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**Sketch, drawing, composition – from observation of nature to creative search when creating a lacquer miniature painting project**

**Abstract.** The article examines the role of preparatory stages in the process of creating a composition and project for lacquer miniature painting, including the execution of search sketches and drawings from life. Using the experience of great masters of Western European and Russian art as an example, the significance of drawing from life for working on a painting or project is revealed. The influence of observing nature on the conception and realization of the lacquer miniature painting project theme is emphasized.

**Keywords:** lacquer miniature painting, composition, sketch, search sketch, drawing from life, higher education.

The process of creating an artwork is a journey from the initial conception stemming directly from the perception of reality to its profound understanding and creative transformation based on the artist's experience, impressions and skill. This path can be described as dialectical, moving from direct observation of actuality towards its synthesis with intellectual analysis. Such a trajectory may be represented as a sequence of interconnected stages, each addressing unique and significant tasks. Fundamental among these are interrelated phases of the creative process: observation, conception, idea formulation, sketching (compositional search), drawing from life and extended study drawings. Their interaction forms the basis for professional artistic methodology, where sharpness of vision serves to reveal the creative intent while anatomical knowledge helps specify the image created by imagination. The history of art provides vivid illustration of this ongoing dialogue between the truth of life and that of art [4, p. 12].

Let us proceed to examine the fundamental stages which serve as primary components in the formation of an image within visual arts. It is not the creation of the artistic image itself or even its concept that marks the beginning but rather the act of observing nature. Gradually, it becomes clear that observing nature for artistic purposes always involves a dialogue between specifics and generalities, chance occurrences and underlying patterns. Unlike a cursory glance aimed at identifying objects for practical recognition (a tree, person, cup), artistic observation immediately raises questions such as: what character does this form possess? How does it relate to its surroundings? What principle or “idea” does it embody?

There exist various types of observation – sequential and holistic, for instance. Typically, non-artists observe objects sequentially, shifting focus from one detail to another without perceiving their interconnections. In contrast, artists cultivate

professional vision, aiming to encompass nature through a unified, “volumetric” gaze, grasping the relationship between all elements visible. They perceive not merely a figure against a background but a single tonal and chromatic field where the contour of the figure “resonates” rhythmically with folds and the background actively contributes to shaping the form. This ability to see holistically underpins compositional thinking, essential for forming the artistic image [2, p. 6].

Artistic vision is selective and critical. Nature offers an infinite array of details, yet the artist, guided by his intention (even in the quickest sketch), acts as an editor. He analyzes what aspects of what he sees are crucial for conveying the essence, structure, mood and what constitutes unnecessary and dispensable details. During reflection on the image, everything secondary – anything that could be omitted – is eliminated. A compositional selection takes place, feasible only when working on a series of exploratory sketches, studies and alternative solutions. Selectivity, aesthetic rigor developed at this stage, becomes one of the key qualities of future artists, combining observational skills with the capacity for discernment.

The complexity in depicting the material world lies in the contradiction between visual and tactile, voluminous perceptions of objects. However, extensive viewing experience enables overcoming this issue. Observation combined with haptic sensation allows lines in drawing to become not mere contours but traces of movement along the form, while spots transmit materiality. Additionally, visuo-motor and imaginative memory develop. Brief but intense observation of motion (gesture, bird flight) followed by an attempt to reproduce it from memory in a sketch trains the ability to retain and generalize impressions, which is critically important for creative work independent of direct reliance on reference models.

The journey from an initial concept to final resolution can often be lengthy, although sometimes it is determined in the very first sketch. Using examples from paintings by I.E. Repin, J.-L. David, S.V. Gerasimov and V.G. Perov, we will explore how authors arrive at the embodiment of their ideas through different paths, as well as the challenges they encounter along the way. For example, figures 1<sup>34</sup> и 2<sup>35</sup> illustrate the considerable distance traveled by I.E. Repin's compositional exploration for his painting “Didn't expect”, showing the vast difference between the first thematic sketch and the finished canvas.



