

The human dimension

Don Glynn takes the pain out of adding figures to your paintings

An essential ingredient in any leisure painter's repertoire is an understanding of the human figure. Without this knowledge your subject matter will be limited. Many students say that they are unable to paint figures and it is most noticeable at art club exhibitions where there are a vast number of paintings devoid of life: empty street scenes, and deserted beaches and seascapes. Many of these paintings would be transformed by the introduction of figures.

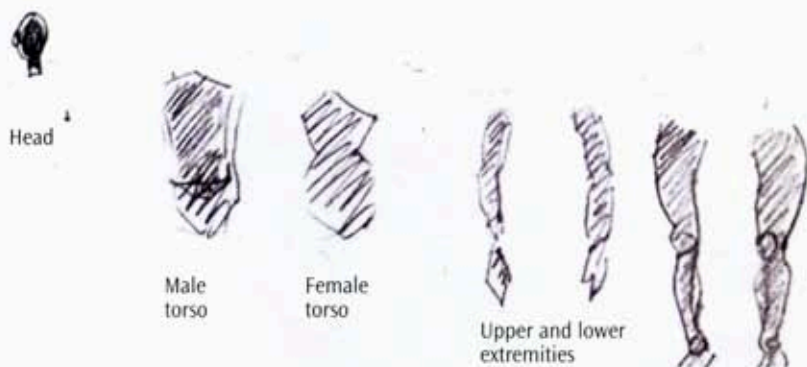
Anyone who applies themselves with due diligence can become technically skilful as a painter. It requires simply the desire, good tuition, application... and practice, practice, practice!

Shapes and proportions

Front view Rather than thinking of the figure in terms of lines, look for the basic shapes and proportions of the body – then join them together. In its simplest component parts, the figure is made up of the head, the torso, upper extremities and, finally, lower extremities (Figure 1, top right). Figure 2 (right) shows how I brought these simple shapes together to achieve basic male and female figures.

Figure 3 (above right) shows the sequence I used to paint these simple forms using a mix of cadmium red with a touch of cadmium yellow. When trying this exercise, relate the size of the head to the rest of the body, and notice how the upper and lower extremities are larger at the top and taper away at the feet. Remember you are not making an anatomical drawing; you are creating simple figure shapes to complement and help your composition. So relax and don't worry if the proportions don't look right. Analyse where you are going wrong, then continue until you are satisfied with the result.

Side view I repeated these exercises to show the side views of the male and female figures (Figure 4, right). Notice how the vertical line of gravity helps you to balance the figure, and the curvatures of the spine helps to define the torso.



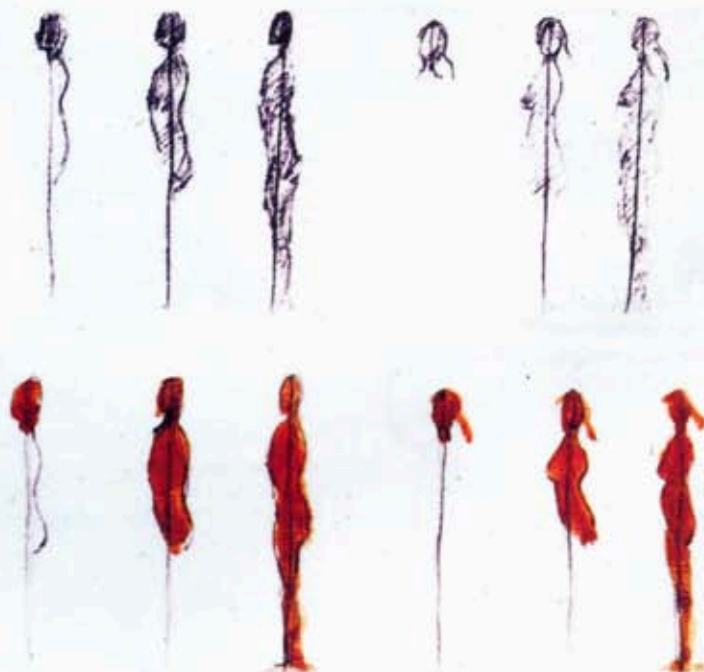
▲ Figure 1 Silhouetted figure shapes, showing individual features



▲ Figure 2 The shapes from Figure 1 are put together to make male and female figures



▲ Figure 3 The shapes are then painted using a No. 10 sable brush and firm washes of cadmium red with a touch of cadmium yellow. And there you have simple figures!



▲ Figure 4 Pencil sketch of side view (above) then sequence of painted male and female forms. The vertical line helps you to balance the figure

Posture

The next step is to consider the human figure in a variety of poses. This introduces movement into the equation so it is important to consider and simplify the major moving parts of the body: the head, torso, shoulder girdle, arms, forearms, hands, thighs, lower legs and feet.

Stand in front of a mirror, move these parts individually then combine the movement to see the shapes you make. Turning the head, nodding or shrugging the shoulder are just some of the many movements we perform daily. Note that the movement sets off a chain reaction through the body, which helps maintain balance. It is these postures that we must learn to capture.

I used the same initial simple shapes in *Figure 5* (top) but on the first two left-hand male and female figures, white spaces have been used for the articulations. It is now a simple matter of painting the figures in their swim wear and you have the makings of a beach scene (*Figure 6*, right).

