

Materials, Techniques, and Visual Perception in the Graphite Portrait Drawings of J. A. D. Ingres

ABSTRACT

Research into the graphite portrait drawings of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1876) was carried out in conjunction with the acquisition of four drawings by the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1995, when the author was the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Paper conservation at the Gallery. Over sixty graphite portrait drawings by Ingres from public collections in the U.S., the Netherlands, and the U.K. were examined with attention to the artist's choice of drawing materials and techniques as well as the present physical condition of the drawings.

The project included time for extensive study of these drawings under the microscope. Characteristic features of the artist's technique became apparent which made possible a better understanding of this body of Ingres' work. For example, the artist's use of erasure and scraping of the paper surface, and other techniques of cutting into the paper surface, were documented and interpreted in the context of the historical development of drawing technique.

The study also included an investigation into the visual qualities that make these images so striking. The apparent simplicity of a controlled, subtly modulated, black graphite line on smooth white paper was developed by Ingres into portraits of surprising complexity, visual interest, and psychological insight. Technological developments in the production of artist's materials in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century are seen to work in concert with aesthetic developments at the time to influence the production and presentation of these drawings.

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