

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.

BEGINNER

You do not need to know all 600+ muscles in the human body to draw it convincingly. You need to know the major surface muscles that create the big forms visible from the outside. For the torso: the pectorals (chest), the deltoids (shoulder caps), the latissimus dorsi (the wing-like back muscles), and the trapezius (the neck-to-shoulder slope). For the arms: biceps and triceps create the two-sided arm form. For the legs: the quadriceps group and hamstrings create the thigh, and the calf (gastrocnemius) creates the lower leg form. These big forms are what you see, and knowing what they are and where they attach gives you enough to draw a convincing figure.

HOBBYIST

Beyond the major groups, the key is understanding how muscles attach to the skeleton and how they change shape with movement. When the arm is flexed, the bicep shortens and bunches; when extended, it lengthens and flattens. The deltoid compresses when the arm is at the side and stretches when raised. Understanding these changes means you can anticipate what a muscle will look like in a pose you have not drawn before. Bridgman's Constructive Anatomy groups muscles by their directional pull and their location, making it easy to remember where each one goes and what it does.

PROFESSIONAL

Anatomical knowledge becomes selective rather than comprehensive at the professional level — you know everything but choose what to emphasize and what to suppress based on the image's needs. A painted figure in dramatic side lighting shows a very different set of anatomical details than the same figure in diffused frontal lighting. Michelangelo's figures show enormous anatomical knowledge expressed through selective emphasis on the forms that communicate power and movement, not through exhaustive surface detail.