

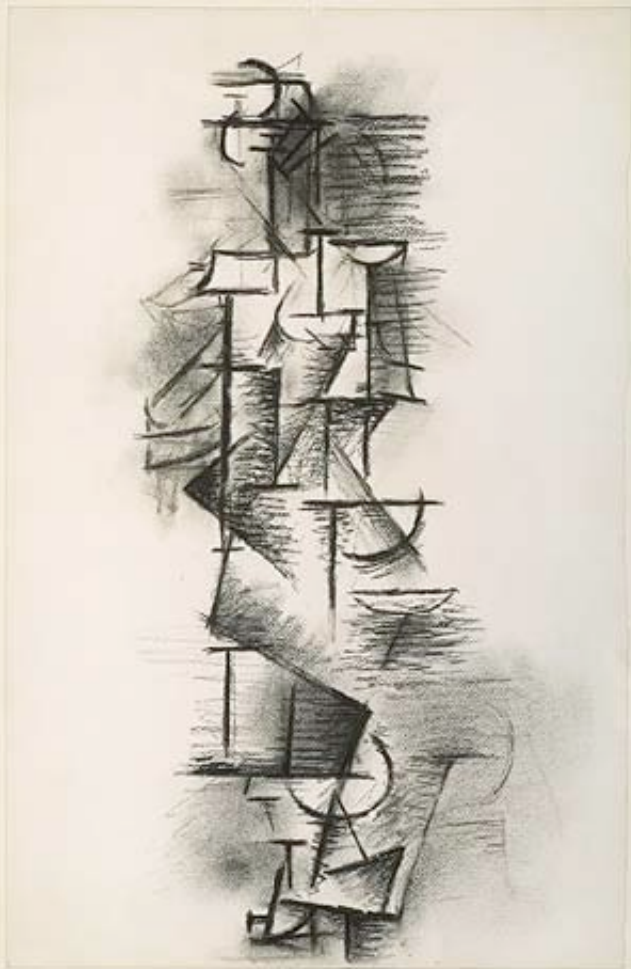
# Figure Drawing

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Approaches to understanding and drawing figures

Marsha Devine © 2009  
Adapted from a presentation by  
Judith Marquez 2008

The human figure is an endlessly fascinating subject for artists, as seen in the many interpretations throughout art history.



Pablo Picasso, 1910



Michelangelo. 1500's

The figure is also one of the most challenging subjects, complex and always changing. Figure drawing requires careful study of the form, and the willingness to practice a general approach without concern for a 'perfect' drawing.

We'll review three techniques for simplifying figure drawing:

- **Gesture** – a loose, quickly executed sketch recording an immediate response to the posture, size, and shape of figure
- **Sighting for Measurement** – using a unit of measurement for accurate proportions, observing horizontal and vertical alignments.
- **Modeling** – shading along the major planes of the figure to show volume.

# Gesture Drawing

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To accurately draw figures and portraits, it's essential to constantly search out the relative placement of features and parts.

- This means always considering the 'whole' of your subject, how the parts work together visually.
- Details are not important at this stage, and can interfere with seeing accurate proportions and underlying structure, the foundation of a convincing figure study.

**Gesture drawing is great way to practice seeing and drawing the entire figure!**

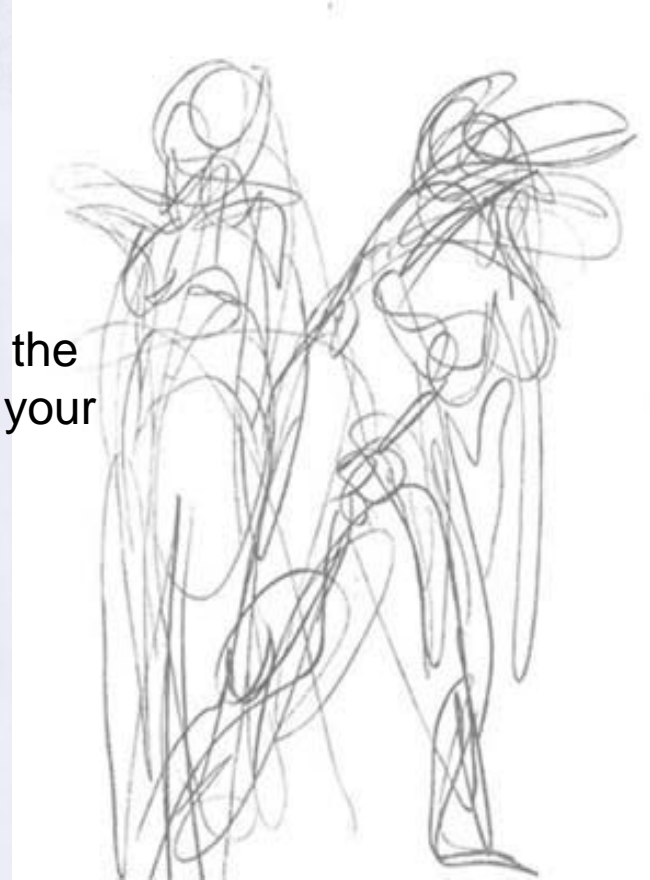


In learning to draw the figure, we can tend to look at details first, drawing these in isolation without noticing how they relate to adjoining shapes and the overall form.

**Gesture is a quick *but thoughtful* drawing based on observing the general structure and movement of the subject.**

Gesture drawing explores the form and movement of the figure in space; ideally it duplicates the movement of your eye across your subject.

- Observe how the parts relate as a whole, not how they appear individually – this is the essence of gesture.
- Often, we must consciously ignore specifics and look for overall arrangements.



- ▶ In gesture drawings, lines move in and out of the form, not remaining on the outside edges.
- ▶ Gesture seeks the main proportions, movements, and energy of the pose. The drawings won't always look realistic -gestures aren't meant to represent the figure in detail, but rather suggest the essential feeling of the subject.
- ▶ The idea is to move from the general to the specific, establishing the essential arrangements of the form before refining the drawing.

