

The Art of Drawing Part 3: My Technique for Photo-realistic Graphite Pencil Art

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The Starting Point

The starting point, for every drawing is the selection of subject matter. The first thing that you should do is ask yourself ... *what is my story, and what is the point of my drawing?* And secondly you should think about the narration ... *how do I intend to tell my story?*

In my opinion, this analysis is the foundation for any project that you may choose to undertake. This type of analysis will not only establish the composition of your drawing, but will also influence how you present the subject.

So ask yourself some very simple questions before you even put pencil to paper. What part of this subject interests me. And what part of this subject is superfluous, or redundant. (Don't believe anyone who says you can't improve upon nature). Ask yourself, what part of the subject shall I emphasize in terms of scale and position within the drawing, and what part of the subject shall I downplay, or even discard. In very simple terms, this analysis leads to the composition of your project. But the benefit does not end there. Because once you know the point of your story, the way in which you will emphasize line and stroking and value in your drawing, becomes very clear as well.

I consider this part of the exercise much like planning a trip. You can improvise and figure it out as you go. And the trip may end up being fun. But it probably will take longer than necessary, and you may get lost. Or, you can refer to a map and plan a direct route to your destination. The choice is yours.

Step 1: To Have and to Hold

For the precision and detail work that I prefer, it is best to hold the pencil as you do for writing. Holding the pencil this way gives mobility to your hand and flexibility to your fingers.

Step 2: To Serve and Protect

Always rest your drawing hand on a scrap piece of paper. Your skin is naturally oily and you will constantly smear your work, unless you separate your drawing hand from the working surface of the paper. I take notepaper and fold it in half. Be prepared to replace this scrap paper frequently, because it will get dirty with use.

This advice is very important, because there may be areas in the drawing that you want to show as white ... and we can't add white in a graphite drawing (I do not use white chalk or white pencils, I rely on maintaining the white of the paper). And the only way you can hope to maintain the white of the paper, is to avoid getting graphite on it in the first place.

Step 3: Set the Boundaries and Outline the Subject

This may sound trivial, but the first thing that I do is establish the border of my drawing on the paper space. I want to center the image on the paper. And by establishing the border at the very beginning, I can mask off the edge of my drawing with frisket so that I keep this border clean. In effect, I accomplish two things with this simple activity.

But the outline also applies to the subject. I like to know where everything is before I get started. So I attempt to capture every detail that I consider important at this early stage in the drawing. I will use a harder lead at this point, such as H or HB so that these preliminary lines don't smudge, and so that I can retain a crisp outline over subsequent stages of the process. But be careful. Don't press too hard with your pencil, or you run the risk of embossing the paper. And that unfortunately can present problems later in the process when you want the outline to disappear.

Let me give you an example of the detail that I try to capture at this point.

If I am working on a portrait, I will locate the position of the eyes, ears, nose and mouth (sounds like I am a physician). But I will go much further where possible, and locate the eyebrows, folds of skin around the eye, and the iris itself. I will define the position of teeth. I will locate any major wrinkles in the skin. Essentially, I try and save as much time at this stage as possible by establishing the location of any major facial features.

If I am drawing hair, I like to capture the position of major locks of hair. I don't need every individual hair, but by locating the major locks of hair, I can fill in the blanks later. In other words, I like to create some reference points that will help me to map out adjacent areas later.

It only makes sense to capture these details correctly at the beginning. My advice, based on the school of hard knocks ... take your time and do it right the first time ... don't take any shortcuts at this point in the process. It's easy to fix mistakes now ... not so easy to fix them later.

Step 4: Value Added

We are now ready to add value to the drawing.

I typically use a 2B pencil for this stage, although I may opt for 3B or softer leads, if appropriate.

And there are two principles that I maintain at this stage in the process.

I am right handed and I work from the upper left to the lower right as I progress with the drawing. In doing so, I reduce smearing of my work because my hand is usually over the unfinished portion of the drawing. I build up a drawing in layers, and I maintain this convention for each iteration of the drawing. So even as I work on the final layer, my hand remains over unfinished business.

I also draw from dark to light. I find it much easier to control pressure and related value by starting with the darkest areas of the drawing and then easing the pencil pressure as I move into lighter areas of the subject.

Keep in mind, the curvature of surface of the subject as you add value. The direction of the pencil stroke should follow and explain as much as possible the surface that you draw. Don't fall victim to flattening the image by using the same pencil stroke across the entire drawing.

Step 5: Lighten Up

At this point I like to step back and assess the accuracy of value across the drawing. If necessary, I will take a kneadable eraser and lift graphite where I think the value may be too dark. I find it is easier to remove graphite at this stage when it is lying on the paper surface, then to try and lift it later after I have blended the graphite into the paper finish.

Step 6: Put it in the Blender

I use blending stumps at this stage to soften the image, and work the graphite into the tooth of the paper. I work the graphite into the paper using a tight circular motion and follow the pencil strokes that I have already established. I also work from dark to light as previously mentioned.

There are various sizes of blending stumps available. I have a stockpile of several sizes, and use the most appropriate size for the job at hand.

Step 7: Build up the Layers

We are now ready to add detail and texture (and this is where realism resides). At this point I will use the full range of leads including 2B, B, HB and H. The type of lead used is based on the value and detail required. The harder leads such as HB and H are useful for adding line and texture (a harder lead will always be visible when laid over a softer lead). And this rule applies to virtually the entire range of leads. For example, a 2B lead may be relatively soft, but it will certainly stand out when laid beside, or on top of a softer lead, such as 3B or 4B.

Step 8: Second Verse Same as the First

This is the point in the project where we repeat and build up layers of the drawing.

Apply value and texture and line.

Blend value if appropriate.

Lift graphite with an eraser, if necessary.

Take a deep breath, and repeat.

(As a rule of thumb, I would counsel you to use more pencil, less blending and erasing with each successive layer)

I might build up 2-3 layers to reach the level of detail that satisfies me.

Step 9: Paint it Black

I find that realism is accentuated by the use of black. By that I mean, that a strong black goes a long way to adding life to a drawing. Unfortunately, all the iterations that we just described will wear away some graphite (value) as our hand works across the surface ... it is unavoidable. Some artists use a fixative during the buildup of the drawing to avoid this condition. But I don't like to work on a paper surface that has been sealed. And the penalty for my approach is that the blackest blacks will be lost in the process.

So the last step in my process is to re-establish the blacks. And at this point, I will also re-establish the whites (with an eraser).

Step 10: Save it

We are done, and everything looks perfect.

So let's get some fixative on it as quick as possible before we lose anything.

But before we get carried away, let's take one last look at the negative space around the drawing. Clean up the paper with an eraser ... then clean up the eraser residue ... and examine the results under very good light. Make sure that you are happy with everything before you start to spray your drawing with fixative. As a matter of fact, you might want to wait overnight before you spray. Take your time, and make sure that you are really done ... because once you spray it, you can't change it.

Step 11: Sign it

Congratulations, we are done, mission accomplished, and it has been a satisfying project. So what's next?

The Bottom Line

You may not like to plan this far ahead, but here is one more tip. I am always working on 2-3 projects simultaneously ... I do this to relieve the boredom of working on the same subject for an extended period of time, and I also do this to stagger my progress on each project. As you can imagine, the payoff for photo-realism is weighted to the end of the project, and it is to my benefit to have one project at nearing conclusion at the same time that I start another.

Drawing Conclusions

Every artist develops their own technique over time, but there is one common thread to success. And that is ... practice ... practice ... and more practice. Very few of us are naturally gifted. And unfortunately, that means that most of us need to work harder than some of us.