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Kickstarting: A \$30 Optical Tool For Drawing With Camera-Like Accuracy

The NeoLucida, a simple optical drawing tool, is set to disrupt the way artists work.

BY MARGARET RHODES

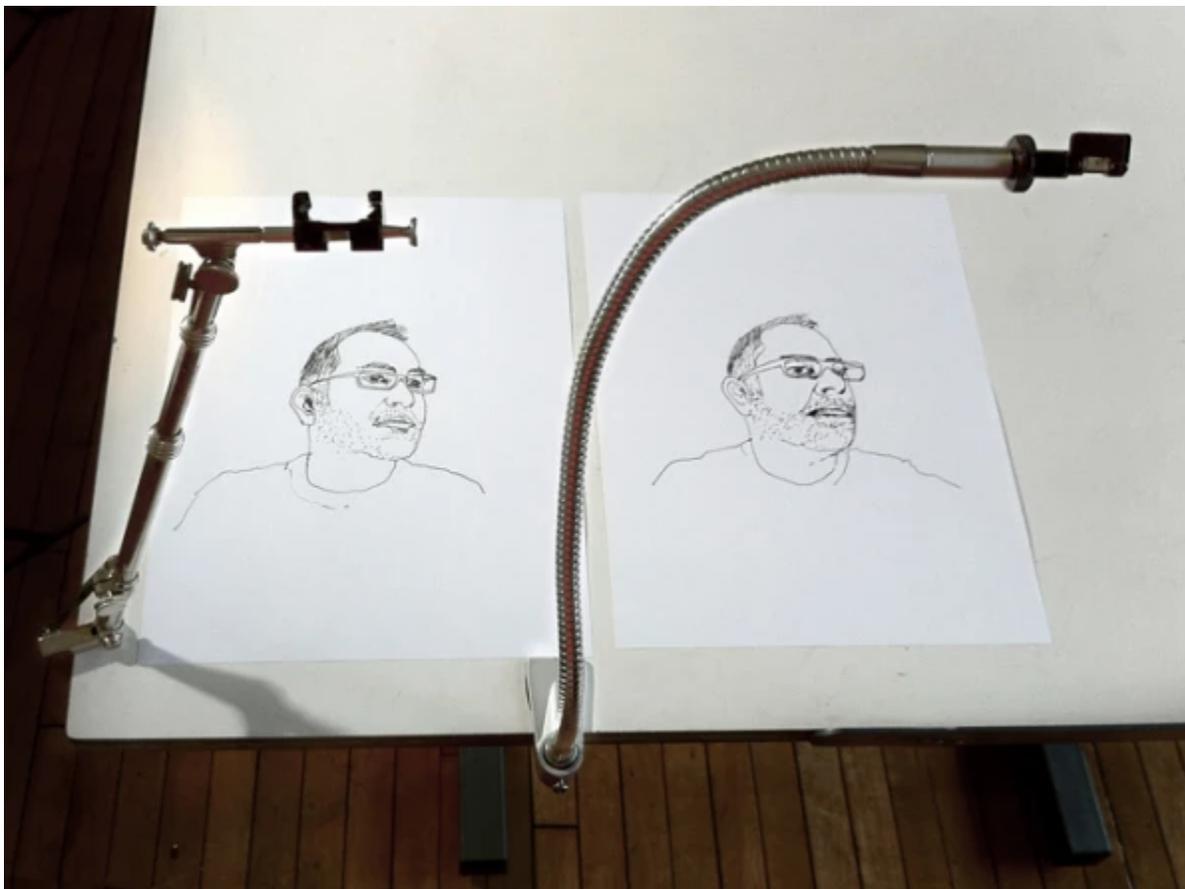
2 MINUTE READ

It's a widely held belief that the Old Masters were exactly that: masters, such as da Vinci and Vermeer, who painted in flawlessly precise freehand. There *are* savants with steady hands, no question. But there are other techniques to consider, which David Hockney (an artist of our age who also pioneered iPad art), expounds on in *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, in which he lays out exactly how European painters used mirrors and lenses to create their compositionally perfect portraits.

That surprised Golan Levin, an interaction designer and a tech performance artist of sorts—and one of *Fast Company's people shaping the future of design in 2012*. Why? “Mostly because it seemed like a truth, but none of my colleagues talked about it,” he tells Co.Design. Levin teaches at Carnegie Mellon and also sits on the admission staff. “All these students come to me from high school, and they think art equals painting, and painting equals realistic painting. They're being set up to believe they need superhuman powers.”

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Pablo Garcia, an art professor at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, has been hip to the (controversial) idea for some years and has amassed an extensive collection of optics. He offered to let Levin try out a camera lucida, one of the tools Hockney says the Old Masters used to capture their subjects more realistically. Levin loved it, and the duo decided to make a 21st-century version.



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A camera lucida is a simple machine: A small prism reflects the image of the subject so the viewer can see their own hand, plus the image, and trace a more accurate rendering onto the paper. The effect isn't far off from the Google Glass video demos we've been seeing. There are layers of images available in your line of sight—for you to use in some smart way. But the only lucidas still available are collectibles, and run a price tag north of \$300—more than Levin and Garcia believed college students would pay. As it turns out, manufacturing just several lucidas costs \$20,000, but each additional prism costs just pennies.

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Which is why the NeoLucida sells for \$30. It's perfect for [Kickstarter](#). Since launching the product on May 8, Levin and Garcia are already hearing from people who missed out on the first 2,500 they made available. But unlike most other runaway Kickstarter hits, this isn't—or wasn't—supposed to be a business. “This whole thing is a performance, or an intervention, or just artwork,” Levin says. Luckily, the project had enough demand and interest so that just two days after going live, Levin and Garcia confirmed that there will be an unlimited second production run, conducted by professional manufacturers.

The effects of getting the NeoLucidas out into the market should be interesting. Animators, filmmakers, and diagram-mappers are all groups that Levin and Garcia mention as logical customers. Because for all the advancements we get with graphic illustration and photography, people still want roll up their sleeves and draw like an old master.

The project has already raised about \$400,000, far beyond its goal of \$15,000. [Support the campaign here.](#)