



artist daily
presents

THE ARTIST DAILY GUIDE TO USING A PHOTO REFERENCE:

Art Tips for Drawing from
Photographs and Turning
Photos to Paintings

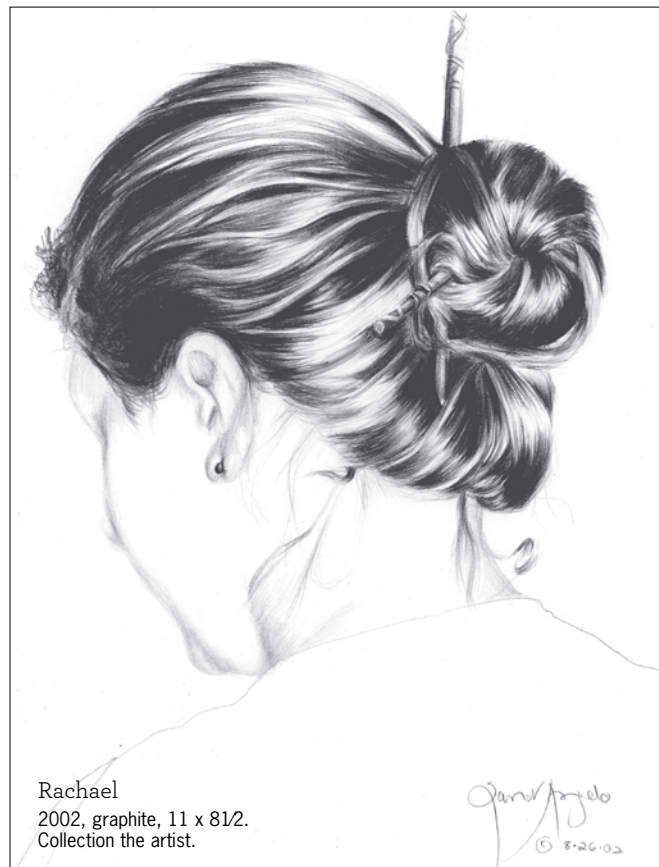
Silver and Velvet
2002, colored pencil,
11 x 16. Collection the artist



USING THE CAMERA *to Your Advantage*

DRAWING PEOPLE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.
by **Sandra Angelo**

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Rachael
2002, graphite, 11 x 8 1/2.
Collection the artist.

For this demonstration, I took a black-and-white photo of the model and made a contour drawing of the major shapes within the hair on a sheet of two-ply, plate-finish paper.

Working from hard to soft graphite pencils, I drew the lines of the hair in varying lengths. Following the three-dimensional form of the head, I worked up to a rich, dark tone near the forehead and around the bun.

Drawing from photographs has its advantages and disadvantages. Deciding whether to draw from life or from photographic reference should be a matter of choosing the practical path. Drawing from life will allow an artist to see a fuller value range than what can be observed in a photograph, while drawing from a photograph of a child, say, rather than asking the child to pose, can make a difficult task much more manageable.

A lot of artists concentrate on the eyes when starting a portrait. Some concern themselves with the general shape of the head, while others

may find that likeness resides in the mouth. But many beginners are filled with trepidation at tackling the most changeable, finely detailed, and idiosyncratic feature of a person: the hair.

Shiny, silky, smooth, frizzy, wavy, kinky. A person's hair is as individual as his or her facial features. Both the style and texture speak volumes about someone's age, personality, social status, and history. But many artists overlook that important aspect of a sitter's appearance and individuality in recording what I call a "personality portrait." They scribble lines, rub tones, and fill in shapes after they've completed the face, hoping no one will notice that the hair looks more like a floppy hat pulled tightly over the head.

Have the right tools for the job

You could use a tablespoon to measure a teaspoon full of liquid, but why risk pouring too much or too little? It's always better to choose the right tool for the job at hand. That's as true in drawing as it is in cooking.