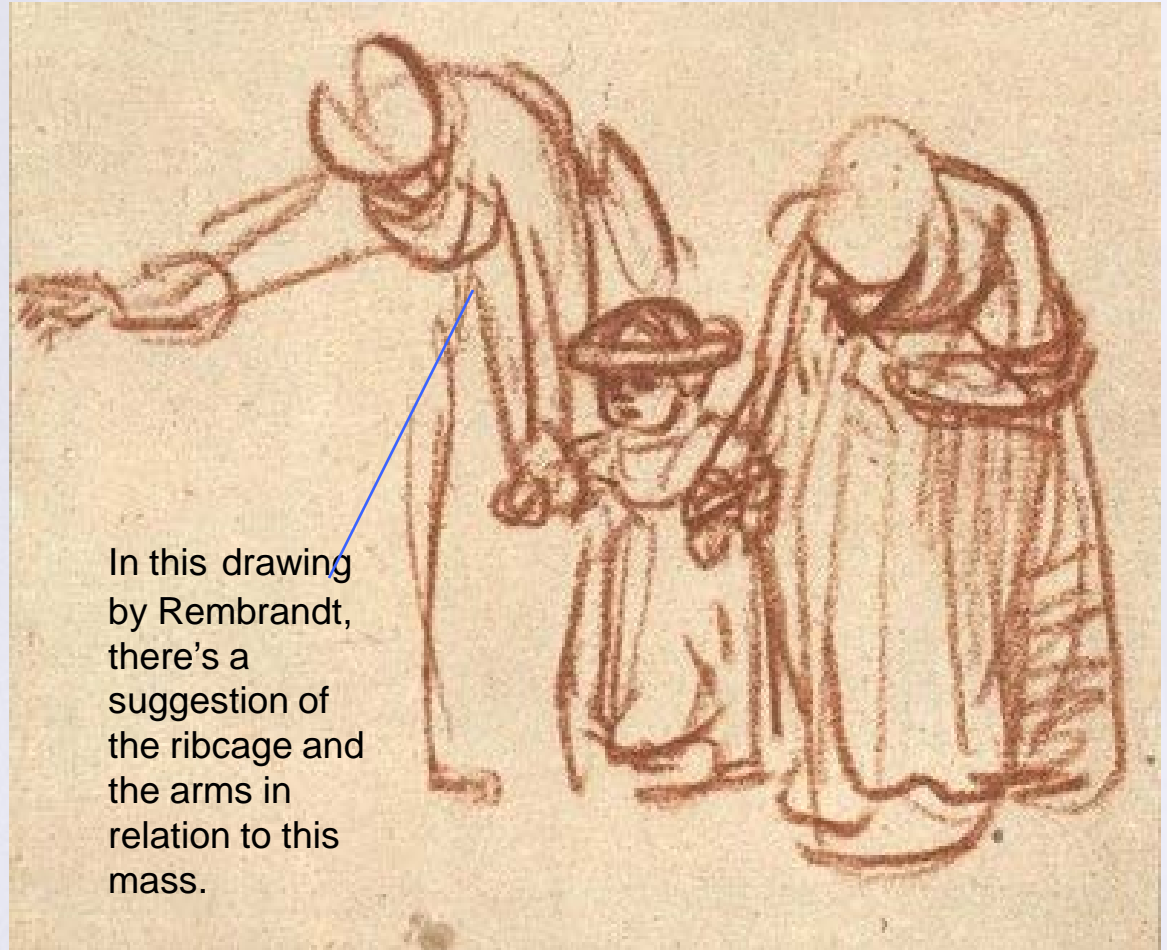


Drawing by Honore Daumier

While often used as preliminary studies, gestures can stand on their own, as seen in these two sketches by Rembrandt.



Look for the primary large, moveable masses - the head, rib cage (chest), and pelvis. Note the relationship of these three masses in each pose, and next how the arms and legs relate to these masses.



In this drawing by Rembrandt, there's a suggestion of the ribcage and the arms in relation to this mass.



# Tips for Practicing gesture

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- **Observe your subject for a few moments before you start to draw.** What is your subject doing? What is the simplest representation of the pose? Is there a single line to express this?
- **Suggest the entire figure and its' position within the first few seconds of drawing.**
- **Think energy and immediacy** – gesture is a visual record of the energy and movement that goes into making the marks.
- **Keep the poses short** - 30 seconds to a minute. This encourages drawing quickly!
- **Keep your eyes on your subject.** Draw in as continuous a line as possible, keeping your drawing tool in contact with the paper. Resist the temptation to look at your paper more than a few times!
- **Draw lightly.** You don't want to erase anything, and you will constantly be making adjustments and corrections. Bold lines that aren't accurate are hard to ignore as you make changes. Light lines can easily be drawn over or added to, or simply left as they are

Another way to understand structure is to 'draw through' the solid forms of the body.

Imagine the figure as transparent and constructed of basic geometric forms. Draw the line of the subject whether you can see it or not.

Understanding and drawing this basic structure gives you a preliminary foundation to further develop your drawing.



Drawing from "How to Draw What You See" by Rudy De Reyna

- Once you've established the main posture, placement, and proportions of the figure, you can begin to add contours to describe the particular character of your subject.
- Measuring for accurate proportions is the next step.



Drawing by Michael Economos, from "The Art of Drawing" by Bernard Chaet

# Sighting for Measurement

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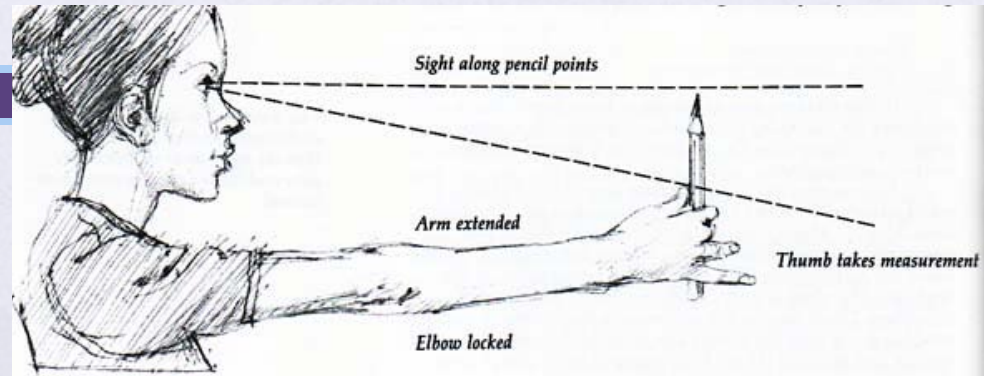
Sighting is a way to achieve correct proportions through observing and measuring relative sizes and relationships of the figure and its parts.

