

Daniela Brambilla

# Portraying Children

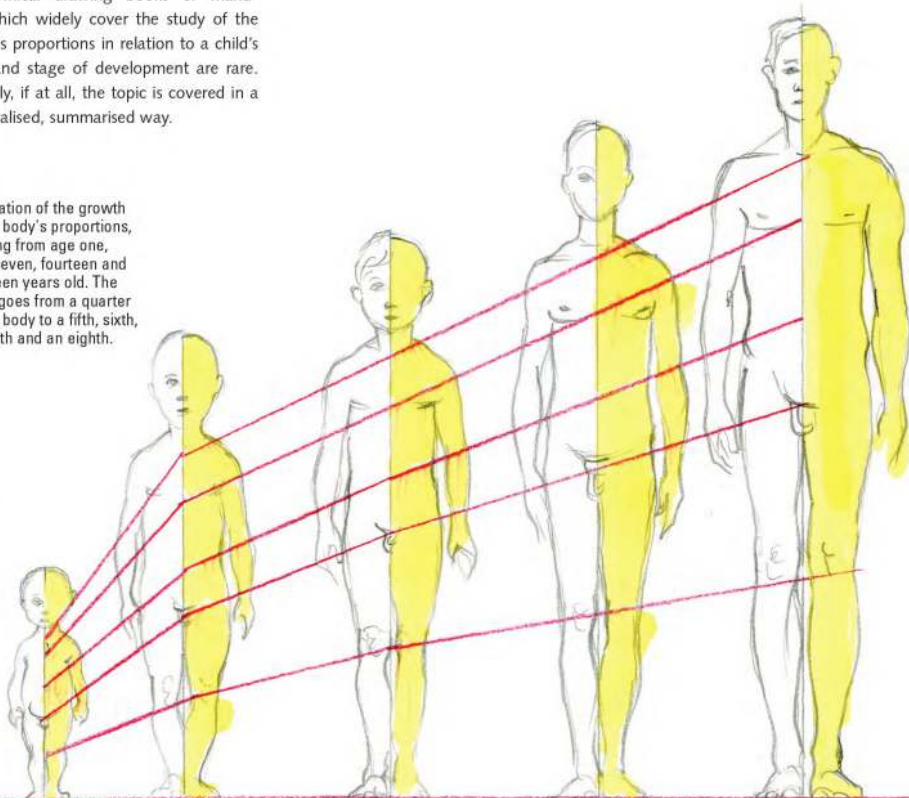
Expressions, Proportions, Drawing  
and Painting Techniques



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Anatomical drawing books or manuals which widely cover the study of the body's proportions in relation to a child's age and stage of development are rare. Usually, if at all, the topic is covered in a generalised, summarised way.

Illustration of the growth of the body's proportions, starting from age one, two, seven, fourteen and eighteen years old. The head goes from a quarter of the body to a fifth, sixth, seventh and an eighth.

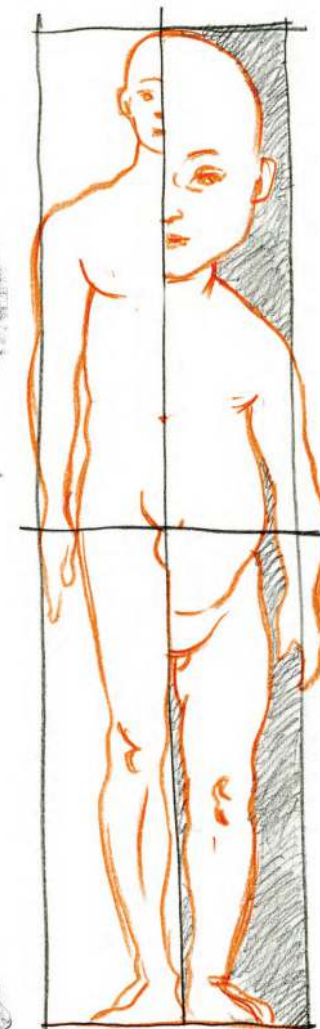


The development of little boys' and girls' bodies and personalities is concentrated in a time span of about 15 years, going from birth to maturity.

Young individuals don't grow in a constant, uniform manner, but rather in steps distinguished by lags and spurts.

During the development process, the relationship between the various parts of the body - head, torso, arms and legs - isn't consistent. The growth of the head is quite gradual, while the legs and the torso grow approximately twice as fast.

At birth, a newborn measures about 50 cm. From that moment until reaching his definitive proportions, the size of the head doubles while that of the torso triples, the arms quadruple and the legs stretch to five times their length at birth.



Juxtaposition of the proportions of a one-year-old and an adult.

The growth of the head in relationship to the other parts of the body is a specific determinant for age.

