



# Dramatic Drapery

Use charcoal and chalk on toned paper to create a stunning drapery study.

DRAPERY IS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT to draw for two main reasons: First, we see a draped cloth as soft and flowing, but when we draw it with free, curvy lines it can tend to look not like cloth, but like something stretchy or gooey. I call this the “silly putty effect,” and it’s a result of ignoring the cloth’s structure. Even the filmiest silk fabric has structural integrity; to analyze it correctly we must first break down its curves into straight lines, and notice angles and corners.

The second reason drapery is difficult to draw is that crumpled fabric tends to have beautiful reflected lights and lots of subtle tonal transitions. When we try to copy those light and dark values, we can unintentionally over-emphasize them so that, for example, reflected lights are too light and jump forward too much. Also, soft transitions can trick us into making halftones creep too closely with the lightest lights, making a white cloth look “dirty.”

By establishing a few basic rules and committing to following them—no matter what—we can create beautiful drapery studies that capture the feeling of movement and the play of light over the intricate folds. Drapery Rule 1: Draw only in straight lines. No curves. Drapery Rule 2: Use white pigment only where the primary light source hits the cloth. Never use white pigment in shadow areas, no matter how bright the reflected light looks.

## Step 1: Sketch: Composition and Value Sphere

I tack up an old sheet on the wall and arrange it into an interesting pattern of light and dark, with one

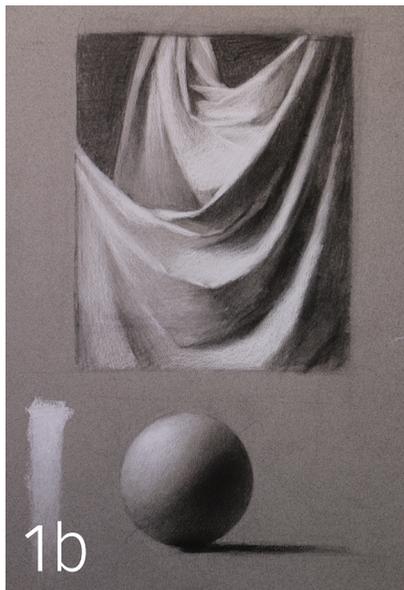


primary light source shining from the upper left (1a). When I’m happy with my arrangement, I mount paper on a drawing board by taping all four sides with white artist’s tape.

Before I actually start drawing, I use a scrap of the same type of paper to do a small, fast sketch to work out my composition (1b). I adjust the

**ABOVE: Study of Winged Victory** (chalk and charcoal on blue paper, 24x18) by Sadie Valeri

edges significantly. It helps to look through a viewfinder and choose a section of the drapery with interesting folds and a good balance of light and dark. I make a quick value scale



and value sphere on the same paper to get a feel for the materials on the paper and to establish a value range. When working on gray paper, it's useful to see the darkest dark and the lightest light right away; otherwise, it can be difficult to establish the correct range when drawing. Experimenting with the materials helps.

### Step 2: Straight Line Block-In

It can be difficult to see a curve and draw straight lines instead, but it's great practice for training your eyes to scan across the subject instead of zooming in on small details, which

can lead to proportion errors. To draw straight lines when you see curves, look for corners and angles. Ask yourself this: If I had to draw this curve with just two lines, where would they meet?

When I'm ready to start drawing, I use all straight lines to block in the largest contours. I start with long, high-contrast lines, and then I segment them until they look like curves. I draw the lines in quickly and spend some time erasing and adjusting them until they match the folds I see. When I feel confident my large lines are correct, I look for smaller shapes and lines. If the smaller shapes don't seem to fit where I'd planned, I back up a step, and re-check the big lines.

I never rush the block-in stage,

even though it's tempting to push ahead into shading. The longer I spend on drawing shapes and proportions with lines, the easier and faster the shading goes.

**Tips:** Use medium vine charcoal sharpened to a point with sandpaper. If the charcoal breaks or wears down until it's too short to hold with your fingers, place it in a holder. I like to wrap the base of my vine charcoal with artist tape to make it easier to grip in the holder. Hold the charcoal at the same angle as the line you intend to draw, and pull the charcoal down the line—don't push—to keep a sharp point while working. Use a chamois cloth to erase errors.

### Step 3: Basic Shadows

I use vine charcoal to quickly shade in the shadows. I keep the shadows simple. Even if I see reflected light, I basically shade everything to the same value with only slight indication of any differences within the shadow. This helps me simplify my lights and darks, and not get too overwhelmed by all the different values.

