Concerning the Sight-size Method

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The sight-size method is a popular and commonly used method of teaching students how to draw and paint realistically from life. I was myself trained to use the sight-size method and subsequently taught it to students in the academy where I received my training, as well as in my own studio and academy. My experience with the sight-size method spans more than a decade, which has given me the opportunity to closely observe and consider both its positive and negative effects upon students. This long experience has led me to gradually change the once high opinion I had of the method, and I now consider it to be quite negative in nearly every respect. I expect this opinion will shock and upset many who are familiar with the sight-size method, and yet, I believe that for an equal or even greater number, its expression will seem long overdue.

What Sight-size Is

One can find detailed explanations of the sight-size method and how to execute it correctly from various sources, including the Internet, but perhaps the best explanation is given by Peter Bougie within the book on Charles Bargue by Gerald M. Ackerman.¹

Simply stated, the sight-size method positions the model (subject matter) and the artist’s drawing board next to each other so that they can be viewed side-by-side, while the artist stands at a specific distance from them. It is extremely important that the position of the model and the artist’s drawing board (or canvas) always remain exactly the same, as well as the position from which the artist observes them. Therefore, those positions are usually carefully marked using tape or chalk. This exactness is so important, that even the shoes of the artist must be consistent because a difference in the height of the heel can throw off the accuracy of the measuring process. From the artist’s set position, or vantage point, the model and the drawing of the model appear exactly the same size (hence, “sight-size”). This arrangement allows the artist to easily compare the model with his own drawing and make corrections. The artist creates a sight-size drawing by taking numerous precise measurements of the model from his set position - using tools such as a plumb line, pencil shaft and mirror - and then transferring those measurements to the drawing board. By continually taking and refining measurements, the artist can create a strikingly accurate copy of the subject as it appears from the artist’s set position.

The following images illustrate the sight-size method (note that whatever distance the subject is from the paper or canvas, the artwork and the subject appear exactly the same size):

¹ Charles Bargue, with the collaboration of Jean-Léon Gérôme: Drawing Course. By Gerald M. Ackerman, Published by ACR Edition Internationale. See, Appendix 2: The Sight-Size Technique. Interestingly, although Bargue’s beautiful plates reproduced in this book are used extensively by most schools that teach the sight-size method, the plates show that they were originally intended for use with a method other than sight-size, based on the blocked in drawings that accompany many of the finished drawings. Bargue’s use of slanting lines - even curved lines - to indicate important relationships within the subject are not in harmony with the rigid horizontal/vertical grid approach of the sight-size method.
Why Sight-size Is Not Traditional

Most schools, academies and private ateliers that teach the sight-size method give it credibility by suggesting that it is a traditional method of instruction with a history that stretches back to the renaissance. In fact, this is not the case. The sight-size method is distinctly different from any traditional methods of instruction used prior to the 20th-century. This, in itself, does not speak for or against the method. The sight-size method should be judged on its own merits as a means of instructing students, whether or not it is traditional and supported by a long history. Unfortunately, this is rarely done and instead the method is faithfully accepted, in part, based on the claims of its historical use.

The short essay, “Sight-size, an Historical Overview,” by Nicholas Beer, is often referred to in support of the theory that the sight-size method has deep historical roots, even though the essay does not provide any definitive evidence to that end. The essay suggests that the sight-size method has been in use for centuries by citing some examples of past artists who were recorded as having placed their canvases next to their models and then stepping back to compare the results. However, merely setting-up the canvas next to the model, even side-by-side, does not constitute working sight-size unless it also involves taking accurate measurements from a fixed viewing position using tools other than the naked eye, and carefully transferring those measurements to the canvas in order to create an image that is exactly the same size as the subject – and it is precisely these criteria that are consistently missing from any historical references. Painters who placed their canvases next to the model were simply taking advantage of the obvious benefit of being able to see and compare their work next to their subject. Some historical references do hint at similarities, but all fall far short of describing the sight-size method with its inherent emphasis on the mechanical pursuit of precise technical accuracy. Mr. Beer admits as much in his conclusion when he states, “These accounts indicate that sight-size, or an earlier version of the technique, was used by many of the finest portrait painters throughout a period that spanned some four hundred years.” It is clear from the examples in his essay that it was not sight-size at all, but rather something else employed by these painters - what he optimistically calls “an earlier version of the technique”- in circumstances that were, at best, simply reminiscent of the sight-size method.

The art historian, Gerald Ackerman, can only trace the sight-size method as far back as William McGregor Paxton (1869 - 1941) who taught the method to his student, R. H. Ives Gammell (1893 - 1981) who in turn taught the method to his students who disseminated it from there - all of which happened in the twentieth century. It is uncertain where Paxton learned the method, or even if he did, because he may very well have invented it. His teacher,

2 Charles Bargue, with the collaboration of Jean-Léon Gérôme: Drawing Course. By Gerald M. Ackerman, Published by ACR Edition Internationale. See note 82.
Jean-Léon Gérôme, did not teach using the sight-size method or I am sure Mr. Ackerman, probably the world’s leading expert on Gérôme, would have noted it.

