

Throughout its long history, silverpoint has been something of a Cinderella among art media—at times overlooked and abandoned, at others exalted and adored. If you love to draw but have never considered trying silverpoint yourself, that's not surprising, as it has often been dismissed as difficult or archaic. It is neither.

Silverpoint has deep roots in the history of Western art. Early artists cherished metalpoints, silver ones in particular, for making fine and consistently even lines that would not smear or fade. No other medium available then possessed those qualities. During the Renaissance, metalpoints became the "Old Masters' pencils." Michelangelo, Leonardo and others placed small pieces of metal



Caption for artwork left and materials above



## Silverpoint: Secrets and Myths

in a stylus or holder that could be used for drawing on surfaces prepared with a slightly abrasive chemical formula that the metal particles would interact with and adhere to, leaving visible marks as if by magic. Renaissance artists used metalpoint under frescos and as preparatory studies for paintings, for standalone portraits and drawings, for travel sketches and for instructional books sturdy enough to withstand repeated use by apprentices.

Interest in silverpoint waned when graphite emerged on the scene around the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Graphite made it easy to vary the values and thickness of marks, mass in areas, blend and erase. But the lure of silverpoint never totally disappeared, its incomparable elegance always inspiring select artists to work within and even transcend its limitations.

Silverpoint is currently enjoying a major resurgence, highlighted by the blockbuster exhibition "Drawing With Silver and Gold: Leonardo to

IMAGE COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.



**Sketchbook Formed of Six Panels of Prepared Boxwood, Open to "Women and Wild Men"** attributed to Jacquemart de Hesdin and others, ca. 1390-1400, model book with drawings in metalpoint (probably silverpoint) on prepared boxwood, 4 x 5 1/4. Collection The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, New York.

Wood surfaces such as boxwood allow metalpoint to be erased more easily than do many papers.

Jasper Johns," on view this summer at the National Gallery of Art (NGA), in Washington. The exhibition features more than 100 images, most of which date from before 1900, bringing to light the sporadic evolution of silverpoint over hundreds of years and revealing the wide array of approaches artists have taken to it. The exhibition also provides us with an opportunity to dispel several persistent myths about this luminous medium.

### MYTH 1: *Silverpoint Can't Be Erased*

A common misconception is that metalpoint is not erasable. Although this assumption contributes an element of awe for the accomplishments of metalpoint artists, it's so intimidating that it unfortunately stops many artists from ever attempting the medium. It's true that silverpoint is not as easily erased as graphite or charcoal, but it can be more erasable than is commonly thought.

The key to the issue is in the selection and preparation of the drawing surface. Early practitioners were limited to using prepared parchment or vellum, which required a delicate touch. Erasing was difficult but not impossible. Contemporary artists have a huge array of nonabrasive erasers to work with, but erasing is iffy on commercial silverpoint papers that are only superficially clay-coated—rubbing can quickly remove their surface preparation. They can be difficult to work on, contributing to the notion that silverpoint is a difficult medium.

A solution to this challenge has actually been known for centuries: use wood. In the 1300s craftsmen began using prepared boxwood as a metalpoint surface, which allowed images to be erased with a damp cloth or repeatedly sanded away and the original preparation reapplied. The NGA exhibition includes a model book composed of six remarkably thin and smooth pages of boxwood that hold drawings of amazing detail.

Today, if you want the ability to erase in silverpoint, you can prepare your own wood surface or purchase ones made with modern pigments combined with acrylic resins, gesso or even house paint. These surfaces make erasing possible, along with the ability to blend, mix media and make large-scale work.

## METALPOINT Versus SILVERPOINT

The terms "metalpoint" and "silverpoint" sometimes cause confusion. Metalpoint is a broader term, referring to the technique of drawing on a specially prepared surface with metals such as silver, gold, iron, lead, copper, platinum, aluminum, brass, bronze and other alloys. Silverpoint refers to a specific member of the metalpoint family. Silver has long been the metal most often chosen for drawing because of the subtle, shimmering hue of its marks and the alluring way it tarnishes to an amber glow that cannot quite be duplicated any other way.



