



Flame to Flourish:
Sagebrush, Charcoal and Learning to
Look

Instructor: Rachel Stiff

“The truest art I would strive for in any work would be to give the page the same qualities as earth: weather would land on it harshly, light would elucidate the most difficult truths; wind would sweep away obtuse padding. Finally, the lessons of impermanence taught me this: loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life.”

Gretel Ehrlich, The Solace of Open Spaces



Artemisia tridentata, commonly called big sagebrush, Great Basin sagebrush or (locally) simply sagebrush, is an aromatic shrub from the family Asteraceae, which grows in arid and semi-arid conditions, throughout a range of cold desert, steppe and mountain habitats in the Intermountain West of North America. The vernacular name "sagebrush" is also used for several related members of the genus *Artemisia*, such as California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*).

Big Sagebrush and other *Artemisia* shrubs are the dominant plant species across large portions of the Great Basin. The range extends northward through British Columbia's southern interior, south into Baja California,

and east into western Great Plains of New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska and the Dakotas.

Several major threats exist to sagebrush ecosystems, including human settlements, conversion to agricultural land, livestock grazing, invasive plant species, wildfires and climate change.

Sagebrush provides food and habitat for a variety of species, such as sage grouse, vireo, pygmy, pronghorn antelope and mule deer. *Artemisia tridentata* is the state flower of Nevada. ♥

Project Overview

This workshop is a drawing workshop which uses wildfires and native plants as a launching off point. We will investigate the role that *Artemisia tridentata* (sagebrush) plays in our regional ecosystem and take a look at how it is incorporated into art of the region. The student's will be taught some drawing basics and will study the plant through sketches and a group drawing.

Wildfires are a supplemental theme. The class will look at what happens to an ecosystem that has been burned (chemistry, reforestation, ecology, GIS mapping). This segment will parallel how charcoal is made connecting the natural cause to the fine art product.

Topics:

- A.) Examine issues surrounding the rise in Wildfires + Burning Native Plants like Sagebrush.
- B.) What is Charcoal as a result of Wildfires and what is it as an art medium.
- C.) Charcoal as a means to create value, form and space on a 2-dimensional surface.

Artists to Explore: Cristina de Gennaro, Shelby Shadwell, Maynard Dixon, Hans Meyer-Kassell, Georgia O'keeffe (charcoal drawings)



Cristina de Gennaro. Sage Drawing VII. Detail. 2015. Charcoal on mylar. 42"X96"

Charcoal is a commonly used drawing medium generally introduced to beginning students and loved by the professional artist. It is extremely versatile and is often used in preliminary studies of a subject, or it can be used to produce high quality renderings. Charcoal is celebrated for its

deep velvety blacks and its ephemeral lightness if used with sensitivity. Vine charcoal is made by burning twigs of wood like willow or grape vines, at a high temperature in an airtight container with hole punctured into the lid. Compressed charcoal will afford the artist the darkest darks and is made by grinding charcoal into a powder, then compressing the substance into small bricks.

Charcoal is also the result of wildfires and can be found in a wooded area after it has been burned. Charcoal is mostly pure carbon. The process can take days and burns off volatile compounds such as water, methane, hydrogen, and tar. It leaves about 25% of the woods original weight in the form of black lumps and powder.



Sage and Rabbit Brush by Maynard Dixon.

Drawing No.1 Gesture Drawing | Warming up

Become familiar with both your subject and your medium. Work quickly, capturing the general form and main characteristics of the sagebrush. Look for mass, volume and shape. Use large and expressive lines. Don't worry about details! Try experimenting with the way you hold the charcoal in your hand. Turn it on its side, like a squeegee! Twist, scrape, pull, dash and dot your lines. Watch as the vine charcoal spreads across the page. For softer areas such as the leaves, some blending and smudging will help to communicate the scrubby nature of this plant.

Drawing No.2 Study | Learning to slow down and look closely

Now that you are warmed up and understand the qualities of charcoal we will slow down. Focusing on one section of the plant, we can learn to appreciate its intricacies. Measure a 7" x 7" square and tape the border of your paper with artist tape. Outline the different values and value transitions that you see. This will provide a good map or line drawing to build on. Begin to apply charcoal to the dark areas. A blending stump or your finger can be used to blend in areas that are soft in texture. Keep your kneaded eraser nearby and a retractable eraser to add details by using the reductive technique. As your drawing develops you may want to use a charcoal pencil to solidify lines and edges.

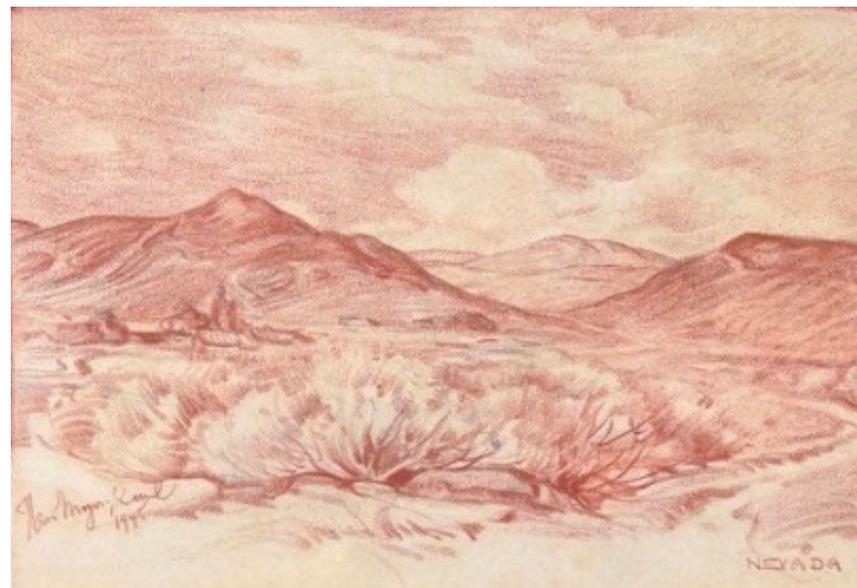
This drawing will be part of a larger group drawing. You've been given just one small portion of a larger image. Get together with your instructor and begin to assemble the pieces. When all of the drawings are on the wall you can critique the work. Notice how many different styles there are! Take this opportunity to ask yourself if you have achieved contrast within your drawing. Did you push your darks enough? Is light preserved in a way that contributes to the three-dimensional feel of your subject? Can you see the barky branches of the plant? *Artemisia tridentata* is named for its three unit leaves or its trident. Were any of your studio mates able to achieve this detail?

Vocabulary:

Art Elements: Line, Mass, Volume, Shape, Value, Texture, Contrast
Three-dimensional.

Technique: Gesture, Massed Gesture, Blending, Reductive Drawing.

Ecological Topics: Wildfire, Atmosphere, Native Plants, Ecosystem.



Nevada landscape in pastel by Hans Meyer-Kassel, 1945.

Materials:

Vine Charcoal	Charcoal Pencils
Pencil Sharpener	Kneaded eraser
Retractable eraser	Blending Stumps
Drawing Paper (Strathmore 400 Series)	
Newsprint for Gesture drawing (optional)	
Artists tape	Graphite Transfer Paper
	HB Graphite Pencil