The sight-size method demands a very specific working environment and those conditions are easily recognizable. The fact that one cannot find descriptions or images of working painters, draughtsmen, students or apprentices prior to the last quarter of the 20th century using the sight-size method speaks volumes against its historical use. Simply look at any images of renaissance studios, 17th, 18th or 19th century ateliers, schools and academies and nowhere is there any evidence of the sight-size method. I have included several typical examples of such images below.

Here are several typical historical images of students studying drawing and painting. Note that there is no use of the sight-size method:

Michael Sweert’s drawing class, 1656-58  Drawing academy ca.1725

London Art Academy, 1770  Drawing and painting atelier 18th-century

David’s atelier, 1804  Academy of Fine Arts, 1826
The question is raised: if not sight-size, what method were these painters and students using? Unfortunately, even if historical images can show us that the sight-size method was not in use, they cannot tell us precisely what drawing method is being depicted. However, there is one familiar method that is compatible with those historical images, namely, the comparative method of measurement. What is commonly known as the comparative method broadly encompasses any method of drawing that involves making measurements primarily using the naked eye, sometimes aided by a pencil, brush or plumb line, and comparing and contrasting these to some other reference or measurement within the subject. This comparison and contrast helps the artist determine correct proportions and geometric relationships. Although different schools and masters throughout history certainly had their own particular style of teaching, their methods were still rooted in the principle of comparative measurement. One might say they were teaching the same language, but each with his own accent. The comparative method will be discussed a bit more, later.

The Positive Aspects of Sight-size

Many would suggest that the accurate images the sight-size method produces are its strongest positive feature, although others would argue this point (see, Limitations). Two less questionable positive aspects of the sight-size method are that it is easy to teach and learn. As mentioned above, the sight-size method is based on the careful and precise positioning of the model, artist and artwork in order to establish a fixed vantage point from which to view the subject and the artwork together. This fixed vantage point allows the instructor to see the model and the work-in-progress exactly as the student sees them, and therefore make objective judgments. Any drawing mistakes the instructor sees can be verified and corrected by the student simply by re-measuring. There is no subjective analysis involved, only
objective measuring. This mechanical objectivity makes it possible for most students to grasp and learn the sight-size method with minimal trouble and also for anyone with a firm grasp of the method to teach the method to someone else. Finally, the sight-size method has shown itself to be an effective means of teaching students how to discipline, or sharpen, their eyes to accurately perceive abstract shapes and relationships and make accurate visual comparisons and measurements.

The Limitations of the Sight-size method

In examining the negative aspects of the sight-size method, it will be useful to sometimes contrast it with the comparative method of drawing.

The sight-size method is limiting, by definition, because a sight-size drawing can only be exactly the same size as the subject as seen from a set position (“sight-size”). To create a sight-size drawing or painting of a subject much larger than life-size would involve having your easel far behind your subject and, conversely, to create a small sight-size drawing your easel would have to be a great distance in front of your subject. Both, though possible, are so impractical as to be pointless, and if attempted, would require an enormous amount of studio space. There are, of course, ways of enlarging and reducing drawings, but these involve a further mechanical effort. By contrast, the comparative method allows the artist to choose whatever size of drawing he or she desires, from any position and right from the start.

The sight-size method requires that the model and drawing board be placed so that they can be viewed side-by-side at a specific given distance. In the comparative method, the drawing board can be held in the artist’s hands, flat on the artist’s lap, or nearly any other conceivable angle in relation to the model and the distance from the model is never an issue (see the historical images above). Also, sight-size is only effective from at-or-near eye-level, whereas, the comparative method also allows you to draw a subject that is high above or below you, and even from your imagination.

Students who only learn the sight-size method are at a great practical disadvantage if they desire to work creatively and imaginatively because they are only familiar with drawing and painting what they can see and measure in front of them, next to their canvas. In other words, they are very dependent upon their model and the ideal conditions necessary in which to work sight-size. In this way, they are little more than copyists. All aesthetic considerations are almost exclusively dependent on the actual appearance of the subject matter. This may be quite satisfying for many people and may serve a valuable purpose in the early stages of a students training, but others have recognized in this a great fault and weakness. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the renowned painter and first president of London's Royal Academy, wrote in 1770 that, “The first endeavours of a young painter, ... must be employed in the attainment of mechanical dexterity, and confined to the mere imitation of the object before him,” but he went on to add “... students who, having passed through the initiatory exercises, are more advanced in the art, ... must now be told that a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator.”