Head of a Girl

by Joseph Edward Southall, 1899, metalpoint (probably silverpoint) with scratching on white prepared paper, 7 7/8 x 6 15/16. Collection The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

In this portrait Southall takes advantage of silverpoint's famously delicate line.

IMAGE COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.

# MATERIAL WORLD

## MYTH 2: *You Can't Create Tone With Silverpoint*

Another common assumption is that metalpoint drawings can only be done with line. A look at some older silverpoint drawings shows that this is not the case. To be certain, many artists make use of silverpoint's exquisite line quality, such as Joseph Edward Southall in *Head of a Girl*. But drawings such as Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of an Unknown Young Woman* illustrate how silver can be used to build tonal masses, rich values and subtle shading. Van der Weyden's drawing also reveals how the gradual tarnishing of silverpoint softens an image. This effect takes time, although some impatient artists have



**Portrait of an Unknown Young Woman**

by Rogier van der Weyden, ca. 1435-1440, silverpoint on cream prepared paper, 6 9/16 x 4 9/16. Collection British Museum, London, England.

Van der Weyden's drawing shows that, contrary to popular belief, it is possible to create tone with silverpoint.

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experimented with ways of speeding up the process.

## MYTH 3: *Silverpoint Is Always Monochromatic*

Silverpoint is often thought of as limited to gray tones, but several images from the NGA exhibition show that there are many ways to combine it with color. For *Standing Woman*, Fra Filippo Lippi prepared his paper with a pink coating and later used a scratchboard technique to scrape

beneath the pink hue to reveal the white of the paper below. He drew with silver, accented with black and white chalk and toned with a brown wash, all of which add color, depth and a painterly quality to the work. Other Renaissance artists incorporated lead-tin yellow, Indian red, earth pigments, terre verte, indigo, whiting and various dyes into their silverpoint drawings. They would impregnate clothlets with those colorants which, when dampened with a binding medium, produced transparent hues that could be applied to metalpoint surfaces.

Contemporary artists can use powdered pigments or water- or acrylic-based hues to add color to their work. For my drawing *Silverpond*, in addition to using several metals I wanted to add other subtle color notes to the rough, gesso-covered canvas.



**ABOVE Silverpond**

by Sherry Camhy, 2008, silver, gold, pink gold, copper and brass points and pigment on gessoed canvas, 20 x 30. Private collection.

I added color to this drawing by applying pigment using both my fingers and small pieces of cloth.

**LEFT**

**Standing Woman**

by Fra Filippo Lippi, ca. 1460-1469, silverpoint, black chalk and brown wash, heightened with white, over blind stylus on pink prepared paper, 12 1/16 x 6 9/16. Collection British Museum, London, England.

A toned surface is one way to add a dose of color to your silverpoint images.

### ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

"DRAWING IN SILVER AND GOLD: LEONARDO TO JASPER JOHNS," IS ON VIEW AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, IN WASHINGTON, DC, THROUGH JULY 26. IT THEN TRAVELS TO THE BRITISH MUSEUM, IN LONDON, WHERE IT WILL BE ON VIEW SEPTEMBER 10 TO DECEMBER 6. AN ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE IS AVAILABLE FROM PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS AND CAN BE PURCHASED AT WWW.PRESS.PRINCETON.EDU.

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IMAGE COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC.

I applied pigments using both clothlets and my fingers, creating an impressionistic mood. The contemporary artist Susan Schwalb takes an entirely different approach to color in her drawing *Strata No. 295*. She uses numerous varieties of metalpoint to juxtapose the color differences between silver, gold, copper, aluminum, brass and platinum, creating a unique sensibility.

With techniques such as these artists are expanding the possibilities of silverpoint at the same time that they are discovering and preserving the techniques of the past. Don't let silverpoint's reputation hold you back—try it yourself and begin unlocking its many remarkable secrets. ❖

#### **Strata No. 295**

by Susan Schwalb, 1998, silver, gold, copper, aluminum, brass and platinum points on Video Media paper, 24 x 24. Collection Eric and Patricia Chafe.

Schwalb's work has the distinction of being the only work by a woman artist included in the NGA exhibition.