, taken by an artist amid the rugged sea-shore and shady woodland scenery of Britain.” Several albums of nude figure studies were advertised, most notably by the Paine family of Walthamstow, with five gold medals to their credit, and great testimonials: “the finest models I have seen” (A Doctor); “Models are physical perfection” (Captain Hawkey).[[18]](#endnote-18) Outdoor settings, silhouetted on the skyline, poses reminiscent of ‘Health and Efficiency’, and of course hairstyles, tie them to the period. They may have been used exclusively for ‘artistic’ purposes, but some albums do list female nude ‘lingerie and boudoir’ poses, as well as ‘child studies’.

The juxtaposition of female form with cold machinery was not uncommon. Soft tonal gradation, the smoothness of satin, was the ideal, to be achieved through finely graded pencils, pastels, airbrushes, or photographs. (fig vii)

Use the Aerograph for rapid and beautiful work. It produces exquisite gradations of tone and delicacy of shading that cannot be equalled in any other way and in a fraction of the time taken by older methods. Over 26,000 in use.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The ‘AE’ model of 1930 claims to have new and improved features but is still for ‘spray painting’. By 1940 the advertisements have more of a streamlined look. The sans serif typeface looks functional, and the subtle gradations show what the Aerograph can do.

More Speed, Less Haste, Thanks to Aerograph Air-Brush Equipment. For retouching and recolouring photographs, producing exquisite gradations of tone with a minimum of trouble, the Aerograph Air-Brush is invaluable.[[20]](#endnote-20) (fig vii)

In 1949 the Aerograph is spraying an image of the earth. It is being used all over the globe:

A Better Job in Half the Time. Aerograph Air Brushes are used all over the World.[[21]](#endnote-21) (fig vii)

The far less messy tools of drawing software, especially Illustrator have, long superseded precision spraying for technical drawing, and for graphic art generally. Airbrush ‘art’ now has cult status, especially for customised cars and bikes. Spray cans are handy for graffiti. As a drawing tool it has become neglected. In recent times drawing has caught the attention of philosophers, and been defined as the ‘inscribed’ mark, the trace of the hand as the pencil moves across the surface. This variety of drawing has no lines and no contact. Spray painting imposes a discipline. As with watercolour you cannot revise: you have to work fast and keep moving.

**3. Every Shade and Every Grade**

Who is doing the drawing? What do the artists look like? What do they talk about? Generally, with their British perspective, they were more confident of their place in the world. Today pencils, pens, brushes, graphics software are advertised in magazines specializing in illustration, and in leisure painting, such as Artists and Illustrators. The practical side of art - visits to artists` studios, the how-I-painted-this -picture articles – disappeared from the ‘serious’ art magazines in the seventies. Their advertising pages, their main revenue source, were given over to galleries. The last place you would now expect to find an article on how-to-draw would be Frieze. If drawings feature at all they are there as ‘art’, not illustration. What makes the copies of The Studio such a rich archive is simply the fact that most of the advertisements were drawn. They were drawn for a purpose, even if it was just to promote a brand of pencil.

In those pre-war days drawing was a broad church. Engineers, architects, commercial artists, all had to draw, and draw with the skills of the professional. Drawing was a career. For the amateur, sketching equipment was advertised in the same slot as field sports accessories. The Studio advertised all-weather wear, but the season proper did not start till May. Dozens of specialized manuals appeared; Jasper Salwey`s ‘The Art of Drawing in Lead Pencil’ (‘with a foreword by Leonard Squirrell’) in 1921; Borough Johnson’s ‘The Technique of Pencil Drawing’ (‘with a foreword by Frank Brangwyn R.A. and a Note on Pencil Drawing by Selwyn Image’) of 1928. Though emphatically practical, these books could embody a philosophical outlook on life, with the occasional hobbyhorse. Lewis Day’s seminal 1901 ‘Nature and Ornament: Nature the Raw Material of Design’ bemoans the neglect of tendrils, because of their sinuous variety. Alfred Rich’s 1918 ‘Water Colour Painting’ - up to the fifties ‘watercolour drawing’ was considered drawing – tours the counties in search of real watercolour country. F.J.Glass (Headmaster of Londonderry Art School) demonstrates how to translate nature studies into decorative motifs in ‘Drawing Design and Craftwork’ of 1920. All these followed Ruskin’s dictum that learning to draw was really learning to see. Some manuals, wonderfully illustrated, are indistinguishable from botany books. Drawing in that period was not primarily a self-conscious ‘art’ form but a means to an end. It was about investigating and communicating, about serious study, be it in science, medicine, design, manufacture, leisure, portraits or landscapes. Carpenters and Westley, of Regent Street, the suppliers in 1906 of the ‘Pocket Diminishing Glass’ were opticians: “Spectacles for Artists a Speciality”.[[22]](#endnote-22)

