

# COMPOSITION

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## Teachers' Notes

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The Art of Drawing and Using a Sketchbook:  
Workshops for Key stages 3, 4 & 5 at the  
Wallace Collection



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**'If you have not got the knack of making a sketch of a man who has thrown himself out of the window whilst he is falling from the fourth storey to the ground, you will never be able to go in for the big stuff'.**

*Eugène Delacroix (19th-century French artist)*

This quotation from Delacroix highlights some of the qualities of the sketch: spontaneous, speedy, agile, imprecise and unfinished – an essential skill, used today by artists, architects and designers alike.

These notes are designed to accompany the KS3 –KS5 workshops on The Art of Drawing and Using a Sketchbook at The Wallace Collection and to support the KS3 – KS5 national curriculum targets for Art & Design and Design & Technology. The notes provide a summary of the sessions, some information on the key works of art used and some ideas on follow-up work.

By introducing a range of drawing activities including annotation of sketches, rapid drawing, making best use of the page and making restatements as opposed to erasing, the gallery based sketching will help students develop their sketchbooks – a personal space to gather information, record observations and explore design ideas.

## The Workshop

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Students should bring their own sketch/workbooks; artist quality materials will be provided.

Following a brief introduction to the Wallace Collection, the tutor will discuss what the students understand by the term 'composition', any problems encountered with composition and what their expectations are for the session. Different approaches to composition will be discussed.

Through a series of sketching activities (see "Sketching Activities" below) students will learn new drawing techniques, hone observational skills and experiment with a range of dry drawing media including graphite sticks, Conté crayons, lead pencils of varying grades and different coloured and toned papers.

Sketching takes place in the galleries, where the emphasis will be on close looking to gather information, based on observational drawing from objects and works of art including paintings, armour and furniture. Illustrated below are a selection of the main artworks which are typically used in this session, but these may vary depending on the tutor.

Sessions are of two or four hour's duration, with each covering the same ground but with the longer session including an extended range of drawing activities.

### Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, Italy, probably 1554 - 1556, Oil on Canvas (P11)

Students to make 3 sketches, using different line quality and marks.

Expressive line to show the pose/action line; controlled scribble to show the overall mass and a controlled line to define the negative spaces to understand the importance of the positioning of the subject on the canvas.

Very brief, outline sketches of the two main figures to contrast their poses and placement on the canvas.



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### Diego Velazquez, *The Lady with a Fan*, Spain, c. 1640, Oil on Canvas (P88)

This is a subtle composition, based on a network of near-horizontals and verticals.

Students to analyse the painting and make a sketch to record this compositional framework; the resulting sketch will probably look like an abstract drawing! A second sketch will be made by only drawing the negative shapes and spaces within and around the figure; this will aid an understanding of the importance of the positioning of the subject on the canvas as a compositional decision.



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### Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Italy, c. 1634 - c. 1636, Oil on Canvas (P108)

This painting has been admired for the beauty of its frieze-like composition and draughtsmanship, inspired by classical art.



Students will be asked to look for and draw the

horizon line as well as the structural framework - mainly verticals and horizontals - used to create a sense of balance and calm, and to observe how the placing of the figures, their gestures and facial expressions contribute to the overall image.

The tutor will explain the Golden Section and suggest how and where Poussin may have used this to help organise the composition.

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### Francois Boucher, *The Rising of the Sun*, France, 1753, Oil on Canvas (P485)

The design of this very large, complex painting is used to discuss how artists arranged their compositions to convey a design idea, suggest scale, tell a story or express an emotion.



To investigate the compositional techniques used, students will work from a reproduction of the image and make a tracing, looking for the circles, diagonals and swirls which underpin the composition and discover how Boucher planned the overall scheme. Sketches will also be annotated to note colour harmonies and other devices used to form a coherent whole

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## Unknown Artist/Maker, Visored bascinet, Italy, c. 1390 – c. 1410, low-carbon steel and other materials (A69)

This helmet, of a type possibly used at Agincourt, can be regarded not only as armour but also a sculpture in steel, designed (i.e. composed) to marry function and appearance.

Students can sketch this 'in the round', identifying the main components which make up the whole. This activity allows students to experiment and make decisions about where to place their sketch on the page, an important compositional issue



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## Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *The Dead Roe*, France, 1721, Oil on Canvas (P630)



Tutor to point out how the artist has placed the animals and objects in a very shallow, pictorial space, so that the viewer feels close up to the scene. The composition is underpinned by swirls and semi-circles (Rococo motifs) and the two dogs frame the scene.

Viewfinders will be used to isolate and sketch 5 main shapes to show the main masses and compositional structure. Each student will create their own, 'mini-composition' by using the viewfinder to isolate and draw small part of the painting.

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## Sketching Activities

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The core activities will comprise the following, with some variations from session to session if temporary room closures dictate:

- Explanation of the main types of compositional structure used by artists
- Working from a large, complex composition, tracings from colour reproductions will be made to analyse the underlying design and planning of the image.
- Students will then sketch from the same painting, looking for colour harmonies, and other compositional devices used to form a coherent whole.
- Different drawing techniques will be suggested: expressive line to show pose/action line; controlled scribble to show overall mass and drawing negative spaces to understand the importance of the positioning of the subject on the canvas.
- Viewfinders and the technique of squinting will be used to isolate and then sketch 5 main shapes in a still life painting, to show main masses and compositional structure and to isolate an area as a new composition.
- With the same painting, students to make a sketch which shows the horizon line, a very important feature of most compositions. Identify the focal point(s) to see how the artist has established the centre of interest.
- Sketch from a selection of paintings to find evidence of frameworks of horizontals and verticals and the location of the horizon.
- Tutor to explain artists' use of the Golden Section.

## Follow up Activities

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Further discussion on how the Wallace artists used composition, a method of organising a subject, of deciding what to put in and what to leave out in order to make an effective picture.

Composition is, in effect, the skeleton or backbone of the picture. To build up a composition, an artist therefore has to make a number of decisions that include:

- The overall proportions of the paper or canvas
- How to stress the main objects and centres of interest
- How to organise the scene to give pleasure to the eye
- Where will the horizon line (i.e. eye level) be placed?
- How to choose a point of view to observe the scene

Students to review their sketches and the paintings used, to analyse how the artists went about arranging their compositions.

## Some ideas for further reading:

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**Felicity Allen:** *Your Sketchbook Your Self* (Tate Publishing, 2011)

**Gillian Robinson, Alison Mountain, David Hulston:** *Think inside the sketchbook* (HarperCollins, 2011)

**Sam Piyasena & Beverly Philp:** *Just Draw It!* (Search Press, 2013)

In the Wallace Collection bookshop you will find several helpful books on the various sections of the collection, including the paintings, armour, furniture and Sèvres porcelain.