

LESSON 3 – THE BLOCK-IN

Right Brain Warm-up Exercise

Another exercise Betty Edwards suggests to help you transition into right brain mode of thinking is Upside-Down Drawing. This will help you disassociate yourself from preconceived ideas of what something looks like and instead will force you to focus on the lines and shapes of a composition, which is very important for an artist to learn.



Fig. 3 - 1

You might experience an initial conflict in the two modes of thinking. Normally our brain tells us an image has a top, a bottom, and sides with familiar items or objects we can name and classify, but when we see something upside down, it can seem frustrating at first.

Just remember, it's the **verbal** left brain trying to control and label things. Be aware if you have a moment of disinterest or skepticism. That's your LEFT BRAIN complaining, "It's too hard – why should I bother?" This conflict will ease as you persist in the exercise, because the left brain eventually stops protesting and drops out from frustration or boredom. That's when the **visual** right brain can take over and proceed with the exercise because it finds it interesting. It will draw exactly what it sees, not what it thinks the subject should be.

Sometimes when drawing, you'll find you weren't aware of time passing; you were alert and absorbed – even exhilarated – but calm and relaxed. That's why drawing is such a pleasurable experience. It may also be because the chatter of the left brain has been quieted.

Upside-down line drawing

You will be copying the upside-down line drawing in Fig. 3-1. Print it out (the document is located below this video's lesson) and lay it on your desk next to your drawing pad.

Don't rush through this exercise. Try to avoid interruptions. Resist the temptation to turn the drawing right side up to see how you are doing until you have completely finished it as that would shift you back into left brain mode of naming specific parts of the image. Instead of drawing the outline of the form then filling in the details, draw one line and then the one next to it, observing the distances between one line or one shape and another.

Copy the lines without putting names to anything like the nose, the eye, etc. – just focus on the individual lines and shapes; but you can think to yourself, "the line runs perpendicular to the edge of the paper then it curves here, this line bends at a right angle, etc." When you find yourself fitting the shapes together like a puzzle, then you have shifted to right brain mode.

Begin your drawing now.

Turn both drawings right-side up and you'll be surprised by how well you have drawn. This is because you are learning to really see and focus on curves and lines accurately. Betty Edwards says that the purpose of this lesson is to "teach you how to make the cognitive shift when perceiving things in their normal right-side-up positions." Once you are aware of transitioning to right brain mode, you can consciously learn how and when to do it.

You might want to do the exercise a few more times to really help you.

Now for our lesson

As stated before, the biggest hindrance to students' progress that I've seen in my years of teaching is that they usually start small and then try to expand their drawing to fill the page. They inevitably get the proportion and scale wrong because they are working from small to large.

When drawing a face, they start with the eye; when drawing a flower, they start with a petal. They want to focus on details too early in the process because that's what makes drawing so fun, and invariably turn out a drawing that doesn't look right because their drawing has no foundation on which to build those details. But if you want your hard work to pay off in a beautiful finished drawing, you have to start big and work small. I'll show you how with the *block-in technique* which is the simplified outline of a subject.

The **block-in** is especially important in activating your right brain because, as John McCrone concluded in his article, "Right Brain or Left Brain: Myth or Reality?" for the periodical *The New Scientist*, "The right brain . . . focuses on the visual and processes information in an intuitive and simultaneous way, looking first at the whole picture then the details."

This is how I recommend starting a picture with the block-in technique:



Normally, I would be drawing from life; however, for the sake of this lesson, I took a photo of a lily (Fig. 3-2) and changed it to black and white in my computer graphics program to see more clearly the value changes (light and dark), which is another foundational concept we will be covering in a future lesson. (When you take a photo, you can

Fig. 3 - 2

also change your camera's setting to black and white or grayscale.) When you are working from a photograph as we are here, it's best to have a copy so you can mark on it without marring the original.

Begin by lightly drawing the vertical and horizontal axis lines which will give you your center point. You can also simply place a viewfinder (described in Lesson 1) over the image (see Fig. 3-3).

Drawing axis lines on the photo will help get correct placement of the elements. Notice things like

- the tip of the flower
- the base and the stem are just to the left of the vertical axis line
- what part of the drooping petals show below the horizontal line?

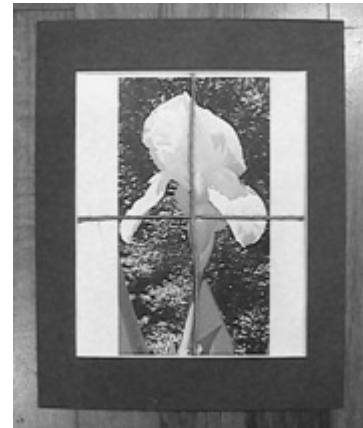


Fig. 3 - 3

This technique will help you get the proper placement. Use the Iris Image document, available for download and printing below this video's lesson, to practice starting a drawing with a basic block-in to get it correctly placed on the page.

