

UNDERSTANDING ANATOMY:

Drawing the Ear

by Ephraim Rubenstein

The term *ear* generally refers to the whole complex sense apparatus that detects sound. This organ is composed of a cartilaginous outer ear that catches sound waves, an air-filled middle ear that turns these sound waves into vibrations, and a liquid-filled inner ear that converts these vibrations into nerve signals.

For all practical purposes, the outer ear, or *auricle*, is the only part of the ear of real interest to artists, as it is the only section of the system that we see. It is a small but deceptively difficult part of the anatomy to draw. Like an exotic seashell, it has curves, hollows, and chambers that seem to defy understanding. Art historian Ernst Gombrich relates that Agostino Carracci considered the ear the hardest of all features to draw and that he constructed a large plaster-cast model for the training of his students.

Structure

The outer ear, or auricle, is best thought of as a bowl-like flap that protects the delicate ear canal while it helps collect and direct sound waves. It is basically ovoid in shape and is made of cartilage covered with skin. Running all the way around the outside of the auricle is a ridge or lip known as the *helix*. The helix defines the basic shape of the ear and looks something like a question mark. It begins deep near the entrance to the ear canal, and rises as it runs all the

way around the upper edge of the ear, ending in the fleshy lobe at the base.

The plane that abuts the helix is the *antihelix*. The antihelix forks at the top to form the depression called the *fossa triangularis*, while at the bottom, it swells into the little bump sitting on top of the *lobe*, called the *antitragus*. The antitragus narrows—and therefore protects—access to the ear canal from the back, while the distinctive projection of the *tragus* does the same from the front.

The depression at the center of the ear is called the *concha*, and can be thought of as the antechamber to the ear canal. Its name comes from the Latin *conch*, and reminds us of the ear's similarity as a whole to that class of seashells, with their spirals, twists, and curves.

Placement

We tend to think of the features of the face as a group, probably because we lump them together as part of our overall sensory perceptual system. But it is crucial to remember that the ears are on a different plane of the head than the others. While

RIGHT

Maddie

2005, pastel on sanded board, 19 x 15.

In this portrait of my daughter, Madeleine, her ear is lit very dramatically from behind. In backlighting such as this, the thinness of the skin and cartilage makes the ear quite transparent. Because of the blood flowing through the auricle, the ear can often add a wonderful note of orange-red to the head.





ABOVE

Still Life With Ears and Mouths

2000, oil on linen, 26 x 42.

I have a set of plaster casts of simplified facial features that I use for teaching purposes. They are taken from Michelangelo's *David* because those features are extremely clear and beautifully idealized. I was playing around with them one day, and the whole thing became surreally charged for me. In this disembodied conversation, the mouths seemed to be trying to speak, and the ears to listen. It seemed to me to be the inverse of the Prud'hon drawings—when Prud'hon draws the life model, you still feel the presence of the cast. Here, you have the cast, yet you feel something being said about life.

