

Talking Points: What is Chiaroscuro?

Text and images to help you explore the idea of Chiaroscuro (light and dark) in art.

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What is Chiaroscuro?

Chiaroscuro is an Italian term which literally means 'light-dark'. Artists have used it for centuries to help them describe form, and to create atmosphere or mood.

To appreciate that the artist is using the chiaroscuro technique, squint at the artwork. Half close your eyes and notice how you can now see the light and the dark, but not the mid tones. You can also use this technique to help you see light and dark when looking at a still life, landscape or interior which you are about to draw.

Find more information on [Google Arts and Culture](#).



Leonardo da Vinci's Saint John the Baptist
(1513-1516)

Art UK: The Superpower of Looking explores Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*



Strange Flower (Little Sister of the Poor) (1880)

by [Odilon Redon](#). Original from the Art Institute of Chicago



Moonlight, Strandgade 30, 1900–1906 [Vilhelm Hammershøi](#)



A Good Pool, Saguenay River (1895) by Winslow Homer. Original from The Clark Art Institute.

Questions to Ask Children

How does emphasising the light and the dark help create mood and atmosphere?

Can you always tell in which direction the light source is?

Has the artist actually used “black” and “white” or are the light and dark areas different tones of “grey”?

Using Chiaroscuro

Chiaroscuro relies on you being able to create tonal values on a page which have enough difference between them. For example, you need to be able to create a “dark dark” and a “light

light”.

Depending on the medium you are using, there are different ways of achieving this. For example if you are using graphite (pencil) then you might create dark darks by cross hatching, repeat shading, intense pressure etc etc, and you might create light lights by using the pencil very softly – or even leaving the light of the paper to shine through. If you are using ink, you might like to use your ink undiluted for the dark darks, and diluted for the light lights.

Take a look at these resources to help you explore Chiaroscuro.

See Three Shapes



Drawing by Torch Light



Graphic Sketches



Drawing Flames



This Talking Points Is Used In...

Pathway: Gestural Drawing with charcoal



[This is featured in the 'Gestural Drawing with Charcoal' pathway](#)

ADDITIONAL PATHWAY: AN EXPLORATION OF COAL MINING, INSPIRED BY HENRY MOORE

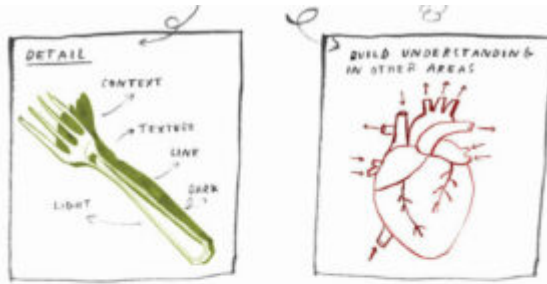


This is featured in the 'An Exploration of Coal Mining, Inspired by Henry Moore' pathway

using sketchbooks to make visual notes



Show me what you see



SHOW ME WHAT YOU SEE METHOD:

1) GUIDE SEEING

"SHOW ME..."

2) RULES



3) CHALLENGE EXPECTATIONS

4) COUNT DOWN