The Benefits of

Sight-Size Drawing

by M. Stephen Doherty

Following a procedure popular in 19th-century art academies, Californian **Tim McGuire** creates drawings exactly the same sizes as his subjects when observed from a measured distance froman easel. He teaches that method to help others gain the objectivity, discipline, and skill that aids in creating representational drawings and paintings.

Students attending contemporary art schools modeled after 19th-century academies often spend their first months making sight-size copies of lithographs from Jean-Leon Gérôme and Charles Bargue's *Cours de Dessin* (see page 64) or drawings of plaster casts. The point of these rigorous exercises is to train students to record exactly what they see without diviation or interpretation. The belief is that when artists have acquired that understanding and skill, they are better prepared to coordinate their imagination and observations in a controlled execution. That is, the hand will be better able to document what their eyes see rather than what their mind desires.

Tim McGuire was amazed by how quickly he developed that ability when he was first introduced to sight-size drawing four years ago at the Florence Academy of Art, in Italy. That experience is so fresh in the young artist's mind that it motivates him to introduce others to the benefits of sight-size drawing. "It was a huge awakening for me," he remembers, "and though I struggled to understand and apply the technique, I quickly realized the benefit of being able to record exactly what I saw while looking at a stationary object."

Cast Study-Lacoon

2005, charcoal and white chalk, 26 x 19. Collection of the artist.

McGuire emphasizes that this method is exacting, to the extent that one must follow specific procedures, work under unchanging conditions, and never deviate from the position established once a drawing is started. "It is not uncommon for students at the Florence Academy of Art, where I studied, to spend a full day setting up their cast; adjusting the position of the cast, easel, paper, plumb line, and lighting," he explains. "It is a real challenge to compose the light so that it is interesting, dramatic, and unfaltering.

"Some people even recommend wearing the same shoes throughout the drawing process so there isn't even a fraction of an inch difference in one's height." McGuire adds. "It goes without saying that the subject one is drawing—a Bargue plate or a plaster cast—must never move or be influenced by a different lighting arrangement. The drawing paper must also be in the same position, and artists should mark the position of their feet on the floor to be sure they are always standing in the exact same position."

McGuire and others who teach the sight-size method carefully prescribe the way subjects are set up to be drawn and the surface on which the drawings are made. "Artists need to be sure they are looking at the center of the subject and the

Step 1

An assortment of drawing supplies, including vine charcoal, sanding board, stumps, kneaded eraser, and white charcoal.

Step 2

Tim McGuire holding a plumb line horizontally while standing a measured distance from the plaster cast and the drawing surface.

