

# The Touch of Color

PASTELS  
AT THE  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY  
OF ART

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FIRST USED DURING THE RENAISSANCE, pastels are still manufactured from a carefully balanced mix of pigment, a filler such as chalk or clay, and a binder, then shaped into sticks and dried. With a single stroke of this stick, the artist applies both color and line. Because of the medium's soft, crumbly texture, the line can be left intact or smudged with a finger or stump (a rolled piece of leather or paper) into a broad area of tone. Pastelists have used this versatile medium in countless different ways over the centuries. Some have covered the surface of the paper or other support with a thick, velvety layer of pastel, while others have taken a more linear approach. Some have even ground the stick to a powder and rubbed it into the support, applied it with a stump, or moistened it and painted it on with a brush. Throughout history, the views of artists and their audiences toward the medium have varied as widely as the techniques of those who used it.

Fig. 1 Benedetto Luti, *Head of a Bearded Man*, 1715, pastel and colored chalks on paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Julius S. Held Collection, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Fig. 2 Rosalba Carriera, *Allegory of Painting*, 1730s, pastel and red chalk on blue paper, mounted on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

A few sixteenth-century Italian artists used pastel to block out colors in preparatory sketches for paintings. Although pastel continued to serve this function for centuries, it was soon used for other purposes as well. By the early eighteenth century, the medium had become a popular choice for independent works of art: pastel head studies by Benedetto Luti (fig. 1), for instance, were so successful that art historian Luigi Lanzi complained a century later that they had “inundated all Europe.” Throughout the eighteenth century, however, artists and patrons considered pastel especially suitable for highly finished portraits: its velvety texture, or “bloom,”

mimicked the lifelike appearance of flawless skin. Among the most influential of all eighteenth-century pastelists was Rosalba Carriera (fig. 2). Her fame extended well beyond her native Venice and helped to popularize the pastel portrait throughout Europe. In 1720 she traveled to Paris, where her delicately executed portraits and allegorical subjects attracted widespread acclaim. The critic Pierre-Jean Mariette, for instance, praised her work, claiming that “this sort of pastel, with all the strength and truth of colors, preserves a certain freshness and lightness of touch . . . which is superior to that of oil painting.” Carriera’s sitters and







Fig. 3 Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, *Claude Dupouch*, c. 1739, pastel on blue paper, mounted on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Fig. 4 Hugh Douglas Hamilton, *Frederick North, Later Fifth Earl of Guilford, in Rome*, late 1780s, pastel and gouache(?) with touches of graphite on paper, mounted on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the 50th Anniversary Gift Committee

patrons included royalty and nobility from throughout Europe. At home in Venice, her studio became a tourist attraction as British aristocrats traveling through Italy visited to commission portraits or to admire the examples on view.

The taste for pastel portraits was especially strong in France and Britain. By mid-century, French pastelists were renowned for their level of technical brilliance: in their hands, pastel could mimic the appearance of every texture from the cold glint of metal to the glow of satin. Foremost among the French portraitists was Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. One observer marveled, “We see, we smell, we think we can touch everything he paints. It is truly velvet, fur, gauze: it is not possible that this is merely the deception of pigments.” La Tour’s contemporaries admired not only his technical skill but also his ability to capture a sitter’s fleeting state of mind—for example, presenting his teacher Claude Dupouch in front of an easel, as though in mid-conversation in the studio (fig. 3). This momentary quality was in fact the result of careful preparation and multiple preliminary sketches. Normally executed on paper mounted on canvas, eighteenth-century pastel portraits were consistently described as paintings rather than drawings. In their richly tonal appearance, with pastel covering the entire surface of the paper, they certainly resembled paintings. Framed and covered with glass to protect their delicate surfaces, they func-

tioned as paintings as well. Some artists, such as Hugh Douglas Hamilton (fig. 4) made elaborate full-length portraits, but the majority were half- or bust-length.

At a time when opportunities for female artists were exceptionally limited, pastel was considered suitable for women to use: working with this dry, manufactured medium was, as one eighteenth-century writer put it, “far preferable to their soiling their fair hands with painting in colors in oil.” Practical considerations also contributed to this notion. A pastel studio devoted primarily to portraits could be run on a smaller scale than the workshop of a painter composing large biblical or mythological scenes, which required models and the help of assistants—almost always male—who had to be supervised.

