

# Learning to generate line drawings that convey geometry and semantics

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Figure 1. Given a set of photographs, our method is capable of making line drawings in different styles seen above. Our method only requires unpaired data during training.

## Abstract

*This paper presents an unpaired method for creating line drawings from photographs. Current methods often rely on high quality paired datasets to generate line drawings. However, these datasets often have limitations due to the subjects of the drawings belonging to a specific domain, or in the amount of data collected. Although recent work in unsupervised image-to-image translation has shown much progress, the latest methods still struggle to generate compelling line drawings. We observe that line drawings are encodings of scene information and seek to convey 3D shape and semantic meaning. We build these observations into a set of objectives and train an image translation to map photographs into line drawings. We introduce a geometry loss which predicts depth information from the image features of a line drawing, and a semantic loss which matches the CLIP features of a line drawing with its corresponding photograph. Our approach outperforms state-of-the-art unpaired image translation and line drawing generation methods on creating line drawings from arbitrary photographs.*

## 1. Introduction

Through introspection and experimentation, human artists have learned to create line drawings that provide

compelling depictions of shape and meaning. A longstanding goal of non-photorealistic rendering is to reproduce this feat and, given an input image, to automatically generate line drawings that are effective at conveying geometry and identity. Manually instilling these qualities into computer-generated line drawings is difficult however because the goals are defined in elusive terms of human perception and cognition. Generating line drawings from photographs presents additional challenges: most photographs lack ground-truth geometry data, and often portray complex scenes with multiple subjects and interactions. Naturally, it would make sense to learn from drawings created by humans or to use humans to evaluate automatic line drawing methods. Unfortunately, the creation of such datasets is challenging and scalability is low.

In this paper, we seek to automatically generate effective line drawings from photographs without requiring paired training data and without requiring human judgment of the implied shape. Our key idea is to view the problem as an encoding through a line drawing and to maximize the quality of this encoding through explicit geometry, semantic, and appearance decoding objectives. Our method approaches line drawing generation as an unsupervised image translation problem which uses various losses to assess the information communicated in a line drawing. This evalua-

tion is performed by deep learning methods which decode depth, semantics, and appearance from line drawings. The aim is for the extracted depth and semantic information to match the scene geometry and semantics of the input photographs. Appearance preservation follows from cycle consistency [45, 81, 86]. With these objectives, our method is able to create convincing line drawings given unpaired data.

Our main contributions are as follows. We present an unsupervised method for automatic line generation which explicitly instills geometry and semantic information into drawings. We apply our method on many styles of line drawings and present results in Section 4. We also provide analysis of the geometry and semantic information conveyed by our drawings, visual comparisons against several baselines, and an ablation study.

## 2. Related Work

Line drawings are of particular interest in both art history and psychology. Although studies suggest that the human visual system understands line drawings comparably to photographs [5, 32, 36, 37, 42, 82], it is still unclear why line drawings are effective representations. Several theories exist for this topic, but this area requires further study [29, 30, 69].

There has been extensive work on creating line drawings from 3D geometry. Approaches range from applying image processing to depth and normal maps [8, 68], using geometric features on top of occluding contours [2, 18, 41, 64], to ensembling all geometry-based approaches with deep learning [55]. Although these methods successfully generate line drawings from 3D models, they cannot be applied to arbitrary photographs with unavailable 3D geometry. Furthermore, most methods draw lines in only one style, although Neural Strokes [54] addresses this issue. Instead, our method creates stylized line drawings from 2D photographs which convey 3D geometry.

Most 2D-based line drawing generation methods rely on supervised data. This includes using ground truth stroke or vector graphics data to create drawings [17, 23, 27, 72]. This stroke-based approach is often supported by differentiable architectures which can draw lines [3, 21, 35, 51, 61, 71, 74, 78, 85] and paint [35, 57, 62] with supervision from raster images. Other works focus on conditional line drawing generation given paired images, which are often collected for specific tasks [50, 52, 58, 79]. In contrast, our method handles unpaired data and translates between sketches of different domains.

Our method is most similar to Unpaired Portrait Drawing Generation (UPDG) [79], which creates portrait drawings from unpaired data. UPDG also uses an adversarial image translation setup, but modifies cycle-consistency for drawings, employs a truncation loss, and uses discriminators for the eyes, nose, and mouth. In contrast, our method

is built on losses which encourage line drawings to carry meaningful information about geometry and semantics. Our objectives allow us to greatly reduce reliance on cycle consistency (or the appearance reconstruction), and to generate drawings for arbitrary photographs and not just portraits.

