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**AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF E. Leonora Perron for the Master
of Science in Teaching Art presented May 28, 1969.**

**Title: Figure Painting in the High School, Experiments and
Recommendations.**

APPROVED BY MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

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B. J. Gardner, Chairman

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Melvin Katz

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Richard Muller

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Fred Kline

My research problem was to experiment with four high school art classes in drawing and painting the figure, to draw conclusions about how they relate to working with the figure, and to recommend methods that appeared to be most successful in broadening viewpoints, developing skills and increasing interest and involvement in art. This problem was selected because teenage students, in the vast majority

of cases, have great difficulty in drawing or painting figures and, therefore, strenuously avoid it.

I discovered that a subjective approach that recognizes personal feelings, along with one that requires close looking, seemed to get the most exciting results and to be the best received by the students.

**FIGURE PAINTING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL
EXPERIMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

by

E. LEONORA PERRON

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF SCIENCE
in
TEACHING ART**

**Portland State University
1969**

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TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

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March 12, 1970

PREFACE

During my teaching experiences with various age groups of young people, I observed interesting differences in approaches to drawing the human figure. Small children happily and willingly draw their parents and friends and themselves. However, something often occurs about the time a child is ten years old--he refuses to draw the figure, or at best draws a stick figure symbol.

As he grows intellectually, he will rationalize to avoid the figure, saying "he's behind that tree" or "he just went into the house". So by the time the student reaches high school, he may have learned to deal with objects in his art work, but he is very unsophisticated in drawing the human figure and is painfully aware of his lack.

My goal for this research project was to find ways to develop a willingness on the part of the student to accept and deal with the figure, and to develop his ability to do so.

First, members of each of my four high school art classes were asked to draw a human figure of their own choice and were given one class period (fifty minutes) to do so. No attempt was made to influence or instruct them. The drawings produced were used to assess the general degree of skill and sophistication they had reached; to define

Figure 1. First drawings of the figure.

problem areas for assignments, and to compare with their later work.

The painting classes were given different assignments, each stressing a particular point of view. They were:

- Class One - Observation
- Class Two - Traditional
- Class Three - Subjective
- Class Four - Combination

So, the structure and organization of the four classes were similar, but the emphasis was different. The objective of this approach was to decide what methods seemed most successful in terms of broadening viewpoints, developing skills, and increasing interest by evaluating the responses to the assignments.

Figure drawing classes traditionally have dealt with the "nude". Since this was impractical for a high school situation, the models used in class were always clothed, whether in leotards, costumes or school clothes. However, the figures appearing in the paintings were sometimes nude, and one boy even painted a skeleton.

Photographs of the students' work are included to illustrate the very wide range of artistic skill and maturity among secondary school children and as a partial record of some of the work done.

Listed in order are the assignments given the four classes over a period of months. A comparative evaluation of the variations follows each explanation. The overall organization of the figure painting unit was:

Drawing experiments - 1-1/2 weeks

Oil washes with model - 1 week
Three oil paintings - 12 weeks

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CHAPTER I

DRAWING EXPERIMENTS

PROBLEM I

Presentation

Class #1: Draw many quick motion studies (15 seconds to 1-1/2 minutes each). Boldly define the main masses and impressive action and direction of the model, not contours, and certainly not details. Avoid conscious control; try to observe and react instantaneously. Use the broadside as well as the edge of a compressed charcoal stick on large pieces of butcher paper.

Class #2: From the model, observe the main areas of the figure and their proportions. Notice how the relationships of the body parts change visually as the model changes position and angle. Use the comparative ratio sighting technique to measure proportions. Use charcoal on butcher paper.

Class #3: Through verbal description of an action being performed, visualize how it looks, assume the position being described, close your eyes and imagine how it feels and draw how it seems, stressing the main lines of direction. Try, not for a cold perfection,

but for an aliveness of impression, setting aside intellectual concerns. Examples: Pushing a huge heavy rock off the road; pulling on a long rope attached to a large bell in a tower above you; crawling under a low fence to escape a pack of snarling dogs. Use charcoal on paper.

Class #4: Same as Class #3.

