
Walt Stanchfield 67

Notes from Walt Stanchfield's Disney Drawing Classes

"A Good Sketch is Like a Good Joke"

By Walt Stanchfield

A GOOD SKETCH IS LIKE A GOOD JOKE

I still love to draw. After 60 years of drawing (I probably started around 10 years old) the subject matters have not depleted nor has my desire to “tell it on paper” been exhausted. Whenever Dee and I go anywhere, we don’t call it a vacation, we call it a “sketching trip.” She loves to drive and I love to sit on the passengers side and sketch.

Having been in animation for so many years has influenced my drawing. I try to get movement (life) into my sketches. I think drawings, though still, ought to have a feeling of liveliness, animation, ‘energy, and must describe or dramatize an action. A drawing should be “charged” with persuasion. You know how a baby will smile when you smile at it, or cry, or act frightened--that is how I would like the viewers of my drawings to react. If I draw someone sitting down, I don’t want the viewers to register anything but that. I want them to feel the “sitting downness” of the sketch. Like the baby that involuntarily reacts to emotional suggestions, I want the viewer to react to my drawings. I want them to take part in the drama I have tried to portray. Granted, the drama is usually pretty subtle, unless the subject is a football game or a boxing match, but subtle things are part of our everyday living experience and have a place in art.

A good sketch is like a good joke. The teller builds the groundwork as succinctly as he can, then, when he has you “hanging on the cliff”, delivers the punch line. It hits you in a climax of emotion and suddenly it is so crystal clear that you explode with laughter and delight. Part of the pleasure comes from the fact that although the teller spun the tale, you were the one that put it all together in your mind and figured out the climax or punch line. Likewise the artist builds a groundwork in the sketch, one which has a one drawing story as its base and also weaves the “punch line” into the drawing in the form of the gesture. One look at it should tell the viewer how to react. The idea or feeling of looking, resting, walking or carrying something should burst upon the viewer, like the climax of a good story or the punchline of a good joke. If the joke has to be explained it is a bad joke--and the same goes for a drawing. If a drawing doesn’t “say” what it means at first glance, it’s a failure as a drawing.

“Great art,” said Tolstoy, “is when a great man who has the highest life-conception of his time tells what he feels. Then infection is universal. Everybody understands it and at once.” Also, “Infection (sharing something with or influencing your audience) is only received (accomplished) when an author (artist) has, in a manner true to himself, experienced the feeling which he transmits and not when he passes on another man’s feeling, previously transmitted to him.” In other words, in order for you to infect your audience with your story/drawing, you have to be infected by it yourself. You have to feel the pose as if you were experiencing it yourself. Then your rendition of it will be sincere and infectuous, and the punch line won’t have to be explained.

Better a real, living, expressive scribble than a superficial, stiff, deathmask-like copy.

Well, having tried to say all that eloquently and persuasively, I now put my integrity on the line by reproducing some sketches I made at the airport on a recent trip to Florida. You will notice that I spent little time on chairs or benches that people were sitting on. For one thing, people are so fidgety you have to move right along on your sketch or they will change positions on you. Also, it is sometimes a challenge to sketch someone sitting, and do it so deftly that the chair can be imagined. It is like the mime who does his act minus props but causes you to imagine they are there. If a chair were drawn, it should be done in the same spirit as the sitter, that is, a person is sitting in the chair, and conversely, the chair is being sat in. They are both part of one action and the chair’s action should be part of the “punch line.”



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