

Power of the Masses

Achieve a distinctive look and mood in your charcoal drawings by focusing on the massing of shapes and gradations in tone.



IN MASS DRAWING, as opposed to line drawing, you're seeking to represent the tonal relationships of the subject. The key to doing this is to try to see the subject simply as an abstract collection of lights and darks, rather than as the actual objects. This technique can be used to effect a particular look, atmosphere or mood in a finished drawing or for preliminary value studies for paintings.

I hope to illustrate this concept with the following drawing demonstration in which I used a very direct, soft charcoal technique.

1. Setup, Rough Measurement

First of all, I set up a still life of a familiar subject, hats—something I've painted many times before. A fairly simple arrangement of hats can still yield many interesting shapes,

ABOVE: This mass drawing uses no lines to describe the forms. Objects are defined purely with tone, one tone blending into another or, where needed, certain areas are rendered with a more abrupt transition of tones and a relatively harder edge. This drawing method can be used for any genre. The overall softness of the tonal gradation in *Nocturne* (charcoal, 8x9) helps convey a still, solitary, nighttime mood.



colors and tones. I used the sight-size method, placing the drawing board slightly in front of the plane of the setup so that the hats would end up being a bit smaller than life-size on the paper. Normally, I'd have chosen to draw them actual-size, but my arrangement was a bit too large to fit comfortably onto a standard-size drawing paper.

Stepping back about six or eight feet from the arrangement, you can use a straightedge horizontally to note where the tops and bottoms of the objects in your setup would be, then accordingly make some marks on the paper. Next indicate some of the main verticals and diagonals in the arrangement so you can center the image on the page. Be careful to get these marks down well before moving on.

2. Spotting In the Masses

After making these few marks for placement, you can immediately begin spotting in some of the tones. Here I used sort of a scribble technique, moving lightly back and forth with the charcoal, to lay down the tone. This technique allows the drawing to take shape very quickly without much preliminary effort.

After a few minutes, you've got something materializing on the page, and you can begin to make adjustments. As you build up the tones, you can also give them some shape. Looking at your subject, don't think "hats" or whatever the objects are, but rather see the whole grouping as a collection of light and dark shapes—here, an oblong; there, more of a triangle; and so on.

There's no need to be too cautious or take excessive measurements;

charcoal is a forgiving medium. Also, the idea isn't to outline each shape and then fill it in with a tone, but rather to let the forms take shape as you put on the charcoal. If a mass has gotten too large or isn't positioned correctly, just wipe it out with a chamois or paper towel.

Try to see both the objects and the detail simply as tones. When you see a contour with a distinct contrast in tone from one side to the other, as in the mass shape of an object against a contrasting tonal background or one part of an object bending sharply into the light, don't think of it as a line; the contour is simply where one tone ends and another begins. For now, allow one tone to flow into the next without bothering with separations to describe what the objects are. That will come later.

Blur your eyes, squint and try to see things out of focus; this will help you think of the still life in terms of spots, like a blurry photograph, instead of the objects themselves. For more control, you can use a kneaded eraser to begin to adjust the shapes. Be sure to move around the drawing as you work so you keep everything progressing at about the same level.

