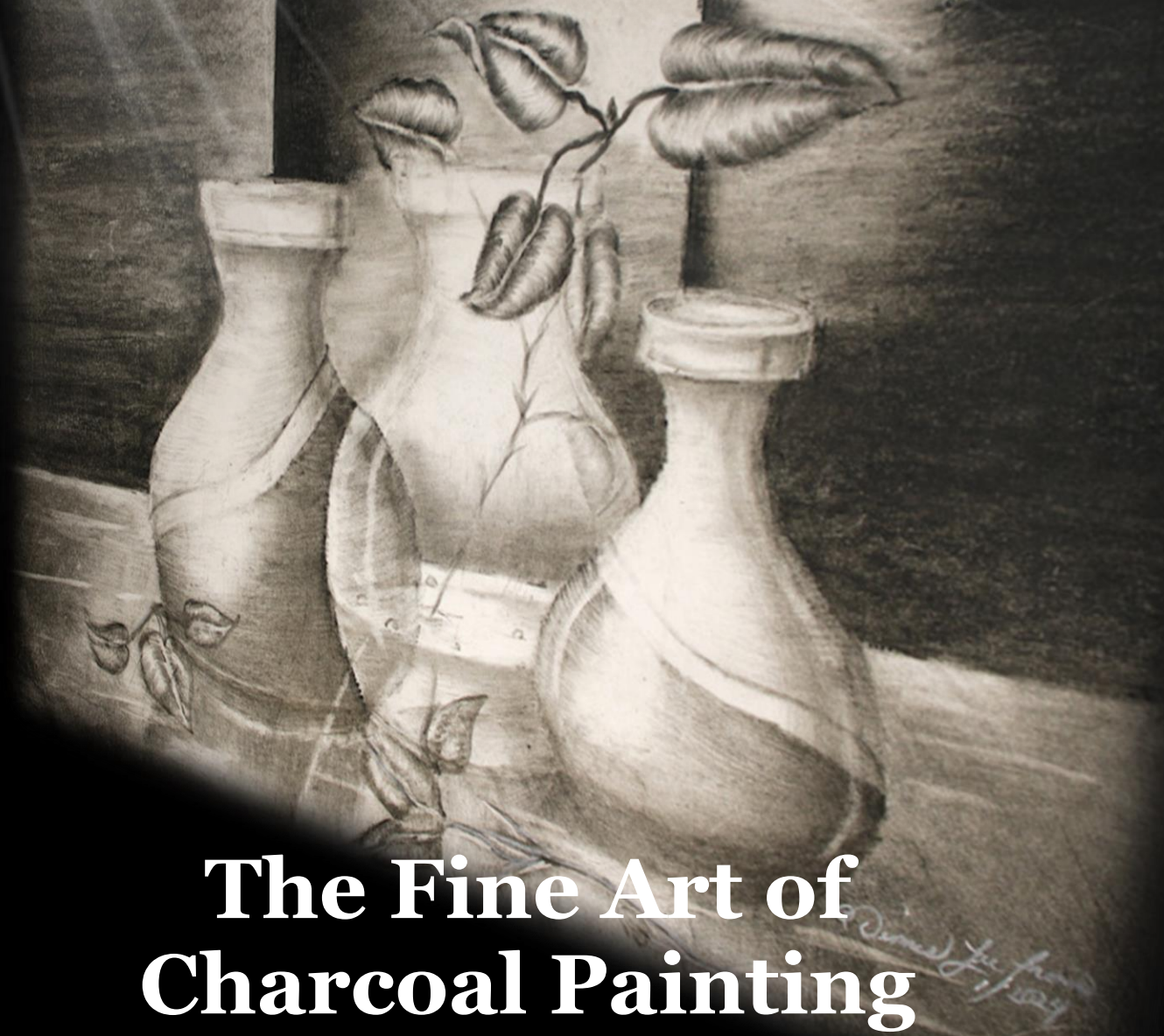


Dennis Lee Brown

The Concept of “Chiaroscuro” Charcoal Painting



The Fine Art of
Charcoal Painting

The Concept of “Chiaroscuro” Charcoal Painting

by

Dennis Lee Brown



Dennis's Fine Art Tutoring

A
dlb
Publication

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<https://www.dennisfineart.com/>

**Published by Dennis Lee Brown
dlb Publishing**

Printed in the United States of America

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The Concept of “Chiaroscuro” Painting

“Chiaroscuro” – Lighting Is All About Contrast.

