GENERAL

drawing the head and hands by andrew loomis

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Introduction

Drawing the head and hands has long been a cornerstone of figure drawing and illustration. For many artists, mastering these two elements is the first step toward creating convincing, expressive portraits and dynamic poses. When Andrew Loomis, one of the most influential illustrators of the 20th century, wrote **Drawing the Head and Hands**, he distilled decades of experience into a clear, methodical guide that still resonates with students and professionals today. This article explores why Loomis's book remains a must read, breaks down its core lessons, and offers practical exercises to help you apply his principles to your own work.

Who Was Andrew Loomis?

Andrew Loomis (1902–1977) was a master of commercial illustration, teaching, and book authorship. He worked for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Time*, and *Esquire*, and his illustrations graced countless covers and advertisements. Loomis's teaching style emphasized clear structure, logical progression, and the use of basic shapes to build complex forms. His books—*Figure Drawing for All It"s Worth*, *Drawing the Figure*, and *Drawing the Head and Hands*—are still regarded as foundational texts in art schools worldwide.

Why "Drawing the Head and Hands" Is Essential

In the world of figure drawing, the head and hands are the most expressive and often the most challenging parts of the body. Loomis's book addresses this challenge by:

- Breaking down complex anatomy into simple, teachable components.
- Providing a step by step approach that builds confidence.
- Offering practical exercises that reinforce learning.
- Highlighting common pitfalls and how to avoid them.
- Emphasizing the importance of observation and reference.

These principles make the book a valuable resource for both beginners and seasoned artists who want to refine their skills.

The Structure of Loomis's Method

Loomis's technique is grounded in three main pillars: **proportion**, **gesture**, and **detail**. Each pillar is addressed in a systematic way throughout the book.

1. Proportion

Understanding the relative size of the head and hands within the body is the first step. Loomis teaches that the head is roughly one seventh of the total body height, while the hands are about one tenth. He uses simple measurements—such as the span of the hand or the length of the forearm—to create a reliable framework for sketching.

2. Gesture

Gesture captures the dynamic quality of a pose. Loomis encourages artists to start with broad, fluid lines that

convey movement before adding detailed anatomy. This approach prevents the drawing from feeling rigid and allows the artist to focus on the overall rhythm of the figure.

3. Detail

Once the structure and gesture are established, Loomis guides the artist toward refining facial features, hand positions, and shading. He stresses the importance of subtlety, reminding readers that over drawing can obscure the natural flow of the form.

Key Concepts from “Drawing the Head and Hands”

Below are some of the most influential concepts Loomis introduces, each of which can dramatically improve your drawing process.

1. The Head as a Cylinder

Loomis famously reduces the head to a **cylindrical shape**for easier construction. By visualizing the skull as a cylinder, you can determine the placement of the eyes, nose, and mouth with greater precision.

2. The Hand as a Box

Similarly, Loomis treats the hand as a box, making it easier to grasp the orientation and spacing of fingers. This approach helps avoid common mistakes such as fingers overlapping incorrectly or being drawn too far apart.

3. The Rule of 5

The **Rule of 5**is Loomis’s shorthand for measuring the head: the distance from the top of the head to the bottom of the chin is divided into five equal parts. Each part represents a specific facial feature, providing a quick way to maintain proportion.

4. The Hand’s “Five Finger” Method

When drawing hands, Loomis recommends starting with the five fingers as a single line and then adding the palm and wrist. This technique ensures that the hand’s overall shape remains balanced.

5. The Importance of Light and Shadow

Loomis emphasizes that **light direction**dictates the volume and depth of the head and hands. By studying how shadows fall on a simple sphere, you can extrapolate how they affect more complex forms.

Step by Step Guide to Drawing a Head

Below is a concise, practical workflow inspired by Loomis’s teachings. Follow these steps to create a realistic head drawing from scratch.

1. Sketch the Basic Shape. Begin with a cylinder or oval to represent the skull. Lightly draw a vertical line to indicate the head’s central axis.
2. Mark the Rule of 5. Divide the vertical line into five equal parts. Place the hairline at the first division, the eyebrows at the second, the bottom of the nose at the third, the mouth at the fourth, and the chin at the fifth.
3. Add Facial Features. Use the divisions as guides to position the eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. Remember that the eyes sit roughly halfway between the hairline and the nose.
4. Refine the Jawline. Connect the jaw to the skull with smooth, slightly curved lines. Adjust the width of the face to match the eye placement.
5. Introduce the Neck and Shoulders. Extend the skull downwards, adding a short neck and broad shoulders to anchor the head in the body.

