

THE BARGUE METHOD:

Learning to Draw the Traditional Way

The Charles Bague Drawing Course, a curriculum used to train many of the 19th century's greatest artists, is undergoing a revival at schools such as the Academy of Realist Art. Here's a guide to how you can use this method to help build your skills of perception and realistic drawing.

BY FERNANDO FREITAS

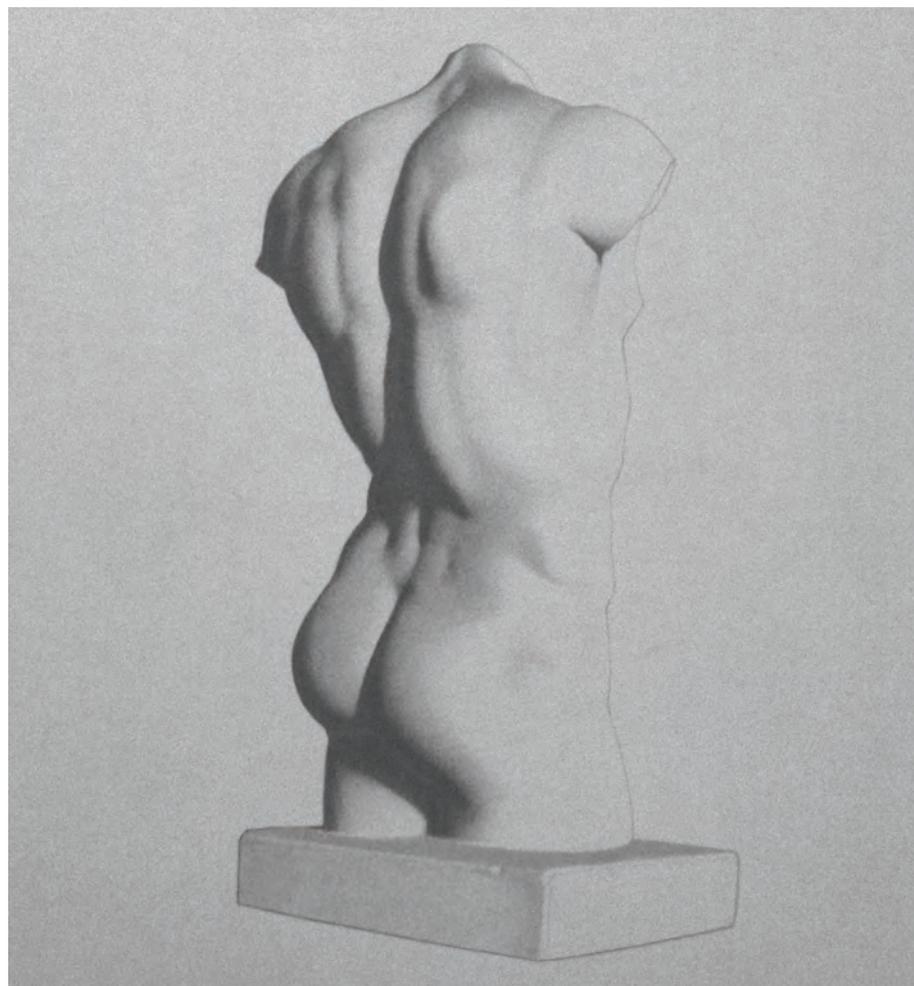
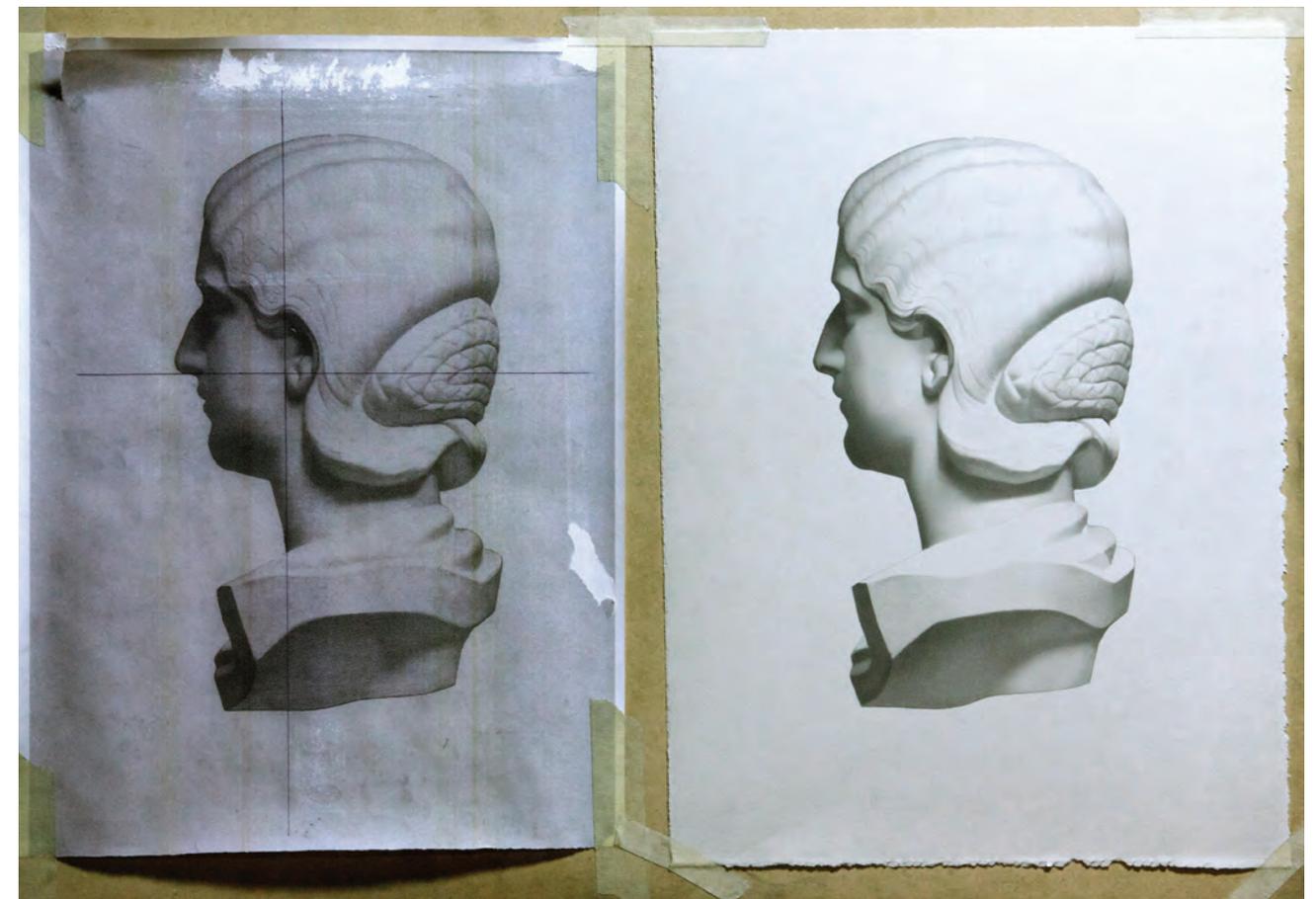


