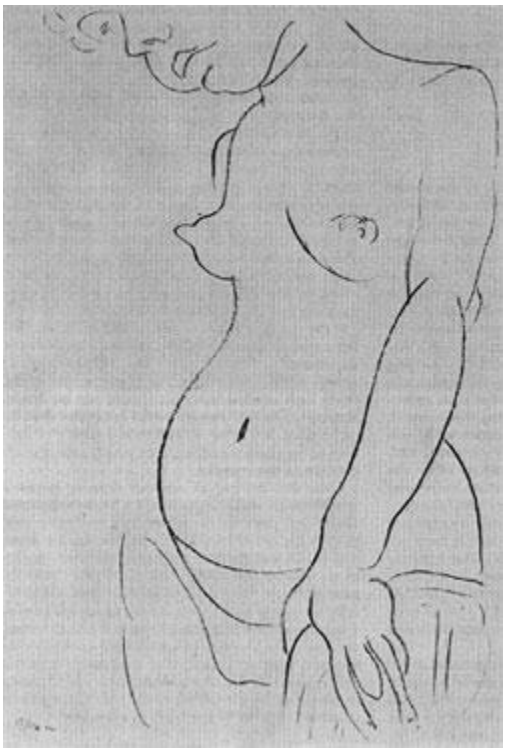
Excerpt from Drawing the Human Form by William A. Berry – an explanation of Contour

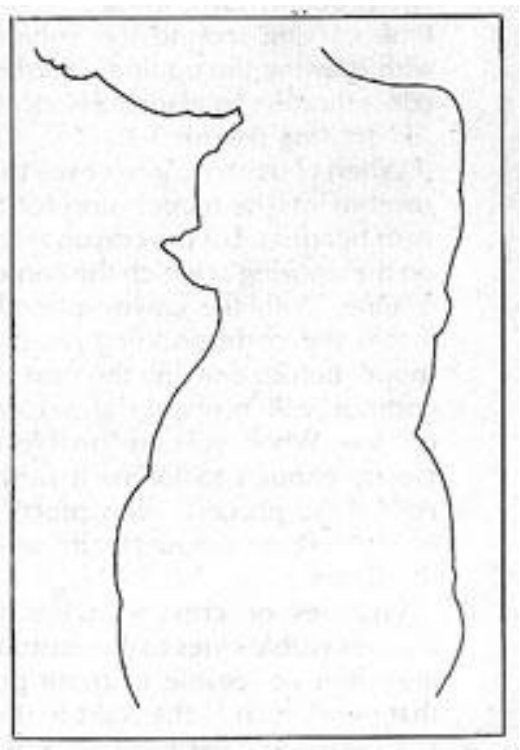
"...the contour ought to round itself off and so terminate as to suggest the presence of other parts behind it also, and disclose even what it hides." -- Pliny

CONTOUR

Many artists make a distinction between contour and outline. The distinction is a subtle one often glossed over in dictionary definitions, but it is nevertheless implied in the derivations of the words. The word "contour" is derived from the Latin con ("with") and tornare ("to turn"), hence its meaning: a line that appears to turn with the form to which it pertains. A naturally occurring contour such as a fold or crease of the skin pertains to the form of the body and is therefore three-dimensional in character. A line drawn on a flat surface can convey a powerful sense of the three-dimensional contour, and it is this type of line that artists commonly designate as contour (Figure 3-1). The drawn contour, as Pliny accurately observed can also effectively suggest the continuity of volumetric form beyond the visible edge of the object observed. This is not the case with an outline, which is literally an outer line that limits the shape of the silhouette (Figure 3-2). An outline tells us almost nothing of the volumes that lie within its edges: it is essentially flat.



3-1. Henri Matisse, Nude, Face Partly Showing, 1914. Lithograph. 19-3/4" x 12". New York, Museum of Modern Art. Frank Crowninshield Fund. Contour line endows this work with a suggestion of roundness and implies a complex sequence of forms with a remarkable economy of means.



3-2. Outline reduction of figure 3-1. Outline, by eliminating overlapping contours, deprives the viewer of a means of interpreting the sequence of forms in space.

