THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALS

It is easy to think that the idea is all that matters in a work of art, but the physical embodiment of the idea is important as well. When artists choose the best medium for their ideas, their art is stronger. The chapter-opening image, Nam June Paik’s Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii, is a large, forty-nine-channel, closed-circuit video installation, composed of neon, steel, and electronic components. All of those materials speak of advertising, signage, and televised imagery, which reinforce the idea that we know the United States in snippets, through bits of travelogues or passing scenes flashing through the car window. It would not be the same if Paik had made a painting of this idea.

Damien Hirst is an artist known for shocking or controversial works, an effect that is compounded by the materials he used in For the Love of God (Fig. 3.2), which is a platinum cast of an eighteenth-century human skull with original human teeth but covered with 8,601 diamonds (1,106.18 carats).

Skulls often symbolize mortality as well as vanity, or the ultimate emptiness and impermanence of earthly things. In this case, there is an extreme contrast between the death skull and a lavish, rich lifestyle suggested by the diamonds. The asking price for this artwork was $80 million, a sensational price that is within the means only of the very wealthy, who are mortal like anyone else.

CONNECTION An example of a painting with a vanitas theme is Jan Davidsz. de Heems’s A Table of Desserts (Fig. 5.14).

We tend to think of media solely as the materials that the artist manipulates, but equally important is the support, which underlies the artwork. Figure 3.3, Royal Profile, from Egypt in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries BCE, was drawn in paint on a fragment of limestone. Although the rock surface is rough and unforgiving, the artist rendered a clear and precise profile with pristine contour lines. Artists have made artwork on rocks, the earth, walls, paper, metal surfaces, and so on.

ART EXPERIENCE Make a drawing on some surface besides drawing paper. Try to make the content of the drawing fit with the surface on which it appears.

MEDIA IN TWO-DIMENSIONAL ART

Drawing

Drawing is one of the oldest forms of art making, and it also seems to be innate. The first marks a toddler makes are scribbles, which are primary to the act of drawing. A wide range of materials are used in drawing.

Dry Media

Dry media for drawing often come in some kind of stick form. Pencil, sanguine chalk, pastel, and silverpoint are examples of dry media used in drawing.

One of the most common drawing tools is the pencil, a graphite rod in a wood or metal holder. The graphite comes in varying degrees of hardness, with the hardest creating thin, controlled lines. Robert Gober’s Untitled (Fig. 3.4), from 1996, resembles a common, quick pencil sketch. His work deals with memory, childhood, religion, and sexuality. Pencils can also be used for large, incredibly detailed studies. Judith Baca’s colored-pencil drawing Las Tres Marias (Fig. 3.5), from 1976, contains two tightly rendered, life-size drawings of women that look very much

Ancient Egyptian artists did practice sketches on small pieces of reeds. Today the support for drawing and painting is more often canvas or paper.

3.4, left  **Robert Gober, Drapery, 1996. Pencil on paper, 8” × 4½”**.

The pencil is probably the most familiar art medium—and also one of the most versatile.


Pen and colored pencil are capable of producing near photographic detail, shown here in two life-sized drawings.
3.6 DOUGLAS SCHLESIER. Shroud and Forbidden City, 2002. Charcoal on paper with gold leaf and color, 23'' x 36''.

The rich blacks of charcoal create visual drama in this drawing.


Pastels are sticks of almost pure pigment, and because of that, pastel drawings have an intensity that surpasses most other media.

Like photographs, the drawings and the mirror in the middle invite viewers to “try on” different identities.

Douglas Schlesier’s Stone God Forbidden City (Fig. 3.6) was rendered in charcoal, a carbon stick created from burnt wood, with added touches of color and gold leaf. Charcoal is capable of producing rich, deep, dark areas and a range of lighter tones as well.

Chalk and pastels are colored materials held together by wax or glue and shaped into sticks. Sticks with more colored material and less wax produce soft, smudgy lines, whereas those with more wax or glue render precise, controlled lines. Pastels and chalks can be used both precisely and expressively. Edgar Degas was a master of pastel drawing, as seen in At the Milliner’s (Fig. 3.7), which contains expressive lines, colors, patterns, and textures.