In one of my classes, I was teaching several people who swore they could not draw a flower like the iris in Fig. 3-2. But when I demonstrated the technique of using axis lines, they were clearly able to get the proper placement of the flower on the page. I pointed out how much of the flower was in this quadrant, how much was in that quadrant, and so forth. One of the students said it was like a light went off for her; she never thought she could draw, but with this technique, she felt confident she could draw a pleasing picture of even a complex subject. She felt encouraged for the first time that maybe she *could* draw after all.

Now it's time to start a block-in on your paper, using our photograph.

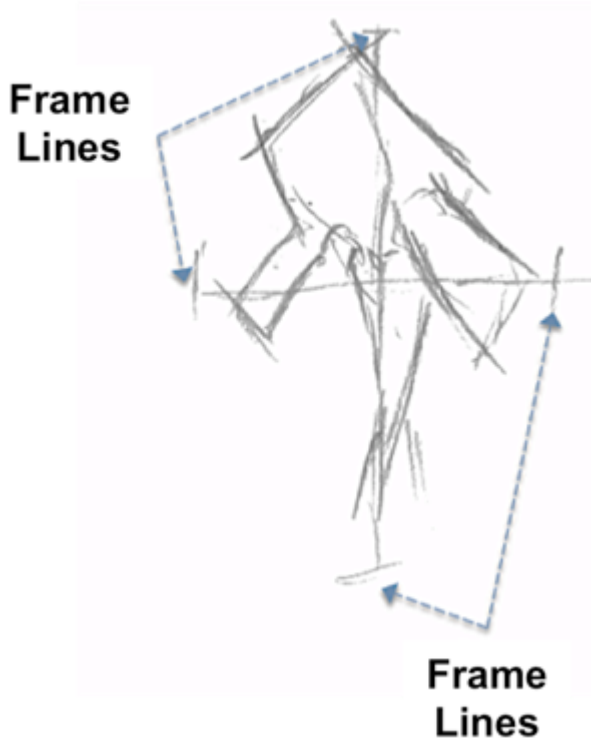


Fig. 3 - 4

Many amateur students would start this drawing by shading the main tulip petal on top, then the next petal, and so forth. However, as I've stated before, starting on one element of a composition at the beginning is almost never successful.

I find it helpful to start with an H pencil and lightly sketch the horizontal and vertical axis lines on my paper. This also gives me my center point, which I match up with the *photo's* center point. Then I sketch light lines on the sides, top, and bottom of the paper to put my subject within an imaginary "frame" (see Fig. 3-4) so the drawing will fit on the page in the proper scale and not run off one or more sides. I then lightly sketch the outer form of the flower with straight lines to get the structural envelope or outside shape and add a few inner lines.

We are not aiming for a nice drawing in this lesson. It looks very abstract and non-representational at first and will be revised many times. Since it is easier to darken and much harder to lighten, start with faint lines as they will be easier to erase.

After comparing my rough shape to the subject and approving the placement on the paper, I then draw more curved lines that describe the outer and inner shape of my subject – constantly comparing distances from the axis lines by asking questions like:

- How much of the top bulb appears to the left or right of the vertical axis lines?
- How much appears above the horizontal axis line?
- How much of the stalk is showing to each side?

These are the types of questions to ask any time you are working with axis lines or a **grid**, which we'll cover in a later lesson. It helps to sketch any forms you think will describe the image during the block-in (e.g. ovals, circles, triangles, squares, rectangles, and cylinders).

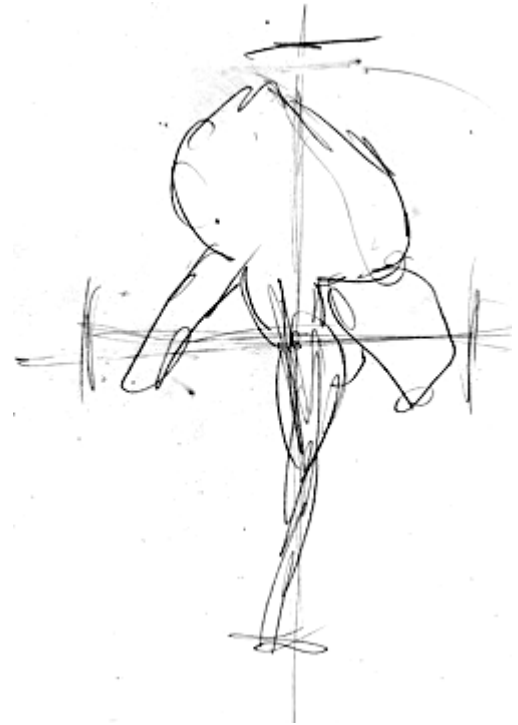


Fig. 3 - 5

Getting the block-in correct might take quite a few erasures before you get it to the shape, scale, and proportion that looks right, **but never rush this part of the drawing. It is the foundation which has to be strong or the rest of the drawing will fail.**

Look at the subject to make sure the tilt and angles are correct. In fact, a good artist probably looks longer at the subject than he does at his drawing at first. If you find you haven't looked up from your drawing in a while, you are probably getting your perspective, proportion, or value slightly off.

