



A CLOUD STUDY IN CHARCOAL

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Beautiful wispy clouds on a summer's day or thick dark clouds heralding a storm are created using the same drawing techniques. Once you know the tricks of the trade, every cloud is within your ability to draw.

This lesson will concentrate on drawing clouds using a classic technique of black and white charcoal on toned paper.

LEARNING SECTIONS

- Introduction to charcoal and toned paper
- Drawing with charcoal
- Blending
- 'Drawing' with a kneaded eraser
- Using fixative

Recommended for artists with intermediate experience.

9 Pages

8 Illustrations

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SUPPLY LIST

- Charcoal pencils or vine/willow charcoal – hard and soft
- White charcoal stick or white pastel pencil
- Kneaded eraser
- Pencil sharpener
- Tortillons, stumps, chamois or facial tissues for blending
- Toned paper suitable for charcoal Use a colour with a middle value – grey, brown or blue. (Canson pastel Mi-Tientes paper was used for this drawing. Use the smooth side, not the textured side)
- A piece of copy paper to use as a hand guard
- Drafting brush (optional) or large paint brush for brushing loose charcoal off your drawing
- Spray tin of workable fixative



What is a cloud?

Clouds form when air is heated by the sun and rises. As the air climbs it continues to slowly cool until a saturation point is reached and the water droplets condense, forming the cloud. As long as the cloud remains warmer than the air around it (cold air is heavy) the cloud will not actually float, but it will fall so slowly it will appear to be floating in the air.

CHARCOAL AND TONED PAPER

Charcoal is made from wood that has been burnt, or charred, while being deprived of oxygen so that what's left is a carbon residue. Charcoal is formed by burning small pieces of wood or vine over head, cutting off its oxygen supply. This results in a slow carbonization of the wood, leaving behind the sticks of charcoal that we are familiar with.

Charcoal also comes in convenient sticks in hard, medium and soft, just as the vine or willow pieces do. Vine and willow charcoal sticks, which are long and thin, are one of the main media for uncompressed charcoal. The vine variety is dark gray,

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while willow charcoal is black. Charcoal pencils are cleaner to use than sticks of charcoal, but either are easily washed off your hands and neither are toxic.

- **Vine charcoal** is created by burning sticks of wood (usually willow) into soft, medium, and hard consistencies. Bamboo charcoal is the principal tool in Japanese Sumi-e (charcoal drawing) art.
- **Compressed charcoal** charcoal powder mixed with gum binder compressed into round or square sticks. The amount of binder determines the hardness of the stick.

Compressed charcoal is used in charcoal pencils

- **Powdered charcoal** is often used to "tone" or cover large sections of a drawing surface. Drawing over the toned areas will darken it further, but the artist can also lighten (or completely erase) within the toned area to create lighter tones.



Toned paper

Toned paper allows you to complete a drawing more quickly because it acts as the middle value for your drawing, enabling you to use just darks and highlights to create form.

Toned papers come in a huge variety of brand names, colors and textures, but for this exercise a mid grey shade is

used to act as the value for the sky and some of the cloud base. These papers often are used for pastel as well and many have a textured side and a smooth side. The smooth side is being used for this lesson.

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APPLYING CHARCOAL

Charcoal is applied the same way as graphite, with layers and blending building the values to the levels that you require.

