

quick sketching techniques -1

LESSON ONE—what, why, and basics

There is a great interest in fast sketching these days!

That's not too surprising given the fact that we are all busy and may need to squeeze creativity into odd moments. Perhaps our crowded schedule just allows for 15 minutes or a half hour of creative time, or we're traveling with non-sketchers who may become impatient, or what has caught our eye tends to move frequently, like the crows at right—in all those cases, fast sketching is a very useful tool. It just takes practice...and practice will build speed, confidence, and ability. That IS win-win.



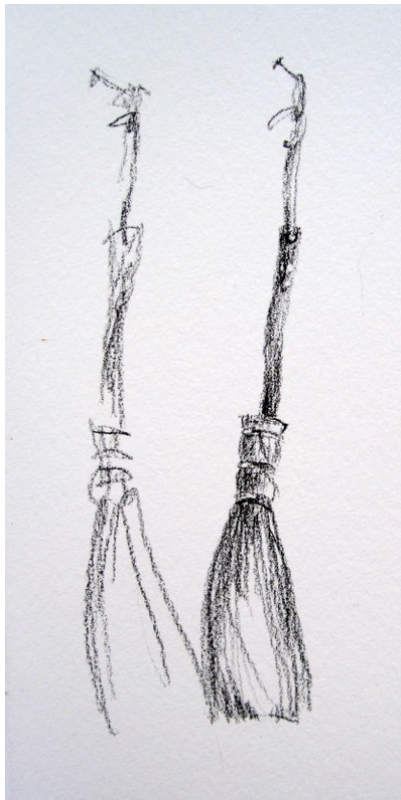
Here you see a variety of quick sketching techniques...colored pencil, pen, pencil, watercolor...

One benefit of this type of sketching is that it keeps your hand/eye coordination in fighting trim. It's simply great practice. As Michelangelo said to his apprentice, "Draw, Antonio; draw, Antonio; draw and don't waste time."

Of course definitions of "quick sketching" vary from artist to artist. I may think of a 15-second gesture sketch as *truly* fast; 5-10 minutes defines it to some, and Alwyn Crawshaw's wonderful little book, *Sketching (30 minute art)* from the Smithsonian, is another approach.



Of course, what comprises *this kind of sketching* (as well as exactly what that means under a specific circumstance) depends somewhat on your subject and its complexity, the medium you're using, and how much time you have at your disposal. 30 minutes can be quite fast, if you're doing a complex scene in watercolor—it still qualifies as a sketch! I did the small one at left on the spot in less than 30 minutes.



Here, the broom on the left is a very quick sketch, and took only seconds—the one on the right is more properly a drawing. I took my time...

I'm often asked what the difference is between sketching and drawing. A drawing can be quite detailed, careful, and may be most realistic. Sketching, as David Rankin, author of *Fast Sketching Techniques* says, is "intense, loose, rapid, and spontaneous."

A drawing may capture an almost photographic likeness—a sketch may catch some spark of life—I often prefer artists' sketches to their more formal works; see *Work Small, Learn Big* if you want to see some inspiring sketches!



This graphite portrait of my husband in his Revolutionary War reenacting clothes is very definitely a drawing...it took hours, with shading, blending, adjusting.

These shoppers in the Half Price Books store, on the other hand, are quick sketches. I used an old fountain pen with a flexible nib for them and worked as fast as I could...the gesture sketches in Lesson Two are even faster.



This colored pencil blue jay on black paper was even faster!



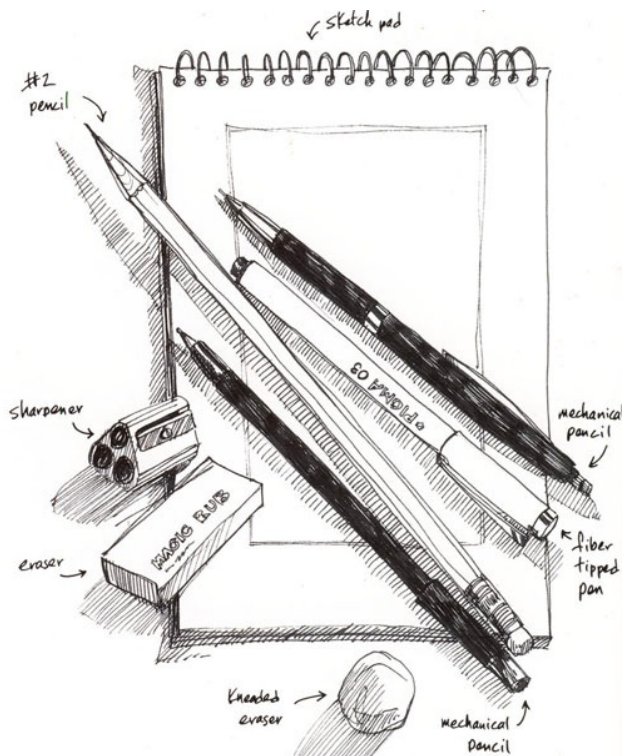
Quick sketching catches something of the essence of a subject in ways that slower, more deliberate drawings may miss. You simply don't have time to muddy the waters or confuse your image with too much detail.