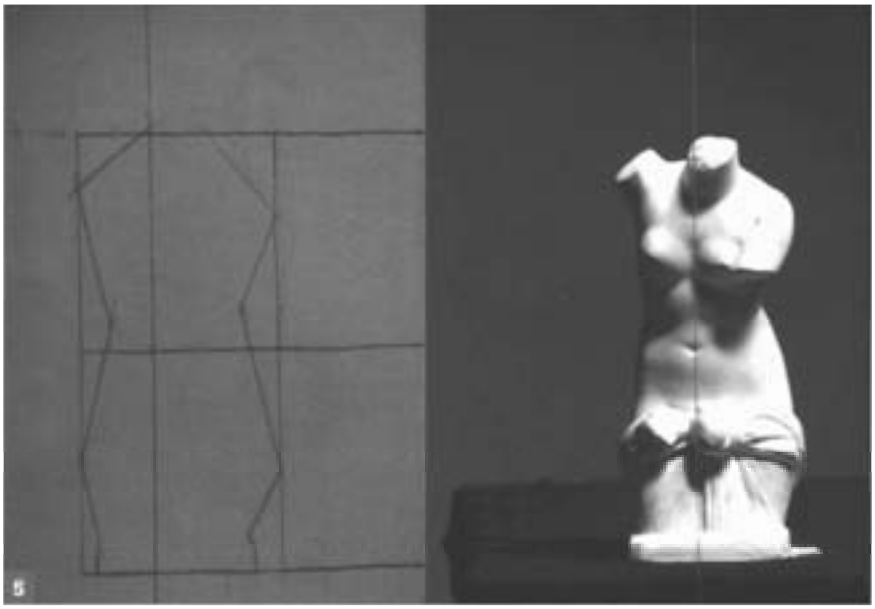
Step 3

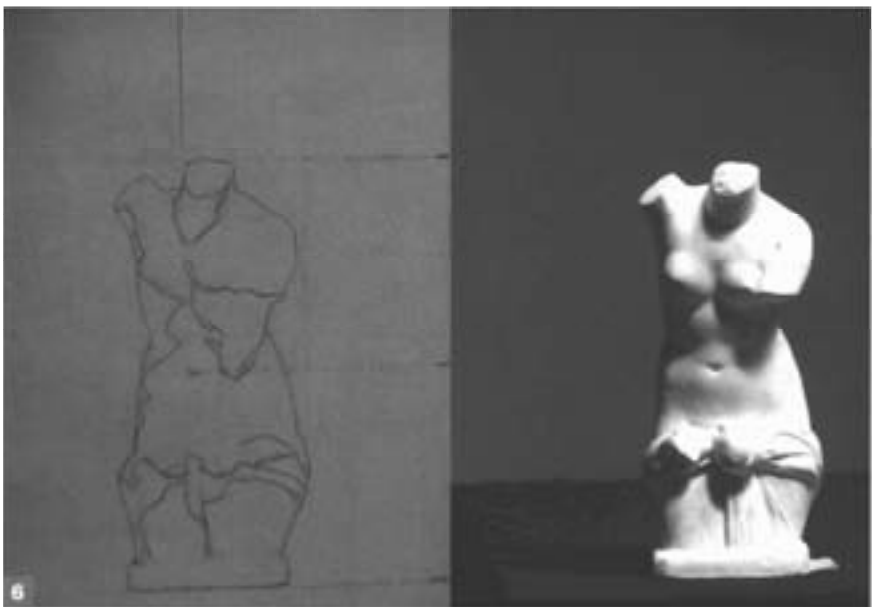
McGuire preparing his drawing surface with three horizontal lines and one vertical line that will help him in drawing the plaster cast exactly the same size as it appears from a measured distance.

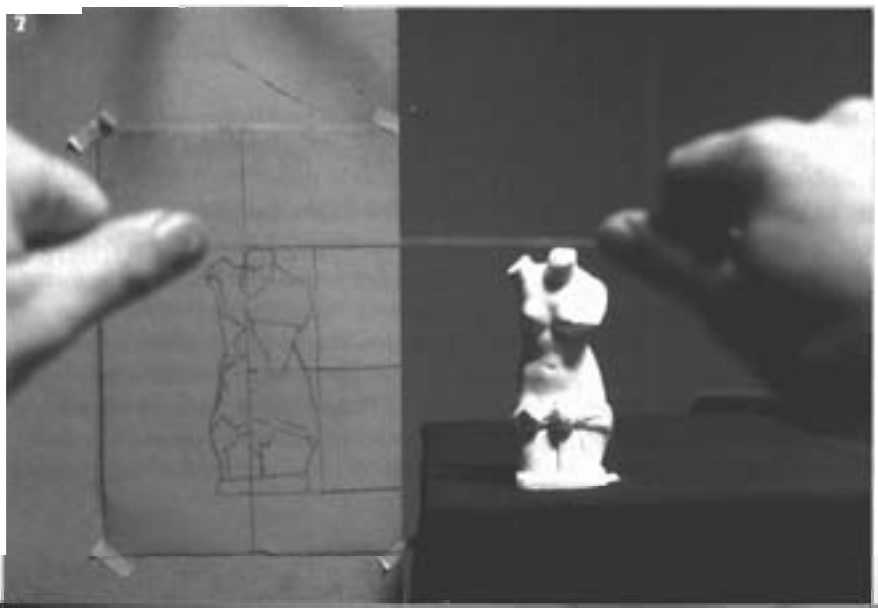
Step 4

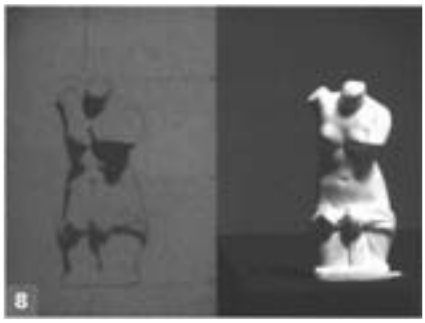
After dropping a plumb line, MGuire uses a rule to draw a clean vertical line.

"Remember, the goal is to draw the specific form, not a generic representation of the subject."