Carriera was far from the only highly successful woman pastelist of the century. In Paris, for example, pastelist and painter Adélaïde Labille-Guiard was one of just four women admitted into the Académie Royale (fig. 5). She also taught a number of pupils—all of them women—and served as official painter to the *Mesdames*, the daughters of Louis xv. This association of pastels with the feminine, however, extended beyond the realm of the artist herself, especially as the fashion for pastel spread to Britain’s middle class later in the eighteenth century. Intimate, informal pastel renditions of family members were popular decorations for women’s spaces, such as dressing rooms. Pastel’s



Fig. 5 Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, *A Fashionable Noblewoman Wearing a Plumed Hat*, c. 1789, pastel on blue paper, mounted on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Century Fund

Fig. 6 Jean François Millet, *Calling Home the Cows*, c. 1866, pastel and conté crayon on tan paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection)

reputation as simple and easy to master attracted a growing number of amateur artists, many of them women. An anonymous French treatise of 1788 recommended pastel to female amateurs, noting that it could “rescue so many young women from the tedium of solitude,” and that it was one of the “resources against idleness, the source of so many indiscretions.” Art supplies were also marketed to women: one prominent pastel manufacturer, for instance, offered a selection for ladies containing a range of colors ideal for “flowers, figures, and landscapes” — subjects considered suitable for the female artist.

Although the careers of some pastelists in France, including Labille-Guiard’s, survived the French Revolution, the sumptuous aristocratic portraits of the eighteenth century had fallen out of style by the turn of the century. Pastel sank into decades of neglect by most serious artists. Its revival in the nineteenth century represented a significant shift in the way both artist and audience regarded the medium. The drawings of Jean-François Millet, for example, were a revelation (fig. 6). Made almost entirely for a single collector and rarely exhibited during Millet’s lifetime, his pastels had little influence until they were shown publicly after his death in 1875. Millet’s approach to pastel could hardly have been more opposed to the meticulous blending of his eighteenth-century predecessors: his coarse, energetic hatching, heavy contours,

and limited tonal range suited his humble subject matter of peasants and shepherds and represented a revolutionary departure in the way artists used pastel.

Millet’s work contributed to an international revival of the medium, though the pastels of the late nineteenth century are so different from their predecessors that they represent almost an entirely new art form. In contrast to the intense focus on portraiture during the eighteenth century, no single subject matter dominated during the revival. The portraits of the previous century were not forgotten, however; on the contrary, a new interest in eighteenth-century art fueled the taste for pastel. While the emphasis on lifelike appearance in the earlier portraits held little appeal, artists and critics admired the use of pastel to capture fleeting expressions. In a passage praising La Tour’s portraits, the critic Paul Desjardins commented, “Pastel should be used to convey what is most ephemeral in nature — the expression passing over the human face, the rapid interplay of sunlight and shadow — nothing more.... That’s the triumph of this technique. It must capture what is most elusive.” This immediacy appealed to the growing number of amateur and professional artists who worked in the open air. It aligned so perfectly with the goals of the impressionists and their circle that most of the major artists of the movement worked with pastel at one time or another. Beginning in the 1860s, Claude Monet turned to it sporadi-

Fig. 7 Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge*, 1901, pastel on blue paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Florian Carr Fund

Fig. 8 Édouard Manet, *Madame Michel-Lévy*, 1882, pastel on gray primed canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

Fig. 9 Edgar Degas, *Young Woman Dressing Herself*, 1885, pastel over charcoal on tan paper, mounted on board, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman



cally over his long career to capture shifting effects of light and color ranging from coastal sunsets to the fogs of London's cityscape (fig. 7). Édouard Manet used it mainly at the end of his life, when his poor health made painting in oils difficult. His body of work in pastel consists almost entirely of fresh and spontaneous portraits, mainly of women (fig. 8). One of the most ceaselessly creative of all pastelists was Edgar Degas, who experimented with the medium for decades. Among other techniques, he combined pastel with a variety of supplementary media such as charcoal (fig. 9), sprayed areas with fixative so he could rework passages without smearing the colors beneath, mixed ground pastel with water and other substances, and reworked prints with pastel.

As in the previous century, some of the most prominent women artists worked in pastel. In some notable cases, women selected pastel not in response to society's expectations but as an aesthetic choice. Early in Mary Cassatt's career, she noticed some Degas pastels in a gallery window. The sight of them changed the direction of her work and inspired her to turn to impressionism. Years later she still recalled the revelation of seeing them for the first time: "I used to go and flatten my nose against the window and absorb all I could of his art. It changed my life." Cassatt collaborated with Degas for more than a decade and they shared many of the same pastel techniques (fig. 10). Over the course of her career she experimented with a variety of pastel techniques, which







were influenced not only by her time with Degas but also by her serious study of old master art, including the pastel portraits of La Tour. Some late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pastel proponents viewed the medium's lingering feminine associations as negative and attempted to dispel them. In a typical example, the prominent British art writer P.G. Hamerton lamented that the "charm and effeminate softness which distinguish so many pastels have also produced... a very erro-

neous... impression, that the art is incapable of manly and vigorous delineation," before hastening to assure his readers that pastel was "a more firm and masculine art than a careless world imagines."