Illustration 1

Three-Quarter Torso, by Lenny Dass. Private collection.
This subject is lit by a strong light.



ABOVE

Illustration 3

Julia Mamea (in progress), by Jay Cudal.
Bague drawing using a one-to-one ratio.

BELOW

Illustration 2

The Belvedere Torso, by Lenny Dass. Private collection.
This subject is lit by a softer light than the subject in illustration 1.



There was a time when drawing was an essential part of all students' curriculum, much the same as math or penmanship. Unfortunately, the technical aspects of accurate drawing have been losing ground for some time, and today the teaching of drawing basics is often seen as an arduous and unnecessary process. However, recent years have seen an extraordinary revival in the skills and techniques of academic art, and in support of this, academically focused schools have made a concerted effort to combine modern tools with the discipline and perspective of 19th-century artists.

One such school is the Academy of Realist Art (ARA), where I teach. An integral part of ARA's teaching model is the Charles Bague Drawing Course (*Cours de Dessin*), a curriculum that was widely used in the French Academy in the 19th and early-20th centuries. At ARA, we firmly believe that this method, which was almost lost over the course of the 20th century, is integral to mastering the academic art style—and any other art form, for that matter. We have designed an instructional approach centered around the Bague course that ensures our students gain the fundamental drawings skills necessary for further artistic study.

