

## **ALL ABOUT CHARCOAL**

### **Part 1 The Qualities of Charcoal**

I love using charcoal and I think it has a lot to offer the artist given its versatility and the variety of forms now available for purchase.

Sometimes people tell me they find the medium too messy/smudgy and awkward to handle. I fully understand this viewpoint and it may not be the right choice for everybody. However I have tended to embrace its characteristics and see them more as a challenge and attraction rather than a deterrent. In these two articles I hope to encourage those of you with reservations to have a go at using it, and for those already engaged with the medium to deepen your understanding of the material and hopefully inspire you with a few ideas so you can further develop your work.

This article discusses the general characteristics of charcoal and the many different forms of the medium. In the second I will be talking about using it including, application techniques and the drawing processes involved in creating pictures.

Charcoal has been used as drawing material since prehistoric times. Historically it was often used when setting up a preparation drawing for a painting or a fresco. It is frequently used for life drawing and portraiture due to the way its qualities enable the artist to capture subtle changes in tone to model form.



Life Model depicted in charcoal on toned paper, notice the tonal range used to describe the form of the model.

Charcoal is produced in a process known as pyrolysis which can be likened to cooking wood slowly. This cooking process removes water and other impurities from the wood just leaving carbon. The types of wood used include; willow, vine, hazel and maple. Willow tends to be the one that is most commonly sold in art shops in the UK.

The medium is now produced in variety of forms and its really worth experimenting with different ones to see which best suits your drawing and mark making style.

- Charcoal sticks are made in a variety thickness ranging from large chunky rounds to fine diameter thin sticks, it is also available in rectangular/irregular chunks
- Charcoal powder can be purchased in jars



- Compressed charcoal is mixed with a binder and usually a clay filler and is available in sticks and pencil form
- Charcoal pencils are available and are often graded dark, medium and light



- Coloured/tinted charcoal is now available in pencils and chunk forms



- A relatively recent development is water soluble charcoal which can be purchased in tubes or in pans similar to watercolour paint. It can be used like watercolour and amazingly the charcoal can still be erased when the paint is dry.



The paper/ground that is selected for drawing also plays a significant role in determining the effects that can be created. Toned papers can provide a midtone baseline that can help extend the tonal range of your work and accentuate highlights. I recommend trying out lots of different papers to find the ones that suit you. I list below a few of my favourites.

- Layout paper, a smooth white lightweight paper used by designers
- Strathmore Charcoal 300 series
- Strathmore Grey tone 400 series



Farm in a Cornish Landscape executed using charcoal sticks, pencils and tinted charcoal for the sky.



Detail; The juxtaposition of these very old farm buildings captured my attention and I think the soft texture of charcoal helps put across the age and character of these buildings.

This medium is tremendously versatile and can be used to create soft flowing lines and subtle areas of tone. The possibilities for creating different kinds of mark are endless. It has the potential to create wonderfully light tones as well as deep velvety ones. The darkness of the lines and tones you create are determined by the pressure you apply and the type of charcoal you choose to use. Compressed charcoal delivers the darkest tones.



This street scene of Liverpool was drawn on toned paper and used charcoal pencils and white charcoal for the highlights.



I often use charcoal for my dance subjects, this low key picture was done on toned paper and used pencils and charcoal powder for the background. My aim was to depict a moody passionate moment of the dance.

As the processing and production of the material has developed in recent decades it is now selected by many artists to create a vast array of different kinds of work. I have included a number of examples of my own work in this article. If you would like to explore the work of some other contemporary artists and masters of the medium on the internet I have listed a few names below you can use in your search engines. I hope the work of these artists will inspire you on your journey.

- Casey Baugh
- Zimou Tan
- Shaun Othen
- Mildred Hankinson

I trust this article will tempt you to delve into the world of charcoal, or for those already hooked, it will extend your interest a little further.

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