

Perfectly Plain Perspective

Perspective lies at the heart of competent art. Learn from an expert ... as our special art tutor guides you through the basics of this important topic.

By Dalerie Patterson



To all the artists who have joined me in the past 12 months on an exciting journey through the 'Back to Basics' series: Did you read the 'Perfectly Plain Perspective' title only to groan out aloud and say one of the following?

1. I've never been able to understand all that technical stuff. I've tried reading books but it just goes straight over my head.

2. Perspective, who cares? Modern artists are not constrained to follow set rules!

Let's start with the vocal lot in the second camp. You are absolutely right.

As an artist, you do not have to conform.

Having said that, an understanding of the methods of achieving realistic effects can only assist you if and when you deliberately divert in another

direction. Salvadore Dali is a perfect example. Part of his ongoing appeal comes from convincingly depicting real objects and then bending and distorting them into the surreal. Remember the old saying that goes something like this:

"You don't know where you're going until you know where you've come from."

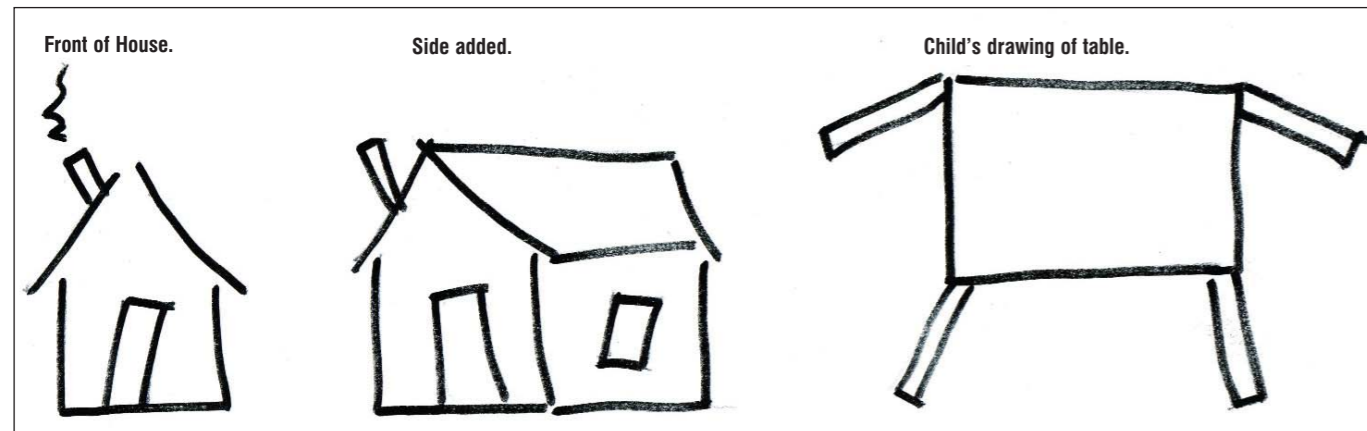
Now let's get back to the first camp. Most of you are – I hope – from the enthusiastic group that has tried to digest my previous articles and is now confident that I will make this subject as easy as possible to understand. Come with me and you will discover that perspective can not only be 'Perfectly Plain' but also interesting ... even fun. I've read many technical books, but over the years I have consistently found that my students

have always been able to understand this simplified version.

By the way, in 36 years of teaching this subject, I have also noticed that generally males absorb and understand Perspective faster and more easily than females. I guess you will all have your theories on that anomaly.

Here is an imaginary example. Man and woman visiting an art exhibition. Man says straight off, "That building is wrong!" Woman peers closer, shakes her head; says, "It looks fine to me." The couple in this scenario do not have any background knowledge of perspective but he instinctively sees what is wrong and she does not. I wonder why?

After that little diversion we'll turn our attention back to 'Perfectly Plain Perspective' by revisiting an important fact.



An artist must give the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface.