It would have seemed odd at that time for someone to ask ‘what is drawing?’ – to lump it all together and try out some definitions. But this is where we are today at the typical drawing conference. Here and there a purist will suggest only hand-made marks on paper count; that anything photographic, printed, sprayed or digital should be excluded. But for the most part we try to be liberal and inclusive. We look at maps as drawings - just at the time, incidentally, when drawing in the ordinary sense is no longer used to make maps[[23]](#endnote-23). Typically the conference viewpoint is that of the ‘fine artist’ rather than that of the designer, animator, or specialist in information visualisation – fields where you would be mad not to use graphics software.

In his comprehensive study of the Fifties, *Having it So Good*,[[24]](#endnote-24) Peter Hennessy points out that religion becomes an intellectual debating point just at the time the Church of England’s congregation dwindles. Perhaps ‘drawing’ has become an attractive conference proposition for similar reasons. Theorists, analysts, scholars, splinter groups, as much as artists themselves, are making the running. The message is that drawing is in a healthy state. The alternative view would be that most of what used to be described as drawing has been absorbed into electronic formats, and the remainder we are intent on preserving, the fine art part, has become the preserve of conservative soul-searchers. It is easy ground for the art theorist. Why, one wonders, is there such a fixation on the low tech, on ‘the mark on the paper’? Surely the sheer ingenuity of the Bezier curve, the Photoshop filter, the complexity of Maya, or even the Aerograph, are worthy of at least the same attention from a ‘drawing community’? This disdain for skill, for the technical side of drawing, for ‘commercial’ or ‘trade’ drawing, can be traced back to the fifties. There was this residual imperial arrogance, deference to an ‘educated’ class, traditions carried on for their own sake, culminating in the Suez humiliation of 1956. Reading *The Studio* editorials of the time, the insularity of the British establishment is striking. One debate was prompted by the President of the Royal Academy proposing a two-stream model, where ‘moderns’ and ‘traditionalists’ could enjoy separate parallel lives. Some resented the way the British Council was promoting the likes of Henry Moore overseas. The Academicians felt that they themselves – the worthy heirs of Michelangelo – should be given the Venice Biennale Pavilion. But their view that they really were the great draughtsmen of their time may have been wishful thinking – they supplied their own criteria, of course, the Royal Academy as ever being a closed shop.

# A million Ideas in Every Box.[[25]](#endnote-25)

There seem to be no images of ‘art intellectuals’ offering advice in advertisements of the fifties and sixties, just the occasional connoisseur, critic, or even scientist – all of whom preferred the bow tie. The term ‘research’ does crop up here and there. There was a company called ‘studio research’ which produced ‘sculptex’ modelling material. There were plastic and viscose alternative types of canvas, and a canvas adapted for watercolour. The scientist leans forward to explain to the artist - who wears a trilby - that Reeves’ ‘Goya’ oil paints are four-star permanent. The 1955 Turquoise Pencil promotion features the ‘reflectometer’, proving that ‘If it says it is 4H it is 4H’, with ‘100% electronic graphite’: a ‘wired’ pencil decades before the Wacom ‘stylus’. Researchers sought ways of making materials more efficient, looking for a smooth flowing pen. Their equivalents today would be the programmers at Adobe, enhancing ‘functionality’ for the ‘workflow pipeline’. (fig viii, fig v)

Anxiety about making any association between the pencil and the machine has its own history – though without developments in technology pencils would never have been perfected and manufactured in bulk.[[26]](#endnote-26) Even in the 1990`s professors at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam insisted that the pencil should be sharpened by hand with a knife, not with a mechanical sharpener.[[27]](#endnote-27) But it is easy to make the wrong assumption about the drawing habits of the past, where copying old master drawings, even photographs – recommended by Ruskin – would be more part of the routine than it is now. Before leafing though these drawings of artists and pencils I lazily supposed that the distrust of ‘modern’ technology went right back to a ‘pre-technology’ era; as if today’s drawing fundamentalists were defending roughly the same ground as the practitioners of a hundred years ago: both would feel that drawings could only be made by hand, that ‘technology’ should be rejected. “Avoid machine-made jewellery,” shouts a 1906 advertisement, “it lacks originality.”

