

PROPORTION

In our new series, Lavender Hill Studios' Nick Bashall introduces a four-point plan for artistic success, before fellow tutor Ann Witheridge guides us through an exercise in proportion



I remember in my pre-art school days there were moments when I saw a face or figure of such beauty that I wanted to capture it in some permanent way. I could photograph it but I wanted more – I wanted to paint it. When I tried to do so, there was always such a discouraging gap between the beauty of the person I was painting and what I actually produced on canvas.

I went in search of a school that could teach me how to close that gap. Unfortunately, I couldn't find it in the UK. Most schools only taught the modern and the conceptual, the art of "our time", which, though fascinating and thought provoking, didn't help me in my mission to capture that beauty.

I needed a school that could teach traditional skills; to see proportions, contrasts, line and volume. I was lucky to find such a school in Spain

ABOVE Scott Pohlschmidt, *Muller*, oil on canvas

and I studied there for some years.

I say "lucky" because that school saved me so much time. I could have spent a lifetime of trial and error to discover for myself a body of principles that already existed and it would have been like reinventing the wheel.

Years later, when working in London as a professional artist, I met two other artists, Scott Pohlschmidt and Ann Witheridge, who had enjoyed a similarly traditional training in Italy. The three of us also had a similar outlook on teaching art in a practical capacity. We recognised that effective training in fine art skills had not just been declining in the UK, but had almost disappeared completely. We also knew that as few established artists now take pupils, the studio or 'atelier' chain that stretched back to the early Middle Ages and along which knowledge was passed from

master to apprentice over countless generations, has been broken. So we decided to set up our own art school to teach aspiring artists within the atelier tradition and by November 2004, the Lavender Hill Studios were open for teaching.

At Lavender Hill, we breakdown the teaching of art into four basic stages:

1. Proportion
2. Line and volume (or 'gesture')
3. Chiaroscuro (or light and shade)
4. Colour

Professional artists regularly use all these elements simultaneously. However, by studying each principle individually, you can develop a greater understanding of the process and see clearly how each stage naturally leads into the next. In this article, we will be looking in depth at the first principle:

proportion. Over the course of the subsequent articles, we will look in turn at the remaining three stages, before rounding off the five-part series with a painting demonstration that shows how one might combine and consider each element in a single portrait sitting.

Workshop 1

In order to accurately capture the likeness of an object or person, one needs to accurately reproduce the distances between the features. For example, let us say you want to draw a standing nude. You need to ensure certain elements are in proportion, such as whether the hips are the right distance between the head and the feet or whether the chin is the right distance between the breasts and the top of the head.

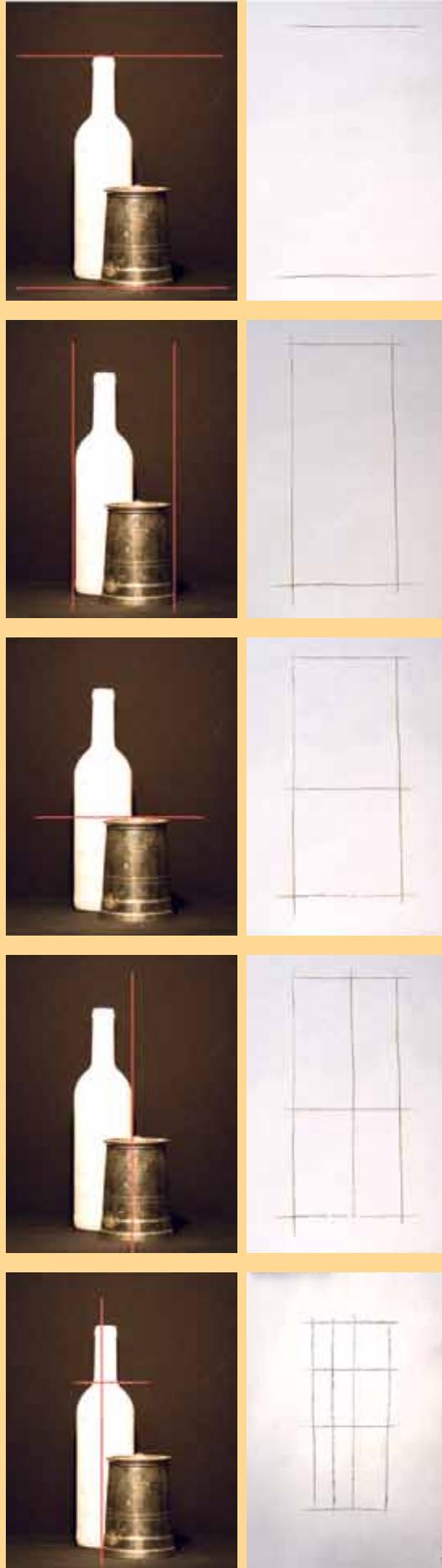
To achieve this, you could project a photograph on a screen and trace the lines. Or you could measure from life the distance between each feature of the subject by holding out your paintbrush and closing one eye.

