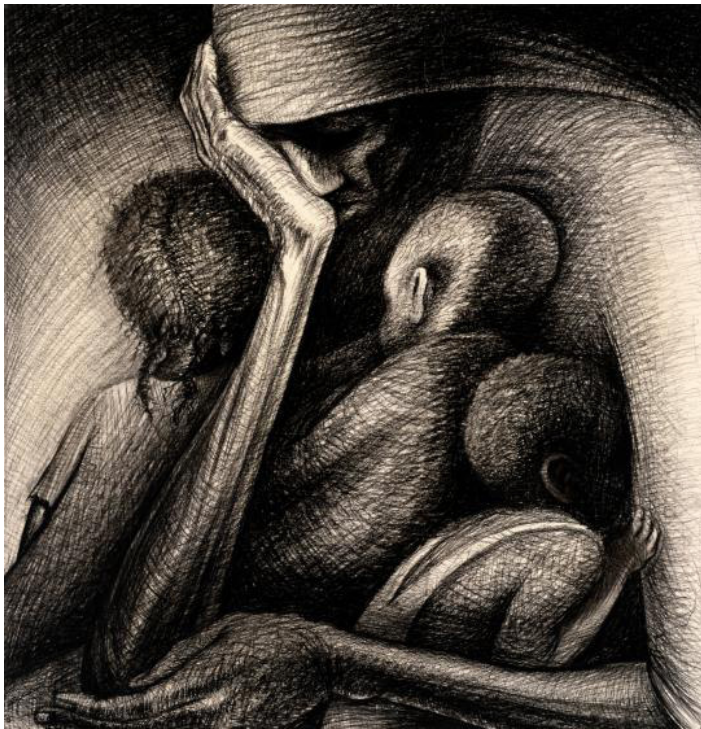


Ideas to Inspire and Invigorate the Art Classroom

Creating Charcoal Sketches



Kick start your students' creativity with new ideas, approaches, and materials designed to challenge participants and take their work to a new level. Each art activity provides detailed instructions and connections to works of art at the MFAH as well as a list of accessible, affordable supplies and where you can purchase them.

This idea is geared for high school instructors wanting to introduce sketching fundamentals with three basic forms of charcoal.

Connection to the MFAH Collection

John Biggers considered himself primarily a draftsman, and here he demonstrates his fine mastery of drawing. Central to *The Cradle* is the depiction of the mother, who cradles her children within her arms. This conveys the immense responsibility motherhood brings, as the woman shields her three young children from the impending darkness. Although the mother appears to be in despair as she holds her children close to her breast, her thin, elongated arms reveal sturdy, worked muscles suggestive of strength and resilience.

Drawn only in crayon, the background is composed of heavy crosshatching, a technique in which varying densities of parallel lines intersect one another to create areas of darkness. This method allowed Biggers to heighten the emotional energy of the work through the expressive background. His dramatic play of light and shadow, with black streaming from behind the figures, intensifies the mood of solitude and reflection. The curved lines of the children echo the curled body of the mother, who envelops her offspring.

Form, rather than detail, is prioritized. By rendering his forms stripped of detail, the artist draws attention to the essence of his figures, reinforcing the pensive solitude and peaceful stillness of this work. The mother and children speak to a universal theme of a mother-child relationship. Composed during a time of difficult transition for the artist, he found an outlet for his frustration in drawing: "I began to work with crayon. My mood must have dictated my sketching the rough contours of a primordial mother image. I thought, 'A mountain of refuge, ravaged by time, yet remaining both strong and tender—protecting life—poised to absorb hostility without flinching.'" *The Cradle* exemplifies Biggers's intrigue with motherhood, especially with regard to African American women. He not only saw motherhood as an enormous responsibility, but he also considered women to be at the heart of African and African American cultures.

Biggers was a new force on the Texas art scene in 1950, having recently joined the faculty of Texas Southern University, a historically Black university. Biggers was recognized by New York's Museum of Modern Art as early as 1943, and *The Cradle* was the first work by Biggers seen by Houston audiences. It was featured in the Museum's 25th Annual Houston Artists Exhibition, where it was awarded the purchase prize, and was the first work by an African American to enter the Museum's collection. This acquisition not only opened up a new area in the Museum's collection, it also marked the year that the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, abolished the segregationist admissions policy that had been put into place citywide during the Jim Crow era.