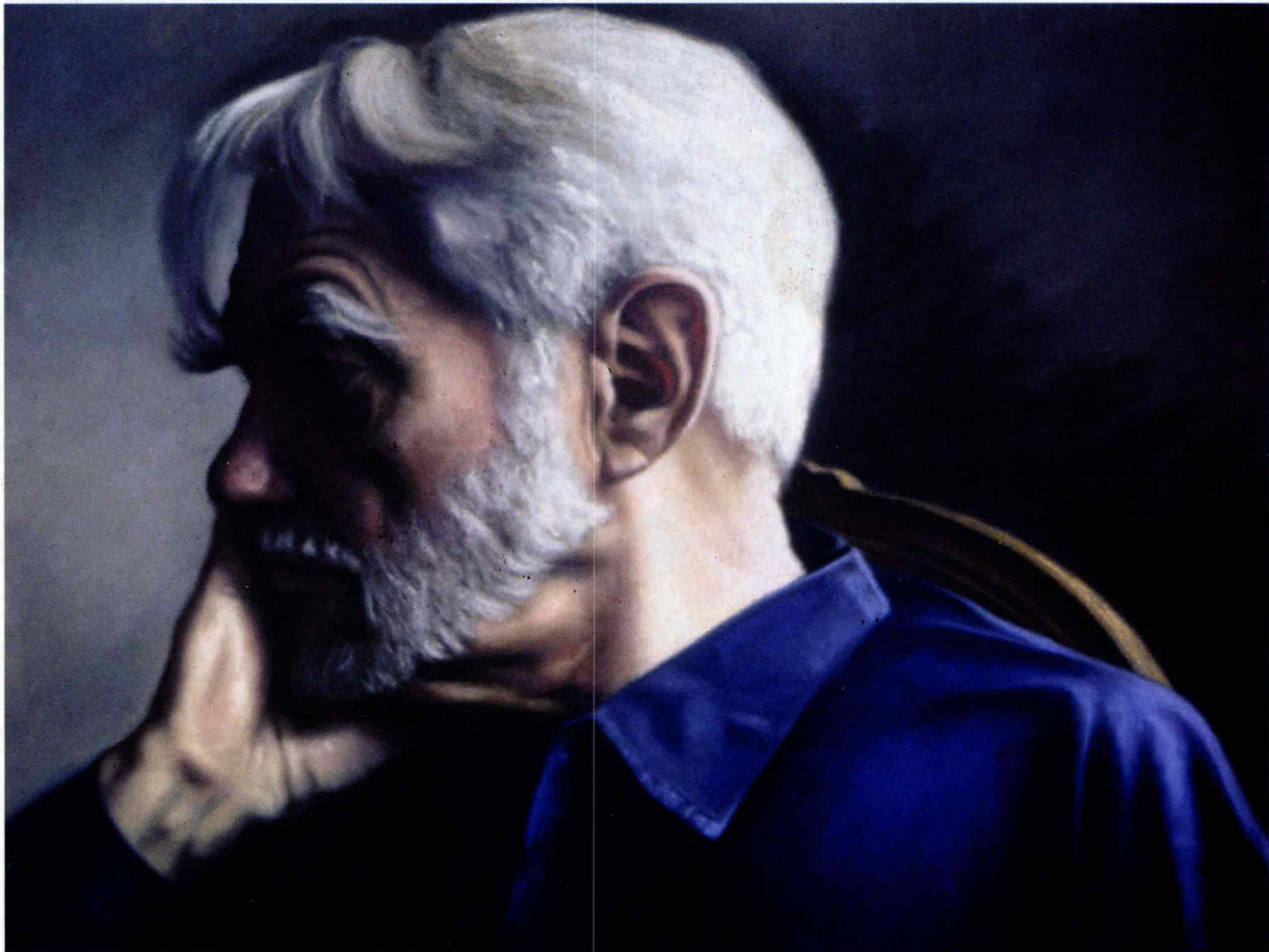
LEFT

Andre

1996, charcoal and white chalk on gray paper, 19½ x 14.

It is crucial to remember that the ears tilt with the plane of the head. If the head tilts back or rotates, the ears move along with it. This means that, except in strict profile, the ears are always foreshortened to some degree. In this head study for a life-size painting, my station point was well below the model's head. It was important for me to give the viewer the sense that the figure was seen from below and that the head was tilted back in space.