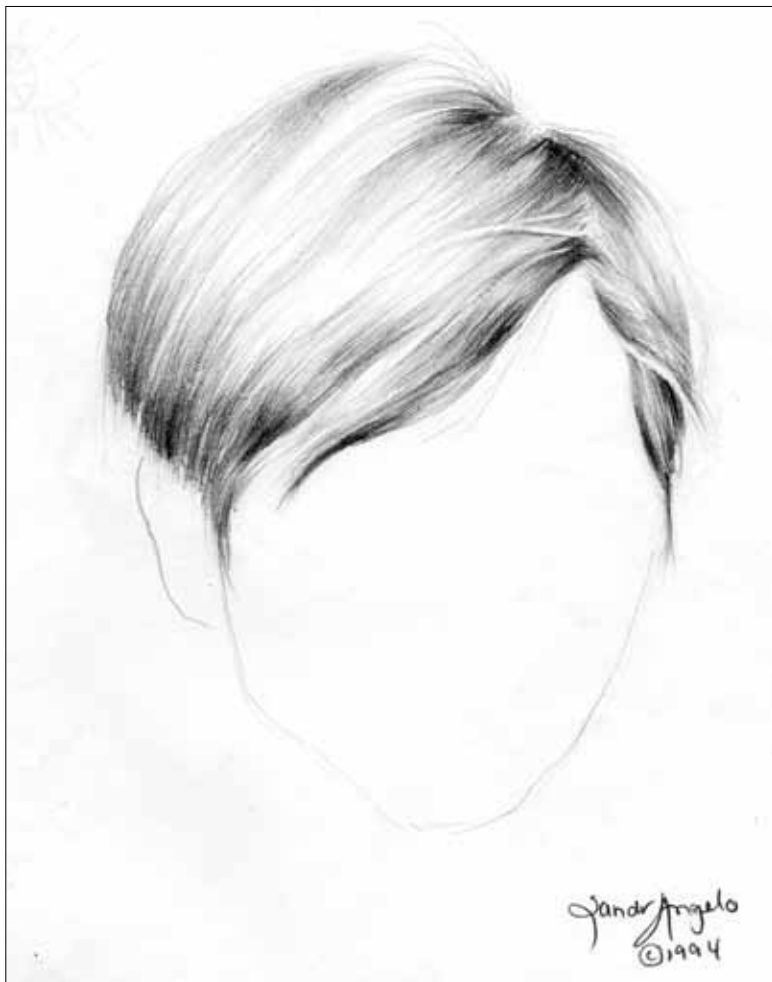
I recommend buying at least six graphite pencils, ranging in degrees of softness from an HB to a 9B, as well as an F. My favorite brands are European, because they yield a much wider range of values. Yes, you could use the yellow No. 2 pencil in your desk drawer, but



Long, who studied with Ballantyne, starts her process with a photo session, during which she attempts to capture the essence and personality of the subject, as well as begin the design and composition process. She then strives to transfer that glimpse of the inner person into her drawings. **"It's important to capture more than just the likeness of the subject in a drawing,"** she explains. "There is an emotion, an attitude, or a moment in time to portray as well."

Sadie

by Cindy Long,
2003, graphite on
cold-pressed Bristol
board, 14 1/2 x 11 1/2.
Collection the artist.



This demonstration shows how to draw hair with an awareness that the lines flow over and around a three-dimensional form, and how the position of the light source (at upper left) affects the placement of light and dark lines.

I practiced drawing strands of hair, making sure they varied in weight and length. The circled areas show how unnatural the hair looks if the lines end abruptly or if all lines end in the same place.

you will struggle to get the deep, rich darks and the soft, light tones that are easy to create with artists' pencils.

Artists' erasers are also a must because, unlike the pink eraser at the end of a writing pencil, they won't damage the paper surface or leave ugly marks. I use a kneaded eraser for lifting graphite from paper, to soften an edge, or to lighten a value. As the name implies, a kneaded eraser can be pulled apart and pushed back together like bread dough to clean graphite from the eraser. I also use a hand-held, battery-operated eraser for establishing sharp edges or

for removing lines completely.

