

Daumier Drawings

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Movement and Time in the Drawings of Daumier: “Still and Still Moving”¹

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In five sketches of the prodigal son on a single sheet (fig. 46) Daumier drew various poses of repentance and comfort with lines in search of the proper effect.² He tested the inclinations of submission: knees bent, back curved, head bowed, arms held close to the body, the son’s head on his father’s chest, like a child burrowing in on a hug. In the most finished sketch with its deep black wash between father and son, the father (shown in a slightly different pose in three drawings on the page) bends over his son, one hand placed on his shoulder, one on his back. Daumier has tried the head in three positions, the two left tentative, more like the other drawings, suggest greater reserve. Finally, the father, legs spread for balance, comforts the son. The lines and positions, seeking out the form and meaning, may suggest Daumier’s ambiguity, or that of the father.

The representation of movement, as the essence of a good drawing, and the suggestion of time, arrested or passing, have been concerns of artists and theorists, going back to Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Leonardo encouraged students to make quick sketches “of people’s actions the moment they meet the eye.” *Pentimenti*, the lines which indicate the various positions the artist tries, the alternatives of choice, are seen in drawings since the Renaissance. (The French term for them, *repentirs*, was first used in the mid-eighteenth century.³) The presence of repeated attempts, the traces of possibility, are clues to the artist’s thought. Their preserved markings suggest movement in themselves.

One of the principal texts on representing movement and time is by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his essay *Laocoön*, first published in 1766 and translated into French in 1802.⁴

If the artist can never make use of more than a single moment in ever-changing nature, and if the painter in particular can use this moment only with reference to a single vantage point, while the works of both painter and sculptor are created not merely to be given a glance but to be contemplated—contemplated repeatedly and at length—then it is evident that this single moment and the point from which it is viewed cannot be chosen with too great a regard for its effect.⁵

1. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Four Quartets*.
2. Daumier drew the subject of the prodigal son on seven sheets, M. 753–759, with one to seven figures on each page. K. E. Maison noted, in *Honoré Daumier: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings* (London, 1968), that Daumier probably intended to make a painting on the subject, though it was never realized.
3. For the etymology of *repentirs* and a brief history of its practice and significance, see Françoise Viatte, “Tisser une corde de sable,” *Repentirs* (Paris, 1991), pp. 27–46.
4. Many of Lessing’s texts were translated into French in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. While we have no proof that he was read by practicing artists, his work was widely known.
5. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, 1984), p. 19.



Fig. 47. *The Sideshow* (cat. no. 103). Pen and ink, black and red chalk, gray wash, conté crayon, and gouache, 270 × 368 mm (10 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques

The issue addressed by Lessing was of concern to artists though I do not think they followed or challenged his precepts as such. In fact, Lessing was arguing here for the superiority of literature over the visual arts in its capacity for narrative. But artists demonstrated that one could in fact imply more than a single moment in a still image.

For forty years Daumier made caricatures for the popular illustrated press, his images taken in at a glance and probably only once. He captured people and events as if in an arrested moment. To trigger an immediate response, he, and others, exaggerated expressions, poses, and actions. And yet, Daumier kept within anatomical credibility in both his caricatures and his drawings.⁶ Daumier's drawings adopted some of the traits of caricature in images that deliver their message through action. His art is concerned with the moment, but how does one invite prolonged contemplation in a glancing art? For Daumier there is a complicated relationship between moment, momentum, and the momentous. They are not the same as the momentaneous or the momentary.⁷

For Lessing, poetry was the place to express human action in time, painting is best at showing human bodies in repose. He warned against depicting moments of great action.

Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.

In the full course of an emotion, no point is less suitable for this than its climax.⁸

Daumier captured the whole in a flash—not just the anticipation of resolution, but the final point in an action.⁹ In *The Sideshow* (fig. 47) the barker points excitedly, at full stretch, to a canvas behind him picturing a crocodile chasing a man. To his right is a skeletal figure in red, braced against a balustrade; shoulders hunched, mouth open, eyes agog, he has reached the limits of that move. His expression is frightened and frightening. The fat lady parts the curtain as far as it will go (calling to mind Delacroix's slave in *Les Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* [1834] and prefiguring Picasso's works of the same subject [1955]), suggesting the space behind the space. The intervals between the figures are part of the rhythm and drama, which intensifies, from the stationary and closely grouped musicians on the left, to the extreme gestures of the barkers and woman on the right.¹⁰

Daumier developed a new repertoire of physiognomy, bearing, and gesture to convey contemporary types and situations.¹¹ The traditional categories for the expression of emotion in art, schematized by Le Brun in the seventeenth century, were inadequate for the complex and ambivalent encounters of everyday nineteenth-century urban life. A "painter of modern life,"¹² Daumier took much of his material from the contemporary working fabric of Paris: lawyers, butchers, couriers, mothers, people on buses and trains, actors, street acrobats, and musicians.