And it's exciting when you DO nail it!

Quick sketching also helps defeat that *Inner Critic* we all carry with us. No time to agonize or worry if we've got it "right," we just get ON with it.

So...let's get at it. **FAST!**

We'll start out with simple supplies for this first lesson—that will give you time to gather what you want and play a bit. (More supplies later!)



BASIC SUPPLY LIST

To begin with, just get a pencil, a pen, and something to draw on. *Fast* can often equate with *simple*...

I branched out a bit for this drawing; you may have seen it in my book, *The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature*. A pencil or two, a pen if you like, a sharpener if your pencil calls for one, and an eraser are fairly basic!

A #2 pencil has a fair range of values, doesn't smear too much, and holds a point; many artists prefer a much softer one, 6B to 9B

BE PREPARED

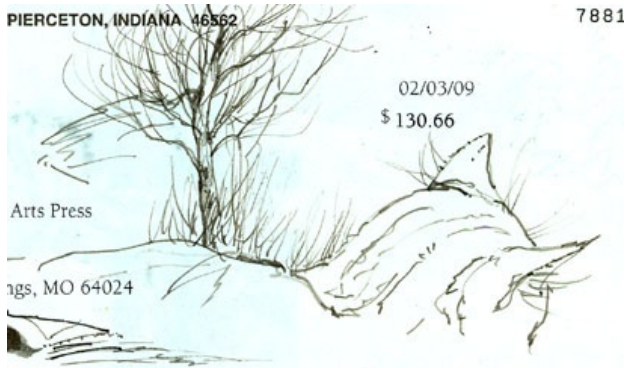
At the risk of sounding like a Boy Scout, *being prepared* to make art, any time, any place, is one of our best tools for quick sketching. It's more than having all the supplies you might think of—it's more a state of readiness.

Keep it simple, especially to begin with. Choose a drawing tool you like, or one you are familiar with. One that feels right in your hand. Never mind archival properties just now, or the latest “must-have” drawing tool. If a good old #2 school pencil is comfortable for you, fine. If you like a ballpoint—or if that’s all that’s handy—use it! If a mechanical pencil feels good in your hand and you love the convenience, carry that. (An added advantage is that you don’t have to stop to sharpen it, or carry a sharpener with you! Advance the lead a bit, and GO.)

My usual quick-sketching tool is an 0.7mm mechanical pencil with a nice, big, soft vinyl eraser (for those times when I just HAVE to do it!) I’ll admit I do try to replace the HB leads with 2B if I can find them—it’s a bit softer and more blendable. It’s also capable of a broader range of values.



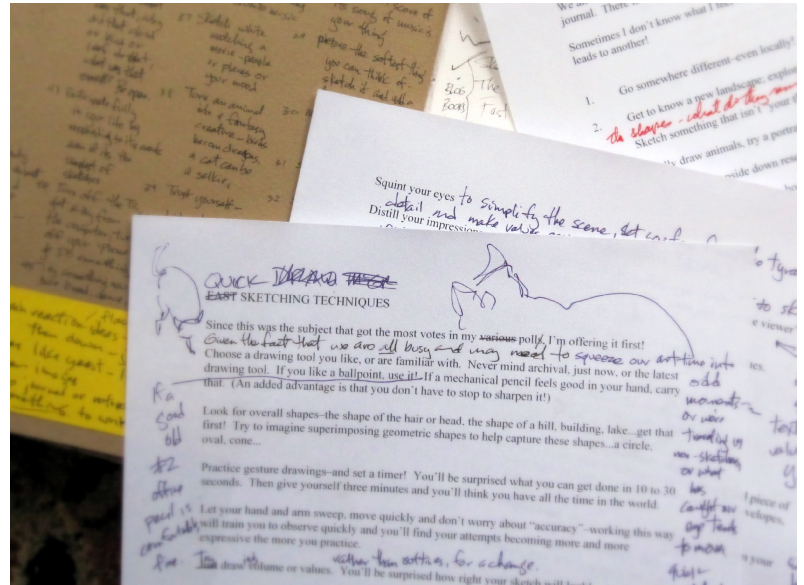
All I had time for at Las Vegas’ McCarran Airport were quick sketches of my fellow passengers with a ballpoint pen. They moved constantly; the fellow in the middle is actually a composite of two people! I was able to get the poses and a suggested on lights and darks with the pen, and added color at home, later.