Recent work has been successful at text-driven image editing and synthesis with the extensive shared visual-text embedding Contrastive Language-Image Pre-training (CLIP) [16, 65, 66]. CLIPDraw [22] also uses CLIP to create drawings, but with text inputs. This method requires no training, and simply minimizes the CLIP distance between a rasterized set of Bézier curves [51] and the text prompt. CLIPDraw demonstrates that the CLIP embedding can match semantics between text and drawings despite the domain gap. In contrast, previous methods have adapted new architectures to specifically examine semantics in line drawings [4, 83]. Our approach similarly minimizes the distance between inputs and generated drawings in CLIP space, but instead conditions on an input photograph and generates drawings in multiple styles.

Our work also shares similarities to CyCADA [33] in that the output images are trained to semantically match the inputs. However, CyCADA applies this constraint with a pretrained classifier for a translation between source and target data for domain adaptation. In contrast, our semantic constraint makes use of the CLIP embedding, which can richly describe complex scenes.

Given two datasets, modern image translation and style transfer methods can transform images into new domains [24, 31, 38, 40, 86]. Modern approaches can produce high quality results given paired correspondences [10, 20, 38, 75], however large aligned line drawing datasets are scarce. Fortunately, many approaches address image translation for unpaired data, often relying on an adversarial setup [1, 11, 43, 45, 63, 70, 76, 76, 81, 84, 86]. Other methods translate images between domains by separating style and content [34, 39, 56]. Cheng et al. also use depth information to provide structure for neural style transfer [13]. Although these approaches are very successful at artistic style transfer and translating between rich domains with shape changes (e.g. dogs to cats, anime to selfies), they still generate create sparse line drawings which are missing key strokes.

## 3. Method

Our goal is to train a model to automatically generate line drawings of arbitrary photographs given a dataset of photographs and an unpaired dataset of line drawings. We formulate this problem as unpaired image translation between domain  $A$  which contains photographs, and domain  $B$  which represents line drawings of a particular style. Most previous approaches solely consider preserving photographic appearance in the line drawing through cycle consistency. Instead, our method further directs this translation

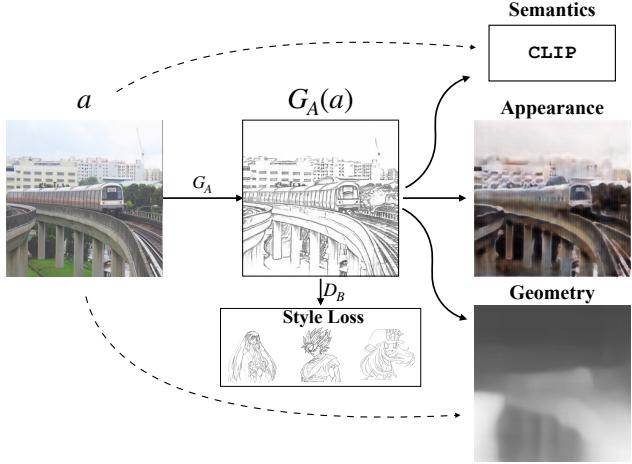


Figure 2. Given a photograph  $a$ , our model trains network  $G_A$  to synthesize line drawing  $G_A(a)$  via four main losses. Adversarial style loss with discriminator  $D_B$  encourages generated line drawings to match the style of the training set. The CLIP, appearance, and geometry losses enforce that the line drawing communicates effective semantic, appearance, and geometry respectively.

through objectives which assess the geometry and semantic information communicated by line drawings. This setup is shown in Figure 2. We show in Section 4 that these new losses are essential for creating meaningful drawings.

We use an adversarial training setup with generator networks  $G_A$ ,  $G_B$  and discriminators  $D_A$ ,  $D_B$  for domains  $A$  and  $B$  respectively. The geometry objective is implemented through a pretrained depth network which predicts depth maps from line drawings, and imposes a supervised loss on the depth outputs. This loss encourages our model to draw lines in geometrically important locations (e.g. occluding contours). Secondly, we introduce a CLIP [66] loss to add semantic meaning into the generated line drawings. Because arbitrary photographs often display complex scenes, we use the visual CLIP embedding which captures semantic details quite well. We then impose that the CLIP embedding of the line drawing is similar to the CLIP embedding of the original photograph. We also use a weakly weighted cycle consistency loss to preserve appearance information.

### 3.1. Losses

**The adversarial loss** encourages generated images to belong to their respective domains [25]. The loss for each domain using the LSGAN setup [59] is formulated below.

$$\begin{aligned} L_{GAN} = & \mathbb{E}_{a \sim A}[D_A(a)^2] + \mathbb{E}_{b \sim B}[(1 - D_A(G_B(b)))^2] \\ & + \mathbb{E}_{b \sim B}[D_B(b)^2] + \mathbb{E}_{a \sim A}[(1 - D_B(G_A(a)))^2] \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

**The geometry objective** maximizes depth information in generated line drawings during training. We observe that

line drawings are often effective conveyors of 3D shape, and apply this property during training. Given a substantial dataset of line drawings, a model may learn this trait without any explicit supervision. However, current methods without such geometric constraints fail to place lines in meaningful places (see Section 4). Domain gaps between the dataset of photographs and line drawings are also obstacles. Instead, we propose a geometric constraint which supervises depth predictions from line drawings.

