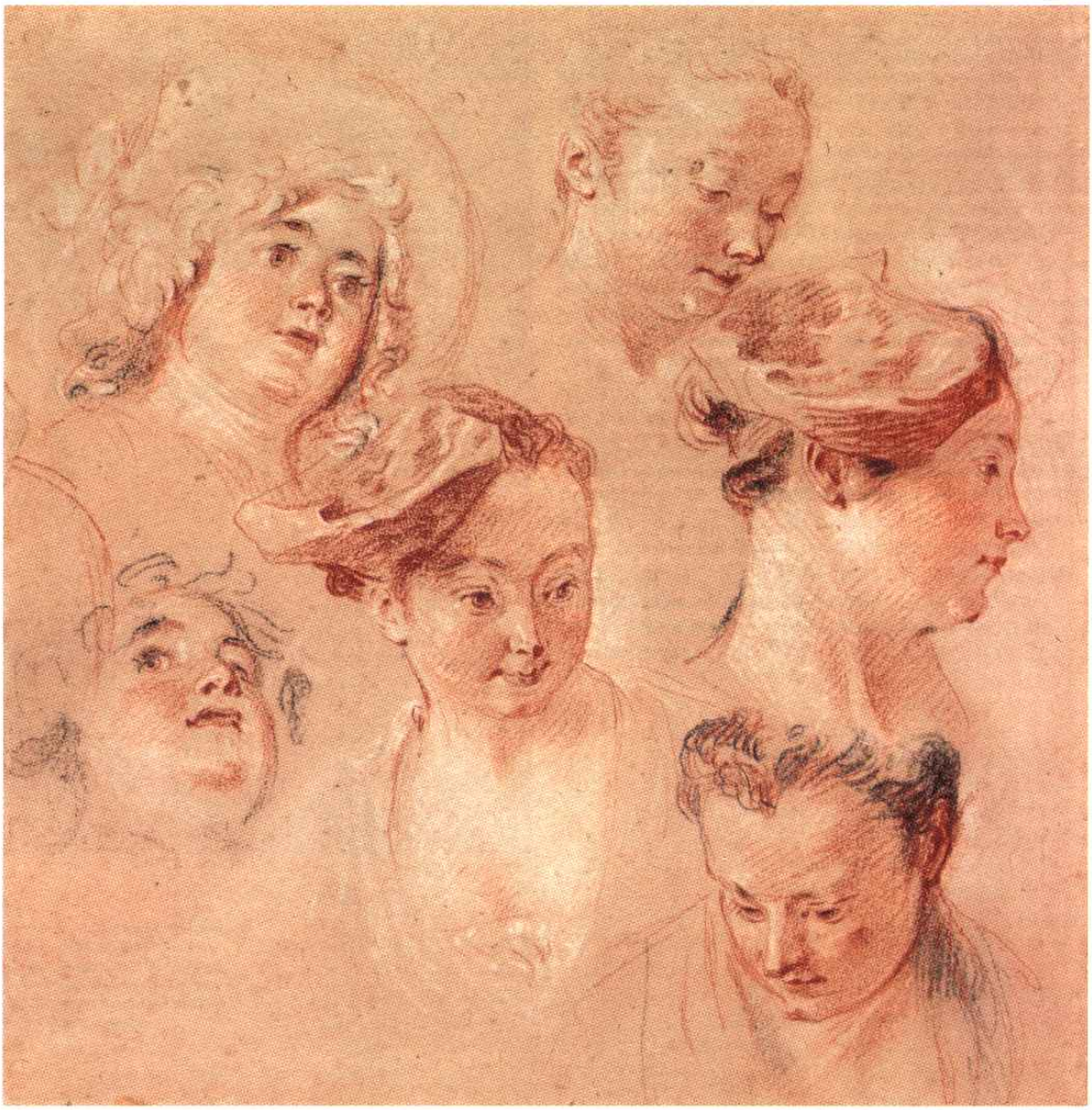
# Drawing:

# The Invention of a Modern Medium



# Time

Oliver Wunsch

Fig. 1
Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Six Studies of Heads*. See p. 284 for full information.

