

# Drawing and Painting the Nude

A course of 50 lessons

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**Philip Tyler**



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CROWOOD

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## **Dedication**

The book is dedicated to my dad, Bob Tyler 1933–2015.

# Acknowledgements

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Chris Taylor and Trevor Sowden for showing me the way at school and opening the door to my life and for introducing me to Euan Uglow and Andrew Wyeth. To Arthur Ruff who taught my first life drawing classes during my A levels. Bill Randall, who taught me more about drawing than anyone I know, an astonishing teacher and to this day an extraordinary draughtsman. I must thank my models who brought so much energy and excitement to the sessions; in particular, Lou, Johanna, Lindsey, Ottavio, Felix, Frankie and Emma. Without them, none of this book could have happened and a good model is a joy to work with. I must thank Tim Benson, Shaun Ferguson, Alex Kanevsky, David Longo, Piers Ottey, Jake Spicer ([www.draw-brighton.co.uk](http://www.draw-brighton.co.uk)) and Julian Vilarrubi, who continue to teach the craft, and for their support, guidance and wise words on the problems of drawing and painting. I want to thank the author of *The Hidden Place* (<http://thehiddenplace.wordpress.com/>), whose blog entries introduced me to so many new painters, led me on the journey to find more, and made me realize that I am not alone. I thank you all, but equally I cannot list the thousands of artists whose work I have peered at, dissected and absorbed over the last thirty years. Thanks also to Seawhite for allowing me to photograph their art materials.

Teaching is about sharing knowledge, and those individuals whom I respect the most have told me all they know. By empowering students with skills, knowledge and understanding one equips them sufficiently to let them explore for themselves. To use the analogy of music, one doesn't lead the student to a piano and say, 'compose a concerto.' I have to thank Emily Ball for giving me the encouragement to contact the Crowood Press in the first place.

Finally I have to thank my wife Louise, whose support I cannot live without. She is my rock and brings me back to earth when sometimes my head is in the clouds.

# Contents

Preface

Introduction

---

Chapter 1 Materials

---

Chapter 2 Linear drawing exercises

---

Chapter 3 Measurement and proportion

---

Chapter 4 Basic anatomy

---

Chapter 5 Tone

---

Chapter 6 Composition

---

Chapter 7 Painting

---

Chapter 8 Colour

---

Chapter 9 The subject within the figure

---

Chapter 10 Afterword

---

Further reading

Index



# Preface

What does it mean to paint figuratively? What does it take to paint the figure well? I had to learn how to paint the figure from scratch – whilst I had a fairly good foundation in drawing from my early art training at school, my painting career had followed a different path and the problem of painting the nude had to be faced alone. I trawled through old books, peered at paintings and explored all sorts of approaches, techniques and media until I found a method that I was happy with. Through the conversations I have had in preparing this book, I have discovered that I am not alone: many artists, despite studying at art school, have had to pursue a path of self-tuition to discover how to paint the nude.

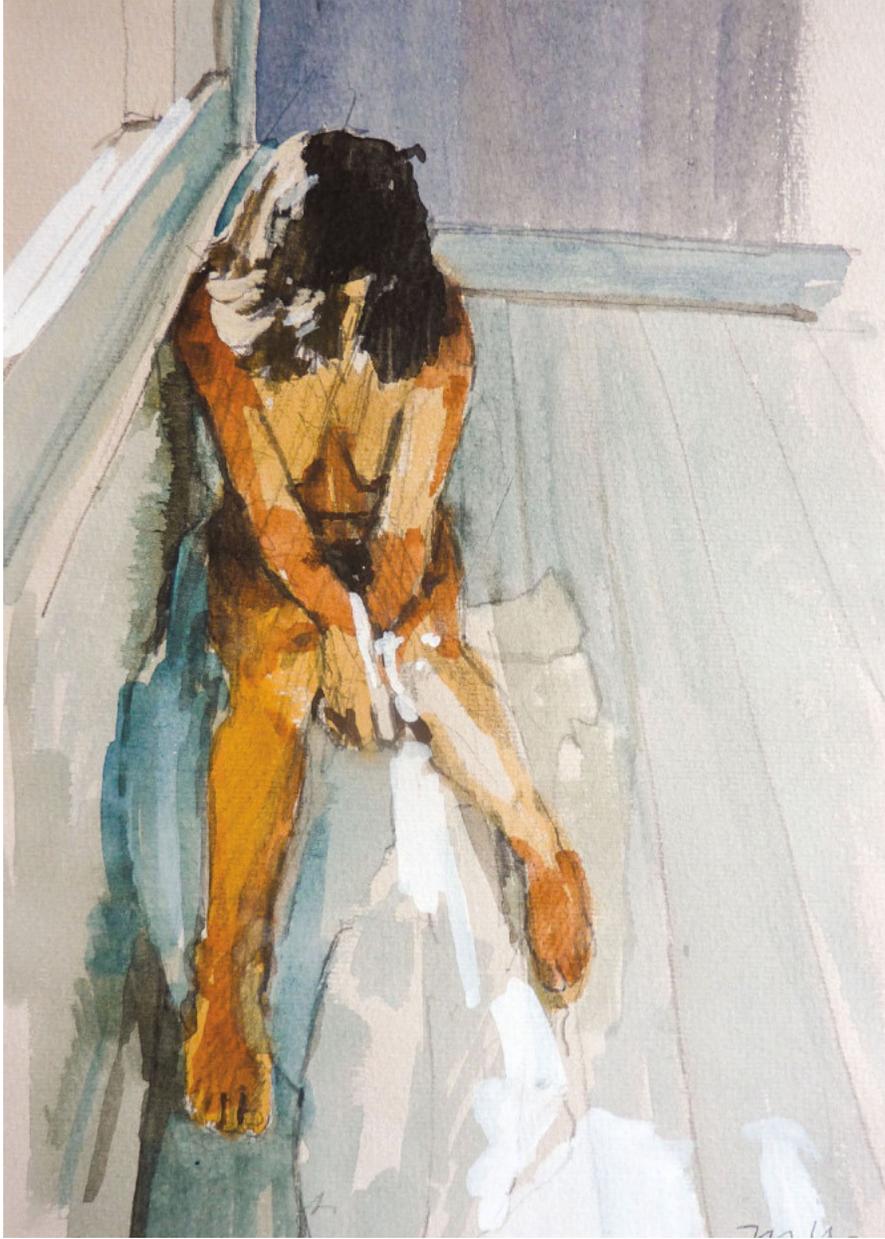
For about six years my studio was my 6' × 9' bathroom, which had no windows. I would convert my bathroom into a studio on a Saturday night by placing an 8' × 4' plywood board on top of the bath (my palette) and rest another on top of that, leaning against the wall (my easel). Onto the top corner of this board I would clamp my anglepoise lamp and place a large mirror on top of the small basin. I would then rest another mirror on the laundry basket, so that I could see a reflection of myself from behind. In that converted studio I painted about 900 nude self-portraits.

To this day I do not have the perfect studio and am rarely in the studio when it is light. I have limited space and limited time in which to paint, with a full-time teaching job, but I am in no doubt that I must not use these things as an excuse. Instead, one must try to understand what can be done with what one has, rather than what one cannot have. I want my own work to pin down reality, informed through the process of observation, to achieve a certain kind of physicality of gesture and energy. I am astounded by the potential beauty of the human form, both male and female, with its grace, poise and dynamism. I hope that I can capture some small fragment of that experience. When I draw and paint I

become completely lost in the moment, losing sight of time, speech and sometimes even conscious thought. It seems to be an almost trance-like state, where, for a brief moment, all one's concerns and doubts can disappear. I hope to share my enthusiasm for drawing and painting the nude in this book, to explain some of the techniques and processes that I have discovered over the years, and to lead you on the path to your own discoveries.

Some questions that we all have to address include: How can an artist bring something new to the subject? How can you paint a nude that has vitality and relevance without resorting to gimmickry or sensationalism? How can you avoid making titillating or voyeuristic imagery that is exploitative? And how might you embrace all that twenty-first-century technology has to offer without being a slave to it? This last question I have raised with the artists who have contributed works to this book. I hope that their responses, as well as mine, might throw some light onto these questions.

The Internet is a wonderful thing and through it are many insightful tutorials and demonstrations. It opens the door to the work of many new artists and has not only opened my eyes to the infinite number of possibilities that the nude presents: it has also brought me into contact with some fantastic artists too – Tim Benson, Alex Kanevsky, and David Longo, to name three. I am grateful to them for sharing their ideas and allowing me to get some insight into their working practice; I hope it will be informative for the reader too.



# Introduction

**P**ainting and drawing the nude successfully is not an unattainable goal, and it should be an immensely satisfying journey. The lessons set out in this book will give you a focus and draw your attention to key themes and ideas. Painting can be broken down into a series of visual problems:

- drawing (perception, observation, proportion, shape)
- tonal value
- scale
- medium and material
- composition
- colour
- facture

Once all of those aspects have been understood then there is the problem of subject. What are you trying to convey, with the nude? What are you trying to say? The exercises in this book have been designed to take you step by step toward your own set of choices and intentions. The primary concern is to provide you with further insight into the discipline. Evidently, nothing can actually replace the activity of drawing itself. But you can go a lot further if at least you have some pointers to help you on your way.

## Where to begin?

Kimon Nicolaïdes stated in his book, *The Natural Way to Draw*: ‘Learning to draw is really a matter of learning to see – to see correctly – and that means a good deal more than merely looking with the eye.’ When we first learn to draw, the marks we make bear little resemblance to the world we see; yet these drawings are the things they represent. The box-like drawing of a house, the triangular drawing of a mountain, these are all symbolic of the thing being drawn. It is

plain to see that children's drawings are very similar, yet to each child these images are very personal and can often have rich narratives. As we get older we try to perfect our symbols for things – eyes, ears, noses, *etc.* – and we tend to strive to produce something more and more realistic. We often draw the same things over and over, constantly perfecting and recreating our symbols. Comic books are an obvious example of this symbolic language perfected, and often prove to be invaluable for the young, as this language can be appropriated and incorporated into their own schema (Gombrich's term for a visual symbolic language used by that individual). For most people, their symbolic language stops developing at the age of about twelve, and from that age onwards the student focuses on a particular image, which they continually redraw, perfecting the image.

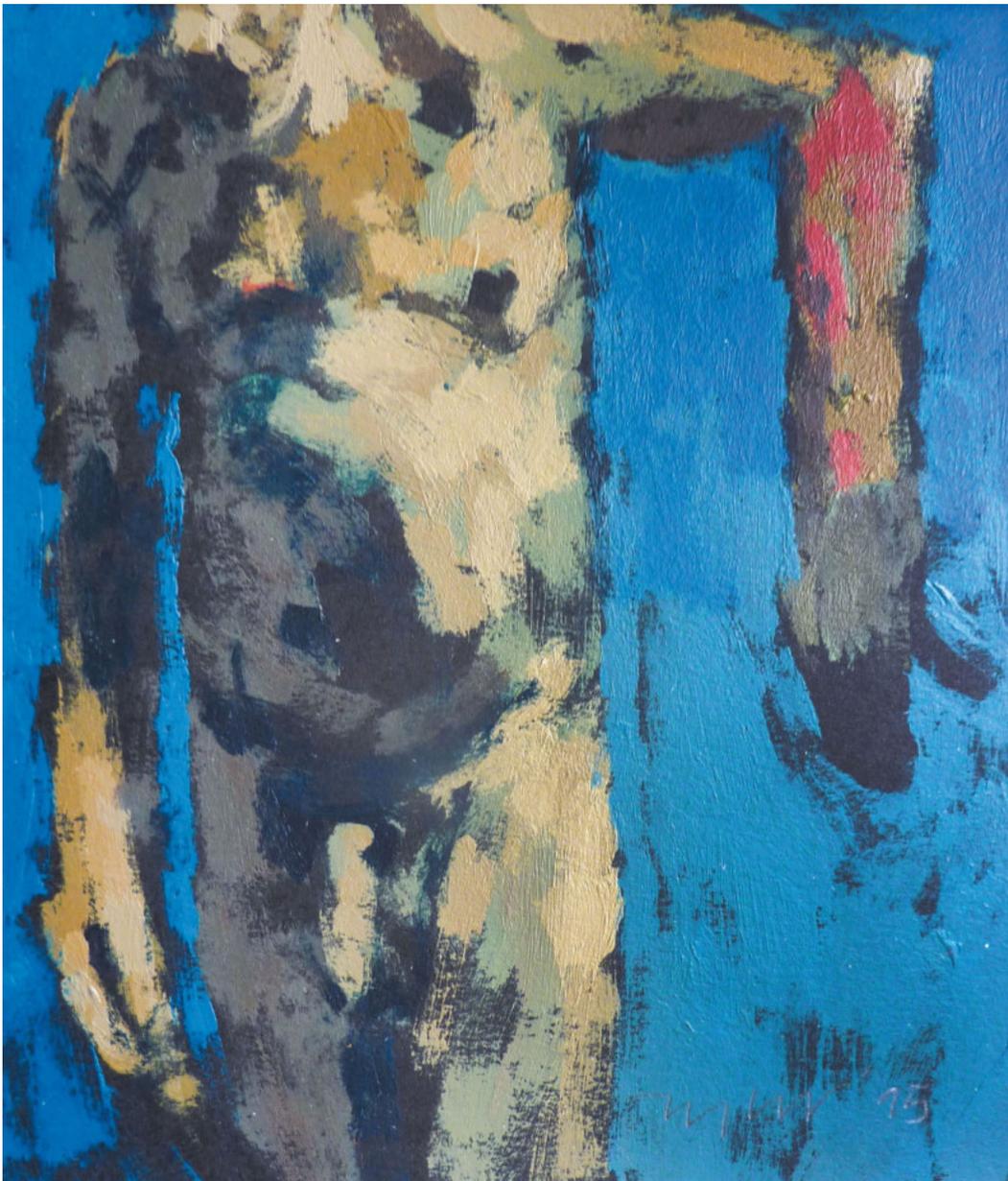
However, we live in a three-dimensional world, seen through two eyes. These receive reflected light images from an object, which fall upside down on the back of the retina and these two inverted images are constantly being bounced around. Each eye has a blind spot and sees two slightly different views of the same thing. This information is encoded into electrical signals, which are then decoded by the brain. With all this confusing information, is it any wonder that actually *seeing* is a difficult thing? Seeing is not so much a function of the eyes but the interpretation of the brain.

The way we see the world is governed by our experience of it. From childbirth we have been collecting sensory information, by placing things in our mouths and feeling them, and this information, coupled with our vision, jointly forms this miniature universe in our minds. But this information is encoded into symbols: although we know what chairs, cups and saucers, *etc.* look like, we don't really *see* them. Instead, when we look at a familiar image, we are actually seeing an interpretation of the object through the symbol we have for it. Similarly, if we write a word, we do not see the word as a series of letters; instead we see the thing it represents. DOG conjures up an image of a dog, not the quality of the three letterforms G, D and O.

Most of our looking is really scanning. When we look at something, we are not really seeing its exactitude at all. Betty Edwards gives a good example of this in her book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. She suggests that you measure the size of your reflection from a number of distances from the mirror. If you try

this yourself you will probably be very surprised to discover that your reflection is half the size of your head. If you draw around your reflection with a permanent marker, as you walk away from the mirror your head will still fit into that shape, no matter how far away you are. So what you see every day is not as easily understood as you might think.

Fundamental to any introduction to drawing is re-educating the way we see, teaching the student how to look at the world in such a way that they do not recognize the thing they draw. If this is achieved then the transformation can be almost instantaneous.



**One of the 900 self-portrait male nudes I painted in the early 1990s. At this time the figure became a central motif in my work whilst trying to convey ideas about grief.**

## Chapter 1



# Materials



## Materials.

Everything capable of making a mark on paper can be used to construct a drawing. Any media can be used for drawing the nude but there is an intimate relationship between the artist, the material, the support they work on and the scale at which they work. Through your own exploration you might find that one medium is better for the kind of drawing you want to make. One might feel more resistant, more gestural, more controlled or easier to remove if you get something wrong. It is worth remembering that children scribble for many years before they begin to make meaningful marks. To

become familiar with the different media, you have to use them and understand their inherent nature.



Good quality paper suitable for sustained drawing and paintings in acrylic or oil.

## **Drawing tool kit**

You should get yourself a basic tool kit for drawing: a small sketchbook, preferably one that is fairly cheap so that you do not feel under pressure when using it. (Sketchbooks can be really intimidating: the more expensive the book the more intimidating it becomes, so a cheap sketchbook is a great start.) Buy a scrapbook as they are really cheap and the coloured paper has a lovely texture for charcoal, pencil, graphite and watercolour, as well as pastel drawing and coloured pencil studies of the figure. Photocopier paper is excellent for basic monoprint, relief print, pen and ink, biro and compressed charcoal studies. It is good for making quick studies from the figure and can be used for lots of other

things too.

Buy some cheap biros too, preferably some red and black ones, a long clear plastic ruler and a cheap stationery kit with a compass and a 45° set square. You can use a red biro to draw the figure – the warmth of its tone suits flesh. Use different coloured biros to draw darker tones. You can see through a clear plastic ruler when you are measuring the figure and your set square can help with proportion. The compass is useful too, especially if you are trying to scale up an image. A plastic rubber is also a valuable purchase.

