



# Mindful Drawing

**Mindful drawings don't  
have to be good;  
they don't even have to be  
finished. More than anything,  
it's about simply doing it.**



Whether you have been wielding your pencil for years or you just started drawing yesterday, mindful drawing helps people see the world around them in richer detail, without fretting about the end result. Noticing more (the literal meaning of mindfulness) is a skill that you can learn by meditating often. By focusing your attention on your breathing during meditation, you become aware of your thoughts, for example, or the things you worry about. But you can also practice noticing things in other ways—and drawing is one of them.

Mindful drawing is different from regular drawing, as British artist and creative mindfulness teacher Wendy Ann Greenhalgh describes in her book, *Mindfulness & the Art of Drawing*. It is not complicated or difficult; you simply draw with more attention and awareness than you normally might. Drawing mindfully is all about the process of drawing in itself; it's not about what you end up creating on the sheet of paper.

**SHARPEN THE POINTS**

When you draw mindfully, you become more aware of all levels of detail: colors become more intense; light and shadow become more distinct. The more you practice mindful drawing, the more you pay attention and see.

But what's the best way to practice? Instead of just putting some stumpy pencils on the table and tearing a sheet of paper off a block, get a nice sketchbook. Organize your pencils on a cleared tabletop and sharpen the points. This way, you send the message to your own mind that drawing is

**“IT DOESN'T HAVE TO REPRESENT ANYTHING, SO YOU CAN LET GO OF BEING CRITICAL.”**



something special for you and that you are about to begin. Then you focus your attention not only on your breathing, as in many meditations, but also on three other things: on the movement of your pencil on the paper; on your eye-hand coordination (particularly when drawing an object) and on the object that you are drawing. You are sometimes then able to pause your thoughts for a moment, giving you more space to take in the world around you. That's just what you need when you are drawing.

**DOODLING**

The exercises in Greenhalgh's book are very suitable for people who rarely draw or have never drawn before. According to Greenhalgh, doodling—aimless sketching, scribbling and drawing—is a great way to start, for example. It doesn't have to represent anything, so you can let go of being critical. Doodling reconnects you to the physical aspect of drawing: You aren't drawing anything specific, so you can focus wholly on your hands and the

movements you are making. It's just drawing lines and shapes on the paper. A key element of mindfulness is a beginner's mind; this is what helps you focus on the drawing itself, on the act itself, and not on the success or failure of the outcome. You just draw as if you've never drawn before, with no expectations but plenty of curiosity. Be curious about the colors of your new pencils, or your new chalk, or what it would be like to use a toothbrush as a paintbrush for a change? When you are drawing with a beginner's mind, you can mess about and experiment as you please. Greenhalgh's exercises are easy to do and fun to try. For starters, collecting objects to draw is already an exercise in mindfulness. You can be mindful of what you run across while visiting a second-hand store, walking in the woods or going to the bakery. A tin can, a small toy, an oddly shaped branch, a stone, a discarded rubber band: even things that are not beautiful at first glance can be interesting >



to draw. You can also walk around your own house to begin your search, and may end up discovering things you haven't really 'noticed' in years.

**Exercise 1:**

*Self-Portrait*

When we look in the mirror or see photos of ourselves, we often have a critical reaction. We might think our nose is too big, our eyes are too small or our ears are crooked. However, when you look at your face with an 'artist's eye', features that are striking about your face (which you might not always like) become interesting to draw. It's a way to rediscover what is unique and beautiful about your face. Remember: The portrait doesn't have to be an exact likeness; it's a drawing and not a photograph. If successful, it will capture something of your mood or personality. According to Greenhalgh, you can capture in your drawing "not just what the eye can see, but also what the heart and mind can understand." And if you succeed at drawing with the right kind of mindful attention, that will be quite a lot.

- \* Use a sheet of (at least) A3 paper. This will enable you to draw a life-size version of your face and head.
- \* Choose a mirror that is big enough to easily show your head and shoulders.

- \* A soft pencil works best for this exercise.
- \* Arrange yourself and the mirror at an angle where you can draw comfortably without having to crane your head.
- \* Take your time. You may also find it fun to give yourself different time lengths: try drawing your portrait in two, five, ten and twenty minutes. This turns it into a game that distracts you from focusing too much on the 'perfect' result.
- \* View your face as if you are seeing it for the first time. This isn't an easy thing to do, but definitely worth a try.
- \* Look to find the lines and curves in your face, the light and shadow, and the texture and shape. Observe the color of your eyes, your hair and your skin.
- \* Acknowledge the presence of any (usual) criticisms that may appear and then let them go again. Try to simply 'experience' your face as you see it in this moment.