The surface I prefer is a plate-finish, 100% cotton, pure-white drawing paper sold in 11"-x-14" spiral-bound pads. I also have one pad with thin, one-ply paper that I take along when traveling or sitting in a doctor's office, and another pad that contains a heavier, two-ply paper for studio work.

If my drawings are going to be handled by a lot of people, I spray them with a light mist of Krylon workable fixative. If they are going to a framer immediately, to be placed under glass, I don't need to give them that protective coating.

Where Do I Begin?

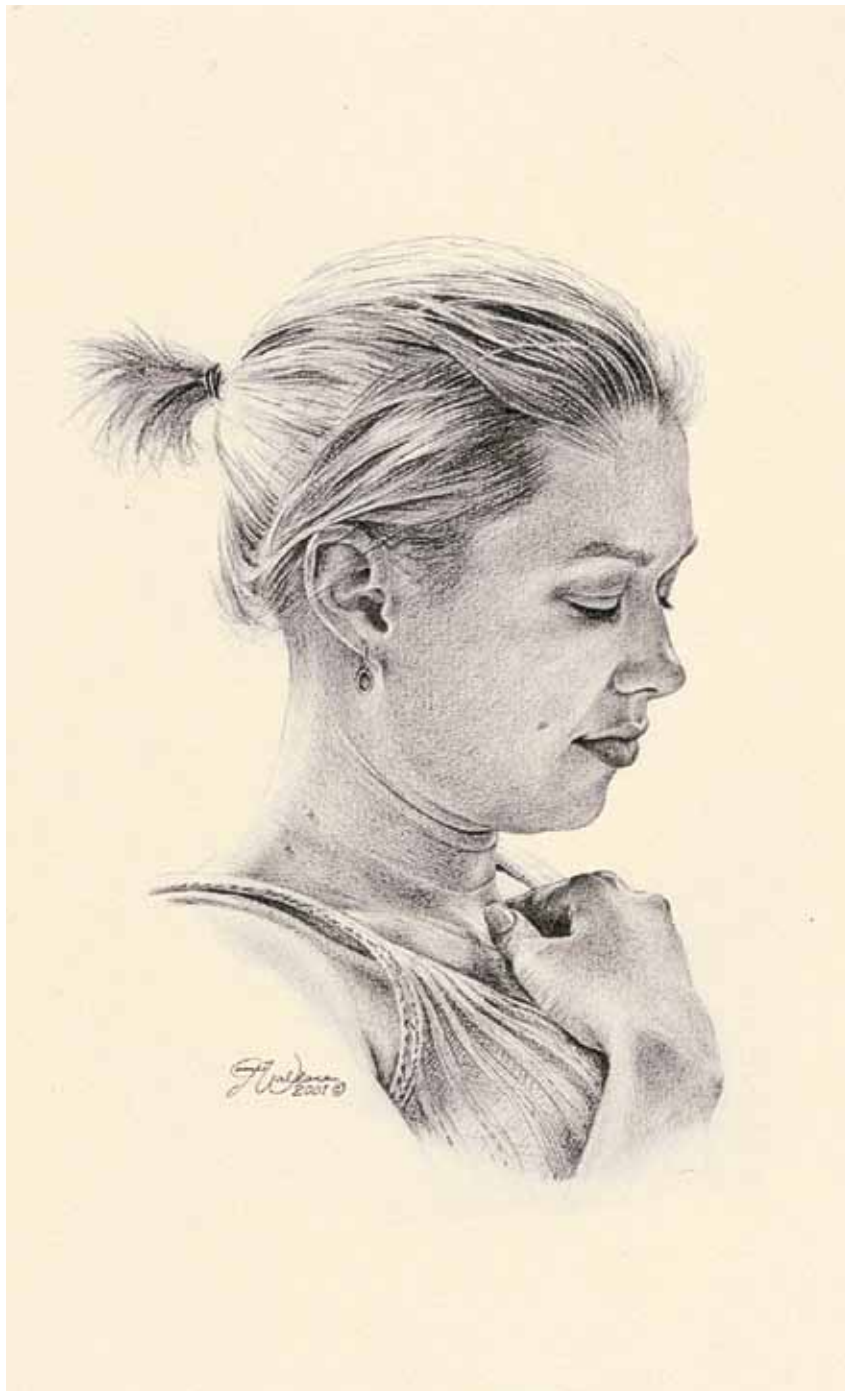
I encourage beginners to learn by copying Old Master drawings, then progress to working from large photographic references. The two advantages of copying Old Masters are that it's easier to render from drawings, because you can see how materials were used, and because you will always learn more from copying a great drawing than from duplicat-