Unlike music or film, drawing is not a time-based medium in any traditional sense. Drawings, however, hardly escape time. They take time to make and time to see, time to tell stories and time to age. Almost any medium is temporal by these standards, but what distinguishes drawing is the way that it cuts time into a series of discrete traces.

Drawings are often described as occupying a place halfway between painting and writing, existing simultaneously as pictures and lines on a page. The spaces between these marks and the succession in which we process them give drawings their own kind of syntax, one that is as close to the sequential ordering of words in a sentence as it is to the blending of paint on a canvas. We see drawings, but we also read them, following their marks, breaks, and rhythms. If we comprehend time through the gaps and dividing lines that segment our experience, then drawings inscribe time through their very structure.

Time may be embedded in the medium of drawing, but not every artist draws it out, so to speak, in the same way. In the early decades of the 18th century, no artist made the temporal possibilities of the art form clearer than Jean-Antoine Watteau. His methods struck his contemporaries as peculiar: instead of drawing preparatory studies for particular paintings, he sketched without a specific goal in mind.[1] He treated his drawings as a place for observational wanderings, often depicting the same subject multiple times on a page. The result was a series of linked studies from different moments, a record of undirected observation in time.

Few of Watteau's drawings demonstrate the effect of these unusual habits more than his *Six Studies of Heads* (Fig. 1). A child's face appears twice on the left side of the drawing, four women's faces to the right. The order and dates of these sketches have generated some debate—Watteau would sometimes return to a drawing after several years and add sketches in the remaining spaces, looping his career into an intricate knot on a single piece of paper.[2] The real timeline of the drawing's creation, however, may ultimately be less meaningful than the temporal effect of the final composition. Five heads encircle the central sketch, forming an arc that leads the eye in an orbit around the sheet. Beginning with the study of the child in the lower left, each successive face in the curving sequence turns at a slightly divergent angle from the preceding one, generating the impression of movement in time. Overlaid on this kinetic temporality is the sense of aging across the faces. From the child in the lower left to the mature woman at lower right, Watteau suggests the possibility of a lifelong temporal progression.

Proust once compared Watteau's studies of faces to the memories that we accumulate of someone over several encounters. The analogy comes in *Swann's Way*, as Swann recalls his early impressions of Odette:

> When he was alone again, he would see that smile, he would see the one she had given him the day before, another with which she had greeted him on some occasion or other, the one with which she had responded in the carriage, when he had asked her if it annoyed her that he was straightening her cattleyas; and Odette's life during the rest of the time, since he knew nothing about it, appeared to him, with its neutral colourless background similar to those pages of studies by Watteau in which one sees, here, there, in every corner, from every angle, drawn in three colours on buff paper, innumerable smiles.[3]

None of Watteau's contemporaries, two centuries before Proust, came as close to articulating the relationship between his drawings and time. This is not to say, however, that these temporal effects are unrelated to the period in which they were produced. In fact, a powerful case has been made that the temporality of Watteau's drawings relates to a subjective understanding of time that emerged in the early 18th century, a historical shift registered in the writings of empirical philosophers and in technological changes such as the proliferation of the pocket watch.[4] What Watteau's drawings share with these developments is the idea that personal experience is necessarily temporal, that we make sense of our relationship to the world by tracking and marking our perception in time.

The personal sense of time embedded in drawing became a significant area of artistic self-definition as the 18th century progressed. Collectors came to fetishize drawings for the irreducible qualities of the artist's hand, and the speed of the draftsman's movements became a proxy for the immediacy of his thoughts, a way of signaling the direct connection between the person and the page.[5] Among the artists who most cultivated these effects in the generation after Watteau was the painter Hubert Robert, who regularly exhibited drawings alongside paintings, beginning with his first submissions to the Salon of 1767.[6] Celebrated among his contemporaries for his "astonishing rapidity of execution," Robert turned speed itself into an art form.[7] What made his approach to time especially distinctive was the way that it entered his subject matter as much as his working process. One particularly revealing example is the Harvard Art Museums' drawing *The See-Saw* (Fig. 2).

