

Form Shadow vs Cast Shadow

BEGINNER

There are two kinds of shadow in every drawing, and they are completely different. A form shadow is the dark side of an object itself — the side that does not face the light. A cast shadow is the shadow an object throws onto another surface — the dark shape on the table beneath a lamp. Turn an apple under a desk lamp: the dark part on the apple itself is the form shadow; the oval blob on the table is the cast shadow. Form shadow describes the object's shape; cast shadow describes the direction and character of the light source.

HOBBYIST

Form and cast shadows obey different visual rules. Cast shadows are harder-edged and darker than form shadows, which are softer-edged and contain reflected light. The shape of a cast shadow is determined by the shape of the casting object AND the angle of the light source. The common mistake is treating form shadow and cast shadow as the same value. They are not. Cast shadow is typically the darkest value in the drawing; form shadow is always lighter because it contains reflected light bouncing back from nearby surfaces.

PROFESSIONAL

The form and cast shadow distinction is fundamental to lighting design across every visual medium. Film cinematographers, game lighting artists, and portrait painters all manage these two shadow types as separate, controllable elements. Form shadows can be modified through fill lighting without affecting cast shadows; cast shadows can be sharpened or softened by changing the size and distance of the light source. The edge between lit and shadow sides of a form (the terminator) is almost always softer than a cast shadow edge.