

*From Big Textures to the Tiniest Patterns*

*Since graphite pencil only gets so dark, I turned to black colored pencil when I wanted realism and texture that rivaled that of the Old Masters. In Eliza Ann Harker Bennion (12 × 10 ½), I created the background with more than 30 layers of light lines and absolutely no rubbing, since I wanted the slight texture of the paper to come through to give the background more energy. Note that I also used lights with cast shadows or gentle darks more than dark lines for more natural-looking wrinkles and hair. And colored pencil made it easy to sculpt the detail of the tiny scallop design in the dress into curves and movement.*





# Pencil-Perfect Renderings

For smudgeless darks and incredible detail, reach for black colored pencils.

BY ANN JAMES MASSEY with Sandra Angelo

**A**n instant from life. Frozen in detail. I was captivated by that when I stood in front of a Jan Vermeer painting (*Young Woman With A Water Jug*) as a youth. Even then, I knew that recreating a moment from ordinary life was what I wanted to do. And the detailed approach I saw in the Vermeer was the way I wanted to do it.

Because pencil lends itself so well to detail, I began experimenting with it. My goal was to achieve the same sense of depth, texture and realism as the Dutch Masters had.

Graphite could only go so far. What finally gave me the control and depth I wanted was black colored pencil. It doesn't smear like graphite or charcoal, and it allows me to create gradual, almost indiscernible value changes. I can also achieve very deep black values with the wax pencil, creating sharp contrasts that produce a strong sense of depth.

Although I spent many years learning to draw from life, I've found that precise detail requires the use of photographs. Photos can arrest time, freeze a gesture or a glance, and preserve the spontaneity of the moment. I often move objects or correct distortions that may be present in the photos; nevertheless, the photographs help me see the gradual value changes I want to capture. (I use color photos as well as black and white).

I begin each drawing with a loose gesture sketch to position the subject on the page. To concentrate on action more than precision, I allow only three minutes for this preliminary drawing. This gives me a

loose interpretation of the photo and prevents the stiffness associated with tracing or projecting the image.

Once I'm satisfied with the relationships between the positive and negative spaces, I tighten the drawing on tracing paper. I use my own transfer paper (tracing paper coated with graphite) to move the detailed image onto a sheet of Bristol board. This process calls for a very sharp, No. 2 graphite pencil and medium pressure to avoid paper indentations. I sharpen about 20 or 30 pencils beforehand so I don't have to stop whenever one gets slightly dull; I simply grab a new one.

## TAKING SHAPE

With 40 to 90 presharpended, needle-point, black colored pencils at the ready, I start on the real heart of the drawing. But first, I place a small piece of tracing paper under my hand to prevent stains and smears.

Resting the pencil gently in my hand, I use the weight of the pencil to mark the paper. I never use a pencil shorter than five inches because this requires too tight a grip (like the grip for writing). The pencil rests in my hand loosely and glides over the paper. Short strokes (no more than an inch) allow for even gradations of value.

In the first stage, I lightly block in the values. This drawing gives me a map of the shadows. Then, I begin to build the objects with soft, gradual value changes, placing the deepest values in the folds of fabrics and in the darkest shadows. Gradually, using light, short strokes, I allow the value to lighten as the object or shape moves toward the light. I analyze each shadow and look for signs of reflected

light at the edges, determining the harsh and soft sides of the shadow.

Real life isn't a coloring book where a shape is outlined and you just fill in the blank space. Instead, changes in values define the edges of objects. It's this effect that I try to capture with the layering technique. Keeping all strokes in the same direction, I layer very gradually, often building as many as 15 to 20 layers of pencil before I'm satisfied with the value gradations. Dark values are made with successive layers, not heavy pressure.

Because I layer so gradually and put only slight pressure on the pencil, I don't have the slick buildup normally associated with wax colored pencils. And because I don't

have to fight this buildup, known as wax bloom, there's no need for a fixative. However, to protect and preserve my drawings, I mat them with archival-quality mats and frame them behind glass. (If colored pencil work is placed directly against glass, the glass will pick up the wax from the drawing.)

