

A REFLECTION ON THE USE OF NUDE MODELS
IN THE ART DEPARTMENT CURRICULUM
AT AUGUSTANA COLLEGE:
THEOLOGICAL AND ACADEMIC UNDERPINNINGS

Inspired by Lutheran scholarly tradition and the liberal arts, Augustana provides an education of enduring worth that challenges the intellect, fosters integrity and integrates faith with learning and service in a diverse world. The College is committed to the education and enrichment of the whole person including exposure to enduring forms of aesthetic and creative expression. In the great tradition of the humane sciences in western civilization, we take it as axiomatic that knowledge of drawing the human form is fundamental to the serious study of art and the training of professional artists in a liberal arts education. For the last seven decades, our Art Department has established a long and distinguished tradition in liturgical and figurative art studies, including the installation of liturgical works of art by professors emeriti Palmer Eide and Robert Aldern in churches throughout the upper Midwest and the establishment of the permanent home for the Hovland Center for Liturgical Arts in Augustana's new Center of Visual Arts, which was dedicated in 2006.

As a church-affiliated college, we take seriously the religious and spiritual dimensions involved in the process of self-discovery, expression and creating lasting works of art. We seek to educate our students in the life-long appreciation of all forms of art and to develop within each individual an understanding of her own code of values and ethics as she seeks to live her life both fully and imaginatively. A Lutheran understanding of grace suggests that God is revealed in the unexpected and overlooked, that through vulnerability and generosity we come closer to knowing what we can not see, and that balance and beauty are necessary to knowing a manifest, creative, living, loving, and compassionate God. To be able to see, one must remain open to the world.

As a department, we are custodians to the time-honored traditions of our discipline and to conveying the great contributions of the artists of the past. One could no more study 19th- and 20th-century European continental philosophy without a foundation in Kierkegaard or even classical Greek philosophy than one could study 19th- or 20th-century European art without looking to the Golden Age of Athens or the Renaissance for antecedents. The expressive potential for the human form realized in the Renaissance resulted directly from the study of ancient Greek and Roman art. Ever since, the human figure has remained the principal focus of study in western art and art education. At Augustana, we are committed to teaching the fundamentals of art and design and have included the nude model in our art curriculum for more than forty years.

As part of the course of studies in art at Augustana, we require all our art majors to successfully complete Drawing II: Intermediate Drawing (ART 201). This course focuses on the theory and practice in the elements of drawing with an emphasis upon the human figure. This requirement is in place because without this course, we can not provide a sufficiently rigorous, traditional and academically solid foundation for our students who major in art. Drawing from the human figure is the keystone to understanding form and we do not offer an opt-out option.

To study art is to discern what makes us uniquely human. Genesis begins this way, with man and woman created in God's own image. We acknowledge the inherent beauty of the human form and that it is indeed a worthy subject of study. The lessons learned in drawing the human form teach us to recognize each individual's uniqueness and worth and for the need to treat the human form with dignity and respect. Great drawing refuses stereotypes and pre-judgment. To look at the model means to see another person in the flesh for who they really are: a sovereign, living individual. Errant conceptions become painfully obvious. Nothing is comparably as difficult, or as expressive, or as finely tuned as our experience of seeing and drawing the human form. The trillion gestural possibilities and seemingly infinite subtle structures of the human body suggest that new discoveries are still possible and that drawing as a discipline is as much a visual process as it is a practice. Balance, proportion, movement, gesture, economy, harmony and vitality of form all extend from the study of drawing the model. You must constantly question what you see, leaving behind what you think you know, take risks, and try to see things fresh again like a child filled with wonder each time you draw.

In preparation for drawing from the model, our students study the forms and functions of the osseous and muscular systems of the human body, similar to students of pre-medicine. Illustrated lectures, readings, slides of master drawings (digital projections) and discussions all contribute to the preparation of the student for drawing from the model for the first time. We specifically discuss in class why we draw from the figure and what the student can expect. We also review the protocols described below which allow each student to understand what is expected of him or her in the studio classroom and to assure that a dignified and respectful environment is maintained. Ongoing discussions, artist presentations, slide lectures, further anatomical studies and readings all contribute to the development of the individual student and allow for proper context and reflection on the experience. A course syllabus is available for review.

Our protocols in the classroom are highly professional and appropriate. We do not hire students; we hire outside the College. Models are paid a professional rate through the Augustana payroll system in which taxes are taken out like any other contract employee of the College. Models are given a private room in which to change and students are never allowed in this room when the model is present. Students never see a model changing into or out of his or her clothes. Models also utilize robes or other clothing during breaks. Students are never allowed to approach the model while he or she is posing. We do not have models in our first semester foundation classes, we draw or paint from the figure only in our advanced studio classes. Our models do not wear skimpy or other suggestive clothing which could change the understanding of our classroom as a learning environment. The drawing studio classroom has examples of great master drawings of the nude on the walls. Skeletons, skull casts and ecorche figures are on display in the studio classroom to further a serious academic and investigative tone. Windows and doors are always shut when classes are in session and no visitors are allowed.

—draft statement by Scott Parsons, modified March 7, 2009