Paper can be anything handy—a sketchbook or journal filled with paper you love is great, but the back of an envelope or deposit slip, wrapping paper, a paper napkin, or the margin of a sheet of paper from your printer works too—the important thing is to DO it when the opportunity strikes!

I was making notes on this class when my neighbor’s cat came by for a visit—he got sketched in the margin, with that same purple pen! Great art? No. Fun? YES!! And it captured that moment like nothing else could.

Paper or sketchbook *size* really doesn’t matter—some artists are comfortable carrying a 9" x 12" journal, others prefer a pocket size. *Use what you’re most likely to keep at hand!*



Tip: Mark your place with a rubber band, ribbon, or bookmark so you can open your sketchbook to the next empty page—FAST.

NOTE: Paper that is *too* rough, like some handmade watercolor papers, may make your pen or pencil skip over that bumpy surface. If that bothers you or slows you down too much, try a smoother paper. TOO smooth is sometimes frustrating as well...like the Three Bears, go for “juuuuust right!” That means just right for YOU—it’s a personal decision, of course...

The *important* thing is to be prepared—have sketching supplies always handy, even if that just means a pencil and piece of paper.

If you’re *not* prepared, be flexible! Grab what’s at hand—I’ve drawn on the backs of envelopes, a paper napkin, a grocery bag (paper, of course!)

Keep these sketches, too—I often paste them in my journal rather than throwing them out. They record something spontaneous that I often enjoy looking at later.

QUICK-SKETCH TIPS

- Simple sketching tools are fast and easy to deal with, especially if you plan to sketch on the spot rather than home in the studio...the more you have to dig for, get out and get ready, the less time you'll have for actual sketching. You can have as much stuff as you want (or can afford!) in your studio, but for quick sketching, be ready to go at a moment's notice. I carry a favorite pen, a mechanical pencil, and a colored pencil in a wee pocket right at the top of my purse, easy to find and easy to get at.
- Keep your supplies organized at home, to make them easier to find quickly...pencils in a mug, pencil holder, box, or held together with a rubber band.
- Keep sketching tools in every room (if you use interesting jars, mugs, vases whatever, this will even add to your decor instead of looking messy!) I often take my journal to bed with me, and do a quick sketch before bed or on waking—I keep a mug with a few pens and pencils, and the world's smallest watercolor set, plus a water brush on the bedside table.
- Keep sketching tools in your vehicle as well. I have a tiny folding sketch journal, a couple of pencils, and even a tiny watercolor set in the glove box of both our vehicles. I don't usually leave home without sketching materials in my bag, but I HAVE...and I'm ready, in that case.

A FEW MORE SUPPLIES

If you want to go a bit beyond the basics, consider:

2B, 4B and 6B drawing pencils
Flat sketching pencil (you may want 4B to 6B or softer for this too)
.05 mechanical pencil

Prismacolor (or other brand) colored pencil in a dark color
Ballpoint pen

Pencil sharpener

Soft white vinyl eraser—you may not need it, but hey...

Paper of your choice...remember that too rough paper may be frustrating as your pencil or pen may skip.



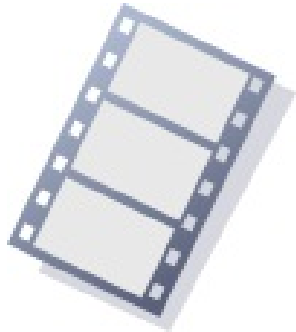
EXERCISE:

EXPERIMENT. Play with your materials a little. Try them out. See what kind of marks you can get with that pencil, pen or brush pen.

Vary how you hold your drawing tool (we'll talk more about that in Lesson Two).

Try varying amounts of pressure (soft pencils may break, with *too* much pressure, though.)

The more familiar you are with your tools, the faster you can make them do your bidding!



Check out these quick videos:

Test driving your tools:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1a-nbpra5CE>

Deciding which one to choose for speed: <http://youtu.be/PbWt1pR203Y>

Get Ready, Get Set, DRAW!

Try different ways to store or carry your tools so they're ready at all times, whenever you are—"Fast Draw McGraw" isn't just a cartoon character!

And make a note of what works for you! Take a look at what other sketchers do. I often get great ideas from sketching with others.

BONUS EXTRAS, books, links and more:

Many of the books I link to have the “look within” feature on Amazon—be sure to hit the “surprise me” link, and scroll down, you can see MUCH more.

David Rankin, *Fast Sketching Techniques*

Alwyn Crawshaw, *30 Minute Sketching*

Danny Gregory, *An Illustrated Life* at this link (yep, one of the images on the cover is mine!) *Sketchbook Confidential*. The variety and types of sketches are bound to inspire you.

And many, many more, of course...you’ll see additional suggestions in upcoming classes.
