

The Terminator

BEGINNER

The terminator is the edge where light ends and shadow begins on a rounded object. On a sphere, it is not a hard line — it is a gradual transition from light to dark. The word comes from astronomy: the line between the lit and unlit sides of the moon. On a more complex form like a face, the terminator follows the contours of the surface — across the nose, cheek, brow, and chin. Finding the terminator on any rounded object is the first step to shading it convincingly.

HOBBYIST

The hardness or softness of the terminator tells you about the light source. A large, diffuse light produces a very gradual, soft terminator. A small, direct light produces a sharper, more defined terminator. The terminator has a zone of transition artists call the halftone area, which is lighter than the core shadow but darker than the fully lit areas. Getting the terminator right is more important than any surface detail — a wrong terminator makes a round form look flat regardless of how much else is correctly drawn.

PROFESSIONAL

The terminator is the primary tool for communicating the character of a light source and the complexity of a form's plane structure. On irregular surfaces, the terminator breaks and reformulates as it crosses different planes — a sharp break indicates an edge between two planes; a gradual transition indicates a smooth curve. For portrait artists, the terminator path across the face describes the three major planes (frontal, side, under-plane). In Zorn's portrait work, the terminator is often handled as a single decisive mark carrying enormous information about both form character and light quality in one stroke.