

Koo Schadler

What is Metalpoint?

The ubiquitous pencil (a piece of graphite inside a hollow tube of wood) wasn't an option for a 15th century, Renaissance draftsman – pencils hadn't been invented yet. Instead, most early artists learned to draw using ink, chalk, or metalpoint.

A metalpoint drawing tool consists of a “nib” (short, thin cylinder) of metal stuck in a stylus. Copper, gold, bronze, brass, platinum, lead, and other metals may be used; however a point made from silver was, and still is, the most popular metal to draw with. Hence the medium is often referred to as “silverpoint”. Other metal objects, such as a wool pad, coin, key, ring – in fact, nearly anything made of a sufficiently soft metal – also may be used as mark making tools.

Ordinary paper will not work with most metalpoints.¹ A drawing surface must be coated to create sufficient “tooth”, or abrasiveness, in order for a metal to leave its mark (literally, a deposit of metal). Many different paints and grounds (including gouache, watercolor, traditional gesso, acrylic gesso, egg tempera), as long as they contain hard pigments or solids that impart abrasion (such as titanium white, zinc white, silica, bone ash), can provide sufficient tooth for metalpoint drawing. Artists also may color a ground, by adding colored pigments, so as to begin a drawing on a light to mid value surface; metalpoint marks create the mid to dark values; light values are rendered by “heightening” the image with white paint or chalk.

Metalpoint lines are delicate and precise, with a limited value range (no deep darks). They cannot be easily erased. Like an egg tempera painting, metalpoint drawings are generally built up in many, many carefully applied layers. Over time some metals, such as silver and copper, tarnish; this is a much-prized characteristic of genuine metalpoint drawings.

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¹ The exceptions are very soft, easy abraded metals, such as lead and tin; they can leave a faint mark when drawn across ordinary paper.