We have previously learned how to give 'depth' to a painting using colour and tone. Now we will tackle the application of the rules of perspective to make the depiction of buildings and forms appear solid. In primitive art, buildings were drawn precisely as the artist perceived them. Consequently, even though measurements and proportions might have been correct, they definitely looked 'wrong'. You have probably noticed when a child does his first drawing of a house he shows only one side. As he grows older, another side is added straight alongside. I have also included another child's drawing of a table – the top and legs are correct in size and proportion but it looks awful.

STEP ONE – EYE LEVEL

Before we commence a sketch or photograph for our painting, we must decide on where the eye level is to be. We have four basic options:

BIRD'S EYE: The artist is above the subject (a building or a tree) – see also Illustration 7.

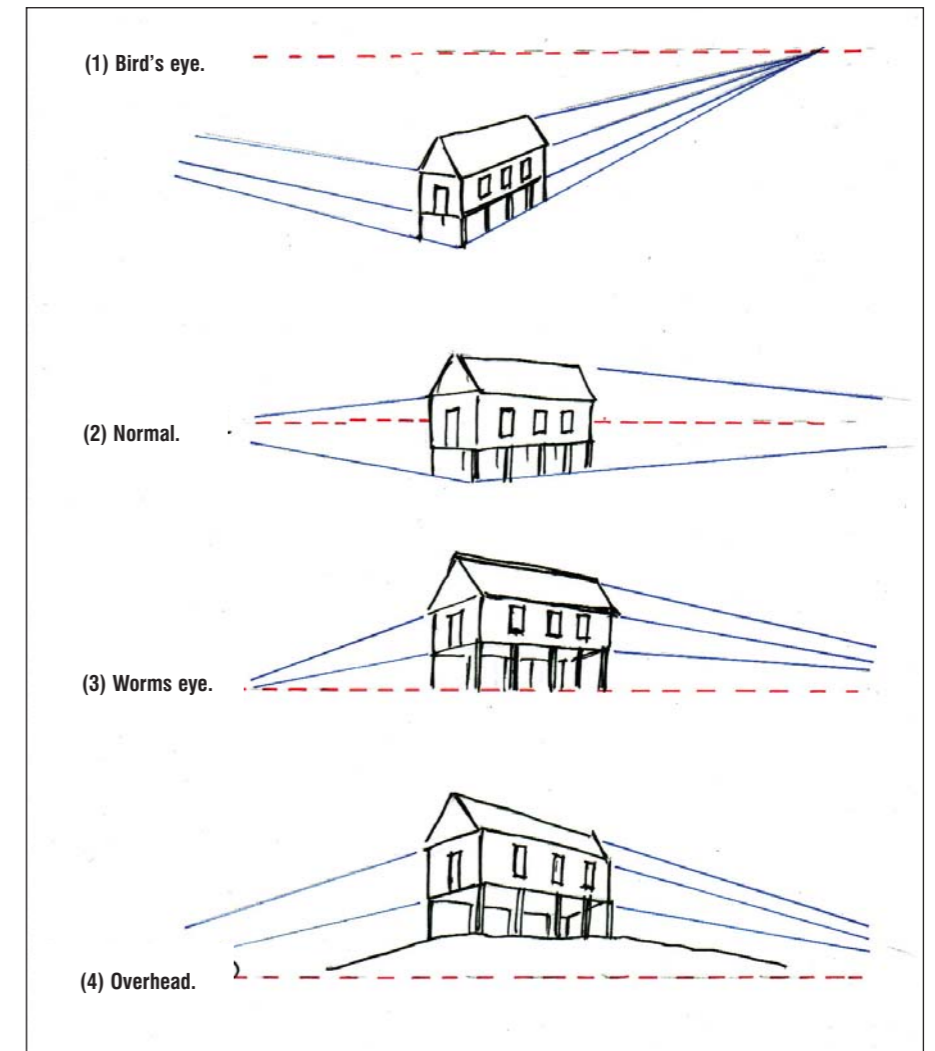
NORMAL VIEW: The artist is sitting or standing – see also Illustration 5.

