

Various pastels: hard, soft, handmade and mass-produced

## Pastel Pointers, Past and Present

**B**y the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, many artists had become disappointed with the way oil paint had been shown to fade, darken and crack with age. Partly because of this, artists became fascinated with a new medium: pastel.

Pastels delivered striking color and were easy to use. Unlike oil paints, pastels needed no time to dry and required no brushes, oil, turpentine or varnish. Costly pigments did not need to be freshly prepared, placed on a palette and then thrown away when they dried unused. According to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, the great 18<sup>th</sup>-century reference work, "Of all manners of painting, [pastel] passes for the easiest and most convenient, in that it can be left, resumed, retouched and finished at will."

"Pastels," "crayons" or "chalks," as they were variously called in the 1700s, did not contain the transparent glossy wax found in modern "crayons" or the oil in today's "oil pastels." They had an opaque matte finish that reflected light, and these hues so delighted viewers that the term "pastel" came to be applied to all light, milky colors.

### THE SFUMATO TECHNIQUE

Pastel tints are especially well suited to capturing powdery skin tones, and pastel quickly became a leading medium for fashionable portraits of wealthy patrons. Rosalba Carriera's Rococo-style portraits made her one

#### 96<sup>th</sup> Street Tunnel

by Daniel Greene, 1995, pastel on board, 40 x 60.



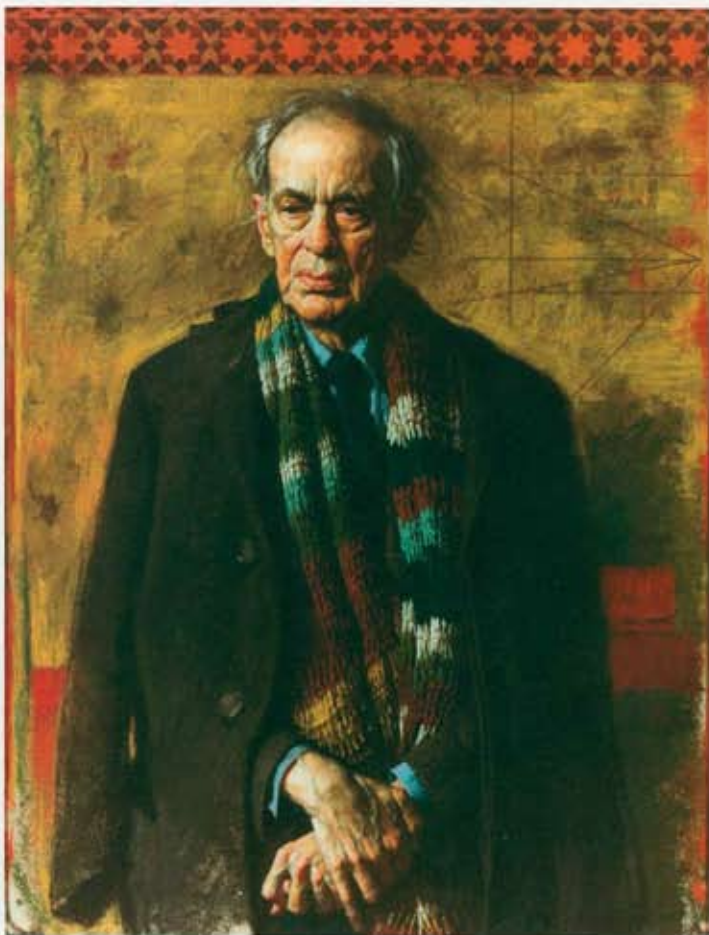
of the most internationally renowned, financially successful artists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. (For another example of this style, see the drawing by Jean Valade on page 71.)

Portraitists of this era used a rubbing technique that helped the pigments adhere firmly to the textured surfaces of their images, creating soft *sfumato* edges with stumps, or *tortillons*. Unfortunately, they also used their fingers to blend the colors. Time has revealed that their skin oils damaged both their pigments and surfaces—an example that serves as a

warning to contemporary artists.

