

In Defense of Stick Figures: A Manifesto

D. B. Dowd
Professor of Art and American Culture Studies
Faculty Director, D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library
Washington University

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In American art schools and universities, to say nothing of the general population, the time has come to think about drawing in a fresh way—not as a how-to problem, but as a *what-for* question. Who draws, and for what purpose? If we reflect on this for more than a moment, it's clear that we all draw. All human beings make drawings. Mostly we do so to acquire, consolidate or transmit knowledge—of processes, structures, relationships. Here is the way to the airport. An insect has these parts. Hang the pictures in this arrangement, this far apart.

Next time you fly in a plane, look out the window. What do you see? Everywhere, fine lines: roads, town grids, farm sections. These linear conceptions, this geometry, were superimposed by surveyors on a landscape, later enacted in concrete or fence lines. These are drawings on a mass scale, but people don't think of them as such. Nor do they think of the explanatory pictures and diagrams as drawings.

Unfortunately, we have misfiled the significance of drawing because we have seen it, incorrectly, as a professional skill instead of a personal capacity. Drawing has been defined as illusion-making, as volumetric rendering, in the manner of painting. I think that tethering drawing to painting has been a mistake, both culturally and academically.

This essential confusion has stunted our understanding of drawing, and kept it from being seen as a tool for learning above all else. Students have developed needless performance anxiety about largely anachronistic rendering skills; have gained little experience with drawing as a thinking and planning tool, which is how most people use it; and have been exposed to exhausted cultural hierarchies, by now grounded in little more than habit. As both a subject and a practice, drawing must be liberated from the aesthetic cage to which it has been confined.



fig1 Designer uncredited, package design for Shinola Scuff Armor, ca. 1960. Product of Best Foods, Division of Corn Products Co., Indianapolis, Indiana. The two-dimensional plane is activated by form and color; the boundary between “drawing” and “design” is difficult to identify.



fig2 Speculative attribution to Federal Brilliant Co., Federhofer's Bakery neon sign, St. Louis, Missouri. Erected 1957, at the founding of the bakery by Carl and Dorothy Mueller. When William Federhofer bought the business in 1970, the sign was modified to accommodate the dark brown panel and script *Federhofer's*. Photograph by D. B. Dowd

Humans mark things. Archaeologists have excavated bathroom graffiti at Pompeii. American GIs scrawled the emblematic Kilroy all over Europe during World War Two. Taggers spray-paint stylized marks on buildings and boxcars. Evangelical Christians place magnetic *ichthys* symbols on their vehicles. Corporations adorn every product and commercial utterance with their “brands,” echoing the practice of burning ranch marks onto cattle haunches. For individuals and groups alike, this is an old, persistent activity. At root, all such marks are drawings.

What should we call this kind of drawing, so oriented toward the symbolic? Given the ubiquity of the phenomenon, we ought to have language for it. I propose to adopt the existing term *glyph* to do the job. Let’s use *glyph* to capture linear symbolic drawing as means for asserting primary form. Let’s adapt it adjectivally, as *glyphic*.

Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mayan syllabic glyphs are discrete pictorial units. In computer parlance, *glyph* denotes a symbolic form. In typeface design, *glyphs* are extra characters, like ligatures and currency symbols. (€, fi, ¥) Admit the specialized use of the noun *glyph* to name a discrete elemental form—a visual integer. By association we could say that graffiti tags, emblems and logos are *glyphic* in character. Historically grounded in proto-writing, *glyphic* images are fashioned for purposes of primary communication.

Consider *glyph* a critical rather than a technical usage. Writing from a modern perspective, I am particularly focused on the adjectival *glyphic*, to isolate an approach to drawing.

By virtue of its roots in the Greek verb *to carve*, *glyphic* captures an intensity of effort and seriousness of purpose. “Carve” is not always the correct verb, even when used by specialists: *incise*, *engrave*, and *cut* all apply to planar surfaces. But the implication of manual exertion is sufficient to get the point across. If you go to the trouble to scratch it in or dig it out, you must mean it. As a corollary, clarity of intention is a prerequisite: how can you *incise*—how can you be *incisive* about—what you do not know? Which brings us to the urgency of drawing as a human practice.



fig 3 Photographer and designer uncredited, cover design for *Pencil Drawing for Fun*, Fawcett Publications, 1952. No author is cited, though an editor is mentioned. The book appears to have been cobbled together from other titles by Fawcett. Evidence of widespread conventional associations with academic drawing in the 20th century.

