

Encajar and sight-size

Ann Witheridge examines two classical drawing techniques that are being revived within the atelier schools

There are art studios and ateliers springing up over the US, Europe and London that differ from the standard art schools and institutions of today in that they have a defined method of training. This form of training, working with more mature artists in a concentrated group, has been around for centuries. The 'encajar' and 'sight-size' methods are firmly entrenched within the atelier tradition, and usually have a trained master or masters at the helm.

Terminology explained

Encajar is a Spanish word that literally means to fit, to embox, or envelope the form. The term sight-size is equally explicit, and means to draw or paint the size you see. Broadly speaking, sight-size is a technique where the sum of the parts makes up the whole, whereas encajar differs in that the whole is expressed

before the parts. Sight-size is generally used for a slower build up of paint, with glazes and mediums, whereas encajar is suited to direct painting, since its initial start is much more immediate. When looking at drawing techniques, sight-size artists will slowly build up the charcoal, while those trained using encajar will mass the charcoal in straight away. However, this is a huge generalisation, as one can be incredibly immediate with sight-size, and also use glazes and layering of charcoal and paint with encajar.

To measure or not to measure....

Sight-size: you literally draw the size you see, so in simplistic terms you are tracing the three-dimensional object on to a two-dimensional picture plane. The artist places the easel alongside the subject, which makes finding shapes obvious and



Sight-size cast drawing, charcoal, 27½×19½in (70×50cm)

foolproof. The most important aspect is that the artist steps back to the same place to examine the subject and image from the same set distance. The student measures using a plumb line, from the given distance, the heights and widths, making calculated marks or dots on the paper. At the initial learning stages the student uses these measuring tools to train their hand-eye coordination. Once confidence grows, the experienced sight-size artist would rarely use or abandon completely the plumb line. Nor would he seek to place a series of dots around the paper. Having gained the necessary aptitude through measuring the artist would work much more broadly. The average first-term student using sight-size would expect to spend 30 hours or more on a refined accurate rendering of a cast drawing (above).

DEMONSTRATION *Sight-size still life*

It is important during the learning process to set up simple harmonious still lifes. Try to look for objects that have a variety of textures, but not a jamboree. The light source is from one direction, creating clear shadow and light masses.



Photograph of the still-life set up



STAGE ONE

Place a series of dots around the canvas to indicate the height and width of the objects

**STAGE TWO**

Draw in greater details the object contour and shadow mass

**STAGE THREE**

Slowly block in the background, holding onto the contour

Encajar: literally enveloping, putting into a box the whole image, ie seeing the large, the whole before the parts. As with sight-size, it is important to stand back from the easel but the distance is not so specific, but with encajar you commit to the top and bottom lines, ie the placement of the whole composition on the canvas, whether working on a plaster cast, a simple still life or a complex figure pose. There are no measuring tools involved, just visual translation. Once the top and bottom are set the artist will establish the outside vertical lines. Within minutes, 12 or so long diagonal lines will be drawn representing the major angles, on the exterior of the form and a few indicating major horizontal landmarks. From here one carves into the high and low points on the exterior contour drawing straight into the form to indicate the shadow lines. Shadows often visually extend beyond the positive space. The student uses the eye immediately to gauge the overall width of the object relative to its height. It takes confidence to learn to trust one's eye from the start, rather than relying on tools, which will eventually be disregarded, to train the eye.

The use of charcoal

With sight-size the artist establishes the outline of the object, then the shadow line. The student slowly builds up the darks with layers of compressed charcoal, working from light to dark. With encajar, the method is more direct. The student still finds the outline and shadow line, but immediately blocks in the whole dark mass, including the background, ie the shadow and the background in one. The artist then removes charcoal to get the varying degrees of dark in the shadow, and adds compressed charcoal to model the uprights.

