



artist daily  
*presents*

# LEARN HOW TO DRAW

*Drawing Techniques  
on Depth, Color & Value*

# Drawing Logic

## Getting Depth Into Your Drawings

by Bob Bahr



A sense of depth makes a drawing much more convincing. The Old Masters used a number of devices to give depth to their drawings and paintings. Here are a few.

Vermeer is just one artist who effectively used *repoussoir* to create the illusion of depth in his art. “*Repoussoir*” is a French verb meaning “to push back,” and in drawing compositions this often means placing a large figure or another prominent element in the extreme foreground—often on the left, where it is quickly read by viewers as their eyes scan

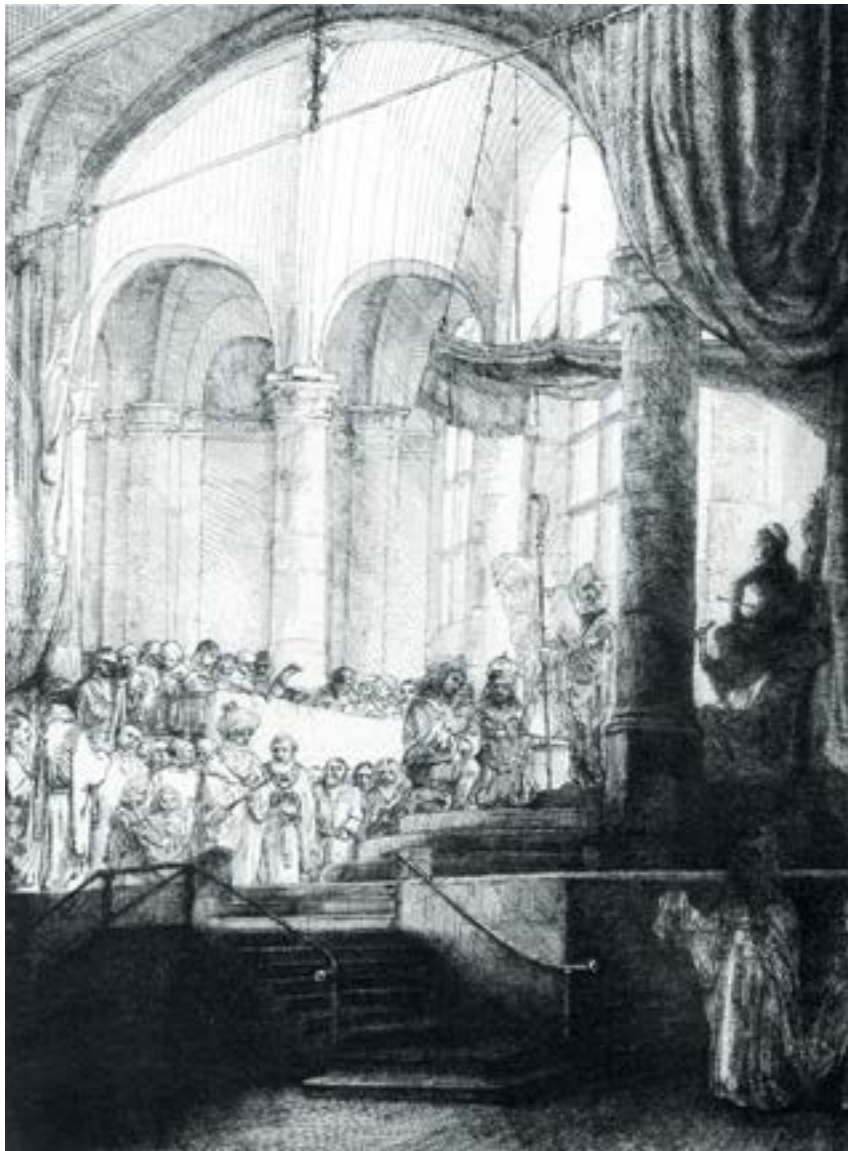
from left to right, moving on quickly to the focal point after having instantly registered the sense of depth suggested. In Vermeer’s *The Artist’s Studio*, for example, the artist uses a curtain on the left to create the sense of space.

Obviously, *repoussoir*’s success is attributable to the fact that objects lessen in size the farther they are from the viewer. But many drawing problems in compositions are attributable to issues of scale stemming from this evident physical law. Careful attention to the rules of perspective will ensure that objects are

### The Artist’s Studio

by Vermeer, 1665–1667, oil, 47¼ x 39½. Collection Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

Note how the prominent curtain in the left foreground helps create a sense of depth in the composition, an example of *repoussoir*.



### Medea: The Marriage of Jason and Creusa

by Rembrandt, 1648, etching, 9½ x 7. Collection the Louvre, Paris, France.

Note how the figure in shadow on the lower right is larger than the figures of the wedding couple, an example of *repoussoir*. The couple overlap the retaining wall in the middle ground, which overlaps the line of spectators, who overlap the main supporting pillar, which overlaps the farthest reaches of the church—all contributing to a powerful sense of depth. Even in the black-and-white, linear medium of an etching, Rembrandt manages to suggest a lessening of contrast in elements as they recede into the background.

wavelength, it is scattered more readily, and thus blue light is more visible in our atmosphere.) Light is further diffused by larger particles, such as those of smoke, pollution, and fog, and the effect of these factors (called *Mie scattering* after German physicist Gustav Mie) is more pronounced closer to the horizon than at the zenith of the sky because these heavier particles sink closer to the ground.

Artists refer to this overall phenomenon as *aerial* or *atmospheric perspective*, which is confusing because it has nothing to do with perspective of scale, the usual meaning of the term *perspective* in discussions of art and composition. (None other than Leonardo gave aerial perspective its name, which probably has something to do with its perseverance.) To suggest the effect of aerial perspective caused by the atmosphere, make the contrasts in value in objects less defined in the far distance. That is, draw features in objects in the distance using marks that are close in value. The atmosphere also softens and blurs the contours of distant objects a little bit—but keep in mind that the main reason their edges are less noticeable is because of the reduction in contrast between their light and dark planes. The important thing is to lighten their tone overall in comparison to similar objects in the middle ground and foreground.

diminishing in size at the proper rate as they recede into the distance.

Objects in the distance are also lighter, less defined, and seem more tightly clustered than similar objects in the middle ground and foreground. Elements appear lighter and less detailed because light, the vehicle for visual information, is affected by Earth's atmosphere. Even under very clear conditions, light (and thus, the appearance of all distant objects) is altered by the optical phenomenon known as *Rayleigh scattering*. The more

atmosphere between the viewer and the object, the more pronounced the effect. Named after Lord Rayleigh, the 19th-century physicist who discovered it, this effect is caused by particles in the air that are smaller in size than a wavelength of light, thus scattering or defusing the light. (Incidentally, the smaller the wavelength of light, the more it is scattered, which explains how our eyes interpret the blue of the sky. The sky's blue color is caused by sunlight scattering off molecules of the atmosphere. Because blue light has a very short



*The atmosphere also softens and blurs the contours of distant objects a little bit—but keep in mind that the main reason their edges are less noticeable is because of the reduction in contrast between their light and dark planes. The important thing is to lighten their tone overall in comparison to similar objects in the middle ground and foreground.*



**A Grove of Pine Trees With a Ruined Tower**

by Claude Lorrain, 1638–1639, pen and brown ink with brown, gray, and pink wash on white paper, 12% x 8%. Collection the British Museum, London, England.

Notice how the contrast in the bark of the near trees on the left is more marked than the bark's contrast in the middle-ground trees. Claude also brought the near hill in front of the middle-ground hill to help push that second clump of trees back. This image is currently on view through August 12 as part of the exhibition "Claude Lorrain—The Painter as Draftsman: Drawings From the British Museum," at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC.



