

# THE ART OF SEEING: A PROGRESSIVE APPROACH TO DRAWING

## Prologue

*“Vision is a faculty. Seeing is an art”*

—George Perkins Marsh, author of *Man and Nature*

Visual literacy requires fluency in drawing. Looking at something is a far cry from understanding it. The best way to comprehending design is by learning how to draw. Nearly everything produced by industry for use in the built environment begins with drawn plans that were inspired by sketches. The man-made world is shaped by decisions made legible by drawings. Everyday design would remain an impenetrable mystery, without some proficiency in drawing. Visual experience is best understood through drawing. It slows us down, focuses our attention, to explore how forms and spaces fit together. Pictures are byproducts of this process, not the goal. Success is achieved when our drawings are legible. But even when they are not, the mental exercise can reconcile empirical observation with personal response. According to Johann Goethe, “Only when we hold the outer world with that of our inner being, do we have full reality.”

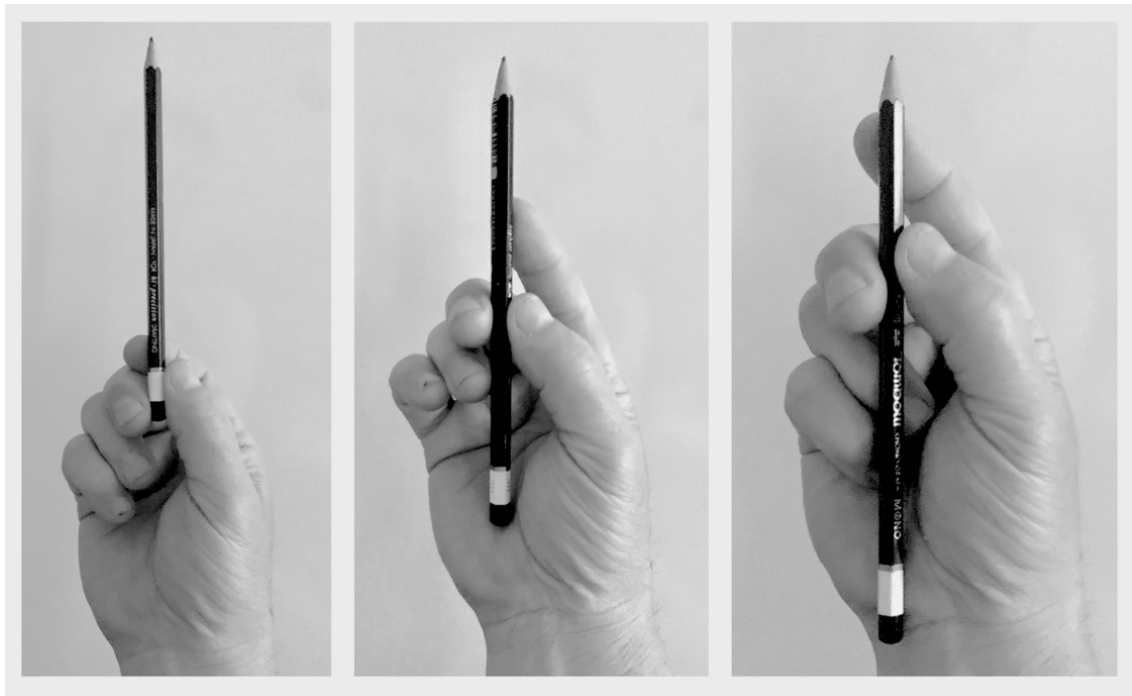
We learn to see in increments. British painter Joshua Reynolds reportedly began each of his portraits by placing the sitter in a darkened room. Reynolds would slowly admit more light into the room until the sitter was fully illuminated for the finishing touches. The more we look, the deeper we see. Making marks on a page while looking at something is a sensory-tactile-cognitive activity that can strengthen visual memory and develop a more discerning eye. One must embody the work of art before they can produce it. To quote naturalist John Burroughs—

“You must have the bird in your heart before you find it in the bush.”

