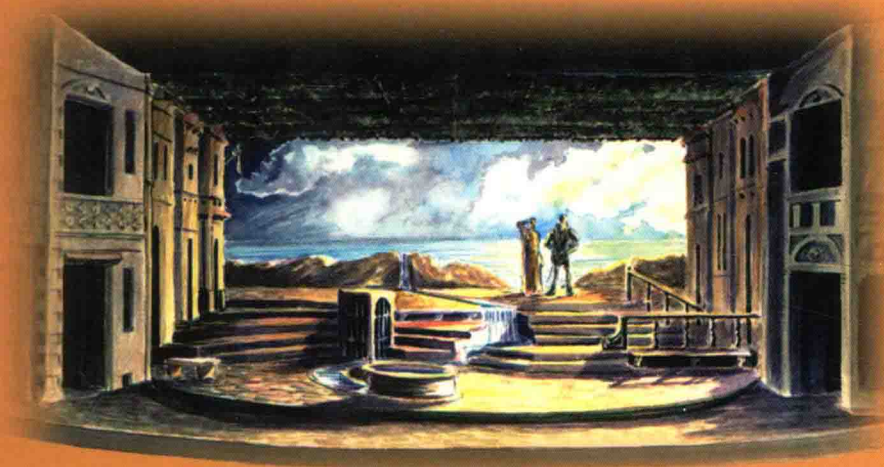# DRAWING & RENDERING
for THEATRE

A PRACTICAL COURSE FOR SCENIC, COSTUME, AND LIGHTING DESIGNERS

CLARE P. ROWE

with contributing author PETER BEUDERT

Focal
Press

Drawing & Rendering for Theatre

A PRACTICAL COURSE FOR SCENIC, COSTUME, AND LIGHTING DESIGNERS

Clare P. Rowe

Recent Focal Press Titles available at bookstores and www.focalpress.com
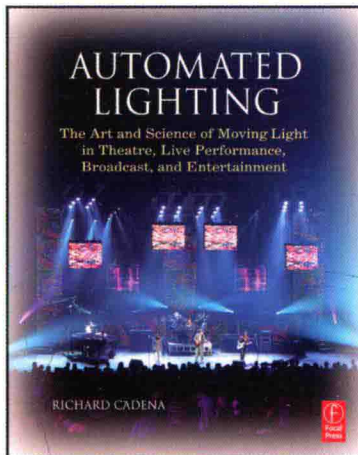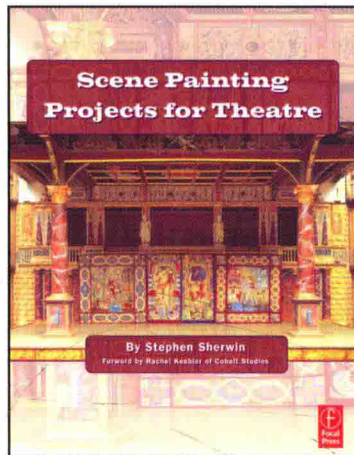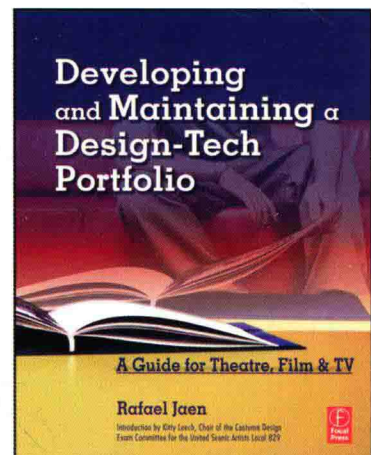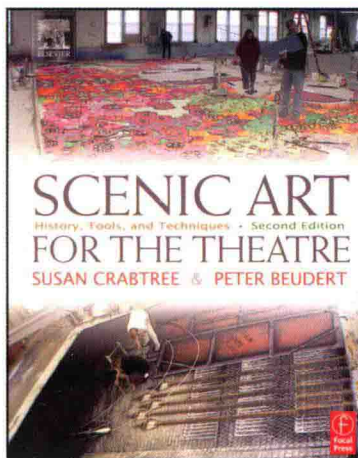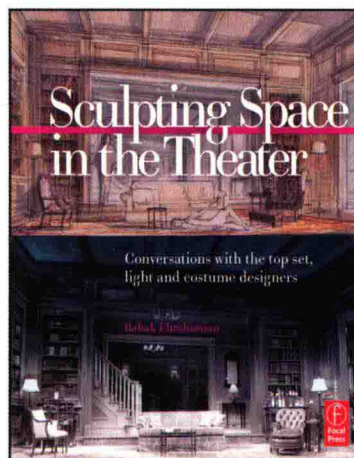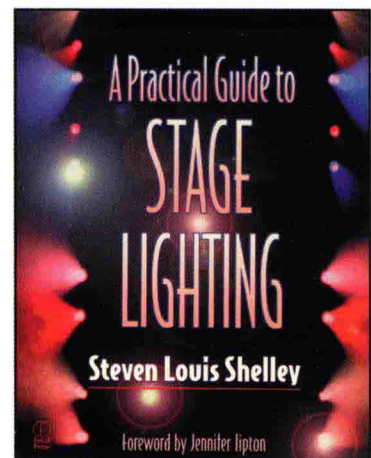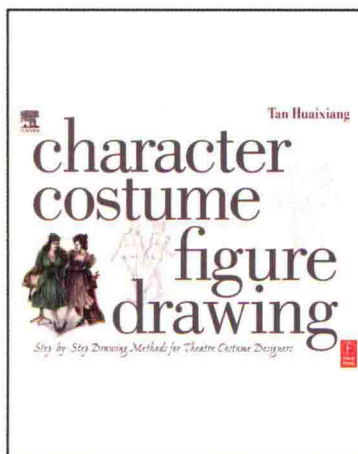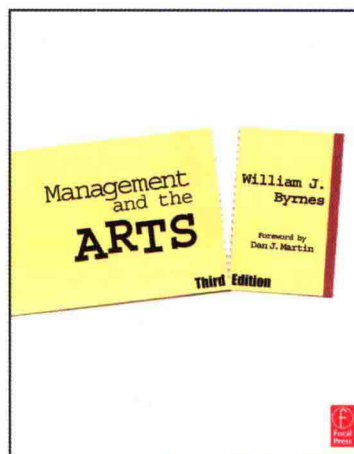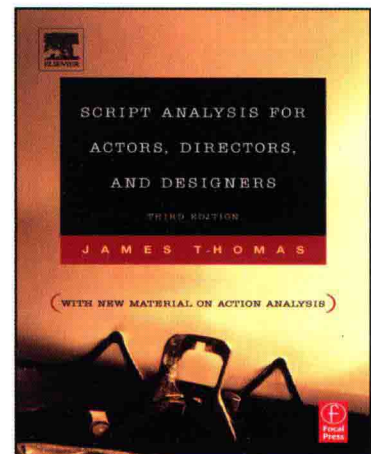
Drawing & Rendering for Theatre

Table of Contents

Introduction

DRAWING

To those with little experience in drawing, the ability to accurately draw can seem like a magical gift. Certainly there are those few who are born with exceptional artistic ability. However, despite our tendency to describe a person with advanced facility in drawing as "talented," "gifted," or even "genius," nearly everyone can develop a high proficiency in realistic drawing, regardless of one's inherited aptitude. As those with some experience in drawing know, those with an interest in drawing are driven to practice; as time progresses these budding artists seek out and begin to incorporate knowledge about perspective and drawing techniques into their practice. Interest translates to practice, and practice becomes proficiency as the artist matures. One who continues this training ultimately displays "talent" that amazes us, although it is actually often just the culmination of many hours of (enjoyable) work.

It is not particularly amazing that young children learn to read and write, yet if elementary school teachers spent the same amount of time teaching children to draw as they do reading and writing we would all be excellent draftsmen. Learning to draw is categorically no different from learning to write or learning a language. However, since this training is not an integral part of most elementary education, generally only those individuals with an early personal interest in the activity make it a part of their everyday lives, or receive specific instruction to improve their skills.