Certain professions have characteristic gestures, like the lawyer's assertive and accusatory pointing hand (fig. 119 and cat. nos. 82, 93, 95) or the barker with the outstretched arm (see figs. 47, 48). Daumier played on the paradox of posing, posture, and imposture. Gesture is revelatory and in the case of the lawyers and performers can suggest inauthenticity. People are captured in their external signs.

Class distinctions are made in the deportment of figures: the working-class nursing mother guzzling soup (cat. no. 40) contrasted with the lawyer's self-conscious and constrained stance (cat. no. 88). There are differences in gestures according with gender: men with legs spread and arms akimbo, seated in a bus, are contrasted with the cramped position of the women; pompous lawyers and defeated mothers are pictured in the antechamber of a court (cat. no. 78).¹³ Daumier's technique, his way of drawing and capturing characteristic poses and gestures, is directly related to his sense of the human comedy.

6. Michel Melot makes this point as well in his "Daumier and Art History: Aesthetic Judgement/Political Judgement," *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988), p. 7.

7. My thanks to Christopher Ricks for this association and other thoughts and suggestions.

8. Lessing, *Laocoön*, pp. 78 and 19.

9. In all fairness, I must quote another sentence of Lessing (*Laocoön*, p. 25): "How many things would seem incontestable in theory had not genius succeeded in proving the opposite by fact."

10. Philip Rawson observes that "the left is our point of entry into a design; the approaching glance travels in from the left, and the closure is at the right" (*Drawing*, 2d ed. [Philadelphia, 1987], p. 215).

11. I discuss this issue in detail in my book *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (Chicago and London, 1982).

12. See Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," written probably in late 1859 to 1860 and published in 1863. In *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge, 1981).

13. This theme is developed in my article "Daumier: Gender and Gesture," in *Femmes d'esprit: Women in Daumier's Caricature*, ed. Kirsten Powell and Elizabeth C. Childs (Middlebury, Vt., 1990), pp. 47–64.



Fig. 48. *Study for a Sideshow* (cat. no. 99). Black chalk, 335 × 251 mm (13³/₁₆ × 9⁷/₈ in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques

Daumier often constructed scenes of confrontation and contrast—one figure gesticulates, the other responds: the lawyer and his client, the saltimbanque and the straight man, the thin clown and the fat lady. He used the device of action and reaction, a basic principle in mime known to Daumier through his attendance at the Théâtre des Funambules. In a still image this stratagem can extend the sense of time. For example, in *Study for a Sideshow* (fig. 48), a sideshow barker is shown with arm outstretched, wielding a pointer. His sidekick reacts to his dramatic gesture with “the take” of surprise (as animators call the pose): everything contracted, arms flexed at the elbow, hands raised, knees bent. In some drawings, Daumier drew only the response. In *Etude d’un acteur* (M. 450) “the take” is recorded at the moment the reaction has registered. We see the figure arrested in a pose which would be transitory.

Daumier had a keen sense of the body’s weight, the accommodation to burdens, the tug of responsibility, as in *Study for the relief “The Emigrants”* (cat. no. 23), where the strained forward motion shares some impulse with larger political issues, as it so often does in Daumier’s work. In the balance of the body against forces of weight or wind, as in *A Woman Fleeing against the Wind* (fig. 71), contrapposto becomes a means of showing strain and despair. In *A Longshoreman* (cat. no. 12), the man’s bony back is overly arched as if he were giving out under the weight he carries as he walks up the narrow plank. There are no repeated lines here, all is weight and shadow.

There are certain conventions for indicating speed of movement that Daumier used, like the fluttering robes of the lawyer (cat. nos. 82, 94, and fig. 119), or hair streaming in the wind (cat. no. 38). In *A Running Boy* (cat. no. 16) faint repeated pencil lines, sparse charcoal markings (broken contours) are played against the animated shadow running along the figure and ground. The boy is all fear, energy, and agility. The flared upward turn of his trousers suggests speed: the Futurist Umberto Boccioni would develop this device some sixty years later.

Lessing maintained that human bodies are the subject matter of art because they exist in space; action, or objects that follow one another, are the property of poetry.¹⁴ Daumier by distributing the action, the effects of movement over time, went beyond Lessing. In *A Study of Female Dancers* (fig. 49) the subject is movement itself. (This is also one of Daumier’s few female nude studies.) One dancer steps across herself, arms trailing. Her supporting foot, hips, and arms have been in other places, as if swiveling around themselves until taking this step. What one does the other is about to do, and so the sense of movement is extended over time.

Stillness, scenes of contemplation or repose, need to appear lively as well. In the series of connoisseurs looking at art objects, Daumier made

14. “If painting, by virtue of its symbols or means of imitation, which it can combine in space only, must renounce the element of time entirely, progressive actions, by the very fact that they are progressive, cannot be considered to belong among its subjects. Painting must be content with coexistent actions or with mere bodies which, by their position, permit us to conjecture an action” (Lessing, *Laocoön*, p. 77).



