



To download Valeri's worksheet with detailed, step-by-step instruction on drawing an ellipse, go to [www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc).

# Constructing Vessels

Follow these simple steps to understand and draw the fundamental structures of dishes, cups, vases and jars.

A COMMON DIFFICULTY in still life painting is making vessels such as dishes, cups, vases and jars look solid and symmetrical. Without careful observation, these objects can tend to look wobbly, lopsided or distorted. The problems are even more

pronounced when transparency and reflection are involved.

The way I approach painting vessels is to first do a detailed line drawing of the vessel structure so I can fully understand the shape of the object. It's only by understanding the form, proportion and structure of a vessel that I can capture its likeness and individual character.

If you look at any vase, jar or teacup, you can imagine a very distinct character for the object: A fat, round teapot can look cute; a tall, narrow vase can look elegant. Vessels can be proud, squat, portly, graceful,

humorous, stately or reserved. I try to capture the unique character of each object. Here are the steps I take.

## 1. Sketching Proportions

I start by sketching the entire composition with a straight-line block-in. Using only straight lines, I draw a rough, simplified shape for each object. I work on this until I feel I've captured the essential proportions and placement of each object. I resist adding curves or details at this stage. Instead, I use long, soft, sketchy lines so I can erase and adjust them easily.

## 2. Building Symmetry

When I feel confident of the size, proportions and placement of each object, I choose one object to focus on and refine that shape further. If the object is symmetrical, at this point I draw a vertical centerline through it. I use a T square or

**BELOW:** Before I begin to paint a still life that includes vessels, I always do a detailed line drawing including ellipses—with precise measurements—to understand the forms and proportions of the objects, as I did for *Wax Paper I* (oil on panel, 11x14).

## Materials

**Grafix Dura-Lar** matte drafting film (I like to do preparatory drawings for paintings on translucent drafting film, which is a strong, heavyweight tracing paper. This way I can erase and refine my drawing over and over without damaging the surface. I can also use the transparent film to transfer my image to the painting panel.)

**Staedtler** Mars Lumograph graphite pencils, H and 2H

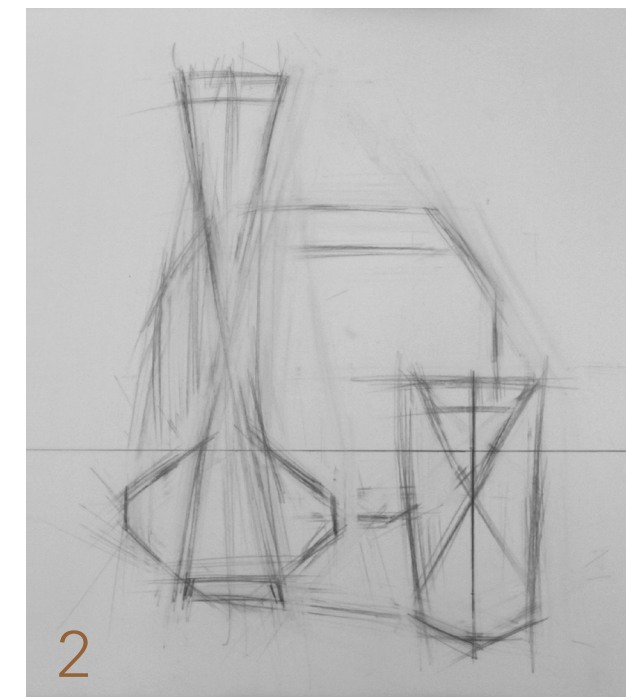
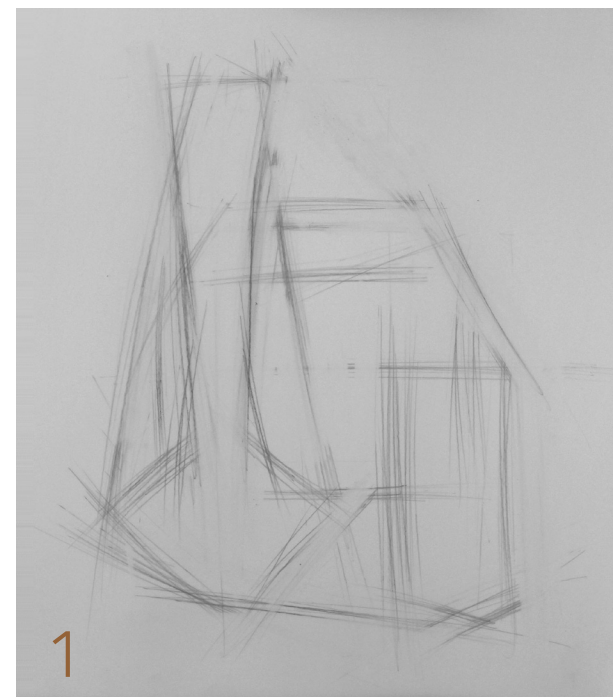
**Newell Rubbermaid Sanford Paper Mate** Tuff Stuff eraser stick

Kneaded eraser

**X-Acto** Snap-Off blade cutter (for sharpening pencils)

200-grit sandpaper (for sanding graphite pencils to an extremely fine point)

Ruler, T square, triangles





triangle to be sure the vertical is precise. Even asymmetrical objects with spouts and handles often have a basic body shape that is symmetrical.

Using a ruler, I measure out from the centerline and mark key points: the widest point of the vessel; the narrowest point; and the major changes of direction at the neck, shoulders and body. I like to use a T square with my ruler so I can be sure all my measurements are truly horizontal. I step back often and evaluate whether the proportions still feel true to my subject.

