

## ART-MARCO GUIDE AM01

GUIDE NO : 1

### Introduction.

Art-Marco guides have been created with the inexperienced beginner in mind. You may already be proficient in another medium, like watercolor for example, but have never tried charcoal and are looking for a few quick tips before you start. This is why I have developed the guides in such a way that you can pick and choose what's of interest. I am not sponsored by any company or supplier and therefore the products I am recommending are the ones that, through trial and error, I have found to work and have used to create the projects featured.

### Tip 1

When you start your first project, perhaps Guide 2 – Pocklington Freddie, we will assume that you have read this first guide. So, if there is one very basic tip or perhaps advice I would give you, it is practice on a scrap of paper each of the techniques we will be covering before you apply them to your artwork. This will certainly pay dividends in future, more complex projects. Don't be like I was and think I can do this without needing to do that. You will have several false starts and spend many hours trying to correct what, in the future, you will look back at as being very basic mistakes. There is absolutely no substitute for practice. I have put these guides together because I could find very little guidance to follow, just lots of videos on YouTube of people making charcoal art. They make it look easy but trust me if it was I wouldn't have written these guides. It's the first medium I have found which I believe is still a bit of a black art. If you have ever rendered, plastered or iced a cake then you will know what I mean. I have mastered two of those skills but not without a lot of heartache and restarts. That is not me bragging by the way, I'm just trying to demonstrate where I put working with charcoal as a skill for beginners.

### Working With Charcoal

**Charcoal**, unlike graphite, is man-made and is a form of carbon produced by superheating wood in minimal oxygen conditions. It is messy, lightweight and fragile and when worked, it powders and will fly away with the lightest of breeze. During this project you will be producing a lot of charcoal dust which will settle on your worktop and more importantly on your floor/carpet. So think carefully where you are going to work. If it's not in a purpose made studio then make sure you put down a large cover sheet to collect your dust. Better still work on a vinyl or hard surfaced floor and don't forget until the artwork is treated with a fixative you and your clothes will also transmit charcoal dust onto upholstery.

**Graphite** is a crystalline form of the carbon. It consists of stacked layers of graphene. It occurs naturally and is the most stable form of carbon and is used in art to make pencils of different hardness. It produces, I believe, a smoother and a much lighter tone than charcoal.

**Pastel** consists of powdered pigment and a binder. It can exist in a variety of forms including a stick, a square, a pebble, or a pan. The pigments used in pastels are similar to those used to produce some other colored visual arts media, such as oil paints; the binder is of a

neutral hue and low saturation. The color effect of pastels is closer to the natural dry pigments than that of any other process.

**I have explained the differences above because you will, in time, use all three of the different types in your artwork and possibly more, but these are the ones you will need to familiarise yourself with at the beginning.** I use all three depending on the effect I am trying to create and each one provides different results. I also, on occasions, even include watercolor as a background.

## Tip 2

### **Keep your hands clean and grease free.**

Don't touch your artwork's paper with greasy or sweaty hands. If you do, you will leave a fingerprint. The charcoal powder sticks to oil, grease and water so always make sure your hands are dry as well as grease free.

### **Regular washing, AND drying is essential especially the areas of the hand and arm which are in touch with the paper surface or rest.**

I always have a pack of baby wipes to hand especially when blending with my fingers but again be careful when using these. I do try to minimise the use of my fingers but, to get a smooth surface which gets into the grain of the paper, sometimes there is no other option. Your fingers must be dry before touching the area of charcoal you are going to blend.

### **Don't blow away the dust created.**

Well not before you have turned the board that your artwork is attached to upside down and tapped it to allow gravity to remove your excess dust. I used to do that but to be honest it's still messy and you still have to pick it up. My recommendation is to invest in a high powered small hand held vacuum. The one I use is detailed below. It's a Litheli



Figure .1.1

bought from Amazon in 2023 and has worked perfectly so far. As you can see from the screen shot it comes with its own battery which is rechargeable from a USB slot. The other big advantage is each element of the filter is washable. It will get clogged with the carbon dust in time. There are several attachments including brushes but I only use the tube extension.

