

The Emergence of Tonal Drawing

by Ephraim Rubenstein

Inscribed on the seal of the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, is the Latin motto “Nulla Dies Sine Linea”, or “No Day Without a Line.” The words come from Pliny the Elder and are part of his account of the industriousness of the great Greek painter Apelles: “In general, it was a standing practice with Apelles never to be so occupied with carrying out the day’s business that he did not practice his art by drawing a line, and the example that he set has come down as a proverb.” A laudatory injunction, indeed. It exhorts the artist to keep up the daily practice of drawing and to be continually mindful of his craft. Encoded in this dictum, however, are several assumptions. The first is that drawing forms the basis of all the arts; and second, that line forms the basis for drawing.



Figure 1 Yellow Rose VI by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2002, graphite powder on yellow prepared paper, 22 x 30. Private collection.

The association of drawing basics with line is deeply embedded in most people’s minds, so much so that the most common disavowal of any talent in art is the tiresome, “I can’t even draw a straight line.” If you ask someone to draw something, his or her drawing ideas will invariably be linear, and strictly speaking, confined to a contour drawing. This makes sense, as lines lend themselves to quick descriptions of objects and to the swift conveyance of information about those objects. Lines separate and therefore are a tremendous tool for establishing clarity. At their most rudimentary level, they function as pictograms—as in stick figures—or as some form of hieroglyph. Raised to the highest level, as in an Ingres or Degas drawing, lines are exquisite—magnificent vehicles for form, movement, and rhythm.

But there exists side by side with the language of line the language of tone, a language based not upon lines but on the juxtaposition of relative values. It is a painterly way of drawing, of seeing in masses

rather than in outlines. In tonal drawing, the eye retreats from the edges of things and sees, instead, patches of light and shade. While linear drawing favors boundaries, tonal drawing aims at dissolving these boundaries and stressing the quality of light and atmosphere that unites all objects in the visual field. It is an emotional, immediate way of seeing, closely related to vision. Within the long history of drawing, it is a more recent development, emerging out of linear drawing. But tonal drawing is a language that has a history and a lineage, and many contemporary artists find its distinctive voice captivating.



Figure 2 Laura Sitting With Her Arms Crossed by Wendy Artin, 2002, watercolor, 8 x 10

Tonal drawing developed from linear drawing through the evolution of materials and practices. Earlier drawing instruments, such as the metalpoint stylus and the goose or crow quill, were very hard and were used in conjunction with equally unyielding surfaces such as parchment and vellum. As these surfaces gave way to the proliferation of linen- and cotton-rag papers in the 13th century, the use of broader, softer implements became possible.

This evolution was also related to changing needs and goals for drawing. Early drawings served primarily as preparations for paintings, and therefore had clear outlines that could be easily transferred to wood panels or frescoed walls. They had to function primarily as templates, as in fresco cartoons. Used for this purpose, the drawings offered a real advantage in having clear contours that separated one form from

another. But as the size of frescoes grew, and as rag paper for cartoons became more available, broader drawing implements such as black chalk grew in popularity. As fresco painting in general gave way to easel painting on linen with oil, artists could draw directly on the canvas and modify the work during the painting process. Consequently, there was less of a premium on fixed outlines. As interest grew in the appearance of the visual field, with its changing effects of light and atmosphere, it became less important to emphasize the contours.



Figure 3 Study for Boy Lincoln by Eastman Johnson, 1868, charcoal, white chalk, and gouache on paper, 14 x 12¾. Collection Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

As prevalent as it has been historically, the contour remains an artificial construction. We don't see in lines, no matter how accustomed we are to delineating objects with them. When I look out the window and see the edge of a building against the sky, I do not see a line, per se. I see a mass of dark tone juxtaposed against a mass of much lighter tone, and the point at which they meet creates an edge. This edge relationship might be described in an abbreviated fashion with a line, but it might also be more fully described by re-creating the tonal relationship between the two masses whose congruence makes the edge. In tonal drawing, there are edges to masses, rather than lines between them. To substitute a line for the edge of a value relationship is to substitute something that is not there for something that is. That is why linear drawing seems more abstract and intellectual. A line seems intellectual not because it lacks feeling—for what could be more emotive than a Leonardo silverpoint line—but because we don't

actually see in lines and therefore they have to be decoded or interpreted. Juxtaposed tones, being so much closer to vision, seem much more immediate.

