

# The Sight-size Method, a Critical Overview

By Semyon Bilmes

“A lie repeated a hundred times becomes the truth” - Mao Zedong

## Introduction

After living in the United States for many years and becoming aware of the complete inability and incompetence of art college and university art departments to teach drawing and painting, I was greatly impressed when I first saw artwork produced by the faculty and students of small art schools which call themselves *classical ateliers*. Most of these schools were teaching a method of drawing and painting which they call *sight-size*. Having been taught in the Russian academic system I had never heard of the sight-size method. I decided to hire a teacher, one of the best artists trained in this system, to teach this new, seemingly valuable method and possibly combine it with traditional methods taught in the art academy which I founded.

The first question this teacher asked me was, “Why do you want to offer the sight-size method?” I answered, “I think it can be helpful to our students.” He looked to the side with a cheerless expression and said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea.” I did not listen. To make a long story short, I talked him into teaching the sight-size method anyway, and went through the significant expenses of setting up the special stations, lights, and easels necessary for this method.

In time it became very clear to me that teaching the sight-size method was a bad idea; instead of being beneficial this method was harmful to the students. I found this method to be a mindless, mechanical transfer process, which retarded the development of the student’s artistic eye: development of which is based on seeing and recognizing proportions.

After abandoning this process, I wrote a short comment on our website about our opposition to this method. I have received numerous e-mails asking me questions about my comment and the sight-size method. Here are a few examples:

“Hello, [I] was interested in the fact that you dismiss the cast size method of drawing. I don’t live in the USA! (but planning to go there to study art). I thought (incorrectly it seems) that it was the classical method used by the old masters. So which alternative do you offer to it?”

“As I read the philosophy of Ashland Academy of Art, I saw that it overtly opposed sight-size method training. Why is this? This exercise only enforces discipline with nuances, which is a small part of having control and awareness of visual elements.”

“Dear Semyon,

I came across your website and I am admiring your efforts in bringing the knowledge of Russian art training into the [United States]. I did graduate from the Astrakhan Art College in Russia and studied 4 years in the Latvian State Academy of Fine Arts. I am teaching art privately in . . . . I am not familiar with the term you have used-- sight-size method, and cannot imagine what it could be. I will try to google it, but would like to know how you see it.”

“I have always been deeply interested in traditional realistic painting but it seems everywhere you turn, you run into the sight-size method. It really does seem like a cult, as you say. I know several people who have studied in Florence, Italy, at the schools there and almost all of them think that sight-size is a bad idea. Some hate it so much to the point of being angry about it. I suppose I caught the fever from them. Listening to them made me realize that it certainly is not like anything that could ever have been a part of the art training of the great masters of the past.”

“Dear Mr. Bilmes,

I was happy to read about your thoughts on the sight-size method (on your website). It is rare to see someone stand up and oppose a method that is so widespread and popular. I wanted to make you aware of a very thoughtful and scholarly essay on the web, opposing sight-size that does a wonderful job of analyzing the sight size method and objectively pointing out its limited positive aspects, and its numerous negative aspects. It also highlights the fact that the method is a recent invention...I simply thought you might find the article interesting, as I did, and maybe even encourag[ed] to know that not everyone is taken in by the sight-size mania that seems to be in so many schools teaching realism. It also may be something you can refer others to if they have more questions about why you consider the method bad.”

I checked out the article mentioned above, and found it to be very well written and informative. It is called: “Concerning the Sight-size Method” written by Hans-Peter Szameit. This article can be found at:  
<http://www.atelierstockholm.se/index.asp?id=64&parentid=64&lang=1>

These and similar e-mails prompted me to do a more in-depth investigation, the results of which I am sharing in this essay in hopes that it will be useful to aspiring artists and art students.

## **Overview**

At the end of the nineteenth century, western European and American art academies and schools abandoned the traditional teaching of drawing and painting and became design and craft schools. Industrialization, emergence of photography, new ideologies, social reforms, and new theories in psychology and education all prompted this change. Deeper

analysis of this reform is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to review the nature and growth of the modern phenomena - the *sight-size method*.

After a big blowout caused by the art education reform, the knowledge and skills that were developed, practiced, and taught for hundreds of years by the artists and art academies... vanished. The only exceptions were art academies of the Soviet Union, where those particular skills were used for the propaganda of socialism in what was called “Socialist Realism”.

However, within the last twenty years there has been a rise of small, private schools in America, that teach realism. These schools are in a constant search for any remaining pieces of traditional art education; they are called *ateliers*, or sometimes *academies*.

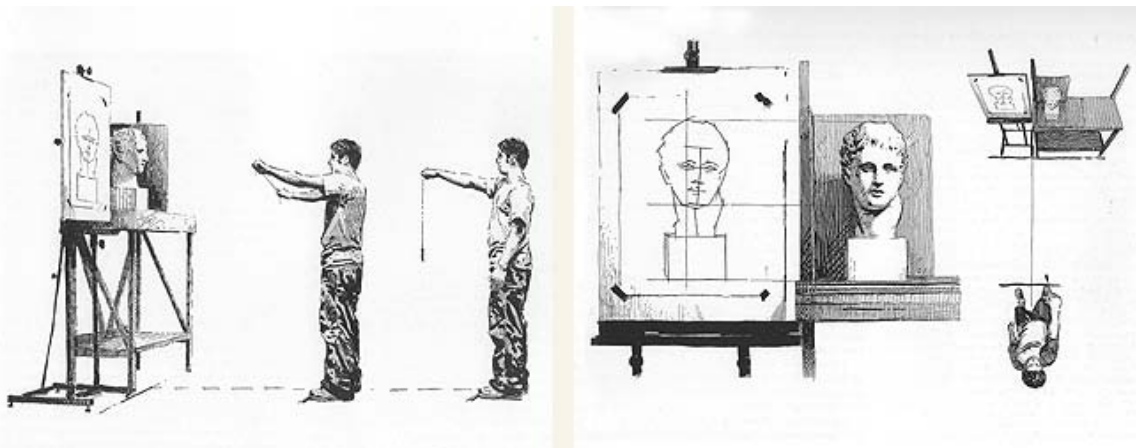
Boosted by the increasing interest in representational art, a new, alarmingly injurious system came to the existence and rapidly gained popularity, namely, the sight-size method.

The sight-size method, taught in those schools, is a mechanical point-by-point transfer from the model to paper or canvas, tracing the subject in the same size as it lines up with the surface.

This transfer works this way:

1. Placing a paper or canvas side by side to the object or model, either next to it, or at a distance, regulating the size of the future picture by the distance.
2. Using a string, construction level, or a ruler mechanically transferring the points of the object or model to the surface by horizontally connecting those points to the surface of the paper or canvas.
3. Using the plumb line to vertically align the relevant points.
4. Outlining the found flat shapes of shadows. Filling in the major shadow shapes with darker tones, and gradually rendering the rest according to the found shapes, and copying tones and colors.