**STAGE FOUR**

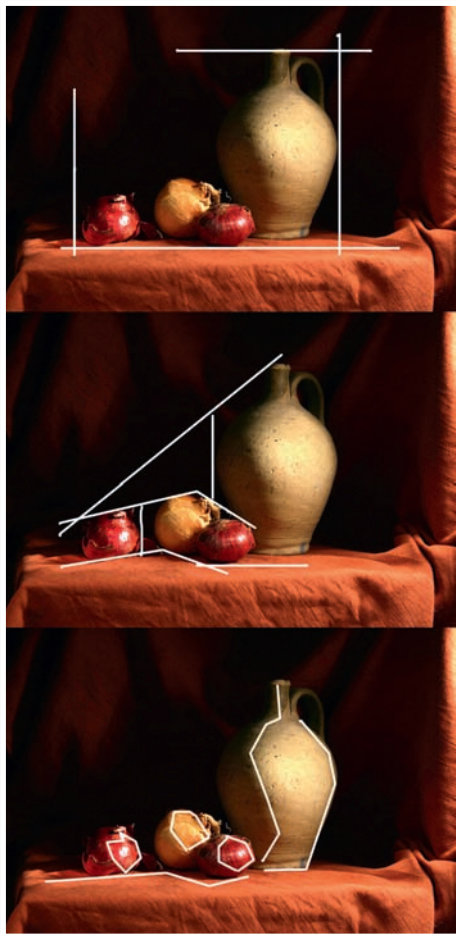
Slowly add the colour notes of the individual objects

**STAGE FIVE**

Sight-size still life, 14¼×17¼in (35×45cm). Keep on modelling up the form

ENCAJAR AND SIGHT-SIZE

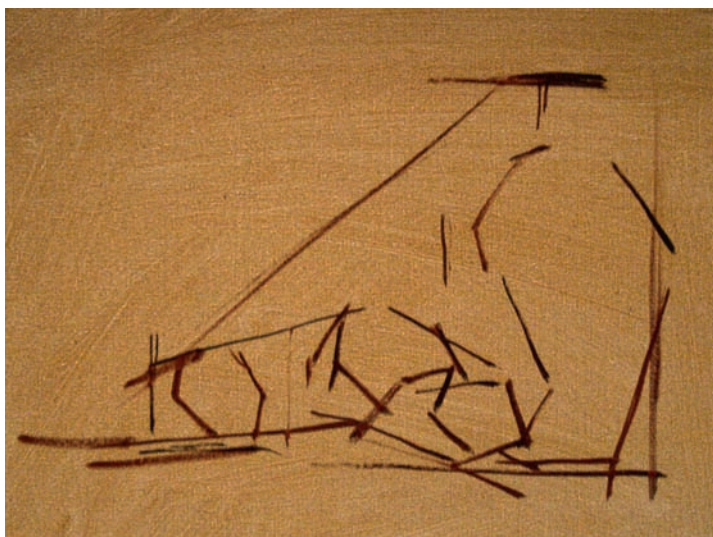
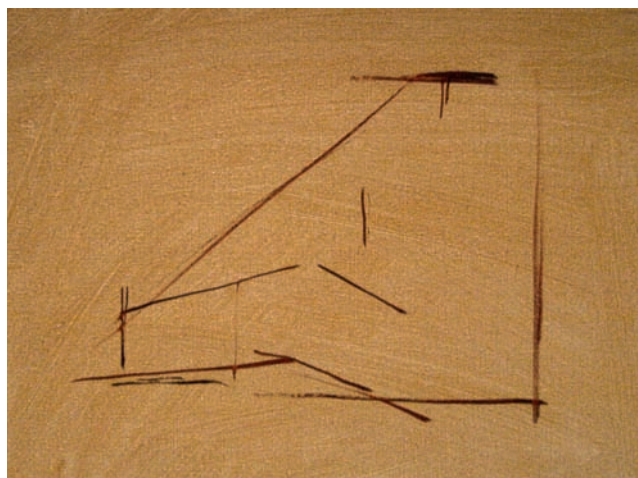
DEMONSTRATION *Encajar still life*



These white lines indicate the initial lines that are laid down to find the overall proportions and relationships of the objects

STAGE ONE

Find the longest outside lines that describe the form, like a sculptor looking at a chunk of marble and slicing off the largest pieces not needed. Using paint, mark the top and bottom of the object and the two extreme sides to indicate the overall height compared to the width. Try to limit yourself to a maximum of 12 lines to indicate the whole form, its proportion and the relationship of the objects one to another



STAGE TWO

Find the shadow shapes

Paint and focus

With the sight-size technique, the student draws for about a year before they can move on to paint. The philosophy being once you can find the shapes with drawing the painting process will seem much simpler.

With encajar, the student is encouraged to start painting within the first term, but always to balance painting with drawing. The philosophy here is that drawing and painting are not separate disciplines. Every aspect of the learning process is the same and the visual language is the same, whether using charcoal or paint. The only difference is the introduction of colour, but colour should never override the emphasis on values (light and dark).