Besides being a sublime linear draftsman, Leonardo was a pivotal figure in the emergence of tonal drawing. He worked at a time of unprecedented curiosity about the visual field, exploring what the eye actually saw. This interest coincided with, and was in turn prompted by, the proliferation of oil painting, which gave artists the technical means through which to record these observations. There was a real shift in Leonardo's era from seeing objects as symbols to having a regard for their material reality. Leonardo's writings are filled with observations about how objects appear to the eye, about light and shadow, and the mitigating effects of atmosphere and distance. Much of this thinking came from his study of optics and aerial perspective in landscape. So when he advises artists about painting from nature, he writes in his Treatise on Painting as a pure tonalist: "The end of any color is only the beginning of another, and it ought not to be called a line, for nothing interposes between them, except the termination of the one against the other, which being nothing in itself, cannot be perceivable." Leonardo was eventually able to take the discoveries he made in oil painting and apply them to drawing. He continues, "Take care that the shadows and lights be united or lost in each other, without any hard strokes or lines; as smoke loses itself in the air, so are your lights and shadows to pass from one to the other without any apparent separation."

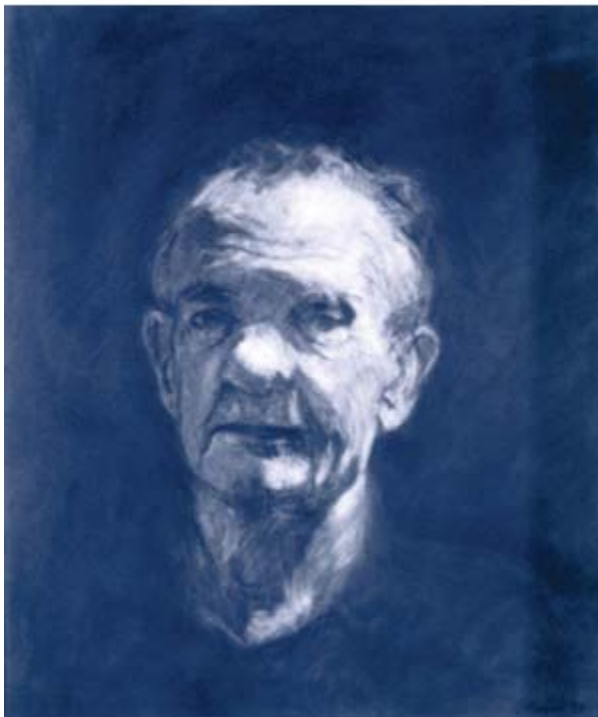


Figure 4 My Father at 93 by Carlos Turbin, 2004, graphite powder on prepared paper, 16 x 13½.

This ultimately became a personal aesthetic for Leonardo, a way of interpreting and presenting nature as much as a way of seeing it. His name has become synonymous with the sfumato (smokelike atmosphere) that bathes everything in his work. In the Head of the Virgin in Three Quarter View Facing to the Right, her head leans beneficently into the drawing, her dark locks cascading down like running water. And truly, as smoke loses itself in the air, she emerges into our own atmosphere, like a creature from somewhere kinder and more graceful than here. The tonal gradations are so delicate that from close-up one cannot tell where a shadow ends and a light begins. Unlike most of his Florentine contemporaries, Leonardo did not feel the need to throw a line around everything, but rather he let things melt, dissolve, emerge, and marry as they do in the visual field.

Other roads to tonalism emerged from an increasing interest in depicting unusual effects of light, such as in night scenes illuminated by fires, candle, or moonlight. One such remarkable early example is a drawing by Guercino for one of his frescos in the Casino Ludovisi. Seated Woman Reading a Book is a study for the allegorical figure of Night that occupies one of the lunettes on the ground floor. Her role as the embodiment of Night, and Guercino's consequent interest in this specific lighting condition, provoked a move into tonal thinking. What is crucial here is not so much the pose of the figure or her proportions but how she is lit. In this study, the effect of light itself has become the subject of the work, and the use of light and dark patches has become much more important than the initial linear underpinning. A later example of the same phenomenon occurs in Eastman Johnson's magical study for The Boy Lincoln, a charcoal and white chalk drawing depicting Abraham Lincoln as a boy, reading by the light of the fire.



