



## Charcoal's Charms

Charcoal is often recommended as a medium for people learning to draw. There are certainly reasons for this—it's an approachable medium that does not require too much technical know-how to get started, and its bold black-and-white tones are immediately appealing. It can be used in linear or tonal, precise or painterly techniques. It's soft, rich, dark and responsive to the pressure of the artist's hand.

All this said, charcoal is neither easy to master nor limited to beginners. For hundreds of years, highly accomplished artists have spent careers working in this medium, which can be all the more stunning for its apparent simplicity.



**Trees Suite, No. 4**  
by Donna Levinstone, 2015, charcoal, 12 x 9.

### HISTORY

Charcoal is a porous dark solid consisting of an amorphous form of carbon obtained as a residue when wood, bone, or other organic matter is heated in the absence of air. It is one of the oldest drawing mediums known to man. About 40,000 years ago, during the Paleolithic Period, Homo sapiens lifted charred pieces of wood from fires and used them to make lines on a cave wall, and a new form of human communication emerged: drawing. Painting was born soon after, when that charcoal became mixed with cooking liquids, mud and natural colors.

During that period of time, human hand prints, abstract forms, and images of horses, bison, saber-toothed tigers and ibex began to appear in rock art in locations such as Altamira, in Spain, and Lascaux and Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc, in France. Some caves even contained rare depictions of men and women or hybrid human-animal creatures. Similar images later began to appear in caves in Africa, Australia and South America.

Millennia later, Old Masters including Michelangelo and Leonardo used charcoal for many of their drawings. Even after graphite became widely available in subsequent centuries, artists such as Van Gogh, Picasso and Käthe Kollwitz chose to work in charcoal. Today, ranks of contemporary artists are bringing fresh concepts to the medium in both small drawings and extraordinarily large-scale works made possible by new surfaces.

### TYPES OF CHARCOAL

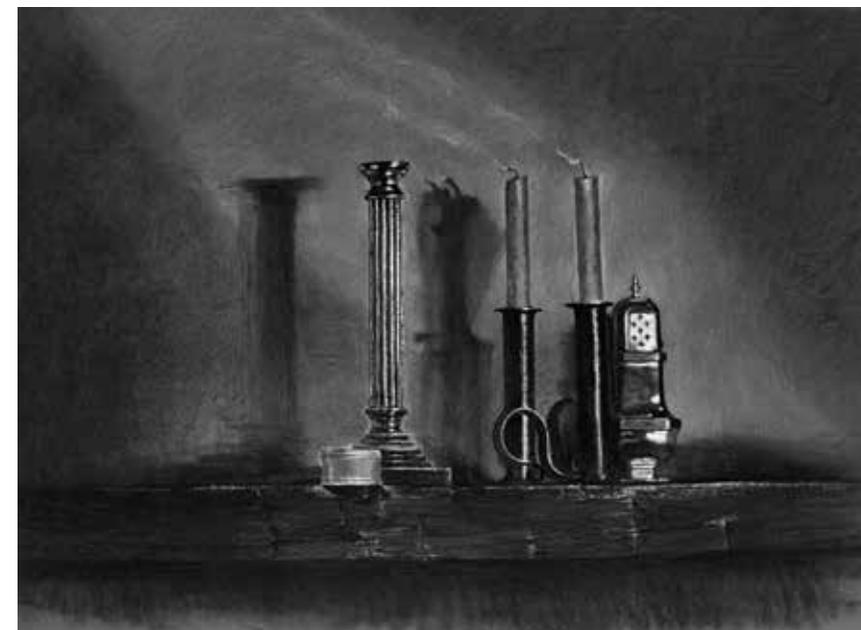
Abundant varieties of charcoal can be found in art stores, many of them quite affordable. Charcoal is usually categorized as either hard, medium or soft and either light, medium or dark. It comes in many sizes and a wide variety of types, including vine, fusain,

compressed, tinted, dry, water-soluble, black, white, carbon-pencil and powdered. Here are some of the most common varieties, which work beautifully on their own or in combination with one another:

*Vine charcoal* is created by the controlled burning of natural vines or branches from trees such as willow or linden. The resulting sticks can be curvy or straight but are always thin and fragile. They produce sensitive lines and somewhat translucent tones. Vine charcoal's best and worst quality is that it is extremely erasable—it can disappear with an accidental flick of the finger. It is often used by painters to make preliminary drawings on a canvas, but beware that gritty charcoal granules can work their way into subsequent layers of paint.

*Fusain charcoal* is manufactured in traditional fashion and usually sold in long, thin rectangular sticks. Compared to vine charcoal, fusain charcoal is harder, stronger, easier to sharpen and control, and more permanent, although still cleanly erasable.