The other alternative is to use the sight-size method: in other words, placing the model alongside the canvas and measuring him or her up with a horizontal stick held at arms length. You could take a line from the top of the model's head/shoulders/buttocks/feet straight onto your canvas. This is a brilliant system and has been much used by artists since Renaissance times; many of the great portrait painters such as Philip de László and John Singer Sargent used it, though not exclusively.

This method does have drawbacks, too. The model must remain still and it is not very useful when you are painting a horizontal nude, a group composition or a landscape. When used in conjunction with a plumb line, it hinders the flow of spontaneous drawing.

All of the above systems are useful, not to mention tried and tested. However, there is another brilliantly simple yet little-known system that has also been used for many years.

In Spain, they called it *encajar*, which translates as 'to encase'. The idea being that you take the subject matter – whether it be a still life or a landscape, a figure or a face – and you 'encase' or envelope it with lines. >



ENCASING A COMPOSITION

To demonstrate encasing, we often set up a composition of five or more white boxes (see page 66). Without explaining how or why, we ask students to draw them. They will always, almost without exception, draw one box at a time. That is when we begin to introduce the principles outlined above. Doing this encourages them to see the whole composition before concentrating on individual parts.

1 In this example, drawn by student Joni Duarte, we've taken a basic still life composition of a bottle and a jug. On your page, draw a horizontal line at the bottom and another at the top, as shown. These two initial lines represent the limits of the composition and they will never change; every other major line will lie between them.

2 Now draw two vertical lines to represent the lateral extremes of the whole composition, as shown. This is your box. The aim of this exercise is for you try to visualise this whole box at the outset.

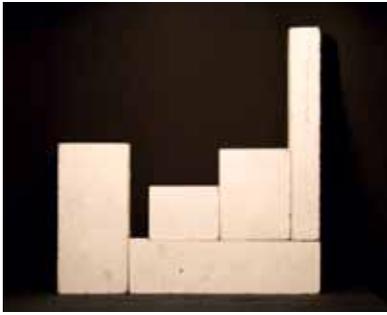
3 You then divide that whole space into two by a horizontal line, representing the top of the shorter jug. Somewhere between the top and the bottom lines is the third line, the top of the jug.

You don't need to measure this. Whether an artist or not, we all have that instinct in us to put the line in more or less the right place.

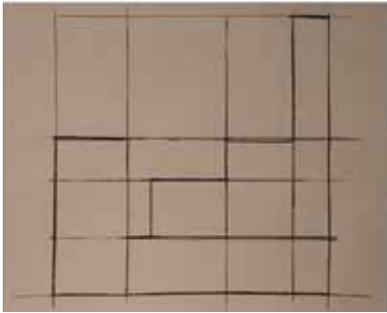
4 Then you put in your third vertical, dividing up the whole box longitudinally. In making this third vertical line, you ignore the third horizontal line you applied earlier.

5 You can then further sub-divide these two boxes into smaller areas as shown. If you then draw or paint within this initial scaffolding of lines, your artwork should remain roughly proportional throughout.

the atelier method



LEFT The arrangement of blocks is a useful way to illustrate the encasing principle. Rather than drawing each individual block, you should attempt to view them collectively, as if on a grid