ing an average drawing.

It's important to work from a large reference, be it an Old Master drawing, a family photograph, or a magazine illustration. Source material has to be large enough for you to see subtleties in tones—particularly in depicting hair. Fashion magazines often have large faces that are excellent references. Stay away from family snapshots where faces are smaller than a thumbtack; the face in your reference needs to be at least 5" x 7" for you to gather enough information for a drawing. With computers and laser copies readily available, it's quite easy to enlarge photos. Just make sure your enlargement retains adequate resolution.

To save time when drawing a grid over the black-and-white enlargement of a drawing or photo, my students use the Discover Art grid kit; the grid lines are on an acetate sheet that is placed over the reference. A sheet with grids (dark lines that show through drawing paper) is placed under the drawing surface. The sheets come with 1/2", 3/4", and 1" grids. The more detail in your drawing, the smaller your grid should be.

If you can't get the grid kit, you can simply use a ruler to mark 1/2" intervals along the edges of your photocopy, and draw grid lines connecting the marks. Draw a proportional grid on a clean sheet of drawing paper, using a light graphite pencil to keep your lines faint. Now you are ready to create a contour-line drawing that will serve as a map for your shading. Draw the outlines of the major shapes within the Old Master drawing or other reference by recording how those outlines move from one part of the grid to another. For example, you might observe that the outline of the mouth begins at the bottom of one square and goes diagonally over to the next square, then the line moves down to the edge of the third square. Draw that outline cross-



Anka

by Gordon MacDonald, 2003, graphite, 10 x 8. Collection the artist.

"Take 20 or 30 photographs of a person from different angles so you can get a sense of the sculptural form of the head and the subtle differences in facial expressions," advises Gordon MacDonald, a finalist in Drawing magazine's 2004 Drawing Competition. "Just one view of the head is limiting, and I need to have enough information to distort things for the sake of capturing a total likeness. A good portrait has three main ingredients: the personality of the sitter, the likeness of the facial features, and the design of the image on paper or canvas."



Jenni

by James Wallace,
2003, graphite, 10 x 8.

Wallace observed his daughter, Jenni, lost in thought while sitting on the patio of their home. He quickly grabbed a camera and took candid shots, one of which captured her pensive expression. Once back in his studio, Wallace used a Sanford design ebony graphite pencil to make a quick gesture drawing to place the head in the middle of a piece of Strathmore Bristol board. He then developed the drawing being careful not to smudge the graphite on the white board.

ing the same set of squares in the grid on your drawing paper. Also observe the width and height of the hair in relation to the face.

If you are struggling with accuracy, consider turning your reference and drawing paper upside down. Or place a piece of paper (with a 1/2" window in it) over your reference, blocking everything except the information contained within a 1/2" square. That will force you to see abstract line and shape relationships instead of working from preconceived notions about how the subject should look. Once your line drawing is accurate, you are ready to start filling in the contours with lines

characteristic of human hair.