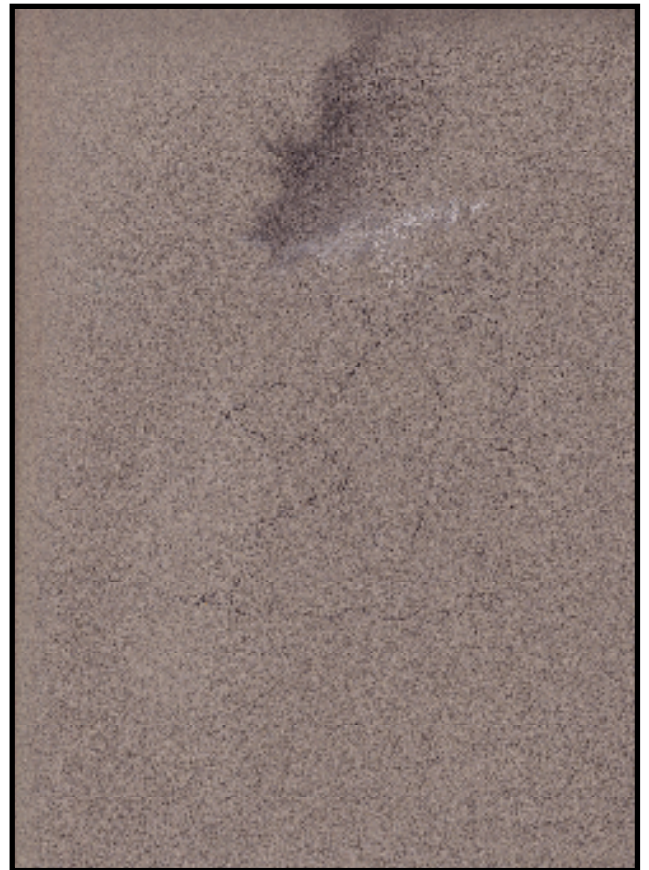
CREATING CLOUDS

Clouds are very free forming and change constantly. This is good for the artist as it provides some leeway in drawing them. There is no need to achieve an exact likeness to have a realistic cloud drawing. Each cloud is unique yet unidentifiable at a later time. I will not be completely following the reference image in this piece but using it as a guide in forming shapes and values and I encourage you to do the same. Add and remove charcoal, lights and darks to make your piece look both realistic and original.

Using your hard charcoal stick or charcoal pencil, start by lightly blocking in the basic shape of the clouds. (*Illustration 1*) Look for layers in the cloud structure and subtle changes in values. Be sure to include these shapes. They will be your guide for forming the mass of the cloud later.

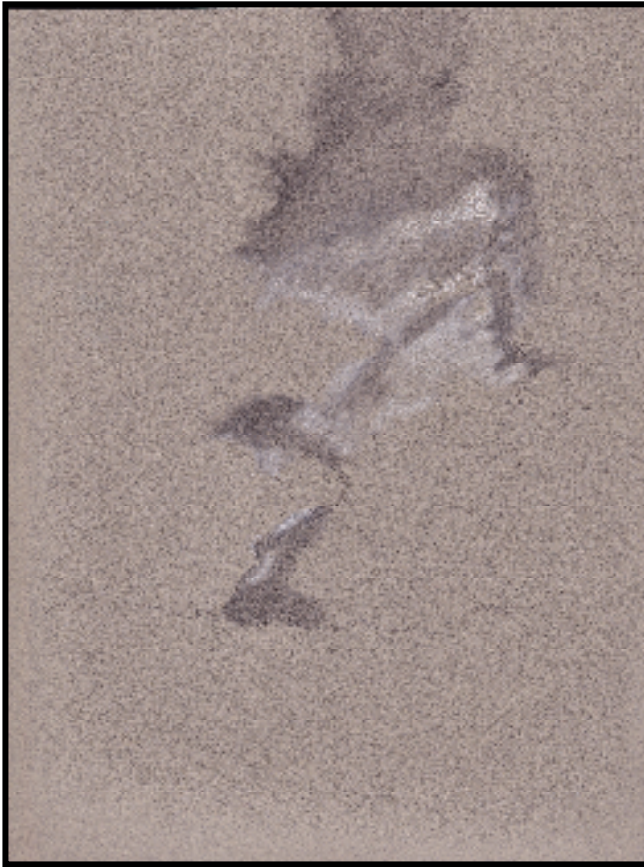
Use your charcoal to lay an initial 'wash' on your paper. This should be as even as possible to ensure that subsequent blending and layers will look smooth. Don't rush this step! Use circular strokes or smooth straight hatching to give even coverage with your charcoal pencils.

