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An Exploration of the Four-Stage Progressive Logic in Figure Sketching: "Contour–Form–Theme–Spirit"

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Abstract: Figure sketching holds an irreplaceable position in Chinese visual arts. From figure copying or live sketching in the supplementary art examinations for junior and senior high school students to figure sketching in university art programs, figure sketching has consistently served as a core medium within the discipline of fine arts, embodying the integration of formal competence and spiritual expression. Current research on figure sketching predominantly focuses on technical expression, yet lacks systematic analyses of the interrelationships between theme, spirit, form, and contour—from internal to external dimensions. This study employs four core dimensions—contour, form, theme, and spirit—to elucidate the formal principles, artistic expressive logic, and aesthetic value of figure sketching. The research methodology includes literature review, case analysis, and formal deconstruction. Drawing on eight years of systematic study at an art academy, four years of teaching practice in higher education institutions, and over a decade of creative experience, this paper posits that contour defines the boundaries of form, form captures the essence of space, theme constitutes the core of expression, and spirit represents the soul of art. These four elements progress hierarchically and mutually reinforce each other, collectively forming a complete artistic framework for figure sketching.

Keywords: Figure sketching; Contours; Form; Theme; Spirit

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1. Introduction

In the historical evolution of sketching, during the Renaissance, sketching served as a foundational tool for oil painting or mural creation, functioning as a repository of material resources for artists. As art progressed into the late period of Modernism, the function of sketching shifted; it gradually became a means for artists to explore formal expression. In the postmodern era, characterized by a strong emphasis on conceptualism, artists continued to produce renderings and process sketches of their intended works prior to final creation [1]. Figure sketching serves as the foundation of form, a vehicle for emotion, and even a cultural symbol; it integrates both technical and humanistic dimensions. Domestic and international scholars have primarily

focused their research on human figure sketching on anatomical structures—including bones, muscles, and fabric folds—the teaching of sketching techniques, and the evolution of sketching styles across different regions; however, studies exploring the interrelationship between "inner themes and spiritual essence" and "external form and contours" remain limited. This paper aims to leverage external technical expressions of contours and form to convey the thematic essence of figure sketching, thereby ultimately achieving the expression of its spiritual essence. This work seeks to provide an academic reference for the teaching of figure sketching, theoretical research on figure sketching, and creative practice in this field.

2. Contours

The contour serves as both the visual boundary and the foundational starting point for figure sketching. It is not merely a simple outline; rather, it embodies the application of three-dimensional thinking to handle the figure's structure, volume transitions, and spatial relationships between foreground and background. The contours drawn in such sketches represent the pivotal relationships within the figure's spatial composition. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres excelled at capturing the graceful and poised posture of female figures. His sketches are characterized by a rustic yet rigorous style, often employing concise and clear lines to delineate the general contours of the figure, without resorting to excessive use of chiaroscuro or intricate shading effects [2].



Figure 1. Ingres, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. (France), Study for The Grand Odalisque, pencil sketch, 18.5 × 25.4 cm, 1813, Louvre Museum, Paris.

The contours of a figure sketch can be divided into inner contours and outer contours—also referred to as inner shapes and outer shapes. Inner contours primarily emphasize detailed key elements such as the transitions of form and the continuity of structure, while outer contours focus on crucial structural aspects like dynamism, proportion, and overall morphology. These inner and outer contours do not exist in isolation; instead, they intersect, helping to capture the vividness of the composition—its interplay of solidity and void, lightness and weight—thereby conveying a sense of rhythm in the figure sketch. As shown in **Figure 2**, the female figure sketch by Chinese artist Guan Jie exhibits a sculptural solidity. The inner contours of the female figure are richly structured; when these contours extend toward the outer contours, they create variations in

solidity and void, lightness and weight, endowing the entire composition with vitality and rhythmic appeal.