Before the final stage of matting and framing, I place the drawing on a distant wall and compare it to the photo reference. Then I put the photo away and examine the drawing by itself, from an artistic standpoint. If some values need to be increased, I gently push these darks with more layers. I try to plan the drawing well enough so I don't have to make corrections; but



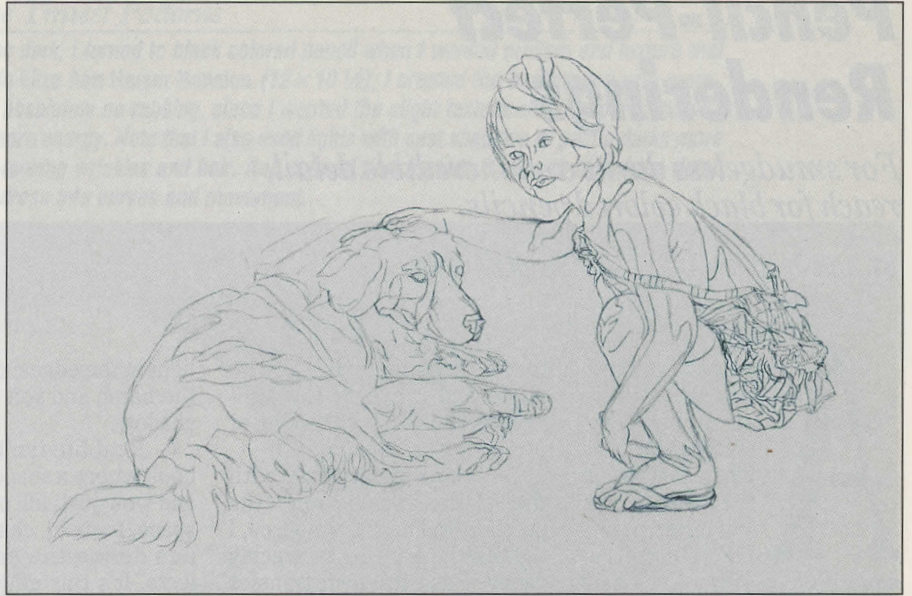
## Pushing the Contrast

*Snowy Afternoon (11 x 10)* is a study of the high contrast that can be achieved with black colored pencil. The beauty of the pencil lies in its deep, saturated darks. These create clean, controlled values without the smearing associated with graphite or charcoal.



### Step One: A Shadow Map

*I captured the action with a loose gesture sketch, forcing myself to record the action in just three minutes. I worked it out further on tracing paper, then transferred the completed drawing, with contours where the shadows should be, onto watercolor paper. I sharpened more than 40 black colored pencils so they'd be at the ready as I rendered.*



### Step Two: Add Layers

*First, I lightly indicated the shadows to get a preliminary value study of the darks and lights in my drawing. The entire drawing, except the white highlight in the eye, got a light covering of value. Then, I began refining the drawing, building light strokes to create graduated value changes. The pencil is very sharp, and the strokes vary in length from one-sixteenth to one inch. I'm careful to overlap the lines to prevent breaks between sections.*



### Step Three: Getting More Precise

*For convincing hair, I first rendered the dark shapes underneath the hair to help indicate its values from underneath. I paid very close attention to each section of hair, making sure it was draped naturally, rather than appearing neatly coiffed.*





### Step Four: Contrast and Compare

I studied each fold in the fabric to determine the light source and the underlying structure that's causing the folds to drape in a particular direction. I like to use a variety of textures, even in a simple piece like Penny (5½ × 9), where I juxtaposed the soft baby skin against the detailed ruffles, the rubber thongs with the dog's shaggy fur. The contrast holds the viewer's interest and mine.



if I do, I lift the color with a kneaded eraser (be aware, though, that the waxiness of the pencil doesn't let it lift easily). I judge the depth of the drawing and make sure the relationship between darks and lights works. Because of the intricate detail, my drawings are often viewed up close, but I want them to work equally well from across the room.

Capturing a slice of life with pencil brings me great satisfaction. With paper, pencil and patience, I'm able to

briefly paralyze the headlong rush of time.

Some critics may scoff at photorealism as simply "copying" reality, but it isn't. I always attempt to present the subject in a way that involves the viewer, that brings his or her personal experiences into the work. Although I love to record what I see, I hope to stir in the viewer the same emotions I felt when I encountered that Vermeer years ago. ■

### About the Artist

A passion for detail and a deep admiration for the Dutch Masters have guided Ann James Massey toward a mastery of realism. Her studies at the Paris American Academy and the Schuler School of Art in Baltimore have proven invaluable in this continual pursuit of perfection.



With numerous awards for her drawings over the past 20 years, Massey entered her first painting in the annual show at El Paso's Museum of Art, and walked away with the "Best of Show" award. That work is now part of the museum's permanent collection.

Her work has been exhibited at the El Paso Museum of Art, The Muscarelle Museum of Art, the Panhandle Plains Historical Museum, and in numerous national exhibitions and galleries. She works out of her gallery, Massey Fine Arts, in Santa Teresa, New Mexico.