

The Summary: Drawing From Turner

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Professor Stephen Farthing, University of the Arts London and Dr Maryanne Martin, University of Oxford, with a view towards establishing a profile of each of the participants and their response to the research question: **Does making transcriptions from the drawings of high achievers have a part to play in a curriculum for learning to draw today?**

Participant Profile

The sample group was drawn from willing participants in four categories: post graduate fine art students specializing in drawing from Camberwell College of Arts, London and undergraduate fine art students from Camberwell and Chelsea College of Art and Design, teaching staff from across a range of art and design disciplines from the University of the Arts, London, established artists across a broad age range, staff from Tate with a higher qualification in art. Each of the 58 project participants had undertaken a formal art education for a minimum of three years and an average of four and a half years. There was an equal divide between gender, and a fairly even age spread, with the majority of birth dates in the 1946 –1981 group. 13% of participants drew with their left hand.

The majority stated that drawing had **not** been offered as a formal part of the curriculum during their art education. This said, the majority rated drawing as ‘extremely important’ in their current studio practice, with only 8% ranking it as ‘of little importance’.

Before embarking on the project the majority of the sample group rated copying ‘of average importance’ in learning to draw, 5% considered it ‘extremely important’ while 30% considered it of little relevance. During their undergraduate courses 50% said they made no copies, 38% an average of five copies and 12% more than twenty five. At a postgraduate level only three participants claimed to have made copies of drawings. At this point I should reiterate that all participants had by the time they were asked to

complete the questionnaire exercised their thoughts around the meaning of the word 'copy' within the specific confines of this project, so were not coming at it with the prejudice one might expect.

Questions Relating to The Exercise

The majority of participants completed their drawing in the Prints and Drawings Room at Tate Britain between September 2005 - 2007, in two and a half hours while 12% spent more than seven hours completing the task.

After completing the exercise participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 [not at all] - 7 [extremely] how important they considered making copies of old master drawings: 80% gave 5 or more, 16% gave 7.

When asked to what extent the exercise enabled them to better understand the drawing they had chosen to study: 80% rated the worth of the activity at 6 or more, 18% awarded 7, while three participants awarded 4.

When asked the more technical question 'to what extent did copying allow you to understand how long it took the original to be made': 80% awarded 5 or above, 14% awarded 7 and four participants awarded 3.

When asked the degree to which the exercise was intellectually stimulating 90% awarded five or over with 40% scoring 7.

When asked if the exercise required a creative response, 80% awarded 5 or over with 22% awarding 7.

With regard to the perceived level of difficulty 50% of participants found it of average difficulty, the remaining group was equally divided between those who found it either

easy or very difficult. There was one modest trend towards older participants finding the exercise less difficult than younger participants.

Participant Observations

The questionnaire concluded by asking participants to identify positive and negative aspects of the exercise. On the positive side the most common issues raised were: the pleasure of learning new drawing techniques and considering another artist's marks, and of spending time looking and having study time alone to concentrate.

On the negative side some participants drew attention to the frustration they felt at only being able to see what Turner recorded not what he was actually looking at. Some said they felt a temptation to replicate rather than try to understand the artist's methodology.

In addition, individuals drew attention to the difficulty of working on a small scale, of finding where the artist had started and finished and in feeling that they were unable to make a personal input. A number of participants stated they had a problem with the use of the word 'copy' within the questionnaire.

Text Panels

In addition to the questionnaires, those artists selected for the Tate Britain exhibition were asked to write a short text panel that summed up their thoughts on the experience of making the drawing. What became clear in each statement was the unexpected degree of excitement, novelty and focus they experienced while carrying out an exercise that received opinion would conventionally have written off as dull and pointless. Roger Wilson for example, who at the time was Head of Chelsea College of Art & Design summed this up when he wrote 'I loved sitting in that room at the Tate just looking hard at the drawing for a long time.'