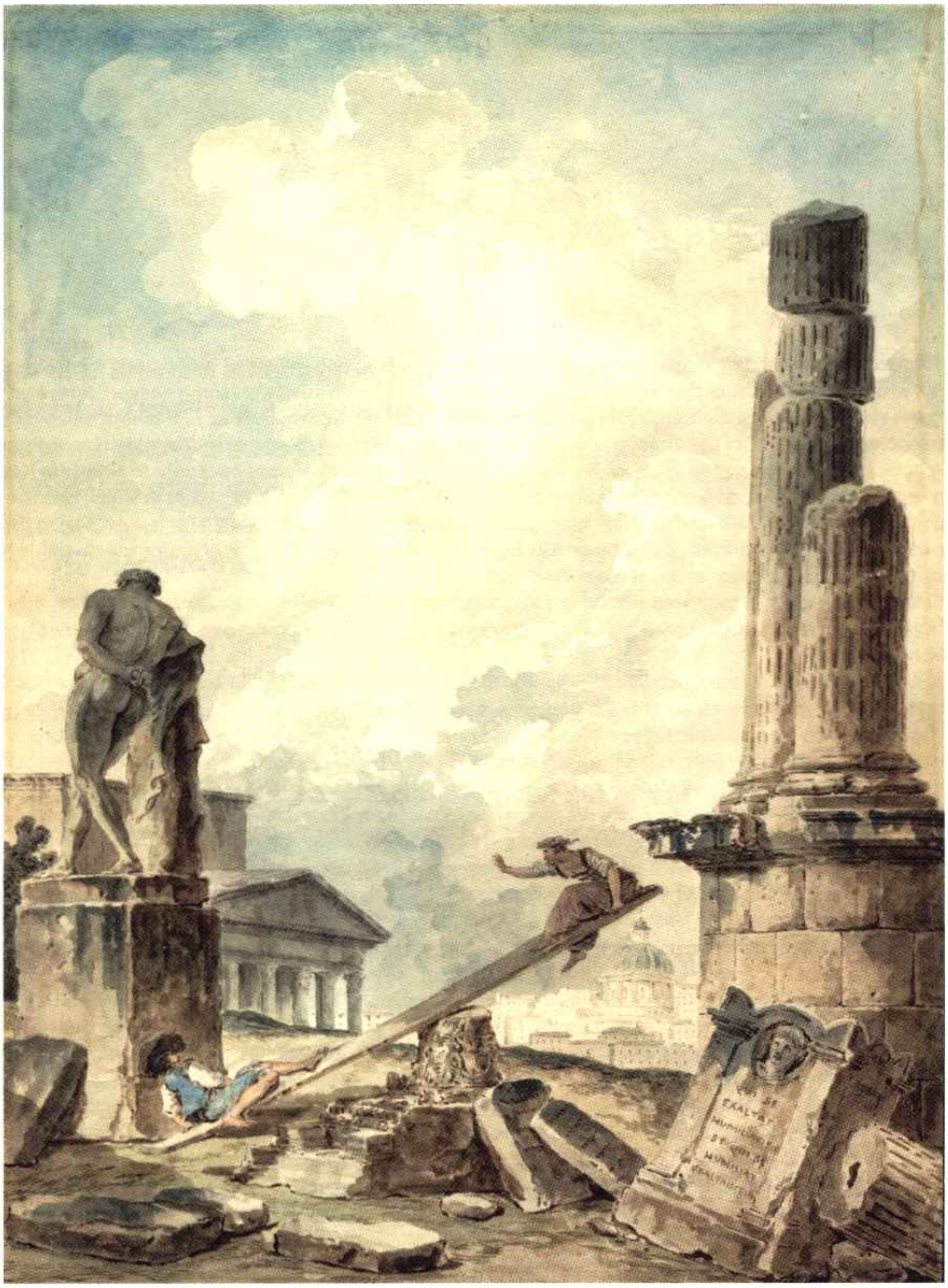


Fig. 2
Hubert Robert, *The See-Saw*, c. 1780–85. Black ink, brown wash, and watercolor on off-white antique laid paper, 44.3 × 32.5 cm (17 7/16 × 12 13/16 in.). Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Charles E. Dunlap, 1956.250.

Drawn in Paris in the early 1780s, the composition is a pastiche of scenes that Robert had seen in person while studying in Rome two decades earlier: the Farnese Hercules stands on a pedestal at left, the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica is visible in the distance. In the lower right corner, a funerary stone bears a biblical passage (Luke 14:11) that casts the scene of ruination in moral terms: "He who exalts himself will be humbled, he who humbles himself will be exalted." Such eschatological thinking, however, finds an obvious riposte in the seesawing man and woman at the picture's center. Either heedless or ignorant of their environment's immense historical import, they revel in the lighthearted pleasures of their own time. The irony, of course, is that their upward and downward movement echoes the rise and fall of civilization visible in the ruins surrounding them, but their playful indifference to the setting evacuates the landscape of any clear moral significance. Unlike the inscription on the funerary stone, the tottering couple suggests that ups and downs need not follow any rhyme or reason. Personal fortune, they imply, may have less to do with spiritual humility than the random bounces of time.[8] Rejecting any lugubrious retrospection or didactic prognostication, they take historical time as nothing more than the backdrop for frivolous amusement in the present.

This almost impudent relationship to history—the sense that the past is the playground of the present—unifies Robert's subject matter and process. The swirling motions of his hand and brush, his exuberant and unlabored gestures, and his casual sampling of ancient iconography all signify something of his own insouciant relationship to time. Robert was, to be sure, hardly indifferent to the past, having spent many of his formative years training in Rome, but he engaged with history in a manner that privileged the improvisatory pleasures of the present. His rapid sketches, with their flowing expanses of watercolor over cursory chalk marks, aspire not to historical monumentality but toward an integration of art with the joys of daily experience. These are drawings that inhabit time on the order of the minute or the hour, not the century or the millennium. It was through his extemporaneous embrace of his own time that Robert made sense of his relationship to the past.