### **Tips in use.**

Try not to touch the paper, just hold the nozzle close to the paper surface. There are two settings - High and Low. On high, the vacuum created is more than enough to pull the charcoal dust off the page without touching the surface with the nozzle.

When washing the filter make sure it is perfectly dry before putting it back together.

### Tip 3

Take your time. This was, in the early days of my artistic endeavours not just with charcoal, one of my biggest mistakes. I wanted everything to be finished in a day. You can and will get quicker but charcoal, in particular, has to be worked. It responds and develops tones and shapes the more you work it. I now force myself to take regular breaks every two to three hours.

In addition, the longer you work at a subject you will get too close to it and you will not see the wood from the trees. Step away, have a coffee, lunch or better still a night's sleep. With fresh eyes you will see, when you return to your piece, the mistakes or poor composition which we all make during the development of an artwork. If you can take it, get someone else to review what you've done so far. My wife is my greatest art critic, but her comments and suggestions are invaluable.

### Squint

The best way to get a feel for how your image is progressing is to sit back and squint at it. It's the equivalent of looking at it from the other side of the room.

### Don't press too hard at first

You will be building layers with the different charcoal and pastels. But you will also be using different rubbers/erasers to create lighter areas. One of the mistakes I made in my early attempts was to press too hard and blend too soon. The harder you rub the charcoal into the paper the more difficult it is to remove. Let me say at this stage that once it's on, you will never completely remove it even with a powered eraser, which we will discuss later in the guide.



### Applying the first layer

Softly and gently at first, use the powder and the associated applicators to gently outline the lights and darks.



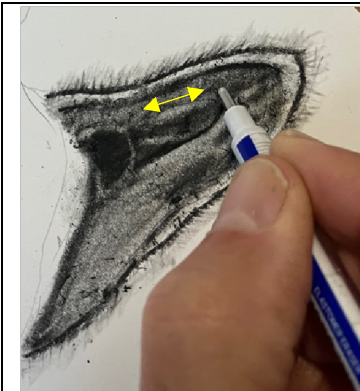


As you can see, I use an applicator to do this. It serves two purposes:-

1. It keeps your hands clean.
2. You can achieve a nice even cover with very little pressure, the lighter the better. That will allow you to lift out or, more correctly, rub out the areas you need to. I like to use the tombow rubber once I have put on the first light layer of powder to identify direction of blending flow and to establish light and dark contrasts. More on this later.

Notice in Fig 3 that I am resting my hand on a home-made cardboard and bubble wrap pressure pad with glassine paper underneath. The glassine greatly reduces rubbing and smudging and the bubble wrap pad holds it down and spreads the point load of your hand evenly across the paper. This is home made because I change it regularly to prevent transmission of dust onto the work surface. I do the same with the glassine which lasts no more than one artwork at best.

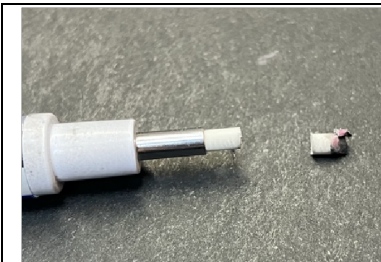
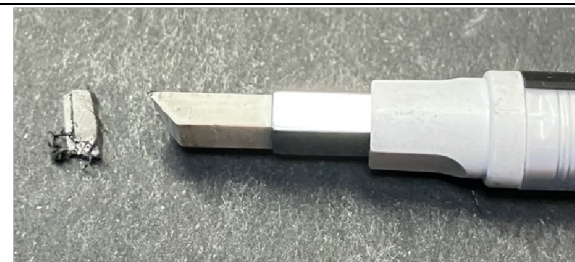

### Lifting Out

There are several ways to do this and a variety of tools to use but here are my most used three.