Creating a two-dimensional image that is a credible copy of the space relationships of natural objects as they appear to the eye is actually simple, if one employs a set of artistic conventions well known to humans for centuries. Success at this type of drawing depends on: (1) the ability to accurately depict the shape and texture of objects and the light that illuminates them, and (2) mastering the principles and techniques of perspective.

Unlike learning a new language (which children tend to learn more effortlessly than adults), learning to draw as an adult offers two major advantages. First, adults have advanced eye-hand coordination and fine motor control from years of practice at skills such as writing, typing, assorted sporting activities, and so on. Second, the principles of perspective and other drawing conventions tend to be conceptual, and therefore more readily assimilated by adults than children. In addition, it is easier for an adult to conquer the innate difficulties inherent to learning to draw.

The adult drawing student may encounter two major challenges. The first is a lack of confidence. Many with rudimentary drawing skills believe that the quality of their drawing corresponds directly with their innate ability and that this ability is a finite quantity. In other words, "This is the best I can do, given my limited talent." Adults are more

likely to remember that if they just keep practicing, they *will* get better. Again, learning to draw, like learning a language or learning to read or write, is an ability that is intrinsically achievable by virtually all humans. Fortunately, a lack of confidence is usually a factor only at the beginning of this drawing course. As one's skills develop, self-assurance improves correspondingly.

The second challenge, ironically, arises from the reality that most adults *can* draw. Many adults are even exceptionally capable, but have developed deeply ingrained drawing practices and routines over the years that may be counterproductive to creating the most effective theatrical design renderings.

Take, for example, the costume designer who, while proficient at figure drawing, had the habit of drawing the left side of the body to a nearly complete state before he even began the right side. He noticed that this practice created problems with symmetry and balance in his figures, and was determined to make a change in his routine. He found that it was surprisingly difficult to change a custom that, over time, had become an unconscious muscle-memory action. Luckily, drawing habits are not addictive. By making a concerted effort, in a short time he was able to modify his routine by starting on the left side, then alternating back and forth between the right and left. This subtle behavioral shift in technique resulted in significantly better costume renderings.

Or, consider the scenic designer who had great difficulty creating a focus in her set renderings. An effective set rendering is not a detailed picture of the set, but rather, is descriptive of a particular moment in the play. Though beautifully drawn and painted, a typical rendering by this designer included as much attention to detail on less significant areas of the stage (for example, a masking flat) as to the area of the action of the play the rendering was supposed to portray. She was accustomed to beginning her rendering by creating an accurate line drawing of the set using measured perspective, as many designers do. She included every detail of the theater architecture, set, and major props in her perspective drawing.

As anyone who has employed the technique of measured perspective can attest, her layout drawing represented hours of work. Although labor-intensive, the detailed layout drawing had evolved to become an integral part of her design process. However, after spending so much time on the perspective drawing, when she began painting, she was reluctant to virtually eliminate major parts of her drawing to create an area of focus. The result was an attractive painting appropriate as an interior design rendering, but not very effective in visually communicating what an audience would see at a particular moment of a theatrical production. The solution for this designer was to change the way she approached her layout drawing. She continued to use the technique of measured perspective and drew the theater architecture and major lines of the set, but without including any detail. Then, after determining the scene in the play she would represent and the area of focus, she drew detail in only that area, creating a vignette of reduced detail around it. The result was an effective communication tool to describe the scenery, action, and mood of a particular dramatic moment.

Both of these designers faced and successfully met the challenge of overcoming their own ingrained habits. As you work through the exercises in this section, keep in mind that your ultimate goal is to produce effective design renderings and drawings. Any ingrained or unconscious habits that you might have that interfere with this goal will need to be identified and modified. Everyone can learn to draw or improve existing drawing skills; as an adult, you are particularly well situated to do so.

