

Sense of Depth in Illustrations – methods and strategies

Tutor - Rogério Lupo, 2026

Suggested materials

Harmonious composition, precise outline, and accurate shading have immense importance as components of a great illustration. However, conveying a good sense of depth is not secondary at all. Every artist eventually faces the challenge of having to deal with the nuisance of a flat result – meaning lack of perspective or three-dimensionality.

The solution might reside in subtle (or oftentimes quite conspicuous) aspects already present in the very subject portrayed, which require more detailed attention. But in many other instances, one may need to resort to artistic tricks, optical artifacts, or else inspiration stemming from other sources of knowledge and from the domains of different media.

Hence, one can, for example, get from photography and optics the idea of different focus ranges for rendering variation of edge sharpness. By observing landscapes and distances, one can draw inspiration to use the effect of atmospheric perspective and represent the proper scale of contrasts and neatness. Combining a few or all of those diverse resorts is also an option, so that the different challenges can be cleverly sorted and all possible solutions reconciled.

In this course, we will study the theory and the empirics behind those methods, examine examples of masterful illustrations, and mostly proceed to live demonstrations using graphite, colored pencils, and even a bit of pen and ink, to explore and apply all the procedures available for the purpose of obtaining a convincing and eloquent sense of depth. Obs.: It is not mandatory that registrants employ the same media used in demonstrations. The students are free to utilize any other media they prefer.

In addition to the analytical approaches described above, the classes provide extensive technical information and discussion of methods for achieving the best results across all media used. Classes are recorded and remain permanently available for all registrants. Students who need feedback on their practice will have an individual online meeting scheduled with the tutor.

Prerequisite - It is recommended that students have a solid practical understanding of analytical drawing and the fundamentals for perceiving and representing light and shade. These skills, however, need not have been developed through formal courses, thus anyone with self-taught abilities in those subjects is free to register. Students must self-assess their skills and freely decide to enroll.

For anyone interested, the tutor offers free guidebooks on graphite, colored pencil, and pen and ink, with thorough information on materials and many technical tips, all available for free download. Follow the link below to find them. As for graphite, besides the guidebook, there is also a video on my channel on YouTube (watch it [here](#)).

https://asba-art.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=92618&module_id=704121

Supplies List

Below you find a list of some materials suggested for your practice as well as recommendations of brands, all based on the tutor's experiences. Please substitute if you have strong preferences for other brands. Also, check and download the free guidebooks ([here](#)) for thorough information on materials (with a deep review of many different papers) and technical tips. Note that all the media suggested below and their related techniques are not the main focus of this course, since it is supposed to provide instruction about the visual representation of depth and three-dimensionality in illustrations. In this sense, technical discussions about the material may occur, but only as side observations and quick tips, except when these discussions become indispensable to expound any aspect of the main subject of the course.

Advice - Use a piece of parchment paper or paper towel under your hand to protect your drawing from your skin oils and humidity that can cockle the paper. Also, I recommend you avoid speaking over the

paper before, during and after drawing, as invisible saliva sprouts can cause yellow spots of contamination in the long run.

Graphite

- Pencils – H, HB, 2B, 3B, 4B and 6B (7B if possible).

Regarding traditional graphite, keep in mind that different brands may present different standards, thus be alert not to purchase, without testing, for example HB and 2B pencils from different companies (or from different product lines of the same company) which might produce the same grade of shade.

Good brands in order of my personal preference are Staedtler, Lyra, Mitsubishi, Bruynzeel, Faber Castell, Caran D'Ache, Cretacolor, Koh-I-Noor.

Derwent is a good and soft pencil, but the ones I have tested may have their lead's tip crumbling down while we work, thus leaving small pieces of graphite on the paper (that was long ago, this may have been improved lately). Do not take that into account, though, if you own and appreciate the Derwent pencils and want to use them, in which case you do not need to purchase new pencils.

I remark that rare has been the pencil, even among the best brands, which does not eventually present crystals that grit the paper while stopping to scribe. Some brands get better from time to time, some worse, and even the most expensive pencils may disappoint us. We should then swatch constantly, rarely breaking relationships definitely with any brand.

My personal preference has lately become the Staedtler's edition named Lumograph Mars Black, which I highly recommend. Unlike traditional graphite though, these pencils feel a little waxy like chalk or charcoal pencils and can seem unpleasant for many artists, hence this preference is quite personal. Their lead is thick and has a high proportion of carbon. They provide an intense shading with a mat finish, tending not to produce the undesired effect of glare, even after overlapping many layers. The range of gradations is limited though, being HB the hardest. Also, there is the novel edition from Faber-Castell named Pitt Graphite Matt, with pencils that allegedly avoid the effect of glare in a very efficient way. Though I have never tested those, I think it is worth it to try them, but according to some colleagues, they feel just like Staedtler Black mentioned above.