Evaluation Of Problem I

All three assignments had positive aspects. The motion sketches loosened them up, and the proportion studies increased their visual observations; but the subjective assignment for Classes 3 and 4 got so involved, thinking and feeling, they forgot about their inadequacies and enthusiastically plunged in.

PROBLEM 2

Presentation

Class #1: Interpret a motion study done the previous day in geometric solids such as cubes, triangles and spheres to show volume and mass. Simplify areas and group smaller forms. By utilizing one of his motion studies, the student is forced to use a pose that is probably more active and challenging than a stiff one he might imagine.

Class #2: Draw the model by sighting the figure with straight lines connecting the main landmarks at all the extremes of direction. Then determine the over-all relationships of distance and direction

between them. The eye is often deceived and distracted by all the minor intervening details. A ruler or one's pencil may be used for sighting and aligning. Draw the lines through and across the figure to help relate it to the space around it.

Class #3: Draw a mechanical interpretation of a figure, finding object equivalents to body parts, or building a figure from mechanical, machine-like gadgets. Employ fantasy and grotesque logic and inventiveness. Think about robots and electronics and engineering. Use pencil on paper.

Class #4: Same as Class #3

Evaluation of Problem 2

In Class #1 students had difficulty transposing human shapes into geometric ones in one period, and, most probably, looking directly at a live model in an active pose would have made it more understandable, rather than utilizing a study made previously.

Class #2 learned to look for relationships and alignments as an aid in figure drawing. Of the three, this approach was the most successful. The mechanical man problem caught the imagination of the students in Classes #3 and #4, but I'm not sure if there was any other value in it.

PROBLEM 3

Presentation

Class #1: Draw the model with pencil showing volume and masses as before, but now with spirals like uncoiled springs. Vary pressure, size and type of spiral. Don't emphasize edges or details.

Class #2: Draw the model but exaggerate and vary the proportions to enlarge some areas, reduce others, and leave some as they actually appear. This necessitates close observation first before one can decide what and how to distort.

Class #3: With a light value crayon and a dark value one, on paper of a middle value, draw a ball of yarn, being aware of its light and dark sides. Imagine the crayons are the yarn and wrap the ball up with it. Then draw three verticle forms and thread the crayon-like-yarn through and around the surface. Finally, imagine a man wrapped in the yarn who is desperately trying to escape, and draw how you think that would look.

Class #4: Same as Class #1.

Evaluation Of Problem 3

The spiral approach loosened them up alright, and they were able to show volume by varying pressure, and were pleased at the lack of emphasis on perfection and detail; but, I do not think it helped them in any way to understand the figure better. The exaggerations were

helpful in that the students saw how distortion offered interesting alternatives to conventional perspective.

Crayon-yarn wrapping was enjoyed by the class, but its main value seemed to lie more in its gimmickry than in its actual properties of visual revelation.

PROBLEM 4

Presentation

Class #1: Draw with ink lines, following exactly the outside contour edges of the model, then the outside plus the inside contour edges. Finally, draw body contours but develop one or two areas three-dimensionally with cross-hatching and shadows. This relates to Problem #3, being linear but more specific.

Class #2: Same as Class #1, but also look for places to break lines to help relate negative and positive spaces. "Glue" your eye to the surface being drawn and try for a slow, sensitive line. Be aware of the effect of overlapping lines in describing dimensions.

Class #3: Cover a large piece of paper with fingerpaint (powdered tempera and liquid starch). Experiment with various marks and pressures with hands, arms and elbows. Then draw a large figure in the greatest extreme of movement you can imagine, such as leaping, jumping and surging. Exaggerate for effect and explore diagonals as directions of movement instead of verticals.

Class #4: Same as Class #3.

Evaluation Of Problem 4

The contour drawing helped encourage close looking, and students felt rewarded in their efforts--pleased with the effectiveness of the simplicity.

The classes that fingerpainted really became enthused and engrossed, probably more because of the pleasurable gooeyness of the paint than the drawing itself; however, it did seem easier for them to exaggerate extremes of positions than when they gripped a pencil in the conventional manner.

