



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

Pastel Pointers, Past and Present

By the 17th and 18th 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 18th-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

96th Street Tunnel

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

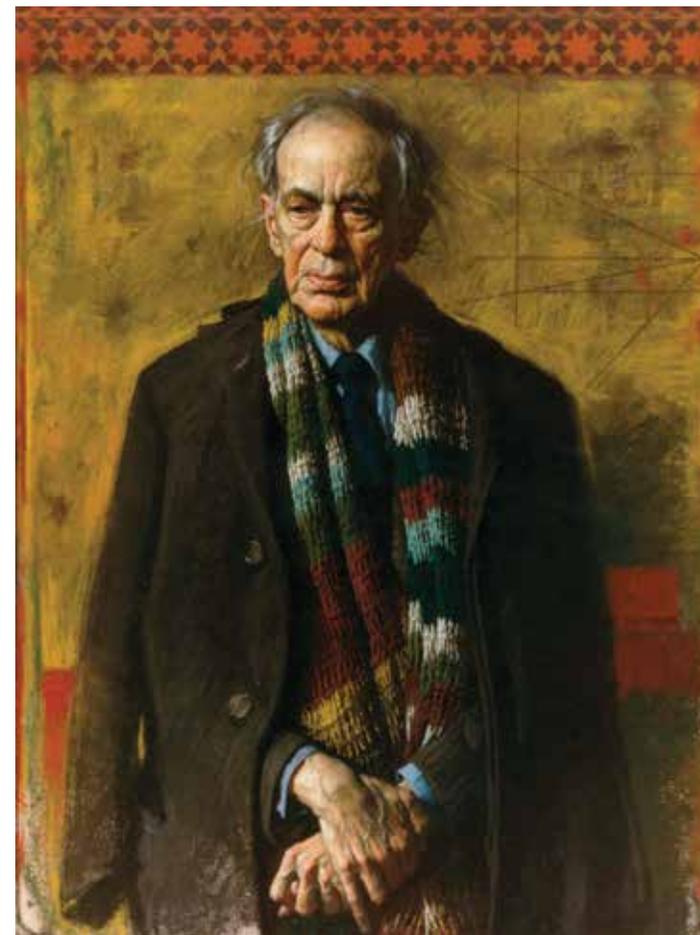


of the most internationally renowned financially successful artists of the 18th century. (For another example of this style, see the drawing by Jean Valade on page TKTK.)

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.

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-17th century. Before then, early adopters of the medium made their pastels by hand by 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



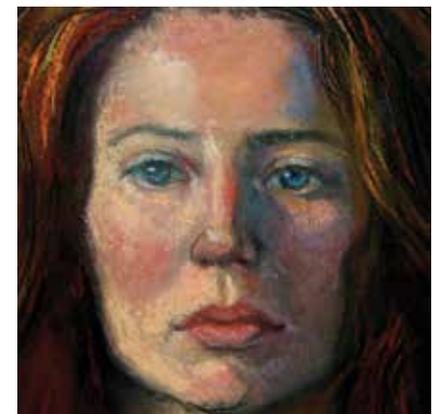
Handmade pastel, with mortar and pestle.



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 18th century some artists produced monumental pastel works on custom-built textured surfaces on rigid supports. My drawing *Sunset* (see TK) 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



Julie (detail)

by Sherry Camhy, 2011, pan pastel on board.