Figure 5 Untitled by Diego Catalan Amilivia, 2005, graphite, 18½ x 14. Collection Art Students League of New York, New York, New York.

Another factor that helped precipitate a move toward tonality was the proliferation of drawing inks from the Orient, particularly the introduction of Chinese or India ink drawing sticks in the 17th century. Extremely portable, these inks could be used outdoors in landscape wash drawing, where capturing fleeting effects of light and shadow are paramount. The burgeoning plein air landscape movement provoked a more tonal manner of seeing because it is based so much more on what art historian Heinrich Wölfflin called the “shifting semblance” of things, in his book *Principles of Art History* (Dover Publications, Mineola, New York). Whereas a figure in the studio or a still-life object on a tabletop are knowable on some level, a tree in the fog or the sunlight gleaming off the surface of a river is not.

Georges Seurat’s astounding black Conté crayon drawings, executed on his favored Ingres paper, broke the concept of tonality wide open. Suddenly artists realized the possibilities of seeing solely in terms of juxtaposed patches of light and dark. Never before, and rarely since, have there been such concerted acts of pure seeing. If all drawing consists of recording some combination of what we see and what we know about objects or the visual field, then Seurat favored seeing over knowing, to an unprecedented extent. He looked out at nature as if he did not know what anything was, but could only perceive its shape and tone. He saw the world primarily as arrangements of silhouette and value, taking the entire visual field, not just the object, into account. His drawings are, in artist Mark Karnes’ view, “intensely

democratic. It is as if he is stating that light doesn't discriminate in favor of one thing or another—it is merely there for all things all the time."

Seurat was able to push seeing purely in values further than it had ever been pushed before. But even he was not dogmatic about never using lines, or the idea that linear thoughts could not play an important role in structuring a tonal drawing. In fact, it is often the tension between the linear and the tonal elements that make the drawing exciting. Particularly early on, Seurat himself exploited a kind of calligraphic scribbling within certain tonal areas that created texture and energy. Many artists, such as Francis Cunningham, use a delicate initial outline to establish the basic forms and their placement on the page. But this outline functions largely as a map to tell him where to place his values as he starts to ally tone to tone. Because Cunningham's drawings are often exquisitely delicate and suggestive, a handful of values will suffice to create a whole world. The remnants of the initial outline then start to work as a foil to show you how much work a handful of values have accomplished.



Figure 6 The Artist's Mother by Georges Seurat, 1882-1883, Conté, 12? x 9½. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Edwin Dickinson, one of the greatest modern draftsmen, also makes incisive use of occasional lines in his tonal drawings. They function, as with Cunningham, as an initial map or, later in the drawing process, a

way to find or restate a lost architectural element. One also gets the feeling that Dickinson put in occasional lines as visual punctuation—to catch your eye, lead it somewhere, slow it down, or even stop it. These linear thoughts are crucial to the tension in the drawing, although they exist as accents within the context of a glorious, soft tonal field that carries the burden of expression in the drawing.

Tonal drawing privileges seeing over knowing—the ostensible subject matter, the “what it is,” is less important than the “how it appears.” As artist and instructor Charles Hawthorne pointed out, everyone knows that a piece of coal is dark and the white pages of an open book are light. But one could place the black coal in the sunlight and plunge the open book into a deep shadow and the value relationships would be reversed. An object can be so subsumed in shadow that we don’t even know what it is. Tonal drawing, because of its emphasis on seeing, leaves you open to the unexpectedness of the visual world, to the unpredictable. It places you right smack in the middle of a struggle between what you believe to be out there, and what actually is there.

In Francis Cunningham’s two drapery studies, the drapery is the occasion rather than the subject of the drawing. Cunningham has downplayed the objective reality of the objects—chair, drapery, model stand—even though they are recognizable and constitute an important part of the piece. But the arrangement of the objects, the rhythms they engender, the glowing light in the one and the symphonic sweep of shadow in the other—these are the themes of the drawings. The pieces bring to the forefront the truth that experience is essentially abstract, that what we see is light and shadow even as we recognize objects within them.