Fig. 1. I.E. Repin. First sketch for the painting “Didn't expect”. 1884. State Tretyakov gallery, Moscow

<sup>34</sup> Fig. 1. Repin. They did not expect that he would first conduct research. [gtg.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Repin_They_did_not_expect_him_first_study_gtg.jpg) // Wikimedia Commons [website]. – URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Repin\\_They\\_did\\_not\\_expect\\_him\\_first\\_study\\_gtg.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Repin_They_did_not_expect_him_first_study_gtg.jpg) (access date: February 9, 2026).

<sup>35</sup> Fig. 2. Analysis of a masterpiece: "They did not expect him" by Ilya Repin // Arzamas : website. – URL: <https://arzamas.academy/mag/1268-aspettami> (access date: February 9, 2026).

Through direct observation of nature, one can acquire the skill of searching for constructive-plastic schemes. Even during a fleeting glance at an object, basic notions about shapes and the principle of “from simple to complex” are established, cultivating schematic representations of rhythmic repetitions and mass relationships in one's perception.

When such schemes and solution variants become part of the artist's figurative “luggage”, the solution might come instantly and the image can take shape rapidly. This characteristic is particularly pronounced among masters of classical and academic schools who frequently constructed compositions based on ready-made geometric templates.

Finally, the highest level of uniqueness is seeing in nature not only physical attributes but also poetic and philosophical qualities. Landscapes, for instance, are observed as states of nature – lyrical, epic, anxious; portrait subjects are seen as individuals, characters, citizens, histories. Here, observation merges with intuition and feeling. Artists seek visual equivalents for emotions: melancholy in soft, blurred lines; anxiety in stark contrasts of light and shadow; grandeur in low horizon lines. This kind of perception transforms mere object study into a dialogue where nature ceases to be just an object of replication but becomes a co-author, a source of inspiration and revelation.

A telling example is J.-L. David's painting “Death of Marat” (Figs. 3<sup>36</sup>, 4<sup>37</sup>). The composition was almost instantaneously resolved in a pencil sketch, incorporating every element down to the dedication (“À Marat, David”). The theme was conceived, contemplated and executed simultaneously in visual, emotional and civic dimensions – a case of holistic (artistic) rather than sequential (ordinary) perception.

A sketch is a vital initial phase in the realization of a complete work of art. It serves as a detailed plan for constructing the composition, refining patches and accents. In a sketch, the artist confronts situations requiring pure creative choices, not dictated directly by nature: how should figures be arranged? Where should the light source be placed? Which format should be chosen?



Fig. 2. I.E. Repin. “Didn't expect”. 1884-1888. State Tretyakov gallery

<sup>36</sup> Fig. 3. “Death of Marat” (study).jpg // Wikimedia Commons : [website]. – URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/The\\_Death\\_Of\\_Marat\\_\(Study\).jpg?utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_source=yandexsmartcamera](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/The_Death_Of_Marat_(Study).jpg?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=yandexsmartcamera) (access date: February 9, 2026).

<sup>37</sup> Fig. 4. “Death of Marat” by David.jpg // Wikimedia Commons : [website]. – URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Marat\\_by\\_David.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Marat_by_David.jpg) (access date: February 9, 2026).



Fig. 3. J.-L. David. “Death of Marat”, sketch, 1793, paper, pencil. Versailles



J.-L. David. “Death of Marat”, 1793, Royal museums of fine arts, Brussels

Each decision represents a synthesis of intuition, knowledge and aesthetic sensibility. The multivariant nature of sketches on the same theme clearly demonstrates that there is no single correct solution, but rather an endless field of exploration where the profession of being an artist manifests itself as an activity dedicated to creating a coherent, meaningful and expressive visual world. This is precisely the perception of the profession as a “significant, integral phenomenon” – not simply a craft, but a mode of thought and engagement with reality.

It is specifically in sketches that one can appreciate the mastery of an artist: some short-term works, due to their aesthetic and structural quality, can stand alone as fully-fledged individual creations. Furthermore, studying sketches by pivotal figures in art history reveals how the author constructs compositions and emphasizes certain elements; these insights can then inform personal projects.

