

# The Fine Art of Drawing: Juliette Aristides & Sherrie McGraw

BY VANESSA ROTHE



Drawing is one of the most basic forms of human expression. It is also a form of language, perhaps even the first, whereby prehistoric humans found they could communicate their thoughts, beliefs, and stories through lines and shapes. This made drawing powerful, even magical, and indeed its importance has endured.

During the Renaissance, such masters as Michelangelo and Leonardo advanced draftsmanship through deft value changes that created volume, and of course their drawings remain iconic today. (Please see page \_\_\_.) Superb as their paintings and sculptures are, those projects were always built upon the firm conceptual foundations, not to mention the flair, of their drawings, which offer us first glimpses of their ideas, gestures, and poses. Michelangelo believed the true test of artistry is drawing; in Venice, he was impressed to meet Titian and admired his style and coloring, yet wondered, “But can he draw?” Leonardo so prized his sketchbooks that he carried them with him, or hid them away.

Today, two of America’s finest draftsmen, Juliette Aristides (b. 1971) and Sherrie McGraw (b. 1954), agree with Michelangelo that drawings reveal an artist’s personality and capacities most authentically.

## DISTINCT, YET KINDRED, TALENTS

Having learned her craft at the National Academy of Design, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and various ateliers, South African-born Aristides now shapes future generations of classical realists through her teaching in the Aristides Atelier at Seattle’s Gage Academy of Art. Her lessons have reached even more students worldwide through three best-selling books: *Classical Drawing Atelier*, *Classical Painting Atelier*, and — most recently — *Lessons in Classical Drawing*. Aristides’s



Framed figure drawings by Juliette Aristides grace the walls of the Seattle collector Debbie Woolsey.



Sherrie McGraw (b. 1954)  
*Study of David's Hand*  
2011, Conté on paper, 4 x 7 in.  
Collection of the artist

creations range from small sketches to powerful finished value drawings, some of which lead onward to paintings of still life, architecture, landscapes, and figures.

In her atelier, Aristides teaches the fundamentals of drawing with time-tested “methods from our artistic inheritance,” offering students a solid foundation on which to build. They are taught how to sight and measure the subject in order to reproduce it accurately, and early emphasis is placed upon contour, proportion, gesture, anatomy, modeling, and the shape of light and shadow. Aristides insists that students master their draftsmanship before moving on to color and oils.

In her new book, she highlights the elegance of drawings and their simple beauty: “Much of the lasting power of art comes not from the obvious content of the image, but from the more subtle impact of harmoniously arranged lines, values, and colors. These form the bedrock of masterful artwork.” Aristides believes that “a few structural lines in the beginning often make the difference,” and she encourages artists to “set the entire scaffolding before focusing on nuances,” meaning one should draw first with broad gesture, then add subtleties and detail. She argues that both are essential to the success of a drawing. Her strategy is a winning combination of solid technique and “emotional accuracy,” a unity she has long admired in the drawings of Michelangelo, Leonardo, Pontorno, Rubens, and Seurat, among other masters. Not surprisingly, studying great drawings of the past is an essential part of her curriculum.

The artist, teacher, and author Sherrie McGraw regards draftsmanship in similar ways. In her native Oklahoma City, she was urged by her teachers, Richard and Edith Goetz, to study at the Art Students League of New York, where the rigorous drawing techniques of George B.



Juliette Aristides (b. 1971)  
*Abi*  
2012, Pastel on paper, 24 x 18 in.  
Private collection



Sherrie McGraw (b. 1954)  
*Dennis Holding a Rope*  
2011, Charcoal and conté on pastel card, 20 x 18 in.  
Courtesy Morris & Whiteside Galleries, Hilton Head, South Carolina



Sherrie McGraw (b. 1954)  
**Venus de Milo**  
 2010, Charcoal and conté on pastel card, 24 x 18 in.  
 Collection of Elise Waters Olonia



Juliette Aristides (b. 1971)  
**The Call**  
 2011, Charcoal with sepia and white chalk on toned paper, 21 1/2 x 18 in.  
 Collection of the artist