When working in color, incorporate blue into the hue of the colors in the background to reinforce the Rayleigh scattering effect. (Pollution and smoke, through Mie scattering, may mean altering the overall tone not with blue but with a warm color.) And remember that shadows in the distance are affected by the same physical laws as other objects in the distance—that is, shadows in the background should be lighter than shadows in the foreground.

Another very helpful way to imply depth in a drawing is to overlap elements according to the logic of the

scene. Adding a branch to a middle-ground tree that overlaps a building in the background will help push the building back. Distant mountains at different depths should overlap so the difference in their tone is readily apparent. Even if they don't overlap in the actual scene, this adjustment should be considered on your paper anyway.

And finally, the human figure, an object that everyone inherently knows well, can be placed at the appropriate scale anywhere in the composition to create an instant understanding of the depth implied in the composition. ■

### A View of the Aventine

by Claude Lorraine, 1673, black chalk, pen and brown ink with brown wash on white paper, 7916 x 1038. Collection The British Museum, London, England.

Claude employed repoussoir elements (the column on the right and the trees on the left) to suggest depth, and he also overlapped the foreground hillock to push the two figures into the middle ground. Elements were rendered with increasing lightness as they recede into the background. This image is currently on view through August 12 as part of the exhibition “Claude Lorraine—The Painter as Draftsman: Drawings From the British Museum,” at The National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC.

# Value Basics

By learning a few of the universal truths about value and planes, you can model any natural form much more easily.

by *Jon deMartin*

The previous installments of Drawing Fundamentals on drawing the cube, the cylinder, and the sphere (with line only) stressed the importance of drawing the object's outlines correctly before modeling form with value. They emphasized the importance of both linear construction and perspective. These factors must come before shading. In other words, all the beautiful shading in the world will never disguise a poorly drawn object. "The art of delineating figures is the foundation of painting, without which, no matter how well one understands color and light and shadow, it is impossible to do anything good in painting," said Roger de Piles in his *Elements de la Peinture Pratique*.

## VALUE

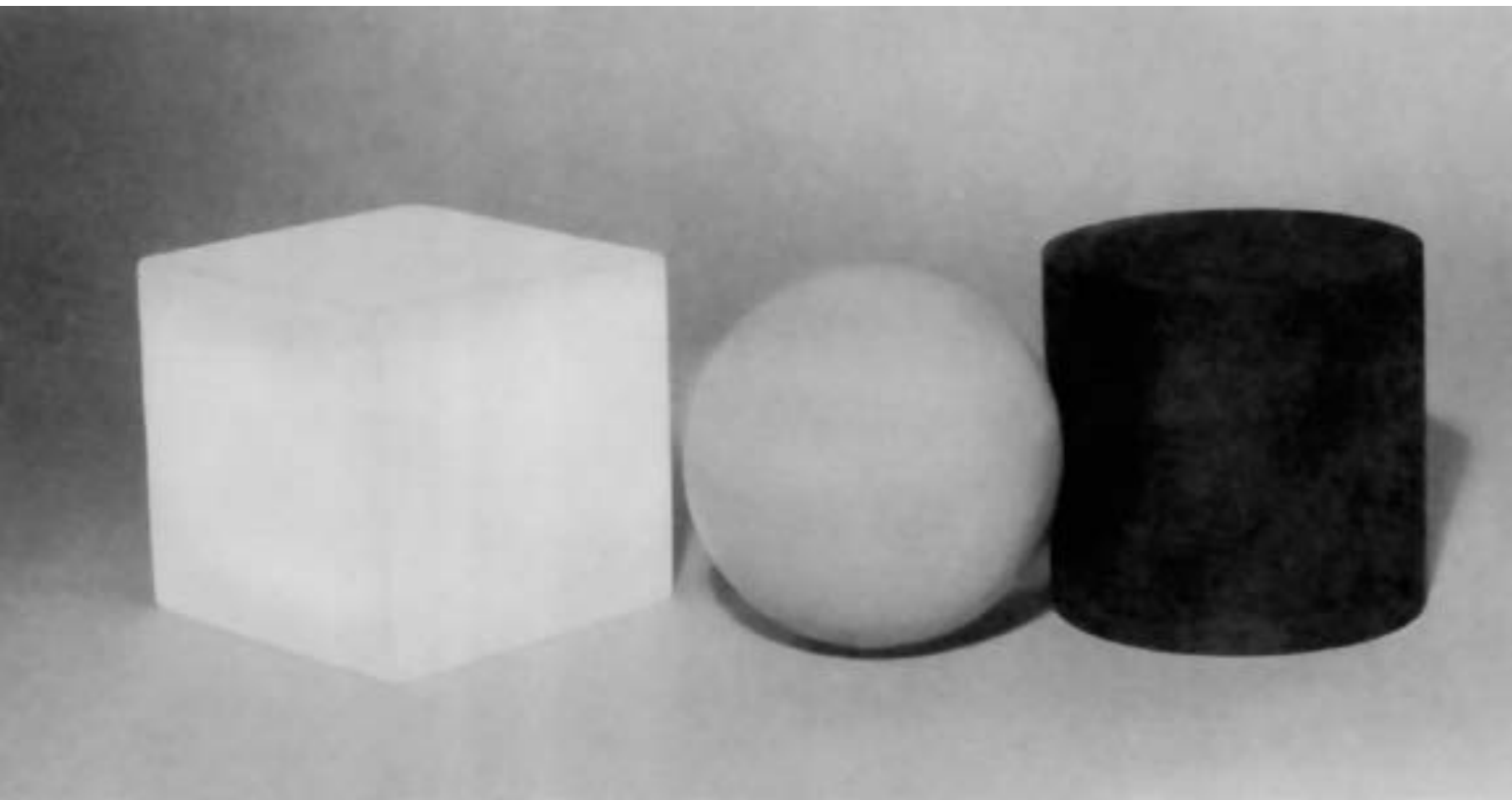
The outline reveals the object's shape and its three-dimensional construction. But it is through the use of values that the object begins to take on a more natural appearance. Values are the way we see our world. Accordingly, artists use values to translate light and shadow into shading, thus creating the illusion of the third dimension. But what is value? Value is the degree of lightness and darkness in a given color. In drawing terms we think of values as shades of gray between black and white.



### Illustration 1

A nine-value scale with seven gradations of gray between white and black.





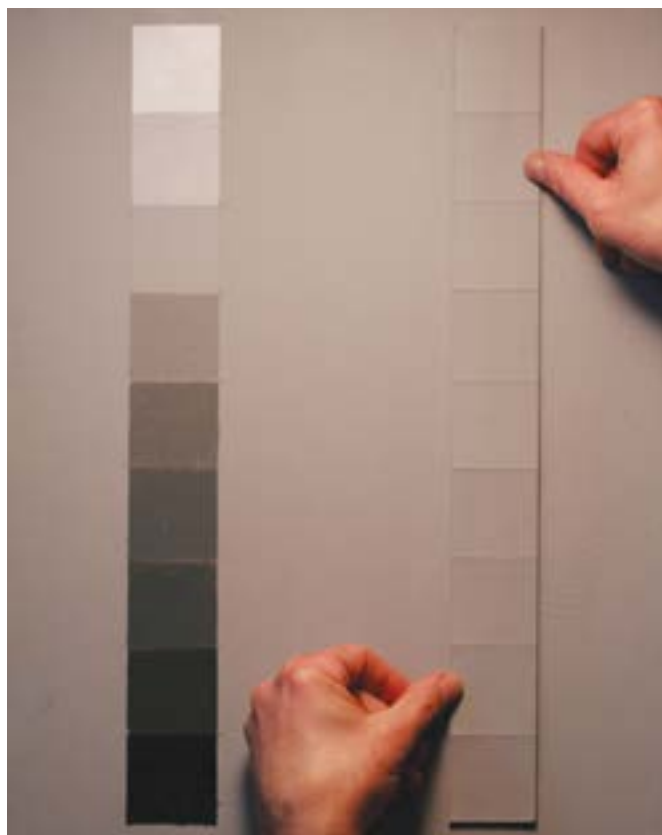
## THE VALUE SCALE AND VALUE AS LOCAL VALUE

The *value scale* is to art what a scale of notes is to music. The value scale gives the artist a means to handle the infinity of values in our world. It enables the artist to make better comparisons and suggest the relationships of the values observed in nature. What do we mean when we say local values?