Three products share a page of the November 1906 The Studio: a Kodak camera recommended as the ideal Christmas present for the art student; the Waterman’s ‘Patent Spoon-feed’ Ideal Fountain Pen - ‘And now no inky fingers’; while Lefranc & Co`s ‘Celebrated Colours’ are being used by a damsel in flowing dress, perhaps painting in ancient Athens. (fig viii)

According to this, the artists of the 1900s are dreamy aesthetes with floppy hair, producing illuminated manuscripts. But meanwhile, across the channel, a more turbulent attack on the canvas was coming about: through Matisse, Derain, Braque, Picasso, Kirchner, Nolde and others. They discarded the distinction between drawing and painting; they would have looked ‘primitive’.

The insularity of The Studio is even more pronounced during the interwar years. In the thirties and forties the artists wear tweed suits and smoke pipes. They are prepared to sketch in all weathers and have a no-nonsense air about them; by the end of the fifties they have grown beards, wear fishermen’s jerseys, listen to modern jazz, and live in Paris. By the sixties The Studio was in love with Paris, with reports of studio visits to Braque, and many now forgotten Parisians, and also to bistros with their art collections. The bohemian lifestyle calls for jokey illustrations that allude to that two-stream model of traditional and modern:

*For sketches and portraits,*

*Or Avant garde art,*

*VENUS assures you*

*Success from the start.[[28]](#endnote-28)* (fig v)

Primitive, traditional, modern, human, technology, are all loose categories permeated with the prejudices of their time. Not so long ago, primitive meant primitive, and multi-culturalism was for oddballs like Dubuffet. Western artists, Western civilisation set the standard. Draughtsmanship was draughtsmanship. Western factories produced the best-engineered drawing materials – though after the war India did the most extensive research in setting up its own pencil industry. Based in Birmingham, those Gillott's ‘Drawing and Professional Pens’ were advertised over many decades. A 1962 advertisement features a hairy crouching caveman with fur pants scratching an angry bison on the wall:

Times have changed… Artists in those days had to make do. Artists today have Gillott's pens.[[29]](#endnote-29) (fig vi)

Right through to the sixties ‘draughtsmanship’ was tied to a gold standard, only attainable after years of study and constant practice, copying Renaissance masters, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo. Their drawings would be studied, not in terms of ‘visual culture’, but in order to learn the mechanics of drawing. To take your bearings from cave drawings, or from a theory about ‘the body’ and ‘how it is to be in the world’, would have been laughable – unless you had studied with Klee, or perhaps Anthony Caro. Equally, Gillott`s 1950`s advertisements use stereotypes that jar with our idea of universal human values. To illustrate ‘the finest pens in the world’, peoples of the world are assembled: a tribesman, a coolie, an African carrying a water jar on her head, a Cossack dancer. These are the background subjects while the couple in dress and suit are the sophisticated travelling Westerners.

Teaching drawing at that time, whether your loyalties were with the Renaissance or the ‘Moderns’ of the School of Paris, you would not have encountered the mix of students from China, Korea, Africa, of today’s M.A. drawing course, where as a tutor you soon learn that drawing embraces variables – such as flesh tones - as much as universals. In China ‘drawing’ can simply mean painting without colour. Skin colour was not a sensitive issue in 1931, not according to the promotion of the ‘Castell’ and ‘Polychromos’ pencil: ‘The A.W. Faber’s made in every shade and every grade.’ This is illustrated by two smiling ‘natives’ carrying outsize pencils. An article on ‘Negro Art’ is also an embarrassing read. This might seem an inappropriate response, imposing today’s values on the past, as if connoisseurship and shading had no connection with racial supremacy. Perhaps. But an advertisement on the previous page announces Sir Charles Petrie`s ‘Mussolini’, a new biography of ‘the great Italian Statesman, published, incidentally, by *The Studio* itself[[30]](#endnote-30).

**4. This word ‘Drawing’**

This word ‘drawing’ seems in these days to have lost so much of its meaning; surely, above all, it stands for sound construction and a thorough searching for form, based upon a profound knowledge of things seen with a sensitive eye. It is this very knowledge of the structure of things, both animate and inanimate, which appears to be lacking in so much modern work. …. One sees so many drawings executed in a loose, scribbling technique that certainly do not portray any, or at least very little, knowledge of the bones of the matter.

