



Simon Henwood's portrait work focuses attention on that difficult age, the teens. His work blends clever painterly styles with almost comic book detailing. Simon's book *Kido*, which collects together portraits of a group of kids painted over a six-year period, is due out in the spring.





Above: Roberto Cirillo, Concept Artist at Core Design, explains how a final game figure emerges. "I start by sketching out the skeleton structure in its actual pose. Once I'm happy with the perspective, proportions and pose, I sketch out the different body parts."

Far-right: Already a renowned comic book artist, Greg Staples is also a co-founder of Sheffield-based Ark VFX. This image, Erhnam Djinn, was produced for Wizards of the Coast. Image © 2004 Wizards of the Coast

Words: Mark Penfold

The fine art of figure drawing uncovered

Drawing the human figure is an art in itself, one which can be as frustrating as it is exhilarating. Here's what the experts have to say on the subject...

There's no doubt that a good figure drawing can arrest the attention like nothing else. Perhaps it's the endless fascination we have with our own form that draws artists in, or it could be the challenge that thrills them. Either way, figure drawing is one of the most expressive and emotive art forms and offers huge rewards to those who practise it.

Many of the best figurative artists have turned a childhood obsession into a career. Comic book artist Greg Staples is typical: "I used to draw a lot of birds when I was small, then around the age of 12 or 13 I began drawing from comic books. To this day I still have a passion for drawing."

In this early phase, an artist lays the foundations upon which a style will be developed. Len Massey, drawing tutor at the Royal College of Art, laments the fact that education doesn't value drawing skills more highly: "Drawing should be taught and given the same significance as writing. Drawing is similar to writing in that both are vehicles for ideas. We can write and talk about our ideas and we can also draw them."

If you didn't spend your youth with a sketch pad in your pocket, the good news is that all is not lost. According to acclaimed animator and painter Simon Henwood, "Nobody takes to it straight away, it's about learning to look." Similarly, Greg Staples explains part of his

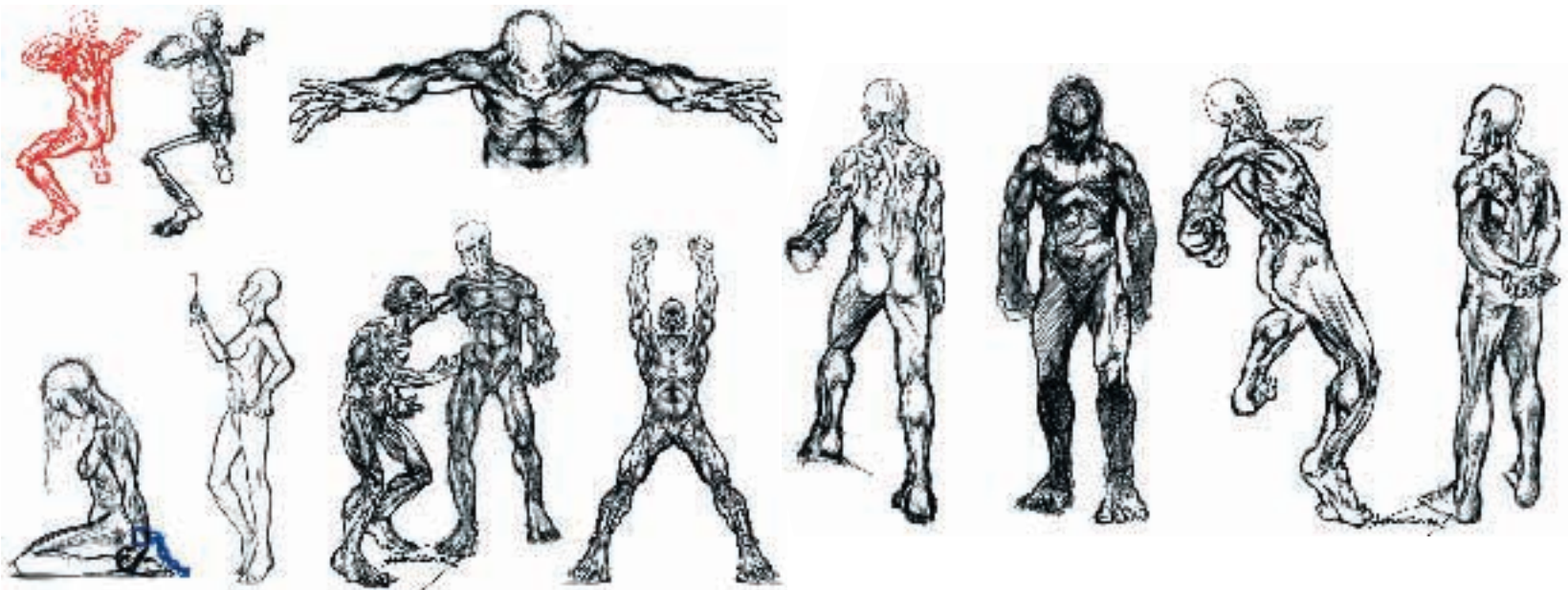
work's fascination like this: "You can never truly master figure drawing. If you did, it would lose its appeal."