It may seem that using a grid is a cheater's way of drawing, but it's actually a process artists have relied on for centuries. It's a simple way of transferring the major lines of a drawing and, at the same time, either reducing or enlarging the image. Furthermore, a grid helps us understand that drawing and painting depend on seeing the abstract relationship of shapes, lines, and values. Once you accept that premise and stop being intimidated by the magnificence of Raphael's Madonna or the intricacies of Aunt Gertrude's lace blouse, you'll be able to draw anything accurately—including hair.

How Can I Make it Look Real?

I recommend that beginners build up layers of graphite from the lightest to the darkest values, because students seem to have more confidence in progressing toward the intense darks rather than away from them. Following that idea, you should start drawing the lightest highlights and work toward the dark twists and folds in the subject's hair. Use your graphite pencils in numerical sequence, increasing the amount of pressure you apply to them as you build

tone. Always place a dark value at the hair roots, to prevent hair from looking like it's a wig that landed on the model's head. Dark roots anchor hair to the head.

The lines of your drawing should flow with the three-dimensional form. That is, have them move as if they were actually strands of hair undulating on your paper over the surface of your model's head. Don't draw each line exactly the same length; let some stop short and others flow beyond the outlines you made over your grid. No matter how much mousse or hair spray is applied to a head of hair, a few strands will always stray from the pack.

Painters talk about establishing "lost" and "found" edges with the movement of their brushes; the same idea applies to handling a drawing pencil. For example, the edge between a person's face and hair is usually a hard one, because there is a shadow cast by the overhanging hair, whereas the crown of the head often fades into the background and becomes a softer, lost edge. There is also a lost-and-found character to individual lines when they begin as firm, dark marks and gradually soften and melt into white paper. The balance of hard and soft edges helps establish a realistic quality in a drawing.

How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?

Yes, practice is the only way to master any art form, be it music, dance, or fine and applied art. It's especially important in drawing, which builds confidence, facilitates the motor coordination between eyes and hands, and increases an understanding of how to depict specific subjects. Practice is also a way of being sure of what you're doing once you're in the middle of a drawing. If you aren't quite sure how to draw the next section, practice on a separate piece of paper so you won't worry about ruining all the good work you've done.



ABOVE

Hannah

by Carrie Ballantyne, 2003, charcoal, 15 x 11. Private collection.

This charcoal portrait was done after the colored-pencil piece because Ballantyne wanted to tackle the challenge of charcoal, and because she wanted to execute a more accurate depiction of her daughter—she wasn't satisfied with certain parts of her colored-pencil portrait. The process for both drawings began with **many photographs, which she developed in black and white to allow her to gauge each one without being unduly influenced by color.**

LEFT

Shades of Gray

by Carrie Ballantyne, 2002, colored pencil, 15 x 12. Private collection.

CHOOSING & USING PORTRAIT PHOTO REFERENCES

Before cameras, portrait patrons had the tedious task of sitting for their portrait for days or even months on end. Enter the camera, a fabulous tool for freezing action, glances, and subtleties. The digital age catapulted photo references to an even greater level of convenience for the portrait artist, because now:

- Reference images can be enlarged quickly and easily on a home printer.
- Values can be modified in image-manipulation software such as Photoshop to explore details difficult to view from traditional prints.
- Even the photo shoot itself provides instant feedback. One can shoot and immediately check the LCD monitor on the back of the camera for any sign of double chins or dangling cellulite—and all but the finest photos can be deleted.

Yet even with modern inventions, artists need to avoid pitfalls that could otherwise force portraits into an uninspired mold, not unlike holding up a banal mirror in front of the sitter.

Three Ways to Stimulate a Good Shoot

Before you begin your photo shoot, **excite your imagination by looking at masterful portraits.** Visit your local bookstore and sink into their comfy chairs with a stack of portrait books. **Wander through online galleries to stimulate your brain with provocative ideas** that may inspire unusual costumes, backgrounds or

even a unique location for the photo shoot. If you want to inject personality into a portrait, simply **schedule an exciting event with the sitter and take your camera along.**

By catching them doing something they love, you'll get candid references that reflect their character.