		
Tombow Eraser Round Tip	Tombow Eraser Chisel Tip	Kneadable Eraser (Faber Castell)
Fig 4	Fig 5	Fig 6

### Tombow Round Tip Eraser

This is a very useful eraser and, as you can see in Figure 4, I am using it to lift out the first and second layers having already created a white boundary to the ear. The yellow arrow shows the rubbing direction. The tombow works just like a propelling pencil. The eraser is a rubber cylinder which I would advise not to extend too far from the tip in use. It will quickly erode but, more importantly retraction reduces flexing. If you want a sharp edge, just cut the rubber across at 90 degrees then retract back it into the body. See Fig7

		
Fig 7	Fig 8	Fig 9

To get a thin line in the charcoal use both tombows, round and chisel, at a sharp angle to the paper see Fig 9. Refills can be bought quite cheaply from Amazon or most art supplies.

### Tombow Chisel Tip

Because it is a rectangular rubber section the chisel tip can remove larger areas and is more rigid. For me it performs best when it has been rubbed or cut to a chisel tip. See Fig 8 I use this shaped chisel head end to create hairs, eyelashes, whiskers etc.

In Fig 9 above you can see how I have managed to create highlights within the ear to simulate veins and tendons using just these two tombows.

### Kneadable Rubber

There are various versions of these available but for me the Faber-Castell brand is by far the best. (See Fig 6) I tend to build quite a large eraser from several by kneading them together. I store it in a small plastic tub with a lid and tear off what I need to use for the job in hand.



Figure 10

**Small Tip** – Always warm the rubber in your hand or put the plastic tub with the rubber inside on a radiator for a few minutes before use. I have a small radiator next to my work table in the studio which works perfectly. The Faber-Castell brand has an amazing capacity to adsorb the charcoal. As you can see above even when black they continue to lift out/rub out way past the time when you think you need to change it.

There is one further product that I wouldn't be without; the Derwent powered eraser Fig 10. Rechargeable and very versatile, when all else fails and you need to remove/lift out a stubborn bit of over enthusiasm on your part, then the Derwent Eraser is a life saver.

There are different versions and models ranging from £5.50 (Hobbycraft) to £25 (Jacksons)

### Blending Tools the Tortillon

The traditional charcoal blending tool is the tortillon. It's made from rolled up or compressed paper and can last for months, even years. Just because the tip gets black do not throw it away, it can be used like a pencil. The only reason to change or use a new one is if you want to blend white charcoal. I keep the two separate. One white and one black of each size. The white ones I also use for blending colored pastel. However I have been known to clean up a black one with a bit of sand paper to use it for white.

I use tortillons and silicon shapers for blending but, as I have already mentioned, sometimes there is nothing better than your finger.

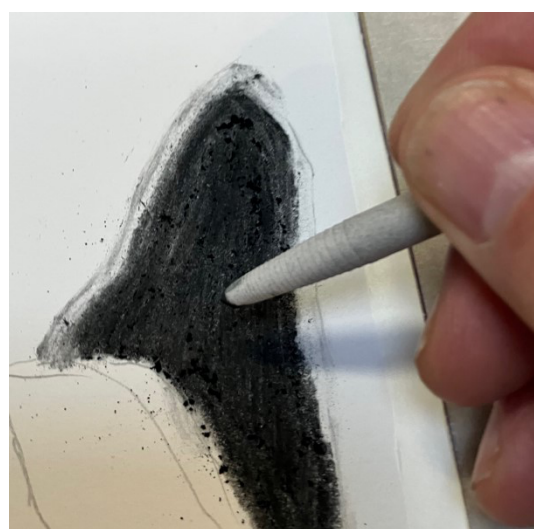
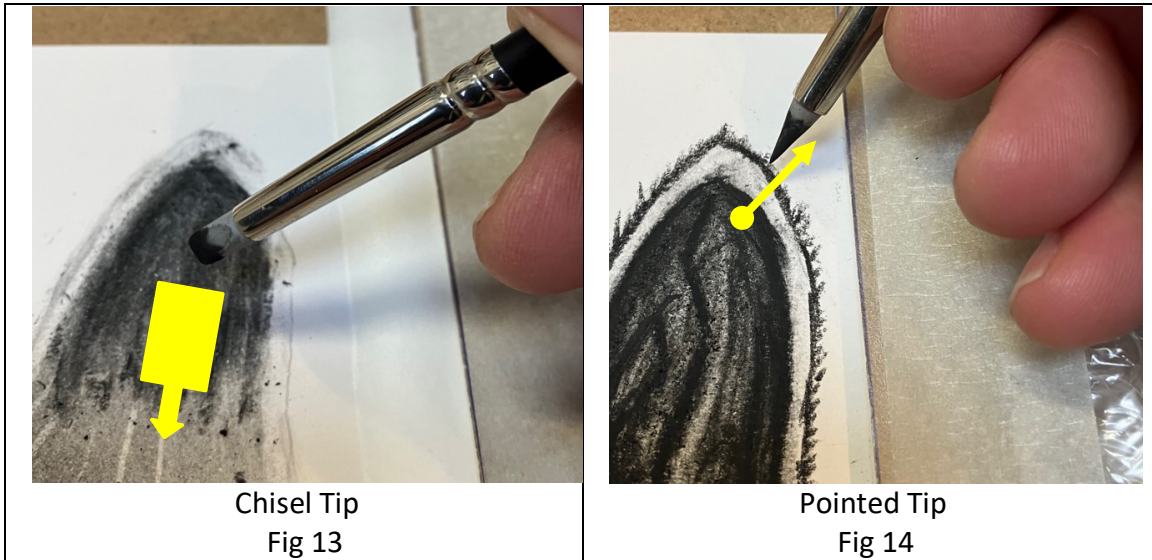