## Three main uses of sighting:

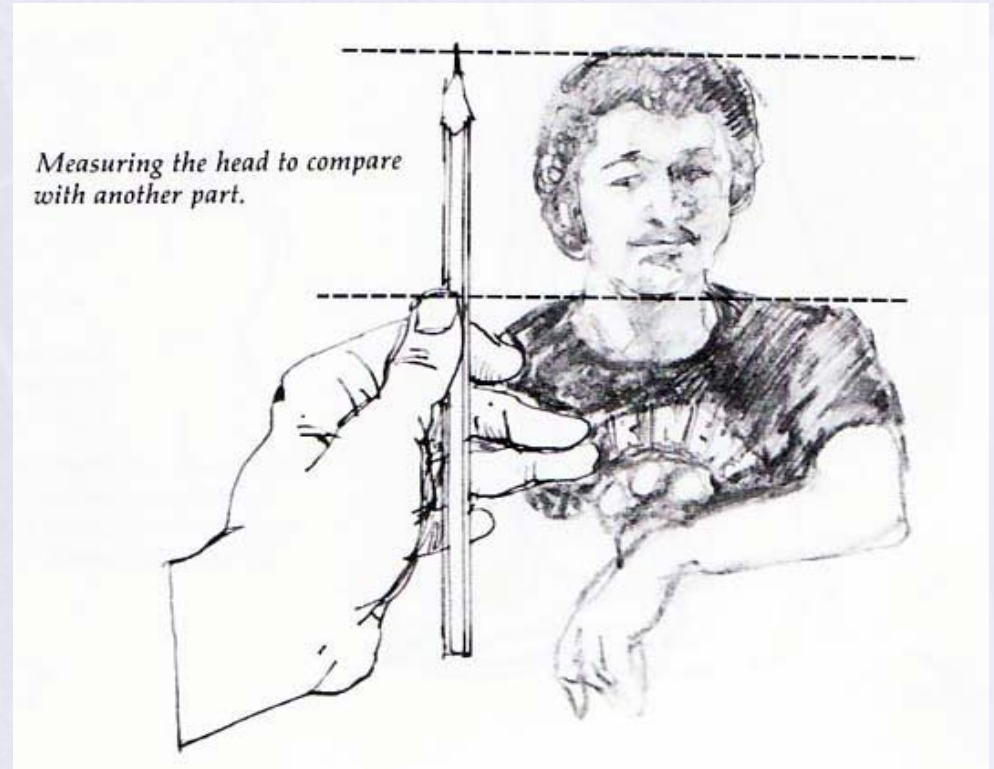
- **Sighting for Relative Proportions:** or taking comparative measurements. Using your pencil as a measuring tool, compare the length or width of one part of the body to another. This helps you see their relative sizes and draw the figure in proportion.
- **Sighting for Angles and Axis Lines:** You can compare the angles of the figure and limbs against a horizontal or vertical line established by how you hold the pencil. An axis line is an imagined line running through the center of a form. Finding the mid-point of a form can be useful in establishing accurate proportions and placement on the page.
- **Vertical and Horizontal Alignments** – observe the position of features and limbs, how line up with each other across the figure, up and down and across the entire form.

# How to Sight:

- ▶ Hold your pencil up vertically at one end, between the thumb and first two fingers. Extend your arm fully, keeping your elbow locked. Close one eye and line up the top of your pencil with the top or end of what you'd like to measure. Move your thumb up until it lines up with the bottom of the form. This is your unit of measurement, and you can now compare it to other parts of the form by moving your arm while maintaining the established measurement on the pencil. Keep your arm straight!

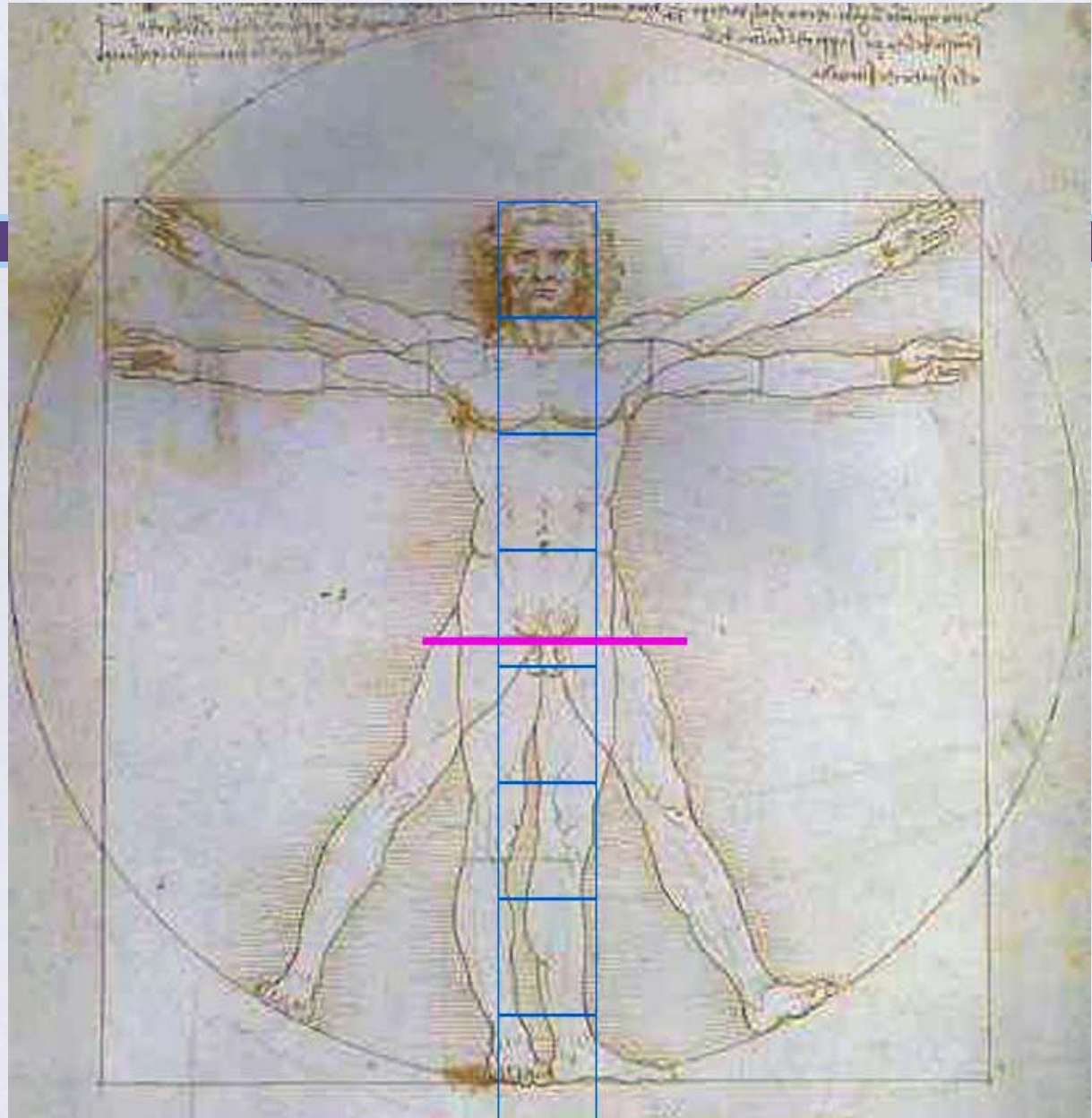


- This is basically comparison – how long is the arm relative to the length of the head? How long are the legs compared to the torso or arm? You are looking at the way parts of the body relate to each other rather than drawing them in isolation.
- The head is a traditional unit of measurement when drawing the figure, measured from the top of the head to the bottom of the chin.