The main differences between newborns and adults are the ratios between the length of the head, the torso and the limbs in relation to the body as a whole. Children's proportions (the relationship between the head, bust, arms and legs)

vary greatly depending on their age. The head is the module of reference. From birth to one year of age, the head takes up a quarter of the body's total height. By three years old, the head is about a fifth of the body; at five, it's a sixth; and at ten, it's a seventh or a bit more. An adolescent's head is thus about a seventh of the body, while in adult men it's an

eighth, and seven and one half for women.

The comparison of the head-body relationship for infants and adults is quite impressive. Such a large difference almost seems impossible, and, seeing the two images side by side, that of the child seems so disproportionate that it's almost monstrous.



## GESTURAL DRAWING

Life drawing, unlike photographs which stop time, moves with time and clearly shows the process of its appearance. In a certain sense, the drawing embodies time. No matter what they are, drawing subjects in movement from real life requires very attentive, in-depth observation followed by quick, general sketching.

It might seem more difficult to draw quickly, in two or three minutes at most, instead of drawing slowly, taking your time. However, sketching with brevity, done without continuously double-checking and re-doing the image, makes it easier to capture the subject's entire gesture and, more importantly, the character of that gesture. At the same time, the dimensions and spatial relationships which exist within the composition of the entire drawing can be rendered.

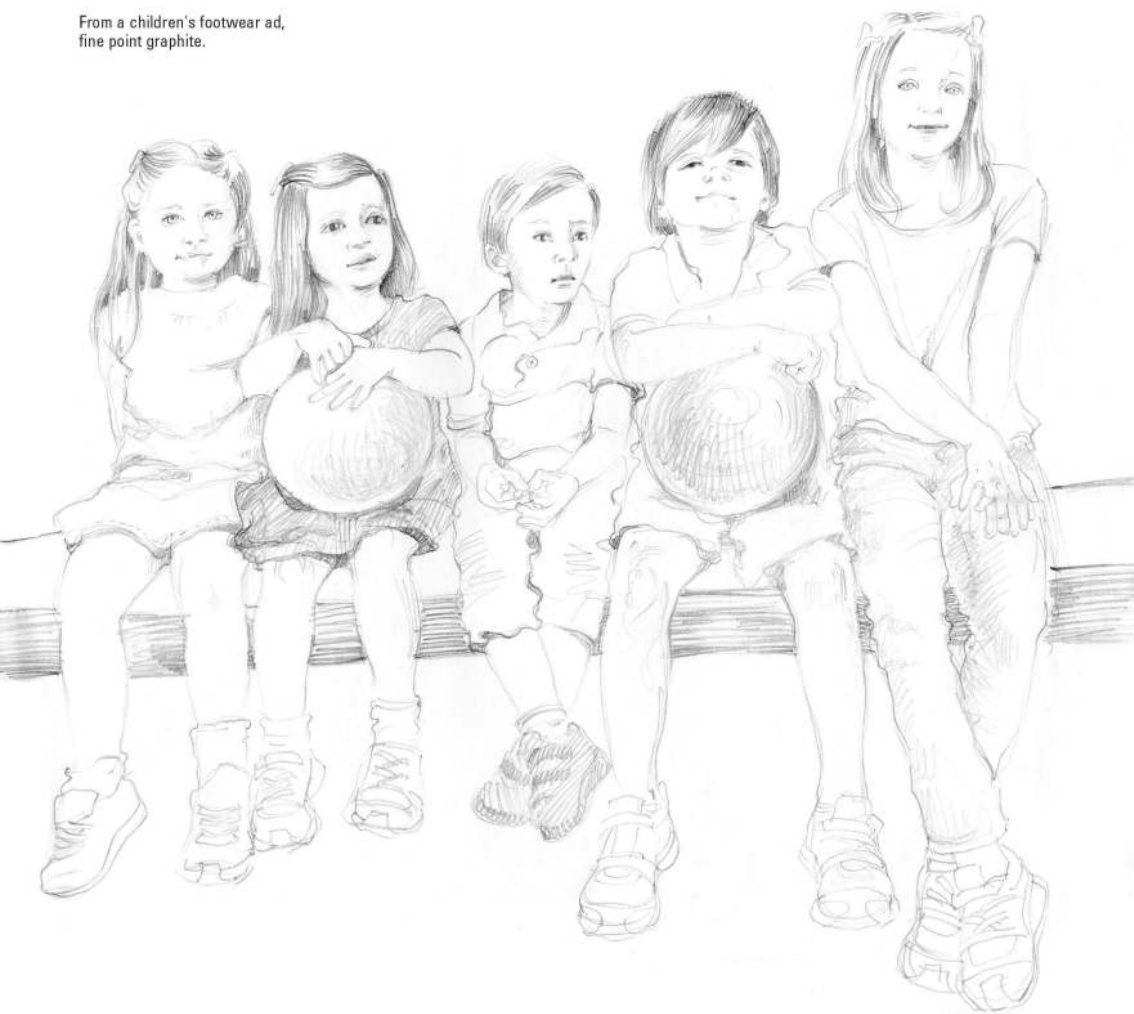
When quickly sketching, the first lines (which may be quite light) are then joined by others which get closer to that being observed and which the artist wishes to capture. It is a continuous, progressive bringing into question, mark after mark. Drawing is an incessant process of correction. It moves forward thanks to corrected mistakes.