‘A Plea for Tradition in English Water-Colour Drawing’ by Alban F.T. Atkins, Art Master, Burford Grammar School, Oxon, 1944.[[31]](#endnote-31)

*The experiments of Picasso and others have so far as I can see failed to find a direction for real development yet. The schools of painting working in the way suggested by the original experiments are producing nothing of consequence….*

I think that good abstract painting must be a natural development through a sound academic knowledge if it is to have any real value. It is useless for students with only a few years painting behind them to just ‘go abstract’ one week-end. They may fool themselves and others for a time, standards of assessment for this kind of painting are very difficult, but there can be no future in it.

‘The Student Speaks’ by Arthur H. Taylor, 1953.[[32]](#endnote-32)

When you look in detail at what was actually taught in the small local art schools - where there really were ‘lessons’ - you come across distinctions and polarised views that are now forgotten. At Kingston the preferred method was ‘Florentine’ drawing, which meant that in outlining any turning point of a form, such as the clothed shoulder, your line had to suggest the underlying flow of muscle. This was quite different from the Coldstream approach, based on Cezanne, on the precise positioning of, say, the end of the shoulder in relation to the electric fire.[[33]](#endnote-33) You did not use a continuous line, but a series of points. You measured. There were also methods that were entirely tonal, using charcoal, or fine gradations of pencil; or pen drawing for illustration. In the sixties I was taught by followers of Vivian Pitchforth, the guru of figure drawing often featured in *The Studio*, who once they had erased your drawing would draw a little geometric anatomical sketch showing how the thorax fitted to the pelvis to help you out[[34]](#endnote-34). The next tutor might say you should use cross-hatching, the next would say don’t use cross-hatching but do include eyelids, and so on. At St. Martins there was also a dissident class run on Bomberg`s principles by Leon Kossoff, where I was ticked off for bringing an H pencil into the class rather than charcoal – there are no lines there, Kossoff would say, looking at the model. He directed you towards the emotional whole: you were to empathise with the model, ‘be her’, feel what she felt; the opposite of the optical, or surgical approach developed from Henry Tonks at the Slade in the 1900s.

But would this prepare you for the pranks of ‘avant garde art’? Even in 1963, the editor, G.S. Whittet, declared that:

Picasso, far from being a boon to modern art, has been its curse. Taken up by intellectuals with whom, let us face it, he had little in common, he became a status symbol of culture for the wealthy boor…. Young painters, labouring day after day to draw just right that complex play of curves in the neck, shoulder and thorax of a model on the throne, looked at later Picasso distortions and despaired.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Are we any the wiser? Don’t believers in ‘traditional’ drawing feel a similar despair looking at a 3D animation - or even at a splashy brushmark masquerading as a finished drawing? Today pencil lovers agonize over the loss of territory to ‘new’ media or to installation art. Scholars, artists want to have the ‘whole’ of drawing in their sights, parcelling it into categories. Deanna Petherbridge`s brilliant National Gallery lectures in 2006 gave a magisterial overview, illustrated at every point, from obsessive drawing to Manga. Anthologies such as Emma Dexter’s ‘Vitamin D’ and Tania Kovats` ‘The Drawing Book’ set out to demonstrate the plurality and vigour of contemporary drawing. But there is practice, and there is theory, and sometimes it isn’t clear which is leading the way. Also in 2006, at the ‘With a Single Mark’ conference at Tate Britain, the eminent French philosopher, Alain Badiou, went for the big picture, but did not mention a single actual drawing; he referred only to a poem of Wallace Stevens, ‘Description Without Place’; the offered definition was that drawing was ‘the trace of a trace’ – to which one wit responded that this was good news for draughtsmen on C.S.I.. A drawing, we were told, was political – it was ‘the medium of resistance’, but not the kind of resistance, presumably, detectable by the reflectometer. To spend an hour or so at a drawing lecture without anything to look at apart from the speaker’s hand gestures must have been a little trying for some. It was like admitting that drawing hadn’t got any intellectual substance of its own. You have to import a philosopher. Some postgraduate courses have resident philosophers at hand. Renaissance courts had astrologers. As drawings become fainter, more minimal, more self-effacing, more Neolithic, so rhetoric and fantasy fill the void.

