

DEEP DIVE

Major Muscle Groups

The handful of large muscle groups that determine the surface form of the figure — understanding these is enough for expressive figure drawing.

Artist anatomy focuses on the muscles that create visible surface changes -- not all 600+ muscles in the body, but the approximately 30-40 that push and pull the skin into the forms you see on a rendered figure. Understanding the origin, insertion, and function of these muscles allows you to draw any pose from imagination.

ORIGIN AND INSERTION

Every muscle has an origin (the fixed attachment point) and an insertion (the attachment to the bone it does move). When a muscle contracts, it shortens and pulls the insertion toward the origin. This determines the muscle's function and the direction of its force. When drawing a figure, the direction of muscle pull creates the ripples, bumps, and depressions visible on the surface -- understanding why they exist lets you draw them accurately.

KEY SURFACE MUSCLES

For artists, the highest-priority muscles are: the sternocleidomastoid (neck), pectoralis major (chest), deltoid (shoulder), biceps and triceps (arm), external obliques (side of abdomen), latissimus dorsi (back), gluteus medius and maximus (hip and buttock), quadriceps and hamstrings (thigh), and the tibialis anterior (shin). These 15-20 muscles create the most dramatic visible surface changes and appear in almost every figure drawing.

MUSCLES IN TENSION VS. RELAXATION

A muscle in tension is shorter, harder, and more pronounced on the surface. A relaxed muscle is longer, softer, and flatter. This creates the entire difference between a flexed bicep and a relaxed arm. When drawing figure poses, analyze which muscles are contracting to hold the pose and which are passive -- this analysis makes the difference between a figure that looks tensed and one that looks convincingly at rest.

EXERCISES

Day 1: Study and memorize the shoulder complex -- deltoid, trapezius, pectoralis major. Draw these three muscles from 5 different angles. Day 2: Study the leg muscles -- quadriceps, hamstrings, calf. Draw a leg in three poses that show the muscles differently. Day 3: From reference, trace the visible muscle boundaries on a fitness athlete photograph. Day 4: Draw a figure from imagination in a strenuous athletic pose. For each major muscle group, decide if it is contracted or relaxed. Day 5: Do an ecorche drawing (skinless figure showing muscles) of a simple torso pose from reference.

