

Charcoal

...expressive, immersive and just waiting for you to dive in!...

Charcoal is an expansive sketching medium, allowing for sweeping expression and gestural marking. It can free us up in our movements and encourage us to draw bigger...and yet can also achieve high levels of detail too...



...this was sketched using just these basics!

...the basics are super affordable, so you can get going straightaway!

THE BASIC TOOLS...

Willow (Vine) Charcoal
An Eraser
Tissue/Paper Towel

GOING FURTHER >>

Charcoal Pencils (Black & White)
Putty Eraser | Pencil Eraser
Blender Stump
Compressed Charcoal
Workable Fixative Spray

...WHAT PAPER?

Experiment! Different paper will yield different results. Charcoal will hold onto a rougher textured paper better, allowing you to work into the artwork for longer, or incorporate other mediums on top. However, smoother paper can allow for easier blending and a more delicate feel. It all depends on what you are trying to achieve.

ERASERS

Different erasers are helpful to have for charcoal. A soft, putty eraser will help to pick up loose particles and a pencil eraser will allow for more precision. But you can do a lot with an everyday eraser too!

Charcoal

So I'm holding a charcoal stick. Now what?

SNAP IT!

Willow Charcoal is easily breakable, so don't worry if you accidentally snap it - in fact, embrace it! If a piece is long and hard to hold, break it to a better size that suits you.

You can use the different lengths for different effects too.

You may find a long piece helps you to make delicate, sweeping gestures, because you can hold it more loosely; while a short stub can make it easier to press harder and fill in larger areas.

START LIGHT

Easy now! Don't go in too heavy first thing. Use your willow charcoal to make light strokes on your paper, sketching out your basic shapes. Willow is a greyer charcoal and you'll be able to easily blend and erase it if you make a mistake.

SIDEWAYS

Use the charcoal stick on its side to fill in large areas of shade, or to help draw straight lines across the page.

PATIENCE

When you first start an artwork with charcoal you may get discouraged by how messy it can look. Try to withhold your judgement in the early stages - charcoal is a medium which gets better the more you work into it. Give yourself time to be loose and experimental. As you begin to put more details in, and as the tones begin to contrast more, you will surprise yourself at how dramatic and expressive your art can be.

* You can get a sharper edge on your willow charcoal by rubbing it at an angle on some fine sandpaper!

Charcoal

It's going everywhere! I'm covered in dust!

KEEP IT CLEAN!

Charcoal, especially willow, is a messy business. Keep a paper towel handy to wipe your fingers, and wash your hands often. Also have a piece of paper nearby to lay over parts of your work when you need to lean on it, to prevent smudging.

Charcoal dust will accumulate on your page the more you draw - you can blow/tap it away into a bin (though this may create tiny marks on the page) or you can use a putty eraser to press and lift some off.

...your fingers are some of the best intuitive tools you have - at the start use them to smudge and blend the charcoal, as you find your way through the drawing.

Just remember to wash them before moving onto a new section to ensure you don't mark the page elsewhere accidentally.

BLENDING

Once you have found the basic shapes of your composition, by blending with your fingers or using paper towels, you may want to start getting more precise. This is a blending stump - sometimes called a Tortillon - and they come in various sizes.

Blending Stumps can be great for smoothing detailed areas which your fingers are too big for.

STAND BACK!

Remember to stand back from your work every few minutes. This helps you to check your perspective and not get lost in the details.

Charcoal

It's getting there! This is looking good!

SHADOWS & HIGHLIGHTS

Charcoal is all about the values. Use your Eraser and White Charcoal to explore the lightest areas of your image - and use your Compressed Black Charcoal to dig out the densest, darkest areas.

Now you are more confident and into the more detailed areas you can break out the charcoal pencils! These can give you more control over the lines you make and the shading you want to achieve.

You can get sets of pencils giving you a range of tones, from lighter (similar to the willow charcoal) to darker (which mimic the compressed charcoal). You may also get a white charcoal pencil.

If you need to lighten areas, utilise your eraser - you can even draw with it by erasing lines inside the shading. Also experiment with White charcoal pencils and pastel chalks - they can brighten and add contrast and texture where you need it.



Compressed Charcoal allows you to create intense dark tones in your art. It is harder to remove so apply lightly at first and build it up.

If drawing from real life, or a photo, look for the very darkest areas - these will be your compressed charcoal targets.

FIXING

Charcoal will always be liable to smudging, so when you finish (or even partway through), you can use Fixative Spray* to hold it in place. Only spray in ventilated areas though!

* Hairspray is a useful temporary solution too.

When storing your charcoal artwork, make sure it is placed between two clean pieces of paper to keep it from marking other artwork.

