

Roy Wright originally specialised in drawing in black and white, rather than charcoal in particular. 'The big change came when my daughter handed me a box of charcoal. I tried it out and found it easier than pastel. It was as simple as that. It just sort of clicked after all those years of working in black and white. With charcoal you can switch with ease between fine line and thick, dark tone.'

Growth

'I started by working small, and experimenting with different papers. I discovered rough-textured Khadi papers, which led me into working larger, because I liked the broken line effect. My strokes became stronger and broader and my drawings expanded from 15in (38cm) to 48in (122cm). Occasionally, for variety, I use a smooth cartridge paper or Fabriano Artistico, and then I might take a rag and spread charcoal lightly over the whole surface, which gives a different tone.'

A large format certainly suits Roy's favourite subjects, which include portraits of trees and cityscapes. He prefers to work on sheets, rather than rolls of paper, and would rather work at an easel than have the paper pinned to the wall. 'I think I

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Many artists use charcoal, often for sketching, but few make it their main medium. Ken Gofton talks to charcoal master **Roy Wright** about how he works with the medium, his delight in drawing trees, and the problems of getting going in the morning and knowing when to stop at night

have gone almost as big as I can with my drawings,' he says. 'The biggest so far is about 66in (167.5cm) wide.'

Focus on trees

Roy's interest in trees began with the Great Storm of 1987. 'The broken branches and uprooted trunks in Richmond Park, close to where I live, were challenging to draw. Then I began to notice other things, like the gnarled bark. I was drawn into it, simply from the enjoyment of being outside and being

▼ *After the Leaves have Fallen*, charcoal on Khadi hand-made paper 480gsm, 35×48in (89×122cm).

Careful control of the tones successfully suggests a weak winter sun from the right, while giving distance to the background. Having the topmost twigs and outer branches extending out of the picture communicates the idea that the tree is almost too large to encompass in the drawing, despite the large scale. It's a technique the artist uses regularly





◀ *September Oak*, charcoal on Khadi hand-made paper 480gsm, 49×35in (124.5×89cm). Grass, leaves, bark and scarred wood are all clearly delineated with a range of mark-making in a drawing that tells of the tree's long battle to survive

its edge as well, I can move on to the next stick without stopping work. I hold the sticks at the far end, which keeps my wrist movements free, so I have to discard them when they get down to about 2½in (6.5cm) long. But I don't throw the bits away – I keep them for times when I'm making broader marks. Mostly it is small, linear marks, though. I rarely use the side of the charcoal.

'Each mark I make relates to the previous mark, and I need to know where it is all going. This means that, starting in the morning, it can be really difficult to get into the right groove, but once I'm there, I don't want to stop. I have a really good daylight lamp to work by, so sometimes it can be 2am before I think that it would be a good idea to go to bed.'

Working with a soft material like charcoal, smudging must be a constant risk.

'Inevitably I do smudge on occasions,' Roy admits. 'Fortunately, it is usually easy to correct. I don't use a mahl stick, but I have made a few arm rests, in different sizes, from a piece of wood about 2×1in, with a little plywood foot at each end so that the gap between the feet is long enough to bridge the paper. I only use these if I am putting in really fine detail, or to steady my arm if I need really straight lines.'

Diversity

From time to time, Roy admits, he likes a break from trees. He's just done two cityscapes from the top of the Shard building in London – one looking east towards Canary Wharf (top right), the other looking across the river Thames to the City, the Gherkin, and so on. He might do a third, although he prefers the uninterrupted view from the top of St Paul's Cathedral to the one to be had from the Shard.

'Cityscapes take a long time to do, and take a lot out of me – I get absolutely exhausted,' he reveals. 'I have to work from a series of photographs; it is really tricky getting all the angles right, and the perspective, and positioning the buildings correctly. What's also frustrating is that city skylines are constantly changing. The most you can say is that this is how it was.'

◀ *Silver Birches*, charcoal on Farbiano Artístico Rough, 300gsm, 22×38in (56×96.5cm). Here Roy imparts the feeling of intimidation he feels on entering a wood. Keeping the receding trunks separated clearly called for great concentration

able to put what I saw in a sketchbook. These preliminary drawings are all in 6B pencil. There is a dialogue all the time between what I see and am able to get down on paper, and how the viewer responds to it. I want to convey what I see and I want the viewer to feel what I feel.

'I like to get under the branches and really feel the tree's presence. I gain great satisfaction from hours spent in close scrutiny of a tree – the more you look, the more you see. Each oak is individual; its shape today is the story of its life. What is very interesting to the artist is the idea of the brain and eye fighting to agree. It's a challenge that requires great concentration to observe and capture the

mood and atmosphere of the natural world, especially from some of the different viewpoints that excite me, such as looking skywards through complicated structures of leaves and branches. When I enter a wood, there is a feeling of peace and melancholy as well as, to some extent, danger and trepidation.'

In the groove

Roy starts the day relatively slowly by lining up 10 or 15 sticks of charcoal, all sharpened. 'I call it sharpening, but what I do is cut the ends square with a Stanley blade, to give me a good, clean edge. When one end gets blunt, I can turn the charcoal round, and then when that loses





▲ *Looking East from the Shard*, charcoal on Bockingford Rough 300gsm, 39×50in (99×127cm).

'Spot the landmarks' has to be the game played by everyone who ventures to the top of London's highest skyscraper. Drawings of this sort, while providing a break from trees, demand accurate placing of all the features and leave Roy exhausted, he says

at that particular moment in time.'

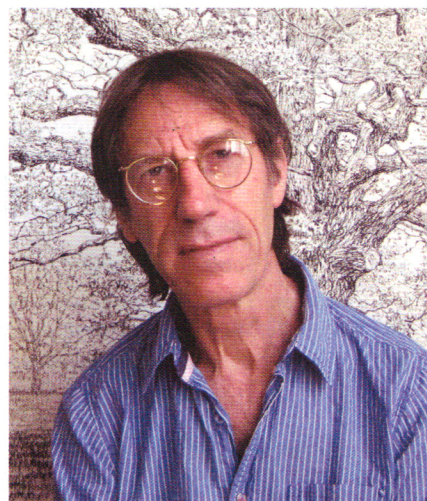
'Animal studies provide another challenge when I need a break from trees. I've drawn shire horses a number of times. Also, we get swifts nesting in our attic every year; occasionally they make their way into the house and have to be rescued. Then I tend to photograph them to provide information for drawings, before taking them outside to release them.'

Roy admires the work of Käthe Kollwitz, who made some fabulous, powerful drawings. Also Egon Schiele, Van Gogh's reed pen drawings, and Cezanne's watercolours, where you can see the pencil marks underneath showing through. Among contemporary artists, he likes Dawn Clements, who often uses sumi ink to produce drawings that are like tracking shots in a film, and the work of Jeannette Barnes and Patricia Cain, who both specialise in drawing construction sites and cityscapes.



▲ *Swift*, charcoal on Fabriano Artistic Rough 300gsm, 39×28in (99×71cm).

Animal and wildlife studies provide an occasional diversion from the artist's focus on trees. Note the texture of the feathers in this sensitive portrait of a bird that strayed into Roy's house



Roy Wright

studied at Hull College of Art, gaining a degree in illustration. Having worked on many national newspapers (twice winning the British Press Award for Graphic Artist of the Year), he now concentrates on his own work. Roy has won many prizes including a Royal Academy Summer Exhibition Drawing Award. He serves on the council of the Pastel Society, and is represented in London and New York by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, www.rebeccahossack.com. www.roywright.co.uk