This incorporates vivid drama, mood, depth, proportion, and emotion in charcoal paintings.

Although Chiaroscuro painting in the popular sense of the word refers to charcoal painting. The same technique can apply to any painting or painting medium. However, for this tutorial, we are going to focus on painting with charcoal. Practice the chiaroscuro lighting method while painting with acrylics, oils, or water paints. And use it when painting with pastels and graphite.

Willow Charcoal or the Willow Tree, also called “vine” charcoal, stands made of scorched willow wood. It is a smooth charcoal that is used to apply “grays,” a mid-toned range between whites and blacks.

Willow charcoal is the softest type of charcoal that is available in raw uncoated paper shaped, like a round stick. It forms soft and light marks, making it appropriate for midrange sections on paintings, and shading effects on large-scale paintings.



Figure 1: Various Charcoals

What is Chiaroscuro Lighting?

From the beginning. “Chiaroscuro” comes from the Italian words 'chiaro' meaning “light,” and 'oscuro' meaning “dark.” In the art world, it refers to the use of strong contrasts between light and dark to achieve a sense of volume in modeling three-dimensional objects and figures. For anyone using charcoal as a medium, mastering chiaroscuro lighting can take your art far beyond the next level. The beauty of chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings is that it allows you to play with shadows and highlights.

This technique can make your art more natural and impressive. It is not just about making an object look 3D — it is about creating a mood, conveying an emotion, and telling a story. Here is why:

The mood in paintings is the emotional response (affecting) a viewer has when looking at a piece. It is the atmosphere or feeling expressed in a painting. Artists can create a unique emotional response in their audience using color, theme, style, concept, and approach. These emotional responses can include happiness, calmness, sadness, and anger.



Painting: 1 A CLIPPING A GLASS VASE
14”h X 17”w Still-life Composition Charcoal & Graphite
© Dennis Lee Brown 1-2024 Dennis Fine Art ARR
Collection: Charcoal Paintings of Winter 2023-2024 IMG:0371-395USD

Effects of Chiaroscuro Art

- **Creating a mood /disposition/ temper / “Mood”** The interplay of light and dark can create a range of moods in your artwork.
 - A soft gradient can suggest tranquility, peacefulness, calm, harmony, and quiet. While harsh contrasts can evoke tension, stress, conflict, pressure,
- **Conveying an emotion:** In the hands of a skilled artist, chiaroscuro can be a powerful tool for expression. By manipulating light and shadow, you can evoke specific emotions in your viewers.

Telling a story: Chiaroscuro is not just a competent process — it is a storytelling device. From the direction light travels, interacting with the objects in a composition hints at a deeper meaning and narrative from the artist to the viewer.



To add a new layer of depth and contrast to your charcoal painting, “chiaroscuro” lighting is a technique worth exploring and incorporating into your piece. In the upcoming section, we will go over how to set up the lighting for your painting and give step-by-step instructions as to how to apply this technique.

Resources/Supplies Needed for Charcoal Chiaroscuro Painting

Painting: 2 KENEN HAYES
Life-like Portrait Charcoal & Graphite on Art Paper
© Dennis Lee Brown- Dennis's Finne Art 2005
Collection: Portraits of Passion IMG0611-400USD

Before you start dabbling in the painting arena of light and dark (tint) and (tone), collectively gather a few things. Simple checklist:

Charcoal: For chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings, you can use either **willow** charcoal for its’ light value, **vine** charcoal for its easy-to-erase nature, and **compressed** charcoal for its rich, deep black tone.

Painting paper: A heavy-weight (90 lb. bond or above) paper is ideal as it can withstand the pressure of charcoal painting. Look for something with a bit of texture to hold the charcoal. Try different grains and smoothness to learn which surface performs best for your work.