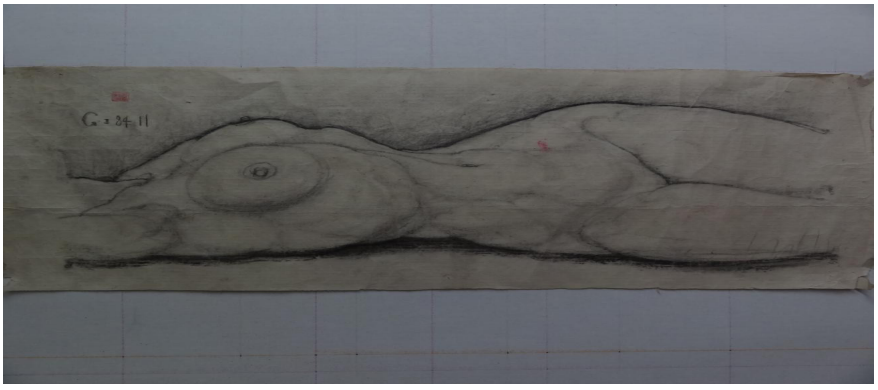


Figure 2. Guan Jie, *Female Figure Study*, pencil sketch, dimensions unknown, 1984, private collection

The outline serves as the cornerstone, underpinned by four core dimensions: outline, form, theme, and spirit. The outline defines the transitions between solid and void within the form, preventing the composition from appearing rigid while endowing the lines with fluidity and vitality. The outline also supports the theme; as illustrated in **Figure 2**, based on the author's established sculptural and powerful thematic tone, the inner and outer contours are either emphasized or simplified according to expressive requirements, ensuring that these contours resonate with the thematic mood. Furthermore, the outline can point toward the spirit; as shown in **Figure 1**, concise contour lines serve as the starting point for capturing the graceful, delicate, and poised poise of Angel's female figure.

3. Form

Form is divided into shape and volume: "shape refers to the surface morphology of an object, volume refers to the aggregate of internal quantities within an object, and form constitutes an indivisible whole" [3]. In figure drawing, the concept of "form" encompasses the figure's volumetric masses, overall spatial relationships, and skeletal-muscular structure; it is not merely a series of thin lines. To effectively render form, one should begin with anatomical knowledge, prioritize structural understanding, utilize volume to create a sense of spatial depth, and finally employ form coordination and center-of-gravity proportions to achieve balance in dynamic poses.

The Chinese artist Mr. Zhao Dajun once remarked: "Volume and movement hold far greater significance as formal elements compared to light and shadow, tonal values, and texture; he cautioned his students, 'We live within forms.'" As shown in **Figure 3**, in Mr. Zhao Dajun's painting *The Strongman*, the various parts of the figure's form, through specific movements, establish an exceptionally vivid spatial relationship within the composition [4]. Examining Professor Guan Jie's work *Female Figure Study* (**Figure 4**) reveals that before beginning a figure sketch, one must observe the completeness and distinctive features of the form, as well as the interrelationships between forms and the significance of spatial relationships. One should not limit oneself to following only the contour lines and the lines of light and shadow when drawing a figure; the contour is an extension of the form, whereas without this connection, the contour would merely be a

line. Frequently, artists unconsciously rely on contour lines and light-shadow boundaries to depict the form, failing to discern which elements constitute essential aspects of the form and which are merely accidental optical illusions of light and shadow that can be overlooked. When the form is rendered within the confines of a contour, what is being depicted is not merely the contour itself, but the form and its three-dimensional volume. If the completeness of this form and volume is insufficient, the depicted form will revert to a mere line—a paradox wherein one is essentially drawing a line, yet the intent is to represent a form. When depicting a form, the contour should resemble intertwined braids—each segment transitioning into the next—to collectively construct a cohesive three-dimensional shape that fits within space. To the naked eye, the form along the contour may appear to vanish; this occurs because the form has effectively rotated past the contour line. Thus, a contour is not merely a line; rather, it is an extension of the form itself.



Figure 3. Zhao Dajun, *The Strongman*, charcoal and ink drawing on paper, 71 × 45 cm, 1977; original work is now lost.



Figure 4. Guan Jie, *Female Figure Study*, pencil sketch, dimensions unknown, 1981, private collection

In figure sketching, the theme is conveyed through the form structure; the form serves as the vehicle for the theme, concretizing it. Simultaneously, the form provides the objective foundation for capturing the essence; without the artist's precise rendering of the form tailored to the theme, the essence would appear pale and hollow. In summary, form constitutes the concrete representation of the figure in sketching; it acts as the pivotal link connecting the external contours, the internal theme, and the overall essence.

4. Theme

The theme of a figure sketch refers to the ideas, emotions, and concepts conveyed by the work, while also integrating aesthetic appeal, emotional resonance, and humanistic qualities. The theme represents an elevation of the subject matter; it requires the subject to be carefully curated and imbued with a specific artistic conception—such as vitality, a sense of power, or humanistic concern—so that the resulting sketch captures the figure's aesthetic characteristics, personality traits, cultural identity, and socio-philosophical attributes. As illustrated in **Figure 5**, Wang Shikuo's *Blood-Covered Clothes*, "Wang Shikuo's sketching during the Yan' an period profoundly influenced his creation of *Blood-Covered Clothes* after the founding of the People's Republic of China. This influence is evident not only in the selection of themes, stylistic techniques, characterization, and emotional expression, but also in the historical significance and social value embodied in the work" [5].