A *local value* is the natural color of an object without any thought of light and shade or three-dimensional form. When we look at a white shirt, we know it's white even though it may also contain different values created by light and shadow. We still describe the shirt as being white. It is the same with a gray shirt or a black shirt. It's easier to see local values when the light is diffused or when the form's surface is not facing direct light. In other words, it's easier to see the true value of your front door when it's not flooded by direct sunlight. For instance, in Illustration 2, the local values of the white cube, gray sphere, and black cylinder are clearly seen because of the dispersed light.

### Illustration 2

This photo shows how one can more easily see the local value of objects in a "flat" light condition.



## VALUE AS PLANES

The primary role of value is to produce the illusion of the third dimension on a two-dimensional surface. The most effective way to create the third dimension is through the concept of *planes*. Planes are inclinations of surfaces on forms that are conceived as being flat or faceted. Planes are for the most part a concept—they really don't exist in nature, especially on rounded forms. However, the concept of planes helps the artist visualize form and simplify the infinite varieties and complexities of a form's surfaces. Let's take a look at the effect of light on a form's planes.

Illustration 3 shows a neutral-gray card scored in nine equidistant segments lying flat on a two-dimensional surface. Notice that the values are basically unchanging because of the card's flatness in relation to the light source. Illustration 4 shows the same neutral-gray card with the light positioned above. The gray card is now curved outward revealing the planes or facets of the form in space. See how each facet clearly changes value according to its orientation to the light. Notice how the faceted card looks strikingly similar to the flat local-value scale to the left. The two illustrations clearly exhibit the relationship between value as local changes and value as plane changes.

ABOVE, LEFT

### Illustration 3

When a neutral-gray card (right) is scored in nine equidistant segments lying on a flat surface, the values are largely unchanging because of the card's flatness in relation to the light source.

ABOVE, RIGHT

### Illustration 4

When the same neutral-gray card is bent outward and the light source is placed above it, the planes show how the value changes according to its orientation to the light.



9	HIGH LIGHT
8	LIGHT LIGHT
7	MIDDLE LIGHT
6	DARK LIGHT
5	LIGHT HALFTONE
4	DARK HALFTONE
3	MIDDLE SHADOW
2	DARK SHADOW
1	ACCENT

## VALUE AS NOMENCLATURE: THE MODELING FACTORS

What do we mean by value as nomenclature? The dictionary defines *nomenclature* as a system of terms used in science and art. It simply means putting names to things. Whether we are seeing value as a local value or value as a plane, it gives us an advantage if we can describe what we are seeing with names. In other words, if we know what we are looking at, we are more likely to see it.

Illustration 5 shows a linear diagram of the value scale shown in Illustration 1 with the names of each value that graduate from dark to light. The value names described here are

LEFT

### Illustration 5

The value scale showing the names of the nine modeling factors used to provide a nomenclature for describing value.

RIGHT

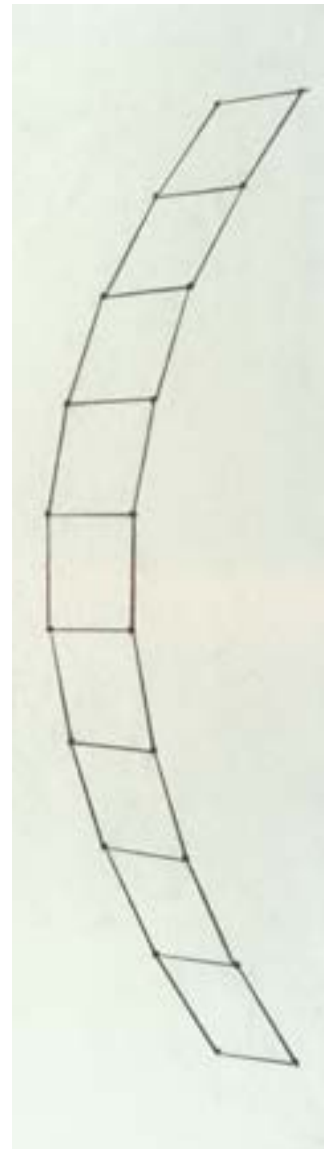
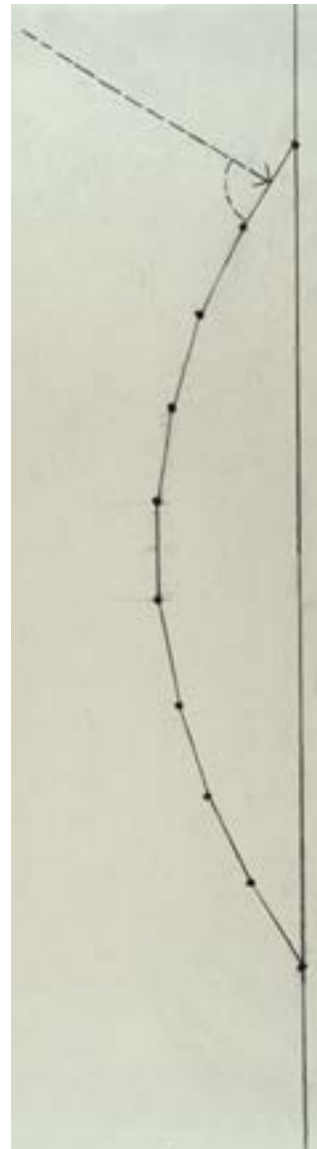
### Illustration 6

A linear diagram of the gray card shown in Illustration 4.

FAR RIGHT

### Illustration 7

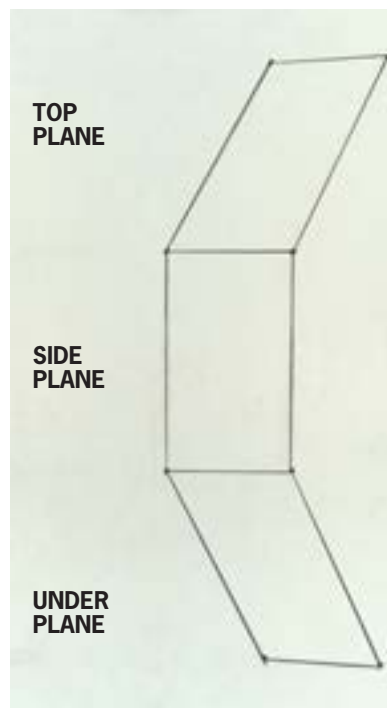
A three-quarters view of the gray card.



