

Drawing: Conte Skulls

by Kim Fjordbotten

Materials

[Black Conte Stick or Charcoal Pencil](#)

[White Conte Stick or Charcoal Pencil](#)

White Mi Teintes Pastel Paper

Black Mi Teintes Pastel Paper

Grey Mi Teintes Pastel Paper

Kneaded Eraser

Blending Stomps or Tortillions

Plaster Skull (or photo of skull)

Project

Using reference from a plaster skull or a photograph of a skull, students are asked to describe the skull using primarily or exclusively tonal variations. No outlines should be visible on the finished work. All shapes and parts should be easily seen due to a tonal shift from light to dark.



Art Goals

A light source (like fire, the sun, or a lamp) creates both highlights (bright areas) and shadows (dark areas), or what is known as contrast. Contrast allows us to see shape. Outlines are not needed in photorealistic drawings. Edges can be well defined when the shading is observed and rendered carefully. In this project, student will learn how to use blending tools to create soft and subtle variations of tones.

Chiaroscuro (English pronunciation: [/kiːɑːrəˈskjɔːroʊ/](#); Italian: [\[ˈkjaɾoˈskuːro\]](#); [Italian](#) for light-dark) in [art](#) is the use of strong [contrasts](#) between light and dark, which affect a whole composition of the image. It is also a technical term used by artists and [art historians](#) for the use of contrasts of light to achieve a sense of volume in modelling three-dimensional objects and figures.^[1] Similar effects in cinema or black and white photography are also called chiaroscuro.

Preparation

Ask the students to see how many shades they can create using Conte or charcoal on a small piece of paper or in their sketchbook. Light touch and gentle smudging will help create the most shades. Remind students that colouring very dark will make a lot of dust, which may smear too easily. Using too much pressure while shading may abrade the paper, making it look rough or damaged in spots (this is also known as “over-worked”).



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What is Conte?

Conté Sticks and **Conté pencils**, are a drawing medium composed of compressed powdered charcoal mixed with a wax. They were invented in 1795 by **Nicolas-Jacques Conté**, who created the combination of clay and charcoal in response to the shortage of graphite caused by the **Napoleonic Wars**. Conté crayons are most commonly found in black, white, and **sanguine** tones, as well as **bistre**, shades of **grey**, and other colors.



Some artists create entire paintings with them, using them like pastels. They are also used often to sketch under pastel paintings or to lay down initial layers before using dry pastels. They are frequently used on rough paper that holds pigment grains well. Conte is not as dusty as pastels or charcoal due to the wax content. Conte smudges and erases with more ease than coloured pencil.



Blending Stumps and Tortillions are traditional smudging tools used by artists to smooth out drawing marks to create incremental soft blends of several shades of colour.

Kneaded Erasers can be used to gently lift excess charcoal, Conte or graphite from an area that needs to be lightened. To utilize this technique, students should sketch lightly to start and add darker colour only as needed.



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Toned Paper

Working on warm grey or kraft coloured paper saves time. Allow the tone of the paper to be the mid-tone of the object and the background. Then, students need only draw the darkest areas and add the highlights in white. Teachers can help students by reminding them to draw only what is necessary to help the viewer understand the object. Not all details need to be drawn; slightly unfinished works can hold more interest to the viewer.



More Inspiration