Figure 11

## Silicon Blenders



I first started to use this product on pastels but actually I find it is also superb on charcoal. I use the Chisel Tip flat, like a paint brush, to smooth applied vine charcoal or turned 90 degrees on its edge when creating directional fur lines on animals.

The yellow arrow in Fig 13 shows the positioning of the tip and the direction of sweep. In this example the flow is down the ear following the guide lines on the lower layer. The silicon tips are hard wearing and clean up easily with a baby wipe. The pointed tip in Fig 14 is even better at creating fur hairs along the edge of ears etc. In the image shown, I have placed the base of the tip flat onto the dark charcoal then dragged the shaper in the direction of the arrow, lifting off at the point you can see where the tip is. The original dark fur line was created with a charcoal pencil and the pointed tip used to pull out and smooth.

Note incidentally in Fig 13 the directional guide lines I made in the first layer, with the tombow, were to remind me of the direction of flow of the fur. You don't have to do this but I find it a useful guide when working at close quarters. The point of the yellow arrow is showing one.

When blending, always consider the direction of flow of light across the artwork and in the case of fur or feathers smooth and blend in that direction. A circular blending motion will create a better effect for curly fur which the light will follow.

## Charcoal Pencils

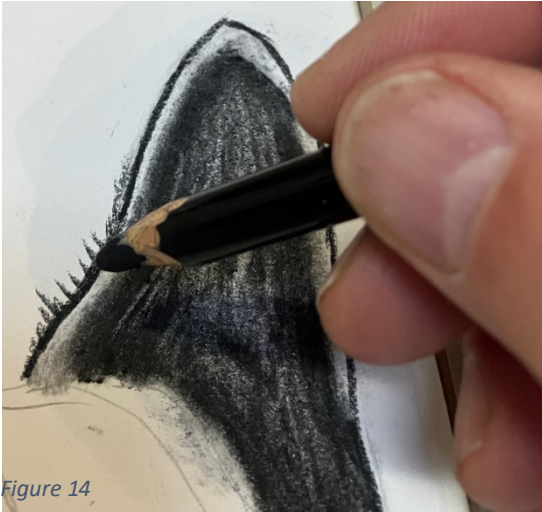


Figure 14



Figure 15

Charcoal pencils come in various grades. Some suppliers categorise them as hard, medium or soft. Others, light wash, medium wash and dark wash. The softer the grade the more charcoal that goes down. Pencils are very much more controllable than vine charcoal but vine charcoal is more easily blended and spread. I use them at different times and for different purposes. When using the tortillon on vine charcoal you will find that once you start blending it will lighten as it smooths. Charcoal pencils less so.