### Step 4: Adding White Conté and Establishing Value

When I've roughly filled in the shadows, I gently sketch in the largest, brightest areas with the broad side of

## Materials

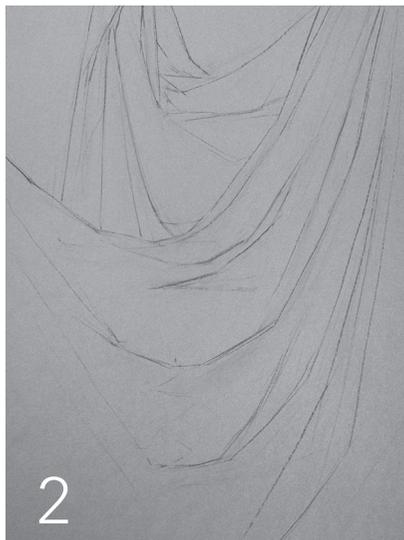
**Surface:** Daler-Rowney Canford gunmetal grey paper, 24x18 after trimming

**Media:** Winsor & Newton soft, medium and hard vine charcoal; General Pencil 2B and 4B charcoal pencils and white charcoal pencil; 2B white Conté sticks

**Blending materials:** inexpensive, rough paper towels (for charcoal), Blick gray paper stumps (for pencil)

**Erasing materials:** chamois (for charcoal), kneaded eraser (for pencil)

**Other:** Blick Viewcatcher, Artist's Tape; 220-grit sandpaper, mounted on a board or taped to a tabletop (for sharpening charcoal)

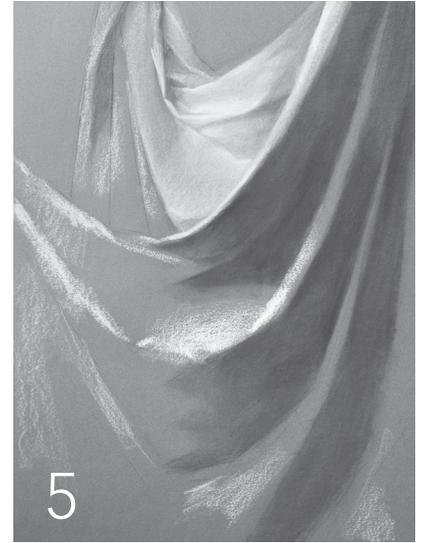


## drawing board

a stick of white Conté crayon. I don't spend a lot of time refining this, but I press hard enough to establish a very bright white in the lightest parts so I can see a full range of values right away. I've spent such a long time on my block-in lines that I'm confident my shapes of light and dark are correct, so this part goes quickly.

### Step 5: Refining Piece by Piece

Now comes the fun part: I slow down and begin to work up each area of the fabric, piece by piece. I try to finish each area as I go. Since I've already established my major value range of light and dark areas—and with my line drawing I've figured out all my major shapes and proportions—I can zoom in on one area at a time, knowing that the general shapes and values are correct, while I play with the details.



### Step 6: Layering Materials

Working slowly across the entire drawing I build up the lights and darks by layering all my materials. I build up larger areas with layers of

soft vine charcoal or Conté crayon, and I rub out texture with stumps and paper towels, being careful to use separate tools for black and white so the pigments don't mix. Then I

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## drawing board



layer on top by shading with harder charcoals and General Pencil's black and white charcoal pencils. I experiment and layer soft over hard, and hard over soft, until I can build up a rich range of value without lots of unintentional texture.

### Step 7: Pushing the Final Value Range

In the final stages of the drawing I stick closely to Drapery Rule 2. I *never* put white charcoal or white Conté into reflected lights. Near the end it gets very tempting to put in strong reflected lights, but I resist the urge to do so, and I use white pigment only in the light.

### When to Erase

When blocking in your straight lines, draw your corrections *before* you erase your mistakes. If a line is wrong, draw it correctly and, only then, erase the correct line. The reason for this is to build on the work already done on your paper. If you erase beforehand, you're starting over on a blank area, and ignoring all the information you have gathered so far.

The light is whatever surface is hit by the primary, direct light source. Reflected light is light that bounces around or comes from a secondary light source (ambient light in the room). I lighten the shadows to show reflected light only by erasing down to the gray paper.

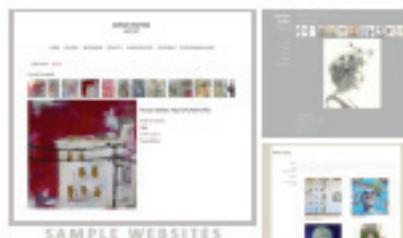
### Conclusion

When drawing drapery, there's a lot of confusing information to process: dozens of folds and hundreds of values. To make a strong, striking image that feels as if it has a glow of light falling over a structurally interesting form, we must be organized in our approach and make a lot of editing decisions. That's why drawing, even with a faithfully realistic style, requires far more than simple copying. We artists have to make choices and decisions all along the way. Careful editing of composition, lines and values is what makes a powerful drawing. ■

**SADIE VALERI** was featured in *The Artist's Magazine's* October 2011 issue. You can find information about taking classes at her atelier, see more of her work, and watch instructional videos on her website, [www.sadievaleri.com](http://www.sadievaleri.com). She also helped to found and launch the blog [www.womenpaintingwomen.com](http://www.womenpaintingwomen.com).

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