

## Anyone Can Learn to Draw

Writing, taught through elementary lines and curves, entered the common school curriculum in the first half of the nineteenth century, about the same time that artists like John Gadsby Chapman published drawing books. (See Fig. 1.1.) Chapman argued that if everyone could write, then everyone could draw. Drawing had practical value in every occupation; it was useful as well as pleasurable.

Basic skills in drawing were no longer to be reserved for professional artists or gentlemen and ladies who studied the fine arts as polite accomplishments to occupy their leisure time. Only a few Americans might be artistic geniuses, but, with hard work, everyone with ordinary abilities could learn how to draw, just as they could learn how to form letters. Penmanship and drawing skills democratized communication as American society moved from rural communities to industrial towns.<sup>1</sup>

## Drawing Literacy

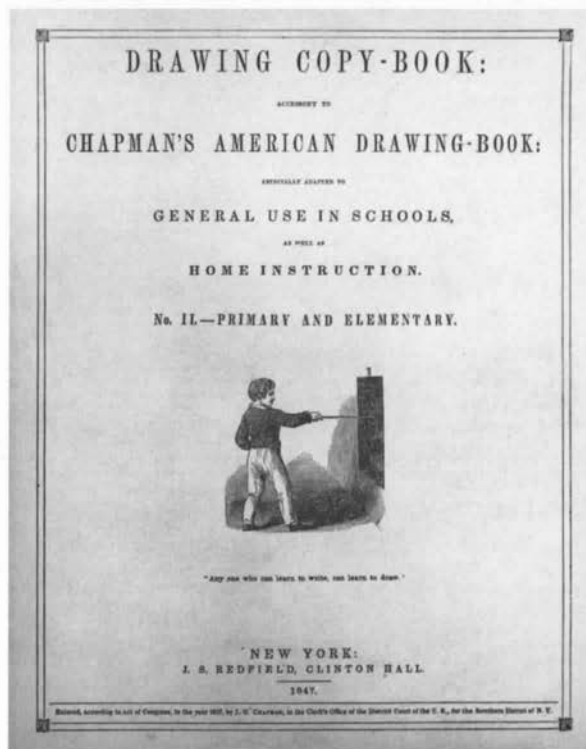
Drawing was a skill for functional literacy in three ante-bellum social contexts: the world of art and artists, the world of genteel society, and the world of technology. In these contexts, the ability to draw enabled men and women to complete practical tasks or to establish social status as refined persons.

Drawing literacy, however, was more than an occupational skill. The ability to draw, like other forms of liberating literacy, could open minds to new ideas and aspirations, extend the limits of one's world, organize experience, and create a desire for more artistic skills. The more people had and used drawing skills, the more they wanted their children to be able to draw. As drawing entered more and more schools, the scope of the art curriculum expanded to encompass a growing range of skills, media, and art forms.<sup>2</sup>

## Learning to Draw in the World of Art and Artists

Since the Renaissance and earlier, artists had learned to draw by working as apprentices in the studios of other artists. Aspiring artists copied drawings, architectural ornaments, and sculptures collected by master artists or the patrons of master artists. The earliest public museums, in post-revolutionary France, collected architectural and sculptural fragments and engravings for use by artists-in-training. Lack of collections of engravings and sculpture and of other exemplary works of art was one reason early North American artists felt disadvantaged and wanted to study in Europe.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the art academy had replaced apprenticeship throughout Europe. The academic education of a painter or sculptor was based on learning how previous artists



1.1 Although many illustrations in Chapman's American Drawing-Book depicted genteel women and girls engaged in drawing, this schoolboy drawing on a blackboard with a chalk holder suggests a different audience for the copybook. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.)

had mastered the human figure. The alphabet for student artists consisted of parts of the human body—eyes, nose, and lips—followed by combinations of these features in full-face and profile; next studies of chins, then ears, leading up to drawings of the head with all the features. Students first copied two-dimensional engravings; later they drew from three-dimensional plaster casts. When the student was judged competent, he was allowed to draw from

life. (Most art students were men, in part because moral strictures made it difficult, if not impossible, for women to draw the nude in mixed company.)

Systematic initiation into drawing was supplemented by studies in perspective, geometry, proportion, and anatomy. Artists gained theoretical knowledge by listening to lectures on artistic principles and on the history of art. Neither cost efficient nor practical for mass education, the art academy remained the model for artist education throughout the nineteenth century and in some places even later.

### Learning to Draw in the World of Genteel Society

#### *Access to the Fine Arts*

In eighteenth-century North America, access to the fine arts was limited to upper-class men and women. Only gentlemen and ladies had the economic resources and leisure to engage in the pursuits of polite society: commissioning handsome houses; selecting fine furniture, paintings, and sculpture to decorate those houses; and cultivating personal talents in music, drawing and painting, or poetry.

These Americans aspired to emulate European aristocracy by creating and living in a world of beauty and refinement. By the 1830s, more Americans had the cash and time needed to devote themselves to the pursuit of refinement, in what Bushman has labeled “vernacular gentility.”<sup>3</sup> Members of the emerging middle class sought to distinguish themselves from lower classes through genteel behavior—polite manners displayed during formal social occasions, ownership of appropriate furnishings in elegant surroundings, and accomplishments in the arts and literature. In this context, one motivation for art education became the desire to emulate one’s betters by cultivating and demonstrating good taste, aesthetic sensitivity, and artistic skills. Women



### John Gadsby Chapman

Chapman (1808–89) was a painter and printmaker born in Alexandria, Virginia. He studied painting with local artists before attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1827. With the help of friends he studied art in Rome and Florence, copying old master paintings. After his return to the United States, he taught wood engraving, drew and engraved illustrations, and painted portraits in New York. Chapman’s *American Drawing-Book* was republished many times. Returning to Europe in 1848, Chapman continued to paint historical scenes and landscapes until his death.

In his drawing book, Chapman listed reasons for learning to draw:

- To make recognizable forms with grace and accuracy and to understand visual images
- To serve as a pleasurable accomplishment, but also as a practical endeavor that trains eye and hand
- To give artistic education to workmen so that they can improve American goods and better compete with European manufacturers
- To help copyists avoid errors in their work
- To provide respectable means of support for dependent females who can use drawing skills in their own handwork and educating children
- To support the growth of national good taste and a national art
- To help schoolgirls select subjects for needlework from nature!