

Building a Visual Vocabulary

The recurring marks, shortcuts, and visual solutions you develop over time that become the recognizable building blocks of your style.

BEGINNER

A visual vocabulary is the set of marks and visual solutions you reach for repeatedly. How do you draw an eye? How do you suggest hair? What marks do you use for grass, or water, or rough stone? Over time, you develop preferred solutions to these recurring problems — a specific way of handling foliage, a characteristic mouth shape, a signature way of indicating shadow. These recurring solutions are your visual vocabulary. When your vocabulary is consistent across many drawings, it reads as style. When it is inconsistent — sometimes you draw eyes one way, sometimes another — the work feels unresolved. Building a vocabulary means making deliberate decisions about your solutions and practicing them until they become automatic.

HOBBYIST

A well-developed visual vocabulary allows you to draw quickly and confidently because you are not reinventing solutions every time you encounter a familiar problem. The vocabulary takes over for routine elements, freeing your attention for the unique problems of each drawing. This is why experienced artists can draw seemingly effortlessly — their vocabulary handles the 80% of recurring visual problems, and their conscious attention goes to the 20% that is specific to this image. Building vocabulary is done through repetition: draw the same thing — hands, faces, trees, folds of fabric — many times, developing your preferred solution.

PROFESSIONAL

At a professional level, visual vocabulary becomes recognizable enough to define a career. The vocabulary of Charles Schulz is so distinct that any line from a Peanuts strip is instantly recognizable. The same is true of Saul Steinberg, Edward Gorey, Tove Jansson, and every other artist with a strong stylistic voice. The paradox of style is that the more consistently you apply your vocabulary, the more distinctively individual it becomes, even though — or because — it is the same solutions repeated. Consistency is what transforms a set of preferred marks into a recognizable style.