Welcome back to class no. 11: Silverpoint

Summer of Drawing
Silverpoint

A silverpoint drawing is made by dragging a silver rod or wire across a surface, often prepared with gesso or primer.

Silverpoint is one of several types of metalpoint used by scribes, craftsmen and artists since ancient times. Metalpoint styli were used for writing on soft surfaces (wax or bark), ruling and underdrawing on parchment, and drawing on prepared paper and panel supports.

For drawing purposes, the essential metals used were lead, tin and silver.

Goldsmiths also used metalpoint drawings to prepare their detailed, meticulous designs.

Design for statuette, Hans Holbein the Elder (1460-1524)
In the late Gothic/early Renaissance era, silverpoint emerged as a fine line drawing technique. Not blunting as easily as lead or tin, and rendering precise detail, silverpoint was especially favored in Florentine and Flemish workshops.

Silverpoint drawings of this era include model books and preparatory sheets for paintings.

Artists who worked in silverpoint include Jan van Eyck, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer and Raphael.

*A Bear Walking* c. 1482-85

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)
Drawing styles changed at the end of the 16th century, resulting in a decline for metalpoint. The discovery of graphite deposits at Seathwaite in Borrowdale, Cumbria, England in the early 1500s, and its increasing availability to artists in a pure, soft (and erasable) form hastened silverpoint's eclipse.

Artists sought more gestural qualities, for which graphite, red and black chalk were better suited. Ink and wash drawings are also prevalent in the period.

*Portrait Study of Dorothea Meyer*
Hans Holbein the Younger, 1516.

Silverpoint, red chalk, and traces of black pencil on white-coated paper.
Dutch artists Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617) and Rembrandt (1606-1669) maintained the silverpoint tradition into the 17th century.

Rembrandt made several silverpoints on prepared vellum.

Botanical artists and architects continued to use metalpoint because of its exact lines.

However, artists who continued this tradition of fine line drawing, such as J. A. D. Ingres, turned to graphite, which gradually improved in quality and availability throughout Europe since the 17th century.

Silverpoint was for practical purposes rendered obsolete by the 18th century.

There has however been a contemporary art revival among European and American artists and academies.

- Wikipedia
Materials

• A support (paper, board, medium to heavy weight)

• A ground (a wet solution which is painted or sprayed on a support, and creates a surface that abrades the stylus, leaving traces of the metal)

• A stylus: some sort of holder with a silver wire (or other metals) either already attached, or a holder that can be adapted to different wires and sizes

• An eraser, preferably white polymer or similar
Grounds

Traditional grounds used common bones calcified in a hot fire, then ground further and mixed with a glue medium of whatever type was available. Modern grounds include:

- Gesso
- Flat acrylic wall paint
- Commercially prepared silverpoint grounds
- Commercially prepared traditional mixtures in powdered form
- Gouache with or without Gum Arabic
Artist’s Wife, Edith Holman Hunt

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910)
(a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood)

Birmingham Museum of Art.
A Dog Resting, 1520

Albrecht Dürer

silverpoint over traces of carbon black on prepared paper
Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617)

Young Woman Reading a Book (Portrait of Sophia Goltzius, Sister of the Artist?), Seen from Above, 1591

metalpoint (probably silverpoint) on prepared paper or parchment
Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)

Five Studies of Heads, c. 1633

silverpoint on prepared vellum
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Joseph Edward Southall, *Head of a Girl*, 1899, metalpoint (probably silverpoint) with scratching on prepared paper
Rembrandt, The artist's bride of three days (detail)
Silverpoint on prepared vellum, 18.5 x 10.7 cm
Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett
Otto Dix (1891 -1969)

*Old Woman*, 1932

metalpoint (probably silverpoint) and graphite (?) on prepared paper

The Museum of Modern Art
Lauren Redding

www.laurenredding.com

‘Chicagoan Hatuey’

Silverpoint and silverleaf on gessoed panel
30 x 24”
Tom Mazzullo

www.tommazzullo.com

Upwrap, 2009

silverpoint on casein-prepared paper

12 x 9 inches (sheet size)

Collection of the Lauren Rogers Museum, Laurel, Mississippi.
Archimedes, 2014, silverpoint on prepared paper, 9 x 15 inches
Two-part Invention No. 15, 2021, silverpoint on prepared paper, 10 1/2 x 12 inches
As you draw, evaluate what is around the part you are drawing. Is it lighter or darker in value?

Make changes with more hatching if you need to. Don’t be afraid to leave areas untouched.

Try a few sketches of the same subject to get the feel of the silverpoint tip.
Filippino Lippi, Sandro Botticelli, and Raffaellino del Garbo

Page from “Libro de’ Disegni,” drawings probably 1480–1504

mounted by Giorgio Vasari, album page with drawings in metalpoint and various media

National Gallery of Art, Washington
Silverpoint: Learning an Old Masters Technique

• With modern materials, silverpoint is an easy medium to try

• Keep expectations in check – the value range is small, and tarnish won’t necessarily improve the results!

• Light lines, cross hatching, following the curve of the form – these are all shading techniques well suited for silverpoint.

• Establish your darker areas first, but don’t try to emulate graphite or charcoal in intensity. Build up layers slowly with cross hatching.

• Plan your moves – it will be difficult but not impossible to erase. However, once the ground has worn off, the silver will not adhere to your support.

• It’s easy to prepare a number of surfaces quickly, so that you can use silverpoint outdoors and on the go. All you will need to take with you is a stylus and eraser.
Elizabeth R. Whelan

www.elizabethwhelan.com

Instagram: @elizabetwhelan

Facebook: @elizabethwhelan

erwhelan@gmail.com