### 3. Using X's

An easy way to analyze the shape of a vessel is to sketch X's through it. It's common to try to draw the body and then the neck—but they would forever feel disjointed. Drawing large X's across the form helps relate the neck to the body. Often the tilt of the shoulders point up to the limits of the neck. Drawing the X's helps us see the object as a whole and observe that the various parts are logically in proportion to one another. (This technique also

works with figure drawing, to solve the problem of the head being too large or too small: Follow the line of a shoulder to the opposite jaw line; there's always a relationship!)

### 4. Measuring for Ellipses

When the basic symmetry and proportions are set, I focus on the ellipses. An ellipse is the shape we see when a perfect circle is tilted in perspective. The degree of tilt shows how much above or below the circle/ellipse is in relation to our eye level. At perfect eye level, the ellipse becomes a straight line.

It's very common for ellipses to look tilted and warped in a painting. The important thing to remember is that ellipses sitting on a horizontal surface are always perfectly parallel with the horizon.

I start each ellipse by drawing a diamond first. This way I can measure to be sure the points are symmetrical and level. I use my

T square and ruler to measure for accuracy. The top and bottom points will always be perfectly vertical, and the left and the right points will be perfectly horizontal. To check this I draw both a vertical and a horizontal midline through the diamond.

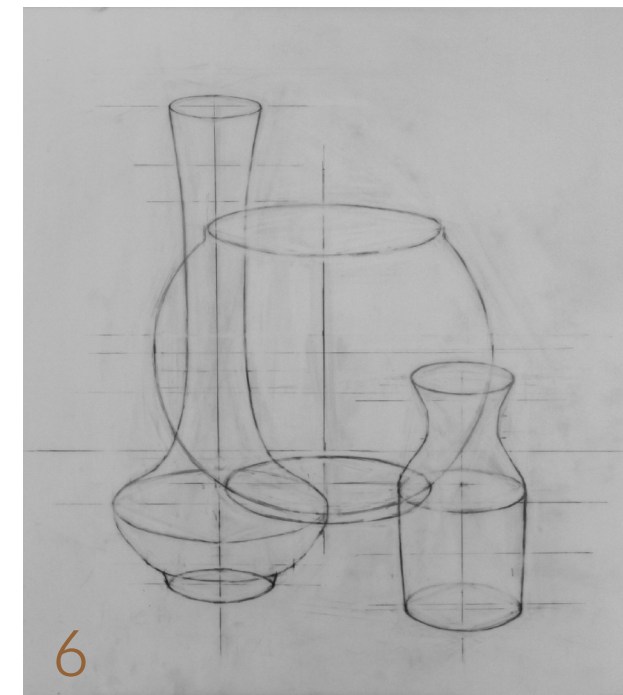
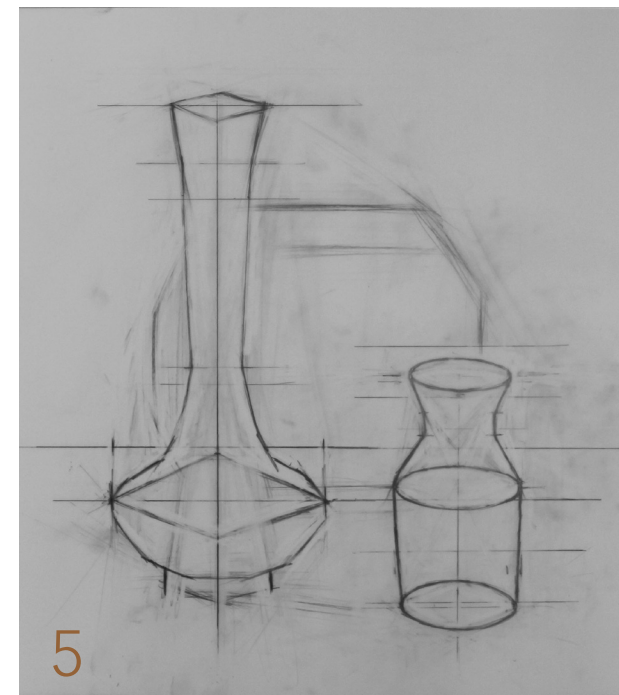
(To follow the laws of perspective, the far side of the ellipse, being

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farther away, is smaller than the near side of the ellipse. To correct for this, I shift the high point of the far edge slightly closer to the horizontal midline. If you're a beginner, at first try drawing them perfectly equal).

### 5. Drawing the Ellipses

With all my diamond points measured and symmetrical, I'm finally



ready to draw the ellipse. A common mistake when drawing an ellipse is to draw it like an Egyptian eye, with sharp points on the corners. Keep in mind that, since we're looking at a circle in perspective, there are never any sharp points. At each endpoint, the contour is momentarily perfectly vertical, in order to make a tight, structured curve. I use my eraser to carefully remove the diamond guides and to refine the contours.

When I've created the top ellipse, I'm ready to construct the bottom ellipse. Another common mistake is to assume the bottom edge of an object is flat, since often we can't see the entire ellipse. I always construct all the ellipses: top, bottom and middle. This helps me see a transparent, structural construction of the vessel.

### 6. Finishing the Construction

I continue to modify and refine, erasing and redrawing when necessary, until my drawing is an accurate portrait of the vessel. I continually remeasure my main points to be sure my drawing is still symmetrical.

When the lines are very refined, even a hair-width error will make a vessel look lopsided.

Using the same method, I construct all the other vessels in the picture. I draw each object as if it were transparent. It's important to draw the entire structure, even of objects that are mostly hidden behind others.

In the final painting, many of these edges will be softened, or even disappear altogether. But in order to capture the strength, beauty and character of a vessel, it's necessary to understand and construct its fundamental structure. ■

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To learn more about how Valeri constructs her preliminary still life drawings and about her drawing and painting processes, find a link to the October 2011 issue of *The Artist's Magazine* at [www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc).