

Exploring Light and Dark

Titus, the Artist's Son, painted by Rembrandt around 1657



Rembrandt is one of the most famous painters who lived during the Dutch Golden Age – a period of prosperity in the Netherlands that started in 1581 and lasted almost 100 years. He painted this portrait of his son Titus, who was around 16 years old at the time.

Rembrandt was born in Leiden but moved to Amsterdam as an adult, where he set up a very successful business as a portrait painter. He is also well known for painting lots of self portraits and over 40 of them survive today.

This portrait of Titus was probably painted in 1657, which wasn't a good year for Rembrandt. Despite his earlier success, he had lost almost all of his money the year before due to his extravagant lifestyle. Titus and his stepmother had to help Rembrandt sell his paintings to try and pay off his debts. This meant Titus had to take on a lot of responsibility when he was just a teenager.

Take a close look at this portrait. Can you see how Rembrandt has used light and dark to focus our attention on his son's serious expression? This clever use of light and dark is often called tonal value, which is an important aspect in many paintings but particularly notable in Rembrandt's work.

Learn more about tonal value and how to use light and dark in your own portraits using our suggested collage and drawing techniques, below.



Rembrandt often used only a limited range of earthy colours in his paintings.

Activity

Three-Tone Collage Portrait

Collage is an easy way to break down an image into areas of light and dark to help you understand tonal value.

You will need:

Three different tones of paper, scissors, and a glue stick.

Step 1.

Lay out three different tones of paper – we suggest black, grey and white but you can use any colours provided you have a dark, light and medium tone. If you don't have any black or grey paper, try using newspaper for your dark or mid tones.

Step 2.

Look carefully at your image. Cut your paper into shapes similar to the light and dark areas you see and arrange them to create your portrait. Start with larger shapes as a base and build up to the lightest tone in layers.

Step 3.

When you're happy with your portrait you can glue your pieces in place. To avoid losing track of where each piece goes it can be helpful to photograph each layer with your phone as you go.



Reverse Drawing Portrait

Reverse drawing is a great way to help you understand the tonal value of an image by focusing on the highlights.

You will need:

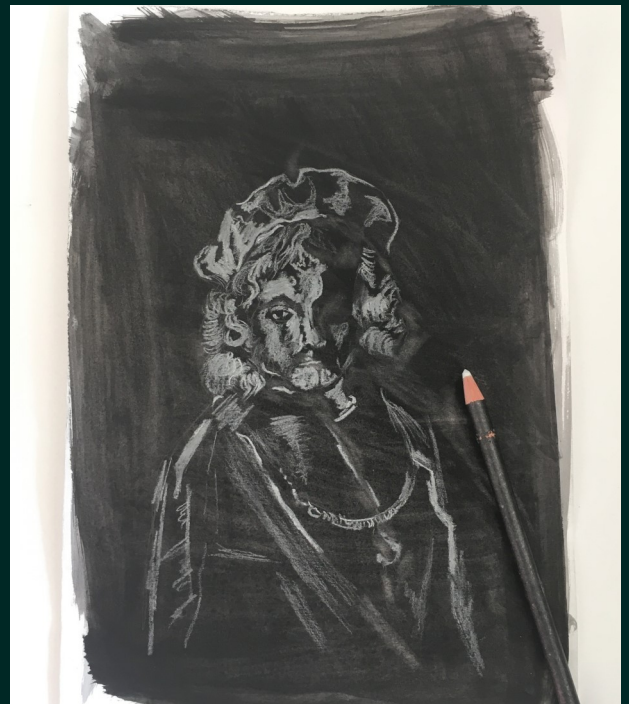
Dark paper and a white crayon, pastel or pencil.

Step 1.

Using your white crayon, start your drawing by marking out the lightest points you see (where the light falls on the shapes in your image). It can be helpful to half close your eyes when looking at your image to get a better idea of the lightest areas.

Step 2.

When you're happy with your highlights, continue to add softer marks for the mid tones, and go over the lightest marks again to build up a gradient in tone. Remember you're drawing in reverse, so you can simply leave the darkest areas blank.



Activity

Reductive Drawing Portrait

Reductive drawing, also called negative drawing, is a simple way to create a portrait using only light and dark tonal values.

You will need:

Drawing paper, a pencil, piece of charcoal or graphite stick, and a rubber.

Step 1.

Begin by covering an entire sheet of paper with broad charcoal or pencil strokes so that you have a large area of solid tone. Don't press too hard because you'll need to add darker tones later on.

Step 2.

Using a rubber, begin to remove the charcoal or graphite where you see the highlights in your image. It's important to think about where the light might fall on your subject and concentrate on rubbing out only those areas. After a while, the detail and outline of your figure will begin to emerge.

Step 3.

When you're happy that you've created all the highlights you can begin to work over your picture with your pencil or charcoal, this time building up the dark tones. These are the areas of shadow in your image. Don't worry if you add too much, you can always use your rubber to lighten up the area again, as well as to blend and soften any marks.

With a combination of rubbing out and filling in, you can build more and more detail into your image until it really comes to life.

Share your work with us.

Did you try our drawing and collage techniques? Which one was your favourite? Why not share them with us – we'd love to see your creations!

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