

Life Drawing at Home:

Gustave Dore and the Paradox of Tonal Contrast in Line

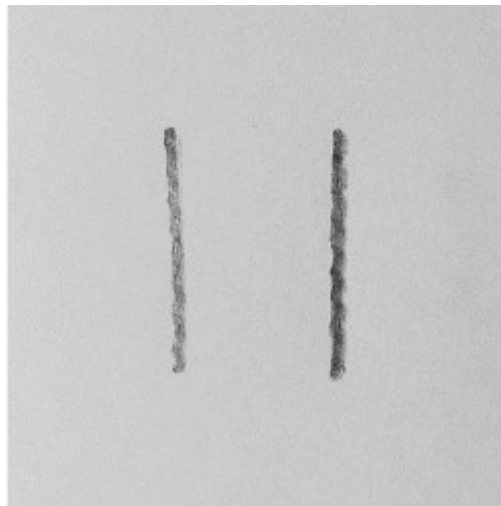


Gustave Dore: Madam Adelina Patti. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 52.5 x 37cm. Glynn Vivian Art Gallery.

This portrait by Gustave Dore demonstrates an interesting paradox concerning the use of tone in art. Can you see how the black background really makes the head jump forward in the picture?

The drawing process encourages the acknowledgement of the drawn mark as an abstract form as well as an interpretation of reality. Attached to this knowledge are numerous visual caveats that an artist must consider and use/overcome/discard. One such relates to the concept of tonal contrast promoting the abstract mark.

Which of the two lines below appear nearest to you?



To our eyes the darker line appears nearer to us because it is tonally less like the paper and is therefore more conspicuous.

This presents a problem. In drawing the tendency is to outline the extremities of the subject, to enclose it in a line. If drawing a person, the dark outline will push forward in our eyes the part of the body furthest from us, resulting in a reversal of depth perception that can flatten an image.

Drawers use numerous strategies to overcome this tonal paradox however we are going to focus on how we can use tonal contrast to help.

Returning to the portrait by Dore, the artist has used black paint to create a partial background so that, contrasted to it, it is the light marks and the lighter profile of the face that appear closer to us. A similar effect has been achieved by a participant in the drawing below, where the line of the left shoulder has been converted into a dark background and the shoulder is therefore promoted forward in our eyes:



Life Drawing at Home Challenge 1: Try adding small bits of background tone in place of some lines to a linear drawing. How does it alter the drawing.

Life Drawing at Home Challenge 2: Make a drawing of your room or your garden without using lines and focusing on the tonal change between each object.

Life Drawing at Home Challenge 3: Try reversing the normal process of drawing by covering your paper with charcoal/graphite and using your rubber as the mark-making tool.