

Pastel Medium

Pastel is pure pigment, the same pigment used in all art media. It is the most permanent of all when applied to conservation ground and properly framed. Pastel has no liquid binder that may cause the surface to darken, fade, yellow, crack or blister with time. Pastels from the 16th century exist today, as fresh as the day they were painted.

Pastel does not at all refer to the pale colors, as the word is commonly used in cosmetic and fashion terminology. The name Pastel comes from the French word “pastiche” because the pure, powdered pigment is ground into a paste with a binder and then rolled into sticks. The infinite variety of colors in the Pastel palette range from soft and subtle to hard and brilliant.

An artwork is created by stroking the sticks of dry pigment across an abrasive ground, embedding the color in the “tooth” of the paper, sandboard canvas etc. If the ground is completely covered with Pastel, the work is considered a Pastel Painting; leaving much of the ground exposed produces a Pastel sketch. Techniques vary with individual artists. Pastel can be blended or used with visible strokes. The medium is favored by many artists because it allows a spontaneous approach. There is no drying time and no allowances have to be made for a change in color due to drying.

A particle of Pastel pigment, seen under a microscope looks like a diamond with many facets. Therefore, Pastel painting reflect light like a prism. No other medium has the power of color or stability. Pastel does not oxidize with the passage of time.

Historically, Pastel can be traced back to the 16th century. Its invention is attributed to the German Painter Johann Thiele. A Venetian woman artist, Rosalba Carriera was the first to make consistent use of Pastel, Chardin did portraits with an open stroke, while La Tour preferred the blended finish. Thereafter, a galaxy of famous artists such as Watteau, Copley, Delacroix, Millet, Manet, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Vuillard, Bonnard, Glackens, Whistler, Hassam, William Merritt Chase....used Pastel for finished work rather than preliminary sketches.

Edgar Degas was the most prolific user of Pastel and its champion. His protégé, Mary Cassatt introduced the Impressionists and Pastel to her friends in Philadelphia and Washington, and thus to the U. S. In the spring of 1983, Sotheby Parke Bernet sold at auction, two Degas Pastels for more than \$3,000,000 each! Both Pastels were painted about 1880.

Note: Pastel must never be confused with colored chalk. Chalk is a limestone substance impregnated with dyes.

Pastel is sometimes combined with watercolor, gouache, acrylic, charcoal or pencil in a “mixed-mealge” painting, but it is incompatible with oil paint.

Today, Pastel paintings have the stature of oil and watercolor as a major fine art medium. Many of our most renowned living artists have distinguished themselves in Pastel and have enriched the art world with this beautiful medium.