

Setting Up for Silverpoint

Silverpoint is quite special. It is a beautiful medium, and although it was once considered archaic and demanding, it is not difficult to learn. Contemporary artists are revisiting its mysteries, discovering its potential, and using it to unearth new and surprising creative possibilities.

Silverpoint is sometimes called the “Old Master’s pencil.” Long before graphite was discovered, artists employed the technique of *metalpoint*, drawing on specially prepared surfaces with silver, gold, copper, tin, or lead. Silver was usually preferred because of the subtle color of the precious metal and how elegantly it tarnishes over time.

The technique is not complicated. The artist draws with a short, round length of silver or other metal placed in a stylus, similar to using a mechani-

cal pencil to hold a stick of graphite. But as materials, silver and graphite are quite different. Graphite is easy to blend and erase. It can be used on just about any surface. And graphite marks can effortlessly be made to flow from dark to light and from thick to thin by simply changing the pressure on the instrument. In contrast, silver only makes visible marks on specially prepared surfaces. In many cases it cannot be erased. And silverpoint strokes are consistently light in value and even in size, regardless of the pressure the artist uses. The only way to change the width of a stroke is to use a wider piece of silver, and darker areas can only be created with patiently repeated, successively aligned marks.

Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer, and Raphael, among others, created



ABOVE
Greek Goddess No. 1

by Sherry Camhy, YEAR TK, silver and gold on prepared wood panel, 40 x 23½.

metalpoint masterpieces. However, considering the limitations and challenges that metalpoint poses, it is not surprising that it fell largely out of favor following the discovery and popularization of graphite. But certain artists were unable to resist the medium’s pull, and it never disappeared. In the 17th century, Rembrandt chose silverpoint to create a portrait of his wife, Saskia. In the following centuries, artists with styles as divergent as John Ruskin and Marcel Duchamp fell under silverpoint’s spell.

Contemporary artists are undaunted by old myths of the difficulties of silverpoint and are instead inspired by its unique, delicate beauty. Here, we present a brief overview of the materials needed for metalpoint. You’ll find that it’s easy (and affordable) to get

started and create your first drawings, although you’ll also find that you can spend a lifetime mastering the technique and finding creative new ways to use this venerable medium.

DRAWING TOOLS

Several metals can be used for metalpoint. Silver is the most common, but gold, iron, and copper are also used—experiment to find which one you prefer. My favorite is sterling silver. It shimmers, catching light and gently tossing it back. It has a complex color that sparkles like expensive champagne and ages like fine wine. Another option is Austrian silver, which is darker than sterling. I generally use it only for small accents. I’ve found gold to be disappointing; it can produce luminous dark tones, but the marks do not appear especially golden. Iron makes a dusky blackish

mark. Copper is lovely because, like silver, it changes with time, turning green, gray, and rusty red.

A wide variety of points are available in different sizes and shapes from art stores and online. Fortunately, drawing with precious metals is not as expensive as you might expect. A small piece of silver that will last a very long time can be easily found for less than \$20. Styluses to hold the points are also available at modest prices.

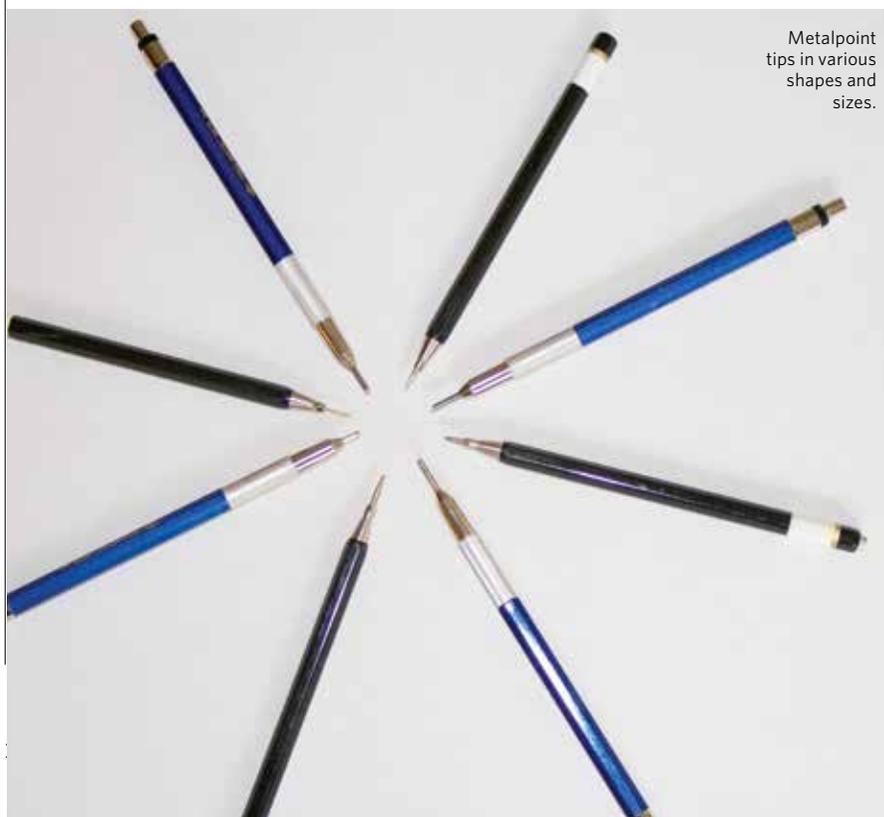
Alternative metal drawing implements can be found around the house or at jewelry or hardware stores. The tip of a silver spoon, a gold ring, a copper wire, an iron nail, or an old coin can be used to draw. And all these tools can be combined with one another and with such media as paint, pastel, or colored pencil—there is no limit to the creative possibilities.