All of this could be achieved only by standing at a distance of six feet or so and walking to the easel from the exact taped spot to make a mark, returning each time back to the taped spot.



Illustrations from Gerald Ackerman, "Charles Bargue. Drawing Course". by Graydon Parrish

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All of the massive research which has been done to find the origin of the sight-size method points to the American painter R. H. Ives Gammell who has taught a number of students in his studio. One of Gammell's students, Richard Lack, opened the Atelier Lack in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1969, had been shown the method by Gammell, but tailored it as a teaching system of drawing and painting.

Most of the founders and teachers of the sight-size ateliers come from the original atelier which was started by Richard Lack. The rest of the teachers are their students and students of their students. On page 7 of Juliette Aristides's book, *Classical Drawing Ateliers*, Aristides says, "The proliferation of ateliers in this day is, in large part, a result of people either having studied directly with Gammell, Lack, or one of Lack's students."

Most all of these ateliers are in the United States, but few migrated abroad.

In Florence, the cradle of Italian Renaissance, there are three schools which are currently teaching the sight-size method (although they are not Italian). Two of these schools are owned and operated by Americans and one by a Canadian. All three of them have studied under Richard Lack or Gammell.

Among other quotations, found in abundance on the internet and showing complete ignorance of art history, this one is appropriate to mention (while the old Florentine artists turn in their graves):

"On the question of technique, Clayton believes that there is no longer a British art school that places any premium on the rigors of the **once dominant sight-size approach of drawing natural form**. Only in Italy did he find such teaching, and he aims to import it as part of the new academy."  
 (www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/clayton.htm)

There is a massive attempt to legitimize the sight-size method. A number of articles have been written on this method containing unsubstantiated historical claims. Phrases and

slogans have been created such as “...in the sight-size tradition”...or “...the old masters sight-size technique...”, or “sight-size classical, academic method...” to create an impression that sight-size is a long-time proven system of drawing and painting, and that it has been taught in the academies or ateliers of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth.

**The sight-size method is not classical.** In classical art the proportions of the models were changed to fit the classical canons of beauty; old masters were always modifying proportions. Also, classical drawing was based on the geometral approach, studying form through geometry and perspective, and not copying shapes of lights and shadows.

**The sight-size method is not traditional** because there never was a tradition of drawing or painting sight-size in Europe, America, or anywhere else. Exceptions are possible; however, exception is an antonym of tradition.

**Finally, the sight-size method is not academic:** it has **never** been taught in any academy or school before Lack’s invention!

Below is a quote from *Charles Bargue: Drawing Course* by Gerald Ackerman (Ackerman 318). This book is very popular in sight-size based schools. In this book Ackerman, reprinted the plates produced by the artist Charles Bargue for drawing exercises. To his credit, Ackerman, a sight-size method enthusiast, states the following:

“There is endless debate among the practitioners about how old the technique is and about who practiced it. Some adherents have attempted to resurrect an ennobling lineage of artists who used the method, much like Renaissance dukes and popes extending their family trees back to Hercules. As a methodical studio practice it seems to be a late nineteenth century development. Although there are many instances where one unself-consciously uses it not as a method but as a natural approach – say, in portraiture or capturing figures at a distance – it is best as an atelier practice. The examination of many etchings, drawings, paintings, and photographs of early ateliers in session – some as far back as the Renaissance – depicts none of the upright easels necessary for the practice of sight-size. In many other depictions of older ateliers, one constantly sees younger students seated on the ground, with their drawing boards in their laps.”

I must add that examination of all available photographs, drawings and paintings of late nineteenth century academies, ateliers, or studios, depicts none of the sight-size methods in practice.



Ecole des Beaux-Arts



David's studio



Julian's atelier



Antwerp Academy



Julian's atelier



French atelier 19 century



Ecole des Beaux-Arts



American academy, women's draughting class

Paintings and photographs above are examples of traditional teaching ateliers.

The difference between traditional approach and sight-size method is very important. In order to draw, the student needs to develop the ability to measure proportions visually: every part must have the same relationship to other parts in size as it is on the model. For example, the vase is so much bigger than the cup, or the head is so much smaller than the ribcage, etc. The ability to see each part in relationship to the whole and therefore keep all of the parts in the same scale, is not easy to attain and takes years of constant practice. After years of practice, one can draw or paint in any scale they like. This is the essential aspect of drawing, and is the biggest reason why academies had exams and would not accept students who did not develop this ability. Some professors at the nineteenth century Russian academy demonstrated the level of virtuosity by drawing, for example, the statue of Laocoon starting from the small toe all the way to the head in perfect proportions; or drawing parts of the model on separate pieces of paper, mentally keeping them in the same scale, and then, when they put them together, all of the parts fit together perfectly to the astonishment of the students.

The sight-size tracing method bypasses the need for proportional measurement and directly traces the points from the model to the surface, evading a serious and lengthy study of proportion and form. If the student does not quit this practice fast enough, he or she will end up lacking proportional measurement skills and with a severe dependency on this mechanical method.

The other problem with the sight-size tracing method is that it is extremely limiting in size. The rate of reduction in size from the model to the picture plane is very fast. That is why produced drawings and paintings are tiny. If practitioners want to make it bigger, they must stand exactly on a marked point, six feet or so away from their drawing each time when they are looking at the model, which means that they have to walk forward and back each time to make a mark. It is a very limiting and burdening process and impossible for drawing or painting sitting down. Height of the artist's shoe soles makes a BIG deference, because the eye must be in exactly the same spot. Another limitation is that since this method requires the objects or model to be lined up with the surface of the paper or canvas, it makes it impossible to draw or paint anything bellow or above the eye level. This process is also extremely long.

### **Sight-Size Apologetics**

Darren R. Rousar, author of *Cast Drawing Using the Sight-Size Approach*, and creator of the website *Sight-size.com*, has a special section on his website called *Sight-Size Misconceptions*. In this section, Rousar portrays all intuitive and factual arguments criticizing the sight-size method as “misconceptions.” For example, under *Misconception #2*, he lists the fact that: “Sight-size is based upon and defined by mechanical measuring”. He continues:

“The word 'measuring', as used here, means determining exact widths and heights using additional tools besides one's own eyes. On the surface, this misconception



seems difficult to refute due to how sight-size is commonly taught. **Most ateliers that teach sight-size** do so by incorporating measuring into the approach. My book, *Cast Drawing Using the Sight-Size Approach*, **is no exception**” (Sight-size.com).