To supervise depth predictions from line drawings, it is necessary to obtain depth maps for the photographic inputs. Unfortunately, ground truth depth information is usually unavailable for most datasets. However, recent methods are very successful at producing high resolution depth maps for photographs. This advance allows us to use pseudo-ground truth depth maps obtained from a state of the art depth prediction network  $F$ ; in practice we use the network from [60], which is based on MiDaS [67]. We note that pseudo-ground truth maps for photographs are only required for training, and not at test time.

A simple way to supervise geometry predictions would be to introduce network  $G_{Geom}$  to predict depth maps from line drawings during training. However, this approach has several issues. Training  $G_{Geom}$  to learn depth from synthetic line drawings may encourage line drawing generator  $G_A$  to instill depth information in an unwanted form, such as an imperceptible signal [14]. We want to avoid accidentally embedding invisible information into our line drawings. Using pretrained depth network  $F$  on line drawings is not an option because of the domain gap.

We propose instead to learn to infer depth from image features which are commonly shared between photographs and line drawings. Specifically, we pretrain a network  $G_{Geom}$  to predict depth given ImageNet [19] features. Such features, especially in early layers, are useful for transfer learning [47]. This scenario hopes to avoid the invisible signal issue by first encoding line drawings into a shared representation with photographs, and then applying a network which has learned depth from photographic features.

To obtain image features, we input photographs into pretrained Inception v3 [73] network and extract features from the Mixed 6b node (see supplemental). We denote the extracted features at this layer for input  $a$  as  $I(a)$ . After pre-training, network  $G_{Geom}$  provides depth map predictions for line drawings. In practice, we finetune  $G_{Geom}$  while training line drawing generation.

The geometry loss is formulated below. Given photograph  $a$ , we first input  $a$  into state of the art depth network  $F$  and obtain pseudo-ground truth depth map  $F(a)$ . We then generate line drawing  $G_A(a)$  and extract its ImageNet features  $I(G_A(a))$ . These features are then passed to pretrained depth network  $G_{Geom}$  to produce depth map prediction  $G_{Geom}(I(G_A(a)))$ . This depth prediction is then com-

pared to the pseudo-ground truth depth map  $F(a)$ . Further details and depth reconstructions are in the supplementary.

$$L_{geom} = \|G_{Geom}(I(G_A(a))) - F(a)\| \quad (2)$$

**The semantics loss** is implemented by minimizing the distance between the CLIP embeddings of the input photograph and the generated line drawing. The goal of this objective is to convey semantic information from the original photograph into its corresponding synthesized line drawing. In computer vision, semantics are often learned in the form of labels and segmentation maps. However, these representations are limited in capacity to specific domains or objects. To encode semantic information from entire scenes, we use the shared visual-text embedding CLIP [66], which captures rich semantic information in both photographs and art [16, 22]. We then penalize the distance in CLIP space between the generated line drawing and the original photograph. The objective is formulated below.

$$L_{CLIP} = \|CLIP(G_A(a)) - CLIP(a)\| \quad (3)$$

**The appearance loss** (or cycle consistency) has been used to encode input appearance through image translation [45, 86]. The appearance loss for each direction of the mapping is below.

$$L_{cycle} = \|G_B(G_A(a)) - a\| + \|G_A(G_B(b)) - b\| \quad (4)$$

### 3.2. Full Objective

Our full objective is:

$$\begin{aligned} L = & \lambda_{CLIP} L_{CLIP} + \lambda_{geom} L_{geom} \\ & + \lambda_{GAN} L_{GAN} + \lambda_{cycle} L_{cycle} \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

In practice we set  $\lambda_{CLIP} = 10$ ,  $\lambda_{geom} = 10$ ,  $\lambda_{GAN} = 1$ ,  $\lambda_{cycle} = 0.1$ .

**Implementation** We use an encoder-decoder generator architecture with Res-Net blocks in the middle [28, 40, 86], and a patch-based discriminator [38]. The architecture for pretrained depth network  $G_{Geom}$  is based on the Global Generator from pix2pixHD [75] and further detailed in the supplemental material. We use MSE error for the CLIP loss and  $L1$  distance for the appearance and geometry losses. We use Adam [46] to optimize with a learning rate of 0.0002 and train for at least 30 epochs with batch size 6.

## 4. Experiments

We evaluate our described approach and provide qualitative and quantitative comparisons for both general photographs and portraits in multiple styles.

