

Chapter 1

Gearing Up to Start (And Continue) Drawing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Taking the plunge to see if you have what it takes to start drawing
 - ▶ Discovering what drawing is
 - ▶ Finding the motivation, supplies, and style you need to keep drawing
 - ▶ Developing drawing habits that'll get you through the rough patches
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Drawing is primal, universal, and deeply personal all at once. It's primal because the tendency to draw is innate (in other words, you've probably been drawing since before you could talk). It's universal and personal because whether you choose to draw a tree or just a looping spiral, by putting marks on paper, you connect the inner workings of your mind to the outer world.

So you're ready to take a serious step toward honing your drawing skills. Well, you've come to the right place! This chapter is an introduction to drawing as a subject of study. Along with a quick summary of the materials and skills you need to get started, you find useful information about historical and contemporary approaches to drawing. In case you want to know more about any of the topics we touch briefly on here, we've peppered this chapter with references to other chapters where you can find in-depth coverage. As a bonus, we've included some information right at the beginning about how to tell whether or not drawing is for you. (Spoiler alert: Drawing is for you!)

Testing the Waters: Do You Have What It Takes to Draw?

For many burgeoning artists who have a nagging, tickling idea that they may have what it takes to draw, testing out the dream feels like a real risk. After all, if they fail, the dream will be gone — just like that. If you're afraid to risk

losing your dream of becoming an artist, stop worrying! Go ahead and take the risk; you may be surprised to discover that it isn't really a risk after all for one simple reason: Anyone who wants to learn to draw well can do so.

Debunking the talent myth

Every elementary school has at least one kid who can draw an amazing unicorn (or some other detailed animal or object) without looking at any books or photos for inspiration. All the teachers and students look at that kid and say, "That kid's got real talent." Maybe you were that kid in your school. Or maybe you only wished you could draw like that kid. Either way, you can learn to draw well today as long as you're ready to put your mind (and pencil) to work.



What's called *talent* in drawing is actually a heightened sensitivity to visual facts (which, lucky for you, is something anyone can develop!). To draw well, you must be able to see the physical facts, such as size, shape, value, texture, and color, of things and to make comparisons of what you see. Familiar objects are often hard to draw because when you look at them and know what they are, your brain doesn't take time to carefully analyze the way they look. To see things as they actually are, you must practice paying more attention to the facts of what something looks like than the facts of what something is as an object. When you're really tuned in to the facts of what something looks like, that particular something becomes much easier to draw. (See Chapters 5 and 7 for some great tips on how to change the way you see.)

Talent on its own doesn't make an artist. Yes, the ability to see like an artist and make visual comparisons is a necessary condition for drawing well, but they don't matter at all if you don't also have a passion for drawing. Even if you feel like you have no artistic talent whatsoever, if you have a desire to draw running through your veins, you can master the other stuff with a little determination and practice. After all, the bulk of getting better at drawing is work — not talent. No matter how talented you are, you won't grow as an artist if you don't physically work on honing your skills, and passion is what gives you the strength and motivation to do that work.

Embracing your individuality

One of the most compelling characteristics about artists is their uniqueness, or style. But don't think you have to have your own style right away. Even the most well-known and accomplished artists are often influenced by the work of others whom they admire. For example, you can see traces of Cezanne in Picasso, but Picasso was still unarguably unique.

You probably have a few artistic heroes of your own. Perhaps you've made some copies of their works or tried out their styles. If you haven't, give it a try; copying other works is a great way to practice and develop your drawing skills. Just know that you can't claim any copied work as your own. (Check out Chapters 2, 6, and 17 for details on how to develop as an artist by using other artists' works as inspiration, and refer to Chapter 18 for more details on copyright.)



Even as you copy the works and styles of your heroes, don't forget to embrace your own individuality as an artist, and don't try to purge the things about your drawings that are different from those of your heroes. They've already defined who they are as artists; now it's your turn! The things that make you different from your heroes are important clues about who you are as an artist.

Defining Drawing

Essentially, *drawing* is the act of applying marks to a surface. A drawing is usually made up of lines and tones on paper, but it hasn't always been that way and it isn't always that way today (see the following sections for more details).



However you define drawing, it's important to keep in mind that drawing is a verb; it's an action that you do. No matter what tools you use to draw, the act of drawing is the same: You move your hand/arm/whole body while holding a mark-making tool and leave traces of your movement on your drawing surface.