Of course it is “difficult to refute” and of course his book is no exception! It is not that “Most ateliers that teach sight-size do so by incorporating measuring into the approach”, but that ALL ateliers that teach sight-size incorporate mechanical measuring into the approach. It is not “...how sight-size is commonly taught”, it is the ONLY way it is taught!

Ben Rathbone in the article named “Drawing with the Sight-Size Method” states the following:

“Once the subject and drawing are seen as being the same size, it becomes possible to **mechanically measure and compare the proportions** of the subject to the drawing and judge the drawing's accuracy.”

In the “Tools Needed” section of the article he lists the tools for this mechanical process: “The tools needed are a long ruler or T-square, string, easel, drawing paper, and whatever drawing medium is desired.... To make specific comparisons, I used (and still use) a drafting compass.” ([http://www.480bc.com/sight\\_size/sightsizesize.htm](http://www.480bc.com/sight_size/sightsizesize.htm) )

Using mechanical tools such as a “long ruler or T-square, string” or a “drafting compass” certainly fits the misconception # 2 listed above: “Sight-size is based upon and defined by mechanical measuring”.

Under Misconception #7, Rousar suggests why the sight-size method is not tracing:

“Tracing is variously defined in numerous entries on Dictionary.com as, ‘a drawing created by superimposing a semitransparent sheet of paper on the original image and copying on it the lines of the original image...’ Training one's eye using sight-size is a long and involved process. By contrast, tracing needs no instruction beyond how it is done. All that is required is an elementary ability to control the pencil. Either the traced lines match the image beneath or they don't.”\*

\*[http://www.480bc.com/sight\\_size/sightsizesize.htm](http://www.480bc.com/sight_size/sightsizesize.htm)

This definition was conveniently selected, but there are certainly many more definitions of the word “trace” on Dictionary.com including:

1. The intersection of two planes or of a plane and a surface.
2. The point at which a line, or the curve in which a surface intersects a coordinate plane.
3. The intersection of a plane of projection, or an original plane, with a coordinate plane.



4. To follow, make out, or determine the course or line of [...].
5. A line drawn by a recording instrument, such as a cardiograph.

Rousar's comment, "either the traced lines match the image beneath or they don't", describes perfectly the process of sight-size with a difference that "traced lines match the image" not beneath, but to the side.

The term sight-size cannot be found in any dictionary (Dictionary.com says: "No results found for *sight-size*"). There have been various conflicting attempts to define the sight-size method by the sight-size proponents. Mr. Rousar tries to resolve confusion by quoting a former Gammell student:

"Finally, Robert Douglas Hunter, also a former Gammell student, was asked to define sight-size in an interview in the December 1970 issue of *American Artist* magazine, page 48. He says, 'Basically, **it is a method of viewing** the model and your painting simultaneously from a selected position so that both images appear the same size.'

In the *Charles Bargue: Drawing Course*, Gerald Ackerman states that any painter: "...unself-consciously uses it **not as a method** but as a natural approach".

But in the article *Drawing with the Sight-Size Method*, Ben Rathbone says:

"The Sight Size Method **is a method** of constructing realistic drawings with great accuracy.... It is a **method by which anyone with any amount of drawing experience can set up and execute a realistic drawing....**"

It becomes more and more apparent that there are two distinctly different concepts. One concept is defined as "**viewing** the model and your painting simultaneously from a selected position so that both images appear the same size", and the other concept suggests to "**mechanically measure** and compare the proportions of the subject to the drawing."

To stop confusion, clear definitions are needed. I shall refer to these concepts as *sight-size viewing* and *sight-size tracing*, respectively.

Viewing the picture and the model in the same size, or close to it, is a useful observational tool to *spot the difference* among various methods traditionally used by artists to help them see. These methods include: looking from the distance at both the model and the drawing or painting; looking through the mirror turning back to both picture and model; looking through the mirror upside down; using a black mirror, squinting, head-cocking, blurring vision; and using a concaved lens. Sight-size viewing is used and has been used by many artists throughout history, but sight-size tracing is practiced only and exclusively by the modern day sight-size ateliers.

The statement by Ben Rathbone that sight-size is a method by which “**anyone with any amount of drawing experience** can set up and execute a realistic drawing” (bold letter emphasis is mine), raises a question of any need for drawing experience or learning.

In David Hockney's book, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, Hockney claims that old masters just traced images on canvases using *Camera Obscura* and *Camera Lucida* and did not know how to draw or paint without the help of mechanical means.

In Ann James Massey's review of Hockney's *Secret Knowledge*, Massey suggests that “Hockney is doing an enormous disservice to many of the artists of the past; to living artists who draw without computers, projecting, or tracing; and to future artists who will believe learning to draw is unnecessary since mechanical means will be good enough”. <http://www.artrenewal.org/articles/2004/Massey/hockney1.asp>

*Mechanical means* certainly include the sight-size tracing method described by Ben Rathbone as “... **to mechanically measure and compare the proportions**”.

An additional “misconception” from sight-size.com (misconception #3) is that “**sight size breeds dependence upon the model.**” Rousar suggests that “This misconception is misleading since the premise behind sight-size is comparing your work to your subject.”

In *Charles Bargue Drawing Course*, Peter Bougie, teacher and author of a number of articles on sight-size, answered Gerald Ackerman's question by stating: “You are right about the shortcomings of sight-size – it is strictly for working in controlled situations, **and it does breed a dependence on the model**” (Bougie 325).

### **Inaccurate historical claims about the sight-size method**

In this section I will examine the inaccurate claims that the sight-size tracing method is traditional, classical, academic, and was used by old masters.

Because there is no historical reference to support any claim that the sight-size tracing method was ever taught in academies or ateliers, it has been a common practice among sight-size ideologists to refer to, and quote each other.

On his website, in response to the first “misconception” (that sight- sizing was invented by Richard Lack), Mr. Rousar says:

“Most sight-size detractors and some adherents credit R. H. Ives Gammell, his teacher William McGregor Paxton, or Gammell's student Richard F. Lack with inventing sight-size”. ...“I have also asked Lack if he knew who was the first to use the term 'sight-size'. He replied that Gammell told him the term came down from the Boston School of painters and most probably from Edmund Tarbell...”



[Edmund C. Tarbell at work on 'Girl Putting on Her Hat'], 1907 / R. D. McDonough, photographer.  
[http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images/item\\_6128.htm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images/item_6128.htm)

Above is an example of Tarbell's painting being placed next to the model, but as you can see the painting is much higher than the model; this placement would not allow sight-size tracing. Moreover if he would place it on the same level to use sight-size tracing, he would have to crawl forward and back! This photograph shows that the size of the painted model is also smaller than life size.

If Edmund C. Tarbell used a term sight-size, he may have meant just sighting picture and model in **approximately** the same size.