### 4.1. Line Drawings from Photographs

Our first evaluation task is to generate line drawings from photographs of arbitrary scenes. Below we describe the datasets for training and evaluation.

**Datasets** For training, our method requires a dataset of photographs and a separate dataset of line drawings. We train on a randomly selected 10,000 image subset of the Common Objects in Context (COCO) [53] dataset which contains a variety of scenes. For evaluation, we create line drawings from photographs in the MIT-Adobe FiveK dataset [7]. This dataset contains high quality images of many subjects (landscapes, buildings, people, etc).

We train multiple models with different styles of line drawings. Examples for each style are shown in Figure 3. Quantitative evaluations are performed for two styles of line drawings: 1) **The Contour Drawings dataset** [50] contains 5,000 drawings for various scenes (often with humans or dogs). 2) **The Anime Colorization dataset** [44] consists of 14,224 sketches of various anime characters. Qualitative results in the style of OpenSketch [26] and artist drawings from Cole et al. [15] are shown in Figure 3.

**Comparison methods** We compare our approach to state-of-the-art unpaired image-to-image translation methods for the photograph to line drawing task. These methods include: 1) **CycleGAN** [86] uses an appearance loss and a patch-based discriminator [38]. 2) **TSIT** [39] creates images by combining features from separate content and style streams. 3) **U-GAT-IT** [43] uses an attention module and auxiliary classifier and cycle consistency. 4) **ACL-GAN** [84] relaxes strict pixel cycle consistency into distributional level consistency 5) **Unpaired Portrait Drawing Generation (UPDG)** [80] creates line drawings in multiple styles for portrait drawings. This method builds upon CycleGAN with discriminators for facial features, a truncation loss, and a modified cycle loss using HED images [77]. For the photograph task, we do not include the face discriminators as they do not apply to arbitrary photographs without human subjects. We also provide qualitative comparisons with SPatchGAN [70] and Council-GAN [63] in Figure 4.

**Qualitative comparison** Figure 4 shows compares our method to previous work in two styles. Other methods commonly fail to place lines in meaningful locations, whereas our drawings have recognizable features and boundaries. Some methods such as SPatchGAN, Council-GAN, and ACL-GAN attempt to strictly stay close to the training set domain. This is most noticeable for the Anime style, as these approaches often produce drawings which resemble anime characters over the input photographs.

**User Study** We conduct a user study to perceptually compare our approach with other methods. In this study, participants were shown a reference photograph, and two line drawings of the same photograph made by different methods. Users were then asked to select the line drawing that best depicts the input photograph. For this study we showed users up to 100 images and there were 184 unique participants. 1000 judgments were made for each comparison. Ta-