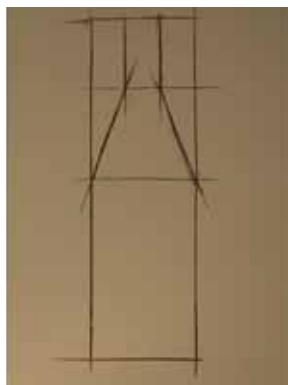


DIAGONALS

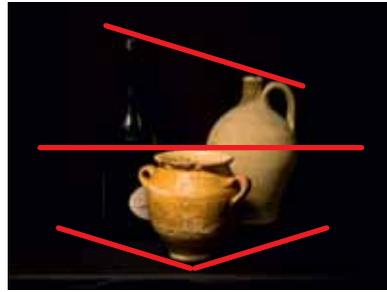
Having previously drawn a scaffolding of the whole composition in horizontal and vertical lines only, we can now introduce diagonal lines. You can do this simply by selecting a single object with curves such as a bottle. Start as before by encasing the whole object with four lines: top, bottom, left and right. Next, place a horizontal line where the body of the bottle begins to narrow down into the neck, and then a second horizontal line at the base of the neck. You can then insert a couple of vertical lines to mark out the neck. Diagonals can then be drawn between the second and third horizontal lines. The actual curve of the bottle can be shaped more accurately in relation to this diagonal.

The bottle is a symmetrical object. You can apply the same principle to an asymmetrical object that has curves – for example, a puddle of water. You can also apply it to multiple objects: in the example opposite, you will notice how you can show that the

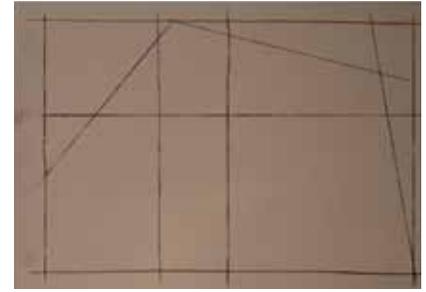
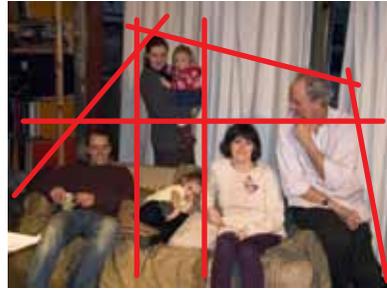
BELOW By drawing in the horizontal and vertical lines of the bottle first, we are able to plot the diagonal lines and shape the curves more accurately in relation to them



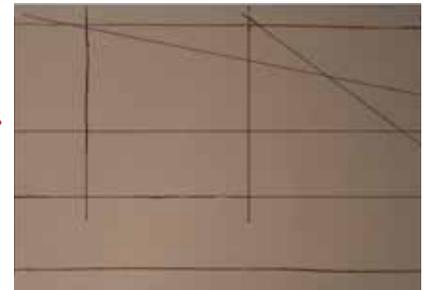
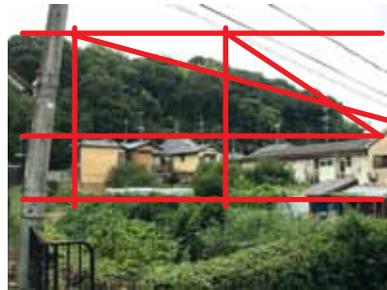
BELOW With the vase in front of the bottle, the lines can be used to show perspective



BELOW A few simple lines can help you draw a seemingly complex arrangement of figures



BELOW Landscapes can also be simplified by creating a framework of lines



vase is in front of the bottle. In other words, you can use this system to show perspective.

You can use the same technique in most situations, from landscapes to figurative compositions. The point is that however complex the subject is before you, you can simplify it by breaking it down into its biggest parts from the outset.

It should be noted that the purpose of these early lines – the verticals, horizontals and diagonals – is only to create scaffolding on which the later stages of the picture will be built. These lines need only take minutes to render but to put them in the right places, takes a bit of practise and repetition. It can be difficult at first to discipline your mind to see the whole before you focus on the parts.

This method outlined above merely describes the starting point – how we can approach our drawing or painting at the outset. We can trust our instincts to see the whole and then the bigger parts before the details. This method of ‘encasing’ an object

and drawing in the diagonals in the early stages of a picture may at first seem mathematical and unexciting, but the opposite is true – the technique relies on your natural instinct and provides, at these early stages, a much greater freedom than stifled measuring.

Detail and greater accuracy come later, as you progress on to the stages that will be outlined in the next three articles. Together these four principles will give you the basic grammar of the visual language. Learning this grammar better equips us to ‘play’ with what we see before our eyes or in our imagination. ‘Play’ is such an appropriate verb, too: you play the piano and create beautiful music, and with an awareness and understanding of these basic principles, you will be able to play more easily with paint or pencil.

Next month: add weight to your drawings by getting to grips with line and volume. For more information on Lavender Hill Studios and the courses they offer, please visit www.lavenderhillstudios.com