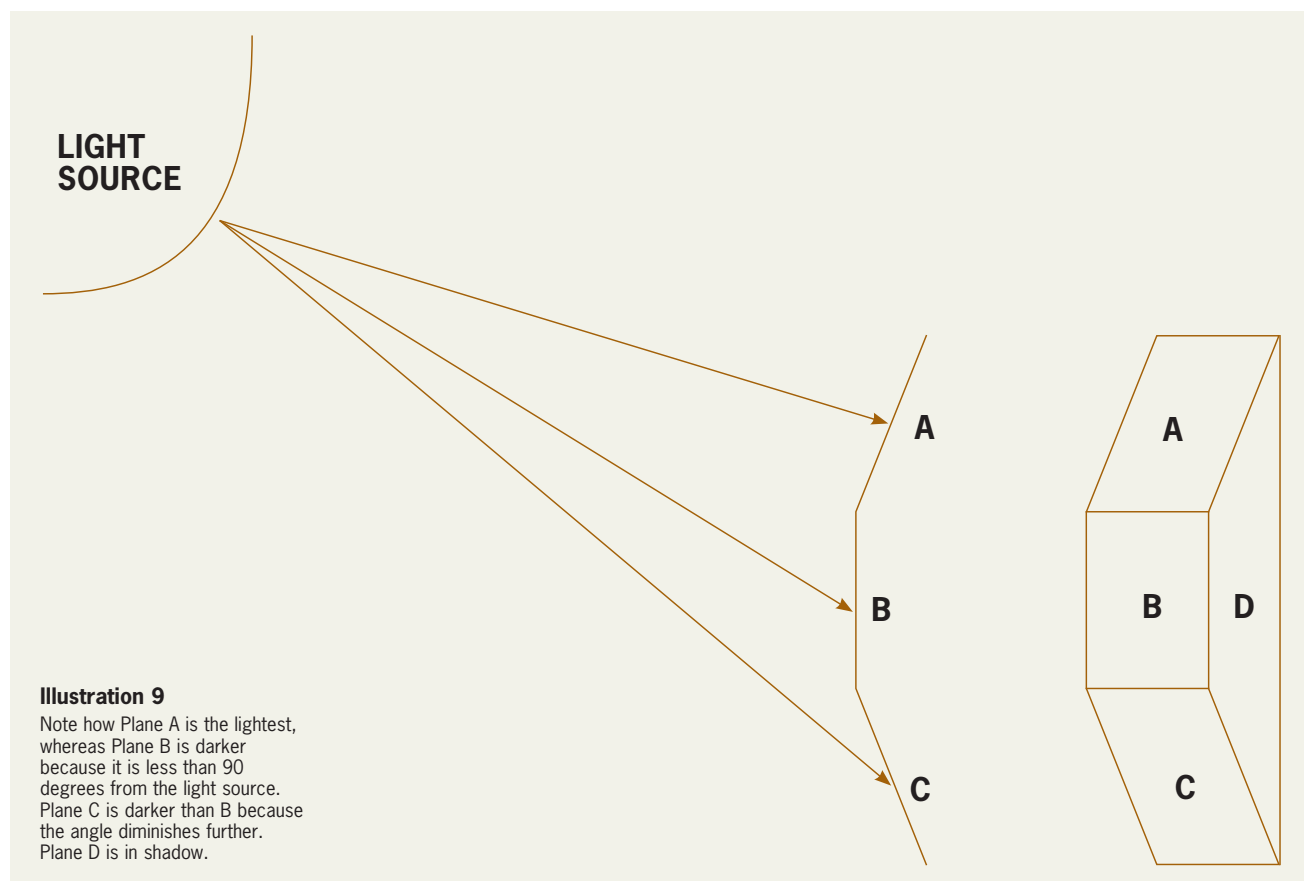
called the *modeling factors*. They name the different degrees of lightness and darkness. “The modeling factors are the planes, or facets of forms, which present themselves to the illumination at different angles, thereby producing different values,” artist and teacher Frank Reilly once said.

Just as it’s important to describe the values we are seeing with a name, it’s even more important to describe—and better yet, *visualize*—the plane’s direction in space. If we don’t consider the planar direction in space before attributing a value, the drawing will look flat and copied. The ability to visualize views other than the one you’re working from will dramatically help you conceptualize plane directions in space. Illustration 6 shows a linear diagram of the curved, faceted card from Illustration 4 from the side view. Notice the symbol indicating the position of the light source. To understand light on form, the artist must consider from what direction the light falls upon the object. The part of the object that has the light most perpendicular to it must be lightest. As the planes turn away from the light, they darken.

Illustration 7 shows the same faceted card but from a three-quarter view. There are nine individual segments showing nine different planes. Because the planes are too numerous to



**Illustration 8**  
A synthesized version of the nine-faceted card, simplified to show the three main plane changes—top, side, and under.



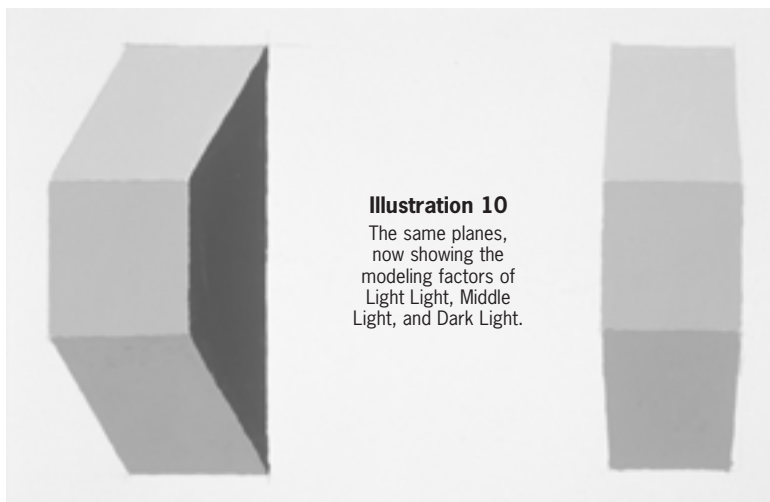
**Illustration 9**  
Note how Plane A is the lightest, whereas Plane B is darker because it is less than 90 degrees from the light source. Plane C is darker than B because the angle diminishes further. Plane D is in shadow.

name, we need to simplify what we are seeing. When we can distill the many facets (planes) into a more manageable number, the planes become more comprehensible.

Illustration 8 is a synthesized version of the nine-faceted card showing three main plane changes: top, side, and under. It now becomes easier to describe the planes' direction when we say the plane is top, side, or under. Even when forms have rounded surfaces we can say the forms surface is top-ish, side-ish or under-ish. "Ish" is the key word. It helps the artist describe the complexities of the form's infinite and varied surfaces. Illustration 9 shows plane A perpendicular to the angle of light—it is the lightest. Plane B is darker because it meets the light at an angle less than 90 degrees. Plane C is darker than B because the angle diminishes more. D is in shadow. Illustration 10 depicts a three-quarter view showing the shadow side and the modeling factors Light Light, Middle Light, and Dark Light as they relate to the top, side and under planes. The right side of Illustration 10 shows the same form from the front view.

These universal concepts hold true no matter what forms in nature we are modeling. My drawing *Male Academy* shows a straight-on back view of a seated nude. Notice how the back curves outward the same way the faceted card does. The dynamics of light on form respond in the same way. The part of the upper back nearest the light is brightest. Why? The plane is top-ish in relation to the light source. As the planes move from top to side to under, they darken in degrees.

The human form is the most difficult form to model. However, by applying these universal truths, you will work with more intelligence no matter what subject you're drawing. ■



**Illustration 10**  
The same planes,  
now showing the  
modeling factors of  
Light Light, Middle  
Light, and Dark Light.



**Male Academy**

by Jon deMartin, 1987, charcoal, 24 x 18. Collection the artist.

# Effective Use of Color

Whether simple or complex, humorous, symbolic, or mysterious, color plays an essential role in many master drawings.

by *Kenneth J. Procter*

Identifying the very first use of pastel or colored chalk in a drawing may be impossible, but without question, 18th-century Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera played a major role in popularizing the full-color pastel portrait. According to art historian and conservator Thea Burns, part of Carriera's success in cultivating the portrait patronage of society women was due to the similarities between makeup and pastel. An aristocratic lady would sit for several hours of hairdressing and makeup to achieve perfection in appearance, a process and ritual similar to the lengthy sitting for a pastel portrait. Both makeup and portrait portrayed an ideal. Even the powdery materials and technique seemed similar.

