

887100 - 887500 Silver / gold pencils

Historical

The silver pencil is considered to be the first drawing pencil used in the fine arts. Already known in antiquity, where it was probably used alongside other metal pens to scratch wax, we find it mentioned around 1400 by Cennino Cennini in his *Trattato della pittura*. At that time, the painter's apprentice was recommended to draw with a silver pencil on a short-lived prepared surface (wood or parchment) as a preliminary exercise for the brush drawing, which was apparently considered to be of a higher order. The silverpoint emerged from this "shadowy existence" in the early Renaissance. Masters such as Dürer, van Eyck, Holbein and others no longer used it merely for preliminary drawing or sketching, but employed it as a means in its own right. They thus created drawings that wanted to be considered as autonomous works of art. The delicacy of the pencil, as well as the fact that it demands clear and unambiguous decisions in form, must have fascinated the Old Masters. Even in Rembrandt's time, the silver pencil was still in use, as surviving silver pencil booklets and a wonderful portrait of Saskia, Rembrandt's wife, testify to us. In later times, because its delicacy and precision no longer corresponded to the style, the silver pencil fell into disuse. It was not until the Romantic period that it was rediscovered. In the last century, Joseph Meder encouraged artists to use silverpoint with his "Büchlein vom Silberstift" (1909) (Otto Dix, *Portrait of Urs*). Contemporary artists who use silverpoint are Mo Häusler, Viktor Koulbak and - with her own website - Marianne Leutschafft.

Peculiarities of the silverpoint - priming

Typical for the silverpoint is a fine, almost graphic stroke, reminiscent of copperplate engravings. One usually works either linearly with different hand pressure or with hatching in different layers.

The silver is applied on specially primed supports (boards, paper, parchment), it does not rub off on normal paper. Erasing with a rubber is possible only to a very limited extent, as there is a risk of dulling the surface of the base. To correct, you can use a razor blade to scrape off a bit of the ground. If you still don't want to do without pre-drawing, you have the option of hinting at the contours of the drawing with fine dots before actually doing it.

The "color" is a delicate, beautiful and luminous medium gray that shines and reflects in incident light. The special appeal of silver is that it darkens over time to a brownish golden color, gaining tonality and contrast. This process, which is caused by the formation of silver sulfide, is promoted by sulfurous elements in the air, but also in the substrate. The gold pencil, on the other hand, remains gray over time, so that when both pencils are used, a cold-warm contrast is created that can be calculated in advance. This can be exploited for landscapes, for example.

One can easily incorporate the background into the design with the skillful addition of color pigments. Leonardo used uniform pink grounds, other painters rather grayish blue; modern artists like Marianne Leutschafft even dare to use grisaille grounds and create the elevations by means of scraping. A silverpoint drawing can also be supplemented with another technique (tracing the shadows with ink, coloring with watercolor, emphasizing the lines with pen and the shadows with red chalk, elevations with white ...).

For pure silver pencil drawings the small format might be the most suitable, on the one hand because of the preciousness of the material, on the other hand because large-scale drawings can get lost in the absence of a properly dark tone.

Range of silver and gold pencils

On the suggestion of an analysis of the Albergati portrait of Jan van Eyck, who used various silver alloys and also gold for his portrait, we currently offer four qualities of metal pencils:

Silver 999 (pure silver), Silver 935 (93.5% silver, rest copper and tin), Silver 835 (80% silver, rest copper and tin) and Gold 750 K.

Silver 999 is the softest pencil, Silver 835 the hardest; the gold pencil is soft but the finest due to its small diameter and can be used well for depicting hair. Silver 835 brings the most darkness, so lends itself to hatching; silver 999 is the lightest and good for outlines. Silver 935 is in between, the "all-rounder" so to speak.

All pencils are made by hand in Switzerland. They are drawn from specially made silver wire, then sharpened to a point on one side and ground to a so-called spoon on the other. After subsequent polishing, they are rounded so that they glide nicely on the surface. This important property is tested for each pencil individually on primed paper. A pencil that is too sharp could scratch the base so badly that the paper is damaged.

If the tip should ever become too flat, it can be sharpened again with fine sandpaper (grit 800/600) and rounded off.

The life of metal pins depends on how they are used. Normally they last almost a lifetime; the author has still been using the same pencil for 25 years. However, anyone who paints sheets entirely with silver or even uses abrasive grounds (e.g. pumice stone or coarse dispersions) will not be able to enjoy the silver for long.

The silver pencils and the gold pencil are supplied in a metal lead holder (diameter 2 mm). The earlier production, which soldered only a little silver or gold onto cheaper metal pencils, would be much too expensive today.

Silver pencil papers

Wood, parchment or paper can be used as image carrier. A wide variety of primers can be found in the literature and on the Internet: Cennini recommends bone ash tamped with saliva on small boards or on specially prepared parchment, some gesso ground, others simple glossy paper.

The most recommended silver pencil ground borrows from a recipe by Wehlte and is said to combine antique with modern. The elasticity of rabbit glue (+ alum) is combined with the pigment lithopone, which brings the sulfide-containing parts necessary for the darkening of the silver. Fat particles in the form of eggs guarantee lubricity. It is important to apply as many layers as possible. On this silver pencil base, the uppermost layers can be scraped off with a scalpel, for example, to correct the drawing or to achieve special effects.

Smooth watercolor paper satin is used as a support, which is wet-mounted on previously sanded (!) boards before priming. This avoids unevenness, grains or undulations of the paper, which could disturb the course of the fine silver line. In addition, using intermediate sanding, the primer should be applied in such a way that no brush stroke should be visible at the end. In order to be able to work with a certain amount of pressure without immediately getting onto the paper, the paper consists of 7 - 9 layers. (Attention: the substrates are very sensitive to contact with metallic cutters). It is advisable not to cut off the adhesive tape of the mounted watercolor paper: it protects the edge of the sheet and is covered by the passe-partout when framing.

(Text: L. Jäger, 07/2009)