The distinction between outline and contour is clarified in the familiar globe model of the earth. The outline of the globe is simply the circular outer shape, which is clearly visible when the globe is seen in silhouette (for example, in front of a window). Contours of the globe are represented by the lines of

latitude, which appear to curve and turn around the spherical surface before disappearing at the edge (or outline). By spinning the globe you can visualize many additional contours. The motion of any point on the globe's surface describes one contour, which results from the actual turning. Moreover, such contour lines turn around an axis, the North-South axis.

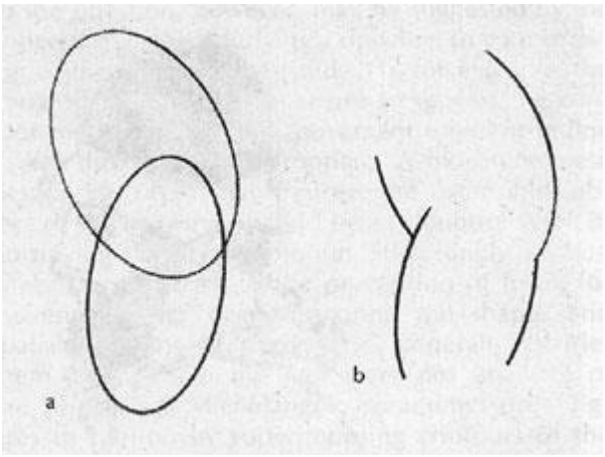
Contours of the human body also appear to run around the form, and, although body forms are more complex than the spherical form of the globe, body contours can usually be visualized around imaginary axes, or cores, as discussed in chapter 2. Just as a point on the spinning globe describes a contour in space, so can the point of a drawing instrument describe a contour of the body, although it is somewhat altered by the dictates of the flat surface.

The artist's contour drawings are generally less schematic than those of the globe but no less interesting, for they are related to the sensuous experience of touch. To an even greater degree than the outline drawing the contour drawing evokes the tactile sense. This may be due to the close affinity of the contour to the tactile experiences of childhood: "Since the child begins to learn how to identify objects by handling them and running his fingers round their edges, it is natural that this pattern of touch should become associated with the contour of the object perceived visually." The child associates the contour with touch and vision in a natural, un-self-conscious way. The application of this principle to your first contour drawing must necessarily be more deliberate. With practice, however, the coordination of your vision with your sense of touch will become second nature.