PROBLEM 5

Presentation

Class #1: Still working with lines, but this time grouping and clustering verticals, diagonals and horizontals--not outlining-- build up the forms of the model by dipping cardboard strip edges in ink and applying to the paper. Extend lines past silhouette of figure to include negative space.

Class #2: As an extension of the last assignment, still work with contours, but now on moist paper with india ink, reed pens, lettering pens and brush. Vary degree and amount of wetness. Use both washes.

and hard edges. Make the most of accidental effects and the particular unique qualities of this technique.

Classes #3 and #4: Use pen and ink on the fingerpainted figures to emphasize and accent some areas.

Evaluation Of Problem 5

Students very much responded to using a new technique, both the cardboard as a tool and the wet paper as a surface. They became more aware of the importance of the quality of a line. The ink detailing on the fingerpaintings detracted from the original effect and did not add anything.

PROBLEM 6

Presentation

Classes #1 and #2: Treat paper with charcoal by rubbing on top of textural surfaces; vary tones; leave some white areas. Draw the model on top of the treated surface and integrate texture, tone, environment and figure areas so they work together. Strengthen and define key areas, those that portray action and feeling, in the figure. Not all areas need be in focus. Consider the atmosphere created by the rubbings and stress it.

Classes #3 and #4: Close your eyes and pretend you are a bug across the street from the school in someone's front yard. Imagine

what things look like to you--grass the size of trees arching near your head, pebbles the size of cars around and across which you have to scamper--things like fallen trees. The cracked sidewalk is huge and gray with deep furrows and craters. As you crawl toward the school, you dart and run to avoid being trampled by huge shoes the length of railroad cars. You crawl into the school and creep down the edge of the hall, praying you will escape annihilation. Then, into the art room, up onto your desk where you first view the great mass of the model towering far above you out into space. Now, open your eyes to draw what you would see.

Evaluation Of Problem 6

The bug's eye-view was an overwhelming success, and the results were imaginative and generally loosely executed. The rubbings were more complex and required more time than fifty minutes to develop.

PROBLEM 7

Presentation

Classes #1, #2, #3 and #4: Use graphite sticks or conte crayon and large sheets of butcher paper spread on the floor. Visit the gymnastic, exercise, and modern dance physical education classes and sketch the people as they are moving. Do not try for finished drawings but look for repetition of motion and the quality and mood of the movements.

Evaluation Of Problem 7

The numbers of people and the varieties of movements confused the students at first. However, after ten to fifteen minutes, they were generally able to cope with it. Especially intriguing to many were the "double exposure" repetitive drawings.

PROBLEM 8

Presentation

All four classes did oil wash studies of a model for five days. The model was sometimes a boy and other times a girl, and both the poses and the length of time allowed per study varied greatly. Emphasis was on showing form; using and controlling dark, middle, and light values; using areas as well as lines; balance and placement of composition.

Evaluation Of Problem 8

Studies using oil washes are an effective means of introducing oil painting. As the length of time spent on the study increases, so, too, does the complexity and buildup of the paint. I suggest beginning with one color of oil paint, thinned with turpentine, progressing gradually to two colors, and then to three colors, such as white, a high intensity color and a low intensity one. Since they are called studies and not serious paintings, students tend to relax, not worrying about making a

mistake, and enjoying what they are doing. My goal is to carry this attitude over into oil painting proper.

Figure 2. Results of drawing experiments.

Figure 2. Results of drawing experiments (continued).

Figure 2. Results of drawing experiments (continued).

CHAPTER II

PAINTING ASSIGNMENTS

PROBLEM 9

Presentation

All four classes received the same first painting assignment which was to compose and paint a situation involving a human figure, utilizing and applying the techniques and knowledge gained from the previous two and one-half weeks.

Evaluation of Problem 9

During the critique that followed each assignment, the students and I were able to make observations about the work as a whole. Introspection characterizes the work that resulted from this assignment in all four classes. Most often there was one figure, almost always of the same sex as the artist, in an environment that appeared isolated or protected. The students quickly observed how frequently the painted figure resembled the painter.

Quality or direction of light and shadow and position of the figure was often quite dramatic. As the students talked about their paintings, it became evident that either consciously or unconsciously the work was

Figure 3. Painting assignment 9.