A trip to an art shop will enable you to buy some larger A1 sheets of cartridge paper (Seawhite supply an excellent 130gsm paper and a very good 220gsm acid-free). The weightier 220gsm paper is great for painting as it is less likely to cockle (deform) when wet. You can buy individual sheets as needed from your local art shop or you could order a pack, but if your budget doesn't stretch that far you could buy a roll of lining paper from your local DIY shop. Buy the heaviest weight you can. These come in roll form and will need attaching to a board with masking tape or board clips.

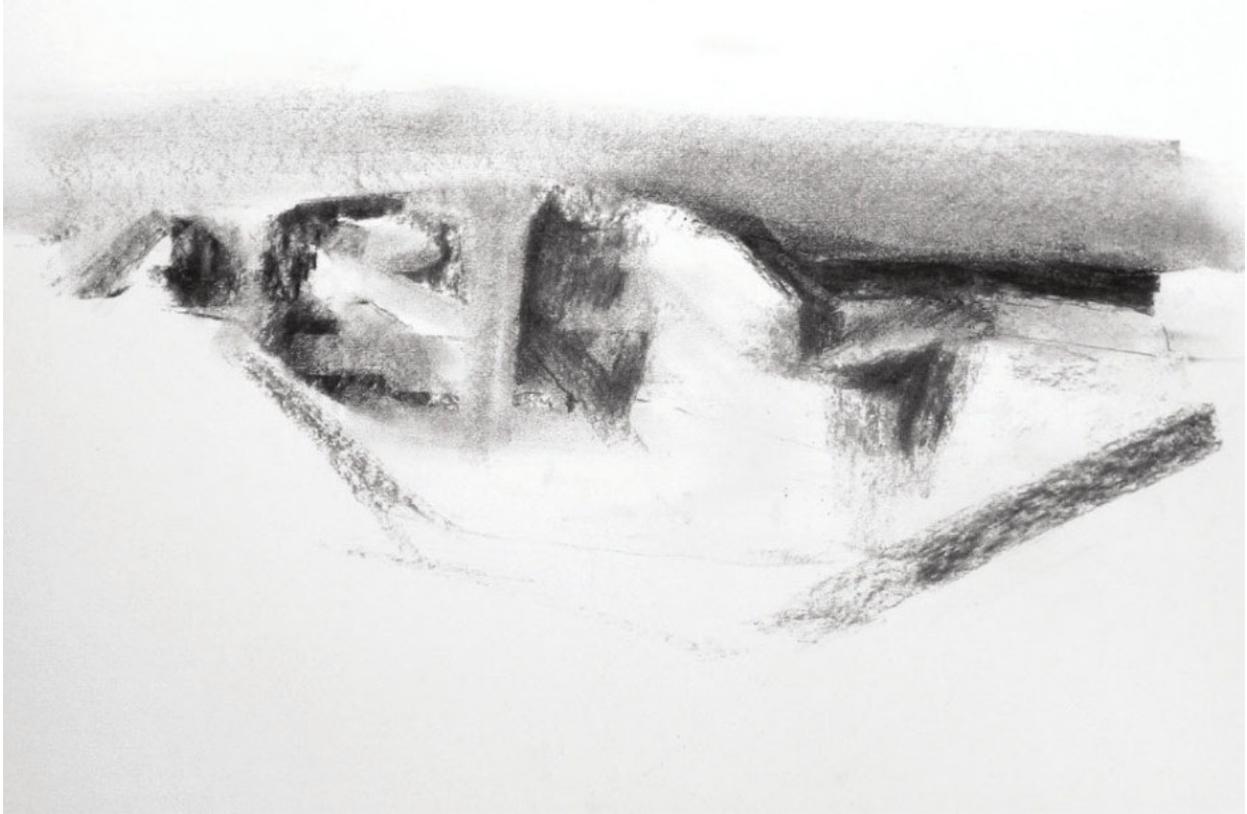
Get a sheet of plywood approx. 1cm deep and slightly larger than A1 paper (approx. 70 × 100cm). You will also need a craft knife with spare blades (a retractable one is best for cutting paper and sharpening pencils) and a roll of black insulation tape.

It is not necessary to go out and spend a fortune on materials. Look at each exercise and buy what you need as you go along; eventually you may need to buy some more specialized drawing and painting media.

## **Charcoal**



**Charcoal study. Charcoal can be used on its side to broadly establish the large areas of shadow in the figure.**



**A finger or cloth can be used to smudge the charcoal to create more delicate tones and begin to locate the figure and model the form.**



**The tip of the charcoal can begin to discover the edges of forms defining the placement of limbs and hinting at the features.**



**The drawing is finally taken to the point of resolution, taking the drawing to its extremes of light and dark, manipulating the forms with both charcoal and an eraser.**

When twigs from a willow tree are placed in a sealed container in the centre of a fire, the wood cooks and blackens; this carbonized wood is charcoal and comes in thin and thick varieties according to the part of the branch that has been used. Charcoal can produce very delicate subtle greys as well as rich, dark tones. The texture of the paper is very important in the depth of tone that is possible.

One of the common mistakes of using charcoal is to try to draw with it like a pencil. Because it can be easily moved around, areas of tone can be put down and very quickly removed, so the drawing can transform and grow in a much more organic way. Charcoal is impermanent and subsequently it needs to be fixed, either with fixative (a shellac-based aerosol which is also carcinogenic), hairspray, or PVA mixed with water and applied using a spray diffuser. The potential of charcoal as a drawing medium of the figure is limitless, from the atmospheric gestural figures of Sophie Jodoin to the elegant and subtle tonal studies of Singer Sargent and Nicolai Fechin. The fugitive nature of the medium

can be used gesturally to capture the fleeting dynamic movements of the figure or the nuances of half tone running across the body into the light.

## Clutch pencil



**Clutch pencil, in this illustration holding black compressed charcoal and sanguine.**

Clutch pencils are lead holders and will grip a thin tube of graphite, compressed charcoal or pastel. Caran d’Ache created the first spring clutch push-button type in 1929 and they now come in a variety of sizes, weights and costs. The very thin leads can break easily and are only really capable of a very fine line. The weight of the tool and how it feels in the hand is an important part of the drawing symbiosis. Clutch pencils, with the ability to hold a thicker lead, mean that you have the scope to render the figure with a more dynamic range of marks. Your mark-making can be expressive, frenetic or delicate. You can change leads easily and that means that you can draw with pencil, compressed charcoal and Conté using the same tool. A soft lead, a sanguine colour Conté and

a black compressed charcoal set of leads, will offer a great scope of possibilities with the figure from quick poses and gestural responses to subtle tonal rendering.

## Compressed charcoal



**Compressed charcoal.** These usually come in a unified stick form, either cylindrical or square ended.

Mixing crushed charcoal and gum arabic produces compressed charcoal. Charcoal pencils tend to be compressed charcoal and they can come in different grades. Usually uniform in their shape, compressed charcoal produces a very strong black and tends to stick to a greater variety of papers than normal charcoal. Compressed charcoal can be used with water to produce washes (gum arabic is also used in gouache and watercolour). It can yield dark and emotive figures and light and airy ones too. It is difficult to erase, however, and when held in the hand transfers itself easily. Compressed charcoal can come in a variety of tones from black through to white where you can produce lighter tone without needing to dilute. This works particularly well when you are drawing the figure on toned or coloured paper.

Because of its glue content, it is less likely to need fixing than normal charcoal. It can also be rubbed onto the back of photocopy paper to make transfer paper.



**Toned compressed charcoal. Like pastel, these sticks come in a variety of tones and hues. The initial drawing is done on coloured paper, lightly marking out the main directions of the figure and considering the angle between each pair of forms.**



**A light grey is added to the drawing, thinking about fleshing out the figure but establishing tones that are darker than the paper.**



**Now a mid-grey and a dark-grey are added, working down to the darkest values of the drawing. This helps to establish the form and make the figure more solid as well as correcting any errors in the earlier drawing.**



**Finally black is added and the full range of tonal and visual contrast is established to make the drawing more visually dynamic.**

## **Conté**

This was originally invented by the French as a response to the pencil. Rather like compressed charcoal, it is a combination of pigment and gums with some waxes too, which makes it somewhat harder than pastel. Conté comes in a wide range of colours and can also be used with water.

# Crayon

Wax crayons tend to be combinations of various waxes and pigment. The pigment content is usually low, so colours tend to be pale. Chunky crayons make excellent tools for frottage and wax resist especially when combined with an ink wash. Pencil crayons come in a much wider and richer variety of hues, and some are water-soluble.

## WAX RESIST

This technique involves drawing with a wax candle (oil pastel or white spirit) and then laying a wash over the drawing; the grease repels the wash. Stan Smith's drawings often incorporated mixed media with wax resist, but it is Henry Moore's drawings during the Second World War that are some of the best examples of the technique.



**Wax resist: the first drawing marks were made with a wax crayon, the highlights on the figure. Then a light wash was applied, which the crayon resisted.**



Further drawing was done with an oil pastel and more washes applied to create depth of tone and a context for the figure.

## Eraser

Usually made from rubber, the eraser can be both a destructive and constructive tool. Paper can be covered with a layer of charcoal and smudged in with a rag or the back of your hand to create an overall grey. The light tones of the figure can then be erased out of the grey making the drawing (rather like a *bistre* study, see Chapter 7), before further tones are added to make the darks.

## BREAD

A humble slice of bread can be kneaded into a small ball. Stale bread is best. This can be used as a rubber in tonal figure studies of the nude. As you will see

in Chapter 5 you can make a reductive tonal drawing using the rubber as a drawing medium removing a charcoal ground to describe light on the form.

## **PUTTY RUBBER**

This is a soft kneadable rubber, and can be manipulated to erase small detailed areas as well as larger expanses. It can also be used to lift out oil paint in *bistre* painting where the oil is applied thinly onto primed canvas.

## **Graphite**



**Graphite offers a wide scope of expressive marks and is an excellent tool for quick gestural studies of the figure in short poses. This drawing was made from a two-minute pose.**

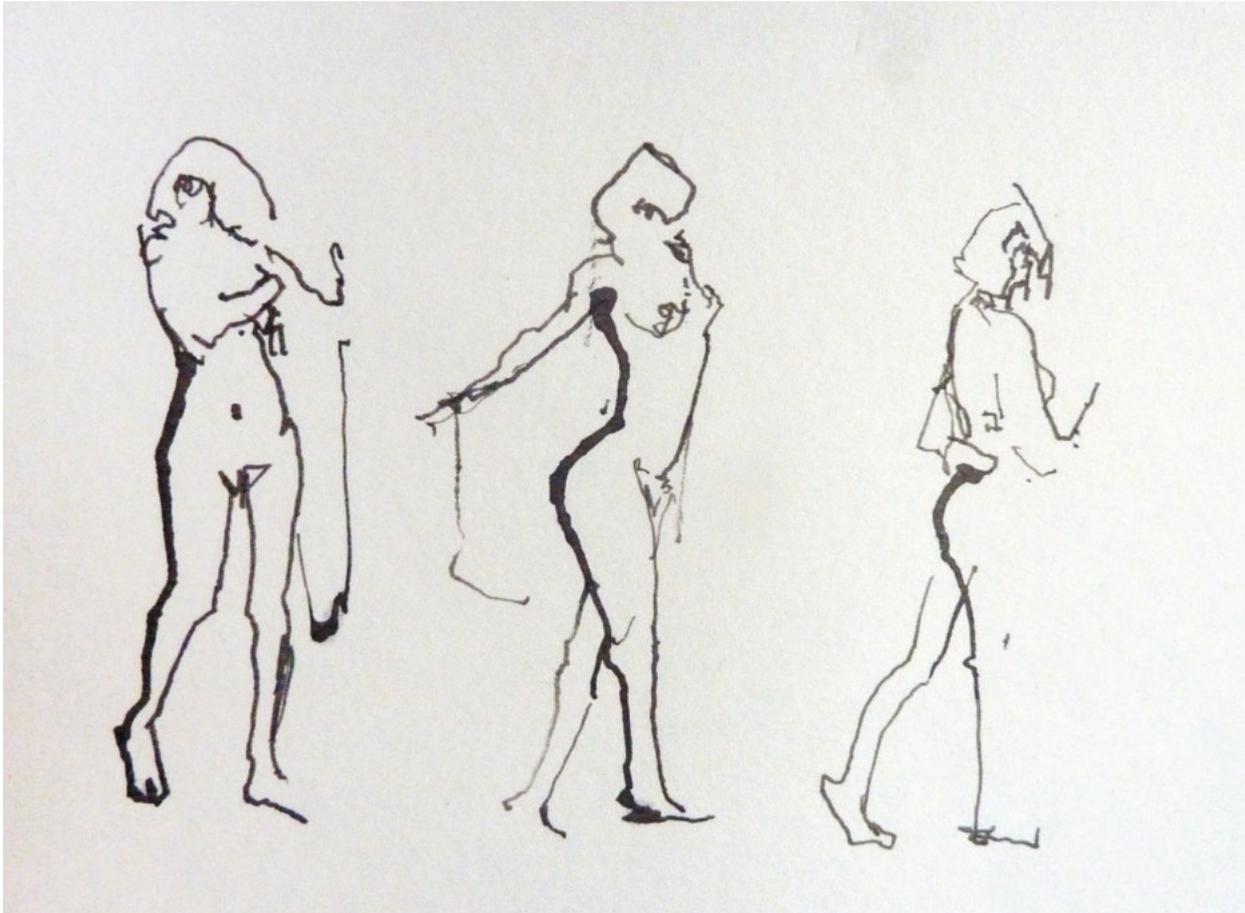
Graphite is a form of carbon. It is found in pencils and the degree to which it is combined with clay creates the various tones available (B for black and H for hard). Graphite can also come in stick form. Soft pencils are great for immediate and tonally rich figure drawing; graphite sticks can make filling large areas of a drawing more economical but are also good for fast drawings, which capture the energy and dynamism of the figure.

Pencil is one of the most widely used media and having a broad range of pencil grades extends its scope: softer Bs can yield rich blacks and a broad range of tones; harder H pencils can yield crisp lines, which are perfect in conjunction with watercolour. Dirk Dzimirsky's photorealist pencil drawings demonstrate the range of tones that are possible but take a look at Kent Williams' and Jake Spicer's life drawing to see the pencil used with great sensitivity to the subject.

## Indian ink



**Diluted with distilled water you can create beautiful washes with Indian ink. In this figure study the ink was applied with a brush and a stick.**



**Stick and ink: with a stick you can also make expressive drawings. The stick can yield rich darks and as the stick continues to draw you will be left with ink residue, which creates subtle grey lines.**

The blackest of the inks, Indian ink is made by combining soot with shellac. It can be diluted with water and you should use distilled water, as normal water causes the pigment to break down and scatter into the wash. When dry, Indian ink is waterproof and lends itself to line and wash, which can produce luminous figure studies. Indian ink was a standard medium for illustrators using a dip pen at the turn of the century. Ink drawings by Phil May and Charles Keene are well worth looking at, as are those by Jason Shawn Alexander and David Foldvari.

## **Oil bar**



**Oil bar is half-way between oil pastel and oil paint. It comes in thick tubes like an over-large pastel but it has a very soft and fluid touch. The bar tends to form an outer skin much like oil paint when it dries, which has to be broken. This can be done with a knife to create a finer edge.**

Rather like an oil pastel but somewhat larger, the oil bar can be used for drawing. It leaves a wet mark on the support, which can be worked like oil paint with a brush and solvent. This can lead to exciting gestural and painterly marks, which lean toward a more expressive interpretation of the figure.



**First layer:** in this figure study the yellow was lightly skimmed over the surface of the paper creating a sense of the pose and trying to establish the main direction of the limbs.