Figure 5. Wang Shikuo, *Blood-Covered Clothes*, charcoal sketch, 192 cm × 345 cm, 1959, held in the collection of the National Museum of China

The German artist Käthe Kollwitz's "Blood Clothes" differs from that of the Chinese artist Wang Shikuo in its macro-narrative approach to the theme of red realism. Kollwitz, on the other hand, focused on the theme of maternal consciousness—as seen in her work *Woman Holding a Dead Child* (**Figure 6**)—where she employed bold, rugged lines to achieve selective composition in line with the thematic requirements. Kollwitz's depictions of maternal themes function like bridges: with just a few strokes, they outline the figure's form and capture its inner world, conveying its essence. In her diary, Kollwitz wrote, "My works are not pure art, but they are art. I agree that my art has a purpose: in an era when humanity is so helpless and seeks aid, I wish to play my part—each person doing their utmost, and that is all" [6].

When an artist establishes the subject of a figure sketch, the canvas provides a feedback mechanism during the painting process; regardless of the techniques employed, the work remains anchored to this subject. Otherwise, the artist may fall into a mode of objective replication—a detached, passive approach to painting—characterized by rigid brushwork, excessive caution, and a fear that even the slightest deviation might render the work incorrect. Such an attitude precludes the creation of a work that truly captures the essence of the subject or conveys the figure's inner spirit. This outcome depends on whether the artist genuinely immerses themselves in the subject, establishing an empathetic connection and entering the world of the subject; only then can such empathy foster a sense of presence, which in turn aligns the artist's own state of being with that of the subject. Finally, this process determines how the artist approaches the work—specifically, which techniques, methods, and forms of expression they will utilize. There are no fixed formulas or definitive rules for technique; rather, the key lies not in the mechanics of the brushwork, but in the way the artist thinks and perceives, enabling them to access a state of profound insight and understanding. In figure sketching, the artist's own state of being—both physical and mental, as well as their cognitive state—must be prioritized. This state is fundamentally determined by the quality of the empathetic resonance between the artist and the subject. Thus, the subject constitutes the ideological core of figure sketching: it imparts meaning to the figure's form and contours; it shapes the expressive language of the sketch through the artist's empathetic alignment; and it likewise provides the conceptual foundation upon which the figure's inner spirit is forged.



Figure 6. Käthe Kollwitz, *Woman Holding a Dead Child*, charcoal drawing, 47.5 × 62 cm, 1903, held by the Kollwitz Museum, Cologne

5. Spirit

In Chinese painting, the concept of "spiritual charm" originated in the Jin Dynasty. The renowned painter Gu Kaizhi once proposed the principle of "expressing the spirit through form," asserting that "only by depicting form with the aim of conveying the spirit—while appropriately emphasizing, selecting, or even exaggerating and distorting the form's spiritual essence—can one truly achieve the goal of 'expressing the spirit through form'" [7].

The essence of artistic expression lies not in mere formal resemblance, but in the visual manifestation of a figure's inner temperament, emotions, and vitality—a spiritual articulation within figure sketches. As illustrated in **Figure 7**, Egon Schiele's *Reclining Nude Woman*, the artist does not strive to beautify the

female physique; instead, through exaggerated and distorted forms, as well as fractured, trembling, and taut lines, he directly externalizes the figure's inner psychological states—such as spiritual anguish and existential anxiety—onto the canvas, thereby evoking a sense of solitude. In his figure sketches, Egon Schiele eschews delicate rendering of light and shadow, prioritizing the revelation of the figure's inner world instead. This approach exemplifies Expressionism: capturing the soul through form, but focusing on the inner spirit rather than outward appearance or demeanor.



Figure 7. Egon Schiele, *Reclining Nude Woman*, Japanese paper; pencil and opaque pigments; 31.4 cm × 48.2 cm; 1914; Albertina Museum, Vienna

The essence of figure sketching begins with careful observation of the subject—such as in Liu Wei's series *Tibetan Sentiments* (**Figure 8**), which captures the dynamic vitality and distinctive features of the people of Xizang, China. This is followed by defining the central theme, and only then does one proceed to render the form and contours. Only through this sequence can the subject's inner state be effectively conveyed. The essence constitutes the ultimate aesthetic goal of figure sketching, guiding the expression of contours, form, and theme.



