

CHIAROSCURO

In the third part of our atelier-style guide to drawing and painting, Lavender Hill Studios' Nick Bashall introduces the concept of chiaroscuro and fellow tutor Ann Witheridge presents an easy-to-follow exercise

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In our two previous articles, we have been looking at the ideas of proportion, volume and gesture. During those two workshops, there was no mention of light and dark. This is where this next article comes in.

From personal experience, we all know about the drama of dark and light – it has the power to move us. Theatre directors know this and they play upon it. Think, for example, about the stage set of an opera, about how it looks like a Caravaggio painting with its stark contrasts in tone. (It is no coincidence that Caravaggio was painting around the same time as the birth of opera.)

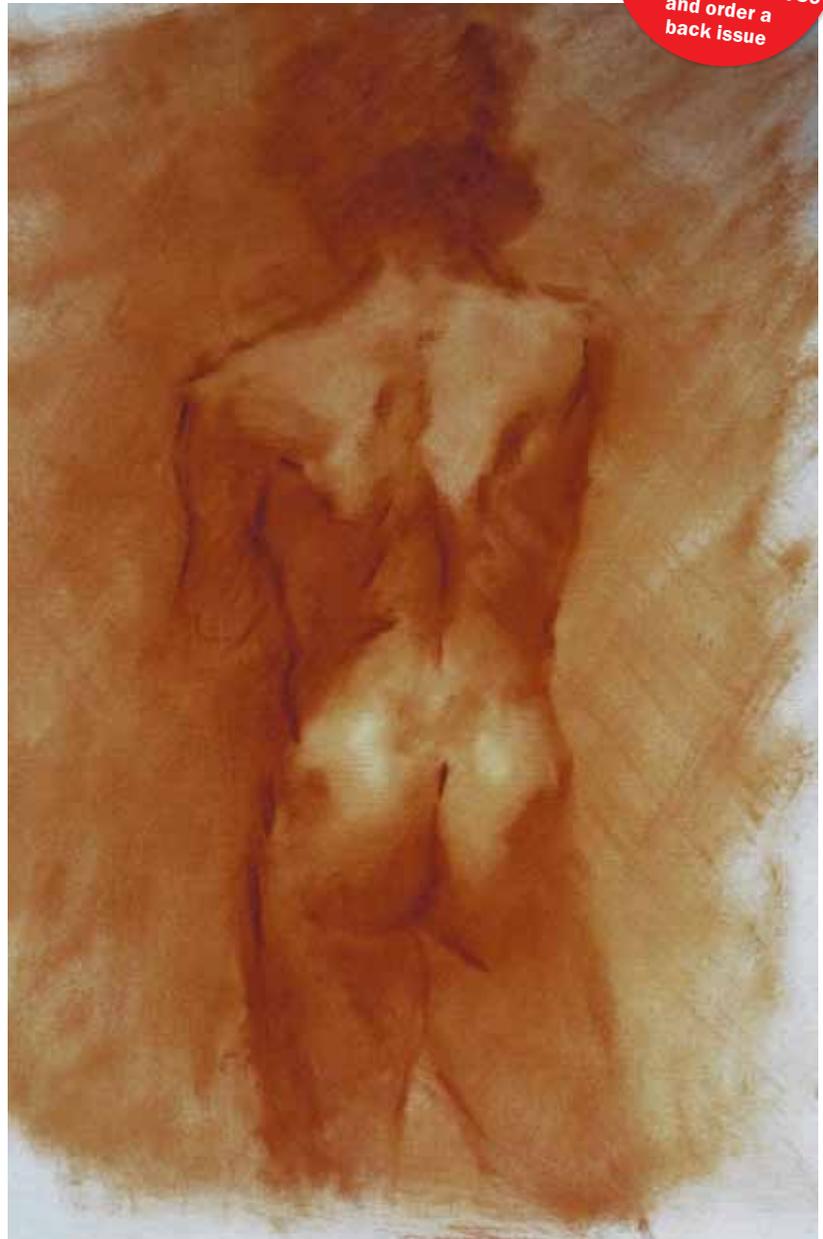
Or imagine a lone singer in a soft-rock musical, pausing silently on a dark stage: a single light from above washes over his bowed head and shoulders, picking out the swirling kaleidoscope of darks and greys as the dry-ice smoke rises behind him. It is a dramatic image and it is also one that is created solely by the interplay between the areas of dark and light. You hold your breath, moved by the image. And then, the character starts to sing and you're moved all over

→ What is 'chiaroscuro'?

Chiaroscuro is a word borrowed from Italian that translates literally as 'light-dark' or more accurately 'light and shade'. It refers to the technique of using contrasting light and dark areas to create an illusion of depth or three-dimensions in a painting or drawing.

RIGHT Ann Witheridge, *Study from life model (Grisaille in Terra Rosa)*, oil on canvas

BELOW Scott Pohlschmidt, *Marrakesh study*, oil on canvas



again, this time by sound. It is the contrast that inspires us, between quiet and loud, between dark and light.