I will show you how to complete a drawing with shading in a later lesson.

Here's an example of how to block in a figurative painting. This is one I painted and we'll use a grayscale photograph of it as an example. (You can see how important good drawing skills are before beginning a painting.) I lightly draw straight lines to get the basic angles, then I draw curved lines to get the figure in. This usually takes a couple of erasures to get it correct, so remember, the eraser is your friend – USE IT. Squint and compare your sketch with the model over and over until you have hammered out any inconsistencies. When you feel like you've accurately drawn the figure's shape and scale on the paper, then you can erase the lines.



Fig. 3 - 6

In another example of a block-in, I'll use this photograph of a bouquet of flowers. Here's my very loose and abstract block-in. I sketch short lines on each side to frame in the subject, then I look for basic shapes (e.g. circles, ovals) that would describe the items in the arrangement. Again, it doesn't have to be perfect at this stage; you just want to get the basic outline in.

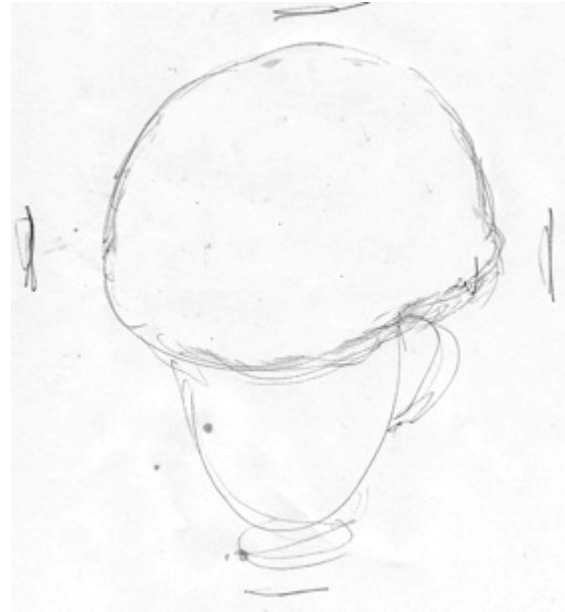


Fig. 3 - 7

Don't forget, this lesson is just to show the block-in. Shading will come later. Don't spend time on that at this stage.

Here is an example of a landscape painting I did of a lily pond. You will want to sketch your horizontal and vertical axis lines first. Instead of starting with one of the lily pads or the pink flower as most people would tend to do, thinking that that counts as blocking in, I urge you first to get down the fluid dynamic curve of the lily pads as a mass (see Fig. 3-8). There are so many lily pads that if you start trying to sketch every lily pad, you'll get bogged down with detail, which is not the purpose of the block-in. You'll run out of room and your drawing won't be placed correctly. Start big, then go small, even when you're just sketching basic shapes. So lightly sketch that organic flow of the pads with a light line. This will make it easier to draw each lily pad and make sure you get them all spaced appropriately on the paper. After you have sketched the axis lines, as well as the main organic curve, then you can start noticing the placement of the individual lily pads (mainly, which pads are located in which quadrant).

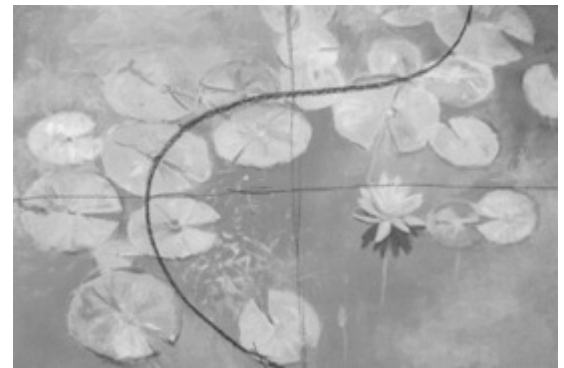


Fig. 3 - 8

Conclusion

I think you can see how important a step the Block-In is. It makes the rest of your drawing go more easily and smoothly because you have laid the important foundation – and the rest is fun!

Practice Before Next Lesson

- Complete the Upside-Down Drawing.
- Print out the Iris Image and complete the lesson on your own.
- Practice each of the demonstrations I showed you in this lesson and save your work, as we will build on each of the block-ins for the next lesson.
- I encourage you to identify a good composition – be it a figure, a still-life, or a landscape – and apply the techniques and concepts covered in this lesson.