Drawing Portraits

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Achieving a likeness in portrait requires close coordination of the hand and eye; Douglas Graves, a professional portraitist, has developed this basic premise into a functional technique. He describes portraiture as an evolving process: observing the basic surface shapes, discovering how these features deviate from the symmetrical ideal, envisioning the underlying human anatomy, interpreting the sitter's personality, then conveying all this with a direct medium in a tonal drawing.

Mr. Graves begins with a list and discussion of the necessary materials—compressed and vine charcoal, chalk, Conte, graphite pencils, papers, erasers, and fixative. He next focuses on the single most important element of the portrait—the sitter's head. He examines the overall bone structure of the head, it's proportions and planes, and the structure of the individual features—the eye, nose, neck, ear, and mouth. Of course, portraiture often includes the hands, and so Mr. Graves devotes another chapter to the bone structure, muscle, and proportions of the hands. In subsequent chapters, he considers common portraiture problems: lighting the sitter, reflections and shadows, composing the portrait with one or more figures, the most effective views of the head, and positioning the head and the hands in relation to each other and to the body.

After these preliminary instructions, Mr. Graves proceeds to analyze and illustrate how to actually draw the individual elements of the portrait. Eight projects offer step-by-step demonstrations of front, side, and three-quarter views of the eye, nose, mouth, ear, and hand. Also included are demonstrations of drawing a plaster cast of the head, the torso and arm with drapery, and various hair textures and colors.

In the succeeding ten projects, Mr. Graves develops complete portraits, demonstrating his technique step by step. He covers a wide range of subjects and media: a woman, child, and man in charcoal; a woman, teenager, and older man in pencil; a woman and man in chalk; a mother and child, and a full family group in Conte. Mr. Graves also supplements his technical instructions with some advice about drawing from photographs, using unusual or offbeat poses, and the question of flattery.

Drawing Portraits is simply yet engagingly written, with over 260 black and white illustrations. Artists, beginning and advanced students, and teachers will find Mr. Graves' technique of portraiture clearly and logically presented and a solid basis for developing a personal style.

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