But not all artists found it so easy to create drawings with an awareness of their position in historical time. For some, the past was as much a burden as it was an inspiration. Few artists strained beneath its weight more than French painter Théodore Géricault. A year spent in Italy (1816–17) solidified his understanding of his place in historical time. Upon arriving, he is said to have "trembled before the masters of Italy," and took a long time to recover from his confusion.[9]

Whatever historical burden Géricault felt at first, he soon channeled it into drawings of a subject that consumed him for much of his trip: the race of the Barberi horses. He witnessed this annual horse race down the Corso in Rome during the Carnival of 1817, and he executed more than 50 drawings related to it over subsequent months.[10] The Harvard Art Museums hold one of the most developed of these drawings, one that testifies to the competing temporal interests that guided Géricault's draftsmanship (Fig. 3).

What began as a study of a specific event in contemporary Roman life soon evolved into a scene with a much more complicated temporal structure. As his drawings progressed, Géricault stripped his figures of their modern garb, showing them instead as classical nudes. The Harvard drawing comes toward the end of this evolution, as Géricault tried to solidify the configuration of human and equine bodies against a schematically rendered backdrop. He flattened and simplified the urban landscape of Rome, pressing the figures into an increasingly frieze-like formation that dramatically reshaped the picture's sense of time. The revised composition positions the figures along an axis running from left to right, encouraging the viewer to survey them sequentially rather than in a single glance. Because Géricault borrowed this format from ancient friezes, the arrangement also implicitly invokes a deeper sense of archaeological time. Drawn as if it were an antique band of sculpted stone, the whole image carries the heft of a relic that has survived for thousands of years.

