

Skies and Clouds

Start by just looking up.

Ever since a fellow artist challenged me to include a sky in one of my drawings, I have been keeping my mind in the clouds. I am continually amazed at the beauty of just looking up in the sky! Over the past couple of years, I have been learning the importance of toning the sky and adding clouds as part of overall compositional improvement in my landscapes. I think I could spend hours and hours fiddling with each puff of white!

Start looking up to the sky and observe cloud formations. Take photos of clouds and you will be amazed at what you will start to “see”!

What’s the purpose of a sky?

Is it important to put a sky in? There isn’t any clouds in the sky so why should I shade it? I use to think this and if you visit my website, you will see many of my earlier works did not include a toned sky. For a long time I didn’t even “see” tone in the sky. It wasn’t until recently that I realized the impact of adding a toned sky to the overall landscape. Here are some of the things a toned sky will do for your drawing:

- 1) Broadens the range of tones available in your drawing. The white of the paper can now represent the highlights only.
- 2) Creates uniformity to your drawing composition
- 3) Adds an additional sense of reality to your landscape.
- 4) Adds atmosphere and sets the ‘mood’ of the scene.

Here is a drawing done to illustrate the importance of a toned sky and why the sky/clouds should be considered in the overall compositional study of any landscape.

In this series of drawings, I have chosen to a very simple scene with a white barn. My only variable in the three drawings is the inclusion of a sky and clouds.

The first image is a drawing without a sky. The drawing is very stark and the sky (the white of the paper) is competing with the white of the barn.

The second image is much better by adding a toned sky. The white barn is now the focal point as the toned sky accentuates and brings the entire scene together much better.

The third image incorporates a toned sky as well as including clouds. The clouds add depth to the scene as the clouds recede into the distance. They also create a visual directional flow for the viewer. The clouds lead the eye through the drawing and add interest as well.



Cloud Formations and Cloud Types

- Stratus - Wispy light clouds
- Cumulus – white puffy...cottony
- Dramatic – rain clouds - thunderheads
- Back lit clouds - sunsets

TIPS:

- Skies are lighter at the horizon and go darker as you go up the sky
- Clouds use perspective – smaller and tighter the farther in the distance they are
- Unless the sky is the central part of the drawing, light wispy or under-stated clouds work well
- Use clouds to lead the viewer through your landscape
- Clouds have form and are 3 dimensional – they just don't have any lines or hard edges
- The more dramatic clouds – the darker the base tone should be (this allows more range of tones)

Drawing Materials:

This is a very specific list of the materials that I use. Substitutions can certainly be used. Experimentation and adjustments are expected to customize these techniques to your style of drawing.

- .5 mm Mechanical Pencils F and 2H lead
- Chamois
- Tortillion - small
- Blu-Tack
- White plastic eraser
- Small Ruler or T-square
- Strathmore 300 Series Bristol Board
- Make-up brush

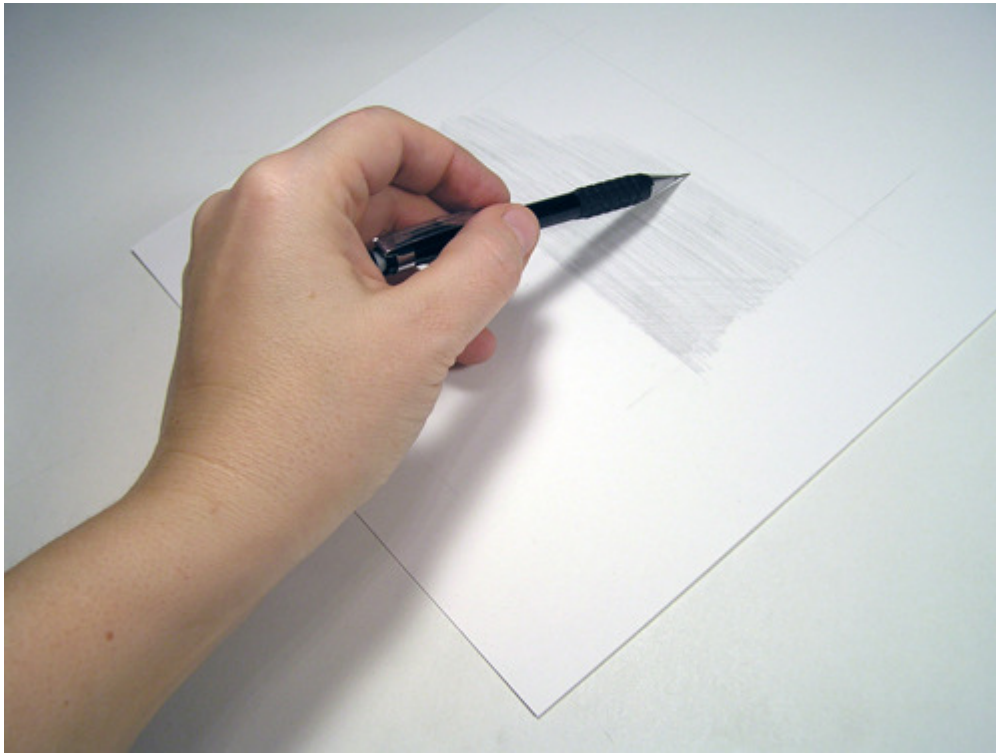
DOWNLOAD AVAILABLE:

The following tutorial is available on my website and can be downloaded in .pdf format.

