

The Art of Drawing Part 2: Tools of the Trade for Photo-realistic Graphite Pencil Art

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Drawing is the foundation for all types of art. Sculpture, painting, and architecture all use drawing as the initial medium in order to conceptualize and understand the various components that will work together in the final project. But that does not imply that drawing is merely the means to an end. In fact, drawing can be an end onto itself. Graphite pencil drawing is my passion, and in my opinion, a fine art.

I hope that the opinions that I share with you will help you to evaluate and assess the various drawing tools that are available. But I also am convinced that you must be prepared to experiment with all kinds of materials in order to determine which tools work best for you.

My materials don't have to be your materials. But for you to be successful, you must know *your* materials.

The Paper Chase

The type of paper that you select for your work will influence the result of your project more than any other tool that I will discuss. Consider paper to be the starting point for your drawing and make the selection with care. There is nothing worse than fighting with your paper, because you will always lose.

Paper is described with a term called *tooth*. Tooth defines the texture on the surface of the paper. A rough surface (tooth) paper can be advantageous when drawing something with texture, or can be beneficial for a dark drawing where you wish to hold more graphite. A smooth surface paper is better for producing fine detail work. And pay attention to both surfaces of the paper, since the tooth is sometimes only on one surface.

Most papers are made from either wood pulp or cotton fibers. Your best choice for drawing purposes is to use papers that are identified as "acid free". A drawing on acid free paper should outlast you and your descendants with no appreciable yellowing, staining, or embrittlement.

White papers are most commonly used, and in fact are my preference. But you can use colored papers for special effects. Graphite on gray or buff paper can be quite beautiful.

Another drawing surface popular with artists is coated paper. This is a paper with a thin coating of clay. Scratching through the layer to expose white underneath is a way to achieve sharp accents and highlights.

Paper mounted on cardboard is called illustration board. These boards may be nice to use because they are stiffer than flimsy paper, but be sure to verify that the backing is also in fact acid-free.

Paper is measured by weight per ream (500 sheets). This weight indirectly relates to the paper thickness ... a 200-pound paper is thicker than a 60-pound paper for example. As

for formats, fine art paper comes in a variety of sizes, the most popular being 9x12, 11x14, 14x17 and 19x24.

Bristol paper, or bristol board, is made from two or more layers of paper bonded together to make a thick sheet. It has a smooth surface ideal for fine line drawing. I have had great success with 100-pound 14x17 Strathmore Bristol Vellum 300 Series and this happens to be my personal preference. I like the stiffness of the paper, which means that it is resistant to creasing. And I like the body of the paper ... I can work it without fear of damaging the integrity of the surface.

Frisket ... Sounds Like Something They do at Customs

One way to protect the surface of your drawing paper until you are ready to work on it, is to use a material called frisket. This is a transparent film that will mask off areas that you want to keep white while you work on adjacent portions of the drawing. In my experience, frisket will leave an adhesive residue on the paper after you remove it (and adhesive and graphite just don't mix). So I restrict it's usage to the border of my drawing. I typically use this material to frame the image. I create a frame of this material so that the graphite does not smear onto the paper beyond the working area, and when I peel away the frisket ... voila ... I retain a nice clean white border around the drawing.

2B or NOT2B

You can draw with anything ... in fact, you can draw with anything that makes a mark on paper. There are many choices for drawing materials including charcoal, Conte, pastel, and carbon pencils. But probably the simplest and most versatile medium to use is the graphite pencil. Using just pencil and paper and very little else, you can render almost any subject imaginable.

Graphite pencils are available in soft, medium and hard leads. They are graded from 10H (very hard) to 10B (extremely soft) ... and in the middle is the HB grade. Pencils in the H series make fine, hard gray marks. B pencils make a rich, dark line. *Think of H for hardness and B for blackness.*

By the way, lead is a misnomer for graphite pencils. Pencils were initially known as black lead (and this is somewhat misleading since lead is a metallic element). Graphite is actually a form of pure carbon and clay, although we tend to use graphite and lead interchangeably.

The proportions of graphite and clay in a pencil determine how hard the lead is and how dark a mark it will make. The more graphite, the softer the lead and the darker the mark.

There are several manufacturers of graphite pencils. And there are subtle differences in the product that don't become apparent until they are used. Some pencils have more graphite and glide across the paper, while other pencils are more dry and tend to crumble across the paper. At the end of the day, this is a personal choice and there is no right answer.

