

Renaissance Art Project: Create a Silverpoint Drawing

Before we had ink pens and graphite pencils, scribes and artists in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance used metal styluses to make notes and create art. Silverpoint, drawings made by scratching silver on specially treated paper and allowing it to tarnish, were especially popular because the fine metal point allowed artists to create exquisitely detailed work. Silverpoint's popularity eventually declined because making the styluses and preparing the paper was labor-intensive. But nowadays, with modern art and hobby stores at the ready, this beautiful drawing style is easy to recreate.

Revive silverpoint by making a silver stylus! In this activity, your high schooler will learn how to prepare specialized paper called 'ground' and to put together a stylus with gauge wire and a mechanical pencil. The result? A silverpoint sketch that she can turn into a historical model, an unusual art project, or funky decor for her bedroom!



What You Need:

- 4" x 4" square of art board or heavy paper that will not bend
- Paintbrush
- Mechanical pencil
- 2" to 4" of 16-24 gauge wire in sterling silver, pure silver, or copper which can be purchased in an art or hobby store. The gauge depends on the size of the mechanical pencil; these sizes are approximate.
- Metal or needle file
- White gouache, an opaque version of watercolor
- Sketch or image you want to draw such as flowers and animals, other elements of nature, or a portrait

What You Do:

1. Prepare your drawing surface. Coat the paper or art board with several layers of gouache. Let the paper dry completely between layers.
2. Make your "silver" stylus. File one end of the 16-24 gauge wire to a point. This will be your main drawing tool. You can file the other end of the wire so that it is more rounded and use it for drawing as well. A length of wire will last awhile and can be used for many silverpoint drawings.
3. Empty the mechanical pencil. Insert the filed length of wire into the mechanical pencil.
4. With the pencil, draw the desired image on the coated paper. Take care not to put too much pressure on the drawing tool—you don't want to crack, chip, or cut through your surface. It may take some practice to be able to tell when you are cutting through the surface and when you are laying down metal. Silverpoint drawing is a slow technique, so expect to spend some time on even a small piece.
5. When your piece is finished, display it as you wish. Because the tiny specks of silver in the surface of the drawing will tarnish, know that your picture and the details you've drawn will darken over time, especially if exposed to sunlight.