Choosing Subject Matter and Preliminary Drawing

When it comes to choosing subject matter / visual stimulus there are three options you can choose from, you can either:

1. **Draw from life**
   - Go outside to a tree that you know in a park or wood, taking your sketching materials and perhaps a hiking chair! Find an angle that is aesthetically pleasing to you, and do several sketches, focusing on areas that appeal to you.

2. **Take photos and print at home**
   - Or you can go for a walk, taking photos of interesting trees on the way, and choose when you get home which one(s) to sketch. It is best to print out your reference photo if you can.

3. **Search the internet for a suitable tree scene – but try not to copy other artists’ work!**
   - If going outside is not possible, it’s ok to search the internet for your visual stimulus. Perhaps you’re looking for a certain species of tree such as an oak, or a very twisty olive tree, or you’re after a certain perspective or landscape surrounding it.

The important thing is to choose a tree that you really love, whether you’ve seen it in real life or not!

**Ask yourself:**

What are the **physical aspects** that you really want to bring out? What are the key features that excite you about this tree? Is it the shape and curve of the branches, is it the foliage or the blossom? Is it the shadows and plays of light? Think about the observational, aesthetic details and depth.

What are its **invisible attributes**? What are the feelings that it transmits? (Peace, calmness, mystery)? One of your jobs as an artist is to capture an atmosphere and bring it out in your visual representation.
Examples of potential visual stimulus:

You can focus on the main branches and leave out others.

Is the sun shining through?

You can notice dark areas and where the branches are covered by blossom or leaves.

Example of a tree drawn from life (left). Certain areas were exaggerated at the end of the drawing, and the drawing was used to create this painting (right).

Example of Tree Photo used as demonstration in this course:

This photo was desaturated on Photoshop because I want to focus on the form (the shape).
In the drawing, first we will think about the **shape**, then we will think about **tone**, and then we will think about **composition, colour**, and other aspects as we approach the painting stage.

**Please note that there is an “If you get stuck” section if you scroll down this handout!**

Assess your paper and think about the size of your tree and how to fit in everything you want. It is best to start with the trunk, where does it feature in relation to the rest of the tree?

If you were drawing a tree like this, you would have to start in the bottom right hand corner of your paper (landscape orientation) in order to have enough space for the rest of the tree.

My tree’s trunk is central, so I am starting in the middle bottom area of my paper and working upwards and outwards.

**Drawing tips when starting your drawing:**

1. Hold the pencil quite lightly and not too far down. You don’t want to press too hard because that’s hard to rub out. You’re just establishing the general shape at the moment.
2. Keep your pencil sharp and have a rubber and sharpener nearby. It’s fine to use your rubber but persevere with your pencil too!
3. Notice the points when the trunk is bumpy and then starting to slant off into the branches.
4. Keep noticing how different branches relate to each other proportionally.
5. Bear in mind your key aspects and what you like about this treel For me it’s unity, harmoniousness and life-declaring.
6. Try to get fully immersed in the drawing process, with as few distractions as possible from other people/pets etc. Ten minutes of undivided concentration is better than one hour of being constantly interrupted!
In Diagram 1, the trunk is established, and the main branches are starting to appear. The form is beginning to emerge. A lot of flicking the eye back and forth from the subject matter to the paper is happening currently (note that no shading is happening yet).

In Diagram 2, the main shapes are established and I’m starting to go back over where I’ve already been, getting more confident and making firmer lines. I’m adding in minor branches, and starting to put in a bit of tone (shading).

In Diagram 3, some areas have been exaggerated and emphasised, and dark/light areas have been defined. Some of the smaller, thinner branches have been drawn more lightly.

Make notes:

It helps to make notes about key aspects or areas you find difficult. Use your sketchbook as a notebook as well as for drawings.

Well done, your drawing has established a strong foundation for painting!

You should have developed a firm understanding of your tree: its shape, the negative space between the branches, any recurring patterns, as well as light and dark areas.
Remember, a good, careful, well-observed drawing prepares the way for doing a successful painting. You solve problems and lay down the visual information that you need later on.