Learning to look

"One of the most important elements of a drawing is its level of emotional intensity. You have to look at a thing's thingness and as well as seeing it as an object, see its interconnectedness, its cultural significance and include that in your drawing." Len Massey encourages his students to engage with their subjects passionately.

Roberto Cirillo, Concept Artist for Core Design, gives the following advice: "Think >





Above and bottom-right: "A good character design has to have another angle apart from just looking cool. You need to think about his personality, background and his context in the game or film." Kareem Ettouney is a Concept Artist for UK games developer Lionhead.

when you draw — why does that look the way it does? Understand that and you'll get it right. Practise, look, observe and again practise! There is no way around it." Kareem Ettouney, concept artist at games developer Lionhead, repeats this mantra, "Basically, you must be drawing from life models, anatomy books, great masters and comics all the time."

There's no end to the learning process — artists constantly evolve their styles and improve their techniques by whatever means are available. That could mean life-drawing classes, copying comic books or using Greg Staples' secret weapon: "Medical text books are great, but the best thing for learning anatomy is body-building magazines."

Kareem has an interesting story: "Even Peter Paul Rubens, who was one of the

greatest masters, used to copy whole paintings from older masters like Titian even once he was established as one of the greatest painters of his day." Simon Henwood adds: "Look at as many great styles as you can but don't try to emulate them. If you do, you'll get trapped when you need to do something you haven't got an example to copy from."

Conversely, you shouldn't feel pressured into having an individual style, as Kareem warns: "One thing I can advise is not to rush trying to have a unique style in your art. Let that come naturally and it will."

Rough technique

There is a huge range of techniques and approaches which will improve and develop

your drawing. The key is to find one which suits you. Greg Staples explains: "I used to draw a stick figure then block in the muscles. This technique is good for building dynamic poses. Eventually the stick figure stays in your head and you can start with the muscles." Greg continues: "I usually draw a thumbnail sketch to get an idea together, then I blow this up on the computer and work it up from there. This is a lot easier than starting from a blank page."

Len Massey brings it all back to how you see things, "You have to look at things like an anthropologist. 'Why do I walk in circles when I'm waiting for the bus?' You have to look at gestures because these are drawings." The best way to learn is to "get a set of sketch books, one of which should be small enough to fit in your pocket and take it everywhere".

"You must be drawing from life models, anatomy books, great masters and comics all the time"





He adds, "For drawing what's in front of you, I think Betty Edwards' book *The New Drawing on the Right Hand Side of the Brain* is an excellent place to start, as is spending a bit of time drawing those around you and their relationship to the environment. Everyone can draw, it takes practice and passion."

Roberto puts it like this: "Every little bit of the body complements the next and the previous — in other words, there aren't any easy parts to draw, it all really depends on how much knowledge the artist has on the subject." He adds, "Don't try to draw the whole figure unless, and until, you're fully aware of all the key parts that make it! Practice and understand the single parts first."

Digital domain

"Computers are a great tool, but there's no substitute for the physicality of drawing on paper," says Len Massey. "No matter how good the simulation, you never get the built-in noise, which comes from working with charcoal — the smudges and the fingerprints. If you want to draw in the digital environment, why not give a line behaviours and instead of taking a line for a walk see where the line takes you?"

As a labour-saving device, the computer is indispensable, as Rob Cirillo attests: "At least 30 per cent of my work is computer assisted: digital clean-up, digital variations, digital colouring, sketching and painting. It can be a great time-saving machine, I really love it!" The crucial thing to remember, however, is that half of what makes a figurative artist great is the willingness not to take the shortcut. Greg Staples illustrates this perfectly: "You have to be inventive — my style develops every day. Today I'm using a can of chalk. It's taken all morning to get the hang of, but now I'm seeing results." **ca-p**

Above: More drawings from Lionhead Concept Artist Kareem Ettouney.

Right: This warrior figure was created by Core Design's Roberto Cirillo, who stresses that "Sketching out the skeleton structure is the most important part of the figure-drawing process."



Animating characters

How to bring characters to life for gaming and animation...

Generating images for use in animation and 3D gaming is a more rigorous challenge than most life drawing would stand up to. As Roberto Cirillo points out, "A key factor is that you won't get away with just one drawing and a round of applause. We're talking of character sheets and attitudes that need to be developed for each character to help bring him to 'life' within the game context."

Not only that, but the fact a character will be translated into 3D 'reality' means any fudges which would be fine in perspective will only be highlighted in the migration to the digital world. Kareem Ettouney knows the deal: "The more an

artist knows about anatomy, perspective, light, composition, and so on, the more he has the ability to bend the rules. In other words, the more rules you know, the more rules you can bend."

"To design a good character it has to have another angle apart from just looking cool. It's always great to have a cool-looking character, but at the same time if cool is the only criteria then sometimes the character looks shallow." Whatever the technical constraints, the same underlying principles apply to illustration for games as they do for any other drawing: your feeling and appreciation of the subject will guide your work.