During this same period, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin created both still life "pastel drawings"—airy sketches on toned paper—and more finished "pastel paintings," in which distinct linear hatching strokes merged to cover the entire image's surface. Pastel has qualities in common with both drawing and painting, and some artists still abide by Chardin's distinction, referring to smoother works covered entirely with





**RIGHT**  
**Robert Beverly Hale**

by Daniel Greene, 1976, pastel on board, 50 x 36.

**FAR RIGHT**  
Blue pan pastel, with various tools for applying it, and an eraser.



Pastel requires a surface with some texture to abrade the pigment from the stick. You can prepare your own surface by coating any nonporous paper, board, canvas or panel with a ground composed of gesso mixed with an abrasive such as sand or marble dust. Of course, you can also buy premixed pastel gesso or ready-to-use toned and textured papers and boards.

## WORKING LARGE AND USING FIXATIVE

Working large in pastel can be an exciting challenge. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century some artists produced monumental pastel works on custom-built textured surfaces on rigid supports. My drawing *Sunset* (page 22) measures five feet by 10 feet. It was drawn on a single sheet of heavy black paper primed with translucent and opaque white gesso mixed with marble dust, then sprayed with workable fixative and completed with handmade soft pastels. Ragged broken strokes play abstractly over areas of the bare black

pigment as paintings and referring to less-blended, more line-based works as drawings.

## MAKING PASTELS AND PREPARING SURFACES

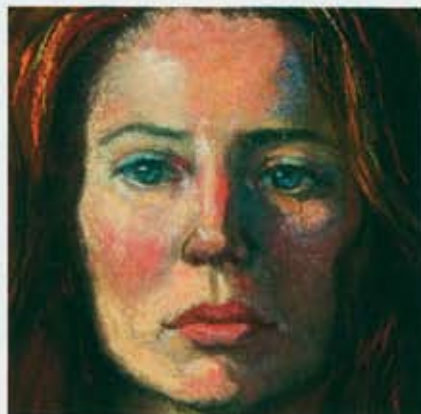
Pastels became commercially available beginning in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Before then, early adopters of the medium made their pastels by hand, grinding the same pigments used for oil paint into fine particles and adding talc (a white chalky extender) and gum tragacanth (a binder). This mixture was mulled and thinned with water to produce a thick paste (or, in Italian, *pastello*, from which “pastel” derives) substance that could be molded into shapes before being dried and hardened, at which

point it was ready for use.

You can make your own pastels in this traditional way either with pure pigments or by using broken bits of old pastels and grinding them to a fine consistency using a mortar and pestle. (Wear a mask and gloves during this process.) Unique colors can be created by combining pigments. Mixing complements results in an array of sparkling grays.



Handmade pastel, with mortar and pestle.



**Julie (detail)**

by Sherry Camhy, 2011, pan pastel on board.



# MATERIAL WORLD



## Sunset

by Sherry Camhy, 2000, pastel on black paper, 60 x 120.

paper, and the contrast of light and dark values increases the optical intensity of the pure pigments.

Fixative has many uses in pastel drawing. Most often it is applied to a completed work to protect the delicate surface, although you should be cautious when applying it to a finished work, as some fixatives will lighten darks, darken lights, deaden reds and add a textured surface. Earlier in the process, you can spray fixative over a problem area, and the changes produced make it possible to redraw. Borrowing an innovation of Degas', I applied many layers of fixative to the surface of *Sunset*, making more layers of pastel possible. The more fixative is applied, the rougher the texture becomes—at the bottom of the image you can see sunlight dancing on raised dots of fixative that settled on top of the paper. I used another Degas technique to produce the highlights

in the image, dipping pieces of pastel into liquid fixative until they softened and could be used like thick paint.

## PASTEL POINTERS

Some principles to keep in mind as you experiment with pastel:

- An enormous range of color is available in numerous forms: pencils or sticks, handmade or manufactured, hard or soft, traditional matte or oil.