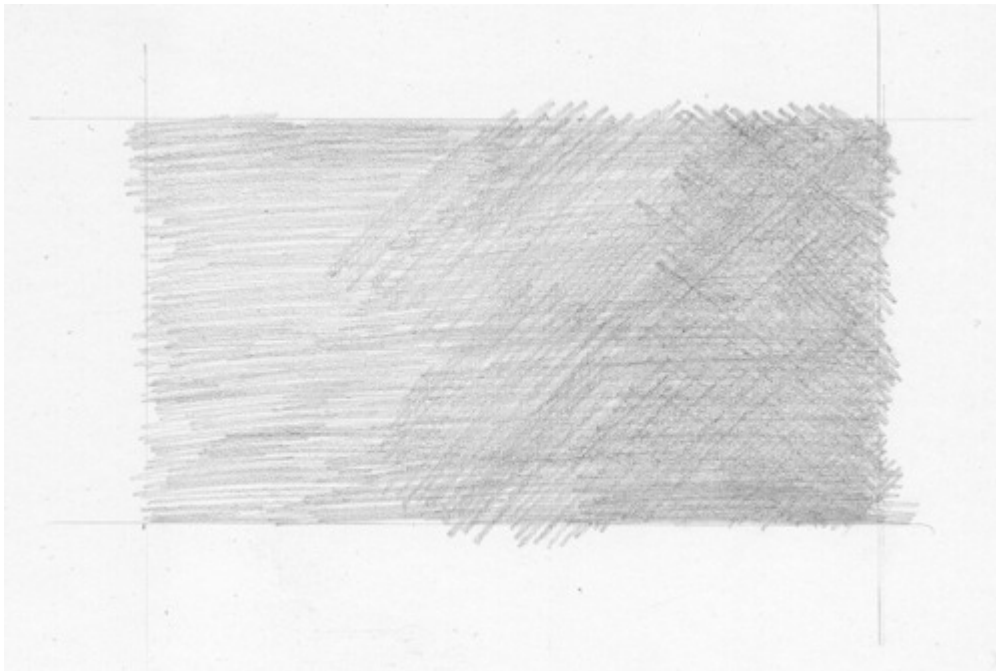
4 Steps - Drawing a Sky with Clouds:

STEP 1 - CROSS-HATCHING

I use a loose-hold hand position when creating the cross-hatching. I find the just weight of the pencil on the paper will create pencil strokes that are light and consistent.



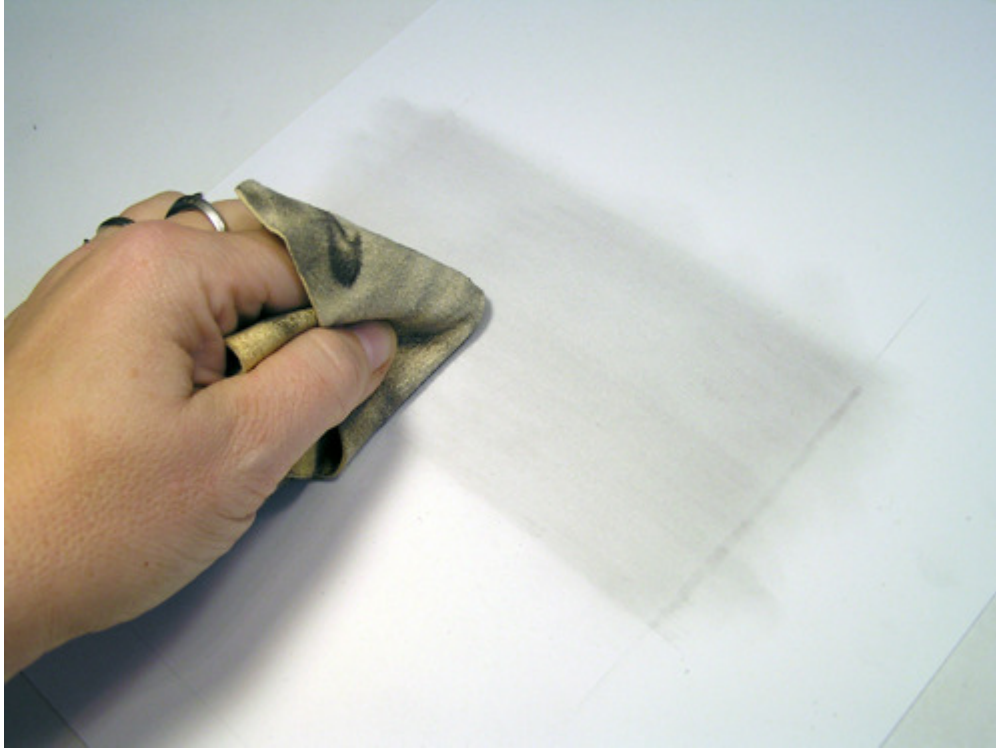
I cross-hatch 3 layers of graphite onto my paper using the F lead. The first layer is placed horizontal on the surface, the next two layers are diagonal.