Sequentially progressing from one stage to another simulates in educational settings the entire cycle of creative activity typical of a professional artist: from impulse and gathering materials, through deep study, to transformative creativity culminating in a completed artistic statement. Awareness of this cyclicity and internal connection between stages forms the foundation for developing mature, synthetic professional consciousness.

Once a provisional plastic solution for the composition has been found, the next step is the physical embodiment of visual objects. The concrete image is taken from real life and fixed using a sketch from nature. Compositional decisions made in sketches are now filled with concrete content and imagery, further specifying the overall concept.

A sketch is a rapid rough drawing in which the artist captures the first impression of what is seen, omitting excessive detail. The resulting depiction may appear crude and imprecise, indicating general proportions, dynamic movements or distinctive characteristics of the subject matter. Under limited time constraints, the



artist physically cannot engage analytical processes as thoroughly as in a classroom setting. Instead, the brain must function differently: capturing and generalizing simultaneously. At this moment, instinctual synthesis occurs – the line assumes roles beyond mere outline, reflecting movement and character, while the spot conveys light, mass and emotional weight [7, p. 113].

Thus, already at the sketch stage, students absorb the key principle of economy and multi-tasking in visual means. Practically, they understand that details do not exist independently but gain significance only in relation to the whole, to the initial overall impression. This fosters an attitude toward holistic perception, something difficult to instill in prolonged work where inexperienced attention tends to fragment across details. Directly in the sketch, one can observe what exactly the author focuses on and which aspects – both material and psychological – are crucial for conveying the image [6, p. 13].

For great painters like Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and Peter Paul Rubens, sketches from nature served as fields for simultaneous scientific and artistic inquiry. Ilya Repin and Vasily Perov used sketches to compile collections of socio-psychological archetypes for future paintings. Edgar Degas filled albums with ballet dancer sketches, striving to capture moments of pose transformation, creating a graphic choreography. Sketches emerge as physical expressions of the author's emotional response.

To witness how, in the course of exploring through drawing from life, the image of the protagonist develops, generalizes and acquires expression, let us return to the story behind I.E. Repin's work on the painting “Didn't expect” (Figs. 5<sup>38</sup>, 6<sup>39</sup>). This example is especially illustrative because the figure of the central hero stands out for its integrity and stillness, achieving expressiveness through a precise silhouette shown nearly devoid of halftones – it stands against the light and is outlined in *contre-jour*. However, this expressive static quality wasn't achieved immediately: in the life-drawn sketches, we see a different image – more mobile, with facial expressions conveying emotion, somewhat fidgety hand gestures, steps, head movements. In other words, the image remains too fragmented, inaccurate, random and slightly theatrical. Only after much deliberation over the image and execution of numerous variations in sketches did the artist manage to imbue the live material with expressive and tragic monumentality.

Of course, on this path, a sense of measure is necessary – an understanding of when to stop, when the image has been accurately captured and expresses the intended message with maximum impact. It is known that I.E. Repin, who was practically never satisfied with the results achieved, continued altering the figure, particularly the face of the exiled man, thereby significantly diminishing, according to contemporaries' opinions, the expressiveness of the image [3, p. 150].

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<sup>38</sup> Fig. 5. Repin. Full figure and the head of the entering man 1883 1884 gtg.jpg // Wikimedia Commons . – URL: [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repin\\_Full\\_figure\\_and\\_the\\_head\\_of\\_the\\_entering\\_man\\_1883\\_1884\\_gtg.jpg](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repin_Full_figure_and_the_head_of_the_entering_man_1883_1884_gtg.jpg) (access date: February 9, 2026).

<sup>39</sup> Fig. 6. Ilya Repin “Unexpectedly and unplanned” detail4.jpg // Wikimedia Commons : [сайт]. URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Ilya\\_Repin\\_Unexpected\\_visitors\\_detail4.jpg?utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_source=yandexsmartcamera](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Ilya_Repin_Unexpected_visitors_detail4.jpg?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=yandexsmartcamera) (access date: February 9, 2026).