The exercises in this book are tailored to aid the theatrical designer in developing the drawing skills necessary to create renderings that are effective visual communication tools. Keep in mind that, regardless of one's area of specialization, versatility is an asset. Therefore, costume designers should not avoid architectural subjects or perspective drawing, nor should lighting designers balk at figure drawing.

Chapter 1

The Benchmark Drawing

This chapter begins with an exercise designed to measure one's existing drawing skills. Follow the instructions outlined in this chapter for setting up and completing the exercise, without reading ahead, so that your drawing is an accurate reflection of your current skills. The purpose of this exercise is to create a drawing that will be an assessment tool and a point of reference for later evaluation of your progress as you work through this book. After you have completed your benchmark drawing, this chapter will discuss typical behavior and results particular to the beginning, intermediate, and advanced student. As part of this discussion, procedures are outlined for analyzing one's own drawing for specific areas that need improvement.

SETTING UP THE STILL LIFE

Set up a simple still life on a table. Cover a small cardboard box with a piece of dark colored fabric large enough so the fabric drapes in folds over the box and onto the table in front of the box. Choose several (four or five) recognizable objects for your still life. One should be a small bust of a human head or torso. The other objects can be anything—a book, a teapot, a cup and saucer, or a wine glass are classics—but choose objects that are smooth in texture and light in value. Arrange the objects on the fabric

on top of and in front of the box. If possible, arrange the still life in front of a blank wall so that you can focus on the objects without background distractions. If you do not have a blank wall available, create a backdrop for your still life with a large piece of illustration board or similar material. Arrange the lighting so there is a strong top side light on the still life.

Figure 1.1 Sample still life setup for benchmark drawing.

DRAWING THE STILL LIFE

Find a position where you have an unobstructed view of the arrangement. Assume a drawing position that you feel comfortable with, either standing or sitting. Using a number two pencil and a piece of drawing paper at least as large as 11 × 14″, sketch the still life. It may be helpful to tape the paper to the table. Your primary goal in this exercise is to faithfully record what you see. Draw continuously for one hour and then stop regardless of how complete the drawing is. Date and save this drawing. This is your starting point and a point of reference for measuring your future progress.

Analysis

After reading this section, you will be able to critically examine your own drawing for specific areas of improvement. This section is broken down into three categories: the beginning, intermediate, and advanced level student. Read all three of these sections first to determine which seems most appropriate for your own current level of skill. For each skill level, one or two sample student drawings of the previously depicted still life are discussed. Use these samples to determine your skill level. Keep in mind that these are not necessarily discrete categories; for example, even if you primarily identify yourself as an intermediate student, there may also be information in the beginning or advanced sections that will be of help.

BEGINNING LEVEL

For the person who draws infrequently or who otherwise has little experience with sketching, the benchmark still life exercise is particularly important, although it can be a frustrating experience. You may have a tendency toward viewing your work as unfavorable compared with the work of others. It is important to keep in mind that this exercise is not a competition. You will progress at your own pace from your own starting place. It is not helpful to compare either your benchmark sketch or rate of progress with other students (other than to assess your current skill level), since your starting place and progress rate will be unique to you. Some will improve dramatically at the onset and then hit a plateau at which it seems no progress is discernable for quite some time. Others will be thwarted by what

seems like no forward movement at first and then, suddenly, see a dramatic leap in drawing facility. Some may even think for a while that their skills have deteriorated. Consider that as long as you continue to practice drawing, your ability will develop, but that the rate of progress is not always incrementally constant.

General Description of the Beginning Student

If you are a typical beginning level student, it is likely that you rarely, if ever, draw as a part of your everyday life. Some of the possible markers of the novice might include one or more of the following: (1) you do not yet have, or have forgotten, in-depth knowledge of basic drawing techniques and conventions; (2) you may need practice in eye–hand coordination; (3) you may find every attempt at drawing to be challenging; (4) while doing your benchmark drawing, you were not sure how to begin the drawing, what size it should be, how to place it on the page, or how to finish in the time allotted; and/or (5) the most frustrating of all and yet most common, you could see with your *eyes* exactly what you wanted to commit to paper, but could not command your *hand* to create the correct shapes. Not surprisingly perhaps, almost all beginning students tend to have some or all of these same difficulties and frustrations. However, identifying behavior that leads to unsuccessful results is the first step in improving one's skills.