WORM'S EYE: The artist is flat on their stomach – see also Illustration 6.

OVERHEAD: The artist is below the base of the object.

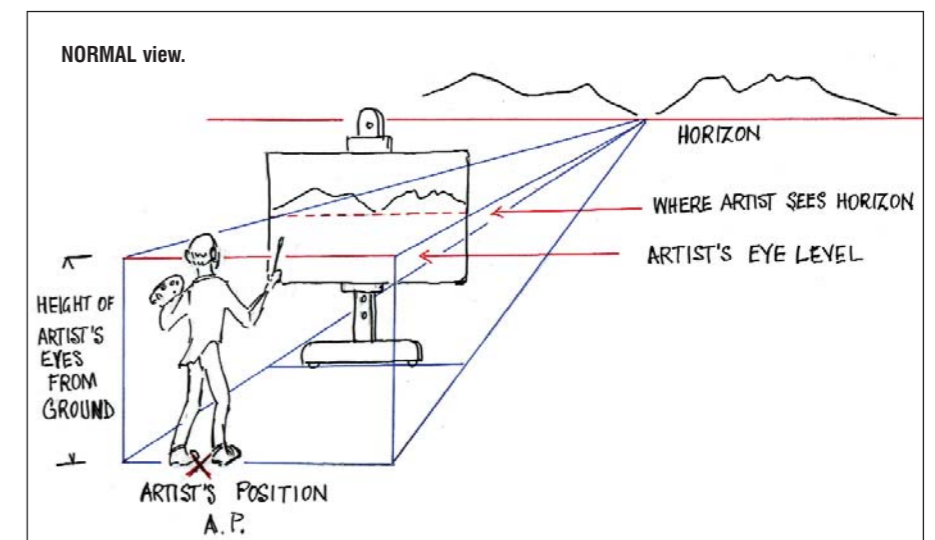
When we settle on a position (hereafter known as Artist's Position – AP), we hold a pencil or ruler horizontally about 30cm directly in front of our eyes. Where this line appears on the scene we are about to paint is the eye level line or horizon line on the painting.

The artist is free to turn right or left (north, south, east or west) but the horizon will always be at eye level.



Artists and photographers go to extraordinary lengths to get the perfect angle on a scene. With reference to Illustrations 6 and 7, forget the

pleasures of plein air painting. Reach for the camera if your artist's position (AP) is an awkward or uncomfortable situation.



Take a close look at our skinny, bald headed artist in my illustration of the NORMAL view.

Note the cross between his feet. 'X' marks the Artist's Position (AP).

Notice also the height of the position of the artist's eye above the ground (artist's EYE LEVEL).

Next, check out the dotted line through the painting. This is where the artist perceives the EYE LEVEL in his painting.

See how the aspect of the landscape alters in each illustration as our intrepid 'Baldy' places himself in danger of a kinked back or rupture just to give his painting an interesting angle.

STEP TWO – VANISHING POINTS SINGLE VANISHING POINT:

Have you stood in the middle of long, straight road and noticed how the sides seem to grow closer together until they converge at a point on the horizon? The road remains a constant width, yet perspective creates the illusion that parallel lines come together as they get further away. This example has only one vanishing point. Most subjects usually have two sides on view and therefore have two vanishing points. You will notice, in the second example, two different blocks side by side. Each block has two sides visible. The right-hand sides (marked 1) are



disappearing to the right to a point marked V1 (Vanishing Point 1). The left-hand sides (marked 2) are vanishing to the left to a spot called V2 (Vanishing Point 2).