## 2. The Instrument

A dancer or actor might refer to their body as their “instrument.” A draftsman seldom does. A drawing tool is an extension of the hand, propelled by the human form. The feet and legs maintain balance, while the hips pivot the torso. Shoulder muscles animate the arm, with its rotary elbow, wrist, and fingers. The trapezius and neck muscles move the head, as one gaze shifts from a subject to the page. Drawing is a physical activity that demands varying degrees of exertion. A pencil, brush, or charcoal stick cannot pick itself up and make a mark.

### Lesson One: *Get a Grip*



Place the butt-end of the pencil in the palm of your hand, lay your index-finger upon its side, extending toward the tip. Rest the shaft of the pencil between your thumb and bent middle-finger. Alternately, you might rest both your first and second finger on the pencil, with its shaft between them. Never hold the pencil in a writing position unless you are seated at a desk. Hold

it instead like a pointer, or an orchestral conductor's baton. A looser grip will create a wider range of marks. A fencing-master in Raphael Sabatini's novel *Scaramouche* tells the protagonist Moreau, "A sword is like a bird. If you clutch it too tightly, you choke it . . . too lightly, and it flies away." The same is true of most hand tools.

## **Lesson Two: Marks**

All drawings begin with a physical gesture. No one can make a mark without moving one's body. An infinite number of possible marks can be divided into two categories—intentional marks guided by decision-making, and automatic marks produced by human anatomy. The natural rotation of the wrist or elbow generates curved lines that appeal to the eye, and feel agreeable to the touch, but they distract from whatever is being drawn. One must learn to avoid making such marks when drawing from observation, although they might bring a soupçon of elegance to more decorative endeavors.

West Point drawing master Thomas Gimbrede said,

*"There are only two lines in drawing, the straight line and the curve line. Everyone can draw a straight line, and everyone can draw a curve line, therefore everyone can draw."*

### **Lesson Three: *Line Pressure***



Start by holding the pencil with its point as far from your hand as possible. Grasp the butt-end of the pencil between your thumb, index and middle-fingers. Sketch lightly, loosely, with mostly indefinite marks. Instead of drawing a solid line, you might make a chain of dots or dashes, to be connected later. As your drawing develops, and you become more certain of what to put down, move your grip closer to the point to darken your line.

### **Lesson Four: *Defining the Frame.***

First look at your subject. Choose either a vertical *portrait* or horizontal *landscape* format. Start by drawing the rectangular boundaries of your drawing—the *window* through which your vision will take shape. Put the point of your pencil on the page at a modest distance from the edge.

Place the edges of the book or page in a notch formed between your second and third fingertips. Let your hand glide from one edge of the page to the other. The shape of the page should never dictate the proportions of *your* rectangle. That decision is yours alone.

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—Thomas Gimbrede. (1781-1832) Drawing Master, U.S. Military Academy West Point.

### **Lesson Five *Straight Lines*.**

As a good warmup exercise before drawing is to lay down a series of straight lines in as many different directions as possible. A line can represent several ideas—a division, a direction, or a connection. Drawing lines with a ruler bypasses the mind, by concealing the action until the straightedge is removed. Learn how to use your body as a mechanical device. Put two dots on the page at some distance apart. Place the tip of the pencil on one dot, at a right angle to the direction of the line you wish to draw. Try to connect the dots without looking at the pencil, or the line you are making. The greater the distance between the dots, the more likely it will be for the line to bend downward because the wrist and the arm both tends to act like a compass.

Anticipate this. Compensate by guiding the pencil upwards.

Similar principles apply to shooting a rifle. If a marksman’s body, grip, and breathing are in perfect alignment, adjusting the weapon for windage and elevation, the bullet will hit its mark.

Practice makes perfect.

### **Warmup Exercise: *Curved Lines*.**

A good warmup exercise is to fill a page with curved lines. The first few times you try doing this, you will notice that most of the curves are identical. The reason for this is that your hand and wrist are in fact a kind of compass. Changing the grip from a writing position to a pointing position will yield similar results. That open curve is proof that one's body is making visual decisions—not the eye or the mind. Practice drawing different kinds of curves on an empty sheet of paper. How many can you invent? Approach learning exercises like play—a corrective form of visual therapy.

### **Lesson Six: Seeing The Page**

The page is always the largest thing in your drawing. Actors and dancers must learn how to walk across a stage—how to own their space—just as anyone who makes a drawing must orchestrate the entire page. Beginners tend to copy objects in attempts to draw, rather than exploring the space around the subject, and within the confines of the page.