But it is a good idea to decide on a brand and then stick with it so that you become familiar with what to expect from a given grade of pencil (*I must admit that I prefer and only use the Staedtler Mars Lumograph product*).

Here are some of the principal manufacturers of graphite pencils

Conte	France
Faber	Germany
Staedtler	Germany
Koh-I-noor	Czechoslovakia
Cumberland	United Kingdom
General	United States
Berol	United States

Although you can complete a drawing with a single grade of pencil, such as HB, you will not achieve the tonal range essential to photo-realism. I tend to use 2B to lay down a foundation of value. Then I build up the drawing in layers with the harder grades such as B, HB, and even H. If I wish to convey atmospheric perspective in the form of a soft, hazy background, I will use a very soft graphite such as 6B or even 8B.

In other words, I tend to use 2B as an all-purpose lead ... and I use NOT2B for everything else. I use harder leads such as HB and H to develop texture and detail ... and I will use a 6B to 8B to convey either a blackest black, or a soft background.

I Would Like to Make a Point

Another tool that is useful, particularly for detail, is the lead pointer, or drafting pencil. I do not refer to the mechanical pencil that cannot be sharpened. I refer to the lead holder that can develop a very sharp point by using a lead pointer ... speak to any draughtsman that used this equipment before the advent of CADD systems ... they will know what I speak of. And typically H through 2B grades of graphite are available to use with this device.

I find this tool essential for fine detail such as outlining any lettering in a drawing.

To Err is Human ... To Erase is Divine

Erasers provide artists with a wide creative margin in which to work. An eraser can be used to clean an area, blend a stroke, or place light markings on a dark value. In other words an eraser is not just a means of correcting mistakes ... it is also a very effective drawing tool.

In selecting an eraser, choose one that will be kind to your paper. Too much scrubbing can form a resist on the surface of the paper. I recommend using white plastic erasers for that reason. I use (3) sizes ... a white block is used for general cleanup ... a large mechanical eraser is used for broad strokes ... and a small mechanical eraser is used for detail.

Erasers will pickup graphite ... after all, that is why we use them ... and should be cleaned periodically as you use them, so that you don't reapply and smear graphite onto

your drawing. I clean them by abrading the used surface with sandpaper, or a metal nail file.

Kneadable erasers start out as neat and dignified squares, but quickly resemble a wad of chewing gum after continued use. They are “clean” erasers and are very useful in the sense that graphite can be lifted from the surface of the paper, rather than smeared with a plastic eraser. I use a kneadable eraser and dab the drawing to lighten tonal value without losing the overall detail. As Martha would say ... this is a good thing.

Please don't use a Pink Pearl eraser ... it will damage the paper, leave a pink smudge or stain, and in the process, destroy all your hard work. Consider this fair warning.

Smooth Operator

Paper stumps in various diameters are used for blending and shading graphite. Stumps are made of tightly rolled paper, with tapered ends. A tortillon is a fancy French name for a similar tool that has a point at only one end ... but serves the same purpose. I prefer the stump because it has a smooth, dense, surface.

Although I tend to use stumps only, there are other media that can be used to the same effect. Sheets of felt, paper towel, and even chamois will create different textures. I just prefer the control that can be achieved with a stump, relative to these other materials.

Patience is a Virtue

I think this may be the most underrated tool in your studio.

You won't achieve photo-realism in a few hours, so don't expect instant gratification.

The Finishing Touch

The best way to preserve a drawing is to spray the surface with a fixative, which binds the graphite particles to the paper. Fixative is typically available as an aerosol spray that will give an even transparent coat over the drawing. One bit of advice for you ... inspect your work thoroughly before you spray it ... once you spray it, you own it. Make sure that you have erased any smudges and extraneous lines before you spray. You can always add graphite to the sprayed surface, but it is almost impossible to remove graphite after it has been sprayed.

I use Krylon Crystal Clear spray coating.

My Quest for the Holy Grail

Someday, God willing, I will find the perfect pencil sharpener and the perfect eraser. At that point, I will consider my life to be complete.

The Bottom Line

Experiment

Learn by doing.

In my opinion, experience is the best teacher, and all my comments aside, you must evaluate these materials (and others) for yourself ... that is the bottom line.