

PASTEL PAINTING by Gainor Roberts



When I first started using pastels, when I was eighteen years old, there were few products on the market and we had to order our Canson Mi-Tientes from France through a local distributor. I remember my excitement when the package from the distributor arrived at my college post office. The papers back then seemed a bit weightier, but we only had about 4 color choices. The Sennelier pastel set pictured on the right, in the photo above, was the set that was the envy of all pastelists and my dear Grandmother funded the purchase that was to be a very special Christmas AND Birthday gift! Some pastel artists favored black velvet papers, on which images (mostly bad) of Elvis, sunsets, and cars, were shown in the local street art fairs. Those papers are still around, but I've not seen a black velvet image for years, thank goodness.

Pastels are very simple. I have made my own sets, which is more work than I care to do any more. Mine were not nearly as nice as the sets available on the market today. Essentially pastels are made from pure powdered pigments bound together into a dough-like consistency, with various gums and resins, the preferable one being gum tragacanth, and sometimes gum Arabic or both. Each pigment requires a different amount of binder and it is tricky to get it right. A stick that has too much binder will be very hard and sometimes not deposit any pigment at all on the paper while one that is too soft will deposit too much pigment or completely crumble in your hands.

Today we have a huge number of choices in pastels and papers which can be confusing to a newcomer to the medium. Hard, soft, medium sticks are pictured above, NuPastel being traditionally harder, while the set on the left is medium and has handy 1/2 sticks so you can get more colors for your money. The Sennelier set is still going strong after all these years and who knows how many years those sticks have in them even though they are considered very soft. Pastels are an economical method of making art, and you will find that you will pay much more for the framing of your pastels than the materials, by far.

Different strokes for different folks abound! Some pastelists use a variety of tools to smudge and smear their colors into a blended uniform look, which others, like myself, seldom, if ever, touch the pigments on the papers. I love the look of a layered pastel drawing or painting that has crisscross strokes that meld into a more Impressionist appearance.

My drawings are almost always done on Canson Mi-Tientes. Today we have something like 53 colors in the Mi-Tientes line of papers....most of which I think are unsuitable for pastels but I have done drawings on pumpkin and purple papers which are quite nice. Mostly I tend to pick neutral colors which in a drawing I will leave unpainted, while in a pastel painting I will fill in the whole paper. You can still find the velvet papers if that is your passion, but most of the pastelists I know will choose a higher quality paper than Mi-Tientes and velvet and use a sanded surface paper like Wallis or Art Spectrum.

The sanded papers are like sand-paper that carpenters use, and once I had a sheet of pastel paper that looked just like sandpaper and had a number like 1500 grit on the back. Sanded papers contain pumice, mostly, or some other grabber, and with them you can use up those expensive pastels quickly. Many artists will start with the cheaper grades of pastel to lay down a foundation, and finish off with softer pastels that deposit a heavier load of pigment at the end.

At one time pastels were considered impermanent and the King of France (which one I'm not sure) made it illegal to work in pastel. Artists did so at their own peril. Pastels must be preserved well, framed properly, and under glass, preferably UV glass, as all artwork is subject to fading, especially pastels. But today the popularity of pastels is raging and companies are manufacturing all kinds of goodies for the pastel artist to play with. One company, Art Spectrum, has a number of wonderful sanded papers available in large sheets, and also in smaller assorted packages. This company also sells a "primer" which is the same material they deposit on their papers. It can be painted on anything so you are not limited any more to the standard sizes and you can mix the primer colors, or make interesting grounds upon which to do your work.

It is also a matter of choice about spraying your work. I try not to spray fixative on my finished pastel, but this causes problems in the framing and transportation of the finished work. Glass and plastic often can get a static charge on them and cause pastel particles to jump onto the inside of the glazing....a situation that is, at best irritating, when the only solution is to take apart the framed artwork. Many framers refuse to frame an unsprayed pastel! One way to prevent loose pastel dust inside of the frame is to add spacers to the backside of the mat, so the stray particles can drop down inside the mat, and anti-static glass and plastic cleaners work very well. I do use one kind of fixative, Lascaux, which is horrendously expensive, being in the \$40 list price range (discounts abound), but it only changes the color values slightly. Others will be very disappointing as your beautiful pastel when sprayed, will look totally different due to the properties of the spray itself. I studied with one artist who used raw pigments and pastel fixative to literally ladle on the pigment load, and one of my pastelist friends uses hairspray!

You will need a support, like a drawing board, foam board or cardboard to hold your paper while you are working on it. Some pastel artists use a face mask. Remember, pigments are toxic and many artists become allergic or asthmatic with that amount of dust around them. Most artists learn quickly not to blow on their work. Instead, knock the board on something outside, or snap your fingers against the board to knock off the stray pastel.

You will need tape and an eraser. Kneaded erasers will do a good job cleaning up stray marks or dust. Don't rub a kneaded eraser....rather use it by pressing on an area you want to lift. The eraser can be kneaded in your hand to expose a clean surface many times before it is useless.

Most of us like to have a set of pastel pencils on hand for doing small details like eyes and fingers. They are handy for sure, but present problems of their own....they are hard to sharpen, and will break off repeatedly if you are not using a very sharp blade in your sharpener. If dropped they are often broken off inside their wooden casings and will never sharpen right! Pencils, obviously, don't give you a high pigment load, but if you don't mind having a messy box of pastels you can twist a stick and hope that it will break into sharp pointed sections. I keep a set of old pastels that I don't mind breaking for this purpose....a tiny dash of white or blue in the eye area is much better done with the stick rather than the pencil....but again, this is my way, not necessarily your way!