

John Berger: Drawing is discovery

29 August 1953.

BY

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For the artist drawing is discovery. And that is not just a slick phrase, it is quite literally true. It is the actual act of drawing that forces the artist to look at the object in front of him, to dissect it in his mind's eye and put it together again; or, if he is drawing from memory, that forces him to dredge his own mind, to discover the content of his own store of past observations.

It is a platitude in the teaching of drawing that the heart of the matter lies in the specific process of looking. A line, an area of tone, is not really important because it records what you have seen, but because of what it will lead you on to see. Following up its logic in order to check its accuracy, you find confirmation or denial in the object itself or in your memory of it. Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen but the edge of what you have become. Perhaps that sounds needlessly metaphysical. Another way of putting it would be to say that each mark you make on the paper is a stepping stone from which you proceed to the next, until you have crossed your subject as though it were a river, have put it behind you.

This is quite different from the later process of painting a "finished" canvas or carving a statue. Here you do not pass through your subject, but try to recreate it and house yourself in it. Each brush-mark or chisel-stroke is no longer a stepping stone, but a stone to be fitted into a planned edifice. A drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event - either seen, remembered or imagined. A "finished" work is an attempt to construct an event in itself. It is significant in this respect that only when the artist gained a relatively high standard of individual "autobiographical" freedom, did drawings as we now understand them begin to exist. In a hieratic, anonymous tradition they are unnecessary. (I should perhaps point out here that I am talking about working drawings - although a working drawing need not necessarily be made for a specific project. I do not mean linear designs, illustrations, caricatures, certain portraits or graphic works which may be "finished" productions in their own right.)

A number of technical factors often enlarge this distinction between a working drawing and a "finished" work: the longer time

needed to paint a canvas or carve a block; the larger scale of the job; the problem of simultaneously managing colour, quality of pigment, tone, texture, grain, and so on - the "shorthand" of drawing is relatively simple and direct. But nevertheless the fundamental distinction is in the working of the artist's mind. A drawing is essentially a private work, related only to the artist's own needs; a "finished" statue or canvas is essentially a public, presented work - related far more directly to the demands of communication.

It follows from this that there is an equal distinction from the point of view of the spectator. In front of a painting or statue he tends to identify himself with the subject, to interpret the images for their own sake; in front of a drawing he identifies himself with the artist, using the images to gain the conscious experience of seeing as though through the artist's own eyes. It is this which explains why painters always value so highly the drawings of the masters they admire and why the general public find it so difficult to appreciate drawings - except for sentimental reasons, or in so far as they are impressed by purely manual dexterity.

All this is prompted by the exhibition of 500 Old Master drawings (Pisanello to Ingres) now at Burlington House. The distinction I have tried to make is relevant for on it are based the standards with which one approaches such a show. A few of the works - the Rowlandsons and the portrait of Gentile Bellini by Giovanni for instance - come under the category of "finished" works. Most, however, can be called "working" drawings. In appreciating these, deftness, charm, ingenuity are, in themselves, beside the point. Everything originally depends upon the quality of discovery. Mannerisms, however elegant, are barriers to discovery as clichés are barriers to thought; look, for instance, at the Pietro Longhis and some (not all) of the younger Tiepolos.

Then, by contrast, go to the Raphael *Head of a Muse* and feel how he discovered the fullness of the form growing under his hand like a pot on a wheel; how Dürer discovered the direction of every fold and fissure as though he were reading Braille, how Guercino discovered the sensuality of his Venus as though he were sleeping with her, how Guardi discovered the space of a room as though he were filling it with air from a pair of bellows; how Rembrandt discovered his figures as though encompassing them with the knowledge of a father. In every case one senses their surprise.