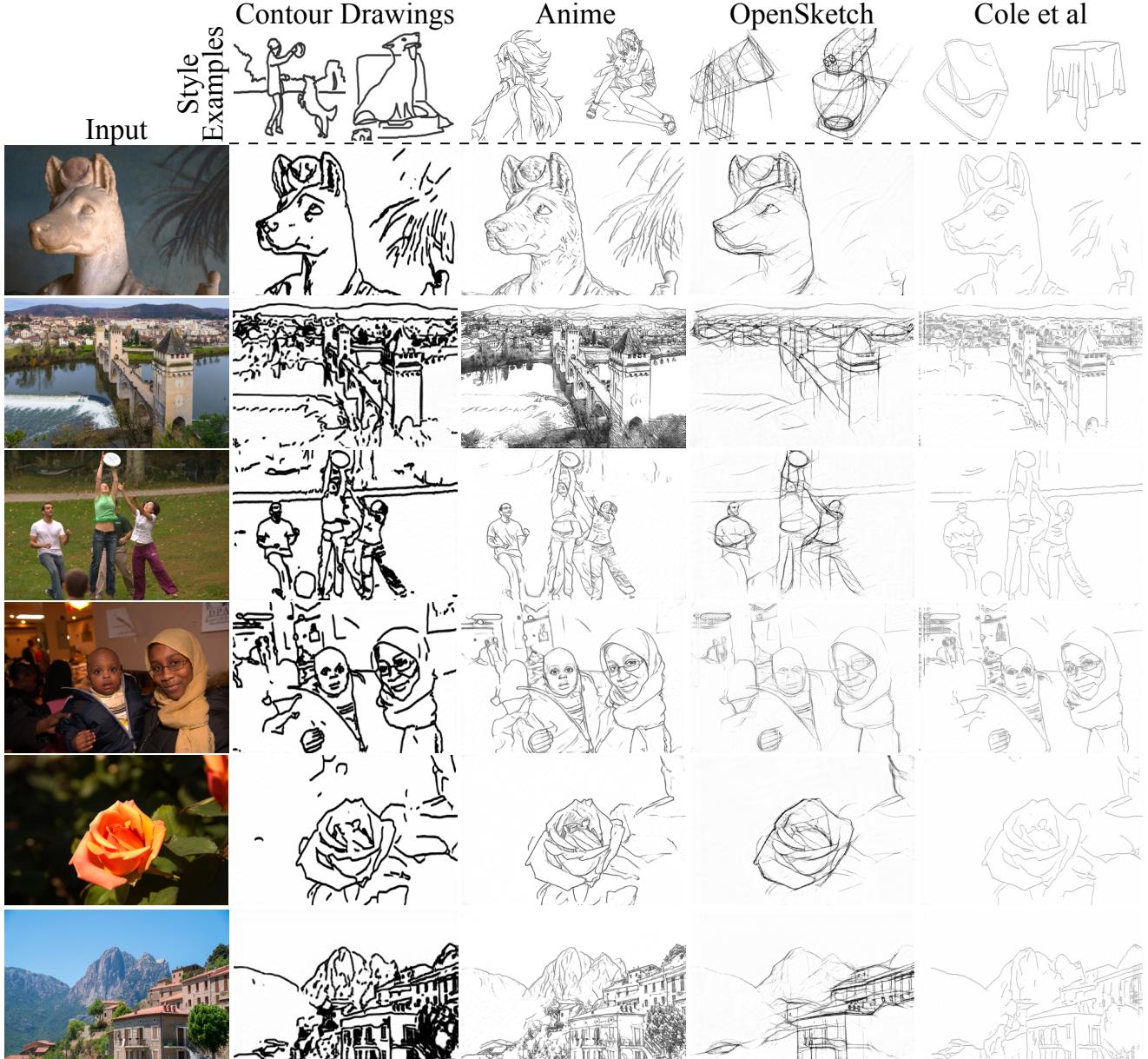


Figure 3. Results of our method in four different styles.

	Contour Drawings	Anime	Total
CycleGAN [86]	98.7%	87.3%	93 %
TSIT [39]	99.6%	95.3%	97.5%
U-GAT-IT [43]	99.5%	97.3%	98.4%
ACL-GAN [84]	100%	97.5%	98.8%
UPDG [80]	98.9%	96.7%	97.8%

Table 1. User study results comparing to different unpaired translation methods. We report the percentage of times users preferred our approach over the other methods.

ble 1 reports the percentage users chose line drawings from our method over various baselines. Users overwhelmingly preferred line drawings created by our method in all cases.

**Ablation Study** We perform an ablation study to verify the inclusion of each loss. Three versions of our model are trained: without the geometry loss, without the CLIP loss, and without the appearance or cycle loss. We compare each ablation to our full method. We use the perceptual study setup described above and report the percentages users selected our full method over each ablation in Table 2. The CLIP loss was essential for all styles, while the Contour Drawings style relies on the depth loss much more than the Anime style. The appearance loss improves results slightly.

Figure 5 shows qualitative examples from all ablations. The CLIP loss adds the most lines. In some cases, styles

