

## INSIDE THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

# Combining New & Old Techniques

When I set out to create a complex drawing involving two models and numerous props, I used photo-editing tools to help determine the best possible design for my image.

BY STEVEN WEISS



THE FINISHED DRAWING:  
**Lovers**

2012, charcoal and red, white, and black Conté on tinted paper, 34 x 53.  
Collection the artist.



Illustration 1

## CONCEIVING AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT

For centuries, great artists have studied the techniques and achievements of their predecessors and sought to emulate them. They also have tried to expand the horizons of their art by exploring new ways of seeing and interpreting age-old themes, while eagerly embracing new materials, techniques, and technology. Recently, while working on a drawing, I found myself combining traditional drawing techniques with modern technology. In doing so, I realized I was following in this long artistic tradition.

My typical practice before beginning a large project is to give my idea a lot of thought, make sketches and other studies, and then begin work once I'm fully prepared. Recently, however, I completed a large drawing for which my early process was different. It included the use of Photoshop to help plan the composition and overcome several challenges that arose while developing and executing the idea.

This large drawing began quite by accident. I was working on another project, and the model took a break and lay down to rest on a small bench in my studio. I liked her pose and told her that if she was comfortable lying like that, I wanted to draw it. She agreed, and I made the sketch shown in Illustration 1.

Around this time, I had been looking at the drawings of Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), who was known both for his ability to capture fleeting expressions in his work and for the *succès de scandale* he achieved when he exhibited one of those drawings, a particularly sensual study of his wife. My immersion in Greuze's work suggested some directions I might take in developing a theme.

The figure in my sketch seemed to be looking at something or someone, and for the next several months I tried to determine what that something or someone should be. I decided it would be a man, and after numerous attempts, I chose a pose with him sitting in a chair facing the woman. However, my studio setup, shown in Illustration 2, was small enough that it would not permit the man and woman to pose together, and in fact, my two models never met.

## BEGINNING WORK AND DETERMINING PERSPECTIVE

I tinted a large piece of Arches 300-lb white paper with a thinned mix of Golden liquid acrylics. This supplied a nice ground for drawing in black, red, and white Conté, or *trois crayons*, a traditional technique used by such masters as Watteau, Rubens, Boucher, and Greuze. I redrew the female model on the large sheet using the three chalks. I changed her pose slightly by altering the position of her hand, and I decided that the woman should be lying on a bed rather than the bench on which she'd actually posed. I left myself room to further develop and alter the scene as ideas came to me.

I next needed to pin down the perspective in the drawing. The bed would be almost parallel to the picture plane, which meant that one of its vanishing points would lie far outside the picture. I took a digital photo of the drawing and printed a copy in black and white at one-fifth the size of the full drawing. I mounted this on a roll of brown paper and made a perspective diagram of the scene. Because my perspective drawing was one-fifth



Illustration 2



Illustration 3

### Quick Tip: PERFECT PERSPECTIVE PHOTOS

When photographing a work in order to print out a small copy to use in creating a perspective diagram, it is important that the image not be distorted. To get an accurate picture, I made sure that my large sheet of paper was perfectly level from side to side and completely vertical, perpendicular to the ground plane. I set my easel on a wood floor with parallel boards and placed my camera tripod so that the camera lens was parallel to the picture surface and the central dot on the camera's viewfinder was trained on the exact center of my paper. My large drawing sagged a bit because of its weight, and in the photo, two of its edges were curved. Using Photoshop, I was able to "snap" those edges straight. Thereafter, I used thin wood strips and many bulldog clips to keep the paper from sagging.

the size of my large sheet, I was able to transfer the lines running to vanishing points pretty easily to my drawing. Establishing the horizon line and vanishing points was essential in enabling me to integrate the man in the chair into the composition. Plotting the image of the chair on the same perspective diagram as the bed allowed it to sit solidly on the floor in my imaginary room. (See Illustration 3, which shows my perspective diagram at a slightly later state.)

Although the models did not pose at the same time, I wanted to ensure that the drawing looked as though they were really engaged with one another. To this end, it was very important to place the male figure exactly the right distance from the female figure so that her extended hand was almost but not quite touching his leg. I drew a study of the male figure in the chair. Then I rigged up my tripod so that it would hold a slide projector and made a slide of the study of the man, which I projected onto my drawing. I moved the image around a bit until I felt I had the exact distance I wanted between the figures, and then drew the man and his chair on the drawing. (See Illustration 4.)

Around this time I also decided on a light source. I chose to have the light coming from an angle that would allow the chair to cast a shadow that would point directly at what I wished to be the central point of interest in the drawing—the woman's hand reaching toward the man's leg.



Illustration 4

## PLACING OBJECTS

I intentionally left considerable room in the drawing around the figures because my ambitions for the drawing had become more complex. I decided to create a room and to add clothing to the picture. I had to carefully consider the clothing's placement so that it would perform two functions: create in the viewer's mind a sequence of events that led to the situation seen in the drawing and help direct the viewer's eye into and around the picture. At the same time, it should look as though all the items had been tossed on the floor spontaneously, not carefully placed by the artist.