Some observers speak of this as the cultural vacuum, a disregard for the visual and for art history bordering on the insane. It makes success or failure in drawing meaningless. Students, they say, are left to decide for themselves ‘what drawing is’. It could be a walk to their village each day, or crosses in a notebook. You take photos, keep an archive, ‘reflect’ on the practice, wrap a theory around it, and if the methodology fits, the job is done. This may be an exaggeration, but I have come across students who think of their work in autistic isolation. They are unaware of an ‘out there’ discipline called drawing. They may visit two exhibitions of contemporary drawing; one of life drawings; the other, featuring videos, maps drawn on the wall, photographed shadows presented as drawings. They see no contradiction. They just like or dislike each show. Passivity, you might say, is a bonus. It might be apathy, or it could be healthy post-modernism. Drawing can be whatever you want it to be. Better that than discipline for discipline’s sake.

Today we like to think we work in ‘an expanded field’ of drawing, applying phenomenology, pushing at the limits, colonising activities like map-making and diary writing. The finer points of technique, whether pencil, pen, brush, drawing software, or even perspective, are less important. The students are left to learn ‘skills’ in their own time. At GCSE level art teachers are pressed to impart ‘drawing skills’. At the next stage they can take an A Level in ‘Digital Arts’, though if they progress through to university they won’t at present find an equivalent Fine Art course. They will need to branch off into ‘Visual Communication’. For ‘drawing skills’ they would specialize in ‘Illustration’.

Drawing, we are told, should now be recognized as an art form in its own right. One argument put forward for its neglect in the past is that drawing hasn’t had an independent history. There is no unbroken chain of movements and masterworks - such as sustains painting, and makes painters feel someone is looking over their shoulder. The ‘drawing artist’ is uninhibited. This is a half-truth. A casual scan through fifty years of pencil advertisements, a dip into the editorials, shows that drawing certainly does have a history, an unfortunate history of well-intentioned bigotry. The attitudes we hold today came from somewhere; they have plenty of echoes in the past. However much we universalize drawing as an expression of being ‘human’ – ‘being in the world’ – we are tied to our time, to our history. A future generation will pinpoint our trademark prejudices, smirk at our pretentious phrases, smirk at a portable gadget called a ‘Powerbook’.

We implicitly exclude whole swathes of drawing by what we emphasise. Take the term ‘the body’. It has become the default term; we draw the body, look at its anatomy, draw with the body, draw with feet, elbows, or pressing against the wall. It is a diffuse concept, as idealized as the body of ‘The Body Shop’, and symptomatic of a culture given over to health clubs and skin care. There would be no room for the calligraphy of Islamic cultures, nor for the outdoor sketch clubs of the twenties, nor for their figure drawing methods. In those drawing classes the ‘figure’ was specifically male or female, clothed or nude, inside or outside, and sometimes classes were for ‘Ladies’ or ‘Gentlemen’ only.

R.B. Kitaj put on ‘The Human Clay’ drawing exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1974; for several years he and David Hockney campaigned against what they saw as the neglect of life drawing in art schools. That polemic is now history, but still influences our thinking, one way or the other. Kitaj took the view that for art to be properly human it had to depict human beings[[36]](#endnote-36). It was existential. Figure drawing was the core, the social bond, linking human to human. So presumably a distant view of Portsmouth Harbour would be less human. He recommended a remarkable book, ‘The Humanism of Art’, by Vladislav Zimenko. This was the soviet view of minimal art, and it was a well-informed view. It still packs a punch, now that the wall drawings of Sol Le Witt, drawings of Eva Hesse or Cy Twombly provide the orthodox canon - any doubts about the quality of that work would be heresy. The book celebrates the heroic socialist realism of painters such as Deyneka, still little appreciated in the West, but ingeniously recycled in Neo Rauch’s dreamy parodies.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Looking back, that exhibition and the idea of reviving drawing, were part of a broadside against ‘modernism’, against what was perceived to be its lack of human soul. Art, we were told, was in crisis. Exhibitions like ‘Art for Society’ sided with the Mexican Muralists, and implied that if you weren’t painting figures you were probably ‘against’ your fellow creatures. Damning Modernism became respectable. Self-styled progressive critics sided with the tabloid press in 1976, when the Tate was ridiculed for purchasing the Carl Andre ‘Bricks’. Being a ‘modernist’ meant a period in the wilderness, especially for architects. If you were abstract you were just painting about nothing, playing with paint, a ‘formalist’. Whether such opinions were well-founded, or just prejudices, was not the point. The argument moved sideways. Previously marginalised groups felt vindicated, scores were settled; the ‘modernisers’ were blamed for alienating the public, blamed for neglecting the ‘sound principles’, blamed for depriving students of drawing lessons. Support was whipped up for bringing back life drawing, or at least going through the motions, something that had a figurative look to it. Without this noise, the Prince’s Drawing School, founded in 2000, would probably never have happened.