SURFACE PREPARATIONS

Preparation of the surface is critical to a successful silverpoint drawing. Your point won’t leave a mark on a surface that lacks a ground made from the proper combination of ingredients.

In the 15th century, Cennino Cennini described a recipe for preparing a metalpoint surface in *Il libro dell’arte*, the first “how to” book for artists. His instructions called for a large quantity of chicken bones, which, he wrote, can be “fetched from under the table.” These bones were burned until they became white ash, then moistened by saliva or (even better) urine, and finally mixed with colored pigment. This mixture would then be carefully spread to dry on parchment, wood, or ivory. The resulting surfaces were quite small and fragile. Any abrasion of the surface made it unreceptive to subsequent marks in that area, and



Metalpoint tips in various shapes and sizes.

RIGHT
Study of a Young Woman's Face

by Leonardo da Vinci, ca. 1490s, silverpoint with traces of leadpoint and white gouache highlights on pale ochre prepared paper, 7⅞ x 6¼. Collection Biblioteca Reale, Turin, Italy.

FAR RIGHT, TOP

Some household objects can be used as alternative metalpoint mark-making implements.

FAR RIGHT, MIDDLE

Cherub
by Sherry Camhy, YEAR TK, silver and gold on prepared wood panel, 15 x 11½.



MATERIAL WORLD

erasing was impossible. Because of the difficulty of working on such surfaces, most older silverpoint images were primarily line drawings, with each line carefully considered and painstakingly executed.

Today, some artists continue to search for and use variations of the mysterious traditional recipes to prepare their surfaces, and others invent their own formulas. Happily, however, we can also purchase good, readymade grounds from art-supply stores or on the internet, without recourse to chicken bones or our own urine.

If you'd like to make your own ground, the basic ingredients are simple: a binder, an abrasive, and an opaque white base. The classic binder is rabbit-skin glue, but gum arabic or polyvinyl acetate can also be used. In place of pulverized chicken-bone ash, you can use gypsum, powdered chalk, or marble dust. Lead white was originally



LEFT
Austrian silver and 24-carat gold points.

BELOW
Silver Sky
by Sherry Camhy, YEAR, silver on clay-coated paper, 30 x 40.

mixture by adding pure pigment, watercolor, or acrylic paint a little at a time. You can assemble the dry ingredients on your own or purchase them from an art-supply store in premeasured amounts ready to be prepared in a double boiler. If you're making your own ground, be prepared for some unappetizing odors, and once it is brewed, keep the liquid refrigerated.

The simplest option, however, is to purchase a premade ground. You can use any high-quality opaque gesso, some house paints, or a metalpoint-specific product such as Golden's Silverpoint Drawing Ground, which dries transparent.

SURFACES

Silverpoint can be used on any painting or drawing surface that has been prepared with a proper ground. Many

included as a base, but today zinc oxide or titanium dioxide is typically used in its place. Gouache, Chinese white, acrylic gesso, flat house paint, and even toothpaste contain the basic necessary ingredients. Many variations are possible and will lead to subtle differences in the results. Color can be added to the



Moses
by Sherry Camhy, YEAR, silverpoint on parchment, 14 x 18.

artists choose the traditional method of drawing on paper—often a heavy stock, such as watercolor paper. To prepare a paper surface, just apply a thin coat of liquid ground and let it dry. An alternative is to purchase “clay coated” silverpoint paper, although the delicate surfaces of these papers can make erasing problematic.

Because the dimensions of silverpoint surfaces are no longer limited as they once were, today we also have the option of using silverpoint on larger and stronger surfaces. I often use silverpoint on large hardwood panels coated with seven to 10 thin layers of diluted gesso

“IN THE HANDS OF DRAFTSMEN OF SKILL AND VISION, SILVERPOINT IS A MEDIUM OF POSSIBILITY, AWAITING STILL FURTHER INVESTIGATION.” —BRUCE WEBER

or acrylic paint sanded smooth after each layer is dry. Used on an inflexible support, neither of these preparations is likely to flake or crumble, so they can also be used to create interesting textures. Using an acrylic base on a firm support also has the benefit of allowing erasing—something not possible when using silverpoint on paper. Areas of a surface prepared with an acrylic base can be gently washed or sanded to remove marks while still leaving the surface enough tooth to allow you to draw in the area again. ❖