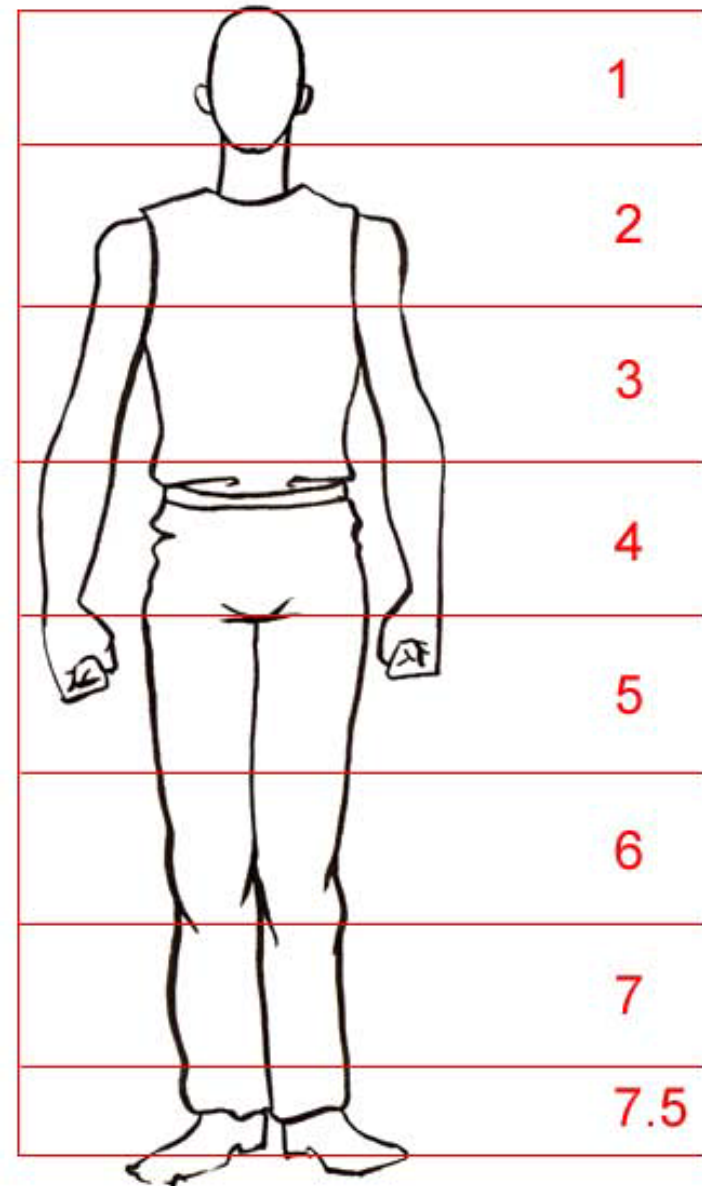


Leonardo Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" depicts what he considered ideal human proportions. The distance between the outstretched arms, fingertip to fingertip equals the distance from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet.

- ▶ The blue squares (not from Da Vinci!) show the figure about  $7 \frac{1}{2}$  heads tall.
- ▶ The purple line shows the midpoint of the body at the hip joint.

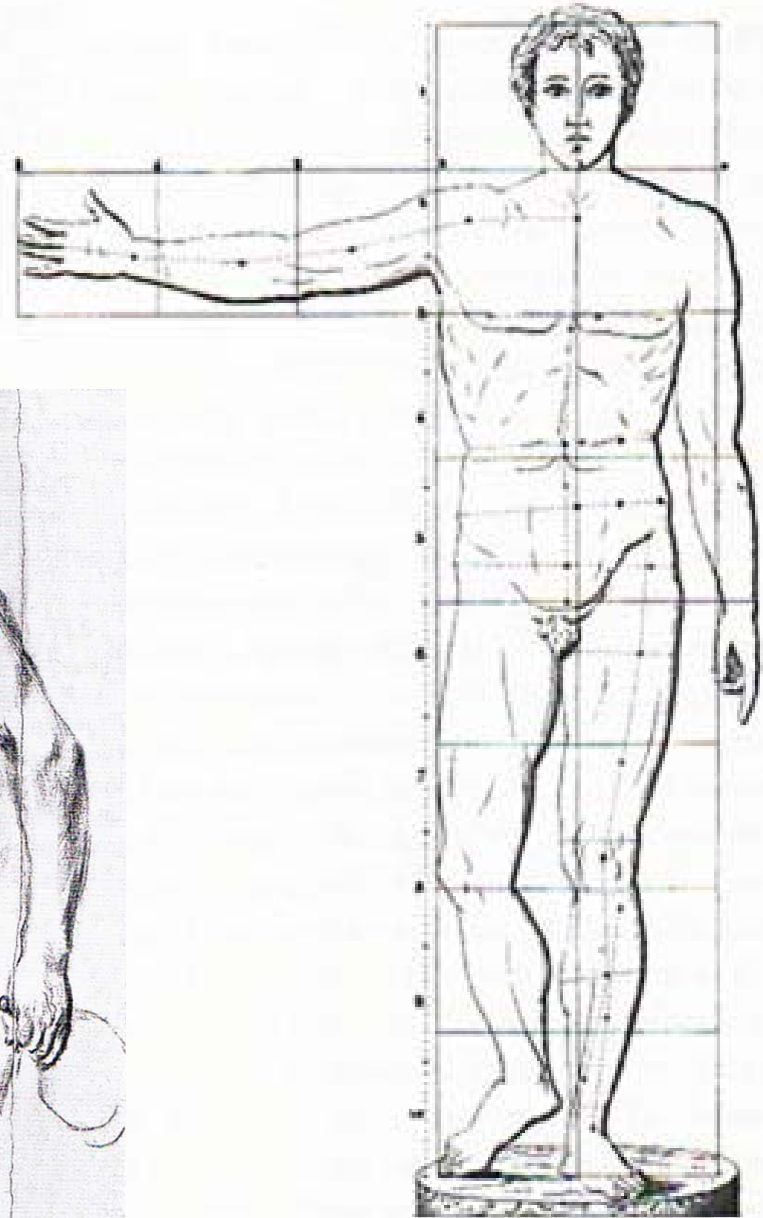
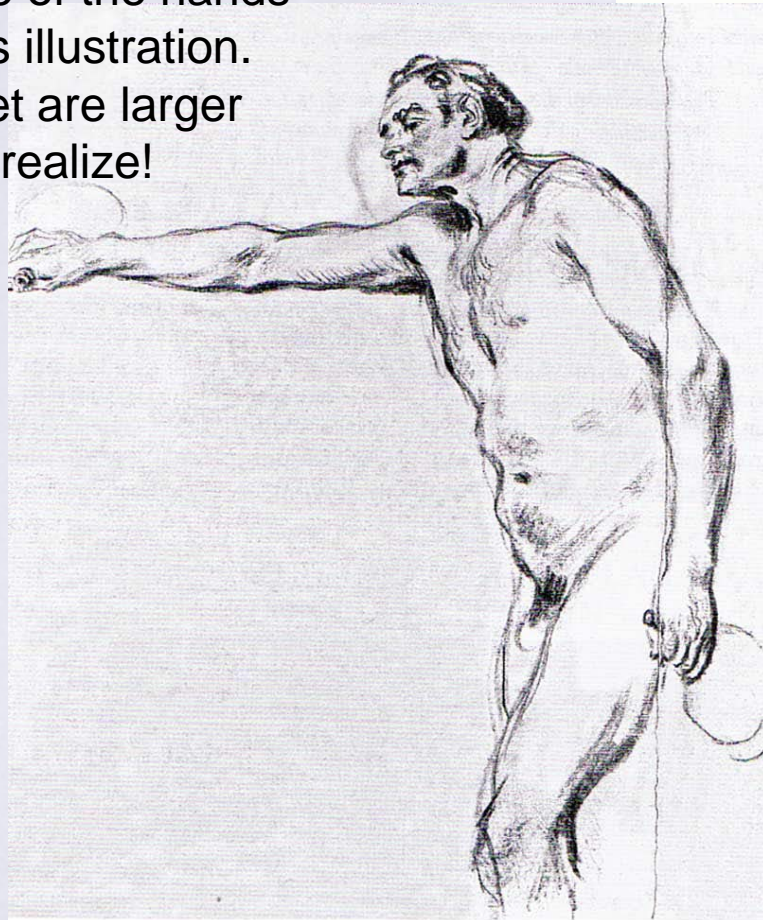