The paradox is that what is being revived does not correspond to the way drawing was taught in the classes that petered out in the sixties; it is a diluted version: without the angst, the tensions, the contrasts and disputes necessary for a thriving culture. It is unlikely that creating institutions, competitions, courses, will of themselves reverse changes that are visible over decades, and that are symptoms of social and technological forces. It is fine to say, as many do, that drawing is good for you, but so is singing, and so is the Eurovision Song Contest. The high octane drawing of the twentieth century greats – Matisse, Picasso, Giacometti, Dubuffet, de Kooning, Tapies, Polke, would be on my list, and certainly Daniel Clowes – is more than this. It breaks through the ‘sound drawing’ decorum preached in the pages of The Studio.

But what of drawing in general? If fundamentalists say the answer is to ‘stop using computers’ to design, draw, work out patterns, visualize buildings, they will have a tough campaign ahead of them. It is telling that the life room at the Royal Academy Schools, once regarded as the epicentre of drawing culture, is hardly used at all by its students, through lack of demand. These postgraduate students represent an elite: 560 apply for 17 places. The suite of Epson printers is used non-stop. Perhaps modernists, vilified thirty years ago, have become re-engaged with a sweet vengeance. If we carry on thinking about drawing in the anachronistic terms of those well-meaning headmasters, as making a mark with a pencil, patching together a smudged representation of a bored life-model, then we are missing the important story. ‘Construction’ no longer begins with a pencil, and no worlds – art worlds or advertising worlds – revolve around the Venus. Cars, planes, wars, adverts, posters, portraits, maps, all begin with something called digital.

For the way we communicate, write, design, compose music, keep photos, fly aeroplanes, fight wars, move money around, the world now depends on the computer. So it would be surprising if drawing with pencils, or painting with paints, remained quite unaffected, even within the most introverted academies. Yet, it seems, human nature being what it is, we always want to universalize our idea of ‘what drawing is’. We fix on the word drawing as if we can identify some pure constant, as if drawing stays the same whatever the available tools, whatever the purpose, whatever the view from the window, and whatever the dissenting sects are saying. Drawing ideologies have been built up around something as simple as pencil and paper. If you take a really long view, this is just one technology, one that worked well for a few centuries.

As with the supposed decline of morals among the young, the decline of drawing has been talked about for at least the last hundred years. For all I know it was the favourite topic of the cave painters when they met up to talk shop. Dismay at falling standards, regret that drawing is going ‘modern’, this goes with the territory. The expertise of one generation means little to the next. Gadgets that are great for drawing while running after animals are put away in the attic. Your favourite ‘watercolour country’ becomes Milton Keynes. The life room becomes a Mac room.

A hundred years ago, T. Martin Wood wrote of the pleasures of English Drawing – specifically the landscapes of Gainsborough, Constable and Cox. He identified this trait: “The true landscape art of England is homely, emotional; loving the village and the way open to it by the open plain.”[[38]](#endnote-38) He preferred the innocent to the systematic:

The pleasure derived from the study of drawings lies in the appreciation of the draughtsman’s sensitive vision as displayed in them and the responsiveness of his pencil. The touch of the artist in a fine drawing is a thing of nerves. This nervous quality was essentially the feature of drawing until these present times, for the reason that the art of line was insisted upon to such an extent that an easy skill in it was then looked upon as the first equipment in every artist. The modern tendency of training has meant the loss of those finely sympathetic qualities of drawing, which evolved from persistent training. This scholarship in drawing remains only with a remnant of artists today, a pure stream difficult to find uncontaminated by so-called systems invented in the schools.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Who knows what he would make of the varieties of ‘pencil practice’ today? There is plenty of mark making with that nervous touch, but would that be enough? Surely the drawing should record the loved local environment? We can be sympathetic to our surroundings, but in most cases we live in cities, cities full of electronic screens, rushing this way and that. If we are not to follow the ‘so-called systems’ – these days that would probably mean art theory – or sketch shoppers in Oxford Street, or Midsomer Murders on TV, I am not too sure what we should do. Perhaps the days of the pencil are numbered, or perhaps not. It would be like asking whether any of those advertisements created the market for pencils, or merely reflected it. Drawing as an activity, whether hobby or profession, goes its own way regardless. Yes, it may ‘go digital’. But whatever form it takes, it will still be buffeted here and there by world events, shortages, dogmas, fashions, and eccentric individuals.