Step 5

With a plumb line dropped in front of McGuire's view of the plaster cast he is able to draw the "potato shape" of the cast's outline.

Step 6

Once the artist is confident in his outline of the cast, he identifies the outline of the shadow shapes.

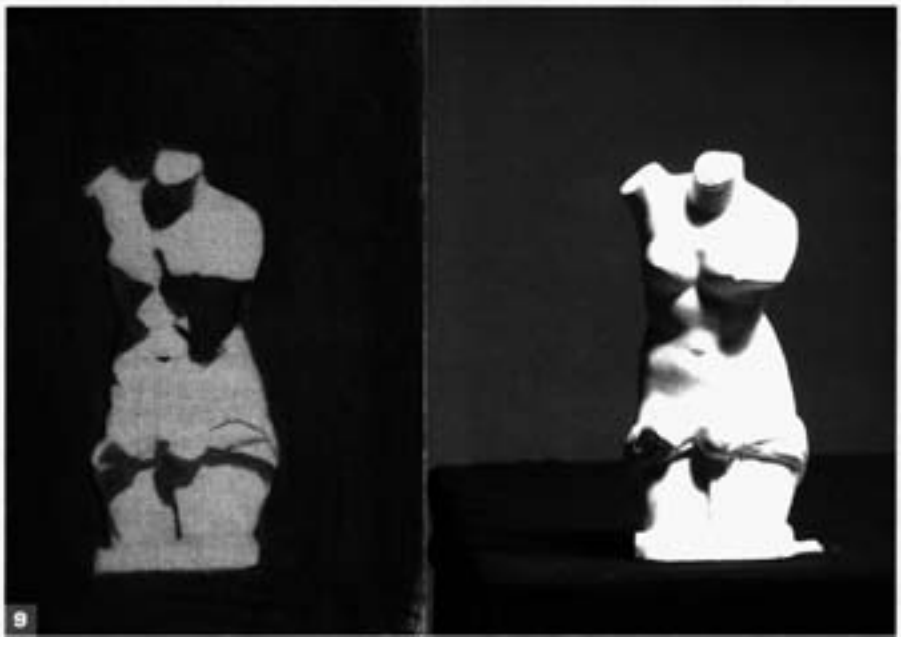
Step 7

Continuing to make all measurements from a distance, the artist uses a line held horizontally to check the alignment of the drawing and the plaster cast.

Step 8

This photograph shows the artist's view of his drawing and the plaster cast from the measured distance away from the eael. Note how McGuire has indicated the dark cast shadows first.

To check the accuracy of his perceptions, McGuire often looks at his drawing through a mirror held above his eyes or to the side of his eyes.



