

The Courtauld

Draw to Discover Detail and Space

Devised by Alexandra Blum



† Robert Campin, Attributed to, The Seilern Triptych - The Entombment, 1425 (circa), oil and gold leaf on panel. The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust) © The Courtauld



“ Each time I look at the Seilern Triptych (The Entombment) painted by Robert Campin, I feel as though I am flying through the space, able to swoop down at any point to take a closer look. For me, it feels as if Robert Campin has created a visual parallel to the way in which we gain a gradual understanding of the actual spaces that surround us, as our eyes, mind and body roam around them.”

Alexandra Blum, artist and Courtauld educator.

Introduction:

The central panel of this artwork shows the burial of the body of Jesus after his crucifixion. In Christian art this is often called the 'Entombment of Christ'. Painted using oil paint and gold leaf on panel (wood), it would have been used for religious purposes, possibly by somebody in their own home. The following drawing activity does not, however, focus on the story being told but instead enables you to explore the incredible detail in the painting, and to discover how those details help create the dynamic space in the image.

Robert Campin made the Seilern Triptych in Northern Europe c.1425, in the area we now call Belgium. Around the same time, on the other side of Europe, artists in Italy began to develop and use the system of linear perspective to create an illusion of three dimensional space in their paintings. Linear perspective uses mathematical rules to construct space within an image and assumes the viewer is in a fixed position, using only one eye to look at the space. In contrast to this, artists in Northern Europe in the first half of the 15th century, including Robert Campin, did not use the mathematics of linear perspective to create the fluid spaces in their paintings. Instead, looking very closely at the world around them was central to the construction of their images.

One aspect of the Seilern Triptych which some artists in the 21st century find exciting is the way in which the viewer's eyes can wander through the space and explore it from many different viewpoints. Use the drawing guide below to discover how the painting's wonderful detail can lead you on a journey through space and time.

Materials:

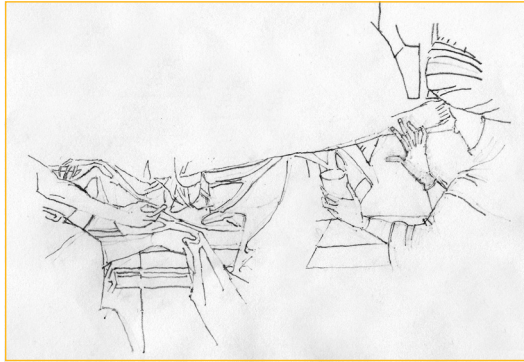
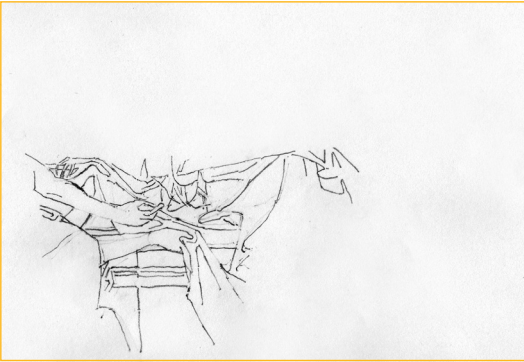
- a pencil (4B if available but not required)
- paper
- rubber

Step 1:



As your starting point select a small area in the central panel where there are intersecting forms. For example, the area where the raised arm of the kneeling figure in red intersects with Christ's arm. With your pencil use line and draw slowly. Draw each form in small sections: for example do not draw all of Christ's arm in one go, instead draw it bit by bit, comparing each part of the arm with the forms either side of it. Include those parts of the neighbouring forms which intersect with the arm in your drawing. As you draw, look closely at the spaces between forms, to help you clearly see the shape of each form.

Step 2:



Start to expand the drawing, so that you begin to go on a journey through the painting. You can travel in any direction, you don't have to follow the example, but make sure you draw each form and space (no matter how small) which you come across along your chosen route.

Advice:

If you feel overwhelmed by the complicated detail of the forms, relax and slow down your looking further. The closer you look, the more you will see and the density of shapes in complex areas will actually help you to compare forms more easily.

Try to forget what each form is (a hand, a face, a foot). Instead, look for curved, horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines within the forms you see. Thinking in that way will help you to see the relationship between forms clearly.

Pause and Reflect:

After about 15 minutes stop drawing and take a moment to reflect on what you have been doing. What have you noticed whilst drawing that you had not seen during your first glance at the painting? A tiny space under a wrist, crisp folds of cloth almost meeting?

Or perhaps you have noticed the ear peeping out from the intricately folded turban?

How has becoming aware of the precision with which Robert Campin placed details within the painting changed your relationship to the space in the image? Do you feel closer to it or further away? Do you feel as if you are outside of the painting looking into it?

Or, do you feel as though you are wandering through the space, focussing on different areas as you do so?

You could discuss this with someone; have they noticed something you missed, or vice versa?

Step 3:

Continue to draw in the way described in steps 1 and 2.

After about 30 minutes

- Stop drawing and look closely at something near to you in the space you are in, for example markings on the floor.
- Look at the folds in the fabric of your clothes.
- Walk across the room and focus on another object.
- What does doing these things remind you of? Does it recall the succession of closely observed details you drew in the Seilern Triptych? Are you aware of the space around the objects and the space that you moved through?
- How do you think you could convey the experience of closely looking at objects one after another in your own future artworks?