Historically, all processes have been given names. If sight-size tracing method had been used before, especially if it was "European", "traditional" or "academic" practitioners would give it a name: above all French! The French had a name for every possible variation of method, system, or style. Just the word "sketch" in French has five different terms describing different types of sketching: *esquisse*, *etude*, *croquis*, *ebauche*, and *modele*.

There is no French name for sight-size, of course it can be made up, but it cannot be found in any historical art related literature or manuals.

Mr. Rousar continues:

“During phone and in-person conversations I have had with Lack, he has denied inventing it and claims Gammell denied inventing it as well....

**Until further evidence comes to light** we can conclude two things. Neither Paxton, Gammell nor Lack invented sight-size or coined the term **and that it was believed by them to have been used by some artists, professionally and as a teaching method, prior to the 20th century.**” (Bold letter emphasis is mine).

But, if we can only ‘conclude’ that ‘**it was believed by them**’ that the sight-size method ‘**has been used by some artists...**’ it becomes obvious that neither Gammell nor Lack knew, nor could name any artist which used sight-size tracing “professionally and as a teaching method” prior to the 20th century.

It is not clear where Gammell picked up the sight-size tracing method. It is possible that he invented it himself. The fact that “... Lack... has denied inventing it and claims Gammell denied inventing it as well” does not explain the fact that all of the leads tracing the origin of the sight-size method point directly to them. Gammell’s teacher, William McGregor Paxton, taught drawing at the Boston Museum School for seven years (1906-1913). None of his students, besides Gammell have been known to use, or teach the sight-size method. There is no data reporting Paxton’s use of the sight-size method.

Photograph of Paxton painting a model shows nothing in common with the sight-size method.



\*Paxton painting a portrait of a model .  
Image courtesy of the William McGregor Paxton papers,  
1886-1971 at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Sight-size advocates keep repeating the mantra that the sight-size method is traditional and classical:

“The sight size method has been utilized for centuries by countless great painters and is still widely used today.” [danalevin.com/site\\_size.html](http://danalevin.com/site_size.html)

Any historical references to the artist’s moving back from the canvas and comparing the picture and the object from the distance by placing the picture next to the model, using upstanding easels, or even using brushes with long handles are labeled as practicing the sight-size method.

In “The Sight-Size Portrait Tradition” Nicolas Beer writes:

Palomino de Castro Y Valasco reports that when painting the portrait of Admiral Pulido Pareja in 1639, Velazquez ... painted with long brushes....”

But Matisse also painted sometimes with very long brushes, which does not make him a “sightsizer”.



Matisse painting with the six foot brush.

Here is an example of how, using any mention of a distance between the artist and the model by Old Masters, Darren R. Rousar creates “*historical evidence*” of using sight-size on the spot, and turns Leonardo and Alberti into sightsizers:

“We at Sight-Size.com believe in the sight-size approach and also see **historical evidence** for its use in the past. Rather than present our opinions of the following artist's writings we'll let them speak for themselves so that the reader can **come to their own conclusions**:

‘When you draw from nature, stand three times as far away as the object you are drawing.’ -Leonardo da Vinci

‘Know that a painted thing can never appear truthful where there is not a definite distance for seeing it’ -Leon Battista Alberti “

The conclusion is obvious; neither da Vinci nor Alberti described the sight-size method.

Even Wikipedia has been used to spread the same disinformation. Under “Atelier Method” it quotes Charles H. Cecil, founder of Charles H. Cecil Studios, an atelier located in Florence, Italy saying the following:

The method was used by many of the finest painters in oil since the seventeenth century, including Reynolds, Lawrence and Sargent. In reviving the atelier

tradition, R. H. Ives Gammell (1893-1981) adopted sight-size as the basis of his teaching method. He founded his studio on the precedent of private ateliers, such as those of Carolus-Duran and Léon Bonnat. These French masters **were accomplished sight-size portraitists** who conveyed to their pupils a devotion to the art of Velázquez. It should be noted that Sargent was trained by both painters and that, in turn, his use of sight-size had a major influence in Great Britain and America.

There is also no support to the claim that Reynolds, Lawrence or Sargent used the sight-size tracing method. Nor is there any evidence that Carolus-Duran or Léon Bonnat were “accomplished sight-size portraitists”, ever used the method, or that they even heard of the sight-size method. Mentioning Velázquez in the same sentence may imply that he was actually using this method. The evidence is contrary to all of these claims.

### **Sir Joshua Reynolds**

Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy of Arts, was a firm opponent of teaching mechanical copying of any kind. In his Discourses on Art (p.29) he says:

“I consider general copying as a delusive kind of industry; the student satisfies himself with the appearance of doing something... as it requires no effort of the mind, he sleeps over his work. Some...confining themselves entirely to mechanical practice, toil on in the drudgery of copying; and think they make a rapid progress....though it takes up much time in copying, conduces little to improvement. This appears to me very tedious, and I think a very erroneous method of proceeding.”

### **Carolus-Duran**

Mr. Rousar states that:

“Regarding its instruction, R.A.M. Stevenson, a fellow student with Sargent at Carolus-Duran's atelier, provides written descriptions of the atelier that a modern day atelier student would recognize as sight-size”. (Sight-size.com)

A modern day atelier student may believe that if they choose, but here is how R.A.M. Stevenson describes a painting of a portrait in atelier Carolus-Duran:

“...a slight search of proportions with charcoal, the places of masses were indicated with rigger dipped in a flowing pigment. No preparation in color or monochrome was allowed, but the main planes of the face must be laid directly on the unprepared canvas with a broad brush. .... no conventional bounding of eyes and features with lines that might deceive the student by their expression into the belief that false structure was truthful...” (Stevenson 147).

Careful mechanical measuring and tracing methods of sight-size is incompatible with such approaches.



But here is a description of Carolus- Duran actually drawing:

“As the drawing proceeded, and one began to grasp its meaning, it became obvious that he was reserving all effect for the painting, towards which this was the sternest preparation. With the care of a general, who surveys the ground on which he is about to hazard battle, did Carolus place his masses and lines: rubbing out occasionally, making alterations, **and holding up the stick of charcoal between his eye and the model to take measurements**, as humbly as any tyro setting out his first drawing from the antique. When done, the only **remarkable** thing about the drawing was its **extraordinary precision: the lines were such as anyone might trace had he the knack to persuade them to go exactly into their right places.**”\*

\*H. Arthur Kennedy, THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW VOLUME LIII. JANUARY— JUNE 1888 ISBISTER AND COMPANY LIMITED

Side-size tracing would automatically put lines “**to go exactly into their right places**”, so there wouldn’t be anything “**remarkable**” about it. This description of Carolus-Duran drawing by “**holding up the stick of charcoal between his eye and the model to take measurements**” undoubtedly shows use of a “sighting” measurement of traditional drawing.