The lessons learned from the Bague exercises extend far beyond learning how to draw. They teach greater skills, such as how to actively observe the world and how to complete a project with painstaking accuracy, leading students to become competent and confident in their work, whether that work is drawing, painting, or something else entirely. Students come to the ARA to build artistic skills in order to excel in fields



ABOUT THE ACADEMY OF REALIST ART

The Academy of Realist Art (ARA) utilizes the academic approach to figure drawing and painting, modeling its curriculum and teaching methodologies on those used by the 19th-century European academies. Its classes are offered on full- and part-time bases and are specifically designed to let students learn at their own pace. ARA offers instruction in Toronto, Boston, and Edinburgh. For more information, visit www.academyofrealistart.com.

ABOVE
Illustration 4
Drawing *The Belvedere Torso* using comparative measurement.

such as animation, architecture, and medical illustration, among others. Many have told us that the Bague drawing process played a key role in developing a visual vocabulary that has served them well in these fields.

Here, I'll present an overview of the Bague course and how it is used at ARA. If you are looking to shore up your ability to draw realistically, I hope you consider this valuable course of study, which you can either practice on your own or through one of the increasing number of schools that have revived it.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BARGUE COURSE

The ARA follows the time-honored tradition of copying from the instructional plates developed by Charles Bague (1826–1883) in collaboration with the great academic artist Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904). Through the process of copying Bague's illustrations, students improve their observational skills, learning how to deconstruct complex visual information into large and small forms and shadows and lights.

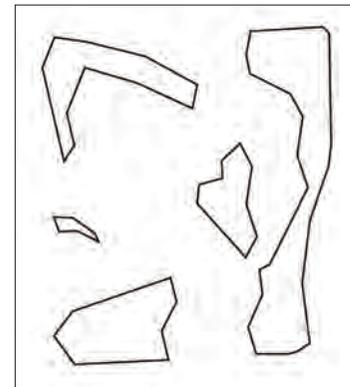
In the ARA program students work their way through four levels of Bague drawings, starting with the simplest. The first lithographs students copy are simple constructs of eyes, ears, noses, and mouths. These are followed by the more complex forms of feet, hands, arms, and heads in profile, three-quarter, and frontal views. Finally, students draw full torsos.

Each of these series begins with relatively simple, high-contrast images (such as the torso seen in Illustration 1) and advances to more intricate, softer-lit plates that demand more detailed rendering techniques (such as Illustration 2). Through this graduated approach, artists learn to progress from larger to smaller forms and from basic to more complex value ranges. By the end of the course, an artist has mastered skills including proportion, the development of the construct (also called the *block-in*), and the rendering of light and shadow.

Students complete their first Bague drawings in a one-to-one ratio, with their drawing the same size as the plate from which they are copying. (See Illustration 3.) At first students may use plumb lines and constructs

provided for them, but as they become more proficient, they are required to discover axes and constructs on their own. When students reach their fourth and final Bague exercise, they are also required to use comparative measurement as a means to evaluate proportion in creating a copy at a different size than the original. (See Illustration 4.)

Some artists question the value of the exactness taught by this approach. The reason for such precision is this: The Bague method is not about artistic expression but about teaching the mechanics that will lead in time to that expressiveness, like a musician learning notes and scales. The method lets artists work side by side with instructors as they learn to observe with accuracy and



ABOVE LEFT
Illustration 5a

The simple geometric shapes that make up the construct.



CENTER LEFT
Illustration 5b

The construct (location, size, and structure).



BELOW LEFT
Illustration 6

Articulation—detailing the contour and the edge of the core shadow.



