Drawing Faces:
By Šárka Darton MFA

When drawing a portrait, always think of the head as a whole.
Firstly give your attention to the overall shape and proportions.
Observe relationships such as:
a) Distance between the eyes
b) Length of the nose
c) Distance between the end of the nose and the top lip
d) Observe where the ears sit in relation to all the other features

When all these are in an approximate place, you may like to compare angles between corners of the mouth and the outer ends of the eyebrows for instance, but most of all be mindful of what you see and be prepared to be surprised.
It is a common assumption to think that the actual face occupies a much larger area than it truly does.
In a case of an adult face in an up right view, the eye level would typically signal half way of the overall shape.
Please see diagrams below:
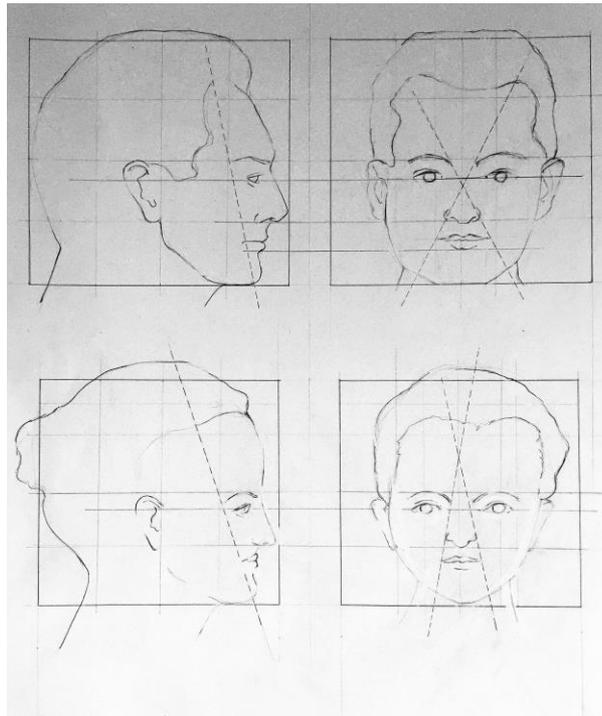
Šárka Darton MFA

A hand drawn diagram of an adult male and female facial proportions.
Outlining the relationships between individual facial features and overall shape

Most of the students would have no difficulty in portraying individual facial features, but the trick is to be able to incorporate these in the overall shape.

Even the most beautifully drawn eye or lips for instance, would look completely wrong if drawn out of proportions or in the incorrect area.

Please see photographic examples below to help you envisaged the changes in shapes and relationships according to different head movements.
Particularly when drawing from photographs, please remember that the head is a sphere. Drawing several elliptical guide lines in your understudy will assist you in placing individual features more accurately and will make your drawing appear more three dimensional.
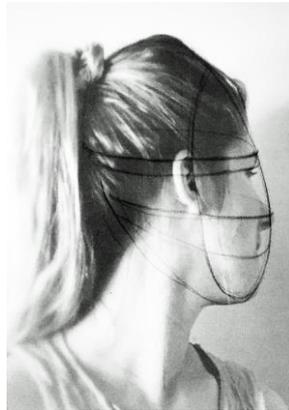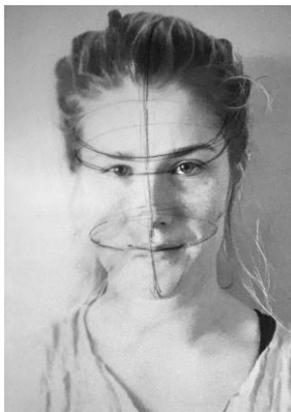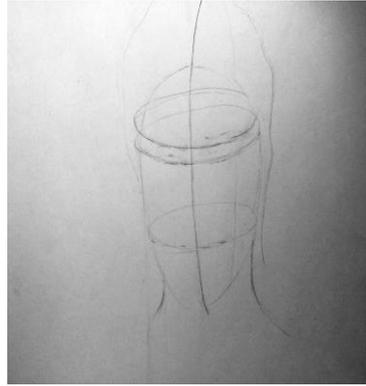

Please pay also attention to slight differences in the male and female over all facial structures.

Thank you to my models, Izzy and Will for posing for these photographs.
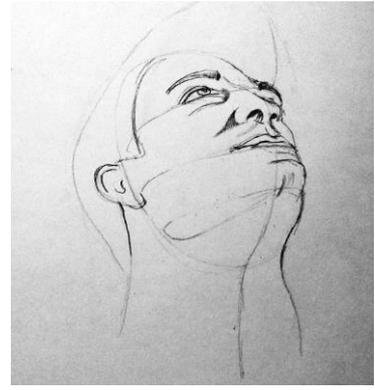
Drawing a portrait
Front view

Front portrait may appear to be the easiest to draw, but please don't feel complacent. Carefully observe the overall proportions and all the relationships as described above. Notice that, also the general drawing strategies would always apply, all faces differ and no ones face is completely symmetrical.

'Izzy'_Pencil on paper_Šárka Darton_2020

Always look at the face as a whole. When all the individual features are in the right place, then you can indulge in shading and drawing all the details.

Drawing a head in three quarter view

Depicting a three quarter view portrait might appeared daunting at first. However, with following the strategies described above, drawing this pose will become easy, rewording and fun.

'Will'_Pencil on paper_Šárka Darton_2020

Be honest and draw what you see. Please set aside any preconceptions of what you think the individual features look like. In this foreshorten view the eyes, nose and lips appear very differently to what we might expect. Allowing a significant time for looking and seeing, prior to your sketching, will certainly help you to produce a more accurate depiction.

A Note on shading

When all the elements are in good proportions and placed accurately in their respective areas, then we can indulge in shading.
Yet again, it is very important to view the face as a whole.

Firstly look for all the mid tones. When these are established, you can add intensity in darker areas and use an eraser to elevate the area where most of the light falls.

Traditionally, in figurative drawing, the light would fall from the top left. (Please see examples above.)

Finally, be sensitive and try not to overwork your drawing.
As in any language, what remains unsaid; i.e. the lines, which remain undrawn, are as important as these that are.