Here is one of the axioms of Carolus Duran:

“Educate the eye before you educate the hand. The hand will become cunning soon enough when the eye has learned to see, whereas if the hand be educated before the eye one may never see” \*

\* *Notes of the Fine Arts, Gossip about painters and sculptors.* The New York Times, January 9, 1881

A description of Duran’s atelier:

“On Monday morning the students set up their easels in **whatever place they could find.** There they would remain all week”\*

\*Carter Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent*, p. 41

Anybody familiar with sight-size method would know that it is impossible to work in “**whatever place they could find**”, because in order to practice sight-size, the arrangement of object and model, easel, light and observation point must be perfectly set up.



Carolus-Duran at Chase School of Art, New-York, 12 April 1898

<http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CPicZ.aspx?E=2C6NU0G9FOER>

In the above photograph Carolus-Duran is painting at the Chase School of Art, founded by his student William Merritt Chase. Here this “sight-size portraitist” paints in a free, normal way, no model is sitting or standing next to the easel, the canvas is slanted and Carolus-Duran does not even have space to move back; this is not the sight-size method.

Photograph of Carolus-Duran painting a portrait of Siam royalty clearly shows that he was painting in a normal, traditional way. The slanted canvas and the level of painting not been aligned on the same level as the head of the sitter, makes it impossible to use sight-size method.



## Léon Bonnat

Sight-size promoters suggests that any mentioning of drawing or painting being put next to the model at any time during the artist's work, represents the use of the sight-size method. In the essay named: "The Sight-Size Portrait Tradition", Nicholas Beer makes a great effort to legitimize the sight-size method and to make it appear historical.

According to Mr. Beer almost anyone who was any good was a "sight-size portraitist." Here Mr. Beer quotes Edwin Blashfield describing Leon Bonnat painting:

"We have seen how, instead of sitting or standing before his canvas with his model at a distance, he placed the latter close beside the canvas, and then went away from his subject to the very end of his studio. There dropping upon one knee to bring the point of



sight to the proper level, and half closing his eyes, he carefully compared model and picture, then going quickly to his easel, painted a few strokes, and repeated his journey.”

\*John Charles Van Dyke , “Modern French Masters”

By examining the words “he placed the latter close beside the canvas,” and “...he carefully compared model and picture” it becomes obvious that Bonnat did not start his painting with sight-size at all, and at the time of positioning the model to his picture, he was well advanced in his painting. “...There dropping upon one knee to **bring the point of sight to the proper level...**” indicates that even when he put the picture close to the model, it was LOWER than the model! Understanding perspective is imperative to understanding this point.

One of his pupils describes his teaching method: “Begin, Bonnat said, **by looking for the overall proportion** and movement in the body.... **Screw up your eyes to see the proportions**”\*

\*Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream, Sue Prideaux



Léon Bonnat painting portrait of Victor Hugo, 1879 by Claverie

Bonnat painting a portrait of Victor Hugo has been depicted by artist Claverie, and as it is seen in the drawing, Bonnat is painting in the traditional method and not with sight-size.



Portrait of Victor Hugo by Léon Bonnat



Painting entitled “Bonnat and his pupils” clearly depicts a slanted canvas which cannot possibly be used in the sight-size tracing method.



Bonnat atelier

Photographs of the Bonnat Atelier provided above illustrate the fact that sight-size was not used there.

### **John Singer Sargent**

Julie Helen Heyneman, a pupil of John Singer Sargent, describes Sargent’s method of painting:

“To watch the head develop from the start was like the sudden lifting of a blind in a dark room. Every stage was a revelation. For one thing he **often moved his easel** next to the sitter so that when he walked back from it he saw the canvas and the original in the same light, at the same distance, at the same angle of vision.”\*

(‘For one thing **he put his easel directly** next to the sitter’ is quoted by Nicholas Beer in his essay The Sight-Size Portrait Tradition).

The part “...he **often** moved his easel next to the sitter...” unmistakably shows, that the painting was done away from the sitter, and periodically moved next to the sitter for better comparison.

“He advised doing a head for a portrait slightly under life-size, to counteract the tendency to paint larger than life. Even so he laid in a head slightly larger than he intended to leave it, so that he could model the edges with and into the background.”\*

\* Julie Helen Heyneman papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Mr. Beer goes after Whistler using T.R. Way's description of Whistler's studio:

“While Bonnat and Carolus Duran aimed at a naturalistic representation, James McNeill Whistler exploited sight-size for more unconventional ends. ....T. R. Way gives the following description of Whistler's Tite Street: studio “I remember a very long, not very lofty room very light, with windows along one side, his canvas beside his model at one end, and at the other, near the table he used as a palette, an old Georgian looking glass, so arranged that he could readily see his canvas and model reflected in it. Those who use such a mirror will know that it is the most merciless of critics ... he darted backwards and forewords to look at both painting and model from his point of view at the extreme end of the long studio.”

Here again, having canvas next to the model and moving “backwards and forewords” he calls “exploited sight-size”, while this quotation of T.R. Way does not even mention the size of the painting, so it is unknown whether it was painted the same size or not. And even if it was, it wouldn't mean that Whistler side-traced the model.

The recycling of names such as of Lawrence, Raynolds, Rayburn, Van Dyck, and Sargent becomes a routine, as they have been repeated in claim-to-fame attempts on most sight-size websites and articles, but periodically we can see inclusion of other names, completely out of the blue such as, Rubens, Velasquez, Leonardo da Vinci and almost any famous artist.

### **Examples of misinformation**

The intention of this article is not to insult sight-size instructors, but to clarify the true definition of the sight-size method as it is taught in sight-size ateliers (a mechanical transfer process), and to stop the circulation of false claims on historic and academic roots of the sight-size tracing method.

The following statements were taken from various Internet sites. These statements exemplify the unfortunate misrepresentation of the sight-size method:

“Sight-size is a unique method of drawing and painting. It can be traced back through the works of Sargent, Lawrence, Raynolds, Rayburn, Van Dyck, Rubens and Velasquez to Leonardo da Vinci”. (<http://www.ingersportraits.com/ingerhodgson>)

“Throughout the course, students are taught according to sight-size practiced by such artists as Rembrandt, Rijn and Sargent.” ([http://marymolony.net/modern\\_renaissance.php](http://marymolony.net/modern_renaissance.php))

Now, Rembrandt is also put in the same company. I don't know who “Rijn” is, but I think she meant Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.



“It's one of the oldest methods for drawing having evolved from the Renaissance, the method was fully developed **and taught as it is taught today by the 17th century**. The list of artists who used the sight size method for figurative drawings and portraits is amazing” ([askville.amazon.com/](http://askville.amazon.com/))

“Through a **historical method called the "sight size" method**, the eye is made to see proportions accurately” (<http://theatelier.org/goals.html>).