**Second layer: red was used next and blended together with a finger.**

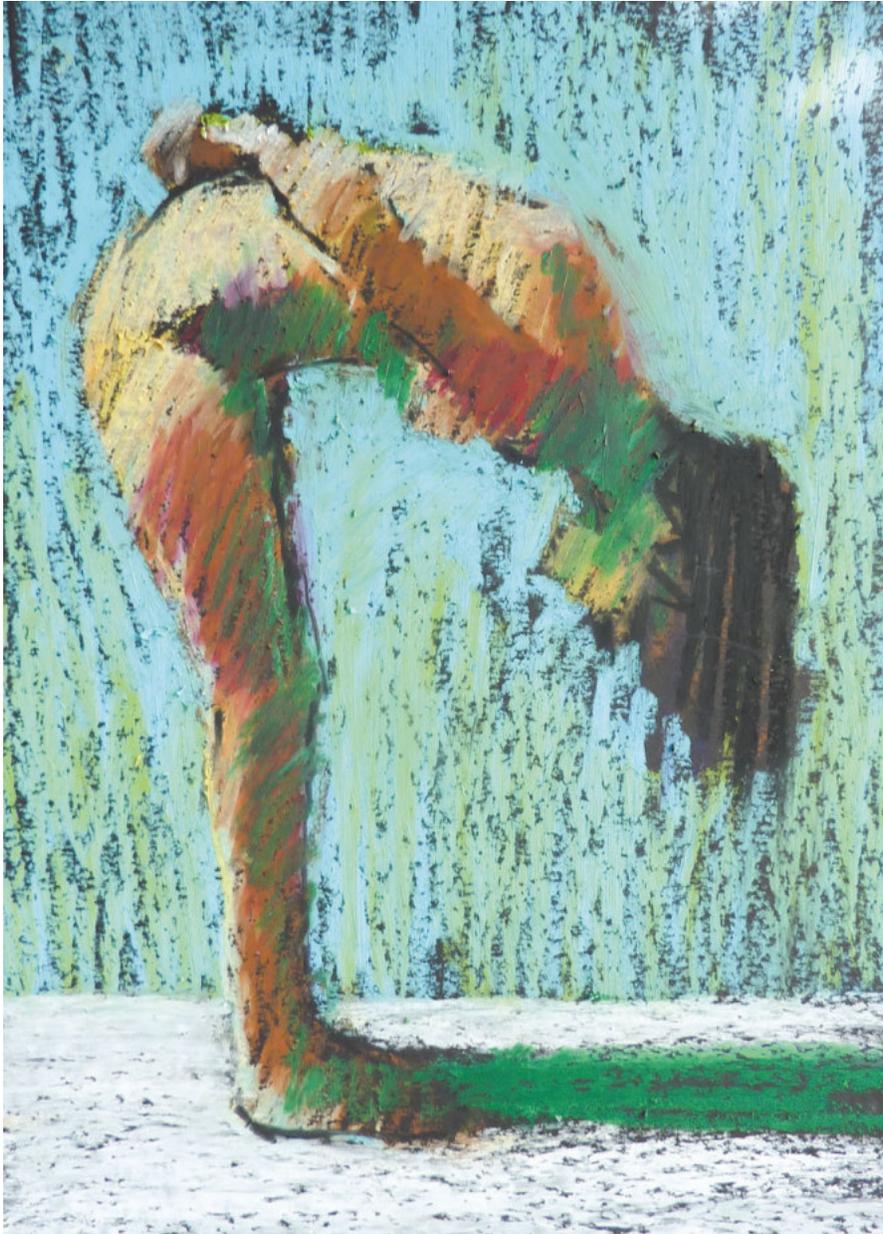


**Two further colours were added – blue and brown. These dominant hues were identified before white was layered over the top to unify the form.**



The piece is brought to a conclusion; consideration was given to the space the figure sits in.

**Oil pastel**



**This twenty-minute oil pastel drawing was made on black paper. The weave of the pastel was kept open, hatching the colours next to each other and over the top of each colour to create a rich surface.**

A combination of pigment and oils, pastel comes in small stick form and a variety of rich colours. They can be mixed with white spirit to produce more painterly effects, but equally they can be used either flat, blended or mixed using hatching, cross-hatching or stippling. The range of the medium, and the scope for its manipulation can yield a wide range of figure interpretations. As with all pastels, if you can, go larger: working on bigger paper – especially coloured

paper – gives you more scope to build up detail and subtle rendering of form and colour nuances.



**Felix was hunched, but was bringing his shoulder blades upwards and his head downwards, exaggerating the size of his back. This oil pastel study was made on a light grey Ingres paper ground with the open weave of the pastel kept loose to build up form and richness of colour.**

## **Pastel**

Chalk pastel is pigment mixed with gums. Powdery in its nature, it too can be blended, or mixed together with cross-hatching, *etc.* However, unlike oil pastel, chalk pastel can be erased. Like oil pastel, the scope of chalk pastel is immense. R.B. Kitaj, Crawford Adamson, Paula Rego and of course, Degas demonstrate true mastery of the medium and it is worth noting that pastel drawings are often referred to as paintings.

## Pen



**In this drawing with a black ballpoint pen the figure is rendered using hatching and cross-hatching, which changes direction to describe the underlying form. Care was given to exploit the touch of the hand to yield lines of varying thicknesses to help describe the third dimension.**

A biro or ballpoint pen has a greasy, viscous ink that is transferred onto the paper with a steel ball. A fibre tip pen and felt tip pen transfer a solvent-based ink, which dries quickly. Some artists use water-based pens, which can create washes when combined with water. Dryden Goodwin and Juan Francisco Casas offer two very different approaches to the humble ballpoint. A dip pen has a split steel tip with a small hole at its mid-point, held in a handle. The tip is immersed in ink and through capillary action, ink is held in the hole and travels down the split to reach the paper. You can dip your pen into traditional ink, but you can also draw with strong coffee, food colouring or diluted gouache. A fine fountain pen can also be used for drawing purposes. Some have mechanisms that allow you to suck up ink and some have ink cartridges. A fine-tipped fountain pen offers a lot of the same possibilities as a dip pen and can yield touch-sensitive lines. It can be used to build up hatching, cross-hatching and stippled areas of tone. The combination of the line and the dispersion of colour into water from the black make for sumptuous and evocative life drawing. It has the advantage over a dip pen that you do not need to constantly refill your pen.



**A linear drawing using coloured felt tips.**



**A water soluble felt tip drawing was made in line and then areas of tone were added. The water was added to create the coloured washes.**

Although associated with children, felt tips can also be used for drawing purposes. They are inexpensive and come in a vast array of colours. Some of them use water-based inks that will disperse into washes when mixed with water. However, the inks used fade in light so would need to be used for sketchbook work rather than as drawings to exhibit.

## **Quink ink**

Black Quink is designed to be used with fountain pens and is a trichromatic ink made up of colour. If diluted, the colour is revealed and can produce some rich effects. Quink is water-soluble when it is dry so a line made with it might disappear if a wash is applied over it.

# **Pencil sharpener**

Generally speaking pencil sharpeners are designed to sharpen HB pencils. Softer pencils tend to snap inside them so it is often better to sharpen pencils with either a craft knife or scalpel so that the angle of cut can be changed to suit the pencil. A small piece of sandpaper may be used to define a tip and can be used to sharpen vine charcoal.

## **Painting tool kit**

### **Brushes**



**A wide range of inexpensive brushes can be a good starting point for experimentation in terms of scale of mark and edge quality. Feel the resistance and spring of the bristles so that you have the control you need when painting.**

These can vary considerably in terms of quality, type and cost. Ideally you want brushes that you can control and ones that are capable of a wide variety of marks so that you can efficiently yield the large masses of the figure as well as describe the subtle nuances across the form. You need a brush that has resistance against the paint, so you need a stiff brush if you want to use acrylic or oil with impasto

or scumbling techniques, and softer brushes for more fluid paint like watercolour or gouache (but you still need that tension in the bristles). A large brush can hold a small point and can give you a good reservoir of paint; a medium round synthetic or sable type brush can give you the freedom to make gesture drawings and ink wash drawings.

Brushes come in different shapes: round, flat, filbert and fan. Each one will give you a different mark so it is worth experimenting to find out what suits you. Brush handles vary in length and it is recommended that you buy long-handled brushes and hold them at their ends so that you can stand back from your painting and see both the figure and your painting simultaneously, to help you understand the proportions and colours on the figure.

## **Acrylic**



**This small acrylic sketch was made quickly with a very dry paint scumbled over the surface of black paper.**

Originally used for mural painting, acrylic is one of the most recent paints to be developed. It comes in both tube and tub form and is usually found in two types. Daler Rowney make Cryla which is a very stiff, buttery paint which has excellent impasto qualities and a high density of pigment. More widely used are Daler Rowney's System 3 flow formula acrylics, which tend to be less viscous and more fluid. Daler Rowney also produce an inexpensive graduate range; these are more easily thinned down to be used with either airbrush or glazes, but are

suitable for most of the techniques outlined in [Chapter 7](#). These thinner colours can of course be mixed with Cryla to make a much more dense paint.

Acrylic can be used with different painting techniques and applications, and can be mixed with different types of medium to either thicken the paint or transform the surface quality. Acrylic medium is white in its liquid form and becomes transparent when it dries. So a colour mixed in acrylic will invariably darken when it dries and will become more transparent. Acrylic is water-based, but once dry it is waterproof. It has a fast drying time but this can be altered with retarder. Because acrylic is fast drying, you can paint quickly in lots of layers – perfect for short, strenuous poses. You can break all the rules associated with oils and can combine many techniques in the same image. It is capable of a broad range of approaches, from expressive and gestural figure studies to meticulous rendering. Have a look at Shaun Ferguson’s figure painting to see just what can be done with acrylic. Winsor and Newton sell Artists’ quality paint, which will usually signify the best quality paint, as well as a Galeria range; Liquitex has a comprehensive range of acrylics too.

## Gouache



**In this small painting study the gouache is used thinly like watercolour and in a more gestural way in areas on the body.**

Gouache can be used in a variety of ways, from thin watercolour-type glazes to thick impasto, but the paint always remains water soluble, which means that new layers can mix with earlier ones, and impasto tends to be rather brittle. Egon Schiele used gouache in combination with pencil in his powerfully moving nudes. Gouache dries flat and can be an exciting paint to explore. Humphrey Ocean made some stunning gouache studies of people which, although somewhat exaggerated, have a real sense of pose and personality.

## Oil paint



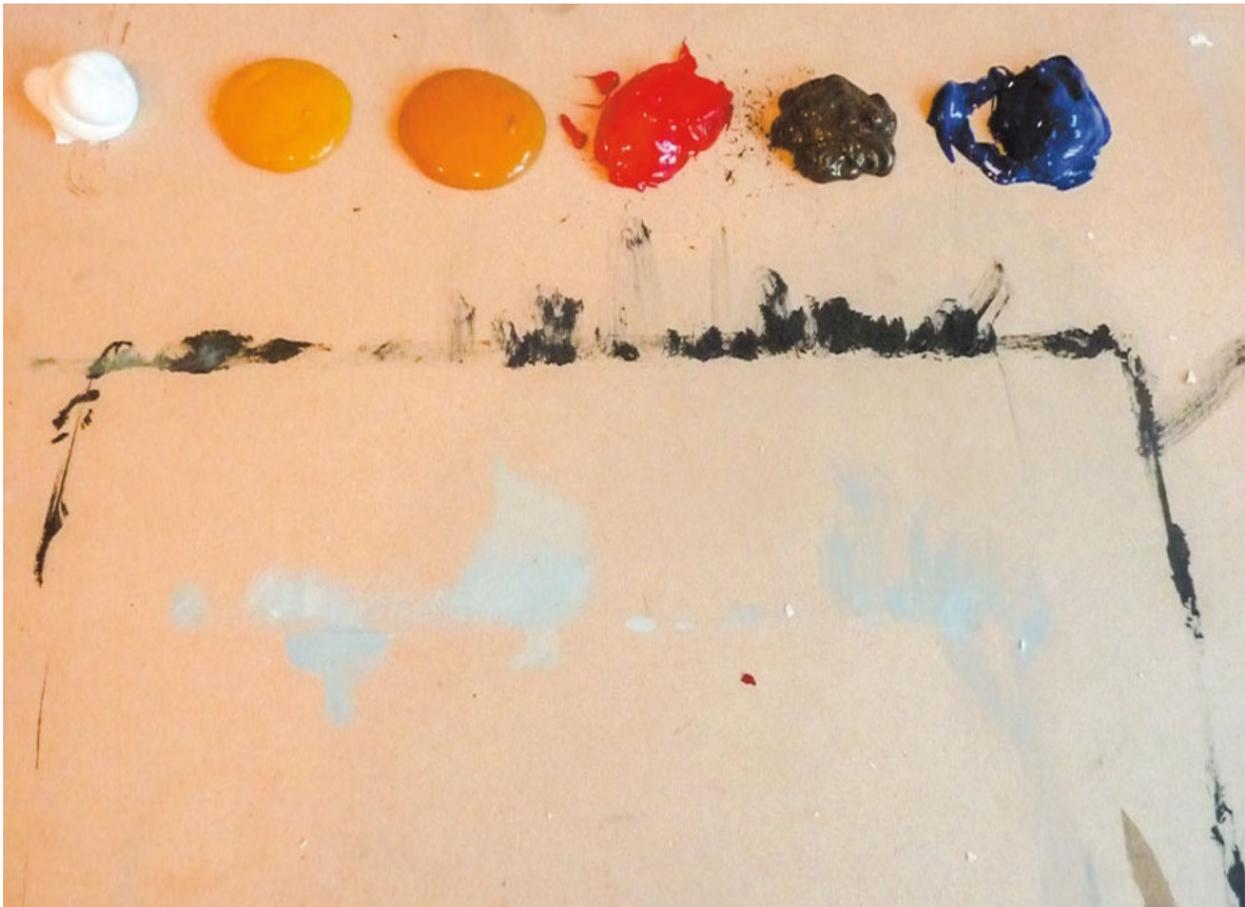
Three-figure study using an initial *grisaille* underpainting. Oil on paper, 70 × 90cm.

A combination of pigment and linseed oil, oil paint was developed in Northern Europe by Jan Van Eyck. It was said that oil paint was invented to paint flesh and it is true that no other paint is as successful at rendering the subtle

modulations of colour and light on flesh (as well as a myriad of other surfaces). Oils can be used both thinly and thickly, but the drying time for oil is lengthy, especially if the paint film gets thicker.

When painting from life you will need to take into consideration the drying time of oil. Depending on the scale of the work a medium sized painting can take anywhere between two and four hours to construct if one is working *alla prima*. A small oil study could take about one to one and a half hours so the nature of the pose that is set needs to have this taken into consideration.

## Palette



**Laying out your colours in a systemized way will develop good practice and will maximize the space for mixing.**

You will need a big palette, so that you have a place for mixing your colour, a

place where you can leave an amount of pre-mixed paint, and a place where you can wipe off excess paint to leave the right amount at the end of your brush. Walter Sickert would look at a student's palette and point out that their painting resembled their palette. In other words, if your palette is a mess of muddy colour then it should hardly be surprising that your painting will be muddy too.

A palette should be the same size as the image you are working on. Maximize the space available for mixing by putting your colour at the top edge, leaving most of the palette free. Clean colour should not be sullied when it is put onto the palette so the palette must be cleaned or refreshed in some way. Organize your colour so that it is logically put down and so that you can find what you are looking for.

Ideally a palette should be non-absorbent. You can use melamine, glass or a sheet of acrylic as a palette. A piece of thin ply can be varnished and it can be cut with a jigsaw to make a space for the hand and thumb. In that way, you have a palette that can be hand-held when standing up to paint. If you prefer to paint sitting down it could be placed on a table or stool near to where you are painting.

If you dislike cleaning, a table-top or board can be covered with cellophane or even newspaper. These can then be thrown away instead of cleaning. You can also use ready-made tear off palettes, which are made from waxed paper, and behave in the same way.



**Dried acrylic can build up into mountains quite quickly if left to dry. Cover with cling film to reduce the drying time and keep your paint useable.**

The colour of the palette itself is an important consideration, as it will influence how you perceive the colour you are mixing. An ideal would be a transparent palette. If you are going to use a coloured ground, you can paint up some paper with that colour and place it underneath your palette.

## **PALETTES FOR ACRYLIC**

Acrylic dries quickly so you might want to consider the build-up of acrylic colour on your palette. Working with a shiny palette means that after a big build-up the acrylic can be peeled off when it is dry. However, this can lead to bits of dried acrylic skin mixing with your wet paint. Air causes acrylic to dry so at the end of a painting session you can cover your acrylic with cling film; this will keep the paint wet for days rather than hours. Alternatively you can use a large tupperware box or a 'stay wet' palette; both of these have sealable lids to keep the air out, but this can cause the acrylic to smell.

## **WATERCOLOUR PALETTES**



**Watercolour palette. The space attached to the box will enable you to mix a wide variety of colours, and can be detached for cleaning. Supplement with a plate for large washes.**

If you are using watercolour the box of paint usually has its own built-in palette.

This is perfectly adequate for most painting but it is useful to supplement this with either a dinner plate or those plastic takeaway boxes as this will give you much more room to mix up enough watercolour for a large wash. You might also wish to use well palettes – the kind with deep recesses.

## Palette knife



**A range of painting and palette knives with a wallpaper scraper and kitchenware too – all capable of being used in the painting.**

The palette knife and painting knife are incredibly useful tools to have in the studio. The painting knife is usually shaped like a triangle and comes in a variety of sizes. A palette knife is usually more like a rounded knife blade and can be straight or cranked. The traditional use of the palette knife is to apply paint to the palette (if the paint comes in a tin), to scrape up the residue paint from the palette to aid cleaning, to mix colour on the palette and to scrape back a painting.

But many artists use the palette knife and painting knife in a more creative way. Household spatulas and squeegees can also yield larger-scale marks similar to painting knives and can also be used in the production of a painting (see the work of Alex Kanevsky).

