Drawing, the search and experimentation of and with ideas and forms, is an essential part of an artist’s practice. Whether depicting details of a particular person or place, presenting a message or question, or creating an illusion, artists often draw from the world around them, capturing their observations and experiences.

As an activity, drawing offers the most direct way of recording thoughts, explorations, and observations. Unlike painting and sculpture, drawing is not inhibited by an obligation to create a final, finished object. Rather, the drawing process allows artists to experiment and explore concepts freely, without concern for the realities of materials or space. Drawings, as objects, take various forms, functioning as informal studies, historical documents, narratives, or records of passing observations. Artists today continue to expand historic definitions of drawing by using unconventional media and applications, as they create new links between their drawings and viewers in the indeterminate space of a sheet of paper.

The process and definition of drawing, a key component of the foundation of art-making, has come to describe an endless array of innovative approaches with an extraordinary range of physical manifestations. The works in the exhibition explore a wide variety of drawing subjects undertaken by artists in selections from the University of Iowa Museum of Art permanent collection.

Natural Surroundings

The natural landscape inspired close study and drawn documentation by the earliest humans. As an activity that fostered understanding of environment, drawing was a tool that reflected the human need to identify and emphasized nature as a source of and place for spiritual reflection. Focusing on naturally occurring elements to explore qualities such as light and perspective, artists such as Claude Lorraine (1951.1) celebrated the endless inspiration that nature and travel provided, capturing the layers of history that contributed to their experience of the landscape.

Before long, the variety of artistic movements that characterized modern Western art began their widespread influence. Other modern artists, particularly those working in the United States, including Marsden Hartley (1976.90) and Arthur Dove (1967.446), were more expressive in their representations and understanding of nature, which they explored through their portrayal of unique natural forms, particular uses of color, and innovative media applications. When the Great Depression of the 1930s fostered the U.S. government public art projects, many artists explored their changing environment in the populist style known as social realism, or the American Scene. These artists created works reflective of their rapidly evolving surroundings, turning their attention towards the
unique alterations that were unfolding in their neighborhoods as a result of the new economics of industry and changing cultural mores. As seen in the drawings by Regina Marsh (1979.39) and Ivan Albright (1975.97), industrial mills and plants, transportation centers, local operations, and small towns became important subjects in depicting the modern American landscape.

With the developing interest and influence of abstraction, Western artists were focusing on personal responses to their surroundings, creating unique interior landscapes. Rather than depicting their environment in a purely representational style, the practice of abstraction suggested that there were different arenas to explore, often stimulated by scientific discoveries and new cultural encounters. Robert Delaney (2003.5), a painter known for his colorful abstract work, moved to Paris in 1953 in pursuit of better opportunities as an African–American. In his depiction of Paris, Delaney captured his love of the energy of the city with the organic, fluid nature of the watercolor medium, weaving together improvisation and expression. In Tokyo, by Sam Francis (1978.231), pools of color push to the edges of the composition. Allowing the color to circulate freely within the margins of the sheet, Francis simultaneously activated the inner negative space, an important characteristic of Eastern art.

Metaphors and symbols are also important devices evident in many of the drawings in the exhibition. Expressing a deeply personal and complex reality, Sweetbox (7230 Sheridan) by Ellen Lanyon (2001.52) presents a surrealist juxtaposition of unique objects and animals, offering a curious representation of a post office address, with its merging of a decorative box and a suburban house.

**Human Understanding**

Physicians, scientists, artists, and athletes, among many others, have pursued figure studies to better understand the capabilities and limits of the physical body. Depictions of the human form, which are present in countless religious illustrations, anatomical studies, and portraits throughout time, continue to be an essential part of the capabilities and limits of the physical body. Depictions of the human form, which are present in countless religious illustrations, anatomical studies, and portraits throughout time, continue to be an essential part of developing observational and spatial understanding.

Through figure drawing, artists develop a strong awareness of proportion, gravity, and space on the two-dimensional plane of paper. For example, in Le Corbusier’s (X1968.186) gestural ink study Three Seated Nude Women, the artist utilized a determined, undulating line to capture the models’ seated poses and demeanors. His use of diagonals and overlapping body parts allude to the depth of the seated figures, while their voluptuous torsos evoke a sculptural weight and gravity. Common figurative motifs presented in the exhibition, such as the iconic mother and child (1969.315), the artist and the model (1978.3), and basic gestural studies (1976.10 and 2007.62), continue to be emphasized in drawing classes today.

**Capturing Locale**

When artists take on the role of recorder/storyteller, they present unique visual, rather than literary, depictions of their lives, cultural happenings, and environments. As markers of time and locale, the drawn documents presented in the exhibition function as visual records of events, actions, and activities. Employing drawing as a language of life, artists communicate information, sharing their world, beliefs, and experiences.

In the Osaka School (1975.17) ink drawing, for example, the appreciation and enthusiastic support of theatrical arts in Japan is conveyed in the rendering of two established kabuki actors, Nakamura Utaemon III and Tsuchi Monsaburo, whose importance is noted by the specificity of their names, lineage, and costume. In Codex by the Mexican artist Maximino Javier (1982.12), particular political figures and acquaintances are included in current events and issues along the road of daily life. Other artists unknowingly become documentarians of their contextual pastimes, leisure activities, and immediate surroundings. For example, in the multi-paneled ink drawing by Juan Gris (1969.325), an outing to an ice skating rink is presented like a comic strip or a series of photographs or film clips, providing a full, well-rounded observation. Other examples in the exhibition that capture locale include Grant Wood’s Grandpa Eating Popcorn (1970.79) and Lee Allen’s No Spiking (1981.31).