This democratic look at the visual field, as simple as it seems, is foreign to most people’s conception of drawing, which tends to segregate objects. Think of academic figure drawing, in which the figure is removed from its context by isolating it in a blank field. And while this quarantining of the lone object may intensify our scrutiny of it, we often come away feeling more strongly about the unnaturalness of the situation than we do about the reality of the object. The figure’s contour, as beautiful as it may be, functions as a kind of containment, withdrawing the object from the ebb and flow of life. Tonal drawing seeks to reinstate the object into its context and see it in terms of its relationship to everything around it.

Mark Karnes is a master of this aspect of tonal drawing. You move across a Karnes drawing rather than staring at one thing in it. All things in his drawings are determined by what is next to them. Unlike the hierarchy of an academic drawing, in which you are asked to look at one thing and one thing only, what is important here is the relationship of things as they come together. A winter tree can only be known by virtue of the dark roof behind it; the more massive shadow of a building on top is completely dependent on the more delicate shadow of a tree below.

Karnes' work is steeped in seeing. Rather than drawing a house or a car, Karnes draws a space and a type of light that happens to have a house and, at this moment, a car in it. The atmosphere is so beautifully captured that we feel that we have been there, even if we have not, and the image expands in our minds like a persistent memory. Karnes also does myriad ink-wash studies of subjects that interest him. Like Claude and Constable, Karnes finds ink to be a tremendously immediate material. It shortens the time between seeing the subject and recording it, so he can respond to it with a directness impossible in any other medium. To this end, he keeps these studies extremely small so that he can give over to the impulse and not have to worry about controlling the structure of a larger work. It is all readable with one glance at the page.

Very much the same thing can be said for Wendy Artin's lovely figure studies in watercolor wash. Her response to the patterns of light and shade as they hit and describe the figure is so immediate that we feel we are looking at something truly in movement. Her models dance before us—first they are there and then they are not. She expresses their glow by marrying the light side of the figure with the paper so that the form can emerge on the shadow side with a deft wash of the brush. And even though they glow with light and move as in a flash, a credible figure is described underneath. Artin never loses the structure or compromises the substantiality of her figures. This combination of movement and palpability is what makes them so infinitely sensuous and graceful.

Like a painting, a great tonal drawing can be read 50 feet away. Reid Thompson's dramatic standing figure is seen silhouetted against the light, and everything in the drawing converges on the glowing backlight that rims the edge of the model's head, shoulder, and breast. Midway through the drawing, Thompson massed and darkened the field surrounding the figure to remove everything extraneous. This ability to add elements, take them out, lighten or darken whole masses, and make substantial changes along the way makes tonal drawing extremely appealing to painters. It is very close to painting, in terms of process, and is very much a painterly way of thinking.

In order to explore tonal drawing, it is important to use materials and methods that lend themselves to tonal thinking. A silverpoint stylus or a hard graphite pencil will not do the job, as these instruments are dedicated to laying down lines. But graphite, for instance, comes in powdered form. It can be applied with a stump or chamois in masses with no lines at all. Working in this manner feels very much like painting in black and white. Unlike charcoal, which is drier and tends to fly away and scatter, graphite has a slightly oily quality that will stick where it is put much more precisely. Because of this, it is capable of great delicacy and detail.

Or one could take a piece of Bristol or hot-pressed watercolor paper, cover the whole sheet with a medium tone of graphite powder, and without using any preliminary lines, start to work back into the tone, removing the areas of light with a kneaded eraser. Carole Turbin's moving portrait of her father is an example of this method. Working subtractively like this is an extremely moody and emotive approach, because the figure literally has been pulled out of the darkness. And Turbin regulates the

intensity of light by pressure, just as you would with a conventional drawing, except that it is in reverse—the harder you push, the lighter the tones get.

There is an infinite range of expressive possibilities in tonal drawing. Whether one gives over to the pure looking, as in a Cunningham piece of drapery or a Karnes sunbeam, or one goes after the naturalism of the subject, as in Diego Catalan Amilivia's untitled, stunning graphite portrait, what matters most in a tonal drawing is seeing in adjacent values, rather than in lines, and melting of the boundaries that contain things. As Wölfflin so beautifully wrote, "As soon as the depreciation of line as boundary takes place, painterly possibilities set in. Then it is as if at all points everything is enlivened by a mysterious movement Forms begin to play; lights and shadows become an independent element, they seek and hold each other from height to height, from depth to depth; the whole takes on the semblance of a movement ceaselessly emanating, never ending."