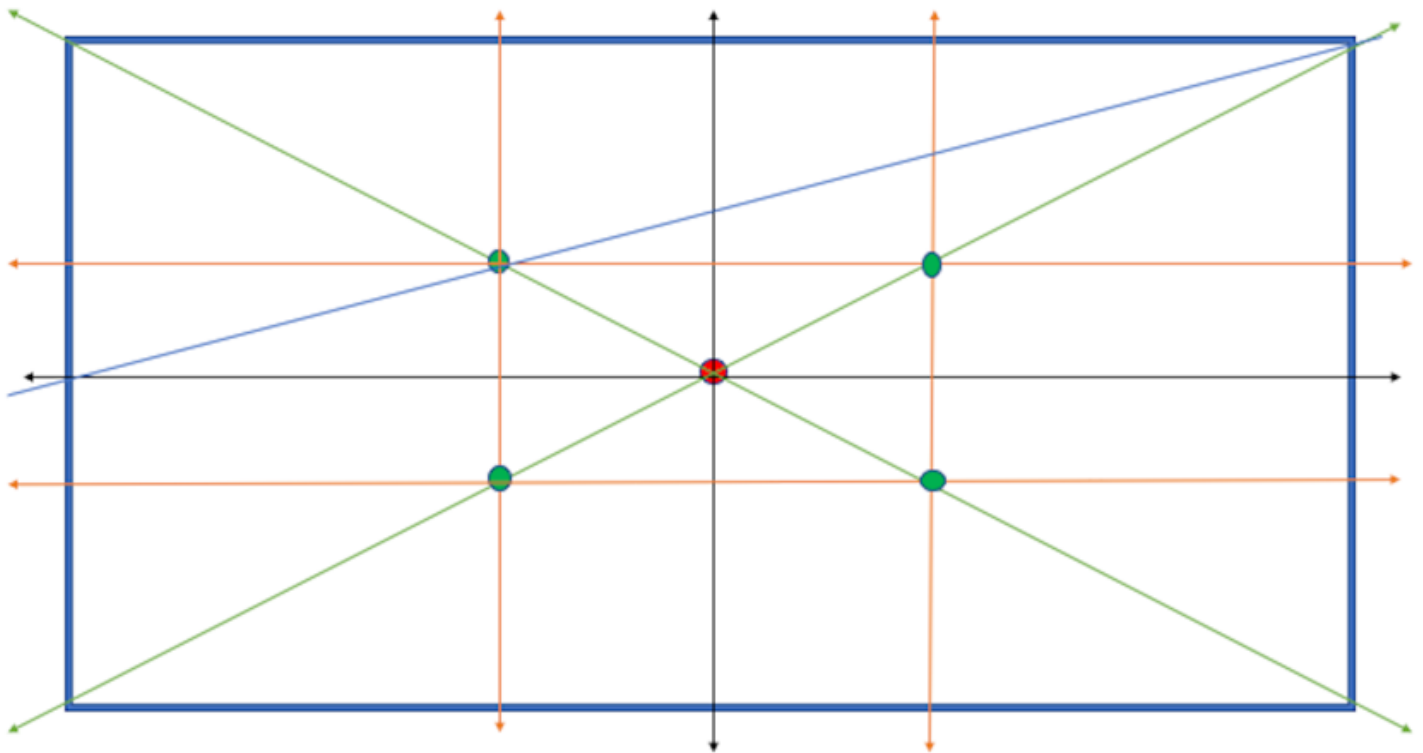
**Exercise**— Use an HB graphite pencil.

**Step one**—Without drawing shapes, make as many unique marks as possible—light and dark, quick and slow, long and short, curved and straight-jagged and smooth—distributed evenly across the page. Keep drawing until every inch of the page bears a mark.

**Step Two**—Stop drawing and look at the page for as long as it took you to fill it. What do you see? Look for an image in your random marks. When you find it, do not make an outline, but delineate it instead with rows of dots or a broken line.

