

## Learning to Draw

Through attendance at primary and secondary school I learned that I have no artistic talent whatsoever. As a child I had two pictures hanging in my bedroom. One was of a beautiful Mediterranean garden and the other of a Square Rigger in full sail. I would fall asleep gazing at these pictures, drifting peacefully into pleasant dreams, transported to a world of sunshine, happiness, and adventure. Sadly such dreams no longer accompany me in my slumbers, but memories of those two pictures will always gladden my heart.

My Art teacher in secondary school was Mr Bruce. I liked Mr Bruce. Perhaps it was because he was one of the teachers who didn't give me any hassle. He took charge of the Sailing club. Being a Clydesider, boats of any description appealed to me and I needed no second bidding to join the club. I regularly travelled to Hogganfield Loch where the Glasgow Schools' Sailing Club had its Enterprise and Kestrel sailing dinghys. This was, perhaps, the only aspect of school which I enjoyed without reservation. On windy days the sailing was exhilarating. On calm days we would practice capsizing, developing confidence in our ability to handle ourselves in the water, even if we found ourselves tangled up in rigging.

However the Art classes consisted of being handed out a sheet of Newsprint and a tray with 9 filthy blocks of Poster Colour paint. A brush and jar of water completed the setup. Mr Bruce would then tell the class to paint such and such. We settled to our task, producing whatever we imagined the "*Such and such*" looked like. With the class occupied, Mr Bruce retired to the store adjacent to the classroom, only to emerge a few minutes before the end of the period to tell the class to tidy up. We were never shown the principles of light and shade, how to mix colours, or the notions of hue and saturation. Nor were we given the most rudimentary guidance on how to represent simple three dimensional shapes on the two dimensional paper or understand perspective.

I was never an antisocial individual, but I enjoyed spending most of my spare time on my own, making models of one sort or another. School conditioning was so complete that I never questioned whether there was any possibility that I might have some artistic ability. It never occurred to me that my hobby was a creative activity which involved handling a variety materials and persuading them to adopt some desired shape in exactly the same manner as a sculptor.

I gave up Latin and was thrown out of French on account of my long hair. I have yet to determine what length of hair has to do with one's ability to learn a language. Many of the girls had long hair and they were allowed to continue in the French class.

Not being a waster, I decided to employ the time during which I wasn't being taught to teach myself Applied Mechanics. This subject turned out to be the one in which I scored my best exam marks. At the time I failed to make the comparison between the effectiveness of my own learning against the so-called education provided by the school.

My dad had received an excellent education and trained as a draftsman. He became a Science teacher and later retrained as a technical teacher. Despite his knowledge, experience, and profession, not once did he give me a lesson in drawing or technical graphics.

Consequently, as my technical interests developed, the skills of engineering drawing and technical graphics, like the Applied Mechanics, were of necessity self taught. In due course I started carrying out my own engineering design. For the most part I also taught myself the practical aspects of engineering workshop practice. The learning process may have been inefficient, but it was infinitely superior to not learning at all.

Ultimately I came to realise that engineering itself incorporated a great many skills which in another context would have been described as Artistic. The important distinctions were those of the detail and precision required by engineering. In engineering, the stylistic element was subordinate to function. Perhaps I failed to make the connection sooner on account of the drawing instruments and deterministic processes used in Orthographic Projection. So while I was unable to produce a freehand perspective sketch, I could turn out a technically exact Perspective Projection.

Put simply, Engineering is Precision Art.

It had taken most of my life, but after 50 years reflection I ultimately resolved to challenge the assessment that I had no artistic talent.

The initial stage of learning is copying, so I concluded that painting by numbers offered the most likely prospect of early success. I used an Image editing programs to experiment with the possibility of producing "*Painting by numbers*" printouts which I could later regenerate. I can't remember the exact steps, but it effectively involved a reduction of the palette to about 16 values and overlaying a mask to dim the colour. I also tried using a graphics input tablet to make an outline sketch layer over a photograph. The printed sketch looked passable but one problem with computer based graphics is the hand-eye coordination. Controlling my hand on the tablet while observing the results on the screen remains most unnatural to me.

I later set out to complete a painting by numbers which we had bought for our son Jim when he was a young lad. It was a “Lowrie” style picture using Oil paint. Jim did about half of it, then gave up.

When I took a closer look at the progress our son had made, I realised that several of the colours were totally wrong. The little tubs of oil paint must have become mixed up against the numbers. There was no proper guide picture to show what the finished result should be like, and there was no colour bar against the numbers. The only guide was the picture on the box, which was partially obscured. We must have been out of our minds to think the Lowrie-esque painting by numbers would be a good present for a young lad. It was not surprising that he became disheartened.

I dislike Acrylic paint, not least on account of its rapid drying property. However, it was readily available and since I was simply wanting to gain familiarity with the basics of painting, I thought it would do no harm to use Acrylic to finish where my son had left off 25 years earlier. I set about overpainting the wrong colours and quickly discovered that Acrylic paint cannot be used over Oils, despite their age. I had read this warning somewhere, but obviously I didn't take it on board at the time. Fortunately, a second coat of Acrylic seemed to do the job.

