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Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns, British Museum

Dazzling shades of grey: virtuoso drawings explore a largely forgotten art

by [Fisun Güner](#) [1] Thursday, 17 September 2015

Unlike Venice, where colour reigned supreme among artists such as Titian and Veronese, Florence was the city where drawing – *disegno* – was held up as the cornerstone of the artist's education. Think of the well-defined musculature of Michelangelo's figures. Florentine artists of the Renaissance practiced an art of detailed precision, mastering clarity of line and structural rigour. Metalpoint, or what is often called silverpoint, since silver was the favoured metal – prized not for its monetary value but its plasticity – was the drawing tool that best displayed artistic virtuosity: an unforgiving medium, it is almost impossible to erase or correct.

The British Museum's exhibition of some 100 drawings in silverpoint and, more rarely, goldpoint, begins with a juxtaposition of hands. A pair, gracefully poised though unnaturally flexed, by the Florentine genius Leonardo, captivate the viewer by appearing almost like a relief in stone. Shaded by close crosshatching and heightened by luminous passages of white chalk, the finely modelled hands radiate a marble sheen. Next to it is a drawing that's more of an outline sketch: four rigid, stumpy pairs of hands that look faintly arthritic by American conceptualist [Bruce Nauman](#) [4]. They were rapidly sketched from videos of his hands performing a series of finger movements.

There's over 500 years between these two drawings, yet the story of silverpoint is not an uninterrupted history, and the 20th century did not see a widespread resurgence. After its flourishing in the 1400s and its rapid decline in Italy in about 1550, silverpoint only continued as a common medium in Germany and the Netherlands until the 17th century, by which time it was overtaken by graphite, a far more forgiving and versatile drawing tool. It was then partially revived in the 19th century by English artists, who included the [Pre-Raphaelite](#) [5] Holman Hunt. These artists clearly enjoyed its relationship to the past, to the medievalist golden age of craft, since silverpoint is also associated with earlier manuscript drawing, and some of these artists were keen on using it for decorative miniatures on a range of craft surfaces.

With its accompanying film, the exhibition is good at explaining just what metalpoint is and how it's used. A metal stylus will only work on paper prepared with an abrasive coating, which is usually made of animal bone ground into a paste. The sheet may then have an additional coating of paint to provide it with a light tint, perhaps a pearlescent pink or a pale sea green. In all, it's a time-consuming process, so this suggests one other reason why the technique gradually died out. But the results can be astonishing and gorgeously ethereal, and time and again

one is stopped in one's tracks by the gossamer handiwork on display

Among the handful of works that do just that is *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c.1435 (**main picture**), the only drawing that's ever been firmly attributed to Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden. It's a drawing so finely wrought, so lightly spun in soft silvery-greys, it appears at once solidly three-dimensional and barely there – an apparition whose presence nonetheless feels vivid. In contrast, the brute force of [Leonardo](#) [6]'s soldier, *Bust of a Warrior* (**pictured above left**), c.1475, is conveyed by a very earthy presence: the jowly contours of a heavy-set, bulldog face in profile, and the extraordinary and elaborate detail of the soldier's armour.

It's no wonder many of the later works, those English artists of the 19th century in particular, feel so vapid in comparison. The few drawings of the late 20th-century also seem largely flat and uninteresting, including a puzzle-drawing by [Jasper Johns](#) [7], where, if you look hard enough, you might find the silhouette-profiles of the Queen and Prince Philip hidden in the contours of a vase.

An exception is Susan Schwalb's *Strata 407*, 2005, (**pictured right**), an abstract drawing of gently undulating horizontal bands, whose variegated silvery tones appear to suggest subtle colours. Bright slivers of untouched white paper enhance the metallic gradations. In an exhibition that dazzles with the exquisite draughtsmanship of the Renaissance, Schwalb's small work at least makes an impression.

- [Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns at the British Museum until 6 December](#) [8]

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