“Kimberley will teach **the traditional sight-size method** of figure drawing” ([edinaartcenter.com/](http://edinaartcenter.com/)).

“Drawing with the Sight-Size Method Sight-size or **right-size drawing** is a **traditional method** of observing the subject, still taught in **classical ateliers**” ([drawsketch.about.com](http://drawsketch.about.com)).

“Some speculate that artists used sight-size for centuries, and **certainly** many nineteenth century portrait painters employed it, including Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua Reynolds and John Singer Sargent”.\*

\*[www.johnpeck.com/.../ClassicalApproachestotheTeachingofDrawing-o.pdf](http://www.johnpeck.com/.../ClassicalApproachestotheTeachingofDrawing-o.pdf)

The word “certainly” goes together with putting Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds in the same century with Sargent.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, Lawrence, John Singer Sargent, Philip De Laszlo, John Collier, John Everett Millais, and many other artists (including myself), have been placing the picture next to the model, using their nearness to check and compare. Claiming they are “sight-size portraitists” unfairly misrepresents their philosophy, training, skills and methods of painting. They all studied drawing and painting in academies and ateliers which never taught the sight-size method.

In fact, any academic literature on the history of art education never mentions the sight-size method. These books include, but are not limited to: *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, by Nikolaus Pevsner; *Teaching Art: from Vasari to Albers*, by Carl Goldstein; *History of Methods of Teaching Drawing*, by N.N. Rostovtsev; *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* by Albert Boime; *The Lure of Paris: Nineteenth-Century American Painters and Their French Teachers*, by H. Barbara Weinberg.

### **More claims, now on lineage**

In *Continuing a Long Tradition of Training Painters*, author Peter Bougie says:

“Richard Lack studied with the Boston painter R. H. Ives Gammell, who was a student of the American Impressionist William Paxton, who in turn studied under Jean-Leon Gerome in Paris during the late 19th century. Gerome studied with

Paul Delaroche; and Delaroche was a pupil of the great neo-classicist Jacques-Louis David”.

Another article by Peter Bougie, *The Atelier Method of Learning Art: a Living Tradition* claims that:

“Through Gammell and these young men, his earliest students, a tradition of painting skills passing from teacher to students could be traced all the way back to the French Neo-Classicalist Jacques Louis David.”

“Tradition of painting skills?” What kind of a tradition is that? Teachers were passing their knowledge to the students in studios, bottegas, ateliers, and academies long before Jacques Louis David. Is this a claim that David was using a sight-size method?

From “Michele Mitchell” by Arlene Winkler, Western North Carolina Women’s Magazine:

"I'm part of a wonderful lineage," she explains. "From Master to Apprentice, from Boucher/Vien 1703-1770 to Jacques Louis David 1748-1825, then to Antoine Jean Gros 1771-1835 to Delaroche/Gleyre 1808-1874 (students of Charles Gleyre included Monet, Renoir and Whistler), then to Jean-Leon Gerome 1824-1904, to William McGregor Paxton 1869-1941, to R.H. Ives Gammell 1893-1981, to my teacher, Richard Lack 1928-present. **And then I am next in line, with my contemporaries at Richard Lack's atelier.**"

Here is an appropriate comment by Gerald Ackerman about sight-size mythical lineage:

“Some adherents [to sight-size method] have attempted to resurrect an ennobling lineage of artists who used the method, much like Renaissance dukes and popes extending their family trees back to Hercules” (Ackerman 318).

By Jack El-Hai, Minnesota Monthly December 2006 :

“Gjertson’s and Lack’s other students **claim an artistic lineage that connects them** to Jacques-Louis David, Paul Delaroche, and Jean-Léon Gérôme of France, in addition to Americans William McGregor Paxton, R. H. Ives Gammell, and Gjertson’s mentor Lack. (**Lineage is important to classical realists** because they believe that the **essence** of their **tradition** moves from master to apprentice, from teacher to student.)” (Bold letter highlighting is mine).

Creation of the term “Classical Realism” by Richard Lack is well documented. It is also admitted by Stephen Gjertson in his article: *Classical Realism; a Living Artistic Tradition*.

So, then Classical Realism is certainly not the lineage that could line them with Jean-Léon Gérôme, or Jacques-Louis David, since neither Gérôme, nor David have ever heard of such a thing as Classical Realism.

Then the questions are: “...*the essence*” of what “*tradition*”? Or, why “*Lineage is important...*”?

The answer to these questions is simple: to legitimize the teaching of sight-size method as authentic, credible and traditional is to **imply** that such artists as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Paul Delaroche, and Jacques-Louis David were using and teaching the sight-size method.

Most consistent lineage claims, repeated like a mantra on sight-size websites are - Jean-Léon Gérôme - William McGregor Paxton - R. H. Ives Gammell - Richard Lack. Gérôme’s position in this lineage is crucial; he was very significant figure in European art and art education. He is made to be the “missing link” between traditional European academic system and the sight-size method; the lineage implication is that **if** Lack used the sight-size method **then** Gérôme used it as well.

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines the word implication as:

“a logical relationship between two propositions in which if the first is true the second is true” and “a logical relation between two propositions that **fails to hold** only if the first is true and the **second is false**”.

The Atelier Studio Program of Fine Art states on their website:

**“A portion of The Atelier’s educational lineage is as follows:**

- Jaques-Louis David (1748-1825)
- Paul Delaroche (1797-1856)
- Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)
- William McGregor Paxton (1869-1941)
- R. H. Ives Gammell (1893-1981)
- Richard F. Lack (1928-2009) “

<http://theatelier.org/>

It makes one wonder of what other “portion” of their lineage is.

Here is an example of how Florence Academy of Art (registered American organization) creates an impression that sight-size method is academic:

### **Figure drawing, the academic method**

Students are introduced to the academic method of figure drawing, employed by the major Realist ateliers of nineteenth century Paris, best exemplified by Jean Léon Gérôme and the French Academic tradition. They are taught to use the sight-size method of measurement ....

We can see how by putting the sentence “They are taught to use the sight-size method of measurement ....” after the sentence “ Students are introduced to the academic method of figure drawing, employed by the major Realist ateliers of nineteenth century Paris, best exemplified by Jean Léon Gérôme and the French Academic tradition” – they IMPLY that major Realist ateliers of nineteenth century Paris used sight-size, that sight-size is a part of the French Academic tradition and that Gérôme also have used the sight-size method.

