

Just get a sketchbook out: top UK artists lament decline of drawing classes

BY DALYA ALBERGE



British artist Sir Peter Blake says he tried to get Royal Academy Schools students to draw, without success. Photograph: Shaun Curry/AFP/Getty Images

The demise of drawing in some of Britain’s most prestigious art schools has been lamented by leading artists. Their comments come as Sir Peter Blake, who is preparing for a new exhibition, and David Hockney recall the inspiration of drawing classes they attended at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in the 1950s.

When Blake and Hockney were students, they learned how to draw in classes that were initially compulsory. Today’s RCA students are offered “feedback” rather than classes.

In the foreword to the catalogue for Blake’s show, Hockney writes: “There was a compulsory drawing class for the very first term, and I enjoyed that – I was aware at the time that I was learning a lot. I always liked the serious stuff, painting and drawing – and so did Peter. We both knew we were benefiting from a very good arts education, and we made the most of it.”

Now the most comprehensive exhibition of his collages will be staged at the Waddington Custot gallery in London from 18 June to 13 August. Peter Blake: Time Traveller will include his largest single picture, Late Period: Battle, featuring collaged and painted figures such as Elvis Presley.

In the catalogue – titled *Peter Blake: Collage* and published by Thames & Hudson on 10 June – Hockney writes: “Collages are essentially an extension of drawing; so to be really good at collage, like Picasso, you have to understand and master drawing. Peter’s drawings are detailed and meticulous. Peter brings the same meticulous quality to his collage work. Nobody has done anything quite like them. They’re terrific.”

Noting that Hockney draws “beautifully”, Blake said: “The general standard would have dropped a notch when Lucian Freud died. But Frank Auerbach is still drawing. He’s a great draughtsman. Colin Self’s still doing exquisite drawings. It’s still there, but it moves in and out of sight.”

Other leading artists echoed Blake’s lament, including the sculptor Michael Sandle, a Royal Academician who studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in the 1950s. He was “appalled” by the recent experience of a Slade student: “They told her ‘we’re not interested in your drawings.’”

He recalled staging a Tate Modern drawing masterclass for postgraduate students some years ago: “Quite a lot from the Slade. None of them knew how to draw because their teachers didn’t know how to draw. That’s the basis of it. You now have people who are more interested in conceptual art – which is actually what you do if you can’t draw... I don’t go into open studios for young artists any more because I lose the will to live... There’s no passion and no originality...”

“It bothers me that a lot of artists can’t draw. There’s an awful lot of snobbery. If you draw well, they say ‘you’re an illustrator’ because they can’t draw themselves. Actually, a lot of illustrators are extraordinarily good.”

Maggi Hambling, who has works in the British Museum, said: “People do whatever they want at art schools now. If you can draw the human figure, you can draw anything. There should be a life room in which people are encouraged to draw from the model.”

Recalling his time studying at the Slade in the 1990s, Stuart Pearson Wright, who has paintings in the National Portrait Gallery, said they weren’t “really taught any drawing at all. I taught myself to draw”.

He applauded his studies at the Royal Drawing School (RDS), adding: “It’s for people who are passionate about drawing.”

The RDS was established in 2000 by Catherine Goodman, its artistic director, and the Prince of Wales. Goodman said that art education changed in the early 1990s when “the concept was becoming the dominant thing, rather than the perceptual approach to making an image”.

“I started the drawing school because there was nowhere in London for serious young emerging artists to draw from life.”

Alexandria Smith, who heads the RCA’s MA painting course, said: “There isn’t a course structure in the traditional sense, unlike undergraduate institutions. Students do not attend classes, but receive feedback on a one-to-one and group basis.”

The RCA confirmed: “There’s no designated life-drawing room.”

Cathie Pilkington, keeper of the Royal Academy Schools, said: “Although academic life drawing is no longer a compulsory subject, many of our students use drawing as a central part of their practice.”

The Slade said: “Drawing is a fundamental part of many artists’ research ... All our students are expected to have an understanding of drawing before they arrive. Even in the pandemic, we continued to offer life-drawing sessions online.”