ABOVE RIGHT
Illustration 7

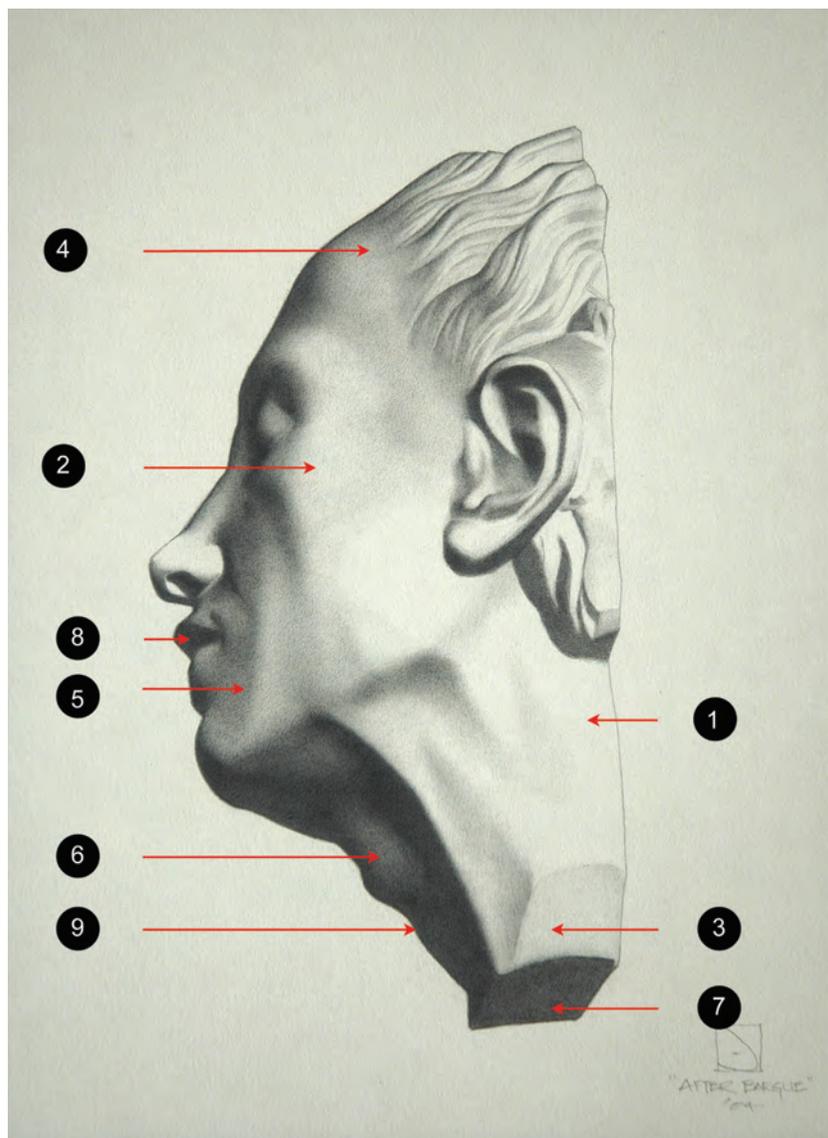
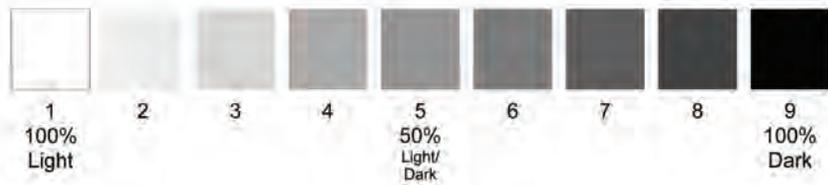
The silhouette, showing the division between light and dark.



BELOW RIGHT
Illustration 8

The essential shadow shapes of the image can be seen as abstract shapes or as creatures or animals.





TOP
Illustration 9a

ABOVE
Illustration 9b

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- *The Charles Bargue Drawing Course*, by Charles Bargue (Dover Publications)
- *Charles Bargue and Jean-Léon Gérôme: Drawing Course*, by Gerald Ackerman and Graydon Parish (Art Creation Realisation)
- *The Bargue Drawing Companion DVD* (available through www.academyofrealistart.com)

discover the truth in what they are seeing. Because in this exercise there is no debate about what the end result should look like, the student and teacher both can focus entirely on the process and the skills being learned.

THE COPYING PROCESS: FROM SIMPLE SHAPES TO SKILLFUL EDGES

Let's walk through the process of copying one Bargue plate. The early-stage Bargue plates provide an image of the construct, composed of large, simple shapes. (See Illustration 5a.) Using a fine knitting needle, try to form this simple construct using a minimum number of directional lines. The visual result should be a drawing made of simple geometric shapes. (See Illustration 5b.) The reason for starting this way is simple: By focusing on the construct, you won't get seduced by the distracting smaller shapes and details. Rather, you train your eye to master distance, proportion, and angles and to identify relationships and key points.

Once the construct is complete, you can move on to *articulation*, detailing the form's contour (its outer edges) and the all-important lines where the light meets the shadow (sometimes called the *bedbug line*, *shadow edge*, or *terminator line*). Break down each simple shape from the construct into a descriptive complex shape that rehearses the topography of the forms. (See Illustration 6.) The subjects will become more complex as you work your way through the program.