- The average person is about 7-8 heads tall, just about everyone is between 6 and ten.
- The shoulders are 2-3 heads wide.
- The hip joint is about the mid-point of a standing figure, top to bottom.
- Women's shoulders are generally narrower and their torso longer than men's, relative to total body length.
- Men's hips are usually narrower than females.
- Remember these are general guidelines. Each figure is unique and should be observed and measured carefully!



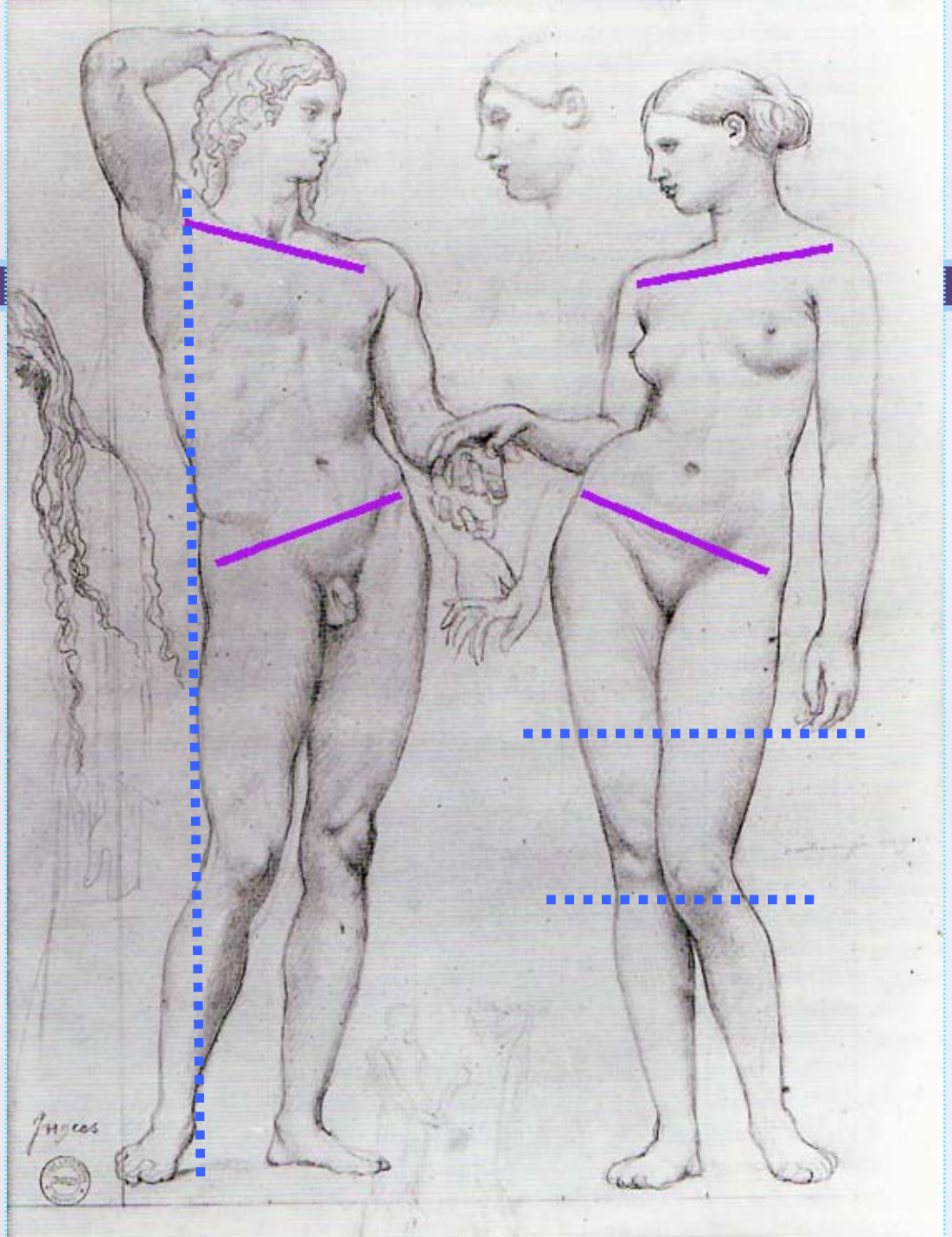


- ▶ Notice the size of the hands and feet in this illustration. Hands and feet are larger than we often realize!



This demonstrates sighting for angles, and for horizontal and vertical alignments.