Fig. 5. I.E. Repin. Sketches for the painting “Didn't expect”.1883–1884



Fig. 6. I.E. Repin. Fragment of the painting “Didn't expect”

Another example of similar “overworking” or “excessive emphasis” on the image is the mother figure in S.V. Gerasimov's painting “Mother of a partisan” (Fig. 7<sup>40</sup>). Working on the head of the main heroine, transitioning from life studies and sketches to the final version, the artist achieved ultimate expressiveness (Figs. 8<sup>41</sup>, 9<sup>42</sup>). However, much later, desiring to make the image clearer for a broader audience, S.V. Gerasimov repainted the head of the main heroine, making the interpretation far more poster-like and straightforward which led to disappointment and criticism from viewers (Fig. 10).

The immense possibilities offered by the flexible, diverse, multifaceted nature of nature-based sketching – its malleability and liveliness – are utilized by artists both in seeking plastic expressions of concepts and in producing specific sketches from life aimed at discovering authentic images of heroes in compositions, which are always more expressive and richer than imagined ones. An image drawn from life can not only guide towards specific plastic resolutions of ideas but also inspire the idea itself [5, p. 32].

Vasily Perov's painting “The loner-guitarist” (Fig. 12<sup>43</sup>) illustrates how a sketch from life can virtually word-for-word translate into a painting, becoming its

<sup>40</sup> Figs. 7, 10. Mother of a partisan 2.png // Wikimedia Commons . – URL: [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мать\\_Партизана\\_2.png](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мать_Партизана_2.png) (access date: February 14, 2026).

<sup>41</sup> Fig. 8 Sergei Vasilievich Gerasimov (artist). Head of mother. Study for the painting “Mother of a partisan” // State catalogue of the museum fund of the Russian Federation. – URL: <https://goskatalog.ru/portal/#/collections?id=20711359> (access date: February 14, 2026).

<sup>42</sup> Fig. 9. Telegram: View @dtlive – URL: <https://t.me/dtlive/73761?single> (access date: February 14, 2026).

<sup>43</sup> Fig. 12. Perov. The loner-guitarist.jpg // Wikimedia Commons. – URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Перов\\_Гитарист-бобыль.jpg?uselang=ru](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Перов_Гитарист-бобыль.jpg?uselang=ru) (access date: February 14, 2026).

idea and narrative (Fig. 11<sup>44</sup>). Likely, the idea to paint arose after the artist had completed this sketch. Yet, the scene witnessed by the artist inherently encapsulated varied thoughts and conceptions regarding human loneliness and abandonment, expressing them eloquently.



Fig. 7. S.V. Gerasimov. Painting “Mother of a partisan”. 1943-1950.  
State Tretyakov gallery, Moscow



Fig. 8. S.V. Gerasimov. Head of mother. Study for the painting. 1942. State Borodino military-historical museum reserve



Fig. 9. S.V. Gerasimov. “Mother of a partisan”, first variant of the mother's image



Fig. 10. S.V. Gerasimov. “Mother of a partisan”, final version, fragment image

<sup>44</sup> Fig. 11. The loner-guitarist. Vasily Grigorievich Perov. Drawings and Illustrations, 19th century // Arthive, 2026 : project. – URL: <https://artchive.ru/vasilyperov/works/32432~Gitaristb obyl'> (access date: February 14, 2026).



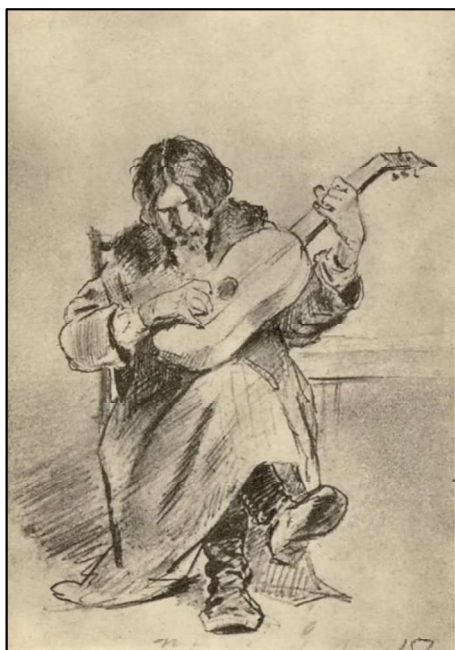


Fig. 11. V.G. Perov. Sketch for the painting "The loner-guitarist". 1865.  
State Tretyakov gallery