Pastel is powdered pigment formed into sticks with minimal binder. Drawn across a page, pastel catches onto the tooth of the paper, and that's all that holds it—usually, pastels aren't fixed, because fixing alters the colors. Burns notes that the combination of fragility and illusion fascinated Carriera's clientele. She quotes a contemporary of Carriera: "I see you taking on the omnipotence reserved to God, and instead of imitating men, you create them. But when I see natural faces

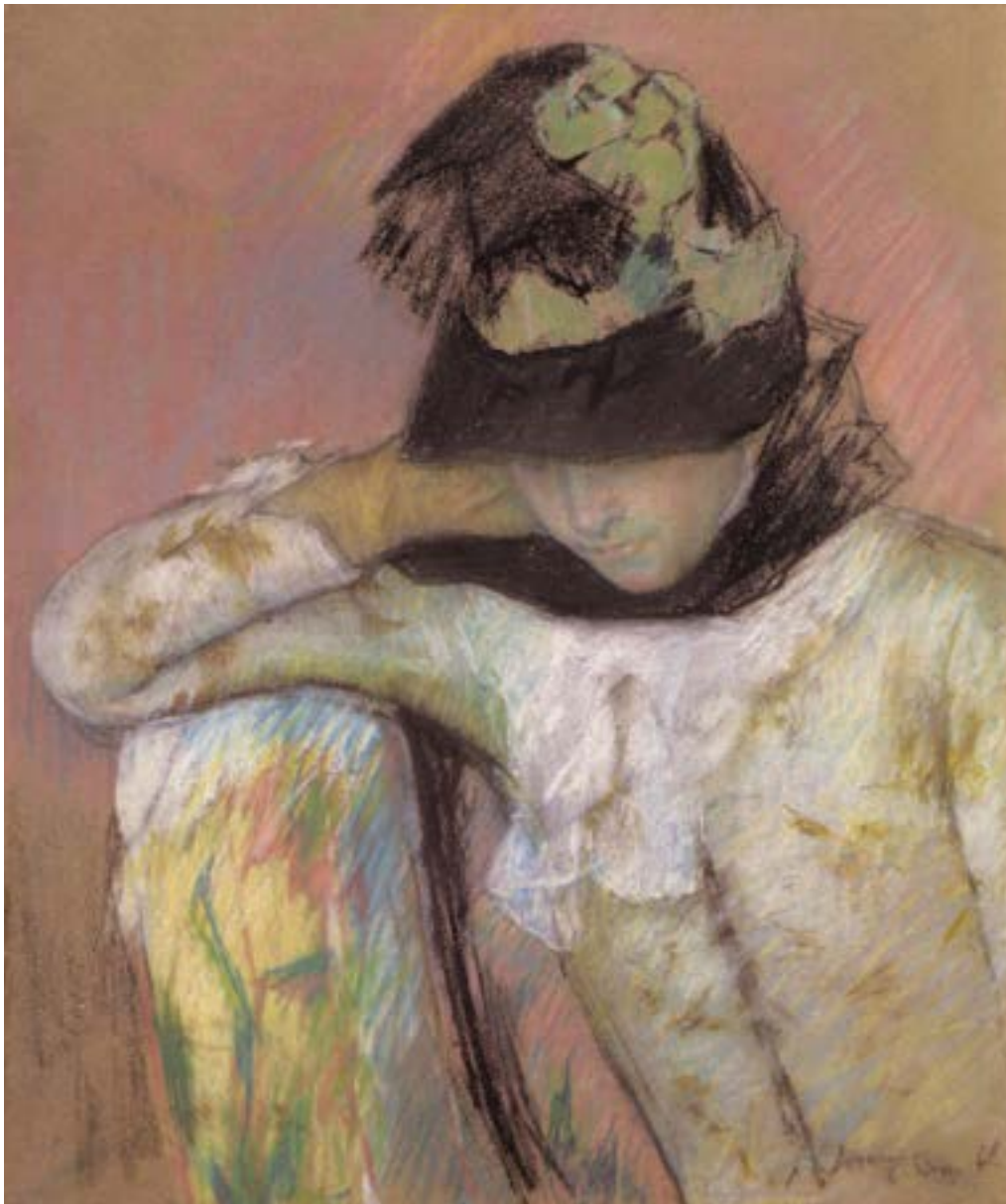


**La Primavera**

by Rosalba Carriera, ca. 1742, pastel on paper, 13¼ x 10¾.  
Collection National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.

This content has been abridged from an original article written by Kenneth J. Procter. © F+W Media, Inc. All rights reserved. F+W Media grants permission for any or all pages in this premium to be copied for personal use.





**Young Woman in a Black and Green Bonnet, Looking Down**

by Mary Cassatt, ca. 1890, pastel on tan (originally blue-gray) paper mounted on paper board, 25½ x 20½. Collection Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey.

As a master of pastel drawing, Cassatt was an heir of Carriera. According to Burns, Cassatt drew on the work of the great French pastelist Maurice Quentin de La Tour, who was directly influenced by Carriera. Influence is not imitation. *Young Woman in a Black and Green Bonnet, Looking Down*, illustrates the distance of Impressionism from Rococo. The drawing is not a portrait in a traditional sense. It's a genre image.

The title makes the point. Hat and collar—full of energy, contrast, and texture—get more visual attention than the woman's serene and restful face. Whereas Carriera's ideal was a made-up beauty, artfully posed, Cassatt caught her model

formed with coloured earths I understand it is possible, because the thing was done one time by God with Adam. But that with coloured earths you paint also the spiritual and intangible soul, this is an extravagant heresy."

Carriera's allegorical *La Primavera* depicts the era's graceful, ideal woman in the sweetest bloom of youth. Burns explains that Carriera started with a white ground for the foundation of a perfect complexion, as was the fashion of the makeup artist. Then Carriera

warmed and tinted her model. This process paralleled the way real cheeks were rouged, pursed lips were reddened, temples cooled, and eyelids delicately shaded. Finally, Carriera heightened and framed *La Primavera's* perfect complexion with coifed curls, polished jewelry, a patch of golden gown, a fresh blossom, and her trademark blue sky, each accessory depicted using a pastel technique suitable to the object's form and compositional prominence.

in a moment of inattention. Maybe she naps. We don't know because the bonnet hides half her face. More's the pity: From what we can see, she's pretty. And compared with Carriera's powdery white *La Primavera*, Cassatt gave her model a subtly variegated complexion, an Impressionist mix of warm and cool tones that play all across the face.

The dress is complex, too. Commonly, white is simple. In many drawings, white is an unmarked spot of paper, a reserved passage in an overall



**LEFT**  
**The Scarlet Sunset**  
by J.M.W. Turner,  
1830–1840, watercolor  
and gouache on paper,  
5¼ x 7½. Collection  
Tate Gallery, London,  
England.

**BELOW**  
**The Butcher's Shop**  
by James McNeill  
Whistler, 1888–1889,  
oil on wood panel,  
4¼ x 8¾. Collection  
Freer Gallery of Art,  
Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, DC.

tonal structure. Or, white is a highlight in chalk. Uncommonly, but true to her Impressionist aesthetic, Cassatt stitched her white dress stroke by stroke from a full palette of colors.