All human markings are descendants of primordial drawings in dirt. To find water, go between the third and the fourth hills. I saw a mastodon—it looked like this. To kill it, aim here. The symbolic projection of human mentality began with a finger in the sand, and then a stick in the clay. From that stick came the calligrapher's brush, the pecker's rock, the moundbuilder's clamshell trowel, the tattooist's bone needle. From the very beginning, human thought has been built with lines on surfaces.

The opposite of the glyphic I propose to call *vedutic*, after *veduta*, or view in Italian. The spectacular vista shows up in the history of technology as much or more in the history of art. Increasingly ambitious simulations of optical phenomena mark the industrial era. Chapters of that narrative would include Hudson River and Rocky Mountain School landscapes by people like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran from 1850, sometimes presented in darkened, cinema-like settings; Paul Phillipoteaux's (and others') enormous painted cycloramas, notably *The Battle of Gettysburg* (1883, restored 2005-08) which integrates objects like cannons and fence rails to create a proto-3D effect; Muybridge's zoopraxiscope (1879), the kinoscope (1894) and early cinema; the advent of animated film after 1910; Max Fleischer's rotoscope in 1915. Big screen cinema, IMAX films and virtual reality are today's version.

The vedutic concerns itself with immersion and illusion, dedicated to opticality, devoted to the simulation of immanence. Light, volume, distance, atmosphere: the veduta addresses experience and sensation through artifice.

The glyphic tradition is far more modest, technically speaking. A sixteenth century woodcut and a twentieth century comic strip are constructed according to the same logic. Each is built from a black-and-white key drawing. The woodcut drawing must be manually converted into a Plate, by a woodblock cutter. The comic strip drawing will be photomechanically transferred onto a litho Plate. The two artifacts, separated by nearly 500 years, help to distinguish between the glyphic (associated with drawing) and the graphic (associated with printing). That is, the elemental

drawing must be converted into a reproducible statement, and is likely to be honed and refined in the process. There is more to say about the graphic, an abused word. For now, we can say that the graphic is a the *programmatically restatement* of the glyphic.

As illustrators and designers, we are familiar with these procedures and languages of visual formation, though generally we lack language for them. But as we reform our discussions of drawing as a human practice, it will help to spell out the visual nuts and bolts we have come to take for granted.



fig 4C. Clement, Picture Lotto game card, ca. 1950. Samuel Gabriel and Sons Co. Picture Lotto was a children's memory game that combined aspects of Bingo! and Concentration. The use of pleasant spot illustrations to create the "vocabulary" images (as opposed to photography) was likely intended to contribute to retention and encourage a sense of wonder about the world.

Common Attributes of Glyphic Presentations

- 1) Binary logic of figure and field
- 2) Restriction of means, typically due to budget for production
- 3) Limited color usage in the service of communication, based on control of value and saturation
- 4) Clarity of conception
- 5) A highly plastic, almost folk sense of spatial organization and arrangement
- 6) Drawing styles which rely on calligraphic line, delineation of shape and clear assignments (circle = ball)
- 7) Availability of tested vocabularies, particularly typefaces and lettering styles
- 8) Accumulated craft knowledge, acquired through repetition
- 9) An integrated formal sense, through which pictures, symbols and characters are conceived holistically.

This articulation of the glyphic and graphic is offered as, among other things, the makings of a positive ideology for such drawing practices, devoted to lucid communication. Culturally speaking, the degree to which drawing has been dominated by the practices and ideologies of art must be recognized and interrogated. Other disciplines must be brought to bear on a critical human capacity, now stuck in an aesthetic cage.

We lack an adequate theory of drawing and its relation to reproduction to explain modern practice—to say nothing of the contemporary. The problem—as well as the opportunity—is significant. Numerically speaking, today's art schools and departments are dominated by design and illustration students. The waning relevance of art history (as traditionally defined) in some precincts suggests new potential for overlooked material. But first we require a useable theoretical literature. Until we develop one, our vocabularies will be under-developed, our analyses will be weak, and our students will be outgunned. The established historical discourse of fine art theory will continue to rule the roost.