## Lesson Seven: The Anatomy of the Rectangle

*Laws of Quadrants and Thirds.* If drawing is all curved line and straight lines, then pictorial composition—designing the picture is all about movements and measurement—motion and rest. If this sounds like music, it is. Motion and rest are represented by two basic concepts: dynamism and balance, expressed as symmetry and asymmetry. Some refer to this as the “anatomy of the rectangle”. Having decided which format—portrait or landscape, and what shape—square, rectangular or panoramic, you need to look at the muscle, guts and bones inside the frame.



*“The one thing a student has got to do is to learn that there is a rectangle up there. . . and it has to be filled.” —Sir Alfred Hitchcock*

## DRAWING OUTDOORS

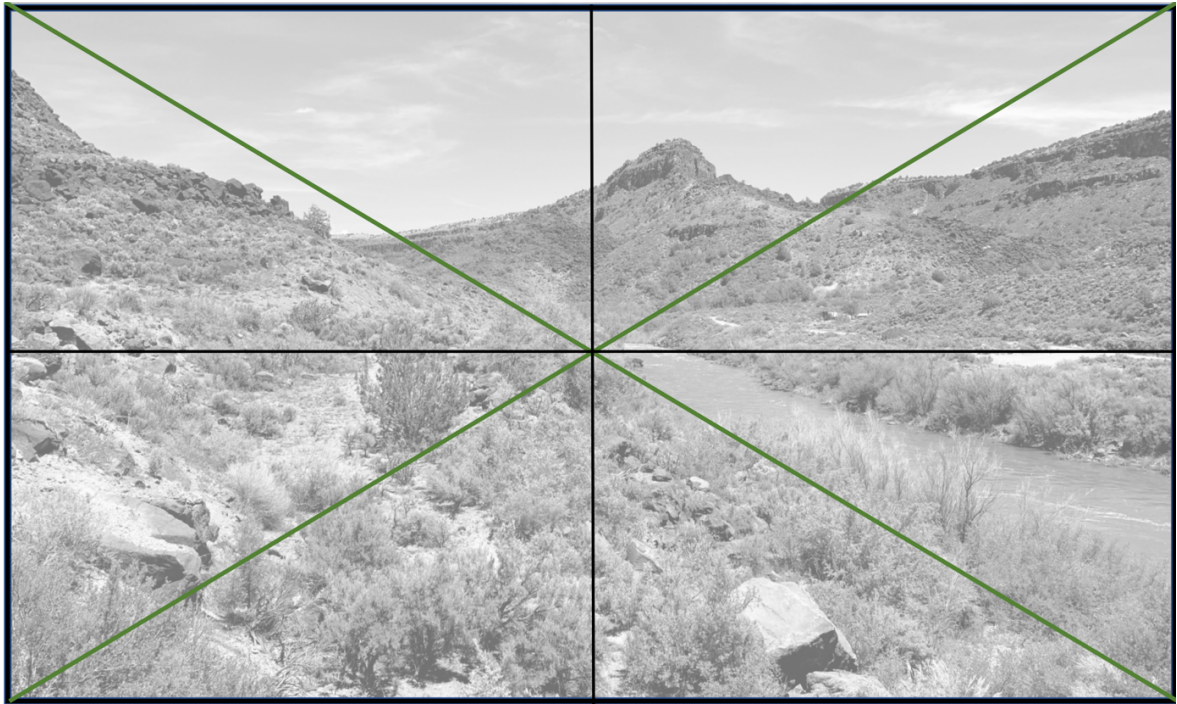


Let's apply these concepts to drawing onsite—

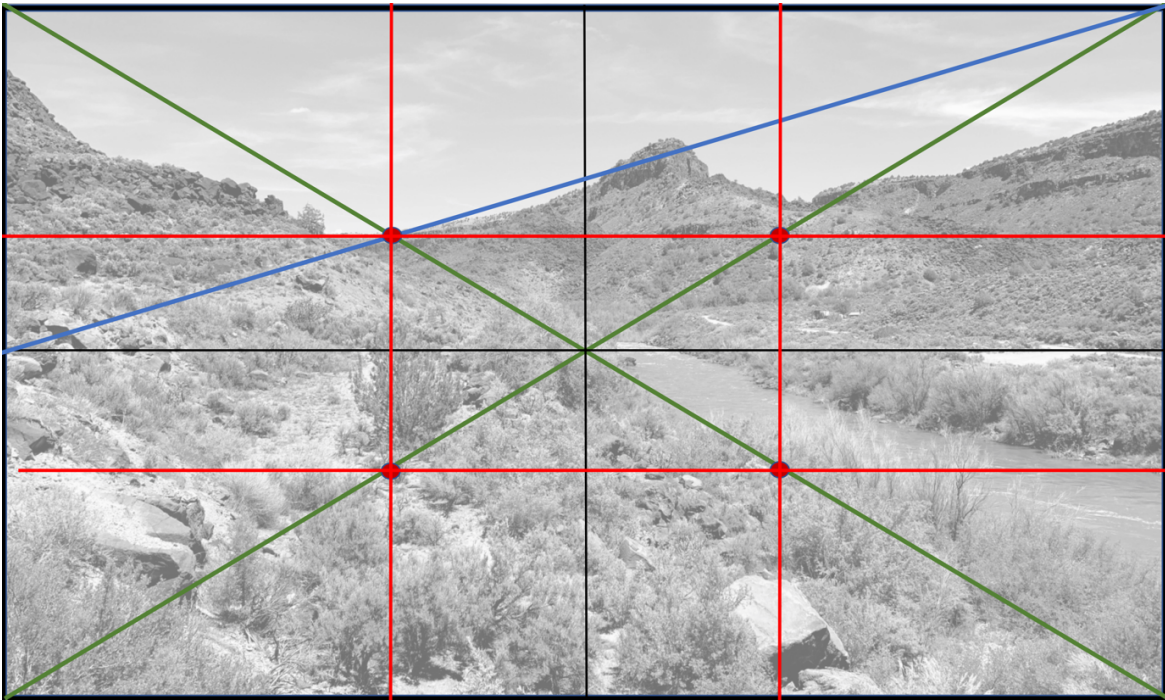
A. **Define the frame:** The rectangle of your page becomes your field of vision.