It soon became clear that there was something horribly wrong with the whole picture. There was neither geometric nor aerial perspective and the matchstick people were more childish than a child's drawing. The colours seemed to have been chosen by someone who was colour blind. Lowrie, like Picasso, and Van Gogh, either never had any artistic ability, or else couldn't be bothered employing it. I have sympathy for Van Gogh. He did try to learn how to draw but just never really got the hang of it. I know that feeling.

I decided that a sensible move would be to get rid of the matchstick people. When I began writing this account the matchstick people were about half gone. Some the top half, some the bottom half, and some the half in the middle. I decided that somehow I would live with the absence of perspective and might be able to do something about the grotesque colours. Initially the exercise served to enhance my distaste for Acrylic paint, but I did at least learn how it feels as a material and even tried mixing colour. On this latter point, I could scarcely have done worse than Lowrie. I also came to appreciate the extent to which Acrylic paint darkens on drying. The reason for that nasty habit is simple enough, but compensating for the effect is yet another skill I haven't begun to master.

In the Autumn of 2015, I found myself obliged to travel to Athlone twice a week. Hoping to make full use of my time waiting there I went along to Athlone

Institute of Technology with the intention of enrolling in a nightclass on painting, only to discover that it had been cancelled due to lack of interest.

I'll never know if the lecturer would have been any better than Mr Bruce, but while I was in the college I called into the library. One of the girls recognised me from the time I was a lecturer at Athlone Tech, and sorted out a reader's ticket for me. It was jolly decent of her.

The very first book I picked up was called “*The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*” by Betty Edwards. (ISBN 0-87477-419-5) It turned out to be extremely useful. I strongly recommend it to anyone who believes they have no artistic talent.

The whole text is based on the premise that the education system is Left Brained = Right handed = Fascist. On the other hand, artistic skills are Right Brained = (Left handed) = Anarchist. Fascists hate anarchists, so the teaching system relegates arts and crafts to the minor league and promotes numeracy and literacy.

Mr Bruce was actually a pretty good artist and I'm a bit disappointed that he failed to develop my potential as an anarchist. I'm sure I would have excelled.

As I understand the situation, the trick to being a good artist is to suppress the fascist for a while and let a little bit of anarchy take over.

Having tried one or two of the exercises in Betty Edwards' book it was clear that there was genuine merit to them. The author produces excellent realistic drawings. She includes several references to Leonardo Da Vinci and Albrecht Durer, both of whom used technical aids to achieve accurate perspective. (Durer's “*Hare*” looks just like the ones that visit our garden.)

Whereas I had believed that using drawing instruments was not really art, some of the finest artists in the world relied heavily on technical aids. It is believed that the Dutch Masters used a Camera Obscura to project their subjects onto a canvass, painting over the projected image.

Although Betty Edwards has a chapter on colour, most of the book is devoted to graphite pencil drawing. In the colour chapter there are some examples, amongst which are two Pastel drawings by Chardin. One is of his wife and the other a self portrait. The realism Chardin achieved with a limited palette is astonishing.

In an epilogue, Betty Edwards makes the point that handwriting is line art and expresses the personality in the same manner as drawing. This is emphasised by the observation that a person's signature is recognised in Law as being indicative of the person.

She illustrates how the education system has eroded the standard of handwriting. Since her book was published, signatures have been replaced by PIN's. I am no longer permitted to use my signature with my credit card. Fascism rears its head in every aspect of our personal lives.

As a protest against fascism, I have once more commissioned my fountain pen and now make an effort to use my "*Best*" handwriting for making notes. It is very slow, and by gum it hurts! On the other hand, I do feel that it has improved my hand-eye coordination. Finally, after some 60 years I am at last able to read my own handwriting.

I am ever more convinced that the education system was established to optimise ignorance throughout the population. It certainly succeeded with me!

In between using Betty Edwards' book, I picked up others. One was on Mucha's "*Art Nouveau*". It includes some of the photographs which Mucha worked up into his posters. His stylisation and graphics are truly beautiful and impressive. Considering that graphic art was at an early stage of development Mucha's work deserved every praise.

While I was about things I tried to use a Calligraphy set as well. I didn't have much success. That may all be part of the curse which I suspect was put on me at birth. However it might have had more to do with the reluctance of Black ink to wet the nib of the pen. I also discovered that the instructions and alphabets are all designed for a right handed person. A normal rounded nib is no problem on account of its symmetry. However the broad point nibs used for Calligraphy have to be held at specific angles in relation to the line and direction of movement.