Osman Ahmed a student on the MA Course in Drawing at Camberwell College of Arts, said of his drawing of Turner's *Mountains near Dunkeld* -

'I chose this work because it had depth, and at so many levels. It took me inside the landscape; it had so many details that fascinated me. I wanted to draw it as Turner would have done at the time. I was surprised by the fact that I was sitting in front of such an interesting drawing. I needed to get inside Turner's skin to get the feeling, to use his idea of drawing hills, mountains and trees. It also awoke my own memories.'

Architect Will Alsop had a very similar experience to Osman Ahmed when he drew from Turner's *Looking Back to the Pic de'L'Oeillette, Gorges du Guiers Mort, Grande Chartreuse*.

'To spend time with an original Turner drawing and viewing it from the perspective of making a drawing of a drawing, results firstly in acting as a detective.

As more time is spent, the bravery of Turner becomes infectious and this gives me a freedom that is only tethered by my own imagination of what Turner himself might be saying to us.'

Jeanine Breaker, AHRB Research Fellow in Digital Imaging at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design also referred to the surprise that drawing from *Turner's. A Man with a Cart and Horses on the Shore, Boats in Choppy Water Beyond* could bring pleasure with it.

'I was particularly drawn to the horse and wagon vignette in this drawing because of its energy and economy of line. I was challenged by the activity of copying another artist's gestural lines, which seemed inherently paradoxical. I found it surprisingly pleasurable, almost therapeutic.'

Another theme that developed beyond the scope of the questionnaire was the interest participants found in slowly redrawing rapid gestures.

Roger Wilson, who drew Turner's *Town beside Lake* said:

'I chose a small, informal drawing of a village seen from a high vantage point. I suppose most viewers would call this a 'sketch' but I have always hated that term. It implies something hasty, less serious and less worthy than drawing. However, I liked the haste of the drawing and found the prospect of sustained attention to such a hasty expression interesting in itself.'

Dr Marcus Wood, artist and Professor of Post Colonial Studies at The University of Sussex who drew from Turner's *A Bridge at Amsterdam* wrote:

'I chose to take pages from one of the sketchbooks that showed Turner at his most ephemeral and economic. His processes of visual shorthand fascinate me, especially when they get to a point where conventional visual communication has almost disappeared. I decided to attempt firstly to mimic Turner's marks, to scale, using a sharpened piece of roofing lead, which would be close to the lead pencils the master used. I then created larger scale dialogues with these small works using bamboo pen and ink. I liked the idea of taking Turner's extraordinary graphic energy and scaling it up. I wondered if things would still hold together. The small drawings were done laboriously and took about an hour each, the large drawings I did in approximately ten minutes each.'

Artist Tom Phillips working with Turner's *The Arrival of Louis-Philippe* wrote:

'I am here transcribing as laboriously as can be imagined a fragment of a drawing by Turner done at his maximum speed. With its thousands of dots this is in effect a slow motion replay on a large scale analogous to what one sees on TV sport programmes. It highlights Turner's most personal drawing shorthand whose urgent calligraphic brilliance first excited me when I looked at the original in the Print Room of the Tate's Clore

Gallery. I made pencil sketches on that occasion and was provided with a photograph. I worked up the pencil drawings by means of dots into a small vignette in negative. I made a xeroxed enlargement of this on to good paper and worked over the result with thousands more dots to capture the nuances of Turner's pen work. Thus, roughly ten hours of my time represent an estimated ten seconds of Turner's, as might be thought only fitting.'

There were surprisingly few participants who intentionally went at the task with a view towards airing their creativity. The majority paid what I can best describe as a respectful homage. Artist Jeff Dennis working from Turner's *The Arrival of Louis-Phillipe* spoke openly about this:

'I soon abandoned any attempt to transcribe Turner's actual marks as futile and pointless: my task was to draw something that responded, in terms of nerve and movement to Turner's original impulse: I did not have his waves and ships to work from, sitting in the quiet of the Tate's Print Room. It became more like a musical improvisation upon the theme that Turner's vigorous little scrap had provided.'

Another was artist Bill Woodrow who said of his torn paper version of one of Turner's *Erotic Figure Studies*:

'My interest was not really in finding out how Turner made his drawings but more about using them to make new works that dealt with the physicality of what he was looking at.'