B. **Law of Quadrants.** Divide your rectangle four ways. Draw straight lines connecting opposite corners. Where they cross is the center on the page. Draw a vertical line through this point. Through it then draw a horizontal, clear across the page. You will see four new rectangles, each identical in proportion to the shape the just divided. This represents symmetry. Make sure that whatever each of these contains has a different character from all the rest. While you want stability, you also want a lively image.



**C. Law of Thirds.** Draw a line between one end of the center horizontal line dividing the top quadrants from the bottom two, and the upper corner opposite. Where this line crosses the diagonal drawn to find the center, make a dot. Drop a vertical through it to the diagonal below. Next draw horizontals from these point past the center of the page to the other diagonals. Mark the interstices as before. Those who are familiar with old SLR cameras will recognize these four dots from the viewfinders of old cameras. These points are used to target subjects off-center to avoid static compositions.



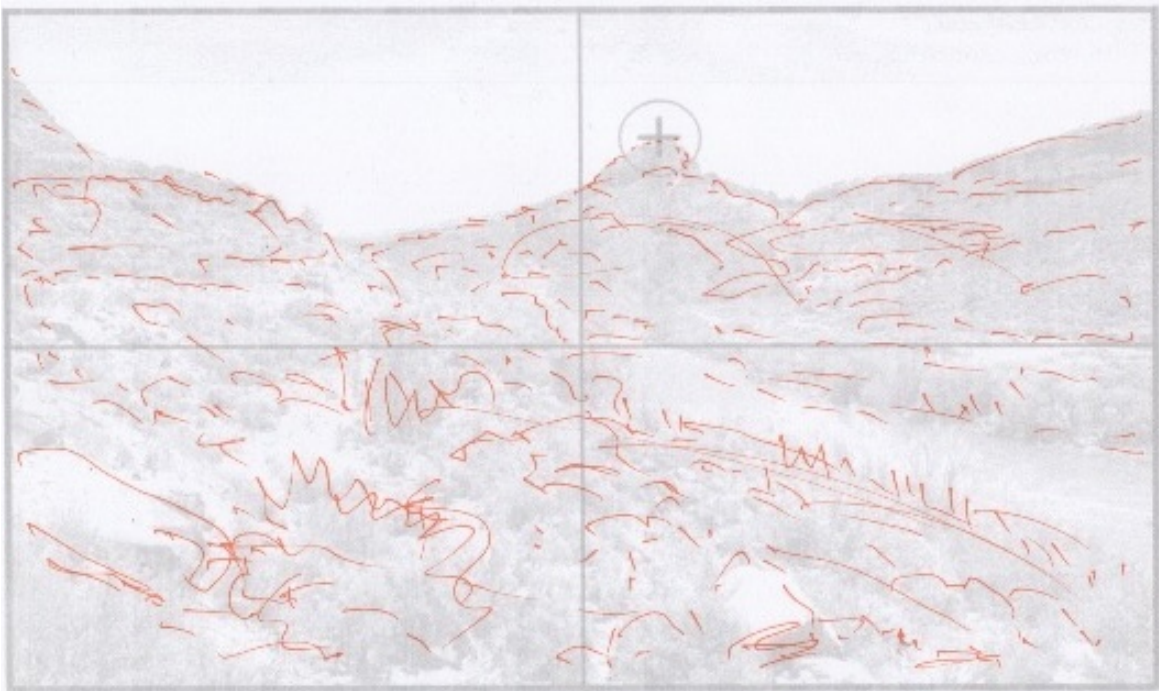
D. **Determine your horizon.** Where is your eye level? This is the divide between looking up and that which is down.