The literal and figurative weight of the frieze captures both the historical burden and ambition that drove Géricault's entire project. He intended to enlarge this

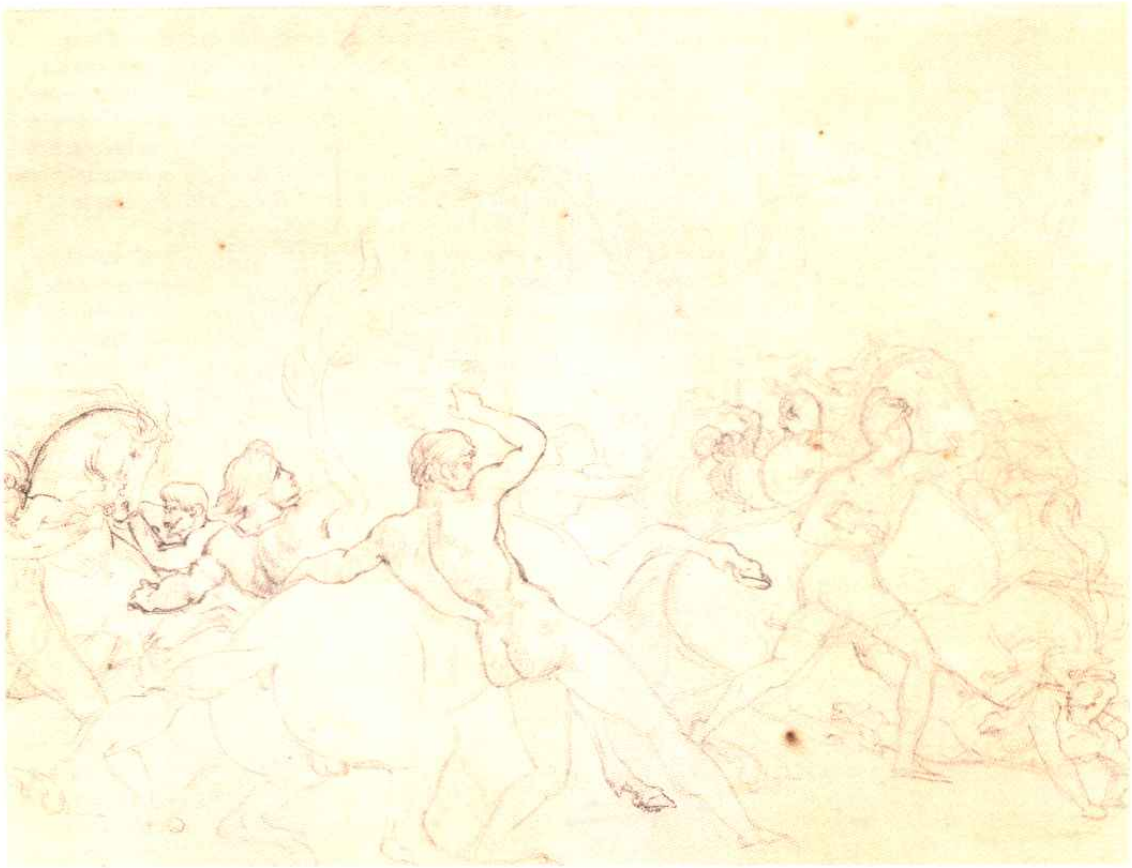


Fig. 3
Théodore Géricault, *Study for the Start of the Race of the Barberi Horses*.
See p. 284 for full information.

composition to a monumental 30-foot canvas—a scale that could compete with any historical predecessor.[11] Each pose in the drawing owes a debt to a long line of artistic progenitors, a simultaneous homage to and display of command over the past. The specific artists and objects that Géricault brought to bear on the drawing are less significant than the way that he transmitted their collective weight into his pencil as it moved across the page.[12] In the torso of the central man, we see Géricault's tendency to inscribe lines repeatedly, not just to emphasize the contours of a figure, but also to ensure their adherence to the idealized forms of classical tradition. As if holding the pencil under the pressure of the artifacts that came before him, Géricault incises these marks deep into the paper.