Although many artists work outdoors with pastel, watercolor is often the drawing medium of choice for color studies created on location. Like ink, but offering full color, watercolor is flexible and quick, compact and easy to transport—a few pans of color, a couple of brushes, a bottle of water (or a scoop from the nearest creek)—and thus perfect for *The Scarlet Sunset*, painted under fast light, maybe in a bobbing boat. Sunset is a brief, miraculous light show ... and then it is dark. To sketch the scene, Joseph Mallord Willam Turner had to be quick. His loose, summary technique saved time and conveyed the fleeting extravagance of the moment. Starting with blue paper established the background color for the whole scene, which is mostly sky and water. Overpainted with trans-

parent washes, the tone of the paper shows through to make a misty, twilight effect. For the sunset's bold, primary colors, Turner applied heavily pigmented bodycolor. To finish, he dashed in a few dark strokes—the contrast and shadow that make bodycolor look as bright as sunset light.

For drawing on location, oil is more cumbersome than watercolor, but it's sometimes preferred for its range of color and optical qualities. James Abbott McNeill Whistler's oil-sketch technique borrowed from watercolor, with his thin oil washes working like watercolor, transmitting light from





**Wing of a Blue Roller**

by Albrecht Dürer, 1512,  
watercolor and bodycolor on  
vellum, heightened with white,  
7¾ x 7¼. Collection Albertina  
Museum, Vienna, Austria.



within for a luminous effect. Like a watercolor, some lights are reserved; like an oil, some passages are opaque. Washes of varying density support the variety of brushstrokes to build the compositional structure.

Many of Whistler's oil sketches are just a few square inches. As in some of his most memorable paintings, detail in *The Butcher's Shop* is minimal to

the point of abstraction. It looks like a quick study, an exercise in color and structure—a thumbnail drawing in paint. Nevertheless, Whistler's title and composition focus on the beef. What a subject! Rembrandt painted a carcass of beef, and some notable artists have tackled it since, but these aren't art for the dining room. In Whistler's time, a raw, bloody subject wasn't favored. Art

historian Donald Holden quotes a critic from the *London Times* as saying, "It is Mr. Whistler's way to choose people and things for painting which other painters would turn from."

Typically, dead animals in art are small and portrayed in still life. The French term is *nature morte*, "nature dead." Hares, pheasants, fish, the prize of the hunt, the catch of the day—food for



### The Birth of Venus

by Odilon Redon, 1912,  
pastel, 32<sup>1</sup>/<sub>6</sub> x 25<sup>5</sup>/<sub>6</sub>.  
Collection Musée du Petit  
Palais, Paris, France.

page. Along the right, where the wing was attached to the body, unfinished passages reveal Dürer's technique. A layer of graduated wash created a base color with a soft transparent edge. Over the wash, dark strokes shaded the feathers and layered them, one atop another, across the wing. Then, to create the reflective sheen, Dürer applied delicate opaque lights, stroke by stroke along the length of virtually every feather. Line—that most basic element of drawing—completes the effect.

Traditional Chinese painting is a world apart from this Western approach, with subjects prized for beauty and rich in symbolic blessing. Wang Zhi Jiar's blessing begins with his title, *Years of Prosperity* (in full, "Many Years of Continuing Prosperity"). His formal, traditional style of writing recalls the ancient link between ink drawing and calligraphy. Both

the pot—are dressed for a banquet. There is also a tradition of scientific inquiry.

Nature's palette can be nearly impossible to imitate. Since Albrecht Dürer's time, science discovered that the blues, greens, and iridescence in a bird's feather come not from pigments but from light dispersion effects—something like the way colors wash and flow

through a sunset. Sometimes it's best not to know what you are up against: Dürer created nature studies so detailed and convincing, his work set a standard for later generations of scientific illustration—without the benefit of this technical knowledge.

The colors and textures in *Wing of a Blue Roller* look almost real on the

flowed from the brush, both in black. Scholar-artists saw black as a universal color: "If you have ink, you have the Five Colors," Chinese tradition says, meaning that with proper control, the spirit and essence of a subject can be conveyed in black and gray tones. Color was considered merely decorative, a cheap attempt to describe the surface appearance of



things. Accordingly, when color was used in a brush drawing, it had a minimal role in a limited palette.

In this modern treatment of traditional subjects, color and even surface effects have found their place. Surely these fish, the flowers, and the churning water were chosen, in part, for the decorative pleasure of color. But like traditional subjects in China, color has meaning.

Commentators on Chinese art note that powerful, thrashing carp recall ancient Chinese scholars striving to pass imperial examinations—carp carry yang energy. Tree-peonies are called the king of flowers. Usually a yang or masculine symbol, peonies in this context are queen, feminine, yin. In Wang’s composition, peonies overshadow the pond to soften the fishes’ yang energy. Yin peony and yang fish balance the composition, but the fish are many and most important.

In Chinese, the word *fish* sounds like the word for prosperity. Because of their color, goldfish are even richer, for their name sounds like “plenty of gold.” And this pond has nine fish—a very lucky number that signifies longevity. Balanced and auspicious, the composition brings a great blessing to the household. To make sure the point could not possibly be missed, Wang stamped “blessing” in a big red oval by his script. Then he protected the bless-



### Years of Prosperity

by Wang Zhi Jiar, ca. 2000, ink and watercolor, 53¼ x 26¾. Collection Kenneth and Wai Procter.

gruesome prequel that I’ll not share here, the mythical birth of Venus inspired artists to create images of sublime beauty and grace, poses worthy of a goddess.

Up to a point, Odilon Redon followed the tradition. In place of the perfect classical contrapposto, Redon drew an S-curve approximation. He left her face and arms unfinished. Lines are more sketched than refined. Instead of refinement, detail, and finish, Redon developed color.

Redon used a warm-toned paper for his color foundation. Scumbling over the paper with a palette of earth colors, he turned the whole foreground into a vague but intensely colored rocky outcrop. Set against the rocks and sky, Redon left Venus mostly nude—the paper color. The contrasts make her skin appear to glow. Just as the blue sky looks most intense where the warm paper peeps through, Venus’ sensuous

figure gains warmth where the blues frame her torso. This phenomenon is called simultaneous contrast—the vibrant effect achieved when bright complementary hues are juxtaposed. The optical intensity of pastel pigment further heightens the colors. The effect is mysterious. Venus rises from her shell in all her luminous, naked beauty, but she’s visible for just a moment—soon she will be enveloped in the preternatural sky and lost to mortal eyes. ■

ing: Among the bright and colorful school of nine fish, Wang painted a single dark fish—symbolically, the scapegoat who absorbs any possible bad luck and carries it away. Even with the black carp out of the count, the number eight represents prosperity.

Born from the sea and carried on the waves by her shell, Venus eventually landed on the shore. Here is where tradition painted a beautiful nude female. Despite the irony of a

BONUS  
CHAPTER

# The Quill Pen

## *How to Draw With the Tool of the Masters*



Both Old Masters and contemporary artists have taken advantage of the wonderfully sensitive marks made by this classic drawing implement.

*by John A. Parks*



ABOVE

### **Two Witches With a Cat**

by Jacques de Gheyn II, 1600–1610, pen-and-brown ink, 9½ x 6.  
Collection The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

LEFT

### **Actor in the Role of Pantalone**

by Rembrandt, pen-and-ink on paper, 8¼ x 4.  
Collection Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands.

This content has been abridged from an original article written by John Parks.  
© F+W Media, Inc. All rights reserved. F+W Media grants permission for any  
or all pages in this premium to be copied for personal use.





When we look at a pen-and-ink drawing by Da Vinci, Rembrandt, or Brueghel, we are seeing the work of a feather quill pen, sometimes used in combination with a reed pen. It is remarkable to consider that from the 7th century all the way to the middle of the 19th century, the bulk of writing and much of the drawing in the Western world was undertaken with the quill pen. Although the instrument was largely replaced by steel-nib pens, artists still use the quill pen for its fluid and expressive properties, and it is neither difficult nor expensive to begin

#### **The Raising of Tabitha**

by Guercino, ca. 1618, pen-and-brown ink and brown wash over stylus underdrawing, 7 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ . Collection The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

your own experiments with this classic drawing tool.