6. Shade for Volume. Apply subtle shading to indicate the head's three dimensional shape. Use light, directional strokes to show the light source.

7. Final Touches. Clean up any unnecessary lines, sharpen details, and ensure that proportions remain accurate.

Step by Step Guide to Drawing Hands

Hands are notoriously tricky, but Loomis's box method simplifies the process. Follow these steps to create a natural hand drawing.

1. Draw the Box. Sketch a simple rectangular box to represent the palm. This box will serve as the foundation for the fingers.

2. Add the Wrist. Extend a short line from the bottom of the box to indicate the wrist. Keep it proportional to the palm.

3. Sketch the Fingers. Starting from the box, draw five parallel lines for the fingers. Space them evenly to maintain natural proportions.

4. Define Finger Joints. Add small circles or ovals at the base of each finger to represent knuckles. These will help guide the bending and curvature of the fingers.

5. Shape the Thumb. Draw a smaller box or oval for the thumb, positioning it at a 45 degree angle to the palm.

6. Refine the Hand's Volume. Use gentle curves to smooth the edges of the palm and fingers. Pay attention to how the skin folds around the joints.

7. Shade for Depth. Apply light shading to indicate the hand's form. Highlight the areas where light hits directly, and darken the shadows where the fingers overlap.

8. Clean Up. Erase unnecessary construction lines, sharpen details, and ensure that the hand looks balanced and realistic.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Even experienced artists can fall into pitfalls when drawing heads and hands. Loomis's book addresses these issues directly, offering practical solutions.

1. Misaligned Proportions

Over emphasizing one feature—such as a large eye—can throw off the entire head. Always use the Rule of 5 to keep your features in harmony.

2. Over Detailing Early

Adding too many details before establishing a solid structure can lead to a cluttered drawing. Follow Loomis's step by step approach to build confidence before refining.

3. Ignoring Light Direction

Without a clear light source, shading may appear flat or unrealistic. Determine the light direction early and use it consistently across the head and hands.

4. Forgetting the Hand's Box

Drawing fingers without a guiding box often results in uneven spacing or incorrect angles. Keep the box as your reference until the final sketch.

5. Neglecting Reference

Relying solely on imagination can lead to inaccuracies. Use high quality reference photos or live models to inform

your proportions and shading.

Practice Exercises Inspired by Loomis

Consistent practice is the key to mastery. Below are exercises that incorporate Loomis's principles and help you internalize the techniques.

- Exercise 1: Head Proportion Drills – Draw a head every day using the Rule of 5, focusing on maintaining consistent proportions. Vary the light source each time to practice shading.
- Exercise 2: Hand Box Construction – Create a series of hand sketches using the box method. Experiment with different angles, from a flat palm to a curled fist.
- Exercise 3: Gesture Studies – Capture quick gesture sketches of hands and heads in motion. Use 30 second turns to emphasize fluidity.
- Exercise 4: Light and Shadow Mapping – Select a simple object (e.g., a sphere) and map the shadows. Then apply the same light direction to a head and hand drawing.
- Exercise 5: Reference Comparison – Compare your drawings to reference photos side by side. Note any discrepancies in proportion or shading and adjust accordingly.

Additional Resources for Deepening Your Knowledge

While Loomis's book is a comprehensive guide, supplementing your learning with other resources can accelerate progress.

- Books

"Figure Drawing for All It's Worth" by Andrew Loomis – for broader figure study.
- "Atlas of Human Anatomy for the Artist" by Stephen Rogers Peck – for detailed anatomical references.
- "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" by Betty Edwards – for enhancing observational skills.

- Proko – offers anatomy and gesture tutorials.
- New Masters Academy – provides in depth illustration classes.
- Skillshare – features hands on drawing workshops.

- Pinterest – for curated head and hand reference images.
- Unsplash – for high resolution photographs.
- ArtStation – for professional illustration examples.

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