A silverpoint drawing is produced by a thin stylus made of silver that leaves marks on paper or wood coated with layers of gesso as a ground. A ground is a fluid brushed onto a support to change its surface quality. Gesso is a common ground made of very fine powdered white chalk suspended in glue (the traditional method) or an acrylic medium (modern gesso). In this case, the gesso makes the paper more absorbent to accept the silverpoint line. The metallic lines in silverpoint drawing will eventually tarnish and darken with age. This technique is seen in Hans Holbein the Elder’s 1508 Portrait of a Woman (Fig. 3.8). Because silverpoint holds a point longer than other media, silverpoint drawings are distinguished by very delicate lines made with precision and control.
Wet Media

In drawing, wet media are in liquid form. Ink is the most common wet medium, and it can be used with either brush or pen. The combination of lines made by pen marks and washes applied by brush makes visually fluid imagery. This is seen in Mi Wanzhong’s Tree, Bamboo and Rock (Fig. 3.9), with calligraphy by Chen Meng. Pen and brush each leave distinctive marks, with a wide range of effects resulting from diluting the ink. Drawing and painting overlap in artworks done in ink; Tree, Bamboo and Rock could be classified as a drawing or as a monochromatic painting.

Today ink is most commonly found in felt-tipped pens and markers. Artists frequently grab any convenient writing tool for sketches. Yoshimoto Nara is a Japanese artist whose Puffy Girl/Screen Memory (Fig. 3.10), from


Ink is a versatile medium. It can be applied to paper with a pen for controlled lines or with a brush for gray washes or bold, dramatic lines.


When making sketches or drawings, artists frequently use whatever is available among their ordinary pens and pencils.
1992–2000, is made with felt-tipped pens on a postcard. Nara is known for his drawings and seemingly quick, casual sketches of aggressive, angry children. Nara remarks that these are but small, irate beings surrounded by much larger, much more threatening adults.

Experimental Drawing Media and New Technologies

As mentioned in the Preview of this chapter, artists can choose just about any material as a medium in their artwork. Cai Guo-Qiang’s Drawing for Transient Rainbow (Fig. 3.11), from August 2003, is made with gunpowder on two pieces of paper. The sketch is related to the events he stages around the world, such as Black Rainbow (see Fig. 2.27).

Digital technologies have provided new ways for artists and architects to produce drawings. The architect Arata Isozaki’s Nara Convention Hall (Fig. 3.12), from 1992, is a computer-generated print, created with the assistance of a computer-aided design program, which uses plots and mathematical formulas to produce vector drawings, three-dimensional solids, and surface modelers. Artists use computers with drawing and painting software to produce raster-based drawings, which are composed of many (millions of) dots of color rather than being based on mathematical formulas.

Printmaking

Printmaking is the process of making multiple artworks or impressions, usually on paper, using a printing plate, woodblock, stone, or stencil. We will look at examples of relief, intaglio, lithography, and serigraphy printmaking. Monotype is a final category of printmaking that is closer to painting and produces a single impression.

Relief

In relief printing, non-printing areas are cut away from a smooth surface, so that the areas to be printed are left higher. Ink is applied to the higher areas, and the print surface is sent through a press or is hand rubbed to transfer the image to paper, as shown in Figure 3.13A.

Woodblock prints are examples of relief printmaking. The nineteenth-century print The Printmaker’s Workshop (Fig. 3.14), from the School of Yokohama, began with an
artist's drawing that served as a guide for the cutter. The cutter carved pieces of that image onto several wood blocks, one for each color. In our example, you can see the entire process of woodblock printing, including drawing the original design, cutting the blocks, mixing the colors, printing the images, and drying the finished prints on overhead lines.

**Intaglio**

Intaglio prints can have fine lines, a high level of detail, and rich, dark tones. The word *intaglio* comes from the Italian verb meaning "to cut into." Artists cut into a flat surface, usually a metal plate, to make the image or design. Ink is rubbed into the cutaway areas, and then paper and plate are put through a press to transfer the image to the paper (Fig. 3.13). Several processes are used in making an intaglio print, including drypoint, etching, and aquatint.

To make a drypoint print, the artist scratches a metal plate with a thin, pointed tool called a burin, or a graver.

3.13, left Printmaking diagram, showing the processes used for (A) relief, (B) intaglio, (C) lithography, and (D) serigraphy.


The woman in the upper right corner is making the preliminary drawing for the print. Just left of her is the cutter, who is carving the woodblock. At the lower right, a woman is grinding ink, and left of her the actual printing is taking place. At the top in the middle, a standing woman is hanging finished prints to dry.
The ink is then rubbed into the scratches, and the plate and paper are put through the press. The results can resemble a pencil drawing.

