

Trees, Foliage & Organic Structures

Visual shorthand for drawing complex organic forms — the fractal-like repetition of nature translated into efficient drawing marks.

BEGINNER

Trees are the single most common element in outdoor drawing and one of the most difficult to handle well. The mistake: drawing every leaf. The solution: drawing the mass of the tree as a single shape, then suggesting the texture of the foliage with marks at the edges. Start with the overall silhouette — the tree's unique shape, which identifies its species as surely as its leaves. Then block in the main value masses: the lit top, the shadowed underside. Then add foliage texture using clusters of curved marks at the edges of the form, suggesting clumps of leaves without drawing individual ones. This approach works for any leafy tree and can be done quickly.

HOBBYIST

The key to drawing organic structures is recognizing and using their fractal nature: large forms are made of medium forms which are made of small forms, all following the same growth pattern. A large tree branch forks into medium branches, which fork into small branches, which carry clusters of leaves — each cluster having the same forking structure at a smaller scale. You do not need to draw all scales; you need to imply them. Drawing the large branch structure convincingly and leaving the leaf detail to suggestion implies the fractal levels in between. The same principle applies to rocks, water, and clouds.

PROFESSIONAL

Production concept artists and environment designers have developed efficient mark vocabularies for organic structures that allow them to suggest complex foliage, rock formations, and vegetation quickly and convincingly. These mark vocabularies are personal and stylistic — the way one artist draws trees is often instantly recognizable and becomes part of their visual signature. Developing your own organic mark vocabulary requires extensive outdoor sketching — there is no substitute for direct observation of how actual trees, rocks, and plants look and behave in light.