### **Jean-Léon Gérôme**

Examination of Gérôme’s own education, his drawing, painting or his teaching practices shows no trace of sight-size method. Detailed descriptions of teaching ateliers of both teachers of Gérôme, Paul Delaroche’s and Marc-Charles-Gabriel Gleyre, could be found in a most scholarly account on the nineteenth century French ateliers, book written by Professor Albert Boime: *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*. No signs of anybody using, teaching, or even knowing about the sight-size method could be found their ether.

Description of Gérôme’s atelier was given by his student Earl Shinn:

Shinn explains that the students would “range themselves, with the maximum of noise, in a crescent around the model.”

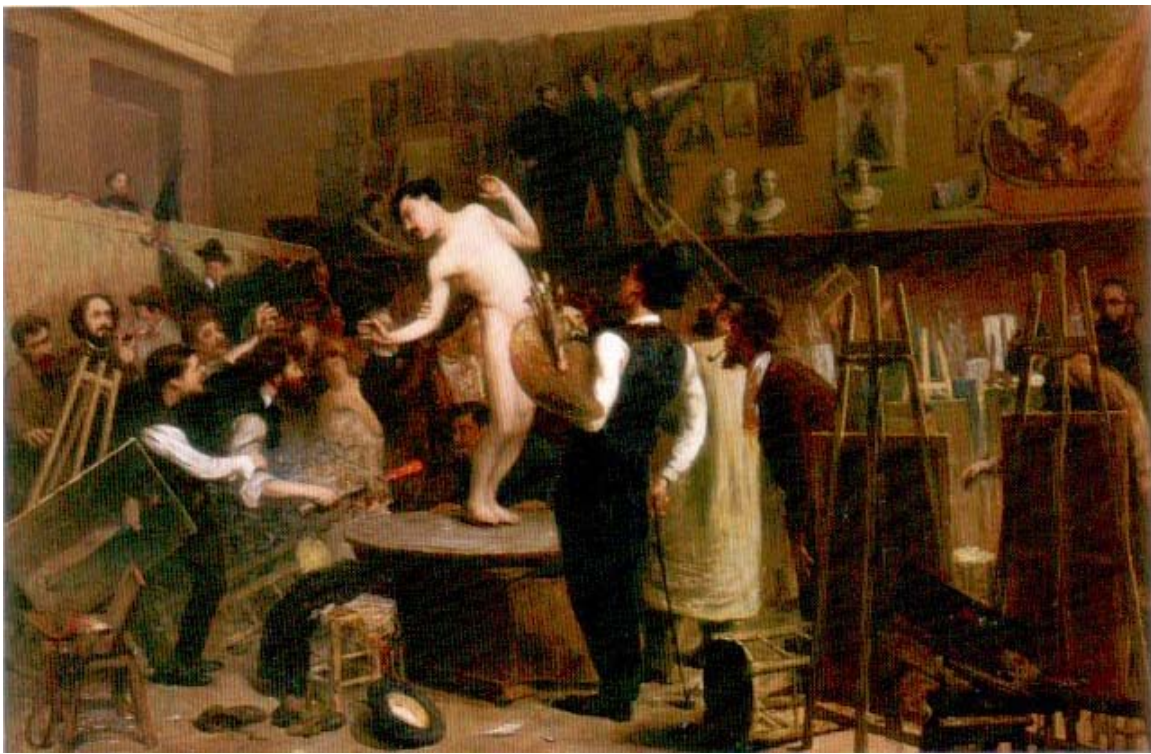
“The nearest semicircle squatted, embracing their drawing-boards; those behind them sat, with the natural circularity of back, upon *tabourets*; another range were standing at easels; while over their shoulders loomed a number of isolated, daring spirits, based upon various pedestals of an impromptu and more or less precarious nature.”

\*Earl Shinn, “Art-Study at the Imperial School in Paris,” *Nation* 9 (April 15, 1869): 293.

This is NOT a description of the sight-size atelier; sight-size method requires very controlled environment; upright easels, stable directional light, standing position of the artist/student (no *tabourets*), plenty of space to back up from the easel.“ ...Space or room must maintain the same setup until the drawing is finished...observing position of the artist as he or she studies the object and the drawing must always be the same”.\*

\* Ackerman, Gerald. *Charles Bague Drawing Course*, ‘ Necessary Conditions for Sight-Size Practice’, p. 319.

Painting of Gérôme’s teaching atelier (bellow) parallels Shinn’s description and shows graphically that the sight-size method was not used there.



Gérôme's atelier by Jean Louis Lefort



Jean-Léon Gérôme drawing a model.

The above photograph is self evident; it clearly shows Gérôme working in a traditional way, not the sight-size.

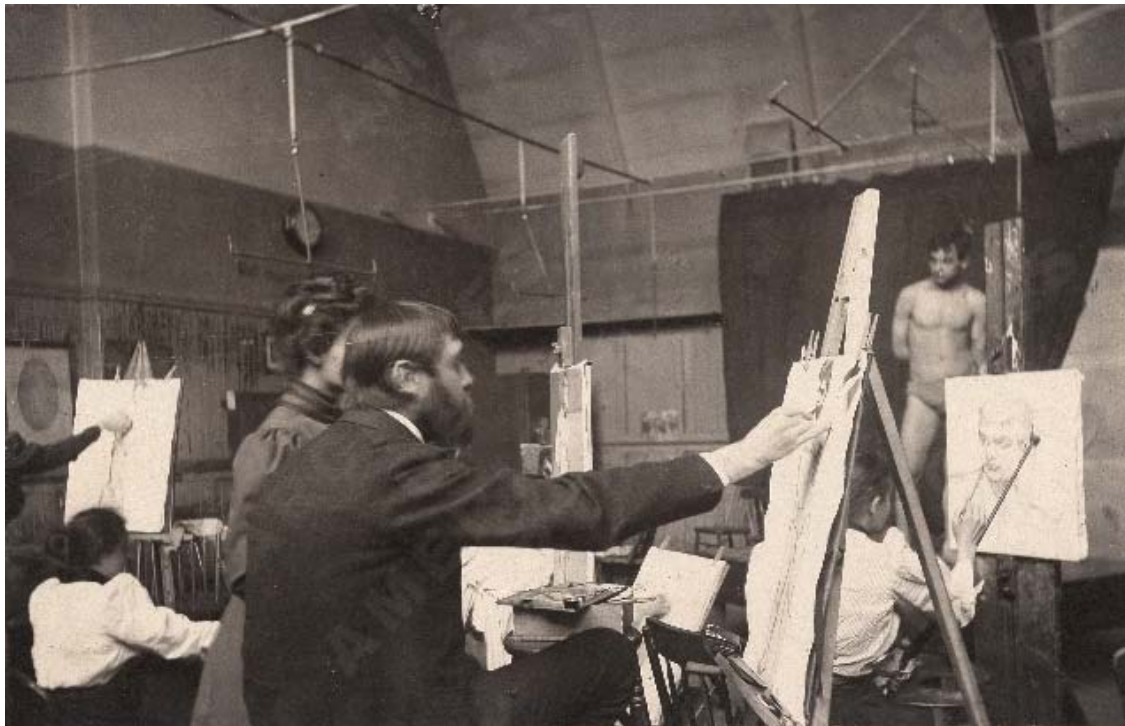
Jean-Léon Gérôme had many students including a big number of Americans; many of them became influential teachers:

“He [D.M Bunker] was one of Gérôme’s many pupils who helped to revise American art institutional practices and to align them with those of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Under their influence the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Eakins), New York’s National Academy of Design (Wilmarth), Art Students League (Cox, Brush, Volk, Weir), and Cooper Union (Low, Eaton, Volk, Weir) and other art schools throughout the United states were transformed.”\*

\* *The Lure of Paris, Nineteenth – Century American Painters and Their Teachers*  
H. Barbara Weinberg. Abbeville Press Publishing.