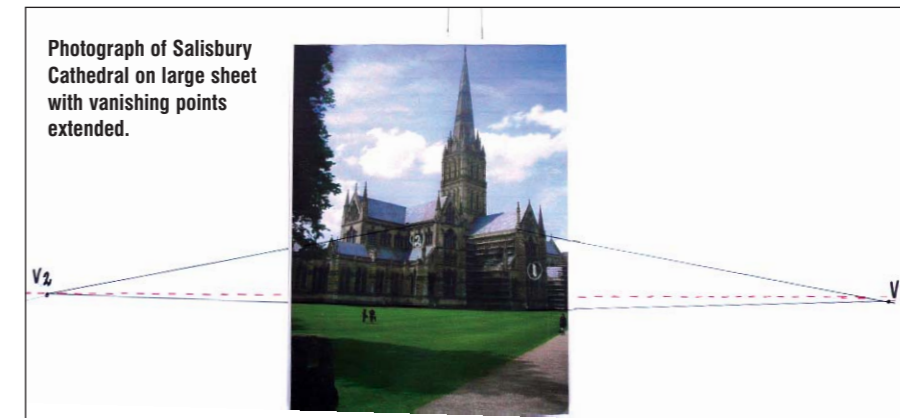
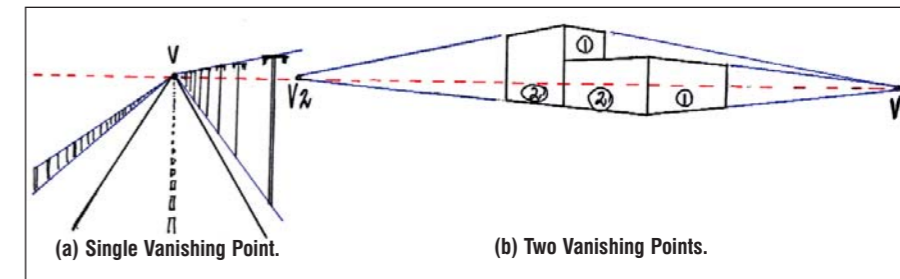
Here is a photograph I took recently at Salisbury Cathedral. I chose this photograph for a couple of reasons. The first is that the building takes up all the area with no background showing. How do we know where the eye level is? First of all, take a copy of the photograph. Just a scan or black and white photocopy will do. Tape this copy in the middle of a large sheet of white paper. This cathedral has several sets of parallel walls showing. For this exercise, I have selected just two and have marked them with No 1 and No 2. With a long ruler, extend the line of the top of wall No 1 out to the right onto the white sheet. Do the same for the line along the bottom of that wall. The point where these two lines meet is Vanishing Point 1 or V1. Repeat this exercise for wall No 2. Mark the junction on the left side V2. The red dotted line joining the two vanishing points is the eye level line. That was easy, wasn't it?

You will see that my eye level line is down almost to the baseline of the building. I was actually walking up a slight incline towards the cathedral and took that shot looking up. If you look closely at the sides of the building, you will see that they appear to be sloping slightly inwards (a certain optical illusion because of the angle of the photograph). However, this spire, I

think, is the tallest in Britain. If it extended upwards to the dizzying heights of a skyscraper we would find that we needed another Vanishing Point, V3. We can safely leave that one on the backburner for now and concentrate on the important V1 and V2. Why not use your long ruler and extend out the other top lines visible and see how they all converge on either V1 or V2?

Once you understand this principle, you can take an original photograph or sketch of a building – move the eye level line up or down – and redraw the building from a different angle. Perhaps you should take a photograph of an old shed or even your own house and play around with the concepts you've learned here. Also, look closely at the building in my article from a couple of months ago called 'Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be'? Check out the building in my dreadful painting and you might be able to discover some more of my deliberate 'bloopers'.

Perfectly Plain Perspective will continue in the next issue.



Thanks for your emails of appreciation and support.

Until the next issue, keep enjoying your painting and drawing!

Dalerie Patterson ... your personal on-line art trainer ... can be found at www.artist-tutor.com and www.artstudio91.com ■