After refining the contour, the next step is to separate the lights from the shadows to achieve a simple, flat, clearly delineated silhouette, as seen in Illustration 7. At this stage, you are visually stating what is receiving direct light and what is in shadow, and the result bears a true likeness of the subject.

Throughout the process, try to view the image and its component parts as



ABOVE LEFT
Illustration 10
Rendering the shadows—assessing values in the shadows and showing what areas are light darks, middle darks, and darkest darks.



ABOVE RIGHT
Illustration 11
Rendering the lights—starting by rendering the larger forms.

abstract shapes; this helps to simplify the form in the mind's eye. There are five basic geometric forms that comprise the drawing lexicon: sphere, cube, cylinder, pyramid, and cone. Try to see and draw various forms as versions of these five shapes—a leg can be treated as a column, the head as a sphere, or a nose as a pyramid. You can also view light and dark shapes as silhouettes of creatures, cartoon characters, or other shapes, similar to finding images in the clouds. (See Illustration 8.) By focusing on these shapes—and not being preoccupied with the complex, three-dimensional form that the shape is part of—you will find it easier to accurately lay in forms.

Once you have established those big shapes separating light and shadow, it's time to begin rendering values. We refer to a 9-value scale, on which 1 represents pure light, 9 represents pure dark, and 5 is the exact middle value. (See Illustration 9a.) This scale is the "alphabet" of the eye. As your eye becomes trained, you will become increasingly proficient at identifying the values you see and depicting them in your drawings, giving you more detailed and lifelike renderings, such as the drawing in Illustration 9b.

Moving back to our Bargue drawing, you next render the shadows, again working from large to small and from simple to complex. (See Illustration 10.) In this stage, you will gradually learn the rules of light, including the principles of the shadow edge, reflected light, cast shadows, and the various levels of values in the shadows.

After rendering the shadows, render the lights. (See Illustration 11.) By practicing this, you will learn to distinguish between direct and reflected light (shown in Illustration 12), the different levels of values in the

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY

Any artist can pursue the Barge method on his or her own—all it takes is a set of reproductions (see “Recommended Resources,” on page 82), patience, and determination. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your self-directed Barge exercises.

- Don’t get ahead of yourself, which will only lead to frustration. Start with a simple, high-contrast body part, and follow the steps in order. It won’t be long before you can tackle more challenging images.
- Remember that the whole idea with the Barge exercises is to learn through repetition. Mistakes are part of the learning process and should never be interpreted as failure.
- While working on a drawing, use these helpful techniques to check your progress:
 - ◆ **Squint.** Blurring your vision will help you gauge contrast between values.
 - ◆ **Turn the drawing upside down occasionally.** This helps to provide a fresh perspective and allows you to see shapes more abstractly.
 - ◆ **Step away frequently** to observe your drawing from a distance.
 - ◆ **Use a small “cut-out window”** on a blank piece of paper to isolate areas and compare them to your copy.
 - ◆ **Have a friend critique your shapes.**
- For a detailed tutorial on Barge techniques, consider the ARA’s DVD *The Barge Drawing Companion*, available at the school’s website.

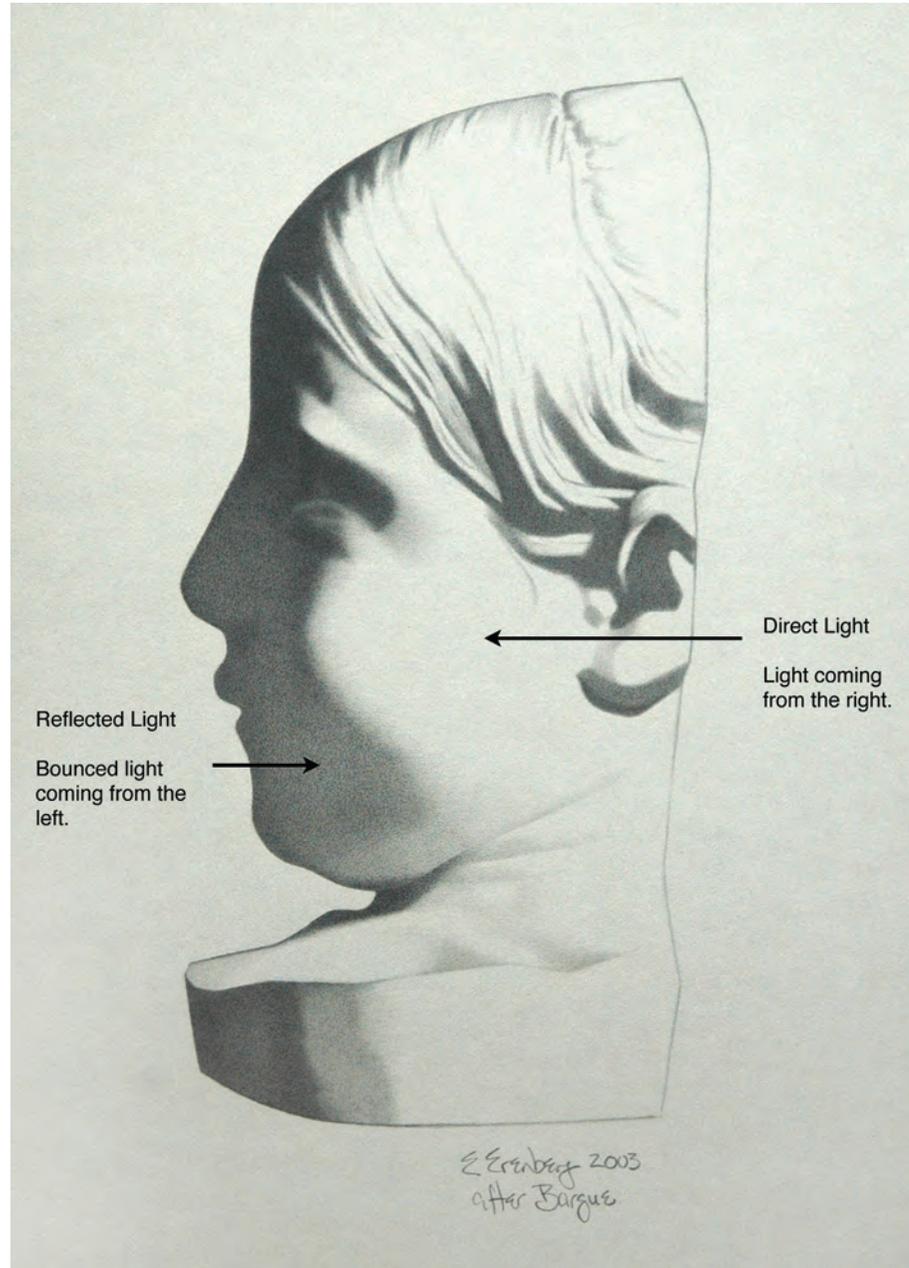


Illustration 12

light, and *facets* or planes of the form. Rendering also teaches the key skill of transitioning between values through hard, soft, blended, and lost edges. (See Illustration 13.)

BARGUE AND BEYOND

In copying four successive Barge plates, artists master increasingly advanced skills. In the first stage, the focus is on developing a strong silhouette. For the second drawing, students build on this ability by copying an image with smaller shadow shapes and more forms and value ranges. In the third Barge drawing, students work on a softly lit image

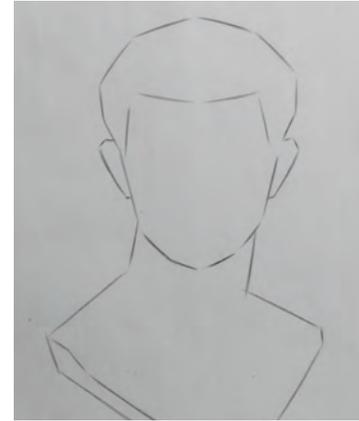


Illustration 14a



Illustration 14b

to execute a more detailed subject (see Illustration 14), and beginning at this point students must develop the construct on their own. In the fourth and final drawing, the lighting and forms are extremely complex, and students are required to do a comparative measurement exercise to better understand ratios—a crucial skill for figure and portrait work.

These drawings are more than just exercises; they form a system that prepares students to excel in painting and other artistic pursuits, all of which require the ability to build constructs, identify shapes, understand tonal value ranges, master complex lighting, and render forms. In addition, despite the fact that during the Barge course one is working in monochrome, the lessons learned through this process can help you develop an eye for seeing the properties of color.