Figure 8. Liu Wei, *Tibetan Sentiments*, charcoal block sketch, 21 cm × 29 cm × 8 cm, 2022, private collection

In *Studies for the Libyan Sibyl*—a figure sketch by the Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti

(1475–1564)—**Figure 9** exemplifies the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance. The figure in the painting turns and raises his arm, exuding a dynamic yet serene presence; its lines embody both rational rigor and vital vitality. Through its form, the figure celebrates and underscores the power of life, human dignity, and inner spirit—a perfect fusion of artistic grace and humanistic ethos.



Figure 9. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), *Studies for the Libyan Sibyl*, red chalk with small accents of white, 28.89 × 21.43 cm, 1510–1511, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, U.S.A.

In Egon Schiele's sketch *Self Portrait as St. Sebastian*, **Figure 10** stands as a quintessential example of Expressionist sketching. In this work, the figure is rendered with taut, distorted lines, and its limbs are exaggeratedly stretched. Schiele eschews nuanced chiaroscuro shading, instead employing concise, sharp contours to directly convey the subject's inner anguish and struggle. The form no longer adheres to objective realism, creating a striking contrast with the sketches of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Through the distortion of the human form, Schiele expresses spiritual torment, using distilled lines to strike directly at the subject's inner psyche—thereby perfectly embodying the subjective emotional expression characteristic of modern Expressionist sketching. A synthesis of spiritual resonance and emotional catharsis.



Figure 10. Egon Schiele, *Self Portrait as St. Sebastian*, pencil on paper, 32.3 × 48.3 cm, 1914, private collection

"Spiritual charm" refers to the precise capture of essence rather than strict adherence to physical form; precise form pertains to physical and physiological phenomena, whereas spiritual charm pertains to psychological phenomena. Spiritual charm emerges from the harmonious integration of the painter's visual language, spiritual cognition, and artistic practice. It constitutes the soul of figure sketching, serving as the core hallmark through which technical expression is elevated to the realm of art, grounded in form, contour, and subject matter.

6. Conclusion

This paper conducts a systematic exploration of the inherent logic underlying the construction of figure sketching, delineating and demonstrating a complete creative chain comprising four progressively layered, interdependent, and inseparable dimensions: contour, form, theme, and spirit. The contour serves as the foundational pillar, underpinning the transitions between form, void, and substance; it ensures that the composition avoids rigidity while endowing the lines with dynamism and vitality. Form represents the concrete manifestation of the figure in sketching, acting as the pivotal link that connects the external contour to the internal theme and spirit. The theme constitutes the ideological core of figure sketching; it imparts meaning to both the form and the contour, fosters expressive resonance through empathy between the theme and the artist, and likewise provides the conceptual foundation for the emergence of spirit. Spirit is the soul of figure sketching—the hallmark through which technical expression is elevated to the realm of art—realized through the integration of form, contour, and theme. These four elements progress from the superficial to the profound, moving gradually from external form toward inner essence; the absence of any one component would compromise the work: a sketch relying solely on contour would appear hollow and superficial; one emphasizing only form might degenerate into a mechanical structural template; one focusing solely on theme while lacking solid form would result in inadequate expressive power; and one pursuing spirit without a solid foundation in form would lead to an overly ethereal and unsubstantiated effect.

By systematically organizing these four logical layers, this study has delineated a comprehensive developmental framework for figure sketching—comprising "technique → form construction → conceptual expression → aesthetic refinement." This framework establishes intrinsic connections among technical training, form construction, conceptual expression, and aesthetic elevation; it challenges the long-standing, one-sided perception in figure sketching pedagogy—which prioritizes technical replication while neglecting spiritual expression—and thereby provides a systematic theoretical reference for artistic creation, classroom instruction, and related theoretical research in figure sketching within an international context.

At the same time, this study has certain limitations. While the primary focus of this research has been on the traditional hand-drawn figure sketching logic, there remains room for further exploration regarding the differences in figure modeling and aesthetic expression across diverse regions and civilizations from a cross-cultural perspective. In subsequent research, it would be valuable to adopt a digital-era approach to investigate how the formal language, creative methodologies, and aesthetic paradigms of figure sketching have evolved following the integration of new media—such as digital painting and 3D scanning—thereby continuously enriching the theoretical framework of figure sketching.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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