*Compressed charcoal* is made up of powdered carbon granules mixed with gum, wax or oil binders and containing varying amounts of carbon, graphite, soot, colored chalks and black pigments. Available in many



**Metaphor, Light and Illusion**  
by Sherry Camhy, 2005, charcoal, compressed charcoal and graphite on black paper, 30 x 40.

shapes and sizes, compressed charcoal is hard and dark. It can be difficult to blend or erase.

*Charcoal pencils* comprise different formulas of dense, compressed ingredients covered in wood or paper. They are designed to be easily sharpened and retain fine points for crisp details.

Several types of charcoal are available in powdered form. You can also make small quantities of powdered

charcoal yourself by sanding a charcoal stick or pencil into tiny particles. Powdered charcoal is particularly well-suited for an under-painting technique similar to that used in oil painting. You can use a brush or cloth to spread the charcoal over a white or toned surface to an even middle value. Then you can use darker charcoal sticks or pencils to establish the composition and a chamois cloth or various erasers



**ABOVE**  
Sticks of vine and fusain charcoal.

**RIGHT**  
An assortment of vine and willow charcoal sticks.



# MATERIAL WORLD

## BELOW

Charcoal powder applied thickly to blue paper.

## BOTTOM

Charcoal powder, charcoal pencil, compressed charcoal and white charcoal applied to blue paper.



to pull out light shapes, for shimmering tonal effects. Large areas of light can be protected using artist's tape, wax or masking products.

## SURFACES

Charcoal can be used on a whole range of papers, as well as some more surprising surfaces. It can be used dry or painted on almost anything by combining its granules with water, oil, turpentine or wet media. Using brushes and other applicators, charcoal or carbon powder can be put on layers of translucent Denril or Mylar.

A recent addition to the arsenal of supports is Dibond, a composite material that facilitates working on a large scale. It consists of two sheets of aluminum that sandwich a polyethylene core, and its strength and lightness make it a fine choice



for creating and transporting mural-size images. Pieces can be cut to size with an X-Acto knife. You can work on it directly, prepare it with any medium or affix several layers of heavy paper to it to create a softer, more responsive drawing surface.

## FIXATIVE

It is sometimes necessary to use fixative with charcoal, especially delicate vine charcoal. One possibility is *workable fixative*, which can be used before starting a drawing on ordinary paper, wood or canvas to make it more receptive to charcoal and increase the medium's adherence to the surface. It can also be used to seal in and segregate one layer of a drawing from another.

The downside to workable fixative is that it can alter the delicate texture of a work. It has a tendency to pull charcoal molecules into clearly discernable points, adversely affecting carefully modulated and blended areas. On the other hand, workable fixative's ability to supply new sequential transparent layers of fresh working surfaces provides a valuable opportunity to continue developing a drawing by softening edges, adding crisp details, overlaying multiple

## ABOVE

### Wing

by Sherry Camhy, 2008, vine charcoal, compressed charcoal and white charcoal with white pastel and sanguine on black paper, 18 x 40.

## BELOW

### Sarah With Feathers

by Thomas Butler, 2015, charcoal, 15 x 11.



images and enriching dense darks. I'd advise experimenting to see how much you want to make fixative an active partner in your creative process.

*Permanent fixative* can be applied to the surface of a finished drawing,

## ADVICE for ARTISTS

Charcoal is not a dangerous medium overall, but take basic precautions when using fixative or when drawing in a manner that produces large amounts of charcoal dust. Work in a well-ventilated area and consider covering your mouth and nose with a mask.

protecting it from normal damage but also rendering it unworkable. After carefully considering the pros and cons of the use of fixatives, many artists prefer to avoid its use and choose instead to protect their finished work by framing it under glass.



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# MATERIAL WORLD



## **BLENDING CHARCOAL AND GRAPHITE**

Charcoal combines well with many media—pastel, in particular—but you don't often see it mixed with graphite. Charcoal and graphite are opposites in some notable ways. Graphite reflects light; charcoal absorbs it. Graphite's

hard, slick, shiny surface resists the adhesion of charcoal, making it difficult to combine the media. But it's not impossible, and juxtaposing the two can lead to a unique, subtle illumination within an image. For example, the glow seen in my drawing *Road Series, Morning Mist* is the result of the play of charcoal darks against the lights reflecting off of graphite marks.

### **Road Series—Morning Mist**

by Sherry Camhy, 2004, charcoal and graphite on black paper, 30 x 70.

Whether you are inclined toward new surfaces and unusual combinations of media or to the classic combination of charcoal and paper, take the charcoal challenge. Try the oldest medium known to man and make it yours. ❖