Those contrasts can be at their most visually dramatic when the lightest light meets the darkest dark. Placed together it can create a sharp line or a silhouette. There is such beauty in that contrast. Imagine a

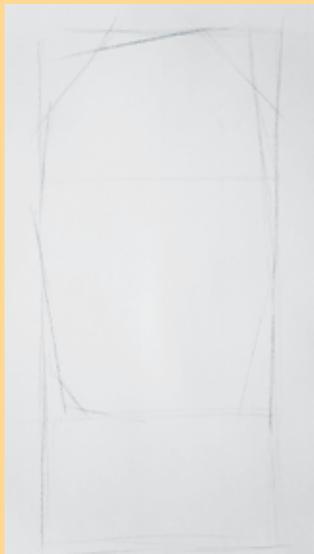
ballet dancer, dressed all in white, silhouetted as he holds a classic yet difficult pose against a dark background. With the light source from the front, he appears just as a white form, outlined by the contrasting light of his body against the dark of the unlit stage. Understanding how the drama of such an image is

BALANCING LIGHT AND DARK

This exercise features a one-hour cast drawing demonstration by Lavender Hill Studios student Sebastian Rous. If you don't have access to a cast or sitter, the principles can still be applied to almost any other subject.



1 In order to create the necessary contrast of light and dark (chiaroscuro), we placed a white cast against a black background and lit it from a single source. In the early stages of learning, we use a white cast instead of a live model, as the contrast of light and dark is greater, the cast does not move and there are no model fees!



2 Draw the scaffolding as described in earlier articles, starting with top and bottom lines and including a series of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines.



3 Within your scaffolding, carefully draw the boundaries of the areas in which dark meets light. It helps to exaggerate the contrast of dark and light at this stage, particularly in the areas where the dark morphs gradually into the light without any hard edge.

If you are struggling to identify the various tonal areas, try half closing your eyes – your eyelashes can act as a screen, cutting out the detail and simplifying the contrasts between light and dark.



4 Mass in the dark up to those boundary lines you have drawn. You will note that in some parts you can no longer see where your cast ends and the background begins, as the dark parts of the cast merge with the dark background.



5 Keep your dark areas to a single tone, flattening it to unify the mass and disregarding at this stage the actual variations within it. Stand back and notice how your image becomes abstracted – an assembly of asymmetrical shapes in two tones.



6 The next step is developing two tones into four. In the dark areas, find a lighter dark; likewise in the lighter areas, look for a darker light. You now have two darks and two lights. The most important thing is that this lighter-dark and the darker-light remain distinct tones and never cross over: the darker-light should never be as dark as the lighter-dark.



7 With your basic shapes in the right place, you can indulge in detail. There are a variety of edges to be identified – soft, hard, lost, found – each depending on the contrast, the angle of the form (whether a gentle or sharp curve) and the type of shadow (whether a form or cast shadow). Conversely, the accents should have little to do with contour or edges, and everything to do with focus and priority.



created is the key to getting to grips with chiaroscuro.

A more common scene would involve not only extremes of dark and light areas but also the more subtle interplay with the mid-tones in between. So imagine that same ballet dancer on a dark stage, except picture him this time with the light source coming from the side of the stage. Suddenly a different sort of beauty emerges. Gone is the clarity of the outline. Parts of his body now appear as dark as the background and in places it is difficult to see where his body ends and the background begins. Now his body is a patchwork of masses of light, dark and mid-tones that fuse with the background. As the light moves across his body, it reveals the musculature, moving around the form of his limbs and torso. The question is: how do you represent this on your canvas?

Workshop 3

There is a wonderfully simple way to capture the figurative scene outlined above. Our natural instinct would be to draw a perfect outline of the dancer's form and fill in his muscles individually with various degrees of dark and light, much like a cartoon, before then painting in the background around him.

Instead of doing this, the example opposite shows how you could attempt to see the dancer as a patchwork of abstract shapes or 'masses' – differing areas of shadow, mid-tone and light. The difficulty comes in putting those masses in the right place but the previous

workshops should have prepared you for this stage somewhat.

As explained in the first two workshops, begin your drawing by establishing the top and bottom of your chosen face or figure. Between these two lines, map out the basic proportions, including the height against the width.

Draw in the gesture with a series of verticals, horizontals and diagonals, as demonstrated in the previous articles. This should not be an *outline* of the figure; this should merely act as a *scaffolding*. And then, within that scaffolding, you should be able to carefully delineate or mark out the shadow edges, where the dark meets light – the exercise opposite shows this procedure in more detail.

While attempting to see the whole before the parts and establishing these abstract shapes within the scaffolding, you should avoid rushing

to add the details. Instead, refine the masses as much as required and only once you are happy with them should you begin to luxuriate over the detail.

At Lavender Hill Studios, we take our pupils through this chiaroscuro stage in charcoal because it is the quickest and simplest medium by which to demonstrate this process – it has none of the extra complexities that come with brushes, mediums, supports or colour!

Applying charcoal in mass is also a perfect preparation for oil painting, because oil paint is also applied in masses. This is why we teach the four basic principles in this order, so that oil painting becomes the last stage in our teaching of the basics.

Next month: introducing oil paints and colour to the mix. For more information on Lavender Hill Studios and the courses they offer, please visit www.lavenderhillstudios.com

TOP Scott Pohlschmidt, *Marrakesh Study*, oil on canvas
This *plein air* painting illustrates the use of light against shade
RIGHT Nick Bashall, *Portrait of a Young Boy*, charcoal on paper
From simple initial masses you can work up considerable subtleties