Movement

With proportion and posture under our belts, we progress to sketching random figures in action (*Figure 7*, right). Despite having painted the figures in a very casual manner, they look like puppets and there is no unity in the scene. They are simply individual, unlinked shapes. However, the figures are a reasonable example of gesture painting, which I use in many of my paintings. *The Natural Way to Paint* by Charles Reid (Watson-Guptill, £12.99, ISBN 9780823031733) has a delightful section on gesture painting. If you can find a copy, all your problems are solved!

Figure 8 (below) is a further progression of gesture painting by the addition of sand and sea. I have kept with the beach theme for this first sketch of a group. I kept the sketch loose and indistinct, which adds character to the little scene. I also added scribbled line to define the figures more. Below is an explanation of how I painted the scene:

Painting process

1 I blobbed in the heads, arms and legs using a mix of cadmium red and yellow.

2 When this was reasonably dry, I painted the cobalt blue top on the left-hand figure then used cadmium yellow for the dress.

3 The skirt was cadmium red, cobalt blue and other dirty colours on my palette.

4 The shorts on the right-hand



▲ **Figure 5** The left-hand figures show where the articulations are placed on the figure, which helps remind us of how the body moves



▲ **Figure 6** Add swim wear and your figures are ready for a beach scene



▲ **Figure 7** Simple action figures demonstrate gesture painting technique



▲ **Figure 8** Action figures on the beach

figure were painted with raw umber, warm sepia, and again other dirty colours on my palette. The figure's hair was painted with the same colour mix.

5 When this was dry, I used a light grey mix made from cerulean blue and cadmium red for the left-hand figure and the blouse of the girl in the brown skirt.

6 The background was simple washes of potter's pink, yellow ochre, and cobalt blue with a touch of potter's pink. A splash of this colour was also added to the figures.

7 I finished with line scribbling using a Rigger to mess up or highlight aspects of the figures. This may have been a mistake but, in writing this article, I am also experimenting and taking chances. But this final scribbling brings to mind the essential requirement of any artist – don't fiddle!

Groups

The next demonstration, over the page, shows groups of figures and deals with the problems of drawing too much attention to one figure through an excess of detail. Try to avoid this because the only thing that will attract the viewer's eye is the dominant figure. An initial sketch, *Figure 9* (top of page 40), gave me a rough indication of the



▲ **Figure 9** An initial sketch will help you to rough out a figure composition



▲ **Figure 10** In this beach scene, shapes are focused on rather than detailed portraits of figures, which adds to the general liveliness of the scene. The colours used were mixes of burnt sienna and umber, raw umber, cobalt blue, viridian with the odd touch of alizarin crimson, cadmium red and yellow

figure compositions which are shown in the finished colour sketch (*Figure 10*, above). The main figures in *Figure 10* are in the foreground and harmonise with the middle distant figures. I connected the two groups by applying simple masses that blend in with the heads and the torsos of the foreground figures. It is a bit of a muddle but, on a well-populated beach, shimmering in the heat, nothing is defined but the foreground figures. This creates the atmosphere and captures the life and vitality of the scene.

I started by painting the headland, which occupied the upper quarter of the sketch. Using a No. 14 Da Vinci sable brush, I applied a light wash of raw sienna and continued it down to include the foreground. This dried rapidly in the heat and I was able to paint the colour shapes of the headland quickly. I was painting *contra jour* (into the light) so the tonal and colour values were quite dark. This meant I took great care to retain my lights.

I painted over the figures that protruded into the headland. The small area of sea was painted with cobalt blue and a touch of cadmium red to tone it down. I took care to retain the triangle shape of the

umbrella. I continued with this wash to cover the base of the headland and form the shadow shapes in the middle distance and foreground. Water was added to dilute the blue as I worked my way down the painting.

When this passage was dry, I painted the two foreground figures using thick pigment. Ultramarine blue and sepia was used for the figure in blue, and cadmium red with raw sienna for the figure in red. The skin tones were mixed from cadmium red and yellow then, when dry, a cast shadow was applied. The middle distant and distant figures were painted as one mass with variations in tone and some lights to suggest heads and extremities.

To finish, I used white gouache for highlights and added more cast shadows as I felt necessary.

From above

Figure 11 (below) shows how to



▲ **Figure 11** An unusual vantage point makes figures more interesting – but accurate drawing is paramount

paint figures from a high vantage point. This was the easiest of the sketches to do because, once you have the figures drawn accurately the rest is relatively simple. Apply a wash of yellow ochre or raw sienna, cutting out the figures at the water's edge so they are left as white paper. Apply the skin tones then the darks and colours as shown. A few diagonal brushstrokes completes the water's edge and the sketch.

Focal points

When figures are the focal point of a painting, you need to work more carefully at the pencil drawing before you apply colour. *Figure 12* and *Figure 13* (below) were made in my sketchbook, which was balanced on my knee while I was watching musicians on television and had pressed the pause button.

Keep practising until you are competent. If you have paintings stored away that could be enhanced by the introduction of figure or two, why not have a go at painting them. **IP**



▲ **Figure 12** and **Figure 13** are action sketches taken from a paused television programme