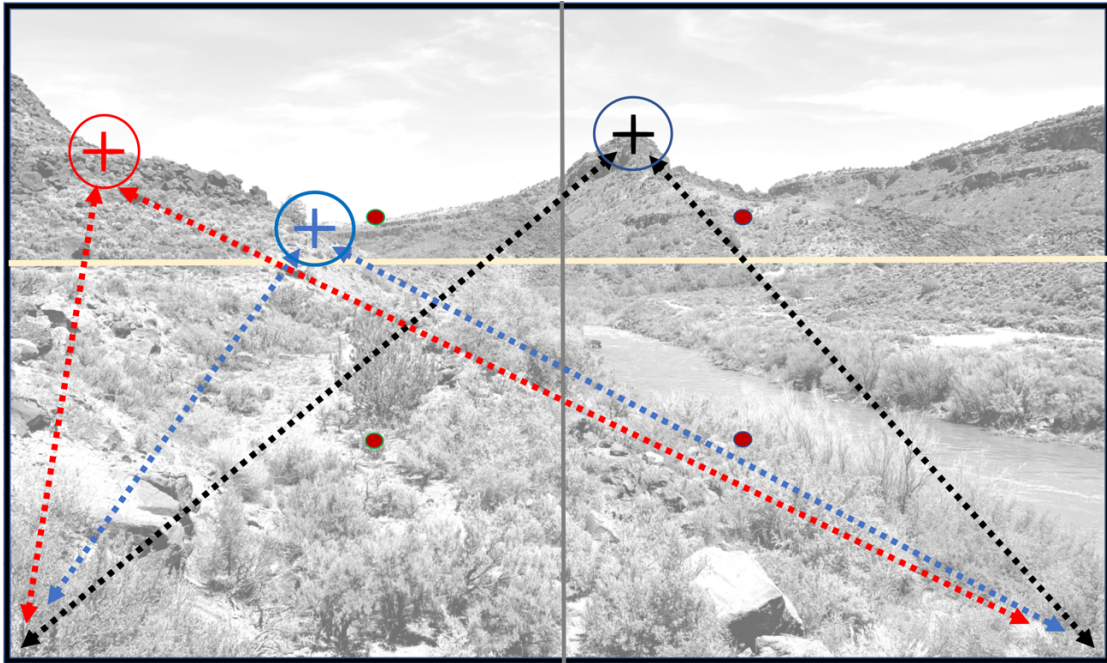
- E. **Establish a focal point.** There may be multiple focal points by the time your drawing is done, but start with one for all your gestures, measurements, and mapping.