Looking back at the first drawings

The earliest known drawings are the ancient pictures of animals and figures made with natural pigments on the rocky walls of caves. These drawings pre-date written history and are some of the oldest records of what human life was like as many as 30,000 years ago. The Egyptians used drawings to create the pictograms that later became one of the first systems of writing (called *hieroglyphics*).

For hundreds of years, drawing was seen as a functional craft. People used it to communicate, tell stories, plan paintings, design architecture, and a whole lot more. The resulting drawings may have become beautiful artifacts, but their original purpose was preparatory and functional — not artistic.

Surveying current drawing trends

Today drawing takes many forms. Artists still use drawing as a way to communicate ideas and plan projects. For instance, architects still use drawing to design their buildings and other huge structures, but now they do most of this drawing on computers rather than cave walls or paper.

Although some people still see drawing as a means to plan the more valuable artistic elements found in paintings, drawing has also become its own art form. After all, many artists now choose drawing as their primary mode of expression. Ever curious and experimental, these artists use a startling variety of materials and styles to create their drawings. As a result, you can undoubtedly find your niche in drawing no matter where your interests lie. So whether you love traditional realistic drawings done with pencil or graphic-novel-like drawings done with ink, you're sure to find what you need in today's drawing world. If you don't know what you want to draw, don't worry! The world is yours to explore. (Check out Chapter 5 for details on how to see the world as an artist and Part III for lots of info on the different subject matter you can draw.)

Examining the Motivation behind Drawing

The desire to draw comes with being human. Children are voracious drawers, and although most people draw less often after childhood, they still encounter drawing occasionally when they're doodling in the margins of a notepad during a long lecture or plotting out their gardens for the year. You know instinctively how to connect your hand and brain to make marks on a drawing surface. Add a little motivation to that instinct, and you have everything you need to be great at drawing. So where do you find this motivation? The following sections show you some different ways you can use drawing and a few important benefits you can get from it.

Finding uses for drawing

As you probably already know, the act of drawing is great for planning things out, but you can also use it to create portraits, landscapes, cartoons, and still-life drawings. No matter what you choose to create through drawing, it's important to remember that drawing doesn't have to be a super-serious process that leads to a product worthy of the history books. Something about the act of drawing just feels good — even if the product you make is whimsical, temporary, or just plain silly.



If you ever feel overwhelmed by the seriousness of your drawing endeavors, give yourself a break and make some playful drawings. The following is a list of alternative, playful uses for drawing, just in case you need some inspiration:

- ✓ Use decorator icing to draw portraits of your friends or co-workers on cakes or cookies. (Keep in mind that realism isn't as important as creativity!)
- ✓ Use thread to draw on your pillowcases. (Yes, we're talking about embroidering here.)
- ✓ Draw with your feet. (Warning: This can get a little messy! Put a large sheet of paper on the floor. Dust your feet with powdered charcoal and walk around on the paper to make marks. See if you can make a somewhat realistic drawing using your feet. Check out Chapters 12 through 15 for ideas about making realistic drawings of various subjects.)
- ✓ Draw in the sand or snow.
- ✓ Arrange rocks or plants in your garden to create a different kind of drawing.

Considering the benefits of drawing

Drawing is satisfying on so many levels: mentally, physiologically, emotionally, and socially. After all, when you draw, your mind reaches through your hand to make direct contact with the world. When you draw from observation, you have the opportunity to physically re-create what you see. It's like you're touching the subject with your pencil and exploring all its subtleties. No matter how your drawing turns out, when you draw something, you feel like you know it better when you're done than you did before you drew it.

Drawing helps you think and process thoughts. Your imagination can be quite fluid and fragmentary, moving from one partially formed idea to another and back again in rapid succession. Drawing out your ideas gives them tangible form and some level of permanence. Even if the form isn't exactly what you were thinking about, having a drawing to work with gives you something you can hold on to and work with.



Drawing is a whole-body experience. Your hand is the most obvious player, but pay attention the next time you draw. Notice the way your arms and shoulders move when you draw and the way your spine supports and responds to the movement. When you stand at an easel to draw, you find yourself falling into a dancelike rhythm — drawing, stepping back to check your drawing, stepping forward again to draw some more, and so on. Even if you sit when drawing, you still develop a physical rhythm. Regardless of where you draw, the process of drawing is a workout — which explains why you sometimes feel exhausted at the end of a drawing session. We can't say drawing is a substitute for a jog around the park, but you'll certainly feel like you've done something after you draw!

