FORESHORTENING

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

In regard to a drawing, illustration and painting - if an object or person is foreshortened, it is depicted as though receding from the viewer into the picture space (or advancing towards the viewer from the background).

Insofar as foreshortening is basically concerned with the persuasive depiction of a form in an illusionistic way, it is a type of perspective, but the term foreshortening is almost invariably used in relation to a single object, or part of an object, rather than to a scene or group of objects. Usually it particularly refers to the depiction of the human form or a part of the human form.

In order to convey the illusion of three-dimensional space as perceived by the human eye, foreshortening is best done according to the rules of perspective.
Uccello is a famous Early Renaissance artist who was fascinated by the new science of perspective and spent nights and days drawing objects in perspective - particularly foreshortening. When his wife called him to come to bed he would say: "Oh what a lovely thing this perspective is!”. Did you feel any excitement when you drew your first perspective drawing?

His most famous work is 'The Battle of San Romano'. This is probably the artist's best preserved painting and it clearly shows his fascination with perspective. The broken lances on the ground all point to a common vanishing point as does the fallen soldier who is foreshortened in one of the earliest examples of this type of painting.

Below is an extraordinary image from a book published in 1560. Projection is used, as in orthogonal drawing, to enable the drawing of foreshortened hands. Jean Cousin the Elder (1490-1560), a painter and sculptor, produced the image for his book, 'Livre de Perspective'. Cousin was the leading theorist on artistic perspective in sixteenth century France.

SEE MORE PAGES FROM THE BOOK HERE - U.S. NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE
'The New Yorker' cover
Saul Steinberg - a humourous, foreshortened vista, across the Hudson River, of the United States

To heighten the effect, some degree of exaggeration is necessary - but how much?
Compare the two examples below. Which one is more effective?

Foreshortening is an extreme example of perspective, where the parts closest to the viewer are exaggerated by drawing them larger to shorten the distance and increase the dynamism. So if Superman is flying towards you fist first, shouldn't that fist be drawn very large? Unfortunately, there isn't an easy way out when it comes to depicting foreshortening as much of the scale used is down to style. Do your research to learn what is actually realistic – look at stock photos, yourself in the mirror, etc. Then see how other artists exaggerate it.