Erasers: Yes, plural! A kneaded eraser is perfect for lifting charcoal and creating highlights, while a rubber eraser can clean up any unwanted marks. Use pencil erasers for intricate details.

Blending tools: Try various kinds of tissue, and diverse kinds of fabric cloth to blend. Use a small, tapered paintbrush for detailing. For more precision, consider using a blending stump or a tortillon.

Fixative: Apply a light coat of workable fixative to your painting as you build layers of charcoal. This helps hold the charcoal in place, preventing smearing and unwanted marks, as you develop the finishing details. When you reach the final layer and you are through with the painting, spray the entire painting with a “final” fixative to preserve your work and protect your masterpiece.

Once you gather all your materials, set up your painting space. This process is just as important as the painting itself because the right setup, including the lighting, and tilt of the table surface, can make the difference between a flat painting and a 3D dramatic masterpiece. We shall explore that in the next section.

Setting Up a Chiaroscuro Painting

How to Set Up the Lighting for Charcoal Chiaroscuro Painting

Setting up the paintings' layout for the correct light flow is vitally important to successful chiaroscuro with a striking contrast in charcoal paintings. The correct focus on light travel will define the intense relationship between light and shadow, which is the main trait of chiaroscuro painting.

Choose a single (one-direction) light source: Ease of simplicity is key here. A single light source will create a sharp contrast between light (white) and dark (black). This can be a ceiling light, lamp, or window light if it is the only source of light hitting your object(s) / subject(s).

Position your light source: Keep in mind that light travels. The light traveling direction and distance of your light source will affect the intensity and size of shadows. Generally, placing the light source at a 45-degree angle to your subject will create a good balance of light (white) and shadow (shade) and cast shadows.

Control the intensity of light: (The Light Luminosity) A rule of thumb is the brighter the light, the stronger the contrast. You can control this by changing the space between light and subject, and the wattage of your light source.

Set up your object/subject: Choose an object/ subject that has attractive shapes and surface textures to make the best of chiaroscuro lighting.

Observe the light and shadow: Begin by first laying out the composition to establish the balance, and perspective (*foreground and background*, before you start painting, spend some time observing your object/subject. Notice where the light falls (*remember if the light falls on the right side, then the left side is in the shade, and vice-versa*) where the shadows lie, and how they profile and define the subject. [See: Painting 2 Growing A Snake Plant](#)

Light Intensity

Finally, use a knead eraser to lift off charcoal from areas that are directly struck by the light. Use a quality rubber eraser to enhance the highlighted areas within the painting. It is good practice to shape the rubber eraser to create fine-toned highlights. For a breakdown of this, see: [Light Striking a Sphere](#)

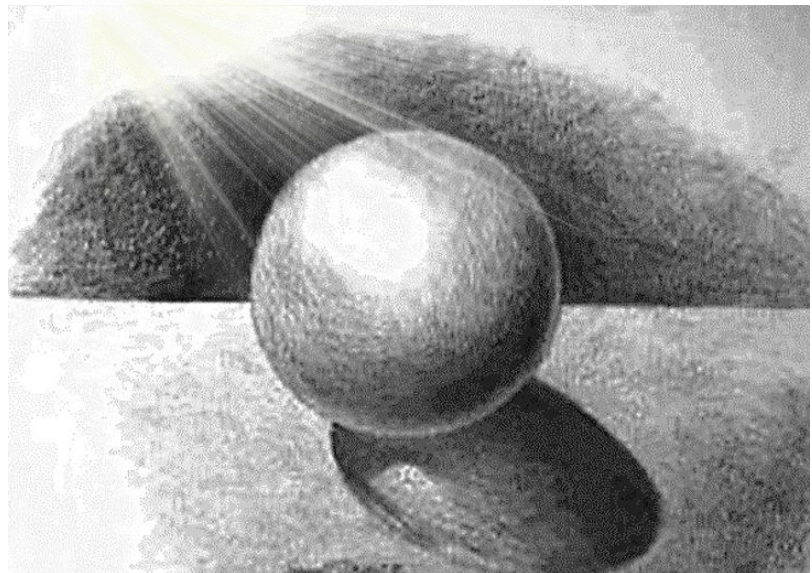


Figure 2: Light Intensity

Applying Chiaroscuro Lighting

Applying chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings is like adding contrasting drama to a painting. It turns an average painting into a visually powerful masterpiece. Keep in mind that a plane painting is not art until you apply the techniques and principles of art. So, how do you add this touch of drama to your charcoal paintings? Here are some helpful tips:

