

DEEP DIVE

Contour Drawing

Following the edges and surface curves of a form with a single unbroken line. Develops observation and hand-eye coordination simultaneously.

Contour drawing is the practice of drawing only the outline edges of a form. It is deceptively simple: just a line. But contour drawing is one of the most demanding observational exercises in drawing education, because accuracy is immediately and completely visible. There is nowhere to hide in a contour drawing.

PURE CONTOUR VS. MODIFIED CONTOUR

Pure contour drawing (sometimes done blind -- without looking at your paper) trains your eye to follow the edge of a form slowly and carefully while your hand follows the same movement. Modified contour drawing allows you to glance at your paper occasionally and includes some interior contour lines. Both approaches build the coordination between eye movement and hand movement that underlies all accurate drawing.

BLIND CONTOUR DRAWING

In blind contour drawing, you look only at your subject, never at your paper. Move your pencil continuously and slowly as your eyes trace the contour of the subject. The result is often distorted -- but the point is training your eye to slow down, observe continuously, and translate what it sees directly to the hand. After weeks of blind contour practice, your eye-hand coordination measurably improves.

CONTOUR OF INTERIOR EDGES

Interior contours are the lines inside the silhouette that describe form changes -- where the nose meets the cheek, where one finger overlaps another. Including interior contours turns a silhouette into a fully described form. The quality of your interior contour lines -- whether they feel confident and specific or hesitant and generalized -- reveals your level of observation directly.

EXERCISES

Day 1: 20 minutes of blind contour drawing from your non-dominant hand. Day 2: Modified contour drawing of a complex object (a shoe, crumpled cloth, a hand). Day 3: Contour drawing of a full figure from life reference with only contour lines -- no shading. Day 4: Contour drawing of a face where interior contours communicate form without any shading. Day 5: Draw a contour of a figure in motion where the contour itself implies movement through its energy.