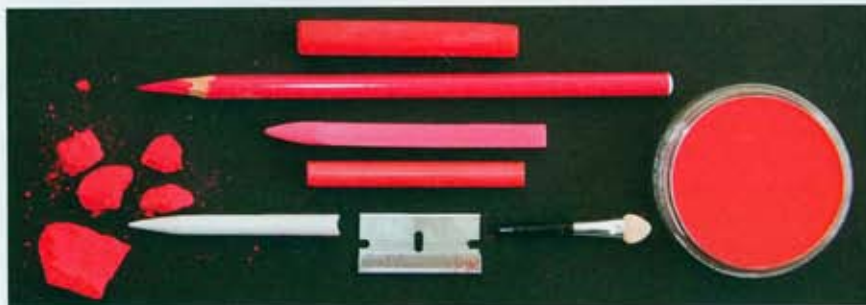
There are also "pan" pastels, powdered

pigment compressed into small, flat, round, stackable containers and designed to be applied like paint.

- Working with pastel provides a natural transition between drawing and painting. Linear sketches can be left as studies or developed into entire pastel paintings.

- Pastel is powerful, opaque color. It can be softly blended, layered to allow colors to optically merge, or heavily applied to cover and redo an area.

- By layering color on color, moving from harder to softer and from darker



Varieties of red pastel. Lower left: handmade pastel. Center, from top: manufactured pastel stick, pastel pencil, hard pastel and oil pastel. Right: pan pastel. At bottom, from left: tortillon, razor and pan-pastel applicator.

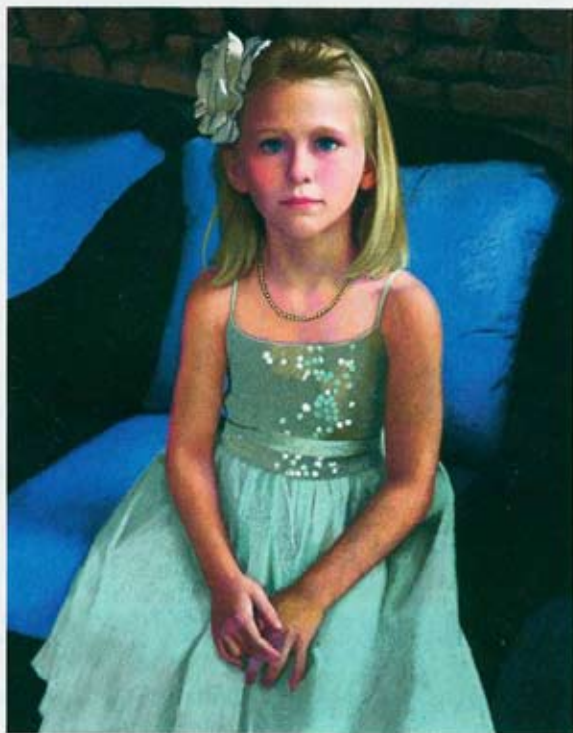
to lighter, you can gradually add large amounts of pigment to fill a gritty surface with intense or subtle tones.

- Colors do not have to be mixed. They can be chosen according to the closest hue, value and intensity at hand, then altered or blended directly on the image's surface. This makes color interactions in pastel easy to appraise.

- By using a sharpened hard pastel or pastel pencil, crisp lines and tiny details can be put in place at the beginning or completion of an image.

- All forms of pastel can be used together on various surfaces, as well as altered, mixed and applied with all kinds of mediums. For example, Degas combined oil pastel with traditional dry pastel to add texture and luminosity to his images. These two types of pastel can be used in a resist technique, with the dry pigment slipping over oil pastel to fill in clean gaps on the surface with color.

There is no limit to the power of pastel to spark the imagination, and I hope you enjoy drawing with this beautiful, rich medium. ❖



### **Melissa**

by Wende Caporale, 2011, pastel on paper, 24 x 18.