Also, if it comes into your imagination to put in another feature such as a bird, nest, symbol or even a person, feel free to let your creativity flow! This is your artwork and your opportunity to create something unique. So, let your personality shine through!

“If you get stuck”

If you get stuck while drawing, go back to the point where you were not stuck and re-start from there! If any areas do not make sense, you can either simplify it or leave it out if observing isn’t working out for you.

If you find your subject matter too difficult, it may be that it is a bit ambitious. Perhaps there are too many branches to take in, or odd shapes. It can take a while to train your eye to isolate visual information, so if you are really not enjoying it, choose a simpler tree with just three or four main branches as this can less overwhelming.

Don’t worry about changing your mind and doing several sketches of different trees. It may be that you need to do several drawings to help you decide which one you like best.

Foliage:

Do not worry about drawing every single leaf, unless you want to do a close-up of part of a tree. I often separate areas of foliage by using a “cloud shape technique” and letting the paper shine through those areas where the leaves will be. (See drawing below). You can always bring in a couple of coloured pencils to assist with blocking in those areas, if it helps.

Painting your background:

- A medium to large sized canvas – 40x50cm or larger
- A charcoal or pastel pencil/charcoal stick
- A set of acrylic paints – Daler Rowney System 3/Graduate is good, Art Discount ok
- A set of paintbrushes: 1 fairly large to paint background, and 3 or 4 small to medium for branches and leaves
- A water pot/jam jar
• A paper towel folded in half to dab your brush on
• Optional: Golden Extra Heavy Gel Gloss or texture paste

Preparation for painting:

Think about what you want to “bring out” in your artwork. What do you want to magnify? What do you want to draw attention to?

It can be advantageous to do a second sketch where you make decisions about colour using watercolour pencils or coloured pencils.

Composition: Do you want it to be portrait (vertical rectangle, just the tree itself) or landscape (horizontal rectangle with more landscape and surrounding area included)?

Does it make sense for it to be square?

Do you want your tree to fill the canvas or do you want some space around it?

Examples of painting styles/compositions/colour choices:

This orchard scene includes other smaller trees in the background, which gives the sense of perspective.

These trees are painted in an impressionistic style using dabs of colour which are not blended too much into each other.
Painting 1 is all about dappled light with the suggestion of a horizon and a foreground shadow.

Painting 2 uses more muted colours to give the impression of an autumn atmosphere.

When you have chosen your canvas, hold your drawing in front of it to get an idea of how much you need to enlarge it. Keep your drawing near you as you prepare to paint your background.

**Starting Background:**

Aim to make a nice, clean, even background for your tree.

**Choose three to five main colours of acrylic paint.** I chose cerulean blue, white, light green, dark green and lemon yellow (sky and grass!). Using a medium-large brush, apply paint fairly quickly with a bit of water mixed in to your paint.

**This is not the time for details;** you need a background for your tree to “hang on”. I like to follow the rough shape of the tree with my brushstrokes to get really into it, intuitively echoing the shape of the tree. If you are including more of the landscape and horizon, you might want to paint in more horizontal movements.

**Surface:** Make sure the canvas is completely covered and that the paint is smooth and of an even consistency. As the paint dries you might need to revisit any patchy “holey” areas.

**Notice how your paint behaves:** Some paints are more transparent than others. Get familiar with your white and what your more opaque colours are. They can help more transparent colours appear more opaque and thick.

At this stage, don’t worry if it seems very basic or not very visually appealing. This is laying a foundation for the second layer, and most of it will be covered up! We are setting the scene here.

Once your background is painted leave it to dry, in lesson two we will begin painting the tree on to the canvas.

**Enjoy your first lesson!**

Chat with your tutor Madeleine in the Drawing and Painting Nature: Tree’s private Facebook group! This group has been set up exclusively for members of Drawing and Painting Nature, as a place to ask questions, get feedback on your work and share experiences, tips, and advice with fellow students.