### **Detailing.**

With a sharp tipped pencil, as you can see in Fig 15, you can add very specific detail but the tip needs sharpening regularly. Get into the habit of twisting the pencil round as you work as that helps to keep the tip sharp and wearing evenly. Notice I have sharpened this pencil with a knife rather than a pencil sharpener. To finish, and during work, I regularly use a piece of sandpaper to keep the tip sharp. Always rub the pencil in one direction into the sandpaper with the tip pointing towards the direction of rub. Do not rub from side to side or drag the pencil off the paper with the tip being the last thing to leave.

## **Adding depth and tone**

There are times when you need to get as close to black as possible and there is no better way that I have found than by using either a Soft Dark Charcoal Pencil or Charcoal Block, with little or no blending. Blocks are good for large areas, but they put down a lot of medium and are costly. So use them sparingly. For me the pencil works best especially when undertaking close up work on portraits or buildings.

## **Order of Application**

So I work roughly, not strictly, in the following order shown on page 8 but it really does depend on the subject in question. If it's a portrait, for example, I always like to start with the eyes once I have sketched or drawn out the main feature lines of the full subject. Not everyone uses this approach, I know. It's a personal choice, but I feel if I can get the eyes I am 50% of the way to getting the likeness.

### Check List before starting work

1. Sketch out your artwork with a light HB pencil or use **tracedown** with the photograph to give you an outline to work to.
2. **If you are right handed work from the top left of the drawing if you are left handed start top right. This will reduce, not prevent, smudging.**
3. Use **charcoal powder** and **applicator** to rough out the overall shape. This is your first layer of charcoal and is important. Use a very light pressure to apply at first.
4. Remove any excess charcoal dust.
5. Use **erasers** and the **putty rubber** to lift out and highlight lighter patches to give definition and flow guides to the next layer to be added. You must remove any charcoal that has strayed onto areas that you don't want it to. You should constantly inspect your hands and your artwork to reduce unwanted transmission.
6. Use **vine charcoal sticks** (various thicknesses) to add further definition and tone then start to blend and set into the paper by using additional pressure with your finger or tortillon.
7. Remove any excess charcoal dust.
8. Charcoal pencils and pastels are then used to give detail, definition and depth of darker tones.
9. Use **compressed charcoal blocks** or **large diameter charcoal** to cover larger areas.
10. Remove any excess charcoal dust.
11. Use **erasers** and **putty rubbers** to pull out the lighter areas again.
12. **Fix areas that are finished by carefully spraying with a fixative whilst screening areas that you are still working on. ALLOW the sprayed area to dry before moving on.**  
**Note- This is the method I use on larger pieces. Not everyone does this, so please do your own experimentation.**
13. **When your work is complete fix completely**

AM01 GUIDE NO1 WORKING WITH CHARCOAL AV1.0  
ART-MARCO ARTIST'S GUIDE

EQUIPMENT LIST

Tools and Products Required to produce the above artwork.