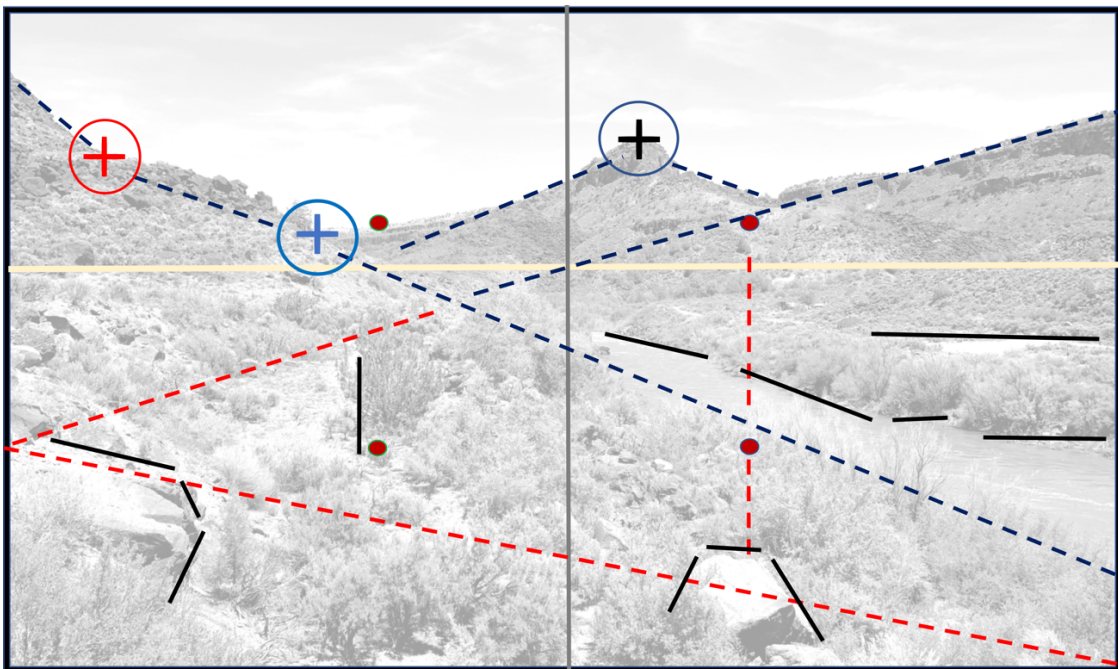
- F. **Make a quick sketch** of the movement of the biggest forms you see. Ignore details.



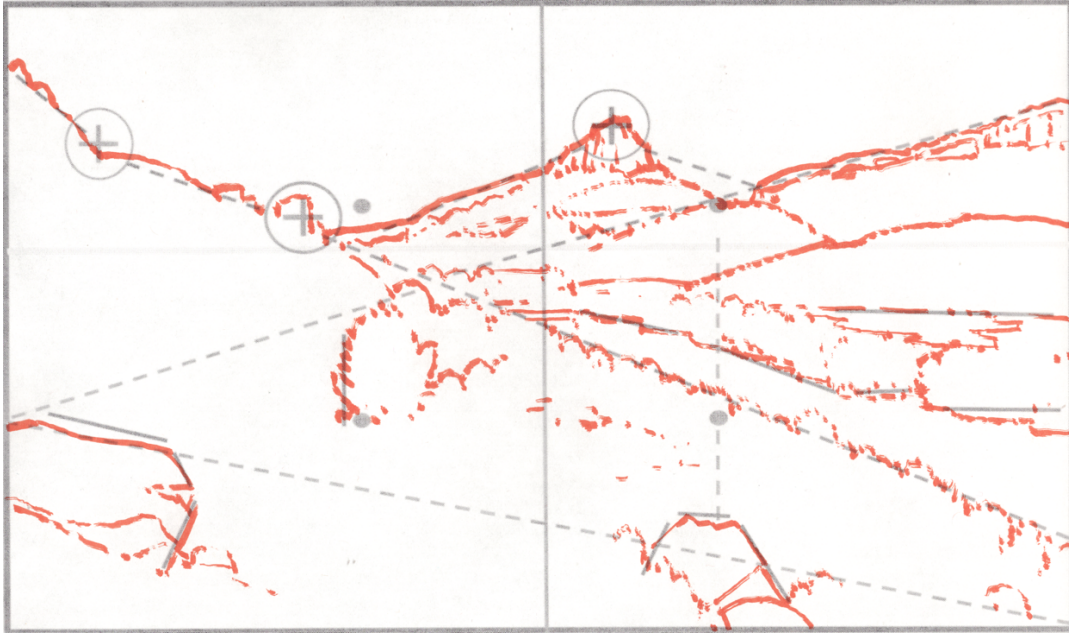
**G. Metes and Bounds.** Measure angles and distances