1. Herbert A. Oliver, on the Reeves ‘Autolycus’ colour box. *The Studio*, August 15 1901. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A South London art school was discarding the magazines. This information was circulated amongst members of the London Group (the artists’ group founded in 1913). As a member, I helped rescue them. All the illustrations are taken from these copies of *The Studio*. My thanks to David Redfern. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Percy V. Bradshaw, the Press Art School (founder and principal since 1905) *The Studio,* March 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This address has long been the studio and home of Anthony Whishaw RA, who recalls the rings in the wall of the studio for tethering the horses. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *The Studio*, August 1944, AD vi. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *The Studio,* August 1960 ad vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *The Studio,* April 1960. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Differences between Ruskin and Walter Crane are touched on in Faure Walker, J, ‘Old manuals and New Pencils’, *Drawing: The Process*, edited by [Jo Davies](http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/authors.php?author=8) and Leo Duff, Intellect, 2005, pp. 15 to 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Kaines Smith S.C., MBE, MA, FSA, ‘The New PRA, 1944 Sir Alfred Munnings, *The Studio,* August 1944 pp. 44-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Alexander Watt, ‘Paris Commentary’, The Studio, July 1953, pp. 24-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For an extended discussion of this question see Faure Walker J., *Painting the Digital River: How an Artist Learned to Love the Computer*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River N.J. 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *The Studio,* July 1925*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *The Studio,* August 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *The Studio,* July 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *The Air Brush Journal*, Rockford, Illinois January 1891. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Advertisement, 1896. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *The Studio,* November 1906. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *The Studio*, October 1928 ad xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *The Studio,* March 1928. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *The Studio,* June 1940. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *The Studio,* July 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. “The Pocket Diminishing Glass is for the use of artists, that they may be enabled to estimate the changes produced in a Drawing when reduced in size.” The work of Erkki Huhtamo in ‘media archaeology’ is seminal in pointing out how optical devices before the computer age literally framed how people saw. For a discussion of how perceptions of ‘nature’ may be undergoing an equivalent change see also Faure Walker J, ‘The Altered Filament: Painting and Nature’, (‘Linking frontiers: art, technology, science and society’), *Proceedings, Congresso Internacional, Artech 2006*, Universidade de Vigo, pp. 74-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Stephen Farthing’s ingenious *plan de desein* positions many types of drawing ranging from skid marks to Air Traffic Control Screens as stations on a London tube map. Being itself a drawing (a map) and a map of drawing, it raises the question of whether there could be an infinite series of maps of maps of drawing. Also, if fine artist ventures into such a specialized discipline as cartography, they may find they are trespassing on hallowed ground. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Hennessy P. *Having it So Good, Britain in the Fifties,* Allen Lane, Penguin, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Turquoise pencil advertisement, *The Studio*, April 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Petroski H, *The Pencil, a History of Design and Circumstance,* Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I am indebted to Marja Van Putten and Wim Vonk for illuminating discussions on this subject. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *The Studio*, July 1960 ad v. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *The Studio*, March 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *The Studio*, August 1931 ad vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *The Studio*, July 1944 p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *The Studio,* July 1953, p. 22. Taylor was a mature student at the Royal Academy Schools. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. My thanks to John Carter for pointing this out. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Tutors who erase any part of a student’s drawing today risk receiving an official complaint, which in some cases has actually happened. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *The Studio,* April 1963 p. 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. R.B. Kitaj Interviewed by James Faure Walker, *Artscribe* 5 (February) 1977. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Zimenko Z, *The Humanism of Art,* Progress Publishers Moscow, 1976 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. T. Martin Wood, ‘English Drawing – The Landscape and Figure Sketches of the Older Masters’, p. 120, *The Studio,* November 1906. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid, p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)