Emotionally speaking, drawing is somewhat of a mixed bag. But even though drawing will sometimes leave you feeling upset if not outright distraught, the emotional benefits you get from drawing far outweigh the costs. Consider the following:

- ✓ The physiological benefits of drawing are part of the emotional benefits. Moving around to draw and tensing and releasing your muscles can really elevate your mood.
- ✓ Learning to draw boosts your overall confidence. As your drawing skills improve, your confidence grows, and greater confidence makes the tougher drawing days easier to manage.
- ✓ The feeling you get from making a mark in response to something you see and knowing that the mark is just right makes all the work you put into your drawings worth it. If you catch it just right, even the curve of a vase can be one of the most exhilarating things you've ever seen!

Because drawing is a solitary activity, it may seem like an unlikely source of social benefits. However, because drawing is a solitary activity that generates questions and excitement, you'll likely be itching to talk to people about your drawings as you create and finish them. Enthusiasm is contagious!



Many communities have sketch groups that meet regularly to draw and share ideas. To find one near you, check your local newspaper or try typing *art group* along with the name of your city and state into your favorite search engine. Turn to Chapter 4 for some great tips on how to find online communities where you can meet tons of like-minded people to talk to about drawing and art in general.

Outfitting Yourself for the Job

If you've ever found yourself standing in front of a 4-foot-high shelf filled with 17 different kinds of erasers and even more types of pencils, you know choosing art supplies can be a daunting task. To make it a little more manageable, we suggest that you make a list before you go to the store so you at least know what to look for when you get there. (Check out Chapter 2 for some helpful and specific information about drawing supplies, including a breakdown of the different grades of pencils you can get and some examples of what they can do.)



When you're first starting out, try to buy your supplies at an art supply store. Although you can pick up a few tools from the office supply aisle at your local grocery store, it's best to stick with the experts until you have a better handle on what your supplies can and should do. By shopping at an art supply store, you can also get answers to any questions you may have about different supplies.

Notice that we don't list specific brands in Chapter 2 or anywhere else in this book. The truth is the brand of your tool isn't nearly as important as the way the tool works. Plus, too many brands offer good supplies to point out only one or two. If you can try out a tool or supply in the store before you buy it, do so. Chances are, though, when you're new to buying art supplies, you may not know what a "good" pencil is supposed to feel like. The best way to find out is trial and error. Buy a couple of different pencils and try them out at home to see which ones you like the best. Whenever you can, add a new supply to your drawing toolbox, and, in no time, you'll know which tools work best for you and your drawing style.



If you can't test out your tools before you buy them and you don't have any preferences yet, shop by price. In most cases, you get what you pay for. You can expect higher-quality supplies to cost a little more, but if you're hoping to get some good-quality supplies without taking out a second mortgage, shoot for the middle range of prices. The cheapest supplies may not give you an idea of what they can really do, so try not to buy all value supplies. Colored pencils, for example, vary tremendously in quality. The extravagantly priced supplies probably aren't necessary when you're getting started, but if you fall in love with a marble-handled mechanical pencil, add it to your wish list.



Drawing has something for everyone. When choosing supplies, balance the quality you want with what you can afford. If your budget is tight, don't feel like you have to spend a lot of money to make drawings. A simple No. 2 pencil and any paper can produce a beautiful drawing. If you don't have any money to spend on your drawing, use whatever resources you have available. We've seen beautiful drawings that were made using coffee!

Discovering Your Artistic Style

In drawing, *style* refers to a set of identifying characteristics found in a particular artist's work. You don't have to worry about finding a style for your work because style is something that happens on its own. Unless you put your foot down and refuse to be yourself, your drawings will take on some signature characteristics that become the seeds of your personal style.

Style comes from who you are. Your drawings will be unique in large part because of things you don't control, like the kind of pressure you automatically exert on a tool, the natural rhythms you fall into as you draw, and the natural tendencies you have to make certain types of marks. Your influences play a part in your style, too. You can't help but pick up a few little things from the artists you admire.