*Cost\* Prices are correct at time of production and may now have varied*

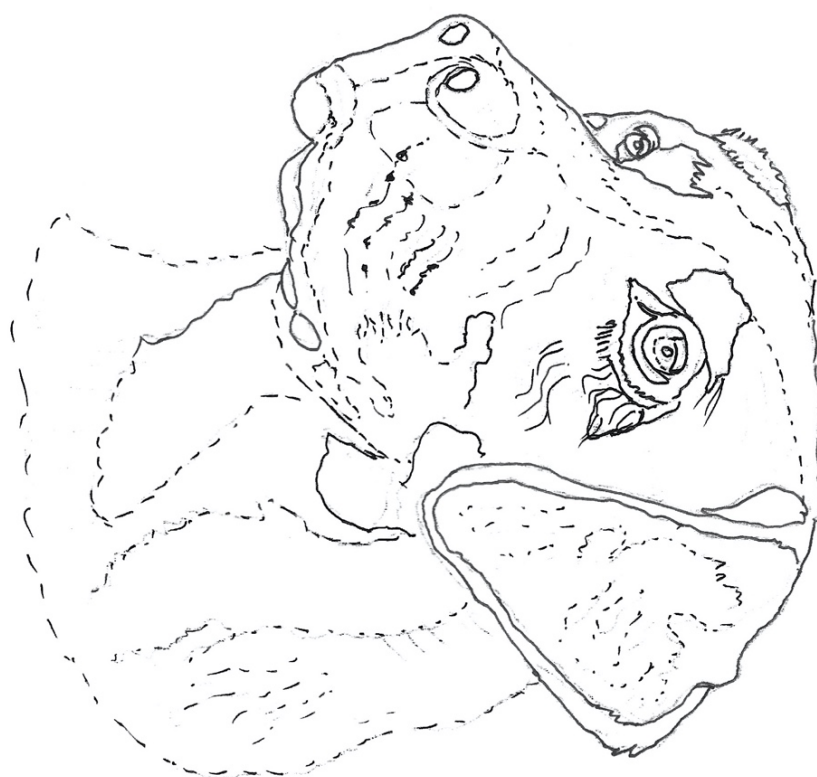
Description	Size/Details	Availability/Supplier	Cost*	Approx Cost for this project	Notes
Drawing Board Frisk Frisk Drawing Board Large (63.5 x 55.8 x 0.5cm)	Plywood or Hardboard	<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£24.75	£2.50 (amortised over 10)	You can make your own of course
Frisk Trace down Paper	A3 or A4	<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	A3 & A4 £10.50	£0.50	Pack of 5 Sheets
Frisk Cartridge 110gsm Cartridge Paper	A3 or A4 Pad A3 for this artwork	<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£5.40	£0.30	Pack of 50 Sheets
Assorted Vine Charcoal Sticks	Hongbee	Amazon	£10.99	£1.00	20 assorted size sticks
Derwent Set of 6 Charcoal Pencils or Nitram Fusaine Hard	Pack of 6	Various Amazon or <a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£12.49	£3.00	1 Light, 2 x Med, 2 x Dark, 1 White
Coates 500ml Jar Charcoal Powder	Jar	Amazon	£15.10	£1.50	Will last for many artworks
Pro-Arte Set of 5 Silicone Shapers	Set of 5	Jacksons Art Supplies or Amazon	£8.99	£0.50	Chisel and Round Tips

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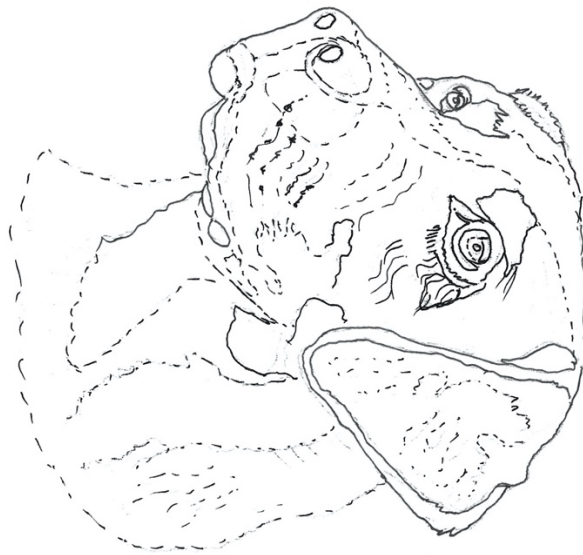
Description	Size/Details	Availability/Supplier	Cost*	Approx Cost for this project	Notes
Pastel Pencils	Faber-Castell Pitt	Jacksons Art Supplies	£42.00	£0.25	Tin of 24 various colors
White Charcoal Pencil	Pasler Pack of 3 or Koh I Noor	Amazon or <a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£7.49	£0.10	Make sure its charcoal
Craft Knife		Your choice		£0.00	
Putty Rubber	Faber Castel	<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£2.50	£1.00	
Tombow Eraser		Amazon or The SAA	£6.50	£1.00	Round Tip & Rectangle Tip
Masking Tape	1" 25mm Roll x 50M	Amazon	£8.99	£0.20	Scotch Pack of 3
Pack of Baby Wipes				£0.50	
Derwent Rechargeable Eraser		<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£28.49	£0.50	Optional
Fixative	Schminke 350ml Can	<a href="http://www.saa.co.uk">www.saa.co.uk</a>	£18.26	£0.50	Other brands are available

Reference Drawings





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