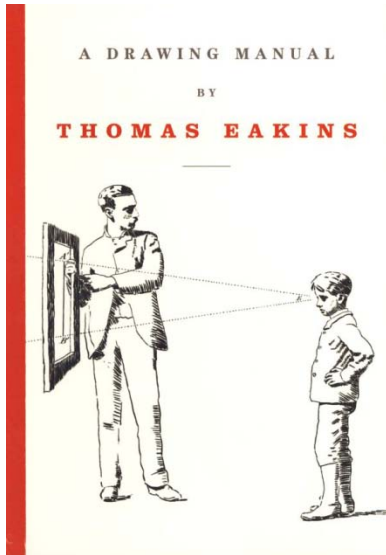
None of Gérôme’s students, French, other European, Canadian, American, or from anywhere else, have ever taught sight-size method.

Kenyon Cox, American artist who studied under both Carolus-Duran and Jean-Léon Gérôme, was teaching at the Art Student League for many years.. A photograph depicting his class shows no signs of sight-size tracing method being taught.



[Kenyon Cox teaching drawing], ca. 1890 / unidentified photographer.

Thomas Eakins, “The favorite student of Jean-Léon Gérôme” who taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, wrote a drawing manual which expresses his philosophy of drawing and emphasizes geometrical method, structure and perspective.



George de Forest Brush, American painter, studied under his friend Jean-Léon Gérôme. He named his son, sculptor Gerome Brush after Jean-Léon Gérôme. Brush also taught in the Art Student League antique drawing (casts) and figure drawing. None of his teaching referred to sight-size.

Frederick Arthur Bridgman was a pupil of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Bridgman would even become known as "the American Gérôme." In the photograph below again one can see no sight-size method has been used.

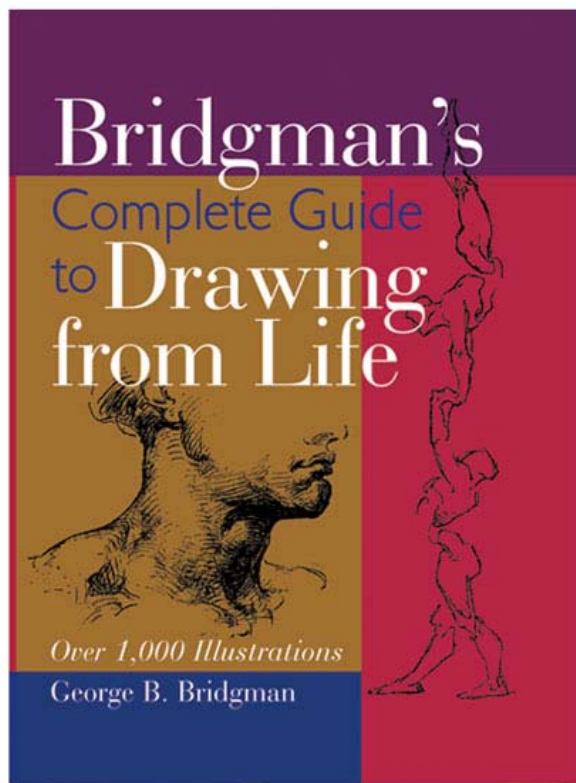




[Frederick Arthur Bridgman in his studio painting], ca. 1885 / unidentified photographer.  
[http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images/item\\_3818.htm](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images/item_3818.htm)

George Brandt Bridgman (another Bridgman), the father of the North American constructive anatomy and one of the most brilliant teachers of constructional drawing, was also a student of Jean-Léon Gérôme. Among many of his students were painters and illustrators such as Norman Rockwell, but also some of the most influential teachers of their own generations: Kimon Nicolaidis, Frank Reilly, Andrew Loomis, and Robert Beverley Hale. None of them claimed any lineage to Gérôme. They did not need to justify anything, and of course, none of them ever taught sight-size.

Bridgman authored many books on drawing, none of which ever hinted to the sight-size method.



In fact, the history of drawing and painting manuals is very long; thousands of books have been written on methodologies of these disciplines over the period of hundreds of years, starting from the Renaissance and continuing to the present day. An amazing number of courses on drawing were written in the nineteenth century alone--just in the United States. According to Michael *Kimmelman*, in his July 19, 2006 article in *The New York Times*, "From 1820 to 1860 more than 145,000 drawing manuals [were] circulated--now souvenirs of our bygone cultural aspirations." However, in my extensive research, I could find only one book on the subject of sight-size by Darren R. Rousar published in 2007.

If there were more books, I think sight-size method apologists would have presented it by now. If this method was traditional, academic, and classical, then we would have evidence to that effect in historical and professional literature; and also in pictorial data showing art classes in academies, ateliers, and other teaching studios of the past. From drawings, paintings, and photographs we see only traditional, comparative measurement-based classes.

In production of painting, artists have been using various mechanical tools including grids, veils, cartouches, tracing paper, photographs, etc. Means by which an artist chooses to execute their art is a personal preference and should not be judged as wrong, or cheating. Learning to draw and paint from life, however, requires mastering various

disciplines, the most fundamental of which is training the eye to see and execute spatial proportions, as Leon Bonnat have said:” Screw up your eyes to see the proportions”. Teaching this discipline by mechanical sight-size tracing is not possible and students who spend years on drawing and painting using the sight-size method will find themselves disabled to draw and paint normally.

In conclusion I would like to say that all efforts in teaching realism are a positive development. The New Renaissance movement is gaining strength on all grounds – spiritually, intellectually and aesthetically. In this cultural war against madness, mindlessness, and aesthetic terrorism of the Dark Ages of art, all ateliers and academies are allies, because all of them are promoting a return to values and beauty. It is my deepest desire to see them grow and develop into the very best schools of Art of all time.

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