Seeing the artistic value in contemporary scribbles

Have you ever been in an art museum or gallery and heard someone say, “My kid could do that painting”? You know exactly what the person’s talking about — the seemingly random scribbles and blobs of paint that have been proclaimed “extraordinary art” by critics and artists alike. So how have these less traditional artworks earned the label *extraordinary*? To find the answer to this question, you need to take a little trip through art history.

Before photography came about, the purpose of art was pretty clear: Record reality as it happens. Although artists and methods changed over the years, the overall concept of art continued on the path to greater realism until the late 19th century when photography was born. Photographs represented life and reality so

well that painting and drawing suffered a major identity crisis — why have artists who paint and draw when you can have photographers?

Fortunately, it didn’t take long for artists to realize everything they could do now that they were free to leave the world of realism behind. They began to ask questions about the meaning of things like art and beauty, and they began to create art that went far beyond what the naked eye could see. Artists like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso twisted and flattened the human form into something just barely recognizable. Jackson Pollock dripped paint all over the place. Their seemingly strange work led to artistic experiments in thinking, and eventually, to the contemporary art you see at exhibitions today.



Guard your individuality! It’s tempting to adopt the style of an artist you admire as though you’re joining an exclusive club. However, if you really want to grow as an artist, you need to allow your own artistic voice to shine through your work.

As long as you’re constantly developing as an artist, your work will continue to change and your style will continue to evolve. Know that some aspects of your work will remain the same, though. Embrace the parts of your style that change and those that stay the same because they both have a hand in defining the artist you are.

Practicing Sustainable Drawing Habits

Drawing is a rich and stimulating process. The benefits listed earlier in the section “Considering the benefits of drawing” are only a handful of the reasons why you may get hooked on drawing. Still, you’re likely to experience your fair share of times when drawing feels scary and hard and you doubt your abilities. Don’t give up! These moments will pass. In this section, we share some tips for how to prop yourself up when the going gets rough.

Acquiring essential skills

Whatever kind of drawing you want to do, it'll be much easier to do if you know the basics about how perception works and how you can create a sense of perception on paper. Chapters 6 through 11 are designed to offer you a solid grounding in the basic skills you need to develop to make realistic drawings. Chapter 6 shows you how to take a drawing from the planning stages to completion, and Chapters 7 through 11 deal specifically with creating a realistic illusion of space. After you acquire these basic skills, you'll have the tools you need to draw anything.

Implementing an effective order of operations

If you've ever spent a long time on one part of a drawing only to realize you made whatever it is you were drawing too big to fit among the other elements you still have to add to your drawing to make it complete, you know how frustrating the drawing process can be. Lucky for you, you can avoid this frustration with a little bit of planning.



The most efficient way to approach a drawing is to begin with the most general aspects and work gradually toward the more specific ones, holding back on the fine details until the very end. For example, if you're drawing an apple, start by drawing its size and shape; then draw the stem and any surface details.

By starting each drawing by mapping out the size, basic shape, and placement of all the objects you want to include in that drawing, you can make sure you have enough room for everything in your drawing space. For instance, if you know you want to include a house and a tall tree in a drawing, first determine where the tree will go and how much space it will take up. That way, you can make sure the house will fit in the drawing, too. To see how this order of operations works in practice, check out the instructions to any exercise or project in this book; we've created all of them using this order of operations. Also turn to Chapter 6 for details about the drawing process.

Following the order of operations saves you time and frustration throughout the drawing process. Because everything in your drawing is loose and general in the beginning, you can make major changes early on without feeling like you're losing a lot of your hard work. After you figure out how big all your objects are and where they go in your drawing space, you can confidently focus on developing the details that make the objects unique without having to worry that you may need to move them or change their sizes.

The hardest thing about working from the general to the specific is waiting to get to the fun parts of your drawings (you know, the details that make everything look real). But do your best to hold off on the fun until after you map out the general layout of the drawing. You'll be glad you did when you see the finished product!

Adapting to ambiguity

Part of what makes drawing exciting is its unpredictability. But, for some reason, the very fact that you know you can't totally control it makes you want to try anyway. When you're just getting started with drawing, the uncertainties may feel like failings on your part. They're not! Try to be patient with yourself, focus on seeing like an artist, and keep telling yourself that you have what it takes to work through the murky parts of drawing. The more you practice, the more confident you'll become, so keep reading and start drawing!