Although there is an occasional reference to a metal nib in earlier centuries, it wasn't until the early 19th century that the first patent was granted for the design of one, and only in the 1820s did John Mitchell of Birmingham, England, begin to mass-produce steel nibs. Steel nibs offered considerable improvements for scribes

and artists in terms of longevity, fineness of line, consistency, and convenience, but with the rise of the steel-nib pen something was also lost. Looking back at master drawings from the preceding centuries, we are struck by a lively warmth in the line, a delightful give-and-take between thick and thin, and a glorious sense that the line has a life and will of its own. A quill is a living thing—its wear is uneven, and its behavior can be erratic and capricious. It often obliges an artist working with the quill pen to take risks and adapt to accident and inconsistency.



**LEFT**  
**The Country on the Banks of the Rhone Viewed From Montmajour**

by Vincent van Gogh, 1888, red pen, quill, and ink over black chalk and graphite on wove paper, 19% x 23%. Collection British Museum, London, England.

**BELOW**  
**The Piazza San Marco**

by Canaletto, ca. 1726–1728, pen-and-ink on paper, 7 x 9%. The Royal Collection, Windsor, England.



## THE QUILL PEN IN THE HANDS OF MASTERS

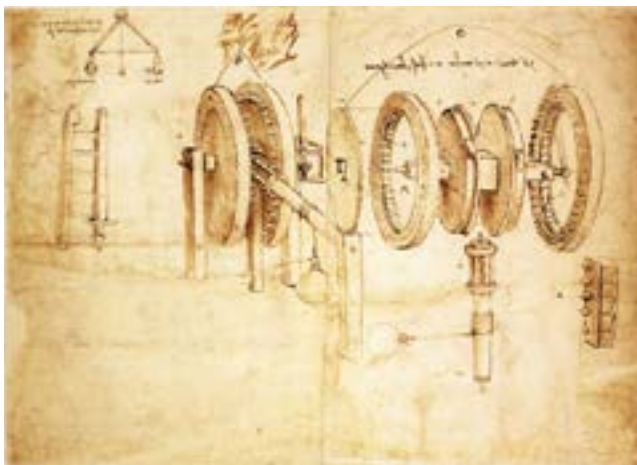
The drawings of many historical masters highlight the peculiarly expressive qualities of the quill. The drawing *Two Witches With a Cat* by the Dutch artist Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629) shows something of the freedom and panache that the quill can engender. Executed in a combination of outline and crosshatching that descends from Renaissance draftsmanship, the artist uses a great variety of weights of line, as well as a very personal handwriting of squiggles and flourishes, to give his figures an enormous sense of life and movement.

Used with wash, the pen line can be extraordinarily evocative and efficient. In Guercino's (1591–1666) *The Raising of Tabitha*, an entire figure composition is summoned out of the thin air of multiple lines and swathes of washed ink. Note how the artist freely moves the head of the central figure to achieve the correct balance in the composition.



**LEFT, TOP**  
**Punchinello With Ostriches in a Villa Garden**

by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, ca. 1795–1803, pen-and-brown ink, brown and golden-brown wash over black chalk, 11% x 16%. Collection Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.



**LEFT, BOTTOM**  
**Study for Toothed Gears for a Hygrometer, Codex Atlanticus**

by Leonardo da Vinci, pen-and-brown ink on paper, 15% x 22. Collection Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, Italy.



The quill pen was not confined to work of a free nature. The notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), for instance, are full of the most meticulous pen-and-ink draftsmanship. In showing his mechanical devices and curious inventions, the artist was able to use the quill’s variety of weight and thickness to produce drawings of the utmost clarity. This strategy is much in evidence in a double page from his notebooks that depict studies for toothed gears of a hygrometer.

Canaletto (1697–1768), a master of elaborate perspectives and orderly views, was highly accomplished with the quill, using his own shorthand of hatching and dashes to render palazzos and gondolas, water and sky. Also in the 18th century, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804) found a new kind of poetry in pen and wash when he made his remarkable *Punchinello* drawings. This series of more than 100 images is an inventive tour de force that follows the supposed career of *Punchinello*, one of the stock characters of *commedia dell’arte*. Here the quill’s rich, warm line endows the drawings with a shifting movement that reinforces the quirky and sometimes dark humor of the narrative.

Even after the invention on the steel nib some artists continued to use the quill. Most famous was Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), who used quill in combination with reed pen to create highly original landscape drawings. Influenced by Japanese models, Van Gogh was clearly interested in allowing the shape of both lone marks and groups of marks to “remake” the density and texture of individual elements within the picture. The results dramatically translate the appearance of the world into an entirely pictorial form.

## Demonstration:

# Cutting the Quill

Cutting the quill requires a very sharp knife, a magnifying glass, a good eye, and a steady hand. Traditionally, scribes and artists used a small knife with a somewhat curved blade—the classic penknife. I found that an ordinary X-Acto blade works very well.



### Step 1

Strip away most of the feather hairs near the base of the quill. As romantic as it looks to hold a full feather as you work, it is actually rather a nuisance, and work proceeds better without it.



### Step 2

Make a simple cut at least an inch above the tip of the feather. The material close to the tip is too fragile to use as a nib.



### Step 3

All feathers have a curve or bias. Decide which side is going to be up by holding the feather and feeling for the best grip.



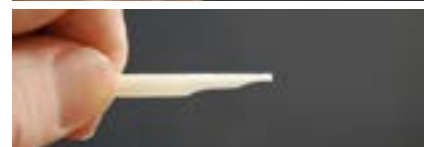
### Step 4

Use a piece of thin wire that is hooked at the end to pull out the filaments from inside the tube.



### Step 5

Make a shallow diagonal cut into the underside of the tube starting about one inch above the end and working downward so that when the end is reached, about half its width has been removed.



### Step 6

Make another cut, at a steeper angle, that cuts into the previous cut about 3/8" from the end. You should now have a blunt, round tip on the feather.

*Continued...*

## USING A QUILL PEN

Given the evident attractions of the quill-pen line, I thought until recently that it was somewhat odd that so few artists use it today. It wasn't until last year, when I attempted to do some quill-pen drawings myself, that the reason for its unpopularity became clear. The business of preparing and cutting a quill requires quite a bit of time and trouble, especially to the uninitiated. Once an artist obtains some skill in cutting reasonably good nibs, there is a further learning period for getting used to the touch and feel of the thing. In spite of a faltering start, however, the adventure proved a good one, yielding drawings of a richness and expressiveness that I hadn't achieved with a steel pen. Here's how I went about it.

The best feather for a quill is generally considered to be goose. Usually the front flight feathers are used, and these can be obtained through a number of suppliers—I ordered mine for less than a dollar each. As well as providing raw feathers, some vendors also offer to supply quills already tempered or with a nib cut into them.

Once you have a raw quill, you have the option to cut a nib right away or to first temper the quill to make it harder. To temper a quill, heat a saucepan of common sand until the material is too hot to touch, then dip the quill into it for 10 to 20 minutes. The longer the quill is immersed in the heat, the harder it will become. (Be careful not to heat too much, as this will ruin the quill altogether.) My experience has been that tempered quills, although undoubtedly harder and more consistent, do not yield as warm a line as untempered quills, which are more



### **Step 7**

Next you must make a split in the nib. Place the tube so that the top of the nib is down on a hard surface, and make a nick in the middle of it with the X-Acto knife. Then, insert a thin brush handle into the tube, and place your forefinger on the outside of the tube at the point where you would like the split to end (about 3/8" from the tip). Push with the brush handle upward toward the nick until it opens into a split. By keeping your finger firmly on the tube, the split should stop when it reaches the pressure point. This is the classic method, which can be difficult, but you can also try simply scoring the desired position for the split and then squeezing the tube.