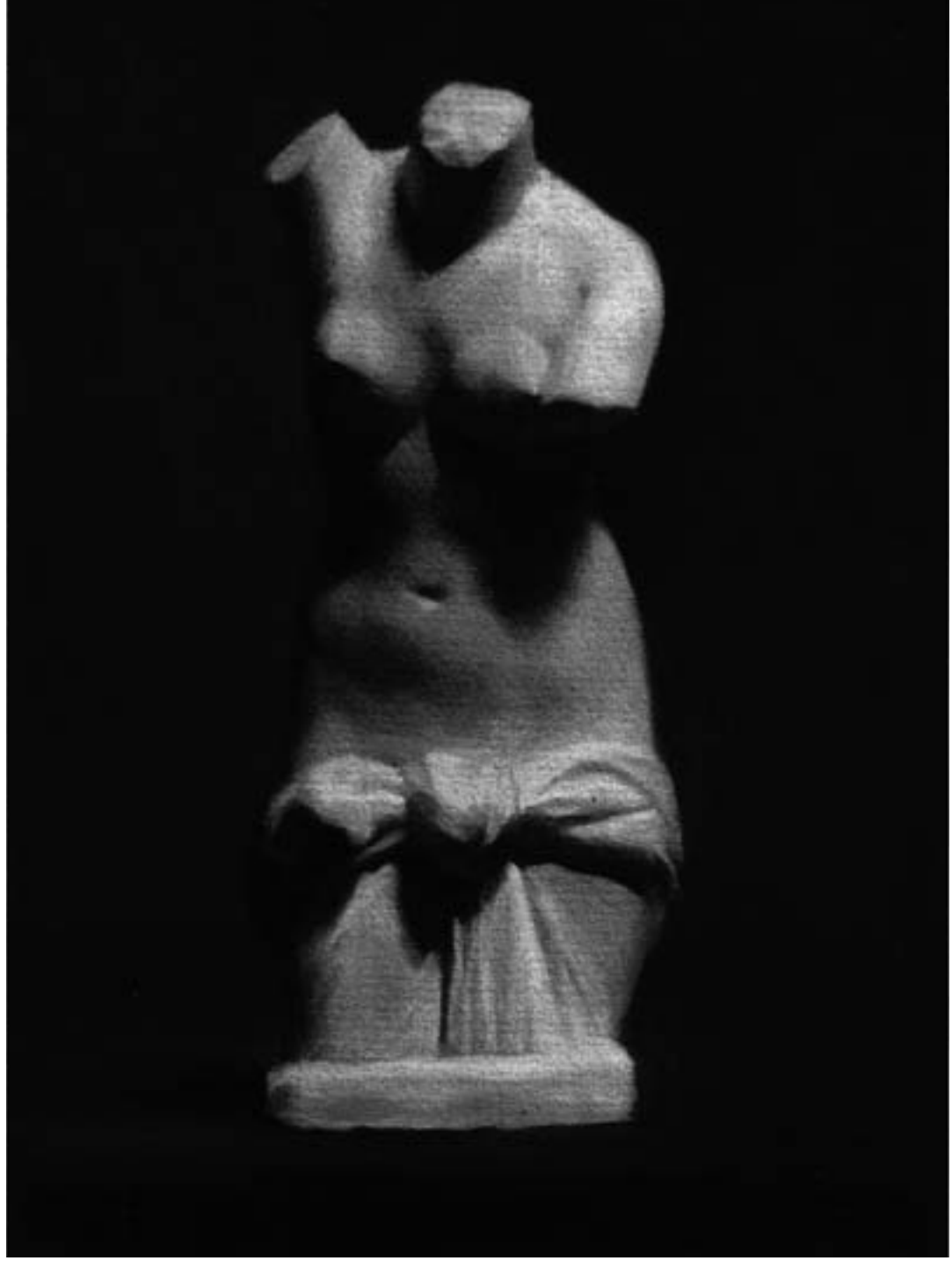
Step 9
Because objects need to be drawn and painted within an environment, McGuire used charcoal to tone the areas of the paper surrounding his rendering of the plaster cast.

Step 10
McGuire begins to indicate the highlights on the plaster cast using white charcoal.

Step 11
A comparison of the finished charcoal drawing and the actual plaster cast.

center of the paper when they stand erect at a measured distance away from the easel," he explains. "All of the observations are made from that distance, not from the view available when one is at the easel, because there can only be one point of observation that guides the artist in making the drawing. Artists stand at that point marked on the floor, calculate measurements by using a plumb line held either vertically or horizontally, and then walk up to the drawing paper to indicate precise marks with graphite (for drawings 11"x 9" or smaller) or charcoal (for larger drawings). The accuracy of those marks is determined by stepping back again to the spot on the floor, not by looking at the subject while positioned beside the easel.

"Beginning students are advised to make copies of the Bargue plates because most of those reveal both the outline of the cast drawing on one side of the lithograph and a shaded drawing on the other half," McGuire continues. "That makes it easier to determine the outline of the forms and the simplified shadows. Bargue's drawings are composed of only a few shadow shapes rather than the multiple shadow variations one can see with the human eye. After making copies of several Bargue plates from the simplest to the most complex, the student is ready to move on to drawing an actual plaster cast."



THE COMPLETED WORK:
Cast Study, Venus
2005, charcoal and white chalk, 19 x 13. Collection of the artist.

"I quickly realized the benefit of being able to record exactly what I saw while looking at a stationary object."

Plaster casts are often placed inside a three-sided box painted black or warm gray, and they are angled toward either a north-facing window or an incandescent light so that the illumination on the cast is constant throughout the drawing process. A plumb line is often dropped in front of the artist's view of the cast to help establish at least three clear points of reference, typically edges of shadows or anatomical features. The vertical alignment of these features is essential in capturing the correct gesture. Also, from the plumb line one can easily take width measurements. "

It is imperative that the drawing paper be taped to a rigid board and placed in a perfectly upright position so the drawing surface is perpendicular to the line of the artist's visior The board should be secured in the easel as close to the Bargue plate or the box in which the plaster cast has been placed, ensuring the paper and the subject line up next to each other while the artist is judging measurements.