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WHAT IS SILVERPOINT?

The ubiquitous pencil (a piece of graphite inside a hollow tube of wood) wasn't an option for a 15th century Renaissance draftsman – it hadn't been invented yet. Most early artists learned to draw using charcoal, ink, or a nib of metal stuck in a stylus, known as metal point. Copper, gold, lead and other metals were used, but silver was the most popular.

Ordinary paper will not work with silverpoint. The drawing surface needs a bit of “tooth”, to imperceptibly abrade the silver nib. This leaves behind a small deposit of metal that appears as a faint line. Traditional gesso, made from rabbit skin glue and chalk, has a pleasingly smooth surface yet sufficient tooth from chalk. It is an ideal ground for silverpoint.

A silverpoint line is delicate. It cannot be erased. Like egg tempera, it is generally built up in many carefully applied layers. Other mediums may be applied on top to extend silverpoint's range: ink, charcoal, or graphite to deepen the darks; white gouache, tempera or chalk to accentuate the lights. Overtime silver tarnishes, a prized characteristic of silverpoint drawings.