### **Step 10**

Fine tune the nib by shaving very delicately into its sides to achieve the exact width for you taste. Use a magnifying glass, and go slowly. Be prepared to make adjustments if the nib doesn't work well first time.



### **Step 8**

To finish the nib, cut a clean, curving line along either the side of the nib end to fashion the point. I have found that the thinner and longer I can make the nib point, the more delightful the mark. A nib that is too thin, however, becomes too fragile and does not last long. Use a magnifying glass to check your work.



### **Step 9**

Once the point is fashioned, place the nib down on the table, and make a horizontal cut across its end.

### **Step 11**

To go the extra mile, you can add a reservoir. Use a small pair of metal cutters to cut a strip of metal (about 1" long and 1/16" wide) from a soda can. Fashion it into a long S-shape, and push it into the tube of the pen so that it is held in place by its own spring. This allows the tube to hold more ink. (This is an extremely fiddly part of the process, and you may enjoy drawing just as much without it.)





flexible. This is probably a matter of taste and feel, and I suggest that you try both.

I was delighted with quality of line I could get with the quill and intrigued with the old-fashioned, Old Master look of the thing. I have tried a variety of papers and inks and found that a good watercolor paper gives the warmest line, and interesting and sharper effects can be achieved with harder papers. Generally I use modern commercial inks from Rotring in black and sepia, although some draftsmen swear by the more traditional iron-gall ink that was used by many masters. The advantage of modern inks is that they don't change color so much over time and don't eat into the paper, as iron gall eventually does. I found that the quill adds an element of thrill and

#### Garden

by John A. Parks, 2009, goose quill pen and sepia ink on watercolor paper, 15 x 22. Collection the artist.

risk to the process of drawing; I'm never quite as certain just how a line will go down as when drawing with a metal nib. However, I soon got a feel for the quill and quickly began to enjoy its generosity as it opened up to thicks and closed down to thins. After a number of trials and studies I did some large drawings of English gardens, distantly thinking about Van Gogh, Fragonard, and Rembrandt. I was intrigued with how the quill-pen line transmits a sense of warmth and pulse, giving the finished drawings an animated and sensual presence. I plan to do many more.

## CONTEMPORARY QUILL-PEN DRAWINGS

Among contemporary artists who use the quill is the sculptor David Beck, most famous for his popular multimedia sculpture *MVSEVM*, in the collection of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, in Washington, DC. A tireless drawer and sketcher, Beck often uses a quill, preferring a turkey feather rather than a goose feather, because he feels that the turkey feather has an added flexibility and delicacy. Beck's interest in natural forms and materials—his sculpture often makes use of bone, horn, shells, and other bits and pieces of animals and plants—readily



embraces the idea of using a feather as a drawing tool. “When I was a boy I spent a lot of time copying engravings out of books,” he says. “I think I got used to the idea of doing drawings from a repertoire of small marks and lines.”

When working with the quill, Beck is happy to innovate. “I find myself drawing with the pen upside down often,” he says. “Somehow it just seems easier to control and less likely to blot drawing with the back of the nib.” Beck also points out the usefulness of having a blank sheet of paper at hand to test the loaded pen before making a mark. His recent drawings of the extinct dodo bird pursue his interest in the extremes of natural forms and project a sense of the absurdity of life and its many manifestations. “Somehow the quill is smoother on the paper than a steel nib,” he says. “It moves evenly and gracefully and is not as likely to snag.” Beck says that he enjoys the fact that each quill nib is different, making each drawing experience unique.

Another artist who uses the quill is the British-American painter Cynthia Barlow Marrs. She incorporates a quill line in her dense, close-up renderings of leaves, which she achieves with combinations of pen, watercolor, and collage. “In *Leaf Fall 2* I used greenish-grey 640 gsm handmade Khadi paper with a very irregular surface,” she says. “For areas of line drawing I used a quill pen with Rohrer & Klingner drawing ink in sepia and black, and for areas of wash and drybrush I used Rohrer ink, as well as FW acrylic inks. The collaged leaf shapes in green were created with relief printmaking ink



### Leaf Fall 2

by Cynthia Barlow Marrs, 2009, drawing ink and printers ink on heavy Khadi paper. 10¼ x 7½. Collection the artist.

on watercolor paper. The piece began as a single sheet of Khadi paper. Working quickly and without premeditation, I dipped the quill pen into ink and made sweeping arcs across the paper, then added smaller clusters that to me suggested leaves or perhaps the whorls of pine needles. This established both the underlying structure of the drawing and the theme. I added collage elements and



LEFT

**Two Dodos**

by David Beck, 2009, turkey quill and walnut ink, 4 x 4 3/8. Collection the artist.

BELOW

**Girl**

by Derek Jones, 2009, goose quill and iron gall ink on paper, 10 1/2 x 6 1/2. Collection the artist.



areas of wash and drybrush to reinforce the composition and bring out the leaf theme. I then went over each drawing with the quill to add details.”

The result is a rich and vibrant image presented with considerable panache. “Thanks to the flexible nib and hollow stem of the quill, I can create long sweeping lines on rough surfaces that would defeat a steel nib,” Barlow Marrs says. “I am particularly interested in a strong attack and attractive finish. I can manipulate ink flow to create a heavy deposit at the beginning of a line and wherever several lines converge, and with the same quill I can create the most delicate lines for details.”

Another English artist, Derek Jones, an indefatigable draftsman, painter, and blogger, has tried using a quill for his lively and stylish work that explores images of women as creatures of attraction and seduction. He has mixed feelings about the instrument, however. “I

have to admit to prefer the metal-nib pen, really because of the balance of the shaft—they are easier to hold,” he says. “The quill seems top-heavy and clumsy at times. And of course with a dip pen, you can get amazing refinement in a drawing by choosing various nibs. On the other hand, the quill pen will always win when you want an organic, swelling, flexible line—and used with an old ink such as iron gall you can get from the most fine, delicate lines to wide, dark lines.”

Each of these artists has succeeded in adapting the quill pen to entirely contemporary visions, using its variety, warmth, and drama to add new qualities and additional life to his or her artwork. Like the violin and its bow, with all their wood, glue, and horsehair, the quill pen offers an instrument whose sensitivity and range cannot be matched by modern engineering. If you give a little time and patience, it will reward you in spades. ■

## ARTIST WEBSITES

For more information on the contemporary artists featured in this article, please visit their websites.

**CYNTHIA BARLOW MARRS:**

[www.cbarlowmarrs.com](http://www.cbarlowmarrs.com)

**DAVID BECK:**

[www.allanstonegallery.com](http://www.allanstonegallery.com)

**DEREK JONES:**

[www.derekjonesart.blogspot.com](http://www.derekjonesart.blogspot.com)

**JOHN A. PARKS:**

[www.johnaparks.com](http://www.johnaparks.com)



# Drawing:

YOUR IDEAL RESOURCE WHETHER YOU PAINT, SCULPT, WORK WITH ARCHITECTURE OR EVEN FASHION.

**A year of Drawing  
WILL BRING YOU:**

DETAILED ILLUSTRATIONS  
AND DEMONSTRATIONS FOR  
ANY SKILL LEVEL

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES TO  
ENHANCE YOUR DRAWINGS

HELPFUL DIAGRAMS ON  
HUMAN ANATOMY

IN-DEPTH ARTIST PROFILES  
AND SO MUCH MORE!

Available in print and  
digital formats.

***Subscribe today and save!***

IT'S QUICK, EASY AND SECURE AT  
[WWW.ARTISTDAILY.COM/SUBSCRIBE](http://WWW.ARTISTDAILY.COM/SUBSCRIBE)

