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ASK THE EXPERTS

The 3 Drawing Exercises That Will Make You A Master



Portrait of Paganini, Ingres, 1819

Ask the Expert: "I want to take my drawing skills to the next level. Maybe this sounds too ambitious, but I want to be able to draw like a true master. What should I be doing to achieve my goal?"

A: Well, the simple answer is, "draw from life as often as you can". That said, hard work alone may not be enough, if you're reinforcing bad habits, or just not working efficiently. Like athletic training, specially designed drawing exercises are necessary to improve underdeveloped skills and correct improper training.



Self Portrait, Kathe Kollwitz, 1943



Jockey on Horse, Edgar Degas

Charcoal Gesture

A gesture drawing is a quickly executed sketch, capturing the essential movement and shapes in the subject with little or no detail. Gesture drawings provide a great warm-up exercise at the start of a drawing or painting session. They also train the artist to work efficiently, avoid excessive focus on detail in the early stages, and sharpen observational skills. Keep gestures brief- under a minute if you can- and do a bunch at a time. Don't just use the hand; use the shoulder and whole body to achieve broad arcs and smooth ellipses. Remember: the goal here is not to make a refined, finished drawing, so don't use your best paper on these.



Egon Schiele

Blind Contour with Continuous Line

A Blind Contour Drawing is done while looking continuously at the subject, not at the paper. The objective is to grasp the proportion of the composition and the subject all at once, in the mind, while rendering overlaps of form. The blind contour drawing quickly increases retention of visual information and forces the artist to constantly consider the edges of the page. The blind contour can be executed quickly or over a longer session, but in order to get the most from the exercise, keep peeking at the paper to a minimum.

Like the gesture drawing, the point of doing a blind contour drawing isn't primarily to arrive at a masterpiece, so until you get comfortable with this exercise, use inexpensive bond pads.



Jesus Christ in Capernaum, Rodolfo Amoedo, 1887

Charcoal Heightened with White

Drawing on toned paper with charcoal and white chalk provides a change from the usual approach of darkening a white sheet of paper. Starting with paper that is a mid-range value trains the artist to reserve darkest darks and lightest lights for passages where they are most effective. Vine charcoal is preferred for this exercise, because compressed charcoal is difficult to heighten, as it tends to stain white chalk. If deeper darks are desired, reserve compressed charcoal for the last step so chalk will not intermix.

Charcoal drawings heightened with chalk can actually be developed into highly refined, elegant finished art, so consider getting a better grade of paper. High quality laid paper with at least some rag content will provide a durable, interesting surface which will spotlight your medium.