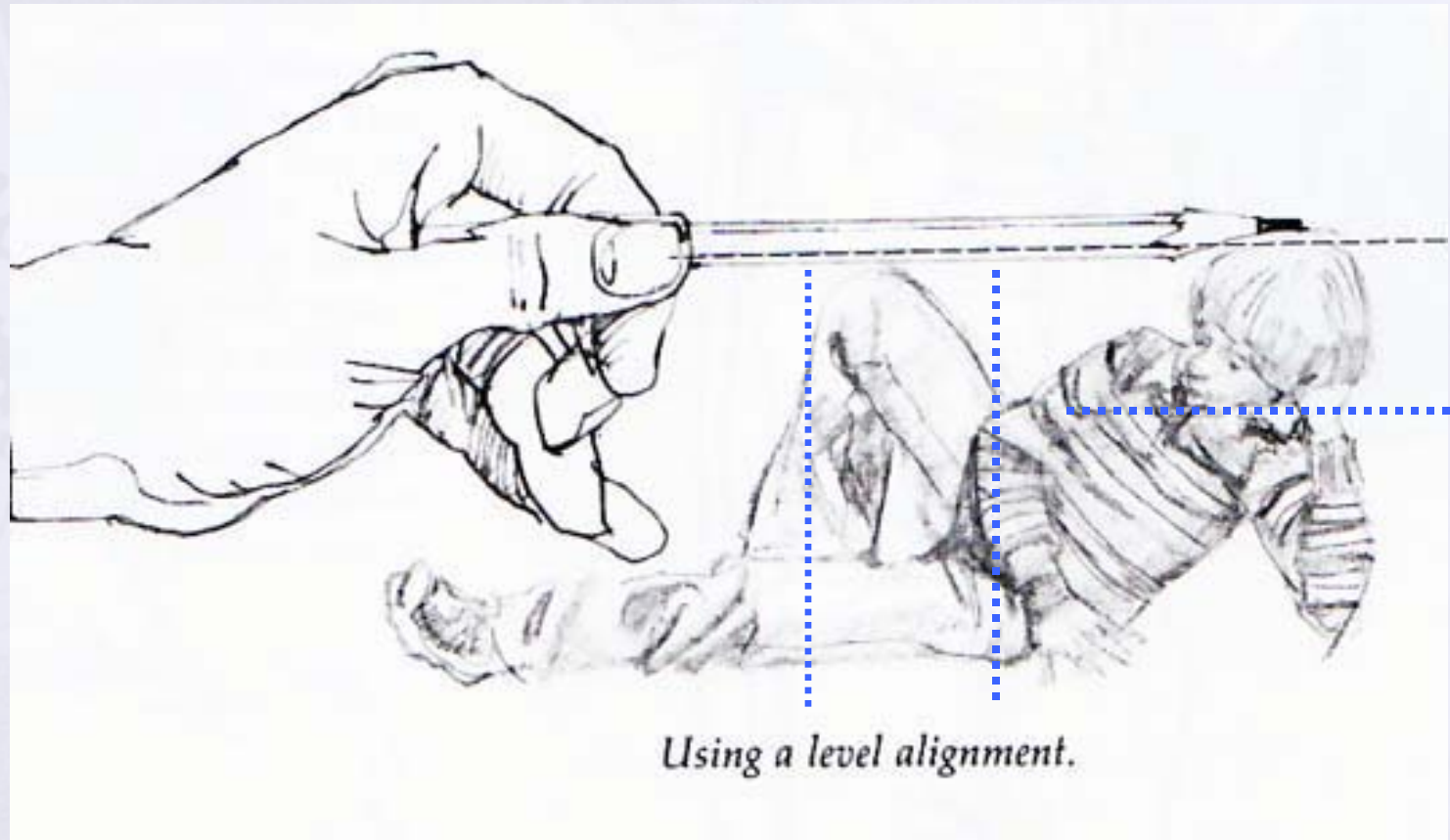
In a standing posture, pay attention to the relative angles of the hips and shoulders. If the weight is more on one leg than the other, one hip will be lower, and the opposite shoulder will be higher.



Drawing by Dominique Ingres, c.1842

Use your pencil to sight alignments of 'landmarks' on your subject - you can see how the top of the head and knee align with each other in this posture.

Find other alignments across the figure, both vertically and horizontally.



# Modeling to Create Volume

Modeling, or shading, is using values to create a 3-dimensional effect in your drawings.

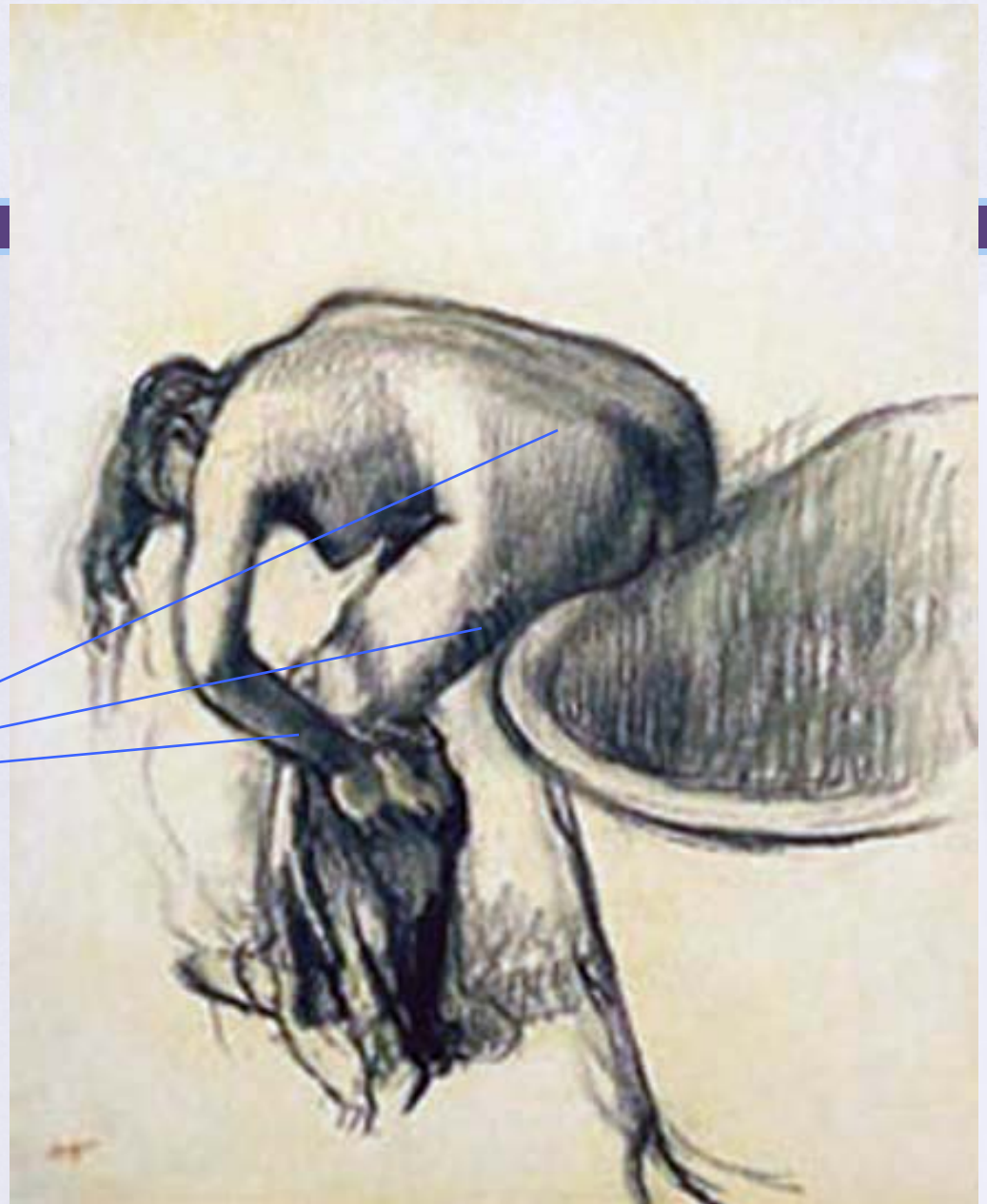
While shading can become very complex, you can create a strong sense of dimension with just a few well placed shapes of tone, as in this drawing by Annabale Carracci.