At the other end of the scale and more representative of the majority of participants position is Christopher Le Brun who drew *Cassiobury: The House Seen in the Distance from the West, across the Park* and wrote the following shortly afterwards:

'I simply tried to copy this drawing. I suspect Turner was searching for the composition, as the likely subject, the house, is faint and remote.'

I found the drawing remarkable for its evenness of attention. Hardly any part is favoured or exaggerated, everything is understated. The result seems like a faithful topography, calm and unfussed, with a steady rhythm. You sense that his great power as a picture maker is present but not called on.

A convincing urgency or rhythm, of course, is the last thing achievable in a copy, since where Turner's eye was flooded with daylight and colour, I have only his time-worn lines on paper for a model.

The lesson of the copy? Perhaps that the pressure to make work decisively aesthetic should occasionally be resisted - for truth's sake.'

Acting Head of Wimbledon School of Art, Anita Taylor was one of a very few participants who related any depth of involvement with the subject matter of her chosen Turner *A Man Talking to an Oyster-Seller (The Bi-valve Courtship)*

'I was intrigued by the intimacy of the drawing, the subject and the sense of a flirtatious transaction between the two protagonists as the oysters are sorted, sold, and opened for consumption by the oyster-seller. As I explored the innuendo and inference of each mark and line accumulated to imply this vignette of a relationship that Turner had observed, I began to re-appraise what I was seeing. Lascivious intent became more certain, as they appeared to be on shifting ground, poised between terra firma and lapping water as forces begin to overtake them.'

More common was artist Suzanne Treister 's reaction to drawing from Turner's *Castle on Rock with Mountains*:

'The experience was almost paranormal, retracing lines made in another period by another (dead) artist. It felt as if I were temporarily embodying a ghost. Although I also felt a sense of control I became more interested in reproducing the same movements as

Turner and suppressed any desire to re-invent the drawing in another manner. I was interested to see how different the copy looked from the original.’

What was interesting about both Triester and Taylor’s drawings was that they were both remarkably similar to their source.

Conclusion

From the evidence of the questionnaires and text panel ‘sound bites’ it is clear that regardless of their age or experience, no-one found the exercise either out of date or pointless. The vast majority positively enjoyed it and could see a purpose in getting close to an artist’s thought process by making drawings of their drawings. This said, clearly not all the participants finished the exercise having learned an identical lesson. Some used the opportunity to explore technical issues, others simply enjoyed the activity as a ritual, and a few it seems got wrapped up in subject matter. Most, however, spoke passionately of the privilege of being able to spend a sustained period of time in private study with a significant original work. A sentiment best summed up by Allen Jones when he wrote ‘As far as my effort was concerned, I see it simply as a record of time spent as close to Turner as if he had been alive.’

On the evidence of both the drawn and written outcomes I suspect that if the task is intelligently presented the making of transcriptions from originals in museum print rooms could be used today as a viable part of a curriculum designed to teach drawing. In saying this I suspect that over and above anything, the participants may have learned about Turner and drawing, the success of the project is very closely connected to the sense of privilege just about every participant felt as a result of simply spending a focused period of self directed study time with a master of drawing.

What we learn from this is that the exercise may have some value in teaching craft skills, but that this aspect of possible value may be of secondary importance to the more

profound benefits of simply spending time using drawing as a tool to analyze and reflect upon a primary source.

A significant outcome from the project was Tate Britain organising a part of the display of their exhibition *Colour and Line: Turner's Experiments* around the underpinning principles of *Drawing From Turner*. The description of this display is probably best left to its curator Nicola Moorby:

‘As a direct result of what we learned from this project Tate Britain has included a drawing table as part of a new interactive space in the Clore Galleries, *Colour and Line: Turner's Experiments*. The focus of this five-year display is an exploration of the theories and techniques that informed Turner's work. A specially designed, bespoke table offers members of the general public the opportunity to closely study some of the artists’ drawings within the gallery space and to have a go at sketching in front of the works themselves. Paper and pencils are provided and individual captions offer helpful but not prescriptive advice on which techniques to try.’

(see <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/turnercolourandline>)

Stephen Farthing

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