**Illustrative Notions**

Illustrations usually begin as drawn sketches characterized by a linear quality and narrative focus. Through the purposeful interaction of elements on the page, the viewer connects the sketch to a text and the voice of the artist. With incredible detail, Balinese artist I Made Moja (1989.6) uses the traditional Batuan watercolor style to combine traditional imagery of living creatures, both human and animal, in the natural environment. Often pulling from Hindu mythology, classical music and dance, and traditional village life, Moja repeats stylized forms of dancers, monkeys, frogs, and other natural elements to illustrate local Balinese iconography and folklore.

Many contemporary artists, such as Phoebe Gloeckner (2011.45), work from their own personal experiences and daily interactions. Gloeckner, who creates semi-autobiographical comics that often confront bold and difficult topics, including the sexuality of adolescent girls, blends realism and distorting exaggeration to create a visual tension appropriate for rendering the contradictory emotions explored in her graphic novels.

**Changing States**

In an effort to reflect the changing nature of their worldview and experiences in various post-war environments, Western artists began incorporating symbols, references, and abstractions from their own personal realities and memories. Surrealism’s increasing influence provided artists with an ideal method, called automatism or automatic drawing, to refer to the subconscious mind and changing spiritual states. Straying from representational approaches, many artists shifted to transitory subject matter, such as moving industrial parts, and other mechanisms of motion, in order to describe periods of change and mysteries of the brain. French artist Robert Michel (1984.28), inspired by his love for engineering, referenced mechanisms and features of machines such as clocks, boats, engines, and numbers, to ally with his notions of the subconscious mind. Michel’s personal experience as a World War I fighter pilot and his ensuing flight crash also contributed to the aerial perspective of the composition.

Throughout the Great Depression and for many years after World War II, Western artists continued to address the harshly changed social and political climate. With the conclusion of the war, Willi Baumeister (1969.325) began his series of metaphysical landscapes, presenting experiments in form that explore visualizations of human thought and existence. The rubbery-like quality of his Metaphysical Drawing relays a connection to the iconology of ancient civilizations. In contrast, Theodore Roszak’s (1982.31) ethereal landscape of unknown terrain looks outward to cosmic entities. Other artists, such as Liu Guosong (1991.208), seem to capture a moment between thought and understanding. Evocative of Eastern practices, Guosong’s Peaks in Contemplation employs subtle color ink shifts in a graceful yet firm form of water to describe the transitory space and fluctuating nature of human reflection.

**Systematic Approaches**

Drawing practices that emerged in the late 1950s offered exciting new possibilities for innovation. With the growth and revitalization of American printmaking, new artistic styles and approaches quickly referenced and entered a mainstream culture that was brimming with advertisements and print media. In Untitled by Andy Warhol (1976.180), the artist embraced the impersonal, systematic nature of the copy machine to defy traditional definitions of drawing. In this critique of authorship, Warhol mimicked the hand of the artist with the often glitchy toner output of the copier, conceptually challenging the traditional notion of originality.
Other artists of this period used drawing to create instructions for fabrication, and markers of time and process. German artist Dieter Roth (1979.496A) systematically drew with both his right and left hands creating a “speedy drawing”—a mirrored image on both sides of the creased and folded drawing paper. Although initially methodical in appearance, the linear drawing by Gene Davis (2001.19) seems to break out of its rigid rules, alive with organic nuance. Artists today, including James Shrosbree (2007.76a–d) continue to explore the growing relationship between line, form, and color in space and various microscopic and macroscopic systems that govern the world. With the interaction of the elements in each panel, the work functions as a process of discovery, exploring dualistic relationships between presence and absence, inner and outer space, and seen and unseen forces.

**Expanded Practices**

With increasing freedoms provided by contemporary approaches, drawing practices became an integral component of large intermedia art projects including performance, architecture, and installation. Artists incorporated drawing with writing, the creation of music, and the manipulation of light in space, as many were eager to transform the drawing process to serve their larger artistic practices. Through these new practices, artists were able to reference the process of creating complex happenings or site-specific installations.

For example, John Cage (1985.77A,B), an artist known for his avant-garde performance and musical techniques, practices, and theories, frequently created hand-rendered music scores, chance documents, and conceptual renderings. Cage’s Haiku was composed with letterpress on paper, a commonly associated drawing substrate.

Frederick Kiesler (1984.55), a pivotal Austro-American designer, artist, theoretician, and architect who was interested in parallels between society’s physical and psychological constructions, developed the idea of the Endless House to investigate how dwellings and spaces directly and subconsciously transform and inform. Although conceived as a built structure, Endless House was never realized, but the subject remained of key importance to the artist throughout his life and became a reoccurring focus of his drawing and conceptual practice.

Other artists utilize drawing as a two-dimensional extension of their physical installations. Recognized for his use of light as a medium, sculptor and architect Rockne Krebs (2014.173) used laser beams and lights projected through space to create works that questioned materiality and the reality of form. Kreb’s small two-color airbrush drawing echoes the appearance of lights and fog machine, which he used in installations to enhance the sensation of walking through veils of colored light.