I worked out a narrative line of my own, made a list of garments to be strewn around, and marked spots on one of my printouts to indicate the approximate locations of objects. I then made careful studies, one by one, of the first six items of clothing and shoes—two examples are shown in Illustrations 5 and 6. I did not draw these to scale, because I wasn't yet sure where in the drawing I would place them. When the studies were complete I photographed them and, using Photoshop, cropped closely around them. (See Illustration 7.) I then moved them around on the picture until I liked the way they looked.

In order to get the sizes of the clothing items correct, I used as references body parts of the models that were parallel or almost parallel to the picture plane. Because these body parts were not greatly foreshortened, I could rely on them to provide true measurements. I then made slides of each clothing item and again used my tripod-mounted projector to place them precisely on the drawing. When I was satisfied with the placement of a particular object, I taped



Illustration 5



Illustration 6



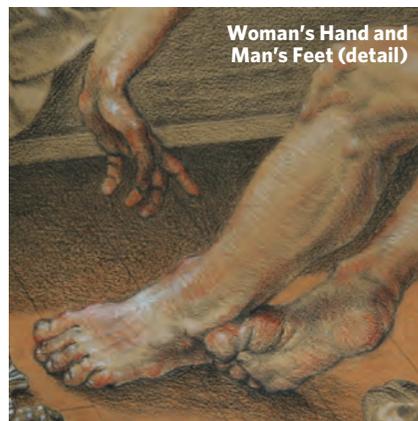
Illustration 7



Illustration 8

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Steven Weiss** is a sculptor and draftsman who works in clay, wax, plaster, stone, and wood, as well as many drawing media. He taught for years at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia, where his courses included figurative sculpture, anatomy, and drawing. He also served as a visiting critic to advanced students and as the chairman of the sculpture department. He is currently working on drawings, a limestone carving, and a book on anatomy for artists. For more information and to see other examples of his work, visit [www.stevenweissart.com](http://www.stevenweissart.com).



Woman's Hand and Man's Feet (detail)



Illustration 9



Illustration 10

a piece of brown paper to the drawing (using drafting tape so that the adhesive could be easily removed) and traced over it from the projected image. The several cutouts taped to the drawing gave me a good idea of how the composition was shaping up. Using Photoshop, in my computer image I replaced each brown-paper tracing with a picture of its clothing study, properly sized for placement in the picture. (See Illustration 8, which shows the drawing in the middle of this process, with both some taped pieces of brown paper and some pasted-in digital images of clothing.)

Next, again using Photoshop, I printed a color copy of each clothing image at the size it needed to be in the drawing and used it to draw that item for the final time on the work itself. The placement of the woman's shirt gave me a lot of trouble, and I tried several locations for it using Photoshop before eventually settling on a spot. (See Illustrations 9 and 10.)

## COLOR DECISIONS

As my drawing progressed, a couple of problems related to color arose. First, I realized that all of the clothing items I'd drawn were black-and-white, with none making use of the red chalk, so I changed the color of the woman's skirt from white to red when I drew the final version.

Additionally, I didn't like the fact that the middle flesh tone on my figures was the same color as the floor—both were the color of the acrylic wash I'd toned the paper with. I wanted them to be distinct from each other, but I also wanted to preserve the feel of this being a three-chalk drawing. Photoshop again came to the rescue. I tried out various floor colors on the screen and chose one appropriate for a wood floor that was close in color to my background wash but distinct from the skin tone. (See Illustration 11.) I was able to find a Conté crayon close to that color to use on the floor.

With the drawing filling out, it became clear to me that I'd allowed myself more than enough paper to complete the project. Again I went to Photoshop and tried cropping the drawing in different places until I found a size I liked.



Illustration 11



Illustration 12



Man's Head (detail)

## COMPLETING THE DRAWING

As I worked, I continued to make changes. I decided to enlarge the bed, move it against the wall, and add pillows. Among other things, the white of the pillows helped make the man's head stand out better from its background. I continued to add clothing to the picture, and I finally found a good place to put the woman's shirt, underneath the man's pants. I next used one of my small printouts and my brown-paper perspective setup to work out the perspective lines for floorboards. I photographed the image, made a slide of it, and superimposed it on the drawing for transfer. (See Illustration 12.)

I used another perspective diagram to plot the cast shadows of all the objects in the drawing. As was the case with the shadow of the chair, I wanted the cast shadows to both anchor objects on the floor and help unify the picture and direct the viewer's eye to the elements of greatest importance. Some of the cast shadows didn't do what I'd hoped, so I took the liberty of changing my light source a bit for those so that I could achieve the results I wanted.

The drawing was complete. The models had never met, the room didn't exist, the light source and shadows were made up, and the clothes were never piled on the floor as seen in the drawing. Creating this image required a great deal of work, and many choices needed to be made, but Photoshop helped me quickly and easily try out various possibilities before deciding which worked best. ❖

*Many thanks to the staff of the New Media Center at Princeton University for helping me with Photoshop.*