Photo References: Three Common Mistakes

1. MISTAKE: LIMITED VALUE RANGE

Light and dark values lend depth to art. For example, subtle shadows indicate underlying anatomical structures such as bones or muscles. If your photo doesn't show detail, you can't draw or paint it. Subtleties are often what make or break a likeness.

SOLUTION: SHOOT WITH VARIED LIGHT.

- a. Shoot each picture with and without the flash.
- b. Print several versions of your photo
 - a dark version to show detail in the light areas
 - a medium exposure photo to show midtones
 - a lightened photo to reveal information in dark zones
- c. Adjust bad photos with Photoshop or another image-manipulation software program.

2. MISTAKE: DON'T TRY FOR A PERFECT PHOTO

A fine art photo should have flawless composition, lighting, and color. By contrast, a good reference simply needs to offer the artist details about the sitter, his or her environment and costume.



TOP
This photo would be much easier to draw because the face is large. This first picture was taken without the flash.

MIDDLE
This second shot was taken with the flash.

BOTTOM
This third frame was modified in Photoshop. It was lightened significantly so that the details in the dark areas would show up.



LEFT AND BELOW

ZZZZZ

by Sandra Angelo, 2003, 11x14.

I cropped out all extraneous information and drew only what was needed to tell the story.



SOLUTION: USE THE CAMERA AS A SKETCHING TOOL

- Shoot close-ups for detail.
- Shoot wide shots for background info.
- Use the same lighting for all shots so that background pictures match the portrait photos and shadows remain consistent.

3. MISTAKE: WORKING WITH ALBUM PHOTOS CAN BE TRICKY

A good photo equals a good drawing, but sometimes there is a special, albeit very poor quality, photo from your past that really captures someone's personality. Perhaps the child has grown or the person has passed away so the photo can't be restaged. But photos of family and friends are generally 4"-x-6" at the largest. Thus, their faces might be the size of a thumbtack in the photo. It's impossible to draw a face when you can't see details, so be realistic—not all memory photos are suitable for drawing. Like most folks, even if you discriminate, you'll likely come up with more good photos than you can draw in your lifetime. Be selective and choose only photos that lend themselves to creating dynamic portraits.

SOLUTION: CLASSIFY PERSONAL PHOTOS IN THREE CATEGORIES.

1. Photos that trigger memories and help tell your story: Leave those in your scrapbook.
2. Photos that are suitable for framing: You want to keep some memories at the front of your mind. Frame these and display them at work and home.
3. Photos that make good drawing references. Photos in this group have the following traits:

- The ability to enlarge the photo so you can see detail.
- A wide range of values that offer critical drawing information.
- A memory that is worth the time and effort it will take to preserve it as a piece of art.

Once you've selected a photo remember you are not a slave to the reference. Eliminate anything that is not necessary for the story.

Before you even begin the portrait, create thumbnail sketches that explore various compositions. Avoid the temptation to create portraits that look like run of the mill mug shots. Ask yourself, how can I intrigue a viewer to linger and get acquainted with this sitter? Remember, portraits tell a small piece of someone's story, like a window that opens into a part of their world.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

SANDRA ANGELO is the author of a Home Study Correspondence Coaching Program titled Turn Family Photos into Art: Faces 101, available at www.DrawFACES101.com. A Fellowship Award Recipient from Rhode Island School of Design, Angelo has assembled a comprehensive, award-winning curriculum that includes 18 step-by-step DVDS and five companion books, as well as numerous coaching programs for beginning and intermediate students. View 18 of Angelo's free online video lessons at: [www.FREE OnlineARTLessons.com](http://www.FREEOnlineARTLessons.com). Email the artist at [Sandra@DiscoverARTwith SANDRA.com](mailto:Sandra@DiscoverARTwithSANDRA.com) or call Discover Art at (888) 327-9278.

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