Once a quick gestural sketch has been completed, the proportions can then be verified in a review. This step which is particularly necessary for representations of children because, as we have already seen, they have proportions which are entirely unlike those of adults. It's a verification which can improve the drawing and make it more effective and realistic.



Above and on the following pages: children represented through life drawing with brush pen, wax pastels and soft graphite.

From a children's footwear ad,  
fine point graphite.



Pencil portraits from photos.





## BLIND CONTOUR DRAWING

In his instructional text, *The Natural Way to Draw* (1936), Kimon Nicolaïdes developed a method which was founded on a few different procedures. One of them was particularly important, subsequently taken up by many other artists: contour lines and blind drawing.

"Imagine that your pencil point is touching the model instead of the paper...Move

your eye slowly along the contour of the model and move the pencil slowly along the paper. ...Often you will find that the contour you are drawing will leave the edge of the figure and turn inside, coming eventually to an apparent end. When this happens, glance down at the paper in order to locate a new starting point. This new starting point should pick up at

A boy of just a few months as he sleeps.



Drawing compositions made from photographs using the blind contour drawing technique.

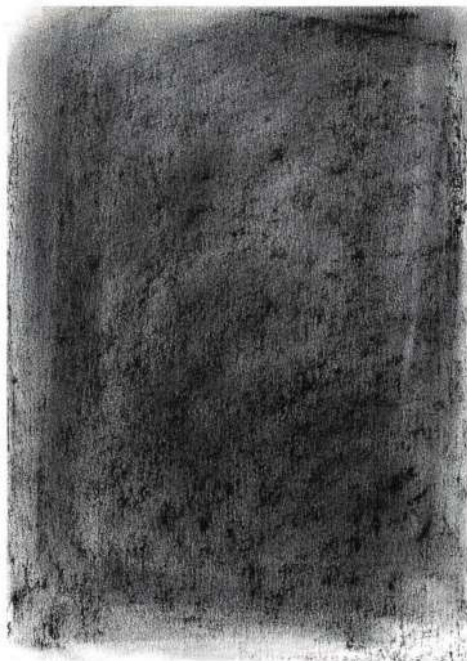


that point on the edge where the contour turned inward."<sup>4</sup>

The goal of this way of seeing and drawing isn't to make a coherent, realistic drawing, what we might normally call a "nice drawing", but rather to have an experience which leads to conquering a way of seeing that is the hallmark of an artist, essential for the creation of effective drawings. This method consists of observing, truly and concretely, while referring not only to the sense of sight, but especially that of touch.

Touch and sight are thus combined. Overall, our understanding of what we see is based heavily on our tactile experiences. The temptation to touch an object to get to know it better is something we all experience, no matter what age, but especially as an infant.





Study of a head of a little girl in terracotta with the erasure method of the light parts on a background darkened with

Such a sharp breakdown helps us see and understand volumes. However, it's helpful to add mid-tones for a more realistic effect and, as was mentioned before, when drawing children, the play of light and shadow is always preferably sfumato. You can thus prepare a medium

grey background from which you can bring out light with a rubber or add greys on a white sheet of paper, avoiding filling in the light parts. To simplify the task, it's best to use a reduced light scale: two values for the light parts, two for the shadows and a medium value for the subject.

At first, avoid darkening too intensely. Try to render the whole with a limited scale of greys to get the best impression of the subject. Only at the end should you identify and accent the lightest and darkest parts, continuing to compare the original and the drawing while squinting.





Before painting, it's best to transform colour photographs to black and white. This makes it simpler to paint, starting from the grey scale.