Engraving entails cutting or incising lines into a laminated woodblock or a polished metal plate. The ink is rubbed into the recessed lines, and the block or plate is put through the press. An example of a metal engraving is Albrecht Dürer’s Knight, Death, and the Devil (Fig. 3.15), from 1513. Engraving produces thin, precise lines that create both detail and rich values, as seen in this print. It is worth looking through a magnifying glass at an original Dürer engraving to see the wealth of details unfold.

In an etching, a metal plate is coated with a sticky protective ground, into which the artist scratches a design. The plate is then placed in an acid bath, which eats away or etches the exposed metal surface. The etched areas hold the ink during the printing. An example of an etching combined with aquatint is seen in James McNeill Whistler’s The Doorway (Fig. 3.16). In this work, Whistler was able to achieve a rich variety of lines and values that evoked the murky water tones in the canals of Venice, Italy.

Aquatint is a process related to etching used to create flat tones or softly shifting values. With aquatint, areas of the metal plate are partly covered with a powder of acid-resistant resin. Heat is applied to the plate, which melts the resin and makes it adhere to the plate surface. The non-resin areas are totally covered with a protective substance. Then the plate is placed in an acid bath, where the exposed areas between flecks of resin powder are eaten away. After the plate is cleaned, it is inked and printed in the same way as other intaglio processes.

Lithography

Lithography starts with a drawing created with an oily crayon, pencil, or liquid on either a limestone slab or a metal surface. Gum arabic, which is a water-based liquid,
Serigraphy

Serigraphy, also called screen printing, is a process in which a stencil is attached over a piece of finely woven fabric stretched over a frame, which supports and gives strength to the stencil (Fig. 3.13D). Ink is then squeezed through the open areas of the stencil and deposited on the surface below, which could include sheets of paper, T-shirts, or cardboard boxes. Photo silk screens are variations on the regular screen printing process. Instead of using stencils, photographs are used with special chemicals to block the ink in certain areas from being squeezed through to the paper.

Andy Warhol popularized screen printing with his multiple images of celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy. Marilyn Monroe (Fig. 3.18), from 1967, is one of a portfolio of ten screen prints on paper. Repeating images in serigraphy is easy, and Warhol uses repetition to allude to mass production and commercialism.

Monotype

Unlike the previous printmaking processes we have looked at, this process makes only one impression of an image, hence the name monotype. A drawing or painting is done with printing ink on a sheet of Plexiglas or metal. Paper is placed on top of the rendering and hand rubbed or put through a press to make the transfer. In Paul Gauguin’s Two

3.19  Plate Carquevoul Two Musquereau, 1902. Monotype. 12 1/2" x 20" British Museum, London.

With monotypes, only one image can be produced from a single working of the plate. Some artists produce a second ghost image from an ideal monotype plate, but usually the ghost image needs to be finished in some other medium.

Musquereau (Fig. 3.19), we see the original and only print, which looks like a combination of both drawing and painting.

Painting

Painting media generally consist of two basic components: pigment and binder. Pigments are intense colors in powder form, derived from animals, plants, minerals, and synthetic chemicals. They are blended in the binder, the substance that holds the components together once it dries. Binders include egg yolk, wax, glue, drying oils, and acrylic liquid mediums, among others.

Although all paints contain colored material, some forms use no binders. Sand painting is a traditional art form in Navajo rituals, used especially for healing. Different natural elements, such as colored sand, crushed stone, charcoal, and pollen, are carefully sprinkled onto a clean, swept earthen floor. Artist priests chant and pray while they create their designs in sand. The sand paintings are then destroyed at the end of the ritual. Figure 3.20 shows

3.20  Natural pigments, similar to those used by the Navajo people to prepare ritual sand paintings. From left to right, the pigments are cornmeal, powdered charcoal, brown sand, red ocher, ground gypsum, yellow ocher, gray sand, pollen, and brown clay.

Pigments in undiluted form can have amazing color intensity.
a selection of dry natural pigments that can be carefully poured through the fingers onto the ground to create a sand painting.

Paintings are all made on some kind of support—usually stone, clay, plaster, wood panel, paper, or fabric but sometimes including even found objects. We just saw that sand paintings use the earth itself as the support. Some of the oldest surviving paintings were made on clay vessels, as in the Red Figure Kylix by the Greek painter Douris (Fig. 3.21), from the fifth century BCE. Slip, a liquid clay, has been applied to the clay vessel before firing to create both the black background and the delicate black details. The red clay of the vessel shows through where no slip has been applied. Also, the human body is and has been a surface for painting. The Chinese opera performer in Figure 3.22 is painting his face in preparation for his character. His painted face, the text, costumes, music, and singing are all components of the genre.