When I was in primary school Mum bought me a fountain pen with a left handed Italic nib which had a curve at the point to help offset the bias. I was really proud of my present and took it in to School. The next thing I knew I was hauled up in front of the headmistress. I can still picture Sister Christopher Mary in her Nun's robes, complete with the white hood. She asked to see my fountain pen and I innocently obliged. Sister Christopher Mary proceeded to remove the left handed nib from my pen and fitting a straight one instead stated "*I'll keep this safe*". I watched in silence as she wrapped the Italic nib in some paper and put it into the top right hand drawer of her desk. I never saw the Italic nib again. Apart from being left handed, I had done nothing to deserve the theft of my present. That was one of my earliest life experiences of Roman Catholicism in action. It wasn't the only one, and it certainly wasn't the worst.

At least I was allowed to continue scrawling with my left hand which is more than my contemporaries in Ireland were being allowed to do in the early 1960s.

I told mum what had happened, but she did nothing. It never occurred to the young boy that any right mother would have raised merry Hell over what Sister Christopher Mary had done. At the very least mum should have recovered the nib for me to use at home out of sight of the fascists, if only because it had been her present to me.

I never used the pen again and have no idea what became of it. The child may have been unable to rationalise his actions, but he instinctively knew the gift had been tainted and the goodness in it was gone forever.

At this stage of my life it is easy to understand the behaviour of people like Sister Christopher Mary. Anyone who was to read the Bible dispassionately would recognise that the New Testament progressively subverts the teaching of the Old Testament. Once the knowledge that the New Testament was written by Christ's closest associates is factored in, it is reasonable to conclude that it seeks to present Jesus in the best possible light. From that perspective, Christ emerges as a rather unpleasant individual. Perhaps the simplest illustration is in Luke Ch10, summarised by Rudyard Kiplings poem "*Sons of Martha*". Christ may have been many things, but I very much doubt if he was any kind of Saviour, much less the Son of God! It is not surprising that some very nasty people profess to conduct their lives according to Christ's example. They are no doubt being perfectly honest.

To quote the Glaswegian philosopher Rab c. Nesbit...

*"School - The happiest days of your life! -  
Aye - if you're some kind of sado-masochist."*

Setting my childhood experiences to one side, I fooled about to see what I could do with the Calligraphy for a while longer. I thought that different ink and writing back to front upside down with my head in a bucket of water might help. Who knows. Perhaps when the bubbles stopped...

After consideration I decided against the bucket of water, and within a couple of weeks, the ink began to wet the pen nib. It turned out that writing back to front and upside down was almost sufficient. I needed to hold the pen with the nib pointed towards me. This produces the correct "*Right handed*" angle between the flat of the nib and the baseline. However, in order to write, the nib must be pulled over the paper. It cannot be pushed.

Consequently each of the parts of the letters had to be drawn in a direction opposite to that shown in the book. I felt that an average six year old could be justifiably proud of the results. It occurred to me that another option would be to produce “*Left handed*” alphabets in which the pen would be held normally making the angle between the flat of the nib and the baseline the supplement of that for “*Right handed*” alphabets. This would have a direct impact on the shapes of the letters, particularly in the curves, since broad lines would appear where narrow lines had been and vice versa.

I settled for a kind of compromise. I carried on going to the college and learning to draw on my own initiative. The arrangement lasted for a couple of months until Winter began to take hold making the 50 mile round trip to the College much too onerous.

In due course the “*Lowrie-esque*”, painting by numbers was completed. I felt satisfied that it was at least as good as that particular “*Artist’s*” efforts. Subsequently I came across a discarded adult colouring book and spent some time colouring in the patterns.

I was able to observe some improvement in my efforts over time with later attempts showing a willingness on my part to blend colours and allow edges to flow into one another.

At that point I devoted some time to another incomplete oil painting. My reluctance to use oil had been on account of its slow drying characteristics. Having obtained some grasp of the value of allowing adjacent colours to blend, it was not long before I discovered that the slow drying oil paint caused this process to occur spontaneously, giving a softer and much less garish appearance than the Acrylic paint had done.

Much as I liked Mr Bruce, he failed me and I suspect most of the other pupils to whom he was supposed to have taught the rudiments of Art.

The time spent in Athlone Tech Library during the Autumn term of 2015 was no more than 60 hours. When at St Thomas Aquinas Secondary School, I had at least one period of art every week for the first three years. Those three years of Art classes in school adds up to about 100 hours.

The exercise at Athlone Tech proved thoroughly worthwhile. There was no certificate and I have yet to take what I learned beyond the rudimentary stage. However I now know for certain, though with some sadness, that in a different life, I might have been encouraged to develop my artistic ability. Had Mr Bruce troubled to make the slightest effort to do what he was paid to do, my entire adult life could have transformed and enriched.

For her part, beyond the abortive support with the left-handed nib, the only support mum could be relied upon to give me with my endeavours was to make recourse to her favourite saying “*Just you stick in*”.

I’ve been stuck in it for so long that now I doubt if I’ll ever get out.

But then...

Perhaps one day I’ll make a passable attempt at recreating the fondly remembered Mediterranean garden, or that magnificent Square Rigger in its wild sea.

Jim Cahill

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