

Drawing

Black Lines and Stark Details

Long before printing presses and the easy duplication of writing and images, hand lettering and hand-drawn sketches were the method of visual communication. Both the lettering and sketches were drawn with inks made from plants, berries and even animal blood. Writing and drawing instruments of this period included everything from twigs and thorns to sharpened feather quills. Early pens, like those used for the signing of the Constitution or the drafting of the Bill of Rights, were natural feather quills, sharpened to a point. The hollow vein in the feather allowed an adequate quantity of ink to be held at the tip and ready for wicking onto the writing surface. The very same instrument would also have been used by any artist of the time.

As time and technology have progressed, the tools used for ink drawing have changed, allowing the artist more control of line and inks that are permanent, lightfast and intensely vibrant in color. Papers of many surface qualities and fiber contents are available in a wide range of colors.

Economy sets are available at art supply retailers that include a variety of point (nib) widths and their coordinating staffs (handles). Some sets include feather-sharp nibs--still referred to as quills--and a slender, smooth staff. Other collections include nibs that are specifically for calligraphy applications. Many packages include a group of nibs that are uniquely suited to drawing and artistic applications.

Individual rendering pens, usually cartridge style, with fixed nib sizes offer reliable, true linear control and no fear of ink depletion. One can draw continuously for hours without skips, sputtering or other unexpected events. Special nibs and staff designs are also available in throwaway styles. These are made especially for the artist and come in the nib sizes most desired for drawing and precision work.

Black inks--permanent, lightfast and richly dense--are made by a number of quality manufacturers. However, artists are no longer limited to black line work only and might opt to overlay colored inks on their completed black line rendering. Not only are vivid ink colors available, but also acrylic liquids in rich colors with high levels of fine quality pigments that work well with nibs or in technical pens.

Grounds onto which pen and ink can be placed include a wide range of textured surfaces and fiber content. When working with a sharp-edged nib, such as a quill nib, it is wise to choose paper with a smooth, even surface such as vellum or Bristol board. Their near-slick surface does not snag the nib and allows for even, flowing lines without interruption.

Rough-textured papers--such as watercolor paper--offer one aspect of ink drawing that is unique to all rough surfaces. When a nib is pulled across the uneven surface, automatic stops and starts of line flow often occur. This can be most interesting, and adds an element that drawings containing continuous lines often lack. The added benefit of being able to add watercolor washes to any finished ink drawing done on watercolor paper is a reason that, despite the uneven texture, watercolor paper is one of the most popular bases for ink work.

Paper bases such as drawing and pastel papers and fine quality stationery stock can be excellent for pen and ink sketches. When excessive line work or a thick ink application is used, it is advisable to use a paper with more weight and thickness.

In application, drawing in pen and ink can be most satisfying. It is an additive technique in which each line adds to the previous lines to gradually form an image. Because you add each line, dot or stroke individually, you are in complete control of the degree of depth you achieve with your lines.

Crosshatching can be the basis for building dark areas in a pen and ink drawing. It is achieved by doing exactly what the name indicates: Short lines are used in a cross pattern over previously drawn lines. The artist is able to build slowly and precisely the tone, depth, shadowing or texture he or she wants by simply adding lines. Gradation of tone is very easy to achieve with this slow and gradual building of detail.

Dots of ink--made by carefully setting the point of a pen to the paper and then raising it away--are called pointillism; and this is one easy way to start your ink drawing experience. If crosshatching seems daunting, consider building a drawing with individual dots of ink. Interest can also be created within a drawing when these tiny spots are used in tandem with longer lines.

When you are ready to work with pen and ink, begin by first sketching in graphite the image you wish to render. This drawing can remain a part of the finished work or may be erased when the ink work is complete. One tip for beginners is to lightly work your shadowed areas first. Then add crosshatching to intensify the depth of the dark once the remainder of the drawing begins to take shape.

NOTE: Rather than outline an object, consider leaving the edge of the surface most affected by light open and work in the shadow behind the object instead. This offers interest to the viewer and allows him to fill in the "blanks."