The tone along the side plane of the thigh emphasizes the volume.



- To simplify shading the figure, look for essential geometric shapes and planes defining the structure. Planes are surfaces or sides of any form, and learning to find basic planes and shade along them helps to quickly establish volume.

In this drawing by Edgar Degas, the strong planes of the back, forearm and thigh are defined with tone and line.



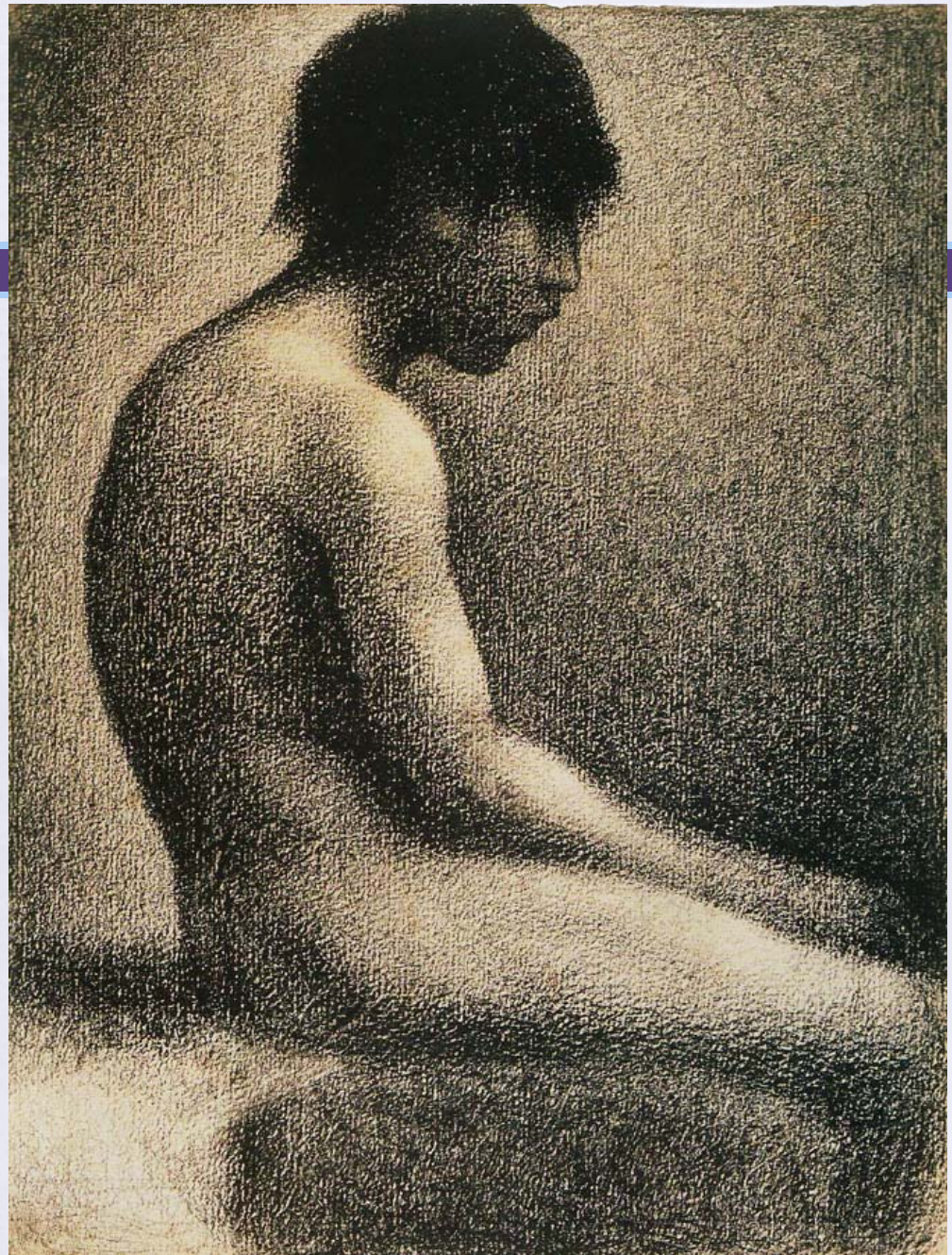
## There are several ways to find the value structure of your subject.

### ➤ **Light Source:**

What direction does the light come from? How strong is it? The side of your subject that's nearest the light will be lighter, the side turned away darker.

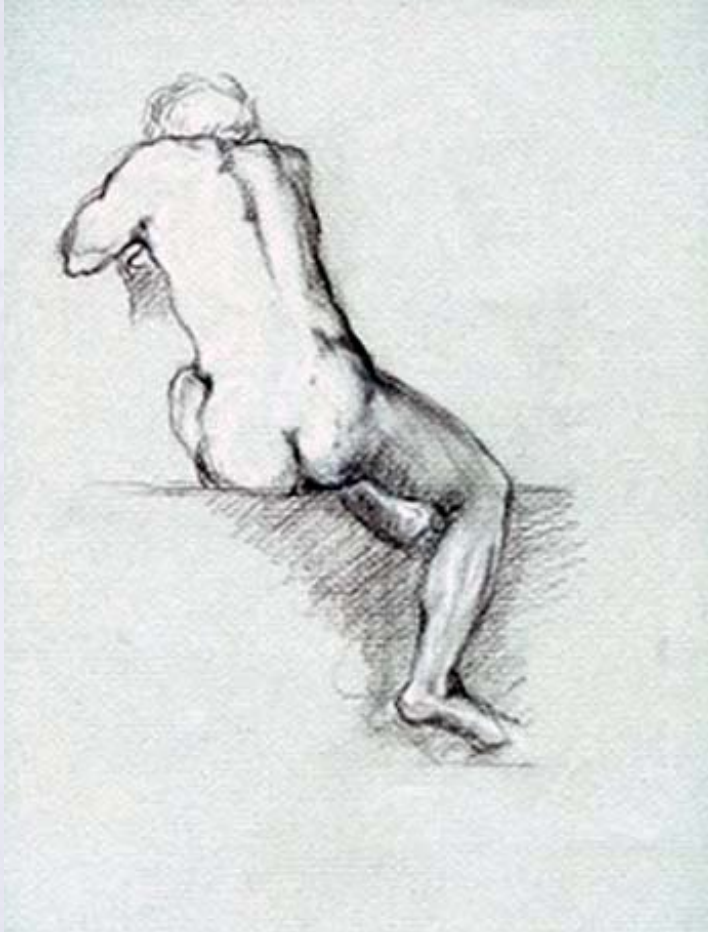
### ➤ **Value Shapes:**

What is the largest, simplest shape of the dark tone, and how does the shape relate to the form? Where is it? What size is it relative to the area around it? Squint your eyes to reduce the values to just a few, and block in the large, simplest areas of tone.



