

The Lazy Man's Approach to Sight Size

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For today's post I'm going to explain the set up for the final version of the iron painting. It's a bit convoluted, but hopefully I'll be able to get it across with the help of a view photos. It seems my still life set ups have become increasingly complicated as I've tried to solve a series of problems and to evolve a repeatable working process.

Perhaps the biggest change from the way I used to work is that for this one I'm working under artificial light. 'Artificial.' The very word seems perjorative. It has to be said, I consider artificial light to be very much second best. As long as the lights are good quality and a few basic requirements are met I don't think that there's anything intrinsically wrong with it, I just prefer natural, diffused daylight for it's gentleness and subtleties. The problem I have is my window - it's west-north-west facing which means that I get direct sunlight through it at this time of year in the afternoon. That shortens my working day too much, whereas the lamps let me work for as long as I can keep it up.

I'm using Solux bulbs for my lights. I don't want to go into the various pros and cons of different types of lights here. It's a contentious issue among painters, and all the discussions I've seen of it on forums owe much more to brand loyalty than they do to facts. Suffice to say that a good working light should have a reasonable CRI and a fairly cool temperature. There's lots of info about this stuff on the web. These Solux bulbs I'm using have a CRI in the high 90s and a temperature of 4700k. Daylight is, apparently, about 6500k so they're a little on the warm side, but I haven't found it to be a problem.

The basic requirement is to have a good light on the subject, and a good working light on the easel, without the easel light affecting the lighting on the subject. That's where the difficulties can start. For the light on the set up, I'm using two lamps together behind a home-made diffuser. Without the diffuser, the shadows are very hard edged and unnatural-looking. After a lot of trial and error, I've settled on a diffuser made from baking paper in a card frame. For the light on the easel, I'm using a third bulb of the same type. Since I'm working sight size and the easel is quite close to the subject, I've had to find a way to keep the easel light from shining on the set up. My advice is always to have plenty of card and tape handy in the studio, it's useful for a thousand things from controlling shadow patterns to making diffusers. I've made a simple screen which is fixed perpendicular to the easel and effectively screens off the easel light from the subject. Here's the first picture, showing the whole set up:



Top left is the diffuser, fixed to an old coat hanger. The iron in its shadow box is in the background there, and the panel I'll be painting on and the colour study from the [last post](#) is on the easel on the right. I hope that's clear enough. This photo is taken pretty much from my working position, against the back wall. This room is really much too small, I'm forever bumping into things.



This picture shows the little screen attached to an MDF drawing board on the easel to screen off the easel light from the set up. I've stuck some black paper on it so I don't get coloured reflected light on the panel. That would be bad.

What you might also notice from these pics is that the easel is set at chair height. I've never heard of anyone sight-sizing from a chair before. No doubt they'd throw me out of those posh European ateliers for it. But why not? As long as you get your head back into the same viewing point every time you take a measurement, I can't see it mattering if you sight sized standing on your head. You might get a bit dizzy though which would make the measuring harder.

There's one advantage to sight-sizing from a chair. If your chair is on wheels, like mine is, it takes much less effort to scoot forwards and backwards to and from the easel and avoids all that tiresome walking. Sight size for the lazy man. It does make it a bit more difficult getting back into the same place every time though, which is a must for sight size work.

So that's the last thing I want to explain about the set up. There's an old print which I think is by Durer, of an artist-type guy using a grid for drawing to help him with the perspective (presumably) and the laying in of a drawing. Here it is:

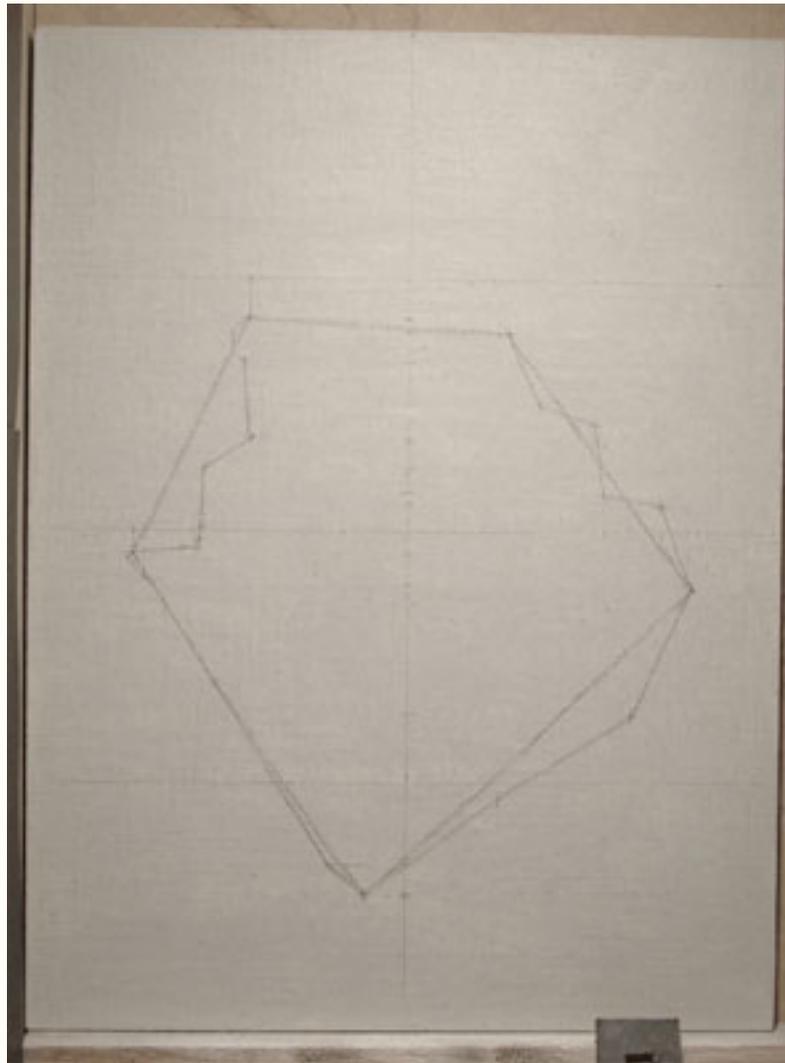


Cool! Notice how he has his eye lined up with the point of that stick thing, to make sure he gets back into the same position every time. If he didn't, the relationship of the grid to the subject would be different and it would throw the drawing out. Well, sight size is a lot like drawing with a grid (I do both) but you create a kind of conceptual grid with the measuring thread. The way I reposition my head is not that different to this guy.



Firstly, I've got the usual central plumb line that the sight size method uses. You can see it coming down the the centre of the cloth here. What didn't come out in this pic is the second plumb line, so I've drawn it in in orange. The photo is not exactly from my drawing viewpoint, so they don't line up exactly, but each of these plumb lines lines up vertically with a particular point on the subject. As long as I get them lining up to those points from my view point each time, I should be about the same distance from the easel and the subject.

What this doesn't give me is the vertical position of my eye. To get that, I've put a bit of tape (see, I told you it was useful for all kinds of things) on the screen attached to the easel, marked by the orange circle in this pic. This bit of tape has to line up exactly with the bottom of the shelf the iron is sitting on. Again, it doesn't in the pic so you'll just have to imagine it. With those three checks, I reckon I should have my head in the same place every time I go back from the easel to my viewing point to judge. Proper sight size, even if I am sitting down.



Yet again, I'd planned to cover more than I've got time to do today. I've been preparing a post on the pros and cons of sight size as I see them which was going to be included here, but I've gone on quite long enough today I think and I need to get back to the easel. The rub-in awaits.