ABOVE

Chris IV

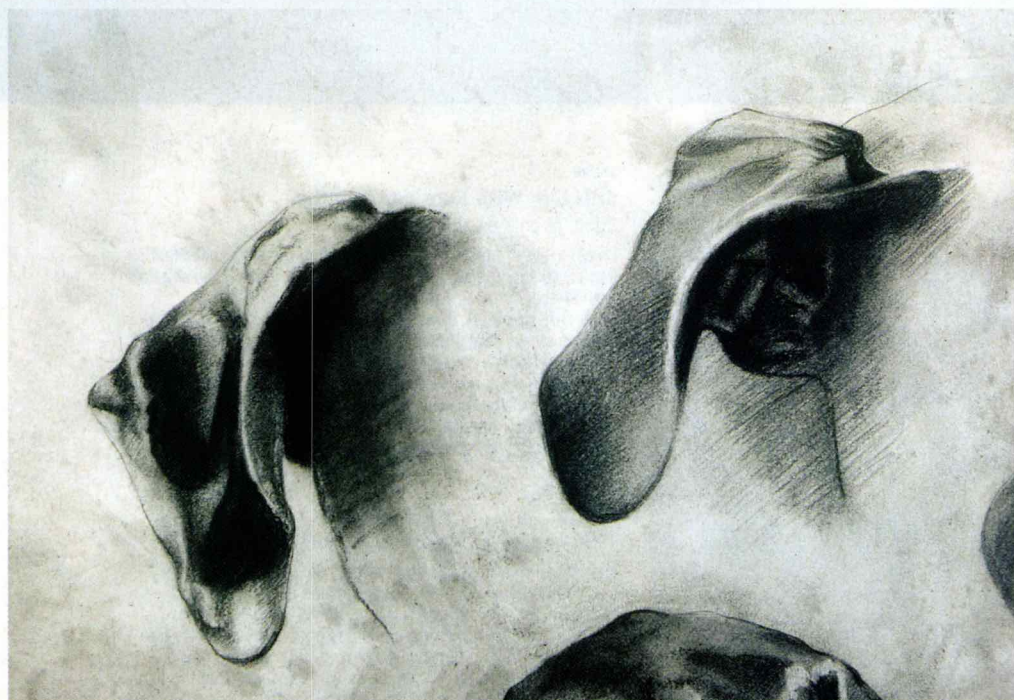
2003, pastel on sanded board,
19½ x 25½.

In this portrait of my friend Chris Beels, I turned him away from the light so that his face is largely in shadow. At the very center of the composition is Chris's ear. I did this because Chris is a psychiatrist as well as an artist, and I wanted to emphasize the listening function of his ear.

RIGHT

**The Artist's Great Dane;
Study of Agamemnon's
Ears (detail)**

2001, graphite, wax, ink,
charcoal, Conté, and pastel on
paper, 38 x 50.





Amelia's Horse, Pali

2003, graphite, wax, ink, charcoal, Conté, and pastel on paper, 26 x 40.

Unlike humans, horses and dogs have mobile auricles, so that they can point each ear in a different direction. This is part of what makes them more sensitive to sound than to sight.

the eyes, nose, and mouth are on the front of the head, the ears are clearly on the side. This means that when you are looking at the face straight on, the ears are foreshortened; conversely, when you look at one of the ears straight on, the rest of the features are either foreshortened or seen in profile.

Seen from the profile, the ear is located just to the rear of center, clearly behind the back of the jawline. The majority of the ear is situated below the centerline of the head, roughly somewhere between the top of the eyes and the bottom of the nose. But here, as in all things anatomical, individual variation is enormous. Some people's ears are barely noticeable, while other people's ears—by virtue of sheer size or the fact that they stick out so much—are quite obvious. Seen from the front or the rear, our ears slant

slightly inward from above to below. They do so because they are more freely attached to the head on top and more firmly anchored on the bottom.

Symmetry

I risk pointing out the obvious by noting that our ears come in pairs. According to evolutionary biologists, when we hear a sound and turn suddenly toward it, it is not so much an attempt to *see* what is out there, but rather to try and center our ears around the sound. This has proven to be a more accurate way of establishing the position of possible danger. Our ears also function as a pair. Horses, for instance, have mobile auricles, or ears that can be pointed in different directions. But our ears are much more firmly attached to our heads, and wherever one goes, the other goes with it.

Prejudice

Figure artist and teacher John H. Vanderpoel points out that the ear is often neglected by drawers because it is either covered by hair, or because it lacks the movement and animated qualities of the eyes or mouth. But the ear is nonetheless an object of great expressive importance. For thousands of years, it has been selected for elaborate adornment through rings, jewels, and other strange piercings. Shakespeare used this small organ to symbolize the entire man, when he had Mark Antony say "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" in his play *Julius Caesar*. And of course, one of the most beautiful moments in Western painting—coming upon Vermeer's pearl earring—would be impossible without the ear that it so magically adorns. ❖