

Light Revelations: Drawing Fallingwater

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Activity and Main Ideas

This workshop begins with the precedent of Wright's high-contrast drawings for projects, like the Larkin building and the Robie House, to initiate a practice of drawing Fallingwater through high-contrast delineation. Participants start to the south or southwest of Fallingwater, by the lookout, and complete three drawings, preceded initially by an introduction, with some time in between to locate a new angle of view. The first drawing is typically completed with a Sharpie and the subsequent two with sumi brush and ink, though participants can choose to use only one or the other medium, if they wish.

Since the intention is to carefully observe and understand the building and surroundings through the impact of light and shadow, participants are discouraged from pre-drawing the geometry or marking un-shadowed edges. The building is unmistakable and powerfully illustrated through shading alone, especially when the transparency of the envelope is carefully drawn.



Figure 1. Two drawings by Gayla Jett Shannon completed during a Fallingwater College Residency.

Material

Participants are provided with 9" x 12" or 11" x 14" bristol board pads (typically Strathmore 300 series) with a stiff back suitable for plein air drawing/painting, a black Sharpie, a sumi brush, and a paint cup of black India ink.

Rationale

This technique has been practiced with students successfully on-site at Fallingwater many times as part of the Fallingwater Institute residency programs. Where people sketching on site more typically focus on the edges of Wright's geometry this technique prompts practitioners to carefully observe how light and shadow reinforce the material contrasts of the building and surroundings. It focuses attention on the horizontality and rhythm of the stone coursing, draws attention to the texture and relationship of the building to the adjacent hillside and the falls, and helps sharpen observations of the curved edges of the concrete terraces.

It's a technique very well suited to the building, though not what people most typically consider using when sketching in this place.



Figure 2. Three drawings by Nathan Scrivo completed during a Fallingwater High School Residency.

Intention and Purpose

The building and its surroundings are texturally rich: the palette of material in the building is explicitly revealed by sunlight and shadow, even without the use of color. This technique prompts a careful examination of surfaces, textures, and transparency including how surrounding trees cast patterns on the building itself. While many people come to Fallingwater with pencil or pen in hand, it is much less common to visit this site and draw with a bold brush. This technique prompts careful study, while leading many practitioners to produce powerful drawings of the place. The examples included here are by past students, from high school and college programs, executed on site within a very similar timeframe to the duration of the ACSF workshop sessions.



Figure 3. On the left, one drawing by Steven Preston completed during a Fallingwater High School Residency. On the right, two drawings by Albert Carrocio completed during a Fallingwater College Residency.

History

This drawing exercise has been included in twenty student residency programs since 2000 and has been a recurring part of the curriculum for both high school and college programs taught by the author. These Fallingwater Institute programs have included students from across the United States as well as international participants. College programs have been offered both as open calls, with students included from many different schools, and as university-based cohorts. Students in these programs are permitted an unusual level of access to the house, including opportunities to draw inside and outside nearly every day. This assignment is typically executed on the afternoon of their first full day of residency and always as an outside drawing exercise. The illustrations included above show the work of two high school and two college residency participants. Overall, more than 200 students have completed close to 600 drawings practicing this technique.