Start your drawing by making light strokes to create the top cloud on the right. (*Illustration 2*) You are trying to produce an even layer of charcoal on your paper. You should not see any hard lines in your drawing. Use your white pencil to lighten the lower edge of the cloud.



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This step will begin to place your values on the paper but is not the only layer and you will be blending and adjusting this later.

(*Illustration 3*) Your drawing will look odd at this point, but don't despair, it will look a lot better soon!

All drawings go through various phases of completion and often people get discouraged if they don't think it's looking as they had anticipated in the early stages. It will take time to complete your drawing, so don't give up before you've given yourself a chance.

BLENDING VALUES

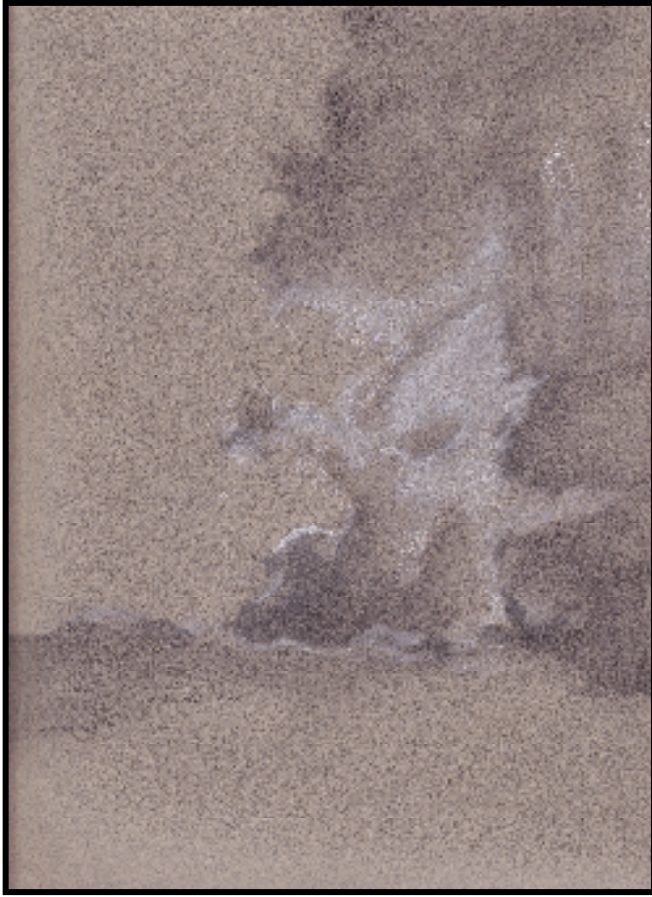
Use your tortillon or a tissue and gently blend the charcoal to give a smooth effect. The edges of the cloud should not be hard lines but feathered out seamlessly into the mid value of your toned paper.

Use a circular motion to achieve an even value. (*Illustration 4*)



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Using your black and white charcoal pencils, continue to build the values throughout the clouds, paying attention to layers and contrasts. Concentrate on getting values in place at this stage.

(☞ *Illustration 5*)

Use your white charcoal pencil and light circular strokes, begin to cover the area of the cloud that is directly sunlit. These areas will be your brightest highlights and give contrast to your piece.

‘DRAWING’ WITH A KNEADED ERASER

Think of your eraser as one of your drawing tools. They are not just for fixing mistakes!