3. Correcting and Defining

At this point in my drawing, individual objects were beginning to



drawing board

Materials

Surface: Canson Mi-Tientes paper, warm white on a drawing board

Tools: Winsor & Newton soft vine charcoal, kneaded eraser

Other: straightedge or plumb line, chamois rag or paper towel

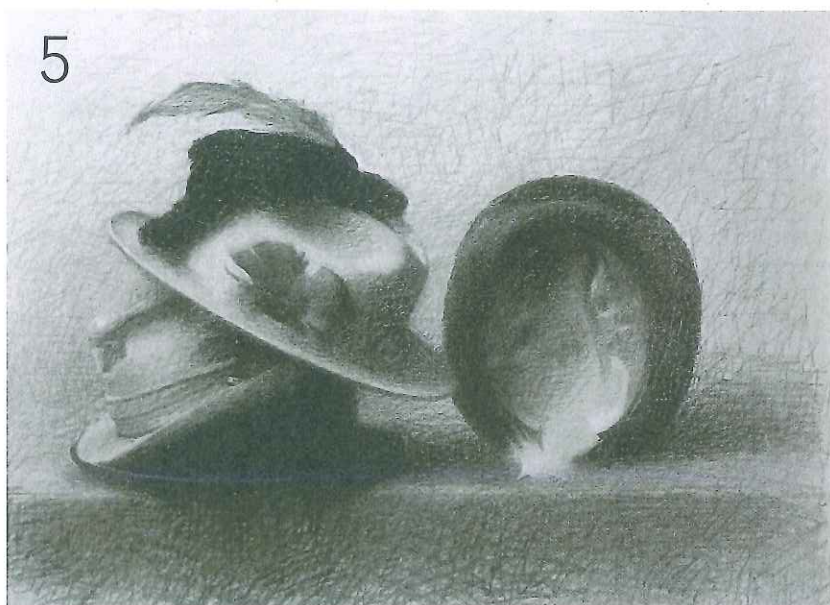
take shape as if emerging from the mist. You can bring things more into focus by sharpening contours with the kneaded eraser or adding important accents. Find the darkest dark; in this arrangement it's the shadow cast onto the bottom hat. The lightest light in the setup is the white inside the upright hat, so I let the blank paper serve for that tone. Everything else falls between those two extremes, so be sure to judge tones correctly and note where they are in the overall scheme.

As you're building up to the darks, you may discover that after a point the charcoal no longer wants to stick but instead begins coming off. If you like, you can use a workable spray fixative over the whole drawing and then continue working on top of that.

As you build up the tone, keep using the tip of the charcoal in criss-crossing strokes. As the tone builds up, the stroke patterns flatten and become a more even tone or shade. Using the kneaded eraser, you can further even out the tone just by removing a dark line or spot here and there.

4. Further Refining

Keep your charcoal sharp for the finishing stages, and knit the tones together by adding accents of lights and darks, and by picking out sharper edges to contrast with softer ones. As with setting the tonal scheme, you can also establish somewhat of an edge scheme by choosing which edge will be the sharpest and



which will be the softest. In this drawing, the cast shadow beneath the bottom hat blends right in with the edge of the hat itself so that the line of the hat completely disappears into the tone. As for the sharpest edge, I rendered it on the upright hat's brim, where it meets the white inside.

To get very even and flat tones, use the tip of the sharp charcoal and fill in smoothly all the light areas between the strokes. It takes patience! For this drawing, however,

I chose at the start to use the rougher side of the paper to allow the texture to show through, and I kept the stroke pattern a bit more open to impart softness to the whole effect.

5. Finishing Touches

I put in the detail only at the very end, and even then somewhat reluctantly, indicating only what was absolutely necessary to describe the incidental forms, such as the feathers and the hatbands. Keeping the details to a minimum preserves the unity and

Mass Drawing Tips

- As you work, keep moving around the drawing. Don't get stuck in one spot.
- Be sure to pay attention to the negative spaces between objects.
- Compare values often, determining which is lighter or darker.
- Don't put the detail in too soon.
- When you're ready for final details, the eraser is often more useful than the charcoal.

softness in the drawing. Depending on my intention for a particular drawing, sometimes I would consider the completion of a piece as being somewhere between steps 4 and 5. Or I might decide to take it a step further, as I did here.

This rendering of *Hats* (at left; charcoal on paper, 19½x25½) further defines my shapes, but as a result, a bit of the tonal softness and moodiness is lost. The moment you decide to stop working on a piece is up to you and depends on your goal for that particular drawing. ■

STEVEN J. LEVIN paints both figurative art and still life, producing work for a one-man show each year. He trained for five years at the Atelier Le Sueur in Excelsior, Minnesota, and continued there seven more years as an instructor. Learn more on his website, www.stevenjlevin.com.

Learn More **ONLINE** 

For a link to another of Levin's step-by-step drawing demonstrations for still life, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/learnmore2013.

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