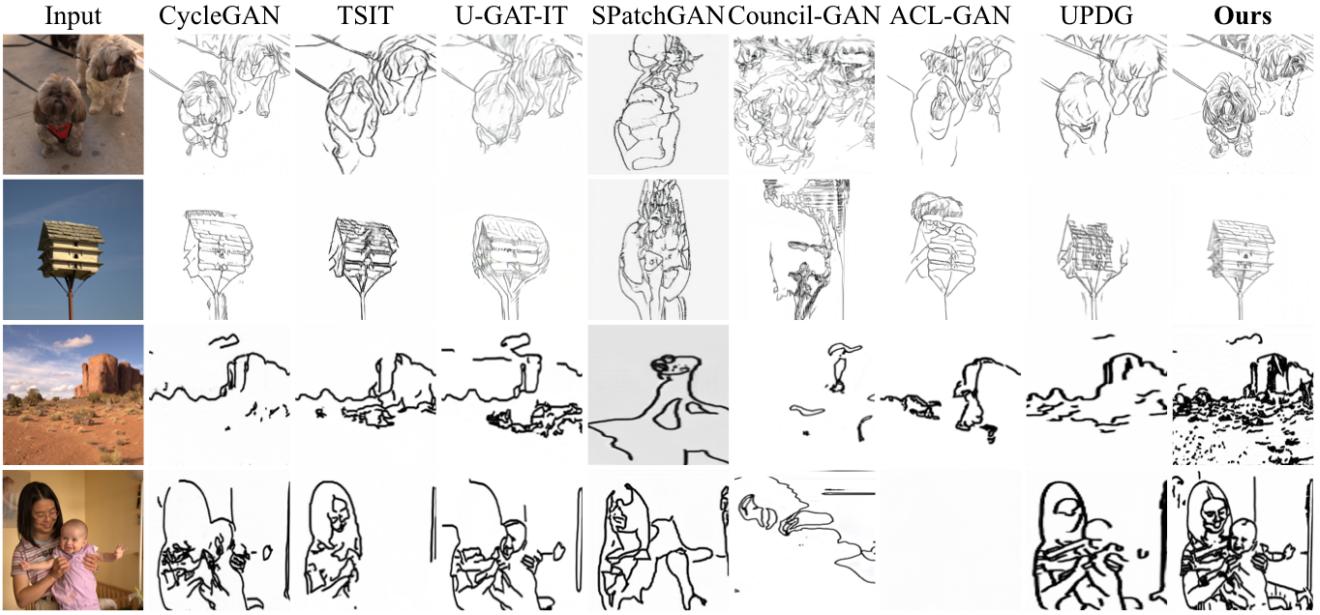


Figure 4. Comparison with other methods. *Left to right:* Input photograph, CycleGAN, TSIT, U-GAT-IT, SPatchGAN, Council-GAN, ACL-GAN, UPDG, and Our approach. All methods are trained using the same data on two styles of line drawings. Our method produces the most detailed drawings capturing important aspects of the original photograph.

	Contour Drawings	Anime	Total
Without depth	92.2%	48.3%	70.3%
Without CLIP	98.9%	84.9%	92%
Without Cycle Consistency	87.0%	64.9%	76%

Table 2. User study results for the ablation study. We report the percentage users chose the full method over the ablations.

	Contour Drawings	Anime	Total
CycleGAN	58.0%	65.1%	62.0%
Ours	68.4%	66.8%	67.6%
Photograph	—	—	70.3%

Table 3. User study results for relative depth prediction. We report the percentage of times users chose the closer point correctly for each baseline. For both styles, users correctly inferred relative depth more often in drawings from our method over CycleGAN.

with a high density of lines may totally rely on the CLIP loss. We find this situation to be the case for the Anime style, whose ‘without depth’ ablation is comparable to the full method. The depth loss is most useful for sparse styles such as the Contour Drawings style, where it adds occluding contours and textures. We note that the semantic loss improves geometry, and depth information can help semantics as well. The cycle loss improves result quality by preserving appearance aspects such as textures and outlines. However, removing the cycle loss does not qualitatively affect results significantly.

**Evaluating Geometry and Semantics in Drawings** We design two experiments to evaluate the depth and semantic

	Contour Drawings	Anime	Total	Unrecognizable
CycleGAN	0.7436	0.8074	0.7799	26.7%
Ours	0.8160	0.8371	0.8274	13.7%
Photograph	—	—	0.8804	0.02%

Table 4. Mean cosine similarity between captions describing line drawings and captions describing the input photographs. The last column reports the percentage of images that users could not identify. Our line drawings are more easily described and recognizable.

information conveyed in the generated line drawings. To examine depth information, we conduct a user study to assess if humans can correctly infer relative depth from our drawings. Participants viewed an image with two randomly placed points and were asked to identify the point closest to the camera, similarly to [12]. We perform this evaluation on drawings from our method, CycleGAN, and on photographs. Table 3 reports the percentage each baseline agreed with the pseudo-ground truth depth predictions. In general, users inferred the correct relative depth more often in our drawings, especially for the Contour Drawings style. For the Anime style, relative depth predictions were better for our results by a slim margin. This result complements the ablation study, where the depth loss was not as effective for the Anime style. If relative depth can already be inferred from CycleGAN (despite lower drawing quality), then the geometry objective may not have much impact. In contrast, the depth loss greatly improves both relative depth predictions and drawing quality for the Contour Drawing style.

To assess semantic meaning, we show users a photograph and ask them to write a one sentence caption for the