Assessing Your Experience with the Benchmark Exercise: Beginning Student Behavior

In the completion of the benchmark drawing, there tends to be a standard set of behaviors that typifies the beginning, intermediate, or advanced student. If you are a beginning student, the following list suggests several possible things you did while you were drawing the benchmark exercise. Some are contradictory. To begin the assessment of your skill level, recall your experience while you were completing the exercise to determine if you identify with any of the following behavioral traits.

- It took you a long time to get started with the drawing because you were not sure of what to draw first. As a result, you did not get to finish to the extent you had intended.

- You found yourself erasing and re-drawing nearly every line.
- You started over on a new sheet of paper several times.
- You stopped drawing before the hour was up either because you were frustrated with the results, or you did not know what else to add to the drawing.
- During the exercise, you mostly concentrated on your drawing and looked briefly at the still life only occasionally to keep yourself on track.
- While you were drawing you held your pencil the same way as when you write.

Take note of any of the previous descriptions and see if you identify with any of them. In the next chapter, you will learn techniques that assist you in overcoming some of these obstacles while developing good productive drawing habits.

Although it is helpful to look at your behaviors and routines in completing the benchmark drawing, ultimately the drawing will be used to designate your initial skill level. We will now examine some typical beginning-level benchmark drawings.

Examining the Benchmark Drawing: The Beginning Level

The following is a list of typical descriptions of beginning level drawings. They are grouped into categories, each of which is discussed at length in subsequent chapters. As you read the list, refer to your benchmark drawing to determine which descriptions pertain to your effort.

Drawing What You See

- The objects you drew are identifiable, but do not look like the actual objects in the still life; rather, they appear to be generic representations of the types of objects in the still life.
- The contours of objects are not accurately drawn. For example, perhaps the opposite sides of objects are not as symmetrical as they are in real life, or one part of an object appears too large or too small.

If either of these are descriptive of your drawing, you are, to some degree, relying on your memory of what everyday objects look like, and drawing a

symbol provided by your brain rather than what you are actually seeing. It will be helpful for you to refer to the section Stored Visual Memories in Chapter 2.

Perspective

- The objects you drew are not in proportion to each other. For example, the wine glass appears to be greatly oversized compared with the teapot.
- The objects look flat, not three-dimensional as if they are receding in space.
- All of the objects appear to be on the same plane in the foreground of the drawing.
- Some objects that you drew appear to be falling over and/or the plane of the tabletop appears to be tilted upward.

There are certain perspective drawing techniques that fool the eye into believing that objects drawn on a flat piece of paper appear to be three-dimensional. For example, according to the rules of perspective, to make a true circle look as if it is receding in space it must be drawn as an ellipse, or oval. Also, all verticals are true verticals but horizontal lines recede to a vanishing point on the horizon. To learn more about the rules of perspective, refer to Chapter 4.

Three-Dimensional Modeling

- The objects you drew were each uniformly dark or light in value.
- It is difficult to determine from your drawing where the light source is located.
- All the objects in your drawing have a uniform outline, such as in a graphic illustration.

The ability to reproduce the naturalistic play of light and shadow on objects in your drawing is one of the crucial elements of realistic drawing.

Each object in your drawing should have an area that is shaded dark and a corresponding lighter area opposite. For more about this technique, refer to Chapter 5.

Composition

- The drawing appears to be too small in comparison with the size of the paper and is randomly placed on the paper.

- The drawing is too big for the paper and important parts of the still life are cut off at the edges of the paper.

You may not be aware that you always draw in the same scale. Every time you draw the same type of object—for example, a human head—it is always the same size, within a fraction of an inch. Become familiar with your default scale and place your drawing on the paper accordingly. Keep in mind, the way you place your drawing on the paper has an emotional effect on the viewer. This choice of placement should become a conscious decision every time you create a drawing. For more information on drawing placement and composition, refer to Chapter 3.