## **Watercolour**



**A direct watercolour study using a Japanese calligraphy brush.**

With the highest concentration of pigment, watercolour is simply pigment and gum acacia. Watercolour is applied as a thin wash and colour can be manipulated through subsequent glazes, although if too many are applied the colour becomes muddy. Although the basic watercolour sets seem relatively simple, watercolour is one of the hardest techniques to perfect because you cannot cover up your mistakes. When combined with white gouache it is called bodycolour. Watercolour can be used broadly to capture fleeting poses, and is beautifully demonstrated in the studies by Wendy Artin, as well as the highly resolved paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

### **Water-soluble oil paint**

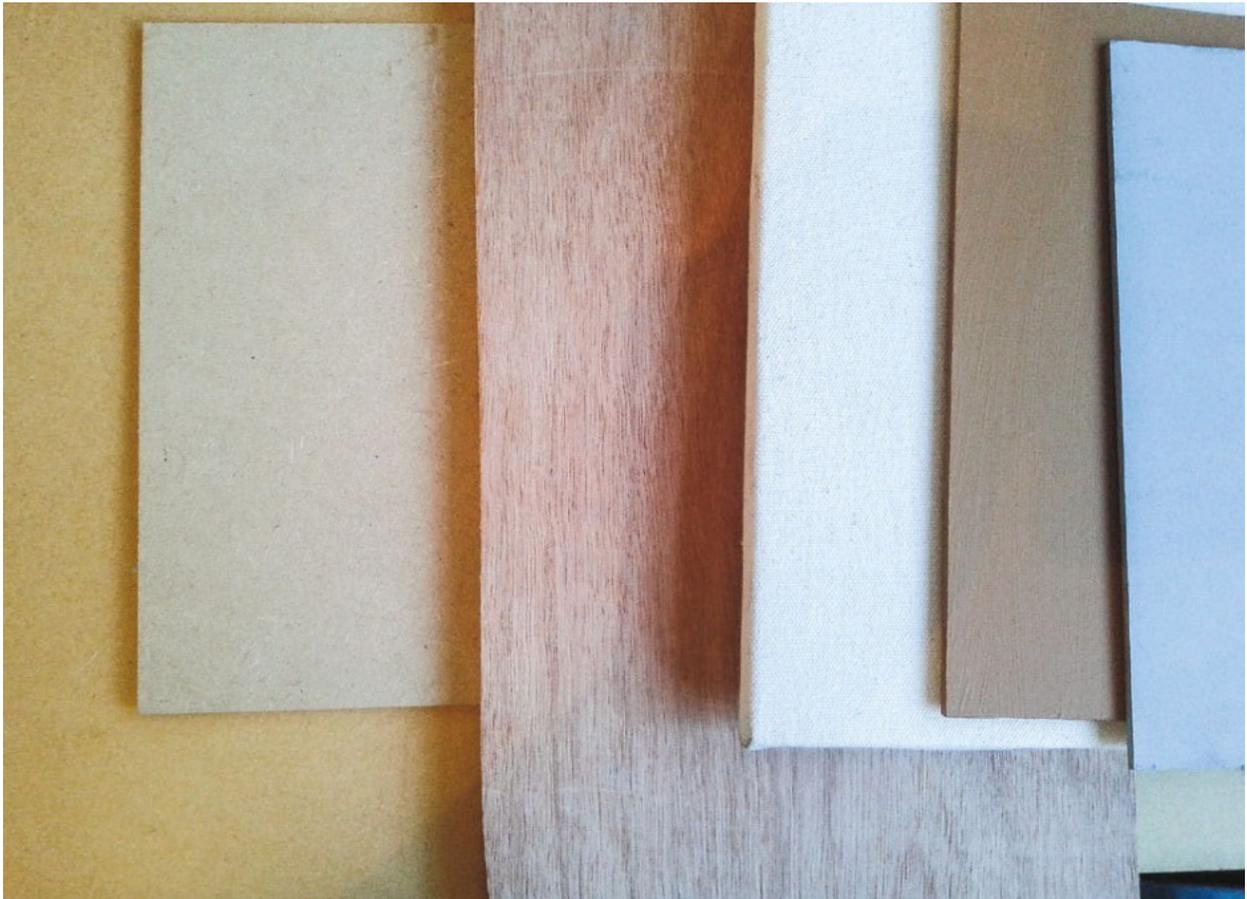


**Some of the Cobra range of water-soluble oil paints. These are becoming increasingly popular.**

With a growing awareness of health and safety, scientists have modified linseed oil in order to make it soluble in water. There are a number of brands of water-soluble oil paints including Artisan (Winsor and Newton), Cobra and the Berlin range from Lukas. They display all the advantages of oil: slow drying, excellent colour retention, etc., without having to clean brushes in white spirit. Paint can be thinned with water but some of the ranges also come with mediums too. If your studio is small and you want all of the advantages of oil but not the smell or

the laborious brush cleaning, this is your medium. Again it can be used to create fluid and immediate figure studies or highly resolved modelling.

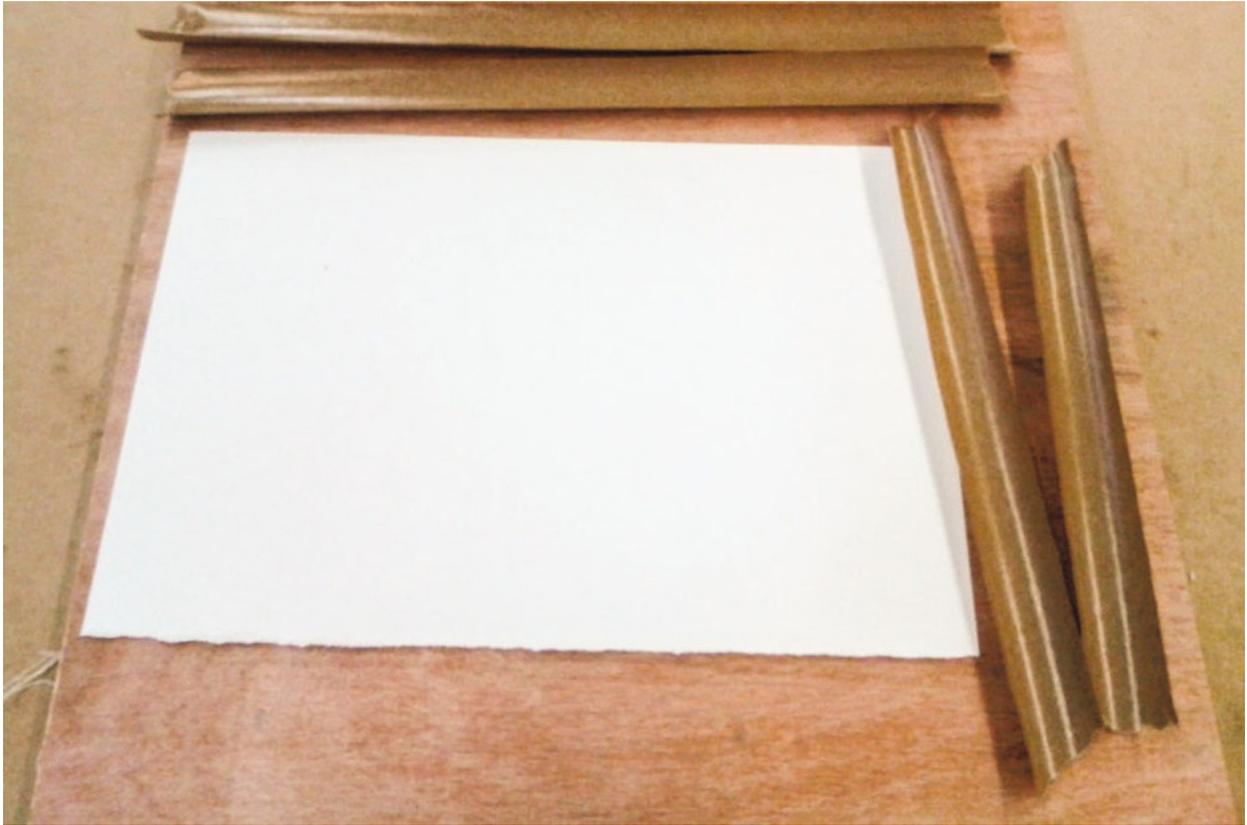
## Supports



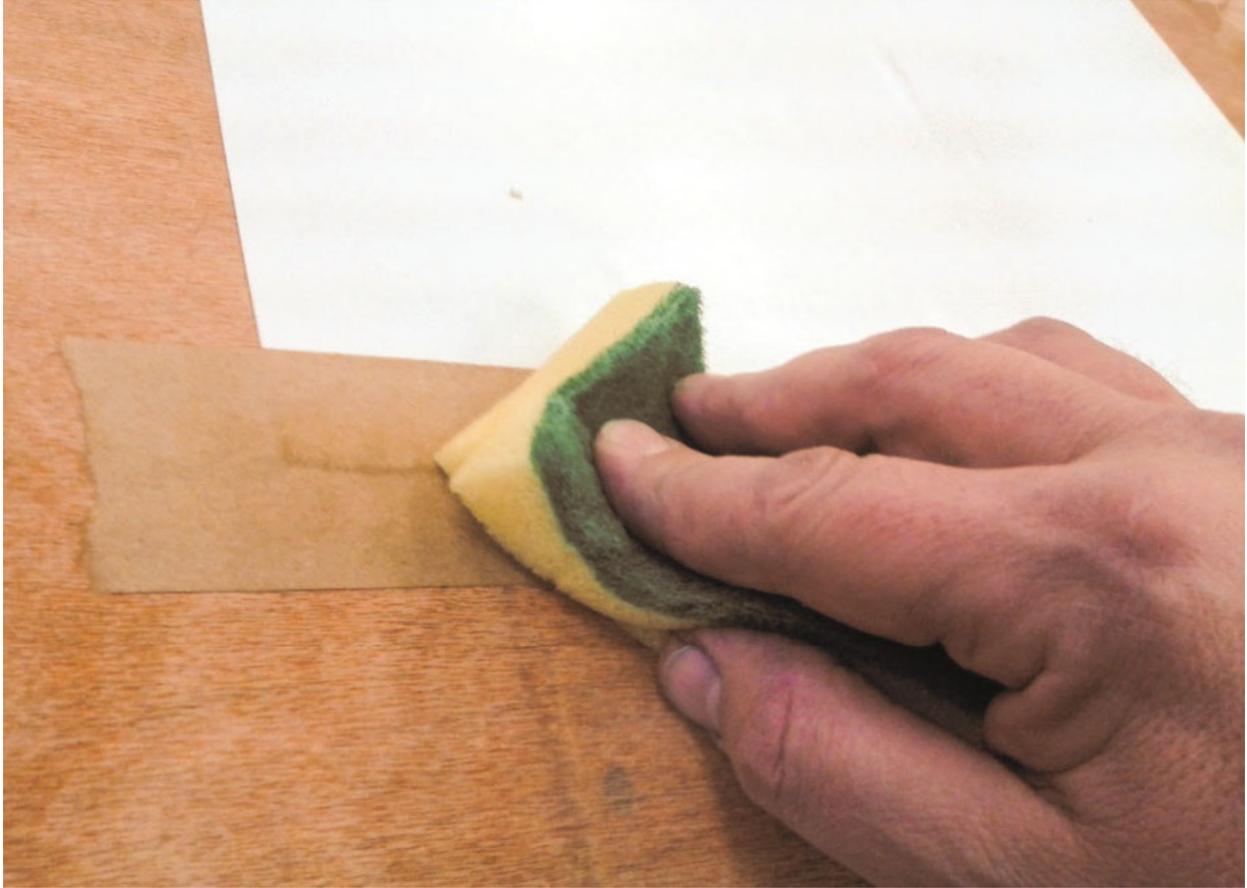
**A range of supports.**

If you are about to make a painting you need to paint on something. Paper, card, board, wood, metal or canvas – these are all supports for your painting. Cartridge paper is a good support for painting; however, it has some drawbacks. If you paint on paper it will absorb the paint almost immediately. The mark that you make will be impossible to eradicate (although you can make marks over the top of it later on). If you are using a water-based paint, then the water content causes the fibres of the paper to expand, causing the paper to enlarge unevenly and undulate (cockle). If this happens and you are using watercolour, then you will have created little troughs that your paint will run into.

## Stretching the paper



When stretching paper, cut your gummed tape 20cm longer than the dimensions of your paper. Do this when everything is dry and away from any water.



**Stretching paper. Pressing the tape onto the paper and board ensures good adhesion.**

Stretching your paper involves wetting a whole sheet of paper, taping it to a board and leaving it to dry. The paper is held under tension and cannot expand any further. Wet your paper on both sides using a clean sponge and use gummed tape (brown paper tape with a gum-arabic-based glue) to attach the paper to the board. You need to ensure that the tape adheres well to the board and paper otherwise the tape will lift. Do not stretch your paper onto thin hardboard or MDF, as the tension in the paper will cause the board to warp; a 1cm deep plywood drawing board is better. Put a staple or a drawing pin into the corners of your paper and into your board to reduce the tension on the tape. When the paper has dried (leave it overnight), it is ready to use. Heavier weight paper is much less likely to cockle and so too is sized paper ('size' is the glue that holds the paper fibres together). Size reduces absorbency; a watercolour paper is heavily sized whereas blotting paper has no size in it at all.

## Absorbency

When painting the figure, the absorbency of the paper affects the kind of mark you make with a brush and the speed that it flows over the paper. This is useful to consider if you are going to take your time building up layer by layer, modelling the figure, or if you are trying to pin down a gesture study in a few minutes. If you are working on paper with paint you might want to consider two different strategies: with watercolour, you might start with a pencil drawing and then build up the colour and tone into this; alternatively you might apply the watercolour directly, drawing with the brush itself.

To reduce the absorbency of the support, you could paint the paper with acrylic, coat it with gum or place another ground onto it. Painting it with anything will alter its texture and might introduce unwanted brush marks, but equally building up the texture might be something that adds another dimension to your work.

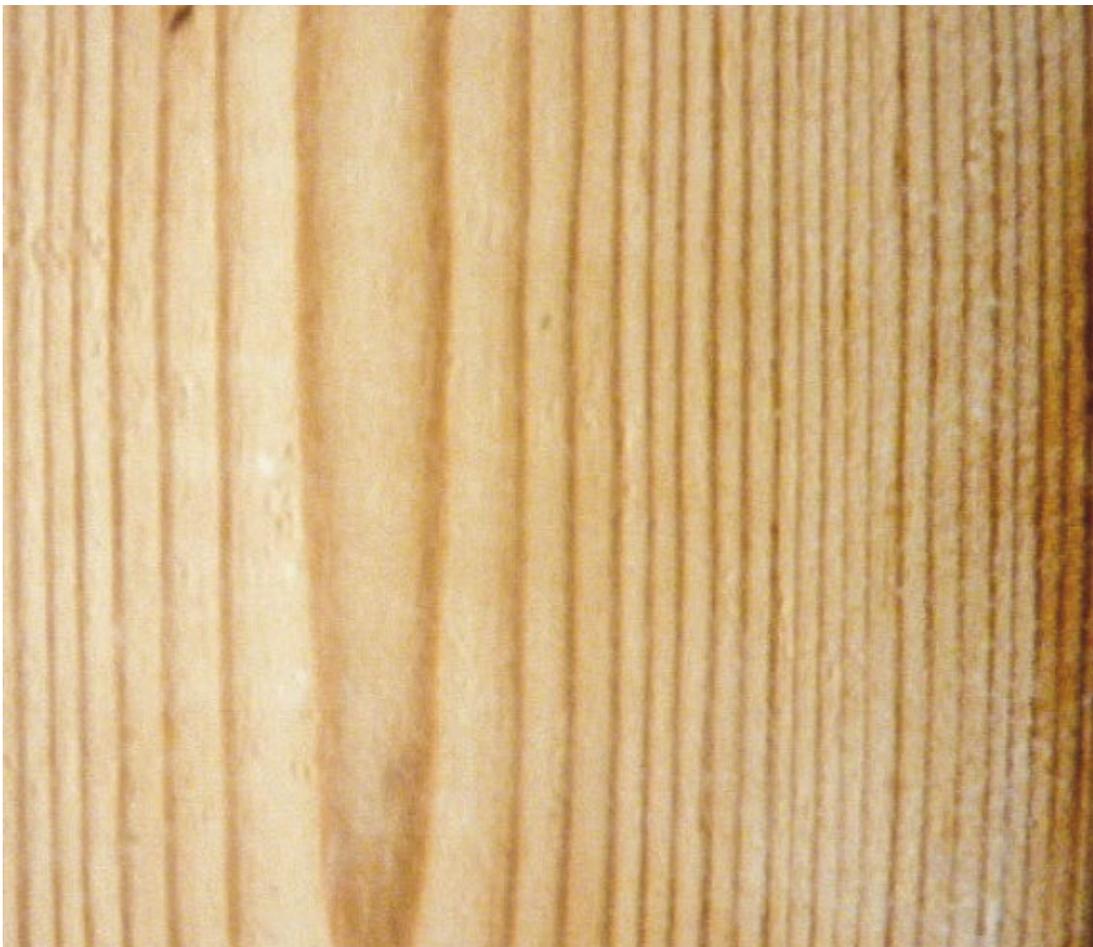


**Julian Vilarrubi ([julianvilarrubi.com](http://julianvilarrubi.com)), *Nude*, mixed media on board, 18 × 13cm, 2003.**

You might wish to create a coloured ground to work on rather than staying with white. Paint the surface with white Cryla mixed with a little colour. It is a good idea to use a shallow tray – the kind you get from a takeaway is ideal. Use a decorators' brush (approx. 5cm wide) and mix the two colours together as well as you can without adding very much water. Try to get the colour on quickly using a scrubbing action so it is the elbow rather than the water that gives you a thin film of colour. This will dry more quickly than a thick layer and you can

then build up another thin layer on top of that. If you have enough left over, then paint up some more paper until you have used all of your paint (so nothing is wasted). You might decide that for different sheets of paper you could add a little of another colour to create a series of coloured grounds for painting, or you might be making up some papers for collage or drawing. Try creating some highly textured surfaces for exciting visual effects. This technique is used by Julian Vilarrubi in his figure studies.