Fig. 12. V.G. Perov. Painting "The loner-guitarist". 1865.  
State Russian museum

This does not imply that the artist played no role in shaping the pictorial language of his own work: beyond what he saw in life, felt the tragedy, recorded it through keen observation and drawing proficiency, he subsequently endowed the depiction with deeper meaning via subtle artistic techniques unapparent upon superficial inspection.

In the sketch, a tipsy tavern-goer is depicted – his appearance and gait betray a hint of swagger, bravado masking inner turmoil. In the painting, however, the image is purged of surface-level emotional coloring, presenting instead a generalized, tense meditation. This progression – from observation to generalization – is essentially what defines artistic creation.

Could the artists whose creative explorations and preparatory work were discussed above have reached such depth of imagery if they began working straight away, without sketches and drawings, relying solely on the fleeting, initial mental image that emerged in their imaginations? Of course, such examples are known in the history of art. F. Boucher prided himself on being able to paint large canvases directly, purely from imagination, and Caravaggio, who never made sketches or preliminary drawings, created complex multi-figure compositions directly from life, right onto large-format canvases. However, F. Boucher's art is permeated with immediate, fluid transience, a sort of frivolous aesthetics, where such a method of work is justified, whereas Caravaggio possessed exceptional powers of observation, precision of perception and understanding of form, which occur extremely rarely – thus constituting more of an exception than a rule.

Furthermore, the creative and educational processes belong to distinct categories. Educational programs impose specific requirements applicable to all students, including compliance with procedural stages in completing assignments. Gathering preparatory materials for compositions is one of the most important stages



of this work and executing sketches and preparatory drawings from life is an indispensable component thereof.

In many areas of artistic education – such as easel and monumental painting, book graphics, etc. – preparatory drawings from life constitute the core of compositional work [1, p. 289].

Why, then, doesn't this practice occupy a comparable position in the training of lacquer miniature painters? After all, the most intricate subjects of representation – nature, architecture, the human figure, groups of people – cannot be portrayed expressively, naturally, artistically or even competently in drawing, painting or composition without prior study of nature. Required is not merely daily practice of sketching and drawing in everyday life, on streets, in transport or during drawing classes, but purposeful work with specific objects and groups of objects used in specific compositional constructions. Thus, a student creates a compositional development of a given theme – a sketch; next, he draws each element of this sketch from life, searches for a model closest to his concept, positions her in the required stance, posture or angle, and depicts this model from life as accurately as possible – executing a preparatory study (Figs. 13, 14<sup>45</sup>).



Fig. 13. Linear drawing of composition



Fig. 14. Drawing from life used in composition work

Such practice should become an obligatory part of the curriculum for students specializing in lacquer miniature painting. Despite the obvious necessity of such work, drawing from life is one of those stages in composition development that is most commonly neglected. This affects the quality of completed works. During intermediate and final assessments in the disciplines of “Design and mockup creation” and “Mastery of lacquer miniature painting”, which are conducted as a

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<sup>45</sup> Figs. 13, 14. Photo from the methodological fund of the department of lacquer painting at the Russian university of traditional art crafts.

demonstration review of completed assignments, there is often fair criticism regarding the depiction of human figures. The issue goes beyond mere violations of proportions or anatomical characteristics – figures are sometimes given movements that are impossible in reality, with poses that humans simply cannot assume, as occasionally seen on some students' artistic-graphic projects.

The reason lies in the fact that, when developing their project, the student neither observed nor studied and drew from life. Often, an excuse arises that the human figure in lacquer miniatures is depicted conditionally, transformed according to traditional canons. But transformation and distortion are fundamentally different concepts. One needs to deeply study the object undergoing transformation.

Here, we're not discussing imagery or philosophical content, mentioned earlier in conjunction with the work of great artists, but elementary artistic literacy – the basic level of preparation that should be formed in students during their higher art education.

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