Figure 3. Painting assignment 9 (continued).

directly related to a personal experience, real, imagined or dreamed.

The quality of paint application was usually tight, self-conscious and overworked. There was a reluctance to use strong value contrasts, and a preference toward creating differences by color contrasts instead. Neither did they exploit nor explore the full range of possibilities of each pigment, often using it directly from the tube. However, they readily accepted the idea of using color expressly to convey a mood or feeling rather than limiting it to a literal representation. For example, flesh tones no longer had to be beige and pink but became sometimes intense blue or red instead.

Response, involvement and success seemed greatest in Classes #3 and #4 where the subjective and eclectic approaches were used. Class #1, where observation was stressed, and Class #2, where more classic methods were used, had greater difficulty, perhaps because there was nothing that they could directly observe as they had done in the preceding weeks of the preparation. Positions of these figures in the paintings were also more passive than the other groups'.

PROBLEM 10

Presentation

The general assignment was to deal with two-dimension and three-dimension simultaneously, utilizing human form.

Class #1 worked from a model in a setup.

Class #2 had no model. They were encouraged to explore the use of materials in addition to paint (such as paper, magazine pictures, cloth, plastic and metallic foils). Visual contradiction, mystery and surrealism as points of view were suggested and discussed.

Class #3 was encouraged to paint on and work with three-dimensional surfaces and to incorporate social commentary and surrealism in their composition.

All three of the above approaches were suggested to Class #4 and they were told a model was available if they wished to use one.

Evaluation of Problem 10

Students responded positively and enthusiastically to the problem. Classes #2, #3 and #4 spent about one week planning and discussing their approaches before beginning their paintings.

Class #1 began the first day with oil washes directly on the canvas. The model posed for five class periods only. It was after the model was removed that the students began to freely experiment with the relationships of forms and colors, evidently feeling even less obligated then to limit their work to literal representation. Areas became two-dimensional most frequently by obscuring or dissolving edges of forms into shadowed areas, or causing areas to share the same color or value. Sometimes a whole form would flatten out next to an extensively modeled area, creating an intriguing contradiction.

Figure 4. Painting assignment 10.

Figure 4. Painting assignment 10 (continued).

Class #2 work was almost unanimously surrealistic and social commentary. They often dealt with several degrees of reality at once without much apprehension or difficulty and employed other materials readily. Students were particularly intrigued with the results, and probing discussions erupted frequently during their class. Shaped or cut out canvases, as well as both found and constructed forms, were utilized as surfaces on which to paint by the students in Class #3. Social commentary or personality projection were the main areas of concern. As in Class #2, the students questioned and discussed enthusiastically among themselves as their work developed.

The eclectic group, Class #4, also had interesting projects. They were concerned with two-dimensional abstract designs, surrealism and mystery. No one chose to have a model, although they often posed briefly for each other to examine a gesture or a particular position. They, too, were often introspective and expressed an aura of personal concern in their paintings.

PROBLEM 11

Presentation

Since students do tend to be especially introspective and egocentric while they are of high school age, an assignment that permitted them to make use of those qualities seemed appropriate. So, the last assignment of the figure painting unit was to paint a portrait of

themselves with a hat on. The requirement of a hat was to provide some additional forms to work with and to alter their appearance slightly from the everyday reflection they usually glimpse. Placement, position, expression and background were discussed. Then, one week was spent studying and sketching specific features, theirs and others. Close observation was stressed in Classes #1 and #4. Proportion and anatomy were demonstrated to Class #2. These three groups were given specific daily assignments. Class #3 was asked to make studies of faces and features from many angles of many expressions, as they thought necessary, to prepare for their painting. The results of the studies from all four groups seem to be much the same. However, when specific qualities and details of facial features were pointed out, it did appear to aid their perception. After the preliminary studies, the oil paintings were begun.

Evaluation Of Problem 11

Class #1 did fairly representational, realistic portraits of themselves; Classes #2 and #3 were more free and open in their approach to color and technique, and Class #4 was by far the most experimental. Some in Classes #3 and #4 were still intrigued with two-dimensional and three-dimensional qualities working together, a carry-over from Problem 10. This assignment was a successful one; they had a model that could be observed closely, and many avenues of

approach could be explored since their range of awareness had greatly expanded.