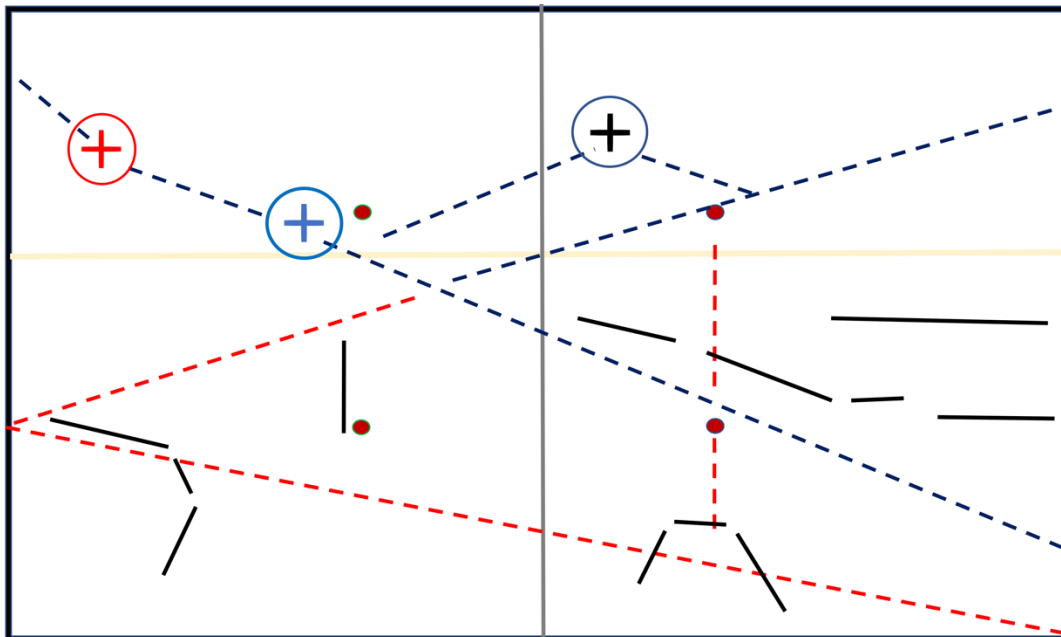
**H. Look for general alignments** of the edges of forms. Begin with the largest



- I. **Map the image**, by combining all the preceding steps. Do not draw outlines and shapes. Only use broken lines. Draw with a light touch of a hard (H) pencil. Orang lines are used below for emphasis.

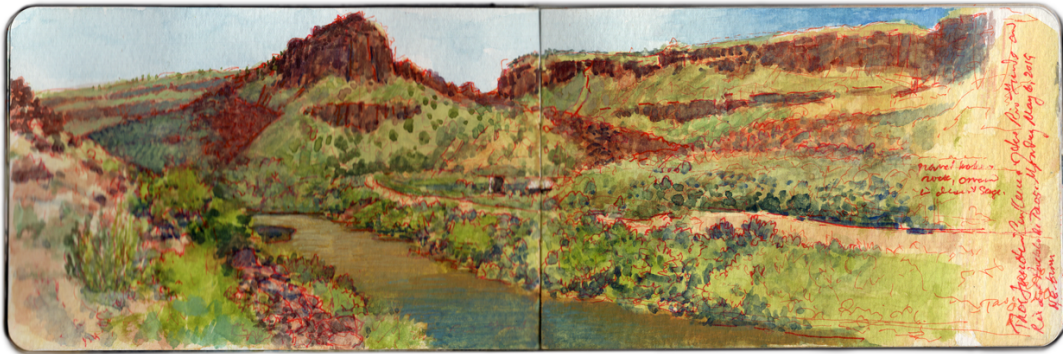


- J. **Hidden abstractions.** Never forget the armature that supports the image.



NB: Once you understand these basic concepts, you can become more imaginative.

Variations on a theme:



Sketchbook painting 3.5 x 10"



Color intaglio copperplate print. 4 x 10"



Watercolor 5.5 z 7.5 inches

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