Drawing by Georges Seurat

Examples of using large, simplified value shapes to express volume.



Drawing in the manner of Dominique Ingres, by Steven Kensrue



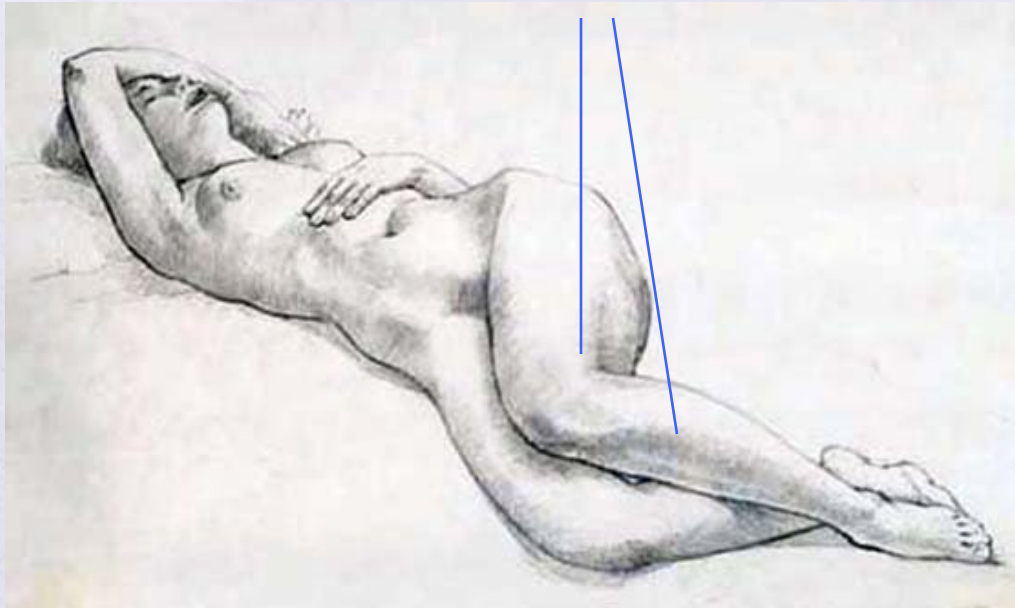
Drawing by Larkin Schollmeyer

► **Variations of Value Within larger Tonal Shapes:**

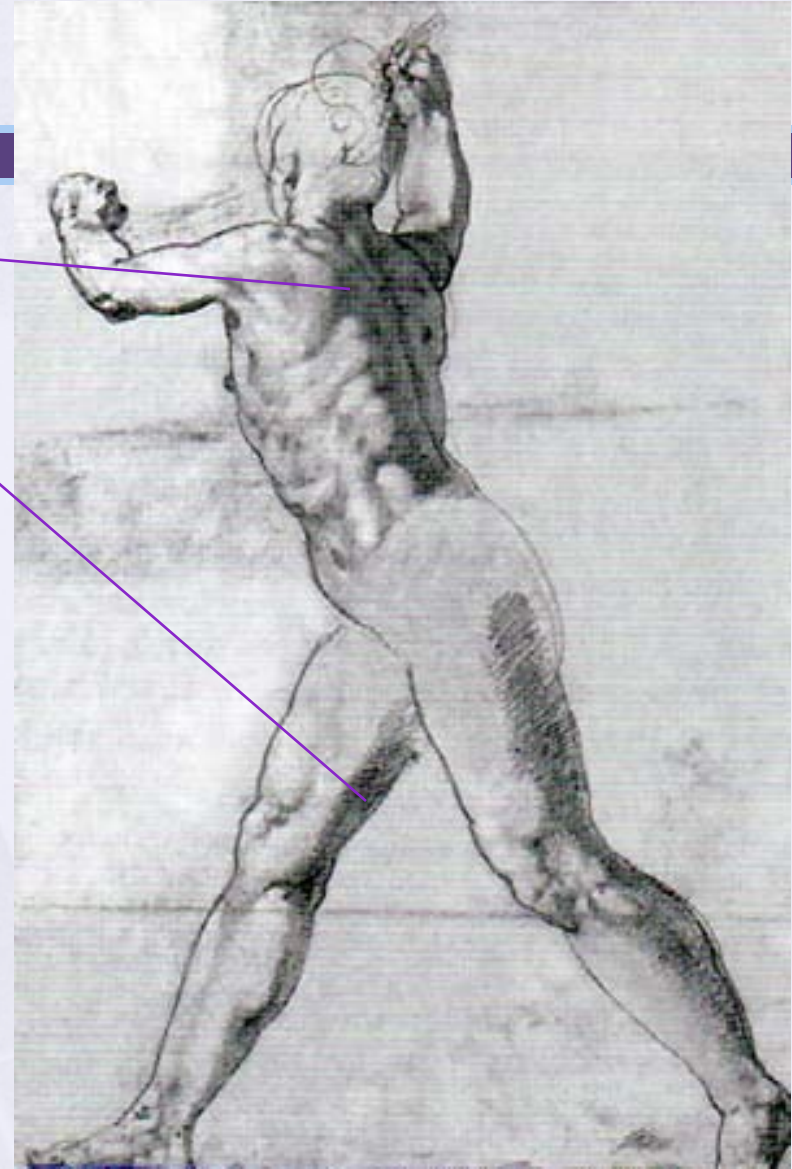
Notice subtle variations of tone within the large simple value shapes. Are the values the same throughout the shape?

► **Edges of Value Shapes:**

Are the edges of the shadows and lights blurry or crisp? Does the quality of the edge change around the shape?



Drawing by Dominique Ingres



Drawing by Taddeo Zuccaro, 1500's



Two different ways of establishing value shapes.



Drawing by Richard Diebenkorn



George Seurat

# Four Steps to Basic Figure Drawing

- 1. Always look at the entire body and the relationships between parts – in other words, don't focus on details but on the whole image.**
- 2. Begin with a rough sketch of the overall "gesture" or first impression.**
- 3. Use Sighting and Measurement to establish accurate proportions.**
- 4. Observe and draw the areas of shadow and light to create a solid, weighty figure.**



Drawing by William Cuddahy