

**This guide is for people who are thinking about going to a life class for the first time.**

### WHAT IS LIFE DRAWING?

**Life Drawing** is often thought of as one of the basic skills of an artist. Life drawing is the term used to describe drawing the human body – from life (as opposed to from a photograph) using your own skills in observation. Models are usually unclothed so that the anatomical structure of the body (skeleton and musculature) can be seen more clearly.

Life drawing fell out of favour for a time when the emphasis of modern art moved from the representational to the conceptual. However the importance and value of drawing has been reasserted of late. As a result drawing has become very popular again and life classes have been reinstated by many art schools.

**A Life Class** will commonly involve one or two models, a tutor and a number of students. Many artists and art students now attend life classes on a regular basis. Experienced artists will also attend life classes in order to practice and maintain their drawing skills.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LIFE DRAWING?

I once had a tutor who told me that if I can learn how to draw the human body then I would be able to draw anything. I think he was right.

**Life drawing teaches you how to see**

**Life drawing teaches you how to draw what you can see**

**Life drawing enables to develop your own style of drawing**

### DEVELOPING SKILLS IN OBSERVATION AND DRAWING

Developing skills about drawing the human body teaches you about:

- **How to observe**
- **How to measure**
- How to evaluate and describe the different **elements of a visual image**:
  - **Shape and Form** – studying how to represent three dimensional forms as shapes in a two dimensional format exhibiting both contour (with “lost” and “found” edges) and volume
  - **Space** – the model’s relationship with the space around him or her and the proportions of the body within that and how these vary from different perspectives
  - **Line** – where, when and how it can be used to describe form; drawing can explore the type and quality of marks which might be appropriate
  - **Values** – light and dark combine to describe the human body. Life drawing enables you to learn how to identify, respond and describe every value and pattern of values in the range between lightest light and darkest dark.
  - **Colour** – life classes which involve painting can help to develop skills in describing the infinite variety of colours that can be found in flesh
  - **Texture** – how to describe the differences in the quality of different surfaces

For those used to drawing from photographs, life drawing presents a challenge but one which will help you to develop skills in observing and drawing the world around you.

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## PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF A LIFE CLASS

## WHERE CAN I FIND A LIFE CLASS?

Life classes can be run by art schools; by local art co-operatives or guilds; by local community colleges as part of an adult education programme and by individual art tutors.

There are a number of ways you can find a life class. Here are some examples:

- Put 'life class' + 'name of your area' into a browser and see what pops up. If the life class has a website presence then this search should generate details
- Most art schools now run programmes of classes for adults who are not taking a fine art degree or a formal art qualification. Find the website for any art school you know about and see if they have a programme of evening or weekend classes. They may also do courses in vacations for a week or longer.
- Try looking at the notice board in your local art store or ask the staff if they know of any life classes. The responses will vary depending on how many artists live locally and how knowledgeable the staff are.
- Check out the programme of adult education courses which run in your local area.
- Ask other artists you come across whether (a) they know of any life classes locally; and (b) whether there are any particular life classes that they would recommend
- Check adverts in art journals

## WHAT DO I NEED TO TAKE?

**Something to draw with and something to draw on**

You will need something to draw with and something to draw on. Paper does not need to be your best paper. You might also need a sharpener, an eraser, paper stumps, a brush, something to hold paper to drawing board and something to fix your drawing if you use charcoal or pastels.

A sketchbook is also very useful for quicker drawings. Alternatively just use one sheet of paper for the quick poses.

You will need a drawing board – check whether or not you are expected to bring your own. I have a portfolio case which doubles as a drawing board when required.

What you will invariably see in most life classes is an awful lot of people working in charcoal. But not everybody does.

Here's a list of some of the media I see or have seen used in life classes I've attended

- Charcoal (the most popular choice)
- Conte crayon – in black, sanguine and white (a traditional medium used by many famous artists in the past but not often seen in life class)
- Graphite (my preferred medium). People often have a set of pencils of different degrees of hardness and/or graphite sticks
- Pen and ink (my other medium of choice).
- Brush and ink – plus water for pale washes
- Oils - on oiled paper (wiped down at the end)

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- Watercolours
- Washy acrylics
- Pastels
- Coloured pencils
- Marker pens
- Erasers – putty rubbers are often used as drawing implements in a life class

Find out whether or not materials are available in the life class or venue. The class I go to has sheets of paper of various types available to buy in the class and also has charcoal and tape available. Some places have art shops on the premises, but these are often closed by the time people turn up for classes in the evenings and at weekends.

I recommend a three stage approach to the use of drawing materials

- At the beginning, I'd be inclined to take whatever you feel comfortable drawing with to start with. Going to a life class is probably a big enough hurdle to get over without adding in working with new materials. So maybe take a selection of whatever you feel you can use to draw quickly and confidently.
- As you become more confident about the life drawing, then push the boundaries. Examples might include:
  - Try working on different paper
  - Try working on much larger paper (most people who start life classes are only used to working small – so try working big!)
  - Try using a brush and water with charcoal
- As you become confident in life drawing class, then you need to think about trying out a different medium for drawing. Place an emphasis on developing the quality of your drawing and then think about which media might help you do that. However, often it boils down to whether you are a person who is more comfortable with a dry medium or a brush in your hand. Try different things. Sometimes it's possible to borrow in a class to try something out.

## WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?

### The place, the people and how it all works

#### YOUR VENUE

What you will hopefully find is

- A large room with enough space for everybody to sit or stand comfortably and still see the model (but it might be very crowded)
- Enough easels for people to work at an easel (but there might not be enough for everyone)
- Enough donkeys for people who prefer to work sitting down. A 'donkey' is a 'drawing horse' which usually collapses down for stacking purposes. You sit astride a long stool which has a section at the 'head' end which lifts up and can be angled to provide support for a drawing board. Like deckchairs – get somebody to show you how one works.

If you have a particular requirement then you may well need to make sure you get there early.

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## THE PEOPLE

The people involved in a life class are:

- A model who typically is experienced and can hold a pose (but this is not always the case!)
- A tutor who is experienced in life drawing and who understands how to communicate and help students develop their skills (but not all can!)
- A number of other class participants

The number of people will vary hugely depending on the size of the space and who is running the class. The more students there are, the less time the tutor has for each student. If you're keen to be taught then ask before you register and/or opt for a smaller class and/or try and find out how much individual teaching there is. Ask if there are 'taster' sessions for people to try before you sign up for a term.

People's experience will typically vary across a wide range from people who are complete beginners to people who have been taking life classes for years.

Don't expect everybody to be chatty at the outset. People who have been in the class for years may appear to be in a 'clique' from the newcomers' perspective. The reality is that they're just a group who know one another well. The more you attend, the more likely they are to want to get to know you too.

## THE CLASS FORMAT

Life classes vary in the way they are run. It often depends on the individual tutor rather than the school – so one school may have two tutors who approach life class in different ways.

People may be surprised to know that there is very often no formal teaching of the class as a whole. Life classes often run so that people get a chance to exercise their drawing skills.

If you have no experience at all in life class then you need to introduce yourself to the tutor and let them know this very early on.

Tutors will often spend short spells with individuals looking at the work, asking you about what aspects seem to you to be working well and what you think needs to improve. Suggestions for improvements are often based on a need to observe and measure more carefully.

Classes vary as to whether people talk or not. In most of the ones I've attended, the tutor talks in a low voice and tries not to disturb people's concentration. In other classes, the tutor enjoys being the centre of attention and thinks everybody wants to hear him all the time – which can be a complete pain for those of us who like our life class to be leaning towards meditative!

## THE POSES:

Models simply cannot hold static poses for an indefinite time. Standing still is more difficult than sitting which is more difficult than lying down. Consequently, classes very often vary the length of time for poses so that people can draw across the range of possible poses. Sometimes a pose is resumed after a break. Sometimes the pose is changed. You need to listen carefully to understand which it will be.

Just as in exercise classes, many life classes start with a short session of quick poses – often with the model standing. Think of it like practising scales for playing the piano and you'll get the idea. These are held for maybe 2-3 minutes. The idea is for people to become attuned to drawing the body and for them to be able to learn how identify the marks which enable the pose to be described in a fast and economical way. These may then be followed by poses lasting 20-25 minutes. These might be standing (often with a support of some sort) or sitting. Some classically trained male models often have a pole which they use to enable them to strike standing poses which would be difficult to hold without a support. Classes often finish with a long pose for the last session. The length of the session will vary depending on the pose. Those which involve the model lying down are often longer.

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Models are sometimes asked to move or perform a set of repeated movements. This helps people to find a way of describing movement in their drawings and to draw movement when the subject is not a model.

Classes can sometimes involve a clothed model but such classes are typically not described as life classes as the challenge is about drawing how clothing works rather than how anatomy works.

I've always found being able to see the clock or wearing a watch to be really useful for judging how to progress/complete a drawing.

## WHAT I'M REALLY WORRIED ABOUT.....

### This section deals with people's common worries about life drawing and life class

#### THE NAKED BODY:

A LOT of people get very worried about seeing the naked body of somebody they don't know.

DO NOT WORRY – you are not alone! It's very rarely as bad as people think it might be. For all the men who may be worried you need to know that life models also come in all shapes and sizes and degrees of sagginess – they are not required to be attractive! Men tell me that fear of anything untoward happening means it won't! Plus by the time you've lost the fear you'll be so used to looking at the model that it won't matter anymore. Lots of people tell me that by the time they get used to really focusing on the observation and the drawing they actually forget that the model is naked!

Treat the model as you would want to be treated in that situation. Always be polite to the model and considerate. Never assume familiarity.

#### BUT I CAN'T DRAW!

Lots of people attending life classes are starting out.

If this is you then it's very unlikely that you'll be on your own. Those who require a certain level of skill will often state this on the application. If nothing is stated then assume that the class will include beginners. Life class is one of those classes where you can have people with very different abilities, knowledge and skills. Which is great – lots of people to learn from besides the tutor!

#### BUT I THOUGHT I COULD DRAW AND NOW I FIND I CAN'T

This is a more common experience than you might think.

People who used to drawing from photographs are often taken aback to find that their drawing skills don't work as well in a life class. You are used to recreating two dimensional shapes on a two dimensional format. Life drawing requires you to work out the four edges to your picture and to translate a three dimensional form into a two dimensional one – with no guides or tracing or any other aids other than your own eyes.

What you need to remember is that everybody learning to draw from life starts from the same place, with drawing skills that do not match their aspirations. So knowledge has to be acquired and skills have to be learned – and then practised.

It's never too early – or late – to start!

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