identify the light source: First things first, you need to identify where the light is coming from and where it hits the object/subject matter. This will dictate where the highlights, mid-tone, and shadows fall on your items. Remember, the areas closer to the light source will be lighter, (*Items in the front of the painting have more revealing details*) while those further away will be darker exposing fewer details.

- **Start shading:** Begin by lightly shading the areas that are farther away from the light source. Think of this as laying down the foundation for your chiaroscuro lighting that you will build dark tones upon. You will gradually build on this to create 3D depth and brilliant contrast.
 - **Light areas:** Using Willow or Vine charcoal begin lightly shading the object/subject, focusing on the shape of the item(s).
 - **Consider, the mid-tones:** Mid-tones (AKA gray tones) These regions are not in direct light or complete shadow but fall somewhere in between. Mid-tones help develop and create a smooth transition between the light and dark areas without any line of separation.
 - **Add the dark tones:** Next, add the darker tones to create shade and even blacker tones to create cast shadows. This is where the technique of chiaroscuro lighting starts to liven up your charcoal paintings. The contrast between the light and dark in space or on objects creates a sense of volume (bulk) and depth with intensity.

Highlight the light areas: Do not apply charcoal currently to any area in which direct light falls on the subject/object. Finally, use a rubber or knead eraser to lift off charcoal from the areas that are directly hit by the light. Apply a light coat of workable fixative to stabilize the charcoal, and with white charcoal highlight the area(s) where light strikes the target. This highlighting method will create the effect of light bouncing off your items, completing the chiaroscuro effect. See [Figure 2: Light Striking A Sphere](#)

- **Detailing is the final stage:** Add refined touches to enhance your art considering the surface and its' texture.

Adding Depth and Texture

Adding depth and texture to your charcoal paintings takes it from a mere painting to a work of art. Practice the chiaroscuro painting method to obtain better contrast control. After you have mastered chiaroscuro lighting, add refinement and richness. The art is in the details. Here is how to do it:

Layer your charcoal: build up layers to produce intensity. Start by layering your paintings' draft sketch.

- Use Willow charcoal to produce light coats first followed by darker layers on top until you reach the tone desired. As you work in more layers, your painting will establish realism that pops off the page. Do not be afraid to go darker in the shadow areas, especially in the cast shadow spaces – this is the creation of contrast that gives your painting depth and the items bulk.
- **Use different charcoal types:** Charcoal comes in different forms such as pencils, sticks, powder, and vine charcoal. Each type has a distinctly different texture. Explore stroke techniques, and practice with these different forms to see which textures help bring out the best enhancement.

Light Striking a Sphere

- **Blend it out:** Smooth blending is an essential key tool in adding depth to your painting. You can use a blending stump for smoothness, tortillons for line hatching, a piece of textured cloth, or even your fingers to blend the charcoal. This will smooth out the harsh lines and give your painting a more realistic look.