- A mechanical pencil 0,2 or 0,3 mm with a B or 2B graphite to be used for contours and details is not indispensable but is welcome.
- Soft white eraser: Sakura high-quality FOAM or Pentel hi-polymer SOFT. Avoid Staedtler Mars plastic, for it causes excessive friction, harms the paper and usually crumbles off in pieces.
- Kneaded eraser: Milan, Sanford Design, Lyra, Cretacolor, Faber Castell, in order of my personal preference among the ones I know.
- Paper: item 1.2 in section 'I - Materials' of my free guidebook on colored pencils offers a discussion addressing various aspects to be taken into account before making decisions regarding papers. It is worth it to research whatever you have available in your country, swatch them, and learn about other artists' experiences. Remember to test both sides of each paper for they often present different surfaces.

Colored Pencils

In this class, there is a preference for permanent colors rather than watercolor pencils. But students can feel free to use whatever material they have. A set of 40 to 60 colors of a high-quality brand (see recommendations below) is enough.

Some brands/editions used by professional artists (permanent colors, not watercolor pencils) are Faber Castell Polychromos, Caran d'Ache (Luminance and Pablo), Prismacolor Premier, Derwent (Studio / Colorsoft / Lightfast / Inktense), Holbein Artists, Staedtler.

If you feel clueless and want to make an audacious investment, an excellent match is the set of 60 (or 80) Faber Castell Polychromos plus the set of 40 (or 80) Caran d'Ache Luminance. They physically blend very well and the different colors of both editions complement each other perfectly. It is possible to improve the sets as well, by purchasing further colors of various brands which are available separately. If you are in more moderate a mood, acquire only one of those sets recommended above.

Blender pencil: Beware for there is a difference between the “full blender” and the simple “blender”, at least when it comes to those made by Caran d'Ache. The former seems to be waxy and intended for a hard burnishing that will not allow any further application of pigment, whereas the latter causes soft friction on the paper to drag the pigment into the tiny pores of the paper and blend colors. After its use, it's possible to continue to lay down more pigment on the paper. As for the simple blender, I recommend Koh-I-Noor (specifically: Koh-I-Noor Hardtmuth Polycolor 3800), Derwent, and Prismacolor, the ones I know. Some pencil sets may include the blender, so test it if that's the case for your set.

Papers:

The paper needs to be smooth enough so that undesired textures will not arise during the application of pigment, but it also needs to have tooth enough to avoid easy saturation. This may be quite a personal issue and my recommendation is that you continually get samples of or buy different papers as much as possible and test them on both faces. Do not ever underestimate the influence of papers on your results.

Do not refrain yourself from getting back to the same papers you eventually tested and did not like before, to experiment with them again, for two reasons: 1 - your technique, your “grab” may have changed, and 2 - the papers may change as well. Thus eventually your own way of working can change and the same piece of paper once discarded may now seem perfect (hence, do not dump papers). On top of that, new batches of the same paper may present different qualities over time, so do not stop giving any paper a new chance every now and again.

Try and experiment with every paper that seems adequate (or even inadequate), without prejudice. Many artists prefer HP watercolor papers, others prefer Bristol Board, many others try different surfaces like drafting film (using slice cutter to remove pigment), water-sanded gesso on a board, or even canvas. Some papers may cause colors to become more vivid and intense, others may bring up a misty atmosphere. But an ultimate word comes from personal preference.

Below are some suggestions of brands and types of paper based on the tutor's experience or on the usage by other professional artists:

- Bristol Board (ultra smooth, but very good and may provide a spectacularly smooth finish, as long as used with a very light hand – test those you eventually already have): Canson XL, Hahnemühle, Lana, Winsor & Newton. All of these brands feel really very similar in regards to tactile sensation or final result. Fabriano may be another option but I haven't tested it yet.

- Specific editions: Strathmore (400 series Drawing paper for colored pencil / 500 series Mixed Media), Canson Graduate Mixed Media/Multitechnique white, Rising Museum Board.

- Dessin (usually softly textured): Canson XL, Canson Graduate, Hahnemühle, Arches

- Toned or colored papers: Canson Mi Teintes (back face is excellent but this paper tends to absorb pigments so the colors may faint in just a few weeks or months), Canson Graduate Mixed Media Gris (gray), Canson Dessin Noir (black) Clairefontaine Pastelmat, Strathmore Toned paper, Stonehenge.

- Watercolor hot-pressed papers (more tooth, grainy, not too smooth): Fabriano, Winsor & Newton, Arches, Saunders Waterford, Sennelier. I personally don't like HP watercolor papers because although they're smooth for wet techniques, their texture or final result is usually quite inconvenient when used for dry techniques. These papers are not among my choices at all, but this is personal, so do not dismiss any paper because of other artists' opinions.

Soft white eraser: Sakura Foam, Pentel Soft, Tombow Mono (all white plastic erasers) or similar. Avoid Staedtler Mars plastic and Fictis, for they cause excessive friction, harm the paper and usually crumble off in pieces.

Eraser pen (optional, to erase fine details): suggested – Tombow Mono Zero Elastomer eraser 2.3 mm

Kneaded eraser: Milan, Lyra, Sanford Design, Cretacolor, Faber Castell.

Graphite pencil: H or HB (for drawing) plus 5B if you will use tracing instead of observational drawing.

Tracing paper (optional): if you intend to draw after a picture on the screen.

Desk sharpener (optional, but strongly recommended for saving time): suggested brand – Derwent or Derwent Super Point, or else anyone of your preference.