**Exercise 2:**

*Seeing*

The act of seeing is a key aspect of all drawing. Looking and observing without judging: this is about as mindful as it gets. (According to Greenhalgh, her book also could have been called 'Mindfulness & the Art of Seeing'.) In the book, Greenhalgh recalls the first time she really saw a rose, when she'd already been staring at it for a

while. "That summer day I thought I was pretty much 'done' with the rose," she writes. "I didn't think there was much more I could take in, but I carried on looking anyway. And as I did, everything seemed to shift. I stopped being bored and suddenly noticed something new—gradations in the shades of pink on the petals, paler at the edges, a deeper tone nearer the center, which I leaned in closer to see better. I stopped looking and started really seeing. By which I mean I lost the sense of 'doing an exercise' or even of being a person looking. My sense of self fell away and I was just there with the rose, taking it in in very close detail."

- \* Draw with your favorite materials, but use just one color.
- \* Pick an inanimate object from nature: a flower, a stone or a shell, for example.
- \* Take the time to really see the object. Use all your senses: hold it, touch it, smell it.
- \* Only after you've done this, should you start drawing. But—and this is very important—do not look at the paper while you draw. This way, you won't be disturbed by any critical thoughts you may have.
- \* Try drawing without taking your pen, pencil, etc. off the paper.
- \* Keep your hand loose and relaxed, and let it follow the movement of your eyes as they 'trace' the lines of your object.

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“NOBODY SEES A FLOWER, REALLY. IT IS SO SMALL IT TAKES TIME—WE HAVEN’T TIME—AND TO SEE TAKES TIME, LIKE TO HAVE A FRIEND TAKES TIME”

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986), American artist

- \* Keep your attention on the object that you are drawing. Spend at least ten minutes with it, drawing and redrawing it.
- \* Remember: This exercise is about seeing and experiencing, not about copying what you see. So you don't have to fret about the end result.
- \* When you are done, take a moment to sit quietly and track your breathing and feel your hands.

According to Greenhalgh, “Most people find that these drawings possess an amazing aliveness. The lines are loose and expressive, and aspects of the object—its form or texture, for example—jump out, in

amazing detail and accuracy, even if the drawing as a whole doesn’t look exactly like the object it was inspired by.”

Exercise 3:

Drawing Landscapes

If you’re someone who likes to be outdoors and spend time in nature, but not always wanting to go for a walk or run, then landscape drawing is a fun alternative.

- \* Start by looking carefully and seeing. Find a place outside that you love to look at and where you can sit comfortably.

- \* Look all around you with an open mind. But don’t forget to also take in the sounds that you hear, the smells and what you sense and feel: pick a leaf, for example, and rub it between your fingers.
- \* Don't zoom in on the details straight away. You don’t need to think about what you want to draw or the composition yet.
- \* By looking carefully first and taking your time, you will gradually notice things and certain aspects will make an impression on you. Patterns in the bark on a tree trunk, for example, or the textures of the earth in a ploughed field in front of you.
- \* Once you have found what you want to draw, you can start with either the details (the bark pattern or the ploughed earth) or the bigger picture.
- \* If you start with the details, you could make four different detail drawings on one sheet of paper. See each drawing as a short meditation.
- \* If you prefer drawing the landscape as a whole, start by faintly sketching the relative positions of everything, getting the proportions and placement right. Be sure to start in the middle of your page and work outwards.
- \* Done? Ask yourself if you have now seen and experienced the landscape around you more intensely than other times. ●

WANT TO READ MORE?

- \* 'Mindfulness & the Art of Drawing: A Creative Path to Awareness',by Wendy Ann Greenhalgh (2015)

DEALING WITH YOUR CRITICAL INNER VOICE

We all hear that critical inner voice that pops up while we are drawing, saying, "I can't do it" or, "This is worthless; throw it away." Here's how Wendy Ann Greenhalgh suggests you respond to this voice:

- \* As soon as it appears, stop drawing and rest your hand on the paper. Focus on what the pencil etc. feels like in your fingers, and concentrate on your breathing. This is the best way to deal with the thinking-mind, especially when it's gone into criticizing mode.
- \* Don't dwell on the criticisms; it only feeds the thinking process. Do acknowledge the voice, however, and keep your attention focused on your hands and breath.
- \* If you keep getting drawn into critical thinking, simply let the thoughts be there. Whenever they appear, just bring your focus back to your body and breath, and use these as mindful anchors.

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