This burden of the ancient past is all the more striking for its juxtaposition with the spontaneous and insistently present movements of the horses that Géricault depicts. In drawing these animals, he is at once definitive and hesitant, sometimes allowing his graphite to swirl freely, other times making fitful, repetitive marks. Rendering the central horse's mane, he lets his hand loose in a flurry of twisting lines. The race was long over when he made these marks, but he outlines the horse's head with the speed of a draftsman trying to capture turbulent movements taking place in front of him.

Time pulled Géricault in two directions, through the depths of the distant past and into the dynamism of the present moment. His hand, at its most mobile, registers what the critic Auguste Jal would call the "actualité" of Romantic drawing, by which he meant its immediacy and concordance with contemporary life.[13] But for Géricault, immediacy remained inseparable from the time of the objects that preceded him. He would abandon, for reasons that he never specified, his plans for a large-scale painting of the Barberi horses. It exists now only as a monumental accumulation of procedural traces.

By the late 19th century, the imperative for rapidity in pictorial representation reached its apex among the impressionists. Drawing, however, occupied a vexed position within the movement. On the one hand, its potential speed made it an ideal medium for satisfying the impressionist preoccupation with transient perception. On the other hand, its preparatory function was of little use to artists who sought to eliminate any temporal gap between observation and painting.

Some of these temporal tensions become evident through the example of Berthe Morisot, one of the most active participants in the impressionist exhibitions in Paris from 1874 to 1886. To some visitors of those exhibitions, Morisot's shimmering and diaphanous paintings were evidence that she wasn't interested in the structure and planning phases that drawing offered. Her supposed disregard for drawing came to be seen, both positively and negatively, as an explanation for the sense of fleetingness in her paintings: "This would be very good if it were drawn," wrote one critic about her paintings in 1880, "but Mme Morisot disdains drawing! Some of her paintings seem ready to evaporate like a light smoke!"[14]

It was around this moment, however, that drawing was in fact becoming an increasingly important tool through which Morisot explored ephemeral effects.[15] Although she kept the vast majority of these sketches private, Morisot spent much of the 1880s attending to passing phenomena with pencil and paper, capturing fleetingness not in an instant but through protracted study. A sheet of her sketches now in the Harvard Art Museums most likely dates from this decade, and it gives some indication of the observational time that went into her seemingly transient compositions (Fig. 4).[16] Two studies of a woman drinking tea overlap with the faint tracings of two other faces lower on the page. In the adjacent sketches of the tea drinker, Morisot renders the same figure in slightly different positions, her face almost in profile at left, then at a quarter turn in the study at right. The sketch records the change of the woman's position as well as the fluctuating effects of light on her skin, tracking the shifting shadows that creep across her cheeks. Morisot's pencil operates much as a brush would, applying the graphite in both lines and smears. Smudges around the face and neck suggest the flickering of light, even a gauzy haze of steam rising from the teacup. The "evaporating smoke" evoked by Morisot's detractor may seem apropos, but the drawing belies the notion that such evanescence stems from a disdain for draftsmanship or sustained

