

Soft Pastel: An Introduction

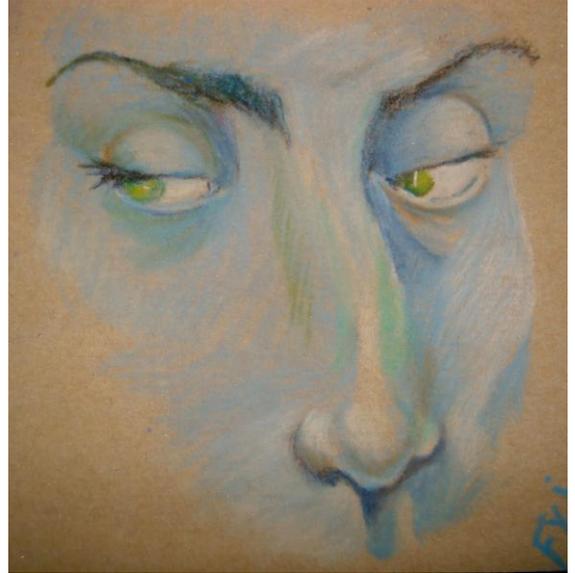
Imagine pure artists' pigments coming directly from your fingertips. Soft pastels, also called chalk pastels, are considered the most direct medium for working in colour. Pastels are basically pigment and chalk compressed with a small amount of gum tragacanth. They contain no additives or solvents, and few tools are needed to create stunning works. Here are some tips and suggestions for those trying this medium for the first time.

The most important consideration with pastels is colour selection. Pastels cannot be mixed like watercolours or oils. Blending, layering and scumbling can create interesting effects but not really distinct value or hue changes. For this reason, the colour selection of -quality pastels is very large: Schmincke (Germany) makes about 300 different colours, Sennelier (France) about 525, and Townsend (USA) claims twice as many (but these are nearly impossible to get). The possibilities for manufacturing colours plus tints (white added) and tones (black added) of each colour. To avoid frustration when rendering with colour in pastels, buy the widest range of colours that your budget will allow or carefully choose a limited palette to suit your subject matter.

You can also choose pastels of different degrees of hardness/softness. Hard chalk pastels are useful for blocking in your first layers while the softest pastels are perfect for finishing highlights and dark depths. Schmincke pastels are large sticks of artist-quality pigments. They are made with superior chalks to create one of the softest, smoothest pastels on the market. Sennelier pastels vary in softness according to the pigments used to make the colour. Holbein pastels are a very good choice for beginners. They are harder than Schmincke and Sennelier, so a little more controllable for layering. Holbein large sets are also more affordable. Stabilo CarbOthello pastel pencils are great for details.

Protect yourself with a dust mask when working with pastels. They are dusty and pigment in dust form is easily inhaled. Keep your work area very clean, so that pigment is not carried with you when you move around. Gloves or barrier cream are also recommended to protect the skin. Some pigments still cause concern for toxicity when used continuously. Never eat or drink in your working area.

The tools for pastels are simple. The most obvious blending tools are your own fingers, but using a tortillion or blending stomp will create more subtle areas and keep your digits and your paper cleaner. Erasers not only fix mistakes but also work as a reverse drawing tool. Chamois work well for softening large backgrounds. Use a deerfoot paint brush to create very soft edges for clouds or glowing cherubs' cheeks. Paint brushes can also be used with water for blending chalk pastels (some brands are water soluble). Just for fun and a bold look, draw with soft pastel on really wet watercolour paper.



By Fiona Yardley Jones



By Travis McEwan

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Speaking of paper, there is a great selection of surfaces to explore. Try many before deciding on your style. Pastel paper should be acid-free (non-yellowing) and fade-resistant. The more textured (toothier) the paper the more layers of colours it can hold. Choosing a complimentary coloured paper will save your pastels and save you work filling a background colour. The most popular pastel paper is Canson Mi-Teintes. It comes in many colours and is very affordable. Sennelier Pastel Card is a delicate sandpaper card that is well liked by artists who build many layers of colour. Wallis Papers and ColourFix, both designed by pastelists, are 100% rag paper that is primed with a toothy, sanded surface that can be tinted with watercolour or other thin-bodied paint. St Armand Sabretooth is similar but with a less pronounced texture. There are also recipes and mediums for pastel grounds for priming your own boards and papers. Come to The Paint Spot to see some examples and get suggestions.

In addition to a toothy paper, a spray fixative will help keep your pastel marks in place. Always spray in a well-ventilated area. Spray many light layers of workable fixative as you are working on the piece rather than a single heavy coat at the end. Ask before choosing your brand — a bad fixative can ruin a great work by darkening the light colours and obliterating your highlights. Schmincke and Lascaux fixatives are proven quality products.

Careful consideration must be given to protecting a finished pastel painting, which should be matted and framed under glass and moved as little as possible. Do not frame a pastel using Plexiglas as the plastic attracts static electricity and it can pull the pastel dust right off the paper surface.



By Robin Morley



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