(☞ *Illustration 6*)

A kneaded eraser is one of the best drawing tools that you will ever have. It has the ability to be molded to fit into small areas and is soft

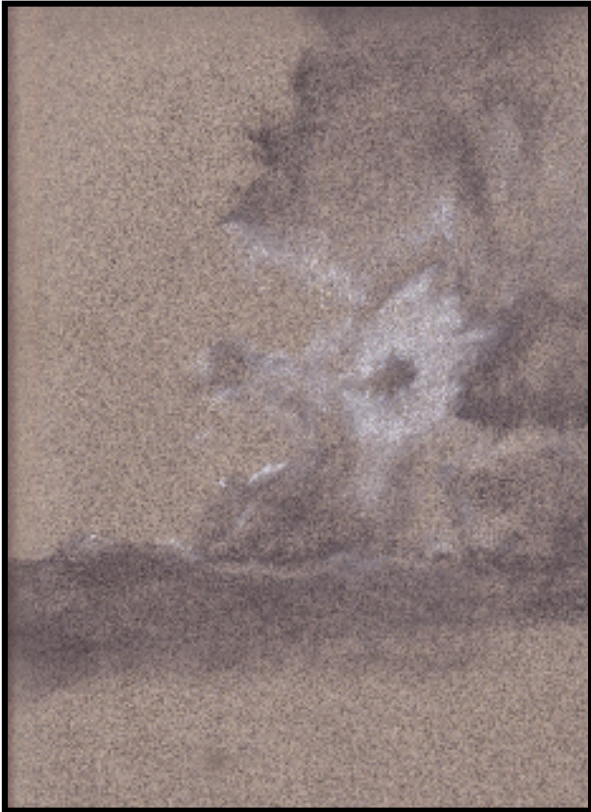


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enough to simply lift graphite or charcoal off the paper without destroying the paper's surface.

Shape the eraser to fit the area, then gently press it onto the surface, removing some charcoal. Use your kneaded eraser to gently lift off excess charcoal and create lighter values in the clouds and graduate the shading between light and dark areas. Do not rub back and forth. This will only drive the charcoal deeper into the tooth of the paper and make it more difficult to remove.



Using your kneaded eraser, start to dab it gently over the darker values in your drawing. The subtle removal of small amounts of charcoal will form the curves of the clouds, making them slightly lighter than the surrounding area and give depth and form.

Keep referring to your reference and carefully observe the changes in values in the cloud layers.

( Illustration 7)

You should now have your values in place and some structure to the cloud formation with three distinct values – light, mid and dark. Now comes the fun part – adding the final details!

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FINAL DETAILS

Go back into your drawing and start adding depth by increasing the dark values and adding highlights to the clouds. Keep blending your values so you have smooth transitions and no hard lines. These increases in values will bump up the contrasts and add drama to the clouds. The final image should make you think 'storm clouds' and want you to take cover!

( Illustration 8)

What does 'fixing' a drawing mean?

Fixatives are a spray mist applied to drawings, charcoal and pastel to help reduce smearing and protect your final drawing. They can also allow you to add additional layers when the tooth of the paper is filled.

A workable fixative allows the artist to spray and continue drawing over the spray, while a non-workable fixative doesn't.

'FIXING' YOUR DRAWING

Because charcoal smears very easily, you need to 'fix' it. Buy a quality spray workable fixative from your local art supply store. Work outside or in a room with good ventilation. Fumes from fixative are very strong and the product is highly flammable.

Before spraying your drawing, spray away from you or onto a throwaway drawing until you see a very fine mist coming from the can's nozzle. Initial sprays can contain large droplets that will leave spots on your drawing.

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Apply a light coat, not soaking your paper, at a 30-degree angle about 1 foot away from the drawing. Read the can's label for full instructions and safety precautions. Spray the fixative horizontally across the piece and let it dry. Then apply it vertically and allow that to dry.

CHALLENGE

Try drawing clouds from life. Sit in your garden or look out a window and draw the shapes and values of clouds that you can see. Use charcoal or graphite and see how each medium defines the clouds on your paper.

Once you know the technique for creating a cloud, you can apply that to any type of cloud that you wish to draw.

Happy drawing!

How are clouds named?

*Names for various types of clouds are derived from Latin and fall into three main categories; **cirrus**, the Latin name for a lock of hair, are the high-level wispy formation clouds; **cumulus**, after the Latin word for "pile" are the clouds found closer to the surface of the earth; and **stratus**, from the Latin word meaning "layers".*

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