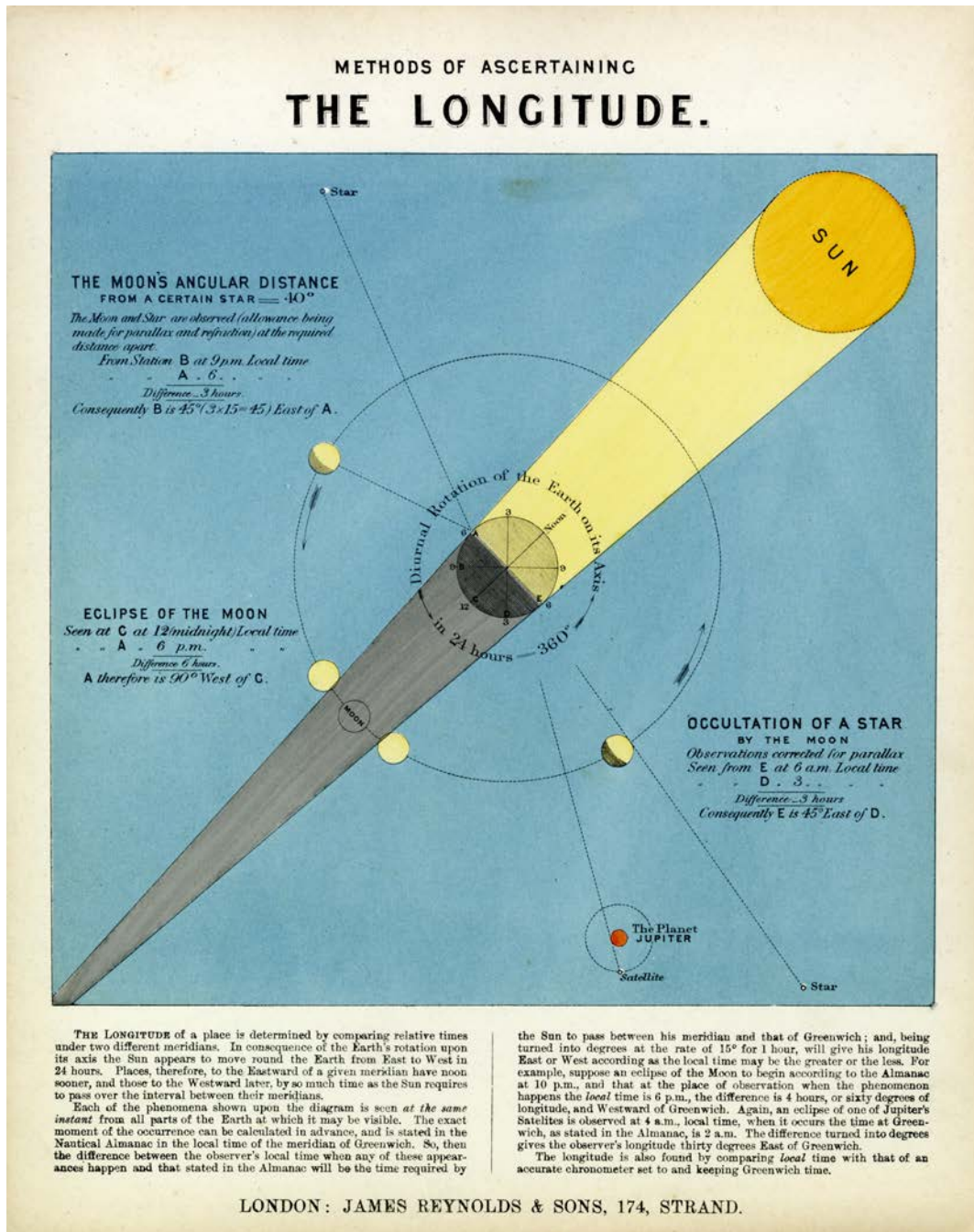


fig5 John Emslie, *Methods of Ascertaining the Latitude*. (London: James Reynolds & Sons, 1846). Encyclopedists have been the most avid commissioners and publishers of informational illustration.