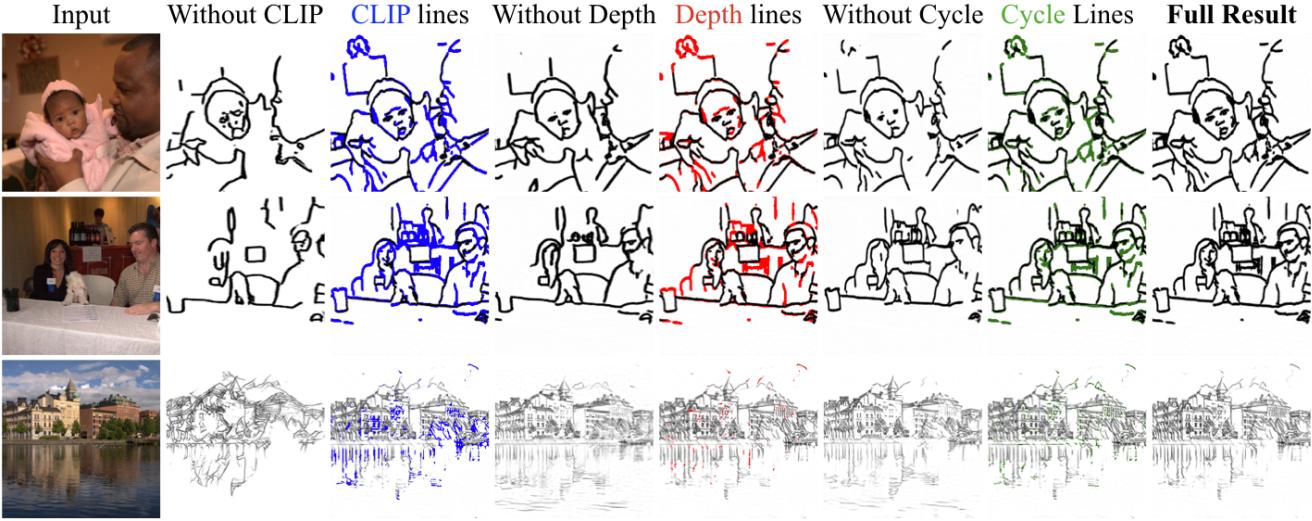


Figure 5. Ablations of our method, and our full result. For each ablations, we show the lines added to get the full result by including each loss. These lines are in blue for CLIP, red for depth, and green for appearance. The CLIP loss adds the most lines, while the depth loss adds more information and occluding contours in the second row. The appearance loss adds small strokes and shading for the Anime style.

image. Participants were also given the option to designate images as unrecognizable. Users viewed results from our method, CycleGAN, and photographs. Each caption is encoded in CLIP space and then compared to the mean CLIP embedded photograph caption using cosine similarity. Table 4 reports the mean cosine similarities and the percentage of unrecognizable images. In all cases our method produces more accurate descriptions and recognizable drawings.

## 4.2. Line Drawings from Portraits

While our method was not designed specifically for portraits, we compare to methods specialized for this task. We use two main settings for comparison. Firstly, we compare to other methods directly on styles they present. Then we provide a second comparison where we train our model on unpaired portraits from the Helen Facial Feature Dataset [48] in the style of the APDrawings dataset [79]. Details for each dataset are provided in the supplemental.

**Comparisons** 1) **APDrawingGAN** [79] uses supervised adversarial training to create line drawings in the style of the paired APDrawings. In one comparison, we train our model on APDrawings directly. This setting disadvantages our method because we do not use paired supervision. However, our method can use unpaired data and we exploit this property in the next case. We then use portraits from the Helen dataset to train a separate model, while keeping the drawing style of APDrawings. Our second comparison evaluates our method trained on the Helen dataset against supervised APDrawingGAN results.

2) **Unpaired Portrait Drawing Generation (UPDG)** [80] is described in Section 4.1. In the first setting, we compare to a pretrained UPGD model in the

style of illustrators Charles Burns [6] and Yann Legendre [49] (style 1 from [80]). We train our model from scratch on an approximation of these datasets (see supplemental), and evaluate on the Helen test set. Secondly, we train both our approach and UPGD from scratch to create portraits from the Helen dataset in the style of APDrawings. We then compare on test portraits from APDrawings.

**Qualitative comparison** Figure 6 shows portrait drawings created with APDrawings from all methods. APDrawingGAN produces reasonable results, while UPGD struggles with the line art style. We achieve decent results training on APDrawings, but quality drastically improves by training on the Helen dataset. Both our method and UPGD create high quality drawings in style 1 (see supplemental).

**User Study** We perform a user study for all portrait comparisons. Participants were shown a portrait and two line drawings from different methods and asked to select the drawing which best depicts the subject in the portrait. Table 5 reports the percentage of times users chose our approach over the baselines. In case 1, users preferred the supervised APDrawingGAN over our method (trained on APDrawings), but found our method (trained on Helen) preferable or comparable in case 2. In general, UPGD struggles with the APDrawings style, and overall users slightly preferred our method for style 1.

## 5. Discussion

**Loss Formulations** We explored several variants of the geometry and semantic losses in initial experiments. This includes using normal maps and multi-view consistency. We found the normal maps helpful for 3D shapes, however