The greatly respected artist and teacher Harold Speed flatly states in his book, The Practice and Science of Drawing, which has long been a standard reference book for all students of traditional art, “Drawing, then, to be worthy of the name, must be more than what is called accurate.” Speed distinguishes between what he terms “scientific accuracy” and “artistic accuracy.” He states, “It is the difference between scientific accuracy and artistic accuracy that puzzles so many people. Science demands that phenomena be observed with the unemotional accuracy of a weighing machine, while artistic accuracy demands that things

3 Discourses on Art, Discourse III
be observed by a sentient individual recording the sensations produced in him by the phenomena of life. sight-size does not allow for the artist to respond emotionally to the model in even the slightest degree, while the far less restrictive comparative method of drawing does. The sight-size method is, to borrow Harold Speed’s words, as unemotionally accurate as a weighing machine.

One might begin to wonder why the sight-size method is so popular and widely used considering its limitations. It is used, I believe, simply because the results are satisfying to so many, and because it is so easy to teach, as described above. By contrast, teachers of the comparative method work outside a clearly defined mechanical process and must rely more on knowledge and experience when training their students. Students of the comparative method are sometimes slower to reach the point of consistently accurate results because they are also working outside the safe and enclosed parameters of the mechanical, sight-size process. For example, finding correct proportions, using the sight-size method, happens automatically. If the student using sight-size has measured and transferred points correctly, the drawing will be accurate in its proportions without the student even having thought about it. However, students drawing comparatively must find correct proportions by making numerous comparisons and corrections until the correct proportions are arrived at. What students of the comparative method ultimately gain by working this way, in addition to the ability to draw and paint accurately, is the ability to work independently and naturally. That is in itself of immeasurable value to an artist.

All students, without exception, enter school with an almost desperate desire to improve their drawing skills. It is no surprise, then, that they are usually thrilled with the results of their sight-size efforts. Their drawings improve rapidly as they get more comfortable with the method and soon they may be consistently producing accurate, lifelike images. Their great satisfaction with this superficial accuracy can delay, sometimes forever, the realization that the mechanical method used to obtain those results is far more craft than art. Students of the sight-size method also risk forming the idea that a high degree of accuracy is a measure of success, or far worse, a measure of quality. Students need to understand and be constantly reminded that technical accuracy and the ability to precisely copy a subject is not art, but that those skills can be of great service to them on their path towards creating it.

It is important for everyone to appreciate that students and teachers using the comparative method are as concerned about accurate, faithful representation as those using the sight-size method, and that the results of the comparative method can be equally accurate, in the technical sense, as results obtained using the sight-size method. It is only the path taken to achieve those results that differs. The comparative road may be less clearly defined and more challenging, but it ultimately gives students greater options and flexibility to create their art. The ability to draw accurately is unquestionably important and should be mastered as a tool of expression, but not to the extent that one excludes or neglects artistic (aesthetic) accuracy. Frederic Lord Leighton, the great 19th-century painter and president of London’s Royal Academy for 18 years, beautifully expressed this in his first lecture to the academy. Leighton warned students of the danger of too much attention to technical accuracy in saying: “an excessive absorption of the attention in the most superficial aspect of things tends to the over-development of the simply imitative faculty, which is the lowest gift of the artist, at the cost of his aesthetic faculty and of his imagination, which are the noblest, and tends therefore also to triviality and loss of that which gives to Art its high place amongst the elements of civilization.”

Conclusion

Since students using other methods, such as the comparative method, can obtain results that match or surpass the results obtained using the sight-size method, I see no reason to
recommend the sight-size method. The limitations of the sight-size method and risks to the student’s development as a creative artist are simply too great. It is worth noting that the greatest and most admired examples of realistic art, which hang in museums across the world, were created by people who had no knowledge of the sight-size method. They did not need it and surely we do not either. However, I am not a purist in that sense. I believe that there are many effective ways to teach students to draw and paint realistically, and that some of those methods are being developed today and others are yet to come. Still, one must carefully consider the positive and negative aspects of each and, in doing so, the sight-size method falls short. If sight-size is ever going to be taught at all, it should be taught in conjunction with the comparative method, in order to temper technical, mechanical accuracy with sensitive, thoughtful, artistic accuracy. Sight-size may be suitable for training beginners to see and render objects accurately, but students must soon be weaned from the method or they risk becoming far too reliant upon it and consequently lose confidence in their ability to work outside of its strict confines. In fact, because it is such an un-natural way to draw, many students of the sight-size method eventually find themselves drifting toward the more instinctive comparative method on their own, which can be a difficult and confusing process. How much better it would be if, from the beginning, these students could receive proper training in the comparative method by knowledgeable and experienced instructors or, at the very least, be helped to make the transition from sight-size to the comparative method at a suitable point in their training. The truth is, many teachers of the sight-size method do not even use the method themselves in their personal work - most not at all - and they often come up with elaborate explanations to justify that fact. It would be more honest if they simply accepted their abandonment of the method as evidence that the sight-size method is not, ultimately, a natural, practical, or very satisfying way to draw or paint.

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