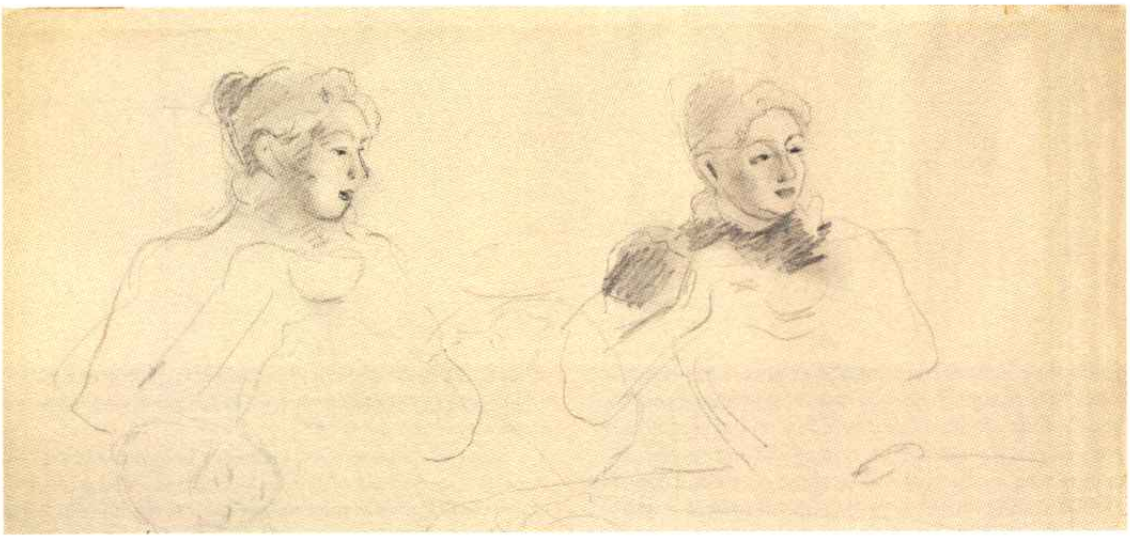


Fig. 4
Berthe Morisot, *Two Women Drinking Tea*. Graphite on cream wove paper, 22.2 × 36 cm (8¾ × 14³⁄₁₆ in.). Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Marian H. Phinney, 1962.17.

study. Transience, Morisot shows, is apprehended only through extended looking in time, when observations are recorded not just immediately but also repetitively and continuously.

Through drawings like this one, Morisot integrated her work into the temporality of daily experience. One of the platitudes about Morisot is that she is the most "personal" of the impressionists, a notion bound up with her status as a female artist, her obligations to family, and her depiction of the domestic sphere. But whatever intimacy exists within Morisot's work owes as much to her sense of time as it does to her gender. More than the representation of the home, more than the subject matter itself, it is her perpetual attentiveness to incremental temporal shifts that gives her pictures their subjective specificity. She captures quotidian moments as well as the smaller moments that exist within them. A turning head and a drifting shadow constitute an event on par with the larger activity to which they belong. An afternoon of tea is incidental to the series of instants of which it consists.

If drawing in general, like Morisot's work in particular, has historically been regarded as an especially personal form of representation, then we ought to consider the importance of time in eliciting that response. Traces of chalk, graphite, or ink may create a sense of intimate contact because of their attachment to an artist's hand, but the connection that these marks establish is as temporal as it is physical. The different kinds of time to which they give access, encompassing everything from the moments spent making drawings to the millennia of history that they subsume, testify not only to the capaciousness of time as a representational category but also to drawing's responsiveness to such varied temporal concerns.

The capacity of drawings to make visible this range of temporal experience is no doubt one reason why they appear to offer us an exceptional point of entry into the private concerns of artists, and even why they may surprise us in doing so. When the first significant group of Morisot's drawings was exhibited just after her death in 1895, her daughter Julie noted the public's fascination. "Maman never showed all these drawings, she hid a part of her work," Julie recalled. "[T]oday," she continued, "it is a revelation."[17]

1
"Il dessinait sans objet" was how Watteau's friend, the *amateur* and antiquarian Anne Claude Philippe, comte de Caylus, put it. See his extensive description of Watteau's techniques in the lecture he delivered to the French Academy on February 3, 1748: Anne Claude Philippe, comte de Caylus, "Vie d'Antoine Watteau," in *Les conférences au temps de Charles-Antoine Coypel: 1747–1752*, ed. Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel (Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris, 2012), 96.