The degree to which the artist polishes up and tightens a painting is a matter of taste. Likewise both techniques can serve an artist to have a refined and tightened

painting style or to remain broad and loose. With encajar, the start is much broader, therefore it is easier to remain broad and you can decide how far you tighten the painting. With sight-size the start is tighter and more specific and therefore it can lend itself to a more refined style. But this again is a generalisation. If well practised, both techniques can lead to the same results, and both can offer a choice of refined or broad strokes.

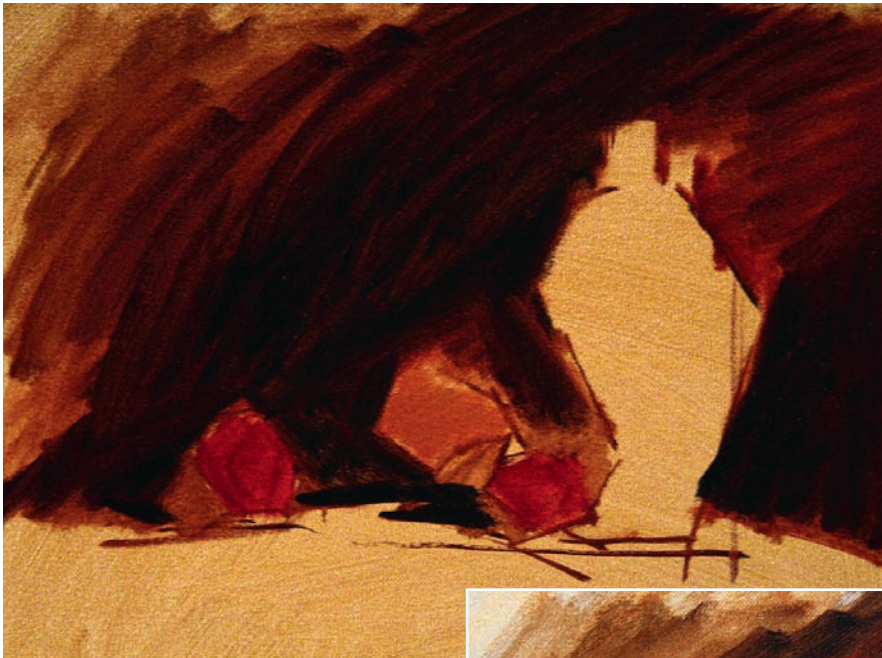
Adaptability

Sight-size is really a portrait technique, although it is used for still lifes and can be used for certain landscapes. Both Titian and Sargent used sight-size for portraiture, but Titian would not have used it for his multi-figure group allegorical or religious painting. Nor would Sargent have used it for his many other genres, his landscapes and beach

views, his watercolours and sketches.

Sight-size can receive a bad press if artists are too purist about it, and try and use it slavishly, rather than broadly like Sargent. The most beautiful aspect of sight-size is not the plumb-line but the idea of focus. As you stand back from the easel you have the same broad focus on the canvas as on the model. Indeed a truly sight-sized painting should appear abstract when up close, and only come into focus as the viewer steps away from the painting, so that you can literally walk away from a painting in a gallery and slowly see it come into focus.

Neither method is superior. Both are just the starting points and have a wonderful heritage in the history of figurative painting. As artists we have so much to learn to better our art form and techniques, we have so much to convey just of the aesthetically beautiful before we even start with a world of ideas. It is


**STAGE THREE**

Block in the whole shadow mass

STAGE FOUR

Add more information to the colour and values in the lights

'It takes confidence to learn to trust one's eye from the start, rather than relying on tools'

important that we share techniques and ideas, that we don't become arrogant and elitist. It is indeed important to remember that it was the stifled Academies of Paris that nearly led to the loss of this figurative tradition. A classically trained singer like Cecilia Bartoli does not compare herself to Madonna. They are both singers at the heights of their genres, but their work is incomparable. Likewise the argument between classical art and contemporary art is futile, furthermore it undermines the true commitment of the figurative artist to work from and translate nature, in all its forms. At Lavender Hill we teach encajar. I feel it is a more immediate approach, more time efficient. For my taste encajar is more liberating and broad, it can translate better to landscapes, to sketches and multi figure group compositions. We do introduce sight-size to students, but only after they have understood the technique of encajar. 

**STAGE FIVE**

Encajar still life, 14¼×17¼in (35×45cm). Leave the highlights and dark accents till last

Ann Witheridge

trained within the sight-size tradition and taught it for five years at the Charles Cecil Studios in Florence. Since leaving Florence she has trained with Nick Bashall who in turn trained with Torrents Llado, in Spain. Ann is co-founder of Lavender Hill Studios, www.lavenderhillstudios.com; <http://annwitheridge.com>