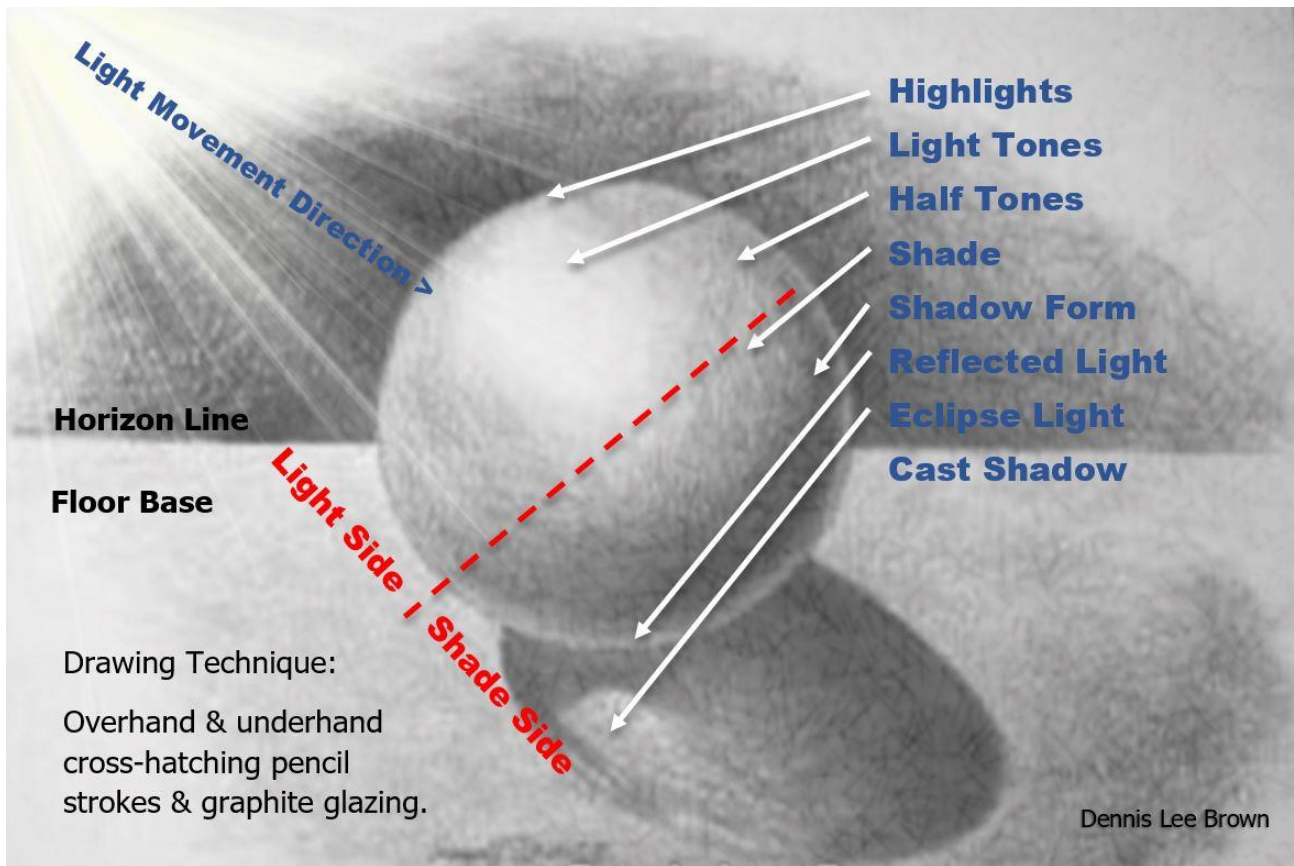


Figure 3 Light Striking A Sphere

Add the details: Most important of all, add the defining details everywhere where needed that bring your painting to life. Minor details can make an enormous difference in your painting. Remember to, “practice,” and practice, and practice again, practicing makes perfect. The more you draw and experiment with different techniques, methods, and principles, along with good-quality art tools, the better you will get. So, do not be fearful to make mistakes – correct them and move on... that is how you learn, and skills increase, and that is how you get on the right road to becoming and growing as an artist. Now, go on and add specific depth and texture to your next charcoal painting.

How to Refine Your Chiaroscuro Painting

Refine, Enhance, and Improve your painting over and repeatedly. Refining equals improving the details, which includes:

The main thing before you sign your painting is to take a step back about five feet from the work. Look at it, and “study” the painting to discover and correct any mistakes.

Repeat this process over, and over again until you get the picture as you want it to be.