## **Board**

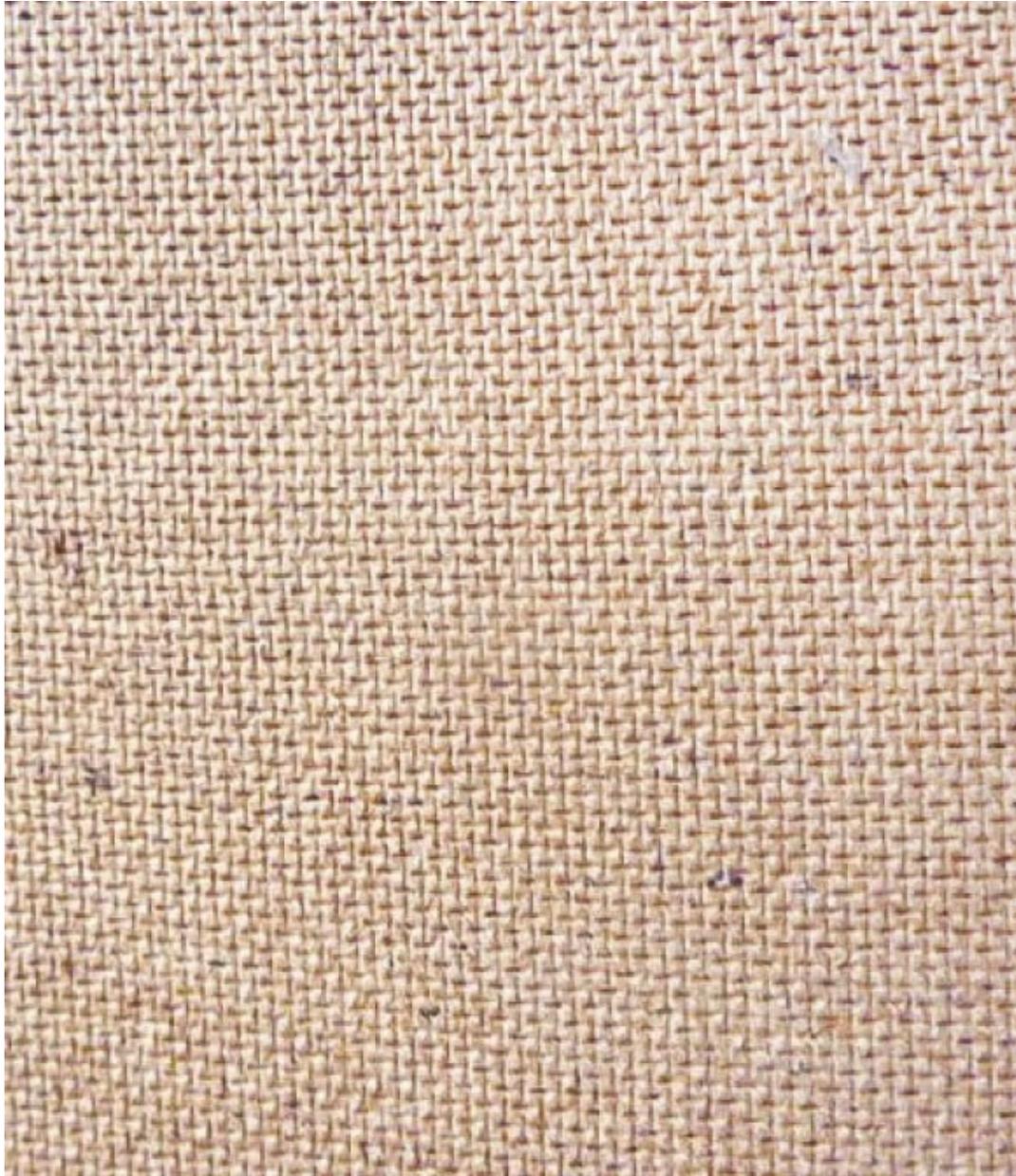


### **Solid wood panel.**

Cardboard gives you a robust surface to paint on and you could give it a coat of acrylic if you want to introduce texture or reduce the absorbency, or indeed to

create a coloured ground especially if you intend to work in oil. Too absorbent a surface will create a patchy painting, although this didn't stop Lautrec from using it as a support. Greyboard is a fairly inexpensive card support (it is the same kind of board you get on the back of sketchbooks) and is a fairly good surface to work on directly with acrylic. It does have an acidic content, however, so it will yellow somewhat with age; not great if you want to sell your work, but fine for experimenting. Mountboard comes in large sheet sizes and can come in a number of colours but it is more expensive, it is a soft material and can be easily damaged, especially the corners.

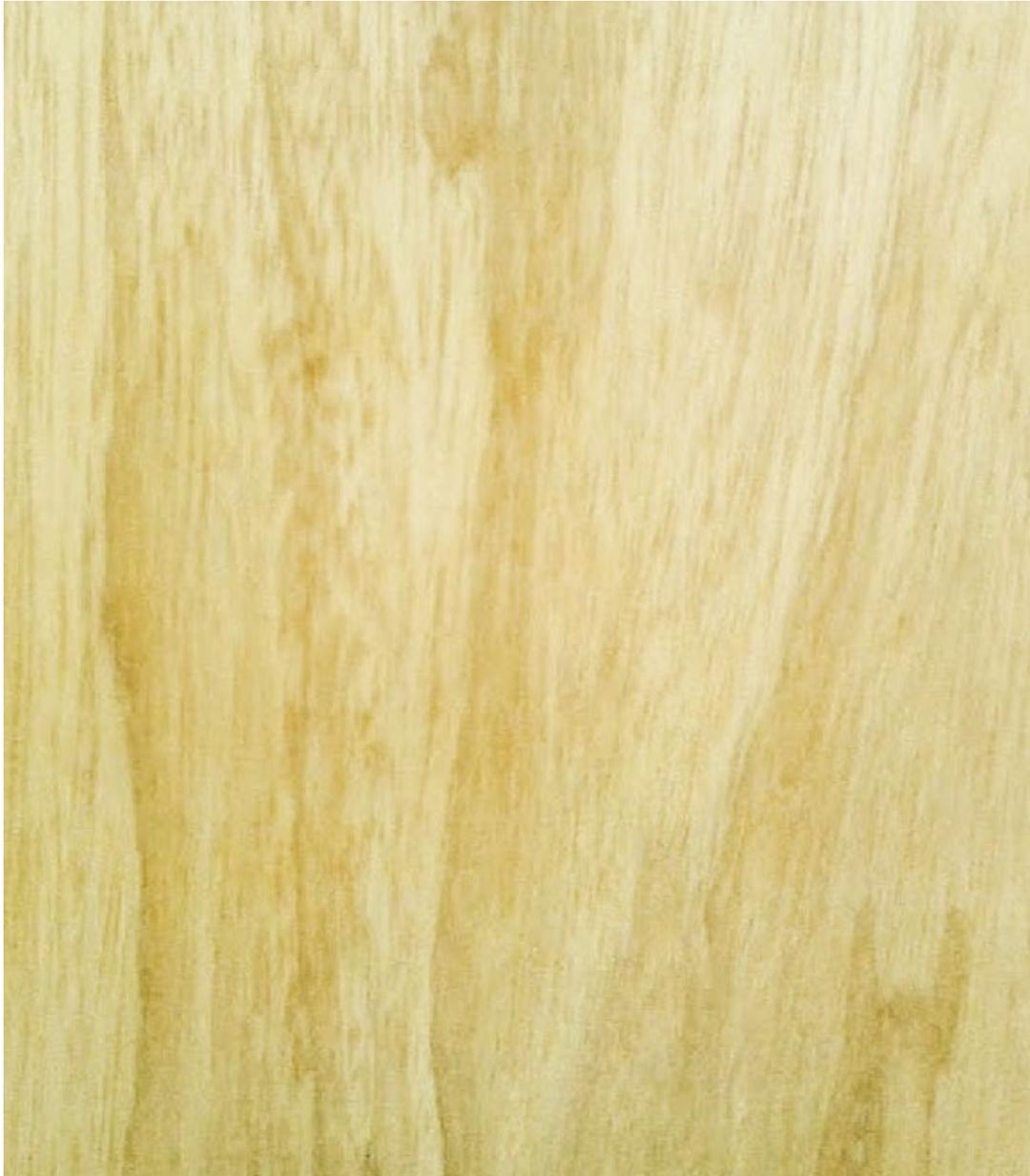
## **Hardboard**



**Hardboard comes in 5mm thickness and has a textured and a smooth side. The textured side can be painted on but the surface is quite coarse. The other side is very smooth and paint has a tendency to slide off it. Hardboard is made up of compressed paper-like layers, so if the corners get knocked, it can become fluffy and may need to be trimmed down with a sharp craft knife.**

Hardboard (Masonite in America) and MDF can be bought from your local wood yard. It comes in sheets  $120 \times 240$ cm, but some wood yards have a cutting service and will quickly and efficiently cut your boards to size. So, one sheet of

wood could give you eighteen 40 × 40cm boards to paint on, coming in at about £1 per sheet. This means that it makes it much less intimidating to paint figure studies on, but the boards are robust enough for you to make significant changes to the artwork without damaging the support.



**Marine ply makes for an excellent support. The cross-ply nature of the thin veneers of wood tends to counter warping; blockboard can be used successfully as well.**

# MDF



**MDF is made from wood dust mixed with glue and formaldehyde. The material is much more dense than hardboard but it should not be sanded or sawn in the studio due to the risk of dust inhalation. These boards can be sealed with acrylic or gesso or rabbit skin glue size (if you are using oil).**

MDF (medium density fibreboard) comes in a variety of thicknesses; 3mm is a good thickness in that it is very similar to card in terms of weight and how much

space it will take up in the studio but has a somewhat more matt surface which takes the paint better. It also has the advantage that if the painting does bow, due to the shrinkage of its surface caused by the application of paint, it can be bent back into shape, but thicker boards cannot. Bigger boards need to be supported by cradling the back with a wooden frame, which can be pinned and glued to the back. Also, the larger board can be painted on both sides which tends to counteract warping.

## **Chipboard**

Chipboard is not a suitable wood for painting.

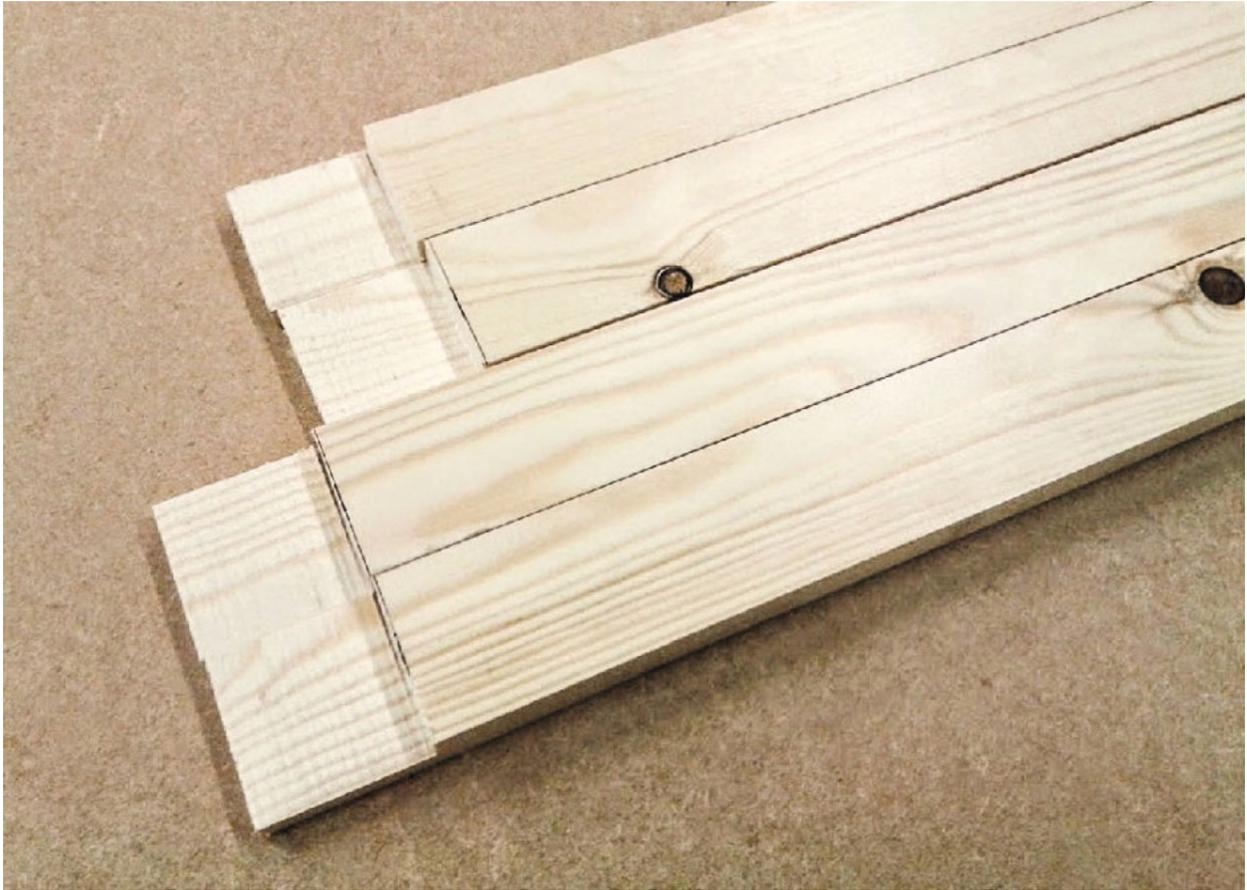
## **Canvas**



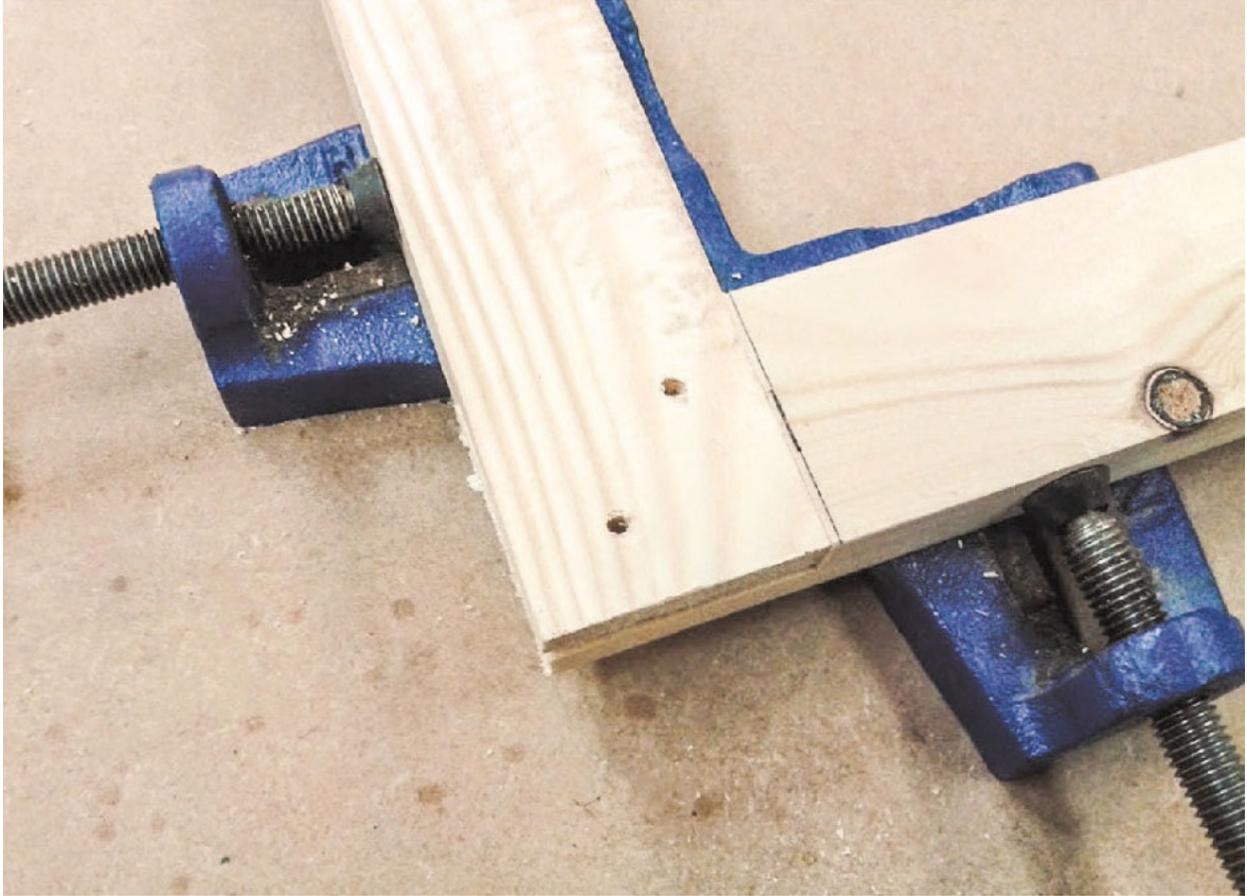
**You can buy off the shelf a host of ready made and primed canvases. They do vary considerably in quality and some of the cheapest contain more primer than fabric.**

Traditionally paintings were made on wooden panels (sometimes a number of panels joined together) but canvas was developed to enable artists to make larger paintings. The wooden framework that holds the canvas is called a stretcher or a strainer, depending on whether the corners can be pushed outwards to re-stretch the canvas if it goes saggy, or whether its dimensions are fixed. The cheap ones are usually very lightweight and can warp easily on the larger scale.