Figure 5. Painting assignment 11.

Figure 5. Painting assignment 11 (continued).

Figure 5. Painting assignment 11 (continued).

CHAPTER III

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the wide diversity of personalities and skills, it is difficult to ascertain exactly which point of view was the most helpful as preparation in dealing with figure painting.

The size, "chemistry", and time of day of the class also appears to influence success. The more people in a class, the wider the variety of paintings, hence the wider the influences on each student. The first period class at 8:00 A. M. was much quieter and more subdued and the smallest with thirteen students. Second period, with twenty-one, and third period, with twenty-four seemed the most wide-awake and most enthusiastic. The students in the fourth group, sixth period, seemed more tired and restless than the others, but the majority of the twenty students seemed to be involved and alert nevertheless.

The first six problems were the only ones obviously different in approach from one another, and this covered a time span of only six class periods. Problems seven, eight and nine were the same exactly. Problems ten and eleven were essentially the same but with subtle variations.

As would then be anticipated, no single point of view emerged as extremely superior to any other. Each of the four approaches offered some challenging problems to the students and resulted in artistic growth and development to widely varying degrees. The subjective, or personal, approach used with Class #3 was definitely the most exciting in that students would easily and quickly relate to the assignment and go to work with enthusiasm. It seems safe to me to generalize that anything that approaches a teenager through his ego has the best chance of affecting him.

A close second to the subjective method, however, was the combination one used with Class #4. Each day, I would decide which assignment had seemed to work best with the first three groups, and then use it with the fourth group. By far, the problem most often selected had been the one used with Class #3. This offered a welcome opportunity to double check the effectiveness of the assignment.

The observation approach with Class #1 seemed to open some important visual doors that up to that point evidently had been untouched. They simply were not used to looking and observing and then remembering what they saw. The classic, or traditional, method used with Class #2 offered an opportunity to try out a lot of exercises that had been used in art books and art classes in years past and to see just how helpful they actually were; it was discovered that some of them actually weren't.

This, then, is my recommendation for an approach to figure composition with high school students--a combination of all four methods, with strong emphasis on subjective interpretation. I recommend these following fourteen problems because they were successful for me and the students with whom I worked. Some of the ones I have left out have potential, but I think their value can be better taught by other approaches. Other problems became mere gimmicks, so then became more important than the figure.

RECOMMENDED FIGURE DRAWING UNIT

	PAGE
<u>Problem 1</u> (Problem 1, Class #1).	1
Execute bold, quick motion studies, 15 seconds to 90 seconds each.	
<u>Problem 2</u> (Problem 1, Class #3).	1
Capture imagined forms from verbal descriptions of actions.	
<u>Problem 3</u> (Problem 2, Class #2 and Problem 5, Class #1).	2,6
Sight and draw figure with straight lines to determine visual relationships.	
<u>Problem 4</u> (Problem 3, Class #2).	4
Exaggerate proportions for effect.	
<u>Problem 5</u> (Problem 4, Classes #1 and #2).	5
Draw line contours of figure only.	

	PAGE
<u>Problem 6</u> (Problem 4, Class #3).	5
Fingerprint figures in extremes of action positions.	
<u>Problem 7</u> (Problem 5, Class #2).	6
Draw with ink on wet paper.	
<u>Problem 8</u> (Problem 6, Classes #1 and #2).	7
Combine rubbings and figure drawing.	
<u>Problem 9</u> (Problem 6, Class #3).	7
Draw from a bug's eye view.	
<u>Problem 10</u> (Problem 7, all Classes).	8
Sketch dancers and gymnasts.	
<u>Problem 11</u> (Problem 8, all Classes).	9
Do oil washes and studies of model.	
<u>Problem 12</u> (Problem 9 and 10 combined).	16,17
Paint a model in a setup, as an extension of Problem 11, but deal with two and three dimensions simultaneously.	
<u>Problem 14</u> (Problem 11, all Classes).	21
Paint a self portrait.	

I believe a unit on figure composition which follows this approach will succeed in developing a willingness on the part of the student to accept and deal with the figure and in developing his ability to do so.

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