2
On the difficulty of dating the sketches, see Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, *Antoine Watteau: The Drawings* (London: Royal Academy Publications, 2011), 116.

3
Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Viking, 2003), 249.

4
Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Drawing Time," *October* 151 (Winter 2015): 3–42.

5
On the collecting culture of 18th-century drawings, see Marianne Roland Michel, *Le dessin français au XVIII^e siècle* (Fribourg: Office du Livre, 1987). See also Charlotte Guichard, *Les amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2008), 150–53.

6
For a recent overview of the role that drawings played in Robert's career, with a particular emphasis on their commercial appeal, see Sarah Catala, "La 'matérialité fonctionnelle': quelques réflexions sur les pratiques de dessin d'Hubert Robert," in *Hubert Robert, 1733–1808: Un peintre visionnaire* (Paris: Somogy, 2016), 63–71.

7
The 18th-century architect and historian Jacques-Guillaume Legrand referred to Robert's "étonnante rapidité d'exécution" in his "Notice historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de J.-B. Piranesi" from 1799. Reprinted in Gilbert Erouart and Monique Mosser, "À propos de la 'Notice historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de J.-B. Piranesi': origine et fortune d'une biographie," in *Piranèse et les Français*, ed. Georges Brunel (Rome: Edizioni dell'Elefante, 1978), 213–56.

8
Nina L. Dubin has provocatively tied Robert's treatment of chance to a broader culture of economic risk and financial speculation that emerged in 18th-century Europe. See her *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010).

9
"Géricault lui-même, dont la nature était si forte, me racontait que son génie étonné avait tremblé devant les maîtres d'Italie, qu'il avait alors douté de lui-même et avait été longtemps à se retrouver de son trouble." Félix-Sébastien Feuillet de Conches, *Causeries d'un curieux, variétés d'histoire et d'art tirées d'un cabinet d'autographes et de dessins* (Paris: H. Plon, 1862), 424.

10
A methodical survey of the series can be found in Wheelock Whitney, *Géricault in Italy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 89–156. Including Géricault's painted sketches of the subject, Whitney connects a total of 85 works to the Barberi horses.

11
The planned dimensions are reported by Géricault's first biographer, who remains a frequently cited source on the artist: Charles Clément, *Géricault: étude biographique et critique, avec le Catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre du maître* (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1879), 104.

12
Wheelock Whitney's *Géricault in Italy* provides the most thorough account of these sources, building upon and challenging the influences cited in Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault: His Life and Work* (London: Orbis, 1983).

13
Quoted in Lucy Marion MacClintock, "Romantic Actualité: Contemporaneity and Execution in the Work of Delacroix, Vernet, Scheffer and Sigalon," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1993, 70. See, more generally, the section titled "Romantic Drawing: A New Definition," 63–71.

14
"Ce serait très bien si c'était dessiné. Mais Mme Morisot se moque bien du dessin! Certains de ses tableaux semblent prêts à s'évanouir comme une fumée légère." Georges Japy, "Les Impressionnistes," *Le Soir*, April 3, 1880.

15
For a recent survey of Morisot's drawing habits, see Marianne Mathieu, "Watercolours, Pastels and Drawings in the Work of Berthe Morisot," in *Berthe Morisot (1841–1895)*, ed. Marianne Mathieu (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2012), 19–55. See also Elizabeth Mongan, *Berthe Morisot: Drawings, Pastels, Watercolors, Paintings* (New York: Shorewood, 1960).

16
The approximate date range is hazarded by Nicholas Wadley, *Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Drawing* (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1991), 182. The Harvard drawing is reproduced as Fig. 50b.

17
"Maman ne montrait jamais tous ces dessins, elle cachait une partie de son travail, aujourd'hui, c'est une révélation." Julie Manet, *Journal, 1893–1899: sa jeunesse parmi les peintres impressionnistes et les hommes de lettres* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1979), 93.