## **MAKING A STRAINER**



**Four lengths of wood are cut to size out of two-by-one pine. These have then been cut into simple lap joints. A mitre saw kit from your local DIY shop is a useful purchase.**



**Squaring up: using a right-angled clamp the two lengths are put together and pilot holes drilled to reduce the chances of the wood splitting.**



**The corners are screwed together so that if the canvas is taken off the stretcher the strainer bars can be taken apart and new lengths added, and a new canvas stretched.**



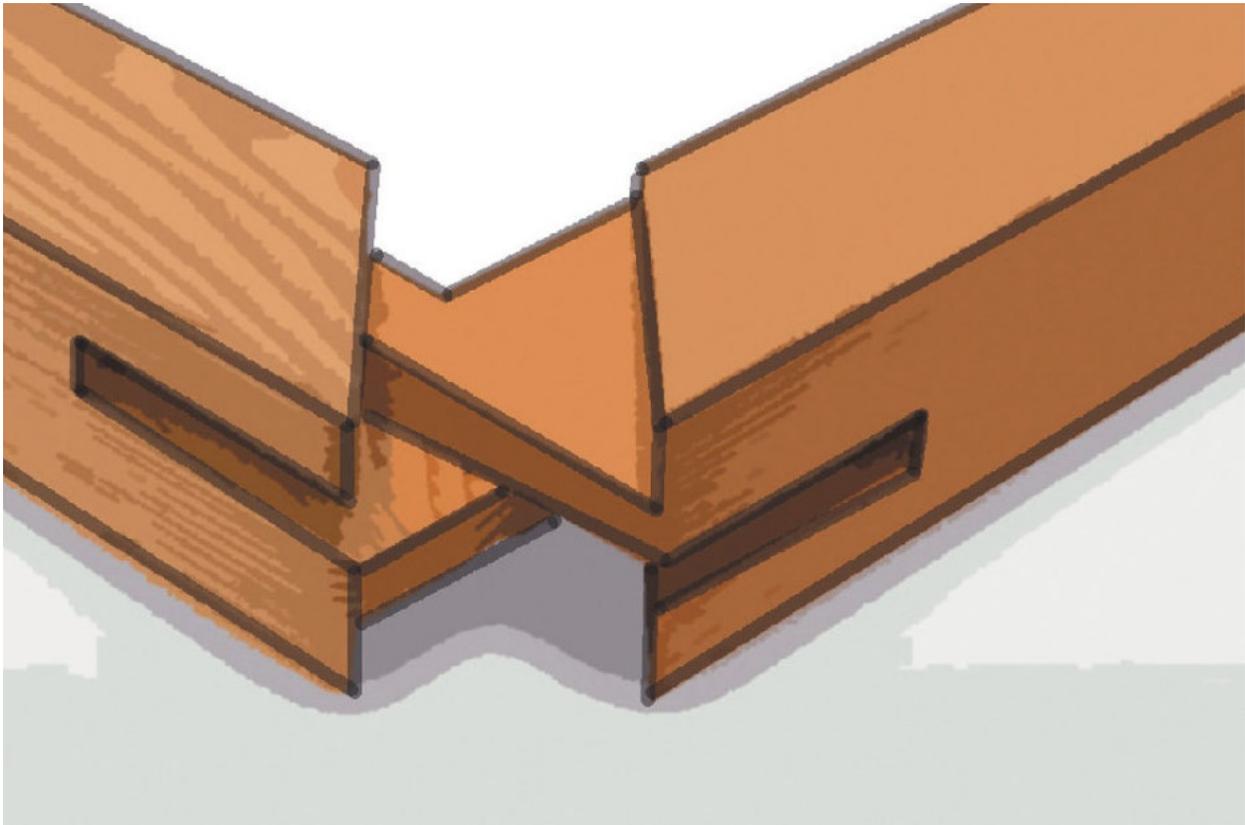
**A thin strip of MDF has been cut which is a few millimetres deeper than the depth of the pine. This is tacked into the strainer so that the canvas sits above the frame. Moulding could also be glued to the top of the strainer.**

The better pre-bought canvases are artists' quality and they are made of cotton duck or linen. Linen is usually a much finer fabric but is much more expensive. Some stretchers are made of aluminium rather than wood; these are more or less museum quality and do not warp. Alustretch produces stretchers for some of the top artists in the world.

You can make your own strainer from four or five pieces of 2.5cm pine from the wood yard. Depending on your woodworking skills you can make mitre joints or half lap joints. However, this wood tends to be green (new) and can warp considerably, especially once it is made and has a stretched canvas on it. The tension that this creates in a centrally heated house can alter the shape considerably. It is a good idea to attach beading to the top outer edge of the strainer so that when you stretch your canvas, it is not in contact with the frame, otherwise you will get the impression of the strainer bars on the painting.

Depending on the size of the painting, a fifth piece of wood can be added to create a central crossbar which reduces the warp in the strainer. Triangular corners can be pinned to the back of the strainer as well to reduce twist.

## **STRETCHER BARS**



**Stretcher bars slot together and can be wedged outward to increase the tension in a sagging canvas.**

If you buy ready-made stretcher bars, these have a raised bevelled edge, which raises the canvas above the bars so that they are not left with the impression of the bar on the finished painting. Ready-made stretcher bars have tongue and groove joints. When piecing together the stretcher you still need to tack the joint together with a panel pin and rest the joint against a carpenters' square to ensure that the bars are at right angles to each other. You also need to measure the diagonals of the stretcher to make sure they are the same.

# PREPARING CANVAS

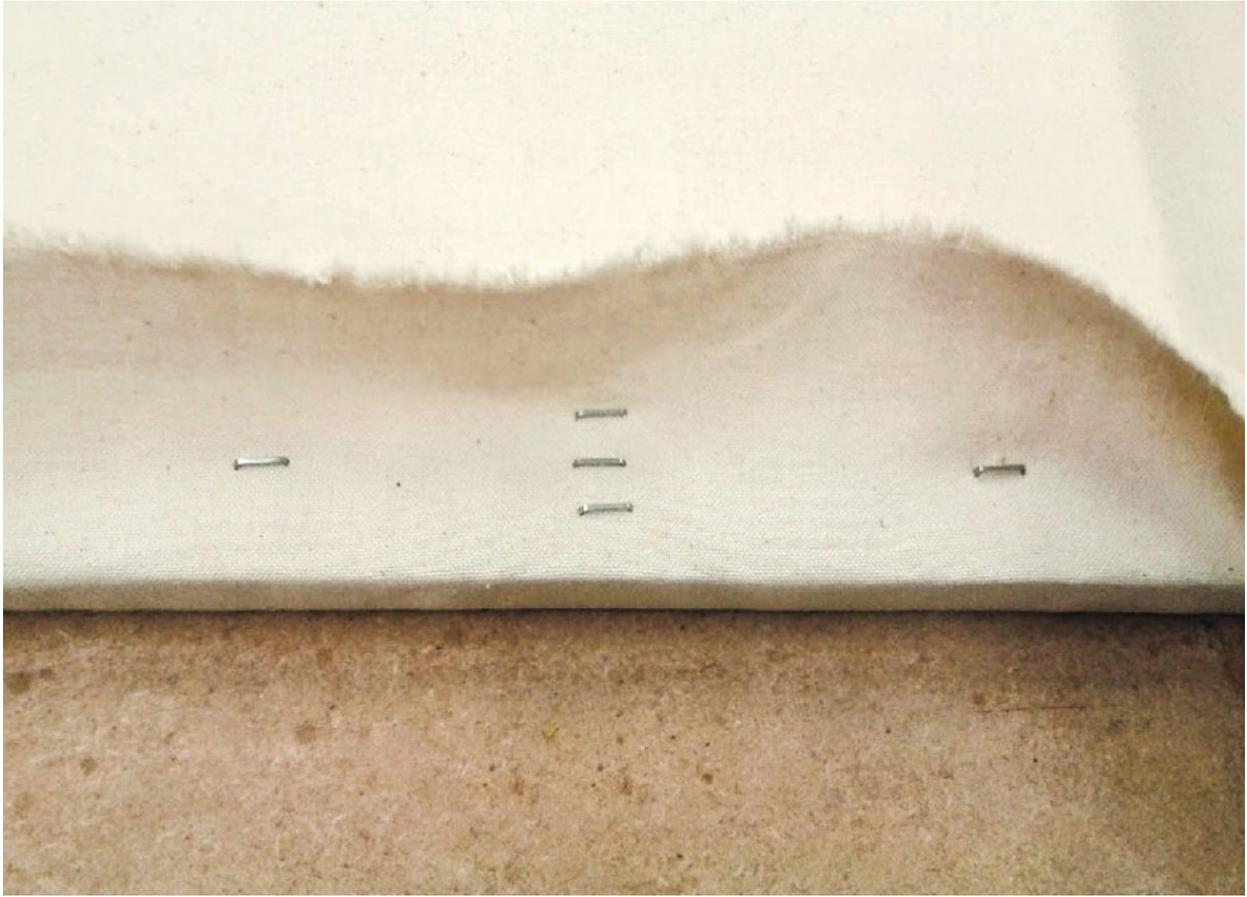


**Preparing the canvas. The canvas is cut approx 25cm larger than the strainer in each dimension.**

Canvas bought on the roll can have a certain amount of resistance to priming (the primer sits on top of the canvas rather than integrating into it). This can be alleviated by washing the canvas first, but care has to be taken that the canvas does not become creased. The best way to do this is to place a roll of canvas into a bath of water and then hang it out to dry. This not only reduces the starch and makes the canvas absorb the primer more readily, it also causes the canvas to shrink a little. Warped canvases are often caused by too much tension on the stretcher due to the shrinkage of the canvas. When making your own canvases, ensure that your canvas is approx. 25cm bigger in both dimensions than your stretcher. This will allow enough room to pull the canvas over the stretcher bars

on the other side.

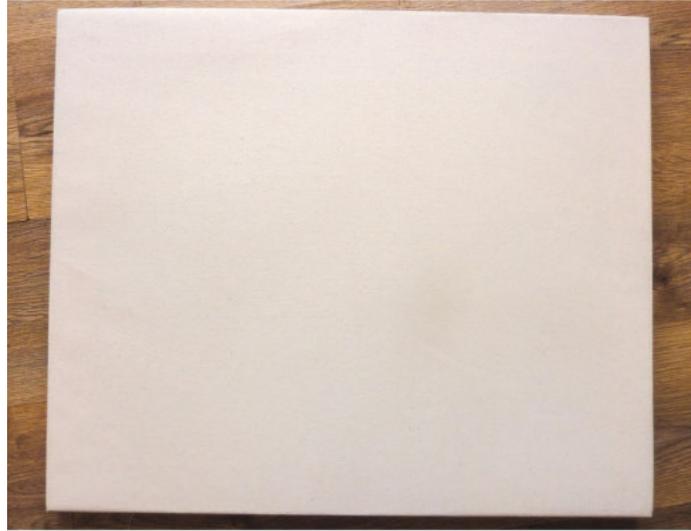
## **STRETCHING A CANVAS**



**Creating the tension. Three staples are attached to the middle of the strainer and the same repeated on the other side. This is repeated on the adjacent sides whilst pulling the canvas outward creating the tension.**



**Stretching outwards: more staples are added, gradually working outward to the corners.**



**The corners are pulled diagonally outward and stapled. The canvas edges are tucked neatly into the back of the strainer.**

Start at the middle and place three staples through the canvas into the stretcher. Move to the opposite side and repeat, this time pulling the canvas towards you and bringing it over the stretcher to create tension. You can use your hand to do this or you might want to use canvas pliers. Now move to the adjacent side and repeat, pulling the canvas towards you and stapling before moving to the opposite side and repeating the process. Working from the middle outward towards the corners, insert staples approx. 10cm apart. When you finally reach

the corners try to pull the canvas taut and neatly fold over the back.

## PRIMING



**Priming.** A stiff brush is used to apply the acrylic gesso into the weave of the canvas. Subsequent layers can be scraped over.

Once the canvas is stretched it can be primed with acrylic primer, acrylic gesso primer or rabbit-skin glue size. (Traditional gesso should not be put onto the canvas as the movement of the support will cause it to crack; acrylic gesso is more flexible.) Rabbit-skin glue size is the traditional way for priming a support for oil. It requires soaking the dried pellets in water before placing in a double boiler to heat up. This hot liquid is applied to the canvas and left to cool and dry for about twelve hours. If whiting (very finely crushed chalk) is mixed with rabbit-skin glue size to create a cream-like liquid, you have created true gesso. Acrylic gesso is like a chalky acrylic and will provide you with a sealed surface

but also a key for your paint to adhere to. If you require a very smooth surface, this can be created by building up more layers of gesso, which are sanded down between coats. Aim to seal your boards or canvases with at least three layers. It is a good idea to paint your boards in one direction and then to change direction for the next layer (horizontal brushing and vertical brushing); this helps to achieve an even coating.

Apply your primer with a stiff decorators' brush to ensure that you get the primer into the warp and weft of the canvas. Once covered you can use a thin scraper to drag the gesso into the surface, filling up the crevices and sanding in between coats to create a smoother surface if you wish. Alternatively you may wish to use a much coarser canvas for the texture (like Sickert's figure studies). Painting on canvas can be really exciting especially when working on a larger scale, but the cost and effort involved can be quite intimidating – you will feel under pressure to do something worthwhile on it.

You can also prime your supports with PVA, a clear acrylic primer, any acrylic colour – or you may choose to work on an unprimed support if you want the resistance of surface. Some hardboards have an oil content which could leach into your paint, and exposed areas of board may yellow due to air exposure, but you should experiment with the preparation of your support because it can make a huge difference as to how the paint feels when you use it.

## Marouflage



## **A marouflage board.**

If you find that you like working on the texture of canvas but find the movement of the support frustrating then consider a marouflage. This is where you glue muslin or fine cotton to a board. If you are working in acrylic, PVA will adhere your canvas fairly well and rabbit-skin glue works very well for oil. Apply your hot glue to the support and add your muslin, which should be approx. 10cm bigger than the support, wrapping the edges around the back of the board. Seal the muslin with a further coat of rabbit-skin glue, ensuring that it goes over the front and is pressed down. Ensure that there are no air holes and that the fabric corners are covered too.

Alternatively you can make a cradled board and stretch your canvas over it in the same way you would do a strainer. This means that if the painting doesn't work you can simply remove the canvas and start again. It also removes the problem of the board and the muslin drying at different rates and becoming detached.

## Ground colour



**A grey ground has been applied with a stiff brush to a board to create an underlying texture to paint over.**

Once you have primed your board you might want to consider the ground that your painting is going to be made on. Do you use white? Would it be more appropriate to choose the dominant colour of the painting (yellow ochre or burnt sienna for the figure) and stain your canvas or board that colour? Do you identify

the complementary colour of the subject and paint your canvas in that colour (the Impressionists would sometimes paint their landscapes on a red ground) – then the colours on top will create interesting colour effects.

The colour of the ground can have a significant impact on the painting so experiment with the following: grey, yellow ochre, raw umber, blue, green and black grounds. Try to make two paintings at the same time. Set up two supports with two radically different coloured grounds. When you make your mark on one painting, try to make the same mark on the other. Do not always put the first mark on the same support each time: alternate to keep the vision of each fresh. Think about how the same colour appears to be quite different according to its background.



***Imprimatura***: a thin application of oil, turps and linseed can be applied to the primed canvas and rubbed in with a cloth to achieve a thin ground colour.

*Imprimatura* is the application of a small amount of oil paint mixed with solvent and linseed oil, which is loosely brushed onto a support and then after a period of time rubbed off, leaving a thin stain of colour. Alternatively you might wish to mix some oil into oil-based undercoat to achieve an opaque ground colour.

## Chapter 9



# The subject within the figure



*Fold* is an *alla prima* oil painting, based on the compositional studies in Chapter 6. This is the third version of the image I have produced, as there is an exciting juxtaposition between the figure and the surrounding space. The first was executed on a surface that allowed me to create a beautiful monotype effect where I would wipe away the oil to an almost invisible film, but later found out that the paint was not adhering to it. The second was made very quickly with a decorators' brush in acrylic and this one painted using a medium sized filbert.

**D**o you have one taste in music? Do you possess just one set of albums by the same artist? Does your musical collection reflect the different facets of you: melancholic orchestral music when you feel the weight of life on your shoulders or breezy tunes when you want to sing along to the world? If music can hold onto your emotions then these can be channelled into the figure as well. Anger and frustration can be given focus through a particular medium or approach (something similar to Auerbach attacking the painting with slashing strokes of oil, carving up the canvas and excavating the crevices and form out of the figure).

Maybe in those introverted moments, when you feel like keeping to yourself, the slow attentive approach of egg tempera might suit your mood. Maybe the lyrical use of colour might seem a fitting metaphor for you to visually lose yourself in the meandering curves and planes of the figure and find some poetic response to it.

