

The Etymology of Draw and Related Concepts

John Schuerman, 2018

Today the most common usage for the word 'draw' is of producing a picture or diagram by making lines or marks on a surface. So, art, diagramming, map-making etc. However, there are 6 broad meanings of the word, with multiple sub-sense definitions in each, producing 75 unique definitions in the OED (Oxford English Dictionary). The broad definition relating to art is number 5 in the OED, which means that it was a later usage in the history of the word.

The six current, broad meanings according to the OED with approximate time they came into use in English¹:

1. Of simple traction. C 950 AD
2. Of attraction, drawing in together. 1175
3. Of extraction, withdrawal, removal 1200
4. Of tension, extension, protraction. 1325
5. Of delineation or construction by drawing. 1305 (came into use about the same time as 'of tension, extension, protraction')
 - a. To draw a line, figure, formal doc. Common usage seems to start in 1500's especially as it relates to drawing a picture. My best guess is that 'drawing a line' came much earlier than 'drawing a picture'.
 - b. To trace (a line or figure) by **drawing a pencil**, pen, or the like, **across a surface**)². The highlighted areas suggest how draw came to be used to mean sketching, diagramming, 'drawing'.
6. Of motion, moving oneself. Approach. 1200 (This one seems to have arrived before 'delineation', but common usage seems to begin in the 1400's))

Humans have made drawings for at least 35,000 years. What words were used for this concept before the 16th century?

The Anglo Saxons (OE I believe) had at least three words for the idea of drawing a picture:³

a-tiefran 'to paint, describe by painting'
a-faegan 'to depict' (*fay* 'to adorn', obsolete)
a-metan 'paint depict'

Of these words, only derivative 'fay' has survived, the loans of Paint and Pict from other languages took over.

The etymology of Paint⁴ is enlightening: <ME *peinten* <OFr *peint* pp. of *peindre* < L *pingere*, to paint, embroider < IE base **pieg*, **to mark by scratching or coloring**, whence Gr *pikros*,

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, definition of Draw

² This is 59 in the OED, which is the first meaning within broad meaning 5, 'of delineation or construction by drawing'

³ Donka Minkova, Professor in the Dept of English, UCLA

⁴ Webster's New World Dictionary, 1980

sharp, OE fag, stained. The highlight suggests that this meaning retained perhaps the very earliest notions of art or drawing symbols, that of scratching lines into dirt, stone or sand.

*Pict I believe comes from Latin, *depicto* and *depictus* which mean to paint, depict, portray. We will circle back to this. For now, I want to look to ancient Greek, where the base of *pieg* went to 'sharp'.*

*The ancient Greeks also had the word *grapho*. Which had the following meanings (in order of development)⁵:*

- 1. to scratch, cut into --this version of the word was used in the Illiad, 800 to 600 BC*
- 2. to draw, to sketch, to paint*
- 3. to write*
- 4. to write down, propose a law, earliest notation 430 BC to 354 BC*
- 5. to write down for oneself. Or to indict, prosecute*
- 6. (perfect passive) be written down, be in written form*

*So, it seems that the Ancient Greek words for drawing pictures or symbols (writing) retained the methodological origins of the concept. Early humans made pictures by scratching into surfaces, and the Ancient Greek words reflect that, and while the word 'drawing' doesn't trace back to those origins, other English words do: Paint, Graph, Autograph for example, and especially, a word like Pictograph, which must be the combination of Latin *depicto* and Greek *grapho**

As an artist who relies on drawing and other low-tech forms of expression it pleases me to know that our language for art has not evolved so much as to lose its reference to the earliest methods for mark making and abstracting experience.

⁵ Wiktionary

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%B3%CF%81%CE%AC%CF%86%CF%89>