Fig. 49. *A Study of Female Dancers* (cat. no. 21). Black chalk and conté crayon, 338 × 274 mm (13¹/₄ × 10³/₄ in.). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques

looking an activity: the counterpoint of the connoisseurs' poses is the key to liveliness. In the *Art Lovers* (fig 50), a squat man peers forward to take a close look at a small painting. The other foreground figures each assumes his own modest pose of regard, head inclined slightly forward, hands clasped behind the back. The poses suggest obeisance toward the object of art, the men accommodating their bodies to better their view.

The Connoisseur (cat. no. 77) suggests the intense concentration of a collector regarding a dynamic and robust sculpture of Venus, the line from



Fig. 50. *Art Lovers* (cat. no. 70). Charcoal, watercolor, and conté crayon, 262 × 193 mm (10 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund

hip to thigh repeated, head inclined toward the viewer. ("The roses had the look of flowers that are looked at" [T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *Four Quartets*].) The classical contrapposto of Venus is contrasted with the connoisseur's casual but concentrated pose, legs crossed, feet turned slightly in, hands clasped.

Daumier's focus is often on work and its hardships. His depictions of *parades* (sideshows) and other street performers are seen from the perspective of the grim performer. *Street Show* (cat. no. 116) pictures a thin frantic clown standing on a chair, gesticulating and proclaiming or singing to the beat of a drummer. The clown arches backward, and there is an echo of lines in the space around him. One arm is fixed and truncated, the hand sprouts like a growth from a severed branch; the other culminates in a scurry of lines that seems to work its way up to his torso. The drummer's arm wielding the drumstick is shown in three positions, again forecasting a Futurist repetition.¹⁵

Even in the biblical, mythological, historical, and literary subjects which are somber and tragic, Daumier often chose anecdotal moments, emphasizing movement, usually through the contrast of figures. In the drawing of fugitives (cat. no. 26) one does not see from where they flee or to where they are headed, nor even the expression of their faces, Daumier depicts the weary treading. *Saint Sebastian* tied to the tree (cat. no. 28) is drawn with a clear and continuous line: the frantic angels flying about him are all blur and fury.

In *Centaur Abducting a Woman* (cat. no. 35), Daumier drew the sweep of action, the woman hoisted off the ground, reaching out and kicking in protest, her feet in several places. The centaur runs with all four legs outstretched as quadrupeds in art did before Muybridge's photographs proved otherwise.

Lessing emphasized the importance of representing the permanent in art: "this single moment, if it is to receive immutable permanence from art, must express nothing transitory."¹⁶ Daumier broke Lessing's rules and drew transitory actions, particularly in his quotidian subjects and his saltimbanques. As Baudelaire wrote, "there is in the trivial things of life, in the daily changing of external things, a speed of movement that imposes upon the artist an equal speed of execution."¹⁷ "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent. . . ."¹⁸

Daumier further developed the equation for the representation of movement with the momentum of the drawn line.¹⁹ Through the trajectory and repetition of lines, Daumier depicted figures coming into being or being transformed. The sense of immediacy is as much in the medium and technique of drawing as in what is represented. The multiple contours do not delineate or delimit so much as they indicate the direction, force, and

15. Rawson, *Drawing*, p. 15: "Drawings are done with a point that moves. . . . Since such movement is the fundamental nature of drawing, the various styles and manners of representational drawing amount to techniques for crystallizing more or less strongly the implicit movement of lines. . . . There always lies at the bottom of every drawing an implied pattern of those movements through which it was created."

16. Lessing, *Laocoön*, p. 20.

17. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," pp. 393–94.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

19. The need for spontaneity in drawing was recognized even in the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*. Students were encouraged to make quick sketches, *croquis*, in a pocket sketchbook (*cahier en poche*), as they had been since the Renaissance. In the course of the nineteenth century quick sketches became increasingly important as a way of capturing daily life and as a means of overcoming academic themes and practices. See Albert

flux of the movement, the energy in the action. Artists since Leonardo have used repetitions of lines to suggest motion. Movement implies extended moment. Daumier exaggerated this effect further in keeping the tentative and superseded markings: his working process is evident and becomes part of the conception. He has caught the paradox in which his art operates. As Baudelaire wrote, Daumier was a "painter of the fleeting moment and of all that it suggests of the eternal."²⁰

For the next generation of painters and draughtsmen, Daumier suggested ways of capturing the sensation of a moment in an anecdote or narrative.²¹ With his great sense of motion and mobility, Daumier is the bridge to the sensate drawings of the Impressionists who are concerned with energy, immediacy, process, and change.

Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1986), esp. pp. 24–35, 112, 166–81.

Daumier drawings range from *première pensées*, rough and quick sketches often in pen and ink, to finished drawings with watercolor and wash. Much preparatory work went into the finished drawings. See also Bruce Laughton, *The Drawings of Daumier and Millet* (New Haven, 1991).

20. Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 394.
21. Nicholas Wadley, *Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Drawing* (London, 1991), writes with insight and clarity about the influence of Delacroix and Daumier on Impressionist drawings.