

The Mannequin Approach

Building the figure from simple 3D forms — boxes for the torso and pelvis, cylinders for limbs — creates spatial consistency before anatomy is added.

BEGINNER

After you establish the gesture with an action line, the next step is building a simplified structural figure on top of it. Think of it like a crash-test dummy or a dressmaker's mannequin: a box for the head, an egg or box for the ribcage, a box for the pelvis, and cylinders for the arms and legs. These forms are not detailed — they are placeholders that establish the three-dimensional position of each body part in space. The pelvis tilts. The ribcage rotates. The head turns. Once you have these big forms positioned correctly, anatomy is just the detail that goes on top. This approach solves the biggest problem in figure drawing: knowing where things go before you draw them.

HOBBYIST

The mannequin approach is the foundation of almost every figure drawing system. Loomis, Hampton, Bridgman, and Vilppu all use some version of it. The key insight is that the figure has three primary masses — head, ribcage, and pelvis — and these three masses relate to each other in specific ways depending on the pose. The spine connecting ribcage to pelvis is what creates the S-curve of the standing figure. The way the ribcage and pelvis counter-rotate in walking creates the characteristic twist. Once you internalize the spatial relationship between these three masses, you can draw figures in complex poses from imagination.

PROFESSIONAL

Professional character designers and animators think entirely in terms of the mannequin approach when designing or animating. In 3D animation, the rig is literally a digital mannequin — pivoting joints, rotating masses — and understanding the mannequin is understanding the rig. In comics, characters must be drawn consistently from any angle on any page; this is only possible with a thorough internal model of the figure as a set of three-dimensional forms. Glen Keane, Milt Kahl, and other master Disney animators worked from a deeply internalized mannequin model that allowed them to construct the figure in any position without reference.