Every artist could take the same starting point and interpret it differently according to what they want to communicate with the figure.



The human figure may be approached from a formal or exploratory point of view.

## Formal language

You may be approaching the figure from a purely formal starting point. You may wish to explore its shape, form or its colour. You may be excited by the illusory aspect of painting and seek to achieve the sense of a limb coming forward or the space behind the head. Uglow was very much concerned with

these formal considerations with some quirky interests in the geometry of a rectangle and the potential of the figure conforming to a mathematical logic: the diagonal of a root rectangle creating the structure of a pose, or the notion that a figure might be able to become a pyramid or a bridge.

## ALEX KANEVSKY

Alex Kanevsky is a contemporary American painter who lives and works in Pennsylvania. Trained at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he teaches in the same studios that Thomas Eakins taught in. Kanevsky's work is steeped in tradition: a sound knowledge of anatomy and a masterful understanding of the craft of painting. His work is a visual delight, mixing both highly observed fragments of reality and abstract mark-making.

If you visit his website ([www.dolbychadwickgallery.com](http://www.dolbychadwickgallery.com)) you get a chance to peep into his head and he allows you to see the evolution of some of his paintings. Figures appear and disappear, rooms become landscapes, figures become submerged into pools of water. As the physicality of paint builds up a patina of history, these layers are scraped back with a squeegee to keep the surface clean. The travail of this tool leaves veils of paint that allude to other forms. These suggest journeys of discovery and new solutions to the problem of making a painting that can stand its ground as an entity in its own right.

Kanevsky makes no secret that he uses the camera and the live model as his source material. These are tools to help him see new possibilities: what happens if that colour is changed, if that figure moves to the left or is completely removed? There is something in his process akin to that of the late Richard Diebenkorn's Bay Area figurative work from the 1960s, in that his paintings would undergo a similar process of revision and radical change. With Diebenkorn you were left with a clogged surface – he wanted his paintings to be ugly up close – whereas Kanevsky presents you with a visual delight, sumptuous landscapes of paint. Before and after Impressionism most artists used painting as a place to build reality, taking information from the observed world and orchestrating it to make a

construction of fragments and making them whole.



**Alex Kanevsky. The head is a tangled lattice of marks suggesting an animated movement. Kanevsky's figure might be standing in a bar or resting in a pool but the top half of the painting suggests a long corridor of a hotel. Whilst there is a drama in the visual contrast between the swathes of black there is a delicate transition of half tones across the figure picking out the light bouncing off the main forms.**

**PIERS OTTEY**

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If Kanevsky shows you glimmers of his paintings' history through the Swiss-cheese holes of scraped paint, Piers Ottey provides you with a map. At the edges of every Ottey painting are a series of coloured tabs that reveal the list of colour decisions that he has made during the formation of the work ([www.piersottey.co.uk](http://www.piersottey.co.uk)).

Ottey came out of art school at a time when the notion of integrity was all-important. He was taught by some of the Euston Road artists who sought a kind of visual truth in recording life as they saw it. Measurement was a device to pin down visual experience but also a mechanism to bring order to the chaos. Process was all-important: paint what you see and document the history of the making process. In *Coldstream*, history was recorded through tiny inflections and indecisions of transparent oil. Uglow would cover up revisions and contemplations to provide you with a skin of paint that might be incised with measuring marks, hinting at the history beneath. Myles Murphy (whose output is tiny but equally finely wrought) was Head of Painting at Chelsea when Ottey was there in the 1970s. With Murphy, abstract passages of colour interplay against fragments of reality seen and absorbed. Like Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series, colour is given the space to breathe and create visual tensions across the space. This balance between abstraction and figuration teeters in Ottey's oeuvre too.

The grid used to enlarge the drawing is another aspect of the paintings' internal logic. The intersection of diagonals, which create the centre of the square, might dictate the placement of a central motif in the work. The subsequent triangles suggest changes to the passages of colour. Each passage of paint is contemplated in terms of its hue, saturation, tonality and surface. Ottey will get you to run your hand over one of his paintings so that you can feel the fourth dimension of his work.



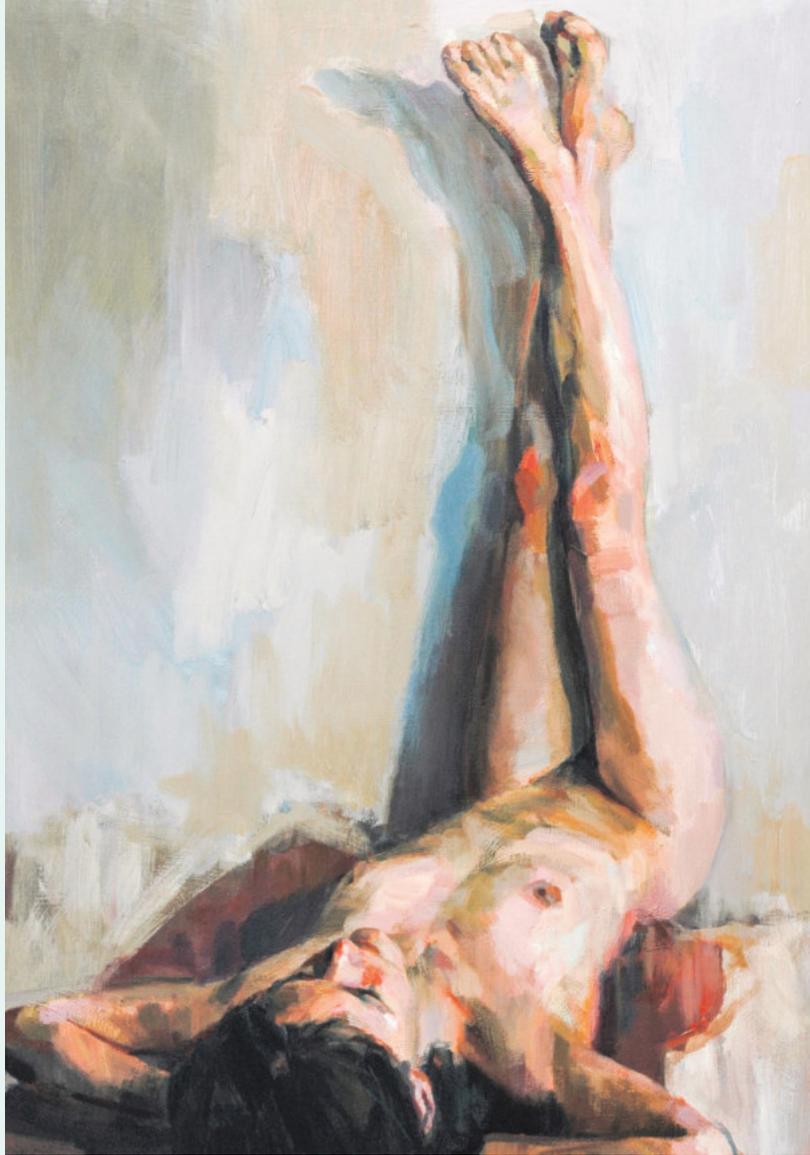
**Piers Ottey draws from life and then meticulously transcribes his drawing to the canvas in order that he can accurately scale up the figure. Once complete he continues to paint from life. He insists that he has no way of doing things – every painting sets its own problems to solve – but life painting is from life.**

## **SHAUN FERGUSON**

If oil paint is continuously mutable and allows the artist the opportunity to

revise and restructure the image, acrylic is not. It dries quickly and can often become plasticized and dead. Brush marks build on top of each other, forming encrustations that become difficult to navigate. Acrylic has a bad press and buyers sometimes value oil more highly. Yet in the hands of someone like Shaun Ferguson, acrylic can be a vehicle of complete expression and virtuoso performance. During his formative years, Ferguson was in awe of Auerbach and Bomberg's visceral troughs of paint. The desire for this physicality of paint is still evident in his treatment of the negative space. Brush marks allude to intimate space, evocative of place but not specific to it.

However, an earlier hero was Degas and this can be seen in his chiselling out of form. Small marks act as counterpoints to the dynamic tensions of a figure lying down with legs balanced precariously against the wall. Ferguson is drawn to these silent narratives, the moments when individuals engage in the everyday.



Shaun Ferguson ([www.shaunferguson.co.uk](http://www.shaunferguson.co.uk)). Behind these captured moments are months, if not years, of doubt and revision. The surface is never clogged because it is often sanded down within an inch of its life. To see a Ferguson up close is to view a constellation of colour. When we look to the skies and see the stars overhead, we look back through history. What Ferguson finally allows us to see (because he doesn't let his paintings out of the studio easily) is a glimpse into his paintings past and, at the same time, a moment of wonder.

## Emotion

So what about the emotional response to the figure? Love might be an underpinning idea and Bernard Dunstan's paintings of Diana Armfield are tender recollections of rooms and intimate moments. Gwen John's naked portrait has an intimacy but also a vulnerability, a figure stripped of protection and laid open to the world's gaze. But your model may not be an object of desire or some loved one, so you might feel that their personality might be reflected by the way they are painted. How did Bonnard communicate a moment of intimacy between himself and his wife? How can she become more beautiful by dissolving into the light of the bathroom?

## Narrative

When you have a figure alone in an image you can think about the painting acting as some kind of portrait or life study. Introduce another figure or an object and we begin to ask questions and enter into a narrative. What happens when the figure is clothed? Sickert's *Camden Town Murder* paintings suggest the punter and the prostitute. Manet's *Olympia* is surrounded by various symbols that tell you who she is and what her role is. She also greets you, the viewer, in the eye, making you part of the narrative too. Kanevsky nudes interact with a vast space – a figure huddled on some boarded floor, a figure swamped by a vast panoramic space.

## Style

Is style something to be sought after? When you discuss the 'style' of an artist with someone else you may find you are talking about different things. You may be referring to the motif ('This artist paints the nude; this one paints reflection in shop windows'); or perhaps their colour palette ('This one always paints with those colours') or technique ('Everything is painted in palette knife like this'). If you go back and look again at those web searches and explore the work of some of those artists in a bit more depth, you may find yourself looking at identikit paintings, each image looking the same as the last, using the same technique, the same gimmicks. Searching for the identikit look is not to be sought after. Julian

Vilarrubi says, ‘When I draw or paint the figure my main preoccupation is to convey something of what the figure feels within the setting they find themselves in.’

Style should not override content. Allow the figure to convey itself to you and be open as to how you explore that. Your work will be much better if it is an honest response to the figure rather than a stylistic imposition.

## Ideas

There is a big difference between someone who can read and play music and someone who composes. Do you want to have big ideas? You might be driven to draw and paint the figure for no other motive than wanting the technical challenge of drawing the figure with more accuracy, to pin down your visual experience. You might be content to switch off to the world and not think about anything else, only concentrating on that moment, that space in time. And that might be a good enough reason to continue your exploration of techniques and process.

You have placed at the centre of your own investigation the individual quality and characteristics of the nude and this, as has already been suggested, can be described through a variety of means. As you move away from the mimetic function of painting, you will become increasingly concerned with the way that complex ideas can be explored and communicated through the figure. You have to look at yourself as well as use your sketchbook as a journal to reflect on your own interests. It is valuable to look much more closely at the work of artists that you really admire and ask yourself the question ‘Why?’ Do this enough times and you might find some common themes emerging.

Kanevsky has said:

Drawing originates in a completely abstract concept of a line. Lines don’t exist. We don’t see them. Yet, when drawing we attempt to express form, space, light, *etc.* through this phantom tool. Looking at a good drawing is like talking to a completely insane person, who nevertheless says some beautiful and profound things.

Shaun Ferguson said:

Drawing can take many forms, fulfilling different functions. I make numerous problem-solving drawings along the way, which litter the studio floor. These might be trying to figure out a compositional issue or where a line sits next to a block of tone or the directional force of a mark. These are usually dealing with formal design concerns and probably wouldn't make much sense to anyone else. I make drawings at the very outset which are often crude visualizations of scenarios or gestures which I then use to direct the model. Then there are large charcoal drawings which are stand-alone pieces in themselves.

In general, drawing seems to be a more intuitive process of 'finding out'. It's through drawing that I find the underlying rhythms and abstract relationships, which are the scaffold of the figurative outcome. The speed of drawing short fuses the intellect and allows for invention, speculation and surprise.

Usually drawings and paintings are made for a specific purpose and it is that purpose, that intention, that ultimately finds its appropriate form. However, as discussed in the opening chapter, the hard-won image may indeed be just that. Understanding what one is interested in, and discovering the most appropriate way of achieving this, is something only accomplished by doing a lot of work along the way.

Kenneth Clark's seminal book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956) put forward a series of ideas and approaches to the figure: Apollo, Venus, Idealized Classic Beauty, Pathos, Ecstasy, Energetic Nude, Heroism, Dionysus, Divinity. Some of these ideas now seem a little outdated but perhaps they are more relevant to the art leading up to the nineteenth century rather than work of the twenty-first century. A naked figure could be an erotic motif and the centuries are filled with artists who have produced a kind of painterly form of titillation (François Boucher, Lawrence Alma-Tadema). Once, artists painted the nude as an ideal form, a kind of pictorial hybrid. An alarming array of images of near-naked bodies surround us every day and the camera, with the use of Photoshop, has now taken over the role of the constructed nude, the idealization of beauty dictated by the fashion industry. These near-naked models are apparently blemish-free and create false notions of reality in the young. The female figure has become so objectified we need to be careful. Alberto Mielgo's private nudes

talk a lot about desire and pleasure as his models are porn stars. Many contemporary figure artists do not strive for a kind of painterly perfection and instead talk of a darker truth. Chantal Joffe and Marlene Dumas take pornography and turn it on its head. Here figures seem vulnerable and ill at ease with their predicament. Jenny Saville paints a body transformed by the surgeon's knife, a bloodied and bruised landscape of flesh. Sophie Jodoin uses the fragmented body to communicate some of the horrors and fears of contemporary society that are carried out behind closed doors.

Does gender play a role too? What if female artists paint the female nude, or the male nude for that matter? Sandra Fishers painted her husband Ron Kitaj naked in an incredibly tender way. Ellen Altfest paints a penis with meticulous attention to detail, recording every pubic hair and crease in flesh as if she were examining some curious piece of microscopic evidence. There is a tenderness too in Hockney's drawing of his boyfriend in bed or by the pool. There is undoubtedly homoeroticism in the male nudes in Michael Leonard's drawings and paintings of men. Does a heterosexual male artist paint the male nude in the same way as a gay man? Freud's nudes strip the body of this gloss and leave us with the naked portrait: a body stripped of its covering, revealing its corporeality and the varicose-veined certainty of a Dorian Gray demise. The body can hold onto emotion, whether jubilation or distress. Consider the difference between an Anders Zorn or Joaquin Sorolla and an Otto Dix or a Jean Rustin.

The manner in which an idea is resolved creates the outcome, so once you have understood how to make a painting, the next step forward is to understand what it is you are trying to say. Only when the search for style is abandoned and you are driven by the desire to resolve ideas does your work take its own form. Great drawing and painting therefore marries a specific intention with an eloquent language. Try to understand this activity, not as some kind of passive acquisition of technique but as a way of developing your language – a journey from your current point to your ultimate destination.



***Felix.*** This painting had been worked on for a year as a still life. I had almost abandoned the painting entirely before I sanded it down and started drawing out the figure using a fine brush. The painting progressed well initially before I realized that some of the drawing was not very good so the painting was scraped back and left to dry. The scrape marks can be seen through the torso. A day later I redrew the figure in paint and worked with a broad brush technique using a soft medium-sized flat. Felix's head was readjusted making it sit on the body and the general feel of the figure reminded me of my earlier male nude self-portraits.



**It has long been my ambition to paint in oil with the same directness as my acrylic paintings. This *alla prima* study in oil on a yellow ochre acrylic ground (which can be seen to come through the paint layers) was made with no preliminary drawing. A soft synthetic flat was used to block in the main directions of the figure. I was striving to achieve an all-in-one wet approach and I did not want to overwork the figure, so strived for something more generic using a limited palette of titanium, buff titanium, yellow ochre, raw sienna, raw umber and phthalo blue.**

**Chapter 10**



# Afterword

When I set out to write this book I had a set of parameters and aspirations for the text. I wanted to create a book that could give the reader some pointers toward achieving the goal of painting the figure well.