Remember, when you improve your work, between each layer of painting medium add a light coat of workable fixative. This is to make sure that charcoal, graphite, or pastels do not smear causing unwanted marks. With this process, you will be able to achieve build-up layers and the final details. Refining your painting is all about taking a critical eye to your work and making those slight changes that can turn your painting into art by taking it far beyond the next level. Do not be in a rush take your time, be patient, and consider — every single stroke of charcoal is a step closer to learning and mastering chiaroscuro lighting in your paintings. Sometimes it is necessary to spot-spray subject matter in the picture to build up the details. This requirement is the approach to get the details where they stand out. After refining the elements, use a final fixative to ensure that the medium stays in place. Once the painting is at the level you want, spray several light coats of final fixative to set the medium. Let each coat thoroughly dry before applying the next coat of final fixative.

Do the following to refine the piece.

- a) Cleaning up any unwanted spears, smudges, and/or marks.
- b) Using a Knead eraser, remove your charcoal dust from the painting.
- c) keep your support (painting) surface as clean as possible.
- d) Place a sheet of paper under the painting hand to prevent unwanted smudges.
- e) Clean hands and paint tools to strip off any charcoal residue.
- f) It is those final changes (details) that make your painting artwork shine. Here is how you can refine your chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings to make your art more striking and lifelike.

Check the contrast: Chiaroscuro lighting is all about contrast — the play involving lights and darks. Therefore, it is necessary to take a step back and stare (study) at your painting, looking for contrast. Make the dark areas dark (black) and the light areas light (white). Black and white is the ultimate contrast and that is what Chiaroscuro is about. If not, you might need to add darker layers of (Compressed soft) charcoal or erase some to get the contrast just lighting.

- **Adjust the details:** Look closely at the details of your painting. Are there objects, or areas (space) that need more accuracy? This could be the shape of an object or

the reflection of light and the casting of shadows. Spend time to fine-tune these details – It is the minor things that make a significant difference.

- **Smooth out the shading:** One common big error is leaving their shading too rough. Use a blending tool (*painting stump, cloth, tissue, or some other tool*) to smooth out the shading. This will give your painting a more developed, realistic look.
- **Review your composition:** Finally, look at the overall composition of your painting considering:

a) The elements of the painting – the object(s) position

i. Forefront objects are larger, darker, and more detailed.

Background objects are smaller, lighter, and less detailed.

b) Consider the cast-shadow(s) the darkest shade of all things.



Painting 3: GROWING A SNAKE PLANT

14h X 17w Still-life Composition © Dennis Lee Brow n11/2023 Dennis Fine Art ARR

Collection: Charcoal Paintings Of Winter 2023-2024 IMG_0369-395 USD

- Is there a balance offset between the light and dark regions? Do the shapes and lines lead the viewer's eye through the painting? If something looks or feels off, do not be afraid to adjust.

Bits of Advice for Mastering Chiaroscuro Paintings

Mastering the art of chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings is not something that happens overnight. It is like learning to dance — it requires a system of light and dark, a hold-lot of practice, and the ability to learn from and correct your mistakes.

Here are some valuable suggestions to help you along your fine art painting journey:

- **Practice regularly:** Like any other skill, practice (constantly) progress to perfection in chiaroscuro painting. Set aside time each day to draw, even if it is just for 30 minutes. As time goes on, you will see an obvious skill development in your work.
- **Study the experts:** Look at the works of artists who were famous for their use of chiaroscuro lighting, such as Rembrandt, Monet, and Caravaggio. Study how to use light and shadow to create depth and drama in their artwork.
- **Adjust light sources:** Do not be afraid to experiment with different light sources. You can use any kind of light, be it a lamp (*move it around to get the right lighting*). Each light source will give the painting a unique feel.
- **Use high-quality materials:** Invest in good-quality charcoal and paper. High-quality art materials can make a significant difference in the result of the final artwork.
- **Get comments:** Do not be shy about showing your work to others. Constructive criticism can help you spot areas of improvement that you might have missed.

Remember, the journey to mastering chiaroscuro lighting in charcoal paintings is a slow process running a long marathon, not a sprint. And so, take your time, be patient, and most importantly — enjoy the process of fine painting!

The Concept of “Chiaroscuro” Charcoal Painting

Cover Design

STRIPED CLOTH & SWEET FRUIT
Still-life Composition 14” w X 10” h
Mix Medium on Canvas

© Dennis Lee Brown 2/2017

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IMG: E0511 -275

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