Utrecht Art Supplies
History: Rendering Drapery

Drapery provides a powerful visual element, both descriptive and abstract at the same time.

This drawing by Jacques Louis David demonstrates the importance of clearly defining overlaps when handling drapery. At each crease and overlap, it's clear to see which forms are in front and which are behind.

Suave brushwork creates a tactile sense of the weight and thickness of this quilted sleeve from a portrait by Titian.

Caravaggio used drapery to communicate both emotional and physical tension in Judith Beheading Holofernes. Sweeping arcs of fabric also provide abstract elements that drive movement within the composition.

Crisp, regular folds in a tablecloth evoke ritual and order while echoing broader compositional geometry in The Last Supper by Frans Pourbus.

In another treatment of The Last Supper, Philippe de Champagne injects subtle realism by describing the wrinkled gathers in the tablecloth where an apostle leans in.

Drapery provides a device to transition from the stable corner of a canvas to sweeping diagonals in this tabletop still life by Jan Davidz De Heem.

Jacques Louis David's handling of a loosely wrapped turban proves that fabric can be rendered with both precision and painterly flourish at the same time.

Through suave technique and careful modulation of color, Ingres creates a highly naturalistic rendering of satin. Crisp fabric provides visual contrast against other textures like skin and metal.

Key to achieving a naturalistic effect with drapery is the juxtoposition of tense pulls and loose gathers. Note how the sleeve in this detail from a portrait by Ingres stretches taut across the shoulder, then goes loose at the inside of the elbow.

With sensitive attention to color and value, it's possible to create the believable impression of sheer fabric. In this figurative work by Frederic Lord Leighton, flesh tones are discernable beneath translucent layers; as more layers overlap, the artist intensifies the orange of the dress and obscures the color of skin.

Fabric can be realistically rendered with minimal strokes through accurate measurement and placement of forms. Reducing folds to simple geometry helps organize complex shapes. (Image: Antoni Caba, "Portrait of Lluisa Dulce i Tresserra")
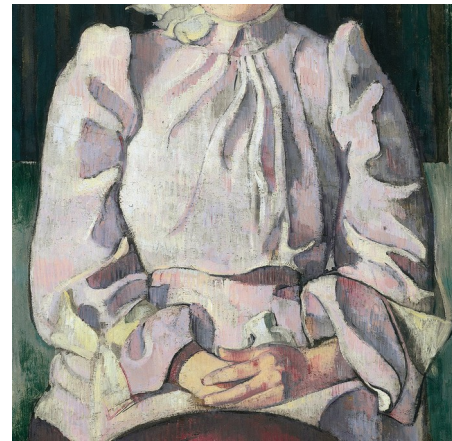
Illumination from the side provides subtle warm and cools that help give a natural sense of light. In this portrait by Emile Bernard, the artist has employed the complementary pair violet/yellow to describe warm light cascading across the subject.

Questions? Ask the Expert