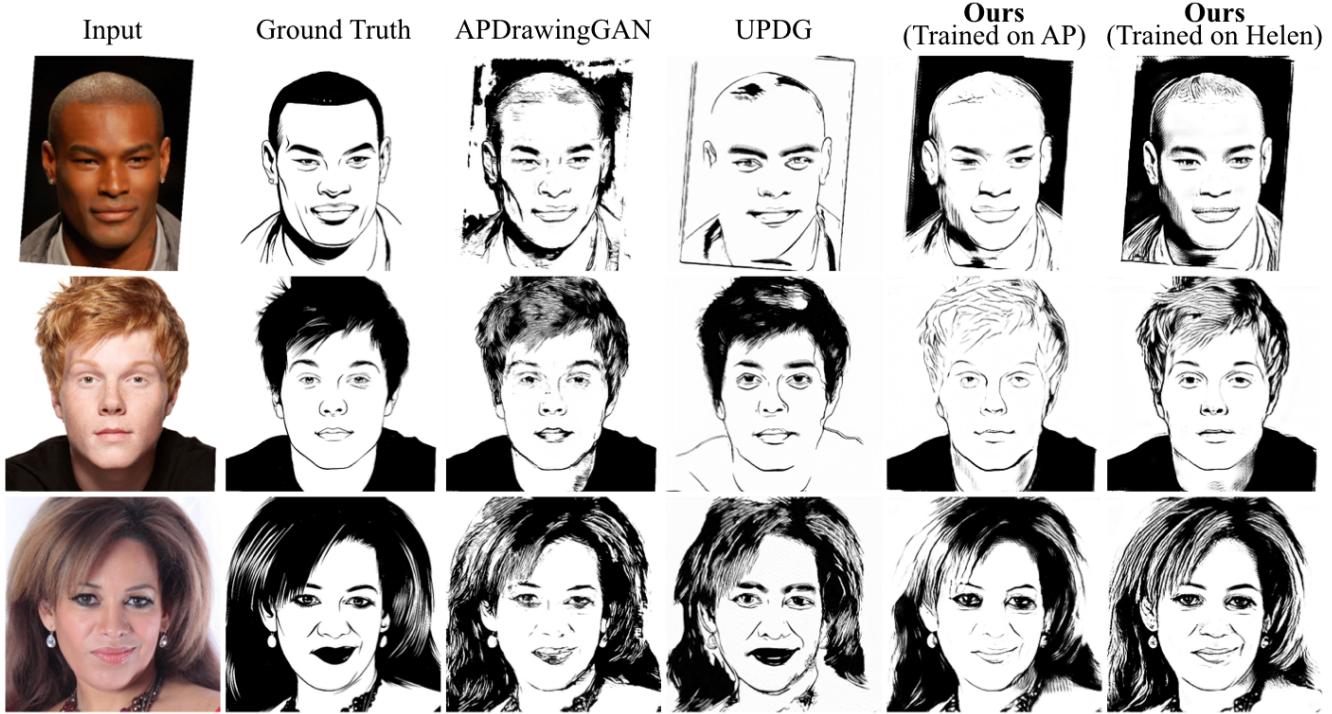


Figure 6. Results for several methods on APDrawings test data. *Left to right:* Portrait photograph, artist’s drawing, APDrawingGAN, UPDG (trained on Helen), Our result (trained on APDrawings), our result (trained on Helen). All methods were trained with the APDrawings line art style. Our approach produces accurate and well formed drawings.

	Case 1	Case 2
APDrawingGAN [79]	36.7%	60.1%
UPDG [80]	64.2%	94.8%

Table 5. Perceptual study results for portrait comparisons. We report the percentage users chose our approach over each baseline. Case 1 compares both baselines on their datasets and styles. In case 2, we train our model on Helen in the style of APDrawings and compare to baselines trained on the same style.

normal estimates are often noisy for photographs. Novel view prediction and using other 3D approaches are directions we hope to explore in future work. We selected depth prediction [60] due to its robustness on photographs, and because we can reliably obtain depth predictions from image features that also can be extracted from line drawings. For the semantic loss, we explored finetuning image classifiers and segmentation networks on drawings and comparing intermediate features from these networks [9, 19]. For a visual comparison, see the supplemental material.

**Limitations** Our method is built on some limiting assumptions. We rely on pseudo-ground truth depth maps from a pretrained network for geometry supervision. Because we essentially distill this pretrained depth prediction network, our model has similar failure cases and biases.

Our model produces meaningful line drawings for many styles, but has failure cases shown in the supplemental. Our

method is based on the hypothesis that a good line drawing accurately conveys depth and semantics, however some styles focus on the essence of the scene and not precision. We also struggle with certain lighting conditions and textures. Overall, the CLIP loss drives results to look more ‘photographic,’ which may or may not be desirable. In some cases, this causes results to converge to grayscale photos.

**Negative Impacts** As with most data-driven techniques, our approach can learn bias in training. For instance, the Anime sketch dataset in Section 4 contains drawings of mostly feminine subjects. In addition, artistic datasets (such as the full Anime dataset used for creating line drawings) may contain sensitive content (e.g. nudity, weapons) whose influence could be visible in the output.

**Conclusion** Our approach creates compelling line drawings given unpaired data. This paper views line drawings as encodings of geometry, semantics, and appearance from real scenes. We built these ideas into a method which explicitly evaluates these properties through depth prediction, CLIP features, and image reconstruction to create line drawings from photographs.

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