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SCENIC ART AND THE SIGHT-SIZE METHOD

by Karen Maness, University of Texas at Austin



Author Karen Maness using the Sight-Sized Method.

Becoming a skilled artist takes a lifetime. I have been a professional scenic artist for 15 years now, studying and working with some of the finest scenic artists in the country. My journey to learn new skills, advance my craft, become a better teacher, and expand my fine art abilities, keeps me in a constant search for knowledge.

In 2001 through the support of the Performing Arts Center at The University of Texas at Austin, I had the great fortune to study plein air painting and academic drawing at the Florence Academy of Art. The plein air painting class was taught in the style of Il Machioli (The Italian contemporaries to the French Impressionists). The course proved invaluable in teaching us to quickly render a landscape scene with accurate colors, value, and atmosphere. The academic drawing class introduced us to a useful principle of drawing, the Sight-Size Method. This is a method of drawing that has been taught in the academy for centuries. The method allows one to look at a subject--be it a cast sculpture, a still life arrangement, or a human figure--and draw it precisely in scale and at a high level of finish.

The Sight-Size Method allowed me, for the first time, to represent a figure in an accurate and highly realistic fashion from life. The program at the Florence Academy of Art holds drawing as the foundation to any good painting. This visual and motor training of representing an object with clear and accurate drawing has crossed over directly to my work as a scenic artist.





The Sight-Size Method

Tools you will need: An easel or vertical flat surface, paper, masking tape, a 2'6" weighted plumb line (string), drawing implements-charcoal, pencil, etc., a long 1'6" thin paint brush or straight stick, and an eraser.

First, set up your easel and paper in line with your model. The easel must be vertical, i.e. not tipped back. You will step back from your easel and look at the subject in relationship to your paper. The center of your paper needs to be at your eye level. Step back 5-7' from your easel. As you step away from your model and easel you will notice the model will reduce in apparent size. The greater the distance between you and the easel, the smaller your subject will appear. Once the apparent size of the model is the size of the image you want to draw on your paper, place a tape spike mark on the floor at your feet. This is the mark you will return to time and again, to observe your subject in the correct scale. This is your vantage mark. While you are standing away from the easel and figure, note which one of your eyes is dominant. Checking your measurements with one eye closed and your dominant eye open will aid you in the precision of your drawing.

Once you have set your scale, place your figure in your mind and in your visual field on the page. Stand at your vantage mark and carefully observe your figure. Take note where the top of the head and the feet fit within the page. These will be the boundaries of your image. Hold up your plumb line horizontally and taut between your hands at arm's length. The line should lie across both the model and your paper; align your string with the top of the head. Take note where the line intersects your paper. With the mark at the top of the head

in your mind, walk forward to your easel and mark the top of the head on the edge of your paper. Return to your vantage point and look at the mark for top of the head that you have just made. Check your mark against your model with your horizontal plumb line. If the mark does not match, remember the difference and change your mark. Repeat this step matching the major horizontal intersections such as the top of the head, the bottom of the feet, the waist, the chin, and the knees. It is important to note that you will never make a mark until you have truly observed it from the model. Always check your work from your spike mark vantage point.

Once you have accurately placed your major horizontal lines on the side of the page, proceed to finding a vertical axis using the plumb line. Walk forward from your vantage mark and place the vertical line all the way down the page. When working with the figure our professor instructed us to find the weight bearing leg and to draw the major vertical axis line along it. When drawing an object rather than a figure, always lay your vertical line down the center of the object.

Now comes the point where you begin to define the boundaries of your drawing. Extend your horizontal marks lightly from the edge of the paper across your new vertical line. Use your major intersection points as the base line from which to measure out. Using your plumb line extended at arm's length between your hands, find the width of the head from the major vertical axis. Remember the measurement and place light marks on your paper denoting the width of the head. Note how wide the chest is; measure and mark its boundaries. Take note where the limbs intersect with the body. You will measure and mark each of these intersecting lines until you begin to form your im-



EDUCATION & TRAINING

age. When you have enough small intersecting lines denoted, begin to connect your lines, thus creating the form. In Laura #1, you can see how I have roughed the figure in using a series of clean lines. We were encouraged to define the form angularly

and then soften down the edges where needed.

In Laura #2, you can see how I adjusted and lengthened her short foot and hand. You can also see how the width of her chest needed to be nar-

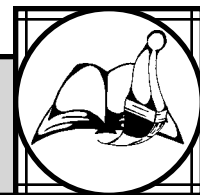


Laura #1



Laura #2

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rowed. Once your drawing begins to find more accuracy in gesture and posture, you can move on to finding the “Shadow Shapes.” Shadow shapes help define the planes of the figure, as you can see in Laura #3. In order to see the shadow shapes more

easily, squint your eyes; this exercise will increase the contrast between highlight and shadow. Draw in the boundaries of the shadow, and the highlight shapes remain. The shadow shapes help you to further define the measured distance between the



Laura #3



Laura #4



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details in your drawing. When drawing in your shadow shapes, for instance, examine how close the shadow of the eye socket is to the hairline. You can see how the eye and eye socket become more refined as the measuring process continues.

I must remind you that at no time during this process do you remain standing at your easel simply filling in your drawing. You need to be actively engaged in viewing your model from the distance of your vantage mark. You must check the proportions and the relationship between elements in your drawing and the features on the model.

In Laura #4 on page 7, you can see the values laid into the drawing. It was rendered in charcoal and white chalk. While in training at the Florence Academy of Art, we kept our drawing tools filed to a fine point. In scenic art, of course, this would not be necessary. Nor would one ever finish a drawing to this level for a cartoon. But the experience gave me exceptional insight into just how deep the values are and how delicate the play between mid-tones can be.

The Sight-Size Method is a great tool for the scenic artist to lay in accurate, rough structures that can be refined further if needed. If you would like to use this method as a scenic artist working from an elevation, you would follow the same basic instructions. However, you would have to mount your paper on the wall and step back from it, with the elevation held up in your hand. The paper on the wall will appear to shrink. Back up until the elevation in your hand aligns with the registration marks on your paper.

For example: if you are drawing a 3' capital, mount your drawing paper at eye level. Pre-mark

the paper on the wall with the parameters of your drawing. Using a tape measure, measure your upper and lower horizontal boundaries as called for by the design. Draw in your centerline. Measure your vertical boundaries and clearly mark them on the page. Once all of your basic measurements are in place, you will begin to use the Sight-Size Method. Hold up your elevation and step backwards until the elevation in your hand fits the boundaries of the marks on your paper. When your scale matches, spike your vantage point on the ground and proceed. You will need to replace your plumb line with a long thin paintbrush or straight stick for your horizontal marks, since you will be working with the elevation in one hand and your stick in the other. The Sight-Size method is a useful process that will allow you to get a quick, precise drawing in any scale without needing to constantly rely on a scale ruler and a tape measurer. Just set a few registration points, step back to observe, and you are on your way.

I want to thank Dana Levin for her exemplary teaching skills at the Florence Academy of Art and I want to thank Lance Brockman for reminding me of the connection between this valuable skill and our industry of scenic art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Maness holds the position of Charge Scenic at the University of Texas at Austin Performing Arts Center. She is currently acting as the Vice-Commissioner of Programming for the United States Institute of Theatre Technology's Scene Design Commission.