(Continued)

Gather These Art Materials

- Drawing paper or newsprint
- Charcoal pencils
 - Charcoal pencils come in a range from hard to soft, just like drawing pencils. The advantage of a charcoal pencil is that you can get a very fine point and apply quite a lot of pressure. The pencil casing will provide strength and cleanliness for the user. Charcoal pencils work well for fine details and small sketches.
- Vine or willow charcoal
 - Vine or willow charcoal is made from burned pieces of vine or wood. As such, it is quite soft and fragile. Be careful not to apply too much pressure when using vine charcoal to keep it from breaking. Vine charcoal is generally a bit silvery grey compared to the other types of charcoal and thus, it doesn't make the darkest blacks. Because these are natural forms of charcoal and use no binding agents, they are easier to erase or wipe away.
- Compressed charcoal sticks
 - Compressed charcoal sticks come in a range of hard and soft and sometimes different colors. This type produces a velvety smooth texture when drawing and blends beautifully. Stick charcoal can create a wide range of values, but is generally appreciated for its rich, intense blacks.
- Chamois
- Kneaded eraser

All supplies are available at most art supply stores or texasart.com.

Additional Information and Resources

To view a hi-res image of the work, visit the [MFAH Collection online database](#).

For additional information and resources from Learning Through Art series: <http://lta.mfah.org/LessonPlans/LessonPlan/LessonPlan-Details/1092>

An image of John Biggers in his studio: <https://emuseum.mfah.org/objects/35927/john-biggers-in-his-studio?ctx=3c087d-0c1ea2c2f0af60c70cabe909dd3b866008&idx=5>

The John T. Biggers Collection at Texas Southern University: <https://www.umusetsu.org/john-biggers-collection>

A story about the restoration of a historic John Biggers mural after damage sustained from Hurricane Harvey: <https://www.houston-chronicle.com/business/article/Restoration-of-historic-John-Biggers-mural-13536667.php>

Front: John Biggers, *The Cradle*, 1950, conté crayon on paper board, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 25th Annual Houston Artists Exhibition, museum purchase prize, 1950, 50.1. © John T. Biggers Estate / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, Estate Represented by Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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Instructions for Project Setup

Charcoal comes in three basic forms: pencil, vine, and stick. Play with all three forms to decide which you like to use. You will probably use more than one type in a sketch. For each charcoal, experiment by drawing lines and practicing shading. You can shade to fill larger areas by turning the charcoal on its side and making big sweeping motions. Also, try applying different amounts of pressure while you draw. The more pressure you apply, the darker and more solid your lines will appear.

1. To start your sketch, use either the side of your charcoal stick or vine charcoal to draw the basic shape of your subject using directional lines. Fill out your entire sheet of paper, trying not to leave large unused areas of space. Quickly put down lines and values to feel out the size and shape of your subject. Take time to look at how the light hits your subject and begin to block out large areas with the different values. Be careful not to get too dark too fast, by starting lighter you will be able to control the tones and values better.

2. Continue fleshing out your subject using both the side of your charcoal for larger areas and the point to create definition along the edges. Don't get too attached to anything yet.

3. Next, try using your chamois to wipe your entire drawing down. Blending with the chamois will give your sketch nice, light midtones that will enable you to later emphasize highlights with a kneaded eraser. Once you have achieved a good midtone, go back in and layer your deepest darks using the compressed charcoal, pushing the values more now that you have a toned, grey ground. Blending and layering the charcoal with this back and forth approach is the best way to reach your desired intensity in value.

4. Now that you have quite a range of dark values in your sketch, it's time to go in with a kneaded eraser and pull out some highlights. Knead your eraser to a suitable shape and gently swipe it over your paper in the areas where the light hits your subject. As your eraser gets black and dirty, simply knead it again to use for more highlights. You can also use a white pastel sparingly to further push your highlights.

5. Squint your eyes to see where the darkest darks and lightest lights are. Make sure you have a nice range of greys. A good rule of thumb is to put a dark background behind a light area in the subject and a light background behind a dark area in the subject. This creates a push and pull for the eye and helps to achieve a more three-dimensional sense of volume. Finish the sketch with some fine, detailed or expressive lines that further define your subject.

Now that you have the basics, gather your charcoal, chamois, and eraser, and start sketching! A good way to preserve your sketches is to spray them with fixative, which will keep your charcoal from smudging. Make sure to use spray fixatives in a well-ventilated area. Newsprint works great for fast sketches, but sketching paper is a more archival option.