

Teaching materials

[Making the invisible visible](#)

The frottage technique

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A. Practical Guide to Rubbing – from Introduction to Mastery

Rubbing is a simple and powerful technique that makes the invisible visible: the textures, patterns and traces carried by a surface.

Rubbing is not only a technique: it is a way of looking differently, of questioning surfaces, of bringing invisible traces to light. With paper, charcoal and a little attention, you become an explorer of what is visible and what is hidden.

Here is how to experiment with it step by step, from beginner level to more creative explorations.

1. The Necessary Materials

a. Paper

- Choose thin paper: newspaper, tissue paper, tracing paper or lightweight printer paper.
- Thin paper adapts better to textures → it reveals more detail.

b. Tools for Rubbing

- Charcoal (soft or medium vine charcoal) → very sensitive to textures, perfect for beginners.
- Graphite pencils (2B to 8B) → more precise, ideal for fine surfaces.
- Dry pastels → create richer textures.
- Chalk or wax crayons → produce clearer, more contrasted effects.

c. To Hold the Paper in Place

- A light but steady hand.

d. To Preserve the Trace

- Fix your drawing with a light fixative if you use charcoal or pastel.

2. Choosing Your Surface: What Can You “Question”?

You can do rubbing on almost anything that has texture:

a. On a Historical Site

- Gravestones
- Worn benches

- Cracked paving stones
- Old walls
- Holes, chips, faded inscriptions

b. In Nature

- Tree bark
- Veined leaves
- Rough stones
- Roots or driftwood

c. In Everyday Life

- Coins
- Textiles (lace, thick fabric)
- Metal grids
- Tiles
- Bags and everyday objects

💡 Tip: Look for surfaces that tell a story. Traces become stories!

3. Basic Technique (Beginner Level)

- a. Place your thin paper on the chosen surface.
 - b. Hold it with one hand (or tape it down if necessary).
 - c. With your charcoal or pencil, rub gently in broad movements.
 - d. Let the textures appear without pressing too hard.
- Observe: what was invisible becomes visible.

4. Intermediate Technique

- a. Vary the pressure: light rubbing reveals fine details; stronger pressure highlights shapes.
- b. Change the angle of the charcoal: flat for large areas, on the edge for details.
- c. Move your pressure point from the centre towards the edges.
- d. Try the “cloud” rubbing technique: rub in small circular areas.

5. Advanced Techniques

a. Turning the Paper (without changing the surface)

- (1) Keep the paper in place.
- (2) Rub once.
- (3) Turn the sheet slightly (10°–30°).
- (4) Rub again.
- (5) The patterns overlap → creating an almost abstract image that reveals hidden depth.

b. Moving Your Gesture, Not Your Paper

- (1) Vary the directions: horizontal, vertical, diagonal.
- (2) Each direction reveals a different aspect of the texture.

c. Combining Several Surfaces

- (1) Start on stone.
- (2) Continue on wood.

(3) Finish on metal.

→ You obtain a poetic map of multiple traces.

B. Questions

1. Encountering the Trace

- What do you feel when you press your paper against an old surface? Do you feel as if you are touching something – or someone – beyond the material itself? Describe precisely what happens for you in that moment of contact.
- When the pattern appears through rubbing, do you feel as if you are discovering something? What does this discovery teach you about the surface or about yourself?
- Have you ever experienced a situation in which something invisible became perceptible to you? Explain how this change in perception took place.
- For you, what is a trace: absence, presence, message, imprint, or perhaps something else entirely that you interpret in your own way? Explain your personal reading and justify it.

2. When Chance Dances with Intention

Rubbing combines chance and intention.

- How do you think this combination influences the creation of an image?
- How can this dialogue between what you control and what appears beyond your control help you create a particular connection with the past or with the traces left by those who lived before you?

3. In the Footsteps of a Surrealist

Max Ernst (1891–1976) was a major artist of the Surrealist movement, known for exploring techniques that reveal the unexpected and the invisible. He developed and popularised the rubbing technique, transforming it into a tool for letting images emerge that are not visible at first glance.

- Max Ernst said that he used this technique to “question surfaces”. What questions would you ask a historical site in Leverkusen, in Villeneuve d’Ascq or elsewhere in the world if it could answer – specifying the surface you would choose?
- Max Ernst used rubbing to overcome their “fear of the blank page”. How could this technique help you enter a creative process?

4. Manfort Cemetery: A Site of Inspiring Contrasts

Which characteristics (a.) of Manfort Cemetery in general and (b.) of the bench in particular inspire Camille to create their rubbing? Describe what these characteristics awaken in them and how they influence their way of giving form to the invisible.

5. Boundaries and Respect of Rubbing in a Place of Remembrance

- Why does Justin initially feel conflicted about making a rubbing in Manfort Cemetery? Describe the thoughts, emotions or hesitations this place awakens in them, and how this influences the way they approach the artistic experience.
- Can rubbing become a gesture of respect and tribute towards people from the past? Explain how.

- With the rubbing technique, do we cross certain boundaries when working in a place of remembrance? Explain which physical, symbolic or ethical limits may be concerned. How can we ensure that rubbing remains respectful of the memorial site? Describe concrete attitudes, precautions or actions that make it possible to honour the memory of the place while carrying out an artistic exploration.

6. The Cemetery: A Place of Death... or a Place of Life?

- Have you ever visited a cemetery that surprised you by its atmosphere – whether sad, peaceful, lively, strange, or marked by some other mood that you personally felt? Describe what struck you and why it touched you.

- When you are in a cemetery, what emotions do you usually feel – fear, calm, respect, discomfort, curiosity, or something else that is personal to you? Describe how these sensations take shape for you and what triggers them.

- Why do you think that some people or cultures feel at peace in a cemetery, while others feel uncomfortable there? Analyse what might create this difference in perception.

- If you could imagine an ideal cemetery that respects remembrance while also celebrating life, what would it look like? Describe its characteristics and explain why you would choose them.

- In several cultures around the world, cemeteries are not only places of silence or mourning: certain traditions associate them with moments of sharing, music or even celebration. By doing a short piece of research, what different funeral or commemorative practices can you discover in other cultures? How do you think these approaches influence the relationship that the living maintain with those who are no longer here? Describe what this inspires in you.

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