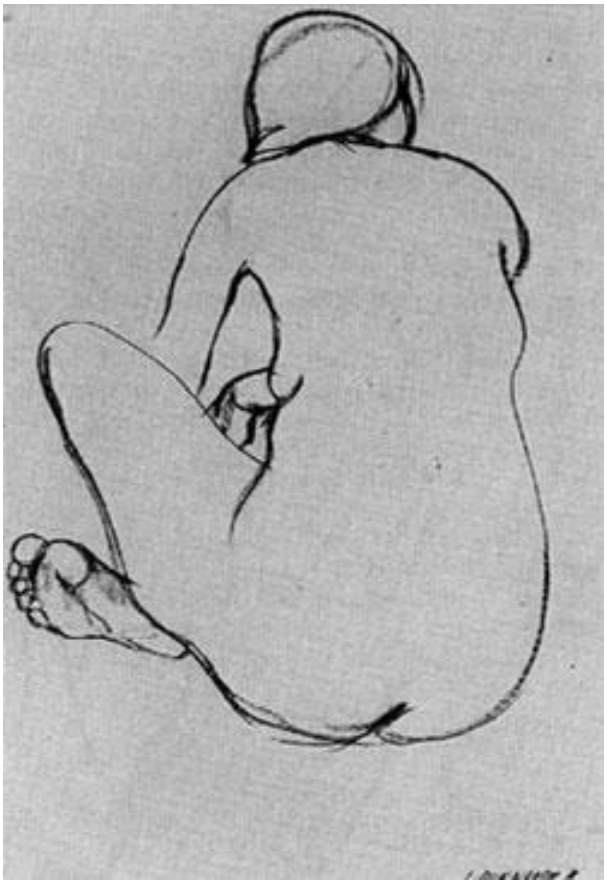
OUTLINE, CONTOUR, AND CONSTRUCT

The outline and contour methods of drawing, until this point considered separately, can be and often are combined in a single drawing. There are many advantages to this. The union of the two concepts allows the artist to be more selective in describing form. In drawing the figure, for example, you may wish to use the contour method only to delineate forms that need more spatial explanation in order to be understood. An overlapping contour, as you have seen, can clarify the sequence of forms in terms of spatial depth. In places that do not require such explanation the more economical outline method can be used. The interplay of the two methods can extend the expressive range of line drawing. your intuition is the best guide in deciding which passages of the drawing require contour, and which outline, but you may find, as I have, that it is helpful to practice restraint in combining the two.

Combining outline and contour in a line drawing is not difficult, and after you have become accustomed to it, you may be ready to add yet a third factor: the oval constructs described in study 7. In that study, you will recall, form was drawn in terms of body shapes that were interpreted as ovoid units. Instead of actually drawing the complete oval constructs of the figure, as you did in study 7, try drawing only those portions that are part of an outline or contour of the form you wish to represent (Figure 3-65). As you draw, it is helpful to visualize the complete construct, even though your drawing will show only portions of that construct. This technique is simply a more economical version of the procedure followed in study 7; much that was drawn in that study can be left out. Nevertheless, a certain amount of practice is usually necessary in order to bring these three concepts together in a free, spontaneous drawing (Figure 3-66). Despite the simple appearance of such a drawing, the method involves the visualization and reduction of constructs that can be quite complex in the human form. Concentration is necessary in order to see beyond structure in terms of ovoid units and at the same time to draw only enough of them to communicate the forms that they encompass. Economy of means is of the essence. It is the method's ability to suggest rather than to completely describe form that engenders the elegance of similar effects seen in some classical drawings.



3-65. Oval drawing constructs. (a) Intersection of two oval constructs. (b) Two oval constructs, similar to (a) but with most of the intersecting portions eliminated. The spatial order of the two constructs is suggested by overlapping on the left side, while the right side shows only outline.



3-66. Student drawing, oval constructs with contour and outline. Crayon on newsprint paper. 36" x 24".

Student drawing using the blind contour method.

Blind contour self-study

For this class, I would like you to buy Kimon Nicolaides' The Natural Way to Draw and Robert Beverly Hales' Drawing Lessons from the Great Masters. Please read section one in the Nicolaides book (Contour and Gesture) as well as section seven (Contour).

For next week, please do a life-size self-portrait using either the blind contour method or your left hand (wrong hand) or both. If that seems impossible to sustain, then use a modified contour line being both passionately concerned with the quality of line and the three dimensional overlapping of form--where does a line recede behind another form, where does it come up over and forward? As line travels over form it moves over mountains and valleys (like footprints over dunes at the beach). Maybe the valley of the chin is in shadow--if the line presses into the depth it becomes darker, telling you it is in a crevice--or likewise up over a plateau, the light hits first and so you travel not only up (and so lift up with the pencil) but also in one fell swoop, indicate the direction of the light.

In light of this, look at Picasso drawings, Matisse drawings, Japanese drawings (Hiroshige, or Hokusai). You might use a hand mirror so you could continue at school. Don't assume you know what you look like. Believe you are seeing your image for the first time, recording with the extension of your finger (pencil) every registration of the conviction of touch. As in class, try to make your hand and eye move at the same slow speed...you can peek at the paper, but be concerned NOT with a likeness but with the observation, with SEEING THROUGH YOUR SENSE OF TOUCH. If this is approached in the right way, it will probably look distorted and a little abstract. More like an electrocardiogram of your experience of touch. Contour comes from *con tornare* (with the turn of the form). Work over and around the form. Remember, an outline is something a cop makes to indicate the position of a dead body. It tells you nothing of the three dimensional quality of the form--so remember to travel cross-country (over and around the form) and don't stay on the coastline.

Work 5 feet or larger, use compressed charcoal pencil, pencil, or India ink and pen. Buy a roll of cheap paper (photo backdrop or inexpensive bond paper). You'll need the remainder of the roll for other assignments.

Drawing above by Gilbert Guerrero using compressed charcoal pencil on butcher paper