



Tip #127

Back to Basics -- Graphite Pencils

All you REALLY need to draw—whether in a journal, sketchbook or whatever—is a piece of paper or other surface and a pencil. I’ve been exploring good old graphite again lately; it’s versatile, inexpensive, and almost universally available, and can range from as subtle as silverpoint to a bold, gutsy black. It all depends on the technique you choose, the hardness of the lead, and even the surface you’re working on.

Unlike ink pens or paints, graphite pencils will work almost anywhere, no matter what the weather. They won’t freeze, melt, or run (unless you’re using water-soluble pencils like Graphitone)—a friend recently went to Alaska with a selection of pencils, knowing they’d even work underwater if need be.

You may be perfectly happy with a regular #2 school pencil, or the ubiquitous HB mechanical pencil—my favorite is the 0.5 mm Pentel Forte A55 in HB. I have replacement leads in 2B (softer) as well, and with the nice soft vinyl eraser on the end, I can do almost anything without the need to carry a sharpener.

127-1 Joseph/ pencils

But if you choose a wood-encased pencil or one that’s all lead, you’ve got a choice of how to sharpen and in the effects you can get. A portable pencil sharpener is handy and makes a nice sharp cone shape that’s quickly refreshed (as at left, here), but you can also sharpen with a knife for a stronger, longer working surface with a lot of possibilities—on the right and above. You can get a lot of variation in your line that way, too!



127-2 Barn/graphite



I was using a knife-sharpened 6-B pencil on this barn, using the flat of the lead for the barn boards in shadow, the tip for the fine details of the tree, etc., and since the lead WAS so soft, I took advantage of that fact and lifted some of the graphite dust with my finger and rubbed it on the paper for the misty sky.

You can refresh that chisel edge by rubbing the lead on a piece of rough paper or fine sandpaper, then use the dust for "painting" with.

TIP: Leads go from roughly 9H—very hard, precise, and pale—to 9B, which is very soft and bold—and messy! B-leads smear easily—you may want to keep a piece of clean paper under your drawing hand to prevent smearing when using softer pencils.



127-3 Bearded Joseph

I did this quick sketch with a gorgeous Prismacolor Ebony pencil, which is very soft and very smooth. You can see how the rougher texture of the paper worked well with this subject, with its bold approach and dark lead. Rougher paper will encourage a more spontaneous broken line, while smooth paper lets you create much finer details. Match your paper to your technique for best results!

There are any number of books out there on pencil drawing, but an all time classic and one of my favorites is Ernest Watson's *The Art of Pencil Drawing*, from 1950, available from Amazon at amazon.com/gp/product/0823002764/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0823002764&linkCode=as2&tag=httpcathyjohi-20.

More on using pencils in Art Tip #110 in our archives, here: katejohnson.info/tips/tip110.pdf.

You can find dozens of wonderful drawing books in our Artist's Journal Workshop "Bookshelf", artistsjournalworkshop.blogspot.com/p/books-we-like.html, or you may like my Quick Sketching 1 and 2 mini-classes, cathyjohnson.info/online.html, which cover a great deal on pencil drawing.

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