STEP 2 - BLENDING

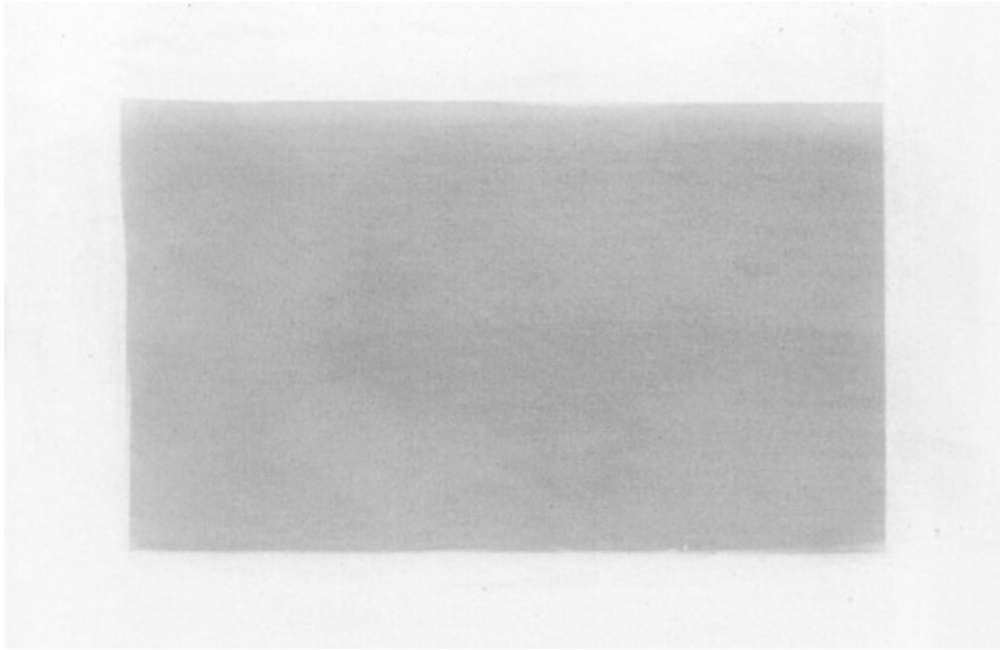
Using a chamois wrapped around my index finger, I blend the graphite smooth. Chamois with a firm, and even pressure. It may take several passes with the chamois to create a smooth even tone. Be

sure to blend over the edges of the drawing area as well as overlapping the buildings, trees and horizon areas. It is much easier to erase than to add a missed section later.



Avoid touching the surface of the paper with your fingers. It is at this point in the blending process that blemishes or finger prints will magically appear. If they appear, it is very difficult to fix (unless they happen to be in a cloud formation) and many times I just have to start over!

I will add 2 more layers of crosshatching with 2H lead and blend with the chamois again. This creates a nice smooth finish. I trim the edges of the drawing using a t-square ruler and a plastic eraser.



STEP 3 - LIFTING OUT THE CLOUDS

I use a mars plastic eraser with a chisel edge and erase my clouds into the sky. For light wispy clouds I use blu-tak and just drag it across the surface.



STEP 4 - DETAILING

Use a 2H lead pencil to layer in darker areas next to the whitest tops of the clouds. A tortillion is used to blend in and work in the details. By blending, lifting, erasing and layering in more graphite, the clouds emerge on the paper.



I soften the clouds by using the blu-tack. To make more dramatic clouds darken the background sky. This allows white cottony clouds to be more fully formed. Keep in mind that unless your drawing's emphasis is the clouds, they should not compete with the rest of the landscape. They should be subtle and gently lead the viewer's eye through the scene. Typically I use light wisps and hints of clouds in most of my landscapes.

I usually spend 5-8 hours just drawing the sky and cloud areas. PATIENCE is key in creating smooth skies.

Once you have the basic technique of creating smooth tones and general cloud formations, the sky is the limit to all the possibilities and variations you can create. Every moment... every hour... every day... every season... the sky changes its mood and design, providing us with an unlimited resource of inspiration to our landscapes.



For a step-by-step demonstration of a landscape with dramatic clouds, visit my website works in progress:

[My Mind is in the Clouds](#)

Sunsets & Dusk Images

Here is a quick study (less than an hour) on clouds in the early evening just as the sun is thinking about setting. The clouds are backlit by the sun and are darker than the sky. The trees are mostly in shadow and most of the details are subdued. This is a small drawing only 4.5" x 7". The sky is a lighter tone than the clouds and is just a reverse of regular clouds.