Jacopo da Pontormo (1494-1556)  
**Three Studies of a Nude Man**  
 n.d., Red chalk on paper, 15 1/2 x 10 1/2 in.  
 Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille, France

Bridgman (1865-1943) and Robert Brackman (1898-1980) have been passed down for more than a century. Having learned a great deal there and from others, such as her present companion, David A. Leffel, McGraw began teaching at the League at the tender age of 30. Now based in New Mexico, she remains on the League's faculty and offers her own popular workshops and demonstrations at venues nationwide. Her artworks range from quick, skillful sketches to large finished paintings, with a focus on still life. McGraw advocates "Abstract Realism," which emphasizes "the abstract beauty of paint itself without the dilution of a recognizable image." She agrees that studying master drawings helps us learn their secrets, and she adds to Aristides's list of exemplars the names of Holbein and van Dyck.

In her book, *The Language of Drawing*, McGraw notes that "the study of drawing remains the enduring foundation of the visual arts."

Beyond such structural disciplines as anatomy and proportion, she writes, artists must include a sense of "vitality," "liveliness," and expressiveness. Like Aristides, she feels that drawing is that crucial stage in the artmaking process when discovery occurs, "where one learns to see," when the intimate act of capturing the essence of a subject takes place. As she draws, McGraw says her own understanding of the subject deepens through "heightened observation." She seeks beauty in an "economy of well-placed lines," which convey much with relatively little. "A good draftsman," she posits, "knows more and draws less."

When McGraw sits down to draw, she is never looking to create a finished drawing that could be sold, but instead to make initial notes, to capture a gesture, moment, rhythm — to awaken to her subject. Very often, however, the drawings prove to be beautiful in their own right, and so are framed and sold. By contrast,

Aristides sits down knowing already if this sheet will be for private reference or for display and sale.

Both women agree that it is more discerning collectors who seek out drawings to buy, people who appreciate these works' beauty and rigor at a deeper level. When you purchase a drawing, then, you are capturing that intimate moment of discovery between artist and subject. Not every collector prioritizes this moment, of course. Aristides and McGraw note that fellow artists are frequent buyers of drawings because they can readily appreciate what went into them.

#### A FLOWERING OF INTEREST

As noted on page \_\_, exhibitions of Old Master drawings are usually well received, yet we are also witnessing a boom in museum shows of *contemporary* drawings. This trend can also be seen in commercial galleries such as New York City's Arcadia Fine Arts, which has mounted numerous projects focused on the drawings of its talented artists. (For example, last September's *Drawing the Line* show attracted large crowds and healthy sales.) Ever more collectors are framing their classical realist drawings and hanging them like paintings, often mixing them in with works of earlier eras.

This coming August, Aristides will be the focus of a retrospective (including more than 25 drawings) at Pennsylvania's Reading Public Museum. Her work can also be seen regularly at John Pence Gallery in San Francisco. A McGraw retrospective is scheduled for September 2014 at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. This will include drawings, as well as brand-new paintings not already sold by her representatives — InSight Gallery (Fredericksburg, Texas), Legacy Gallery (Scottsdale and Jackson Hole), and Morris & Whiteside Galleries (Hilton Head Island, SC).

These prestigious museum exhibitions are poised to remind savvy collectors not only of fine drawings' rich heritage and dynamic present, but also why acquiring them can only enhance the quality and diversity of a private collection. ■

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**Information:** Aristides's books are available via [watson-guptill.com](http://watson-guptill.com), and McGraw's through [brightlight publishing.com](http://brightlightpublishing.com). Also of interest is *Classical Life Drawing Studio: Lessons & Teachings in the Art of Figure Drawing*, published with Sterling Press in 2010 by James Lancel McElhinney and his fellow instructors at the Art Students League of New York. Just last year, that same team produced a further volume, *The Visual Language of Drawing: Lessons on the Art of Seeing*.



Sherrie McGraw (b. 1954)  
**Greg Standing**  
20\_\_, \_\_ on paper, 24 x 18 in.  
Private collection