The practicalities of the Barge approach have a strong bearing on a range of modern disciplines, from animation and visual effects to gaming and tattoo artistry. A number of students have come to ARA to bring their skills up to the level needed to succeed in their chosen fields. For example, Kalene Dunsmoor earned a job with Industrial Light & Magic on the strength of her fine art portfolio. She has since pursued a successful career with various visual-effects studios. According to Dunsmoor, the industry values academic drawing skills as much as computer proficiency. “Those skills don’t come along often,” she says. “But they are in high demand, because you need to know all the same things: edges, color, light and dark, and the drive to finish things perfectly.”

It is unfortunate that in today’s world, proper drawing habits have given way to expediency. But we firmly believe that those habits should be taken as seriously as any other discipline. The Barge drawing process may seem at first to be a simple copying exercise, but the skills it teaches can take you far as you pursue your creative goals. ❖

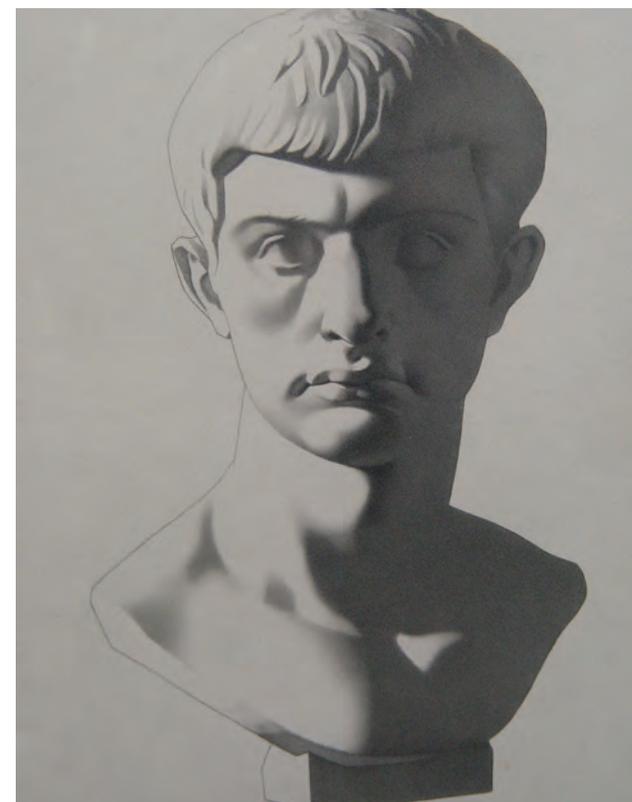


Illustration 14c

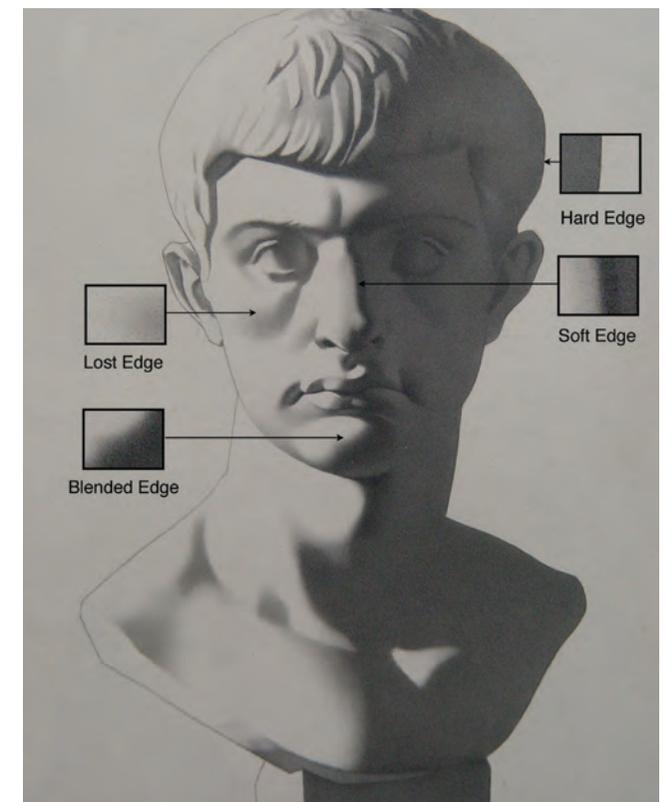


Illustration 13