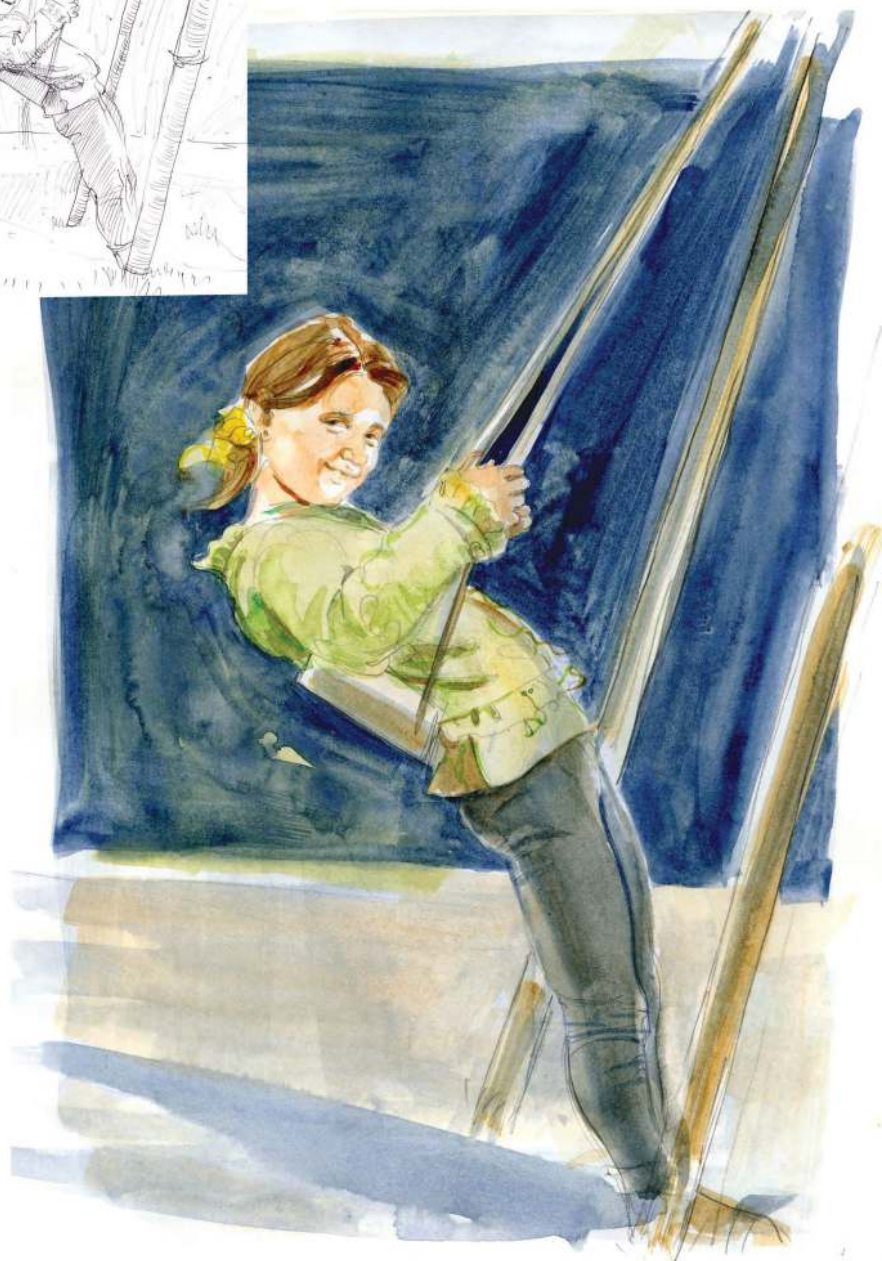
Study of the subject, drawing and shading done in a soft lead pencil. This makes it possible to understand the tonal values which form the base of the colour and to implement chromatic choices which are consistent with the foundation colour.

Identifying the common chromatic denominator of the entire scene depends both on natural or artificial light and on the relationship between all the colours present, so mix it partially with all the colours which make up the image.





A drawing of a picture of Ginevra with hatching in pen and ink; below, a version in diluted tempera.



## WATERCOLOUR

Watercolour painting is the most popular technique at the moment because it is easiest to have on hand anywhere and any time: in the office, travelling, outdoors. All you need is a box of cups, two brushes and a small container for water or even brushes loaded with water, which further reduce the amount of equipment you have to carry with you. Speed of execution is the fundamental characteristic of

watercolour painting and, for this reason, it has become the preferred technique for the sketcher that travels the world to capture impromptu settings and situations. It can be used on pencil strokes or directly from a brush.

It isn't a particularly easy technique - actually, it's generally considered quite complex, if not the most complex method of painting overall. With thicker paints, it's

easier to remedy random inaccuracies and hide mistakes, changing them only in part. But with watercolour, which is transparent and quickly-executed, such operations are not easy and thus best avoided. Before starting, be sure you have an idea of the distribution of colours and, in particular, identify the zones with the most light, to be left white, letting the paper shine through. It is no coincidence that



Watercolour by Graziella Marcotti, Little Blue Riding Hood.



Monotone (yellow) watercolour.