Figure 1.2 is a beginning student's benchmark drawing. The artist opted to draw only one of the objects in the still life, and the effort does not appear to represent an hour's worth of drawing. He was probably overwhelmed by the complexity of the arrangement and restarted on a new piece of paper several times, but each time was dissatisfied with the product. Perhaps he was intimidated by the features of the bust and foreshortened handle of the teapot, but felt more confident drawing the shape of the wineglass. The composition is awkward with the glass base nearly touching the top edge of the paper.

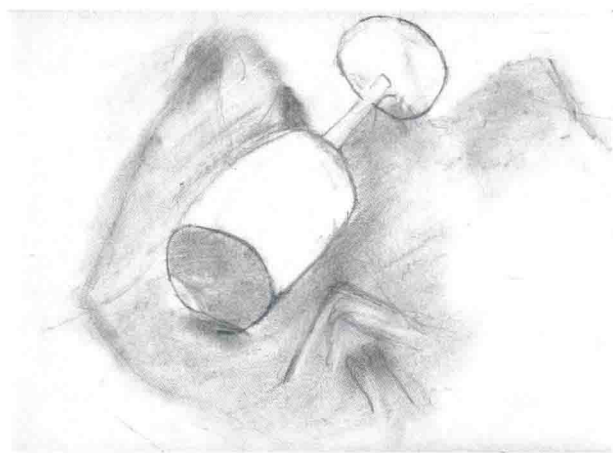Still, this effort shows a high degree of potential. The student carefully observed how the lines of the object intersect. His first attempt at drawing the stem placed it too close to the far edge of the base, and this miscalculation was erased and corrected. He observed that the glass is shaped like a cylinder; one end of the stem must appear to connect at the center of the bottom of the cylinder and the other end to the center of the base. He also perceived that the mouth of the glass and the base appear in perspective to be similarly shaped ovals and parallel to each other. Many beginning students will draw the base and mouth of the glass as round shapes, since in reality they *are* circular. The sample 1 artist, however, is drawing what he is seeing, not what he knows to be the actual shape of the object.

Figure 1.3 shows another beginning student's drawing. This beginning drawing has many positive attributes: (1) the objects are relatively proportional to each other; (2) by including detail in the drape of the fabric, the teapot, and the spine of the book the student has clearly made some careful observations; (3) all the objects drawn have been worked to the same degree of completion; and (4) the drawing fits attractively on the page. However, the objects drawn are representational rather than realistic, they do not recede into space accurately, and the source of light is not clearly indicated. This artist will want to continue to work on seeing and observing, perspective drawing, and three-dimensional modeling.

Now that you have analyzed your benchmark drawing, you know where to concentrate your efforts at improvement. As you complete the exercises in this section, pay particular attention to these areas. For example, if you want to concentrate on composition, think about how you will position the drawing
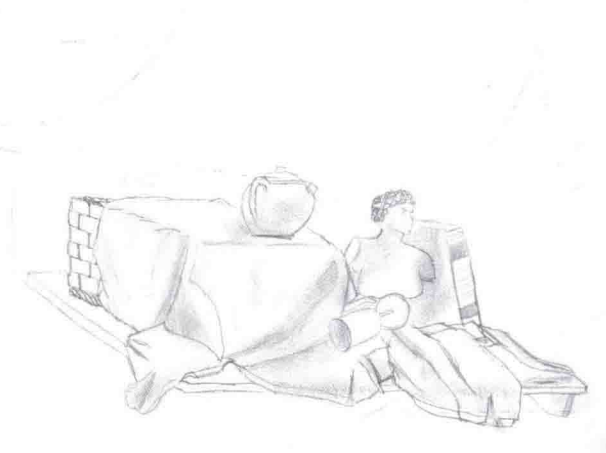

Figure 1.2 Sample 1 of a beginning student's benchmark drawing.

Figure 1.3 Sample 2 of a beginning student's benchmark drawing.