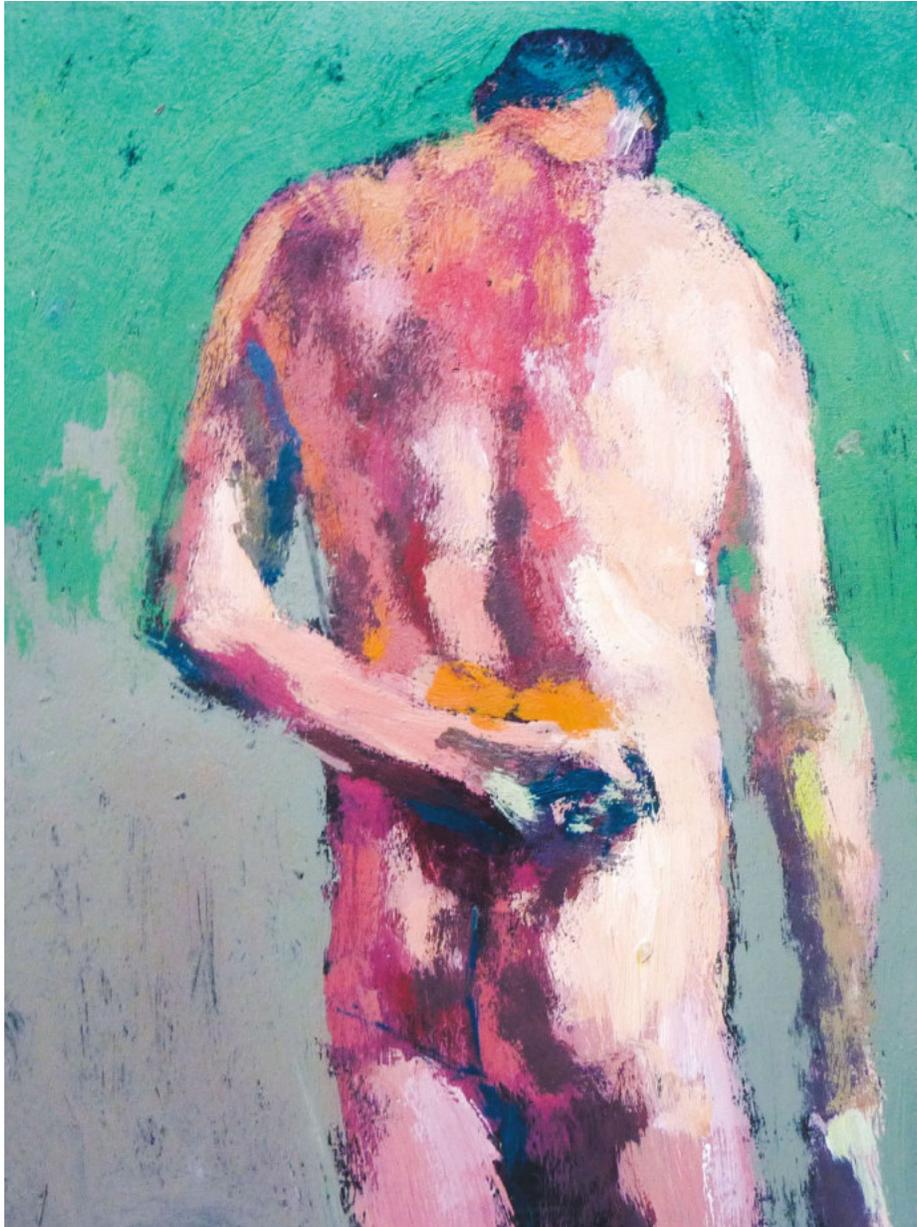
One of the problems of figure painting is that there is nowhere to hide. If your measurement, proportions or form rendering are off, then it shows. We are uniquely hot-wired to spot deviation from the norm, so unless you decide treat the figure in a more abstract vein, the groundwork set out in the early part of the book is vitally important.

Writing this has also involved talking to other artists, and an overriding theme that has come from them is the sheer time they have spent investing in the activity. I discussed the idea of the hard-won image and all of the artists agreed that painting the figure well has been achieved through dogged determination and a lot of hard work.

Whenever I set to my easel I keep seeing the problems I face and keep working towards my goal: to achieve a beautiful figure painting. These challenges never seem to get any easier but make the challenge all the more exciting. Most artists have learned their craft by themselves in the studio but the Internet has opened up this world and made me realize that the problems I set myself are the same problems that other artists face. It has also allowed me to network internationally in a way I would have never thought possible when I was a student.

There is not one method, technique or approach that is right. There are many and if this book has been successful it has encouraged you to explore and find out for yourself. Piers Ottey described a conversation about colour that took place over forty years ago with Norman Blamey. In the end Blamey stated that painting was

a mystery; it is certainly an alchemical beast because it can turn base metal into gold and mud into flesh. Painting and drawing the figure is one such mystery that slowly reveals its clues to you.



**This was one of the first in a series of male nudes painted in acrylic using a black ground. You can see the ground coming through the outer edge of the figure. I used two mirrors in a small bathroom studio so that I could see myself from behind and employed a drybrush and scumbling technique.**

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## Index



(Images are in *italics and bold*)

absorbency 29

acrylic 23

acrylic primer 33

Adamson, Crawford 20

additive primaries 162

after image 167

*alla prima* 25

alla prima in oils 138–142

Alma-Tadema, Lawrence 182

alustretch 31

analogous colors 172

anatomy

anatomical planes

anterior 67

coronal 68, 69

lateral 67

medial 67

posterior 67

sagittal 68, 69

superior 67

supination 66, 76

pronation 76

muscles bicep 70

deltoid 70

erector spinae 67

extensor digitorum longus 70

external oblique 70

fibularis longus 70

flexor digitorum longus 70

frontalis 69

gastrocnemius 71

gluteus medius 71

gluteus maximus 71

iliacus 71

infraspinatus 71

latissimus dorsi 71

latissimus dorsi 67

orbicularis oculi 69

orbicularis oris 69

pectorals 70

platysma 69

rectus abdominis 70

rectus abdominis 67

sartorius 71

serratus anterior 70

soleus 71

sternocleidomastoid 69, 75

teres major 71

tibialis anterior 70

trapezium 75, 76

triceps 69

vastus intermedius 71

vastus lateralis 71

vastus medialis 71

## skeleton

- anterior superior iliac [67](#)
- atlas [63](#)
- carpal [66](#)
- clavicle [75](#)
- coccyx [65](#)
- dorsal vertebrae [64](#)
- femur [67](#), [70](#)
- frontal bone [63](#)
- great trochanter [69](#)
- humerus [66](#)
- iliac crest [67](#)
- ilium [67](#)
- infrasternal angle [67](#)
- ischium [67](#)
- lumbar vertebrae [64](#)
- mandible [63](#)
- manubrium [64](#)
- maxillae [63](#)
- metacarpals [66](#)
- nasal bone [63](#)
- occipital bone [63](#)
- parietal bones [63](#)
- phalanges [66](#), [69](#)
- posterior iliac crest [67](#)
- pubis [67](#)
- radius [66](#), [70](#)
- sacrum [65](#), [68](#)
- scapula [68](#)
- sternum [64](#), [65](#)
- temporal bones [63](#)
- the spine [64](#)
- thoracic [64](#)
- ulna [66](#)

vertebrae 65  
xiphoid process 65  
zygomatic arch 63

Alexander, Jason Shawn 18, 82  
atelier 63, 98, 123

Bailey, David 100  
basic anatomy 63  
Beer, Nicholas 59  
Benson, Tim 154, 157, 158–159  
Bischoff, Elmer 173  
*bistre* 128, 131  
Blamey, Norman 77, 185  
blind drawing 44  
board 29  
Bonnard 181  
Boucher 182  
Brandt, Bill 100  
bread 18  
Bridgman, George 63  
brushes 23

calipers 53  
canvas 30  
Caravaggio 73, 99, 111  
Casa, Juan Francisco 21  
changing hands 47  
changing speed 45  
charcoal 14, 84  
Cheetham, Sean 99, 138  
chipboard 30  
Clark, Kenneth 182  
Claude 82  
Claude glass 82

Close, Chuck 162  
clutch pencil 15  
collage 101  
colour 157  
colour discord 173  
colour palettes 158  
colour theory 162  
colour wheel 164  
complementary colour 167  
composition 107  
compressed charcoal 15, 87  
cone of vision 60, 61  
conte 15  
contour 37  
contour drawing 79  
counterchange 82  
Courbet 142  
crayon 16  
Croquis Café, the 46  
crossing the terrain 43  
cryla 23, 123

dabs and dashes 146  
Daler Rowney 23  
de Stael Nicholas 150  
defining colour 162  
deft touch 126  
Degas 20, 100, 107  
della Francesca, Piero 109, 131  
Diebenkorn, Richard 173  
divine proportion, the 109, 111  
Dix, Otto 95, 182  
dominant eye 53  
Downton, David 84

drawing tool kit 13  
Dumas, Marlene 182  
Dunstan, Bernard 147  
duotone 84  
Dzimirsky, Dirk 18

Eakins 100  
earth palette studies 132  
easel 52  
Edwards, Betty 10  
erased drawing 86  
eraser 18, 85  
essence of the pose 96  
extremities 73

fallibility of memory 37  
features 74  
Fechin, Nicolai 15  
Ferguson, Shaun 120, 121, 163, 180–181

Fibonacci 109  
figure abstracted 174  
figure and space 173  
Fisher, Sandra 182  
fixing a charcoal drawing 85  
Foldvari, David 18  
foot 73  
form and structure 76  
formal language 177  
Freud, Lucian 124, 132, 182  
Frohsin, Kim 173  
function of a study 117

Gale, Ann 147

general points 155  
gesture drawing 96, 97  
Giacometti 78, 95, 96  
Gilman, Harold 173  
Giotto 98  
glazed layering 132  
glazing 131  
Gombrich 9  
Goodwin, Dryden 21, 78  
gouache 24  
graphite 18  
Gray's Anatomy 63  
grisaille 98, 125–127  
Grosz, George 95  
ground colour 34  
Guthrie, James 146

Hammershoi 99  
hand 73  
hard won image 182  
hardboard 30  
hatching and cross hatching 92  
Hockney 182  
Hogarth 113  
Hopper 92  
Howard, Ken 158

ideas 181  
impasto 153–155  
imprimatura 34, 35, 138  
indian ink 18  
Itten, Johannes 115

Jarman, Derek 162

Jodoin, Sophie 15  
Joffe, Chantal 182

Kanevsky, Alex **61**, 100, **122**, **178**, 181  
Keene, Charles 95  
Kelley, Diarmuid 99  
Kitaj, Ron 20, 182  
Klee, Paul 109  
knife painting 150–152  
Kollwitz, Kathe 92

Lautrec 29  
learning from others 120  
Leonard, Michael 182  
light 163  
lighting 99  
limited palette 88  
linear drawing exercises 37  
Longo, David **133**  
looking at others 118  
lost and found edges 81

mahl stick 88  
making a strainer 31  
Manet 181  
mark-making 95  
marouflage 34  
masonite 30  
materials 13  
Matisse 174  
May, Phil 18, 95  
MDF 30  
measurement 49

measurement and  
proportion [49](#)  
Michelangelo [78](#)  
Mielgo, Alberto [84](#), [182](#)  
Millar, Frank [82](#)  
millimetre by millimetre [53](#)  
mixed media [104](#)  
Moore, Henry [16](#), [95](#)  
Murphy, Myles [179](#)

negative painting [40](#)  
negative space [57](#)  
Newton, Isaac [162](#)  
Nicolaidēs, Kimon [9](#)  
Norwich grey [161](#)

Ocean, Humphrey [24](#)  
oil bar [19](#)  
oil paint [24](#)  
oil pastel [20](#)  
on copying [39](#)  
on photography [100](#)  
opacity and translucency [95](#)  
opaque painting [132](#)  
optical colour mixing [162](#)  
Ottey, Piers [52](#), [179](#)

painting [123](#)  
painting tool kit [23](#)  
palette [25](#)  
palette knife [27](#)  
palettes for acrylic [26](#)  
Park, David [173](#)  
partial peek [45](#)

pastel [20](#)  
pen [21](#)  
pencil drawing [90](#)  
pencil sharpeners [22](#)  
Phillips, Tom [162](#)  
physical characteristics of paint [132](#)  
Picasso [39](#)  
playing with colour [161](#)  
Pointillism [149](#)  
Porter, Fairfield [173](#)  
Poussin [175](#)  
preparing canvas [32](#)  
priming [32](#)  
putty rubber [18](#)  
PVA [33](#)

Quink ink [22](#)

rabbit skin glue size [33](#)  
really looking by drawing blind [44](#)  
reclaiming a painting [136](#)  
rectangle [109](#)  
Rego, Paula [20](#)  
relational and proportional measurement [57](#)  
relational measurement [49](#)  
Rembrandt [78](#)  
retarder [24](#)  
Rubens [111](#)  
rule of thirds [111](#)  
Ruskin, John [145](#)  
Ruskin's rules for  
    composition [112](#)  
Rustin, Jean [182](#)

saturated colours 165  
Schiele, Egon 24  
scumbling and drybrush 142–145  
secondary colour 162, 165  
self portrait 41  
shape drawing 38  
Sickert 25, 56, 92, 100, 157  
sight-size measurement 53, 56  
simultaneous contrast 163  
Singer Sargent, John 59, 99  
Smith, Stan 16  
Sorolla, Joaquin 182  
Speed, Harold 126, 163  
Spicer, Jake 18, 66, 91  
split complimentaries 169  
stretcher bars 32  
stretching a canvas 32  
stretching the paper 28  
subject within the figure 177  
supports 28  
system 3 23

tape drawing 39  
tertiaries 166  
Thiebaud, Wayne 173  
tints, shades and tones 161  
Titian 131  
tonal painting on neutral grounds 130  
touch drawing 78  
transitions 43  
triads 171

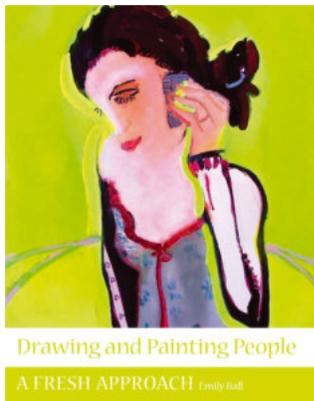
Uglow, Euan 58, 107  
underpainting 125

Van Eyck 73  
van Eyck, Jan 24  
Vaughan, Keith 95  
Velasquez 127, 130–131  
Verdaccio 131  
Vilarrubi, Julian 29, 77, 173  
Vuillard 100

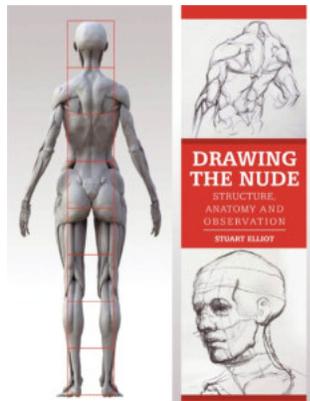
warm and cool primaries 170  
watercolour 27, 132–137  
watercolour palettes 26  
water-soluble oil paint 27  
wax resist 16, 17  
wet in wet 123  
what is the proportion of the rectangle 109  
Whistler 92  
whiting 33  
Williams, Antony 145, 163  
Williams, Kyffin 150  
working with a model 52  
Wright, Paul 150  
Wyeth, Andrew 145, 163

zing effect 169  
Zorn, Anders 78

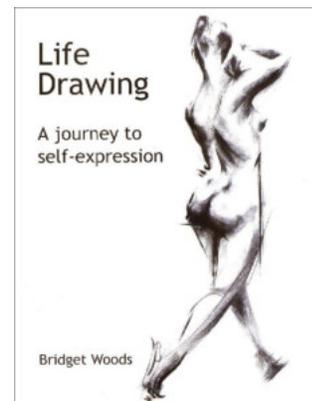
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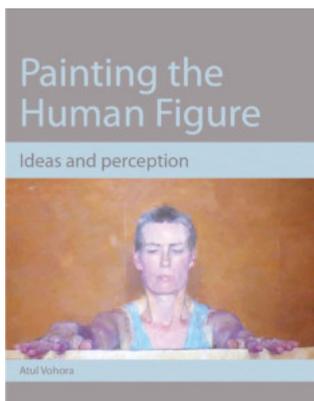
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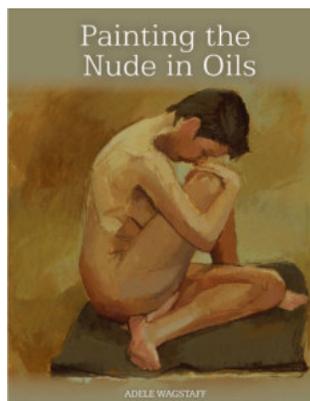
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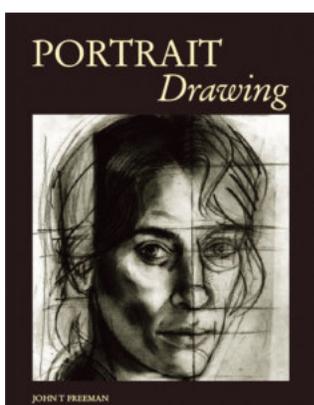
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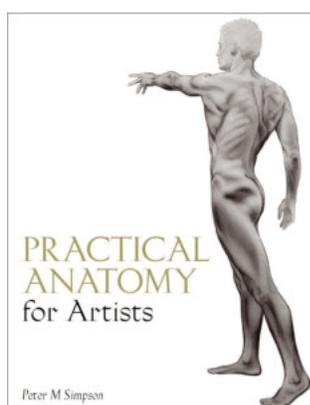
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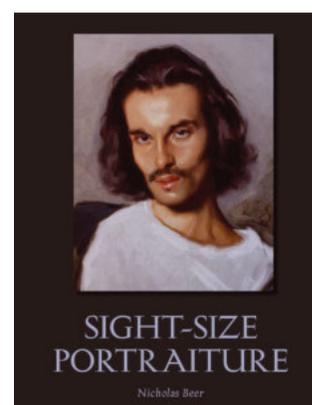
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