Cassatt was just one of the American artists who were exposed to pastel when they studied or worked in Europe. As they returned home, the pastel revival traveled with them. Hoping to encourage the growing interest in the medium, a group of American artists formed the Society of

Fig. 10 Mary Cassatt, *The Black Hat*, c. 1890, pastel on tan paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Fig. 11 James McNeill Whistler, *The Palace; white and pink*, 1879/1880, pastel and conté crayon on brown paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund and Patrons' Permanent Fund

Painters in Pastel in 1882. The society held only a few exhibitions before disbanding, but it exerted a lasting influence: it raised awareness among American artists and the public while inspiring similar societies in Europe, which in turn spurred further interest in pastel and its history. The Société des pastellistes français, for instance, included eighteenth-century portraits as well as contemporary work in its first exhibition in 1885, while the Pastel Society, founded in London in 1898, remains active today.

Although he spent his career abroad, James McNeill Whistler was one of America's most influential pastelists. The artist described his own evanescent sketches of Venice, executed on brown paper in a few strokes of black and then touched with

delicate color, as "something so new in Art that every body's mouth will, I feel, pretty soon water." Many of his contemporaries agreed. The critic Frederick Wedmore marveled, "A few touches of the pastel in various colours, and somehow the sky is aglow and the water dancing. The thing has been wrought as it were by pure magic." Whistler's sketches provided inspiration for a new generation of pastelists when they were exhibited both in London and in the United States throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Palace; white and pink* (fig. 11), for example, appeared in the Whistler retrospective at the Copley Society in Boston in 1904, just after the artist's death. Some critics felt this was the only appropriate way to work with pastel: the British writer





Frank Rinder noted, “Freshness and spontaneity are lost in labour which appears to aim at copying... oil painting, and colour design, a special opportunity of the medium, is too much neglected.” In contrast, other prominent pastelists such as William Merritt Chase (cover) and Childe Hassam (fig. 12) reveled in pastel’s powdery opacity. They kept alive the centuries-old tradition of using pastel in a more tonal manner.

As the twentieth century unfolded, pastel continued to break free of any assumptions or conventions that earlier

artists and critics had assigned to it. The restricted subject matter of the eighteenth century expanded to a limitless variety of themes. In the hands of American artists Everett Shinn and George Luks, the medium once considered suitable mainly for aristocratic portraits now depicted life in the tenements and streets of New York City (figs. 13 and 14). As in the late nineteenth century, some painters or print-makers explored pastel only briefly — Käthe Kollwitz, Henri Matisse (fig. 15), and Roy Lichtenstein, for instance, worked with it for limited periods in their long careers.



Fig. 12 Childe Hassam, *At the Grand Prix de Paris*, 1887, pastel over graphite on paperboard coated with sawdust, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Bequest of James Parmelee)



Fig. 13 Everett Shinn, *Fifth Avenue Bus*, 1914, pastel and charcoal on gray-washed paper, mounted on board, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Bequest of Julia B. Engel



Fig. 14 George Luks, *Breadline*, 1900, pastel on paperboard, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Estate of Susie Brummer)

Fig. 15 Henri Matisse, *Woman with Exotic Plant*, c. 1925, pastel on paper coated with sawdust, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection

Fig. 16 G. Daniel Massad, *Breach*, 2009, pastel on gray paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the artist in memory of his parents

Fig. 17 Jeanne Rij-Rousseau, *Abstraction*, c. 1920s, pastel, charcoal, and black crayon on maroon paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart P. Feld



Others, such as the contemporary American artist G. Daniel Massad, have devoted decades or entire careers to it (fig. 16). Pastel's traditional status as an appropriate material for female artists long ago ceased to factor into the choice for the many who adopted it in the twentieth century. Jeanne Rij-Rousseau's richly colored, abstract pastels (fig. 17) can be linked to her development of an aesthetic philosophy known as *Vibrisme*, which posits that colors emit waves similar to the sound waves of music. More recently, new communities of amateurs

and professionals, the successors to the short-lived Society of Painters in Pastel, have come together on social media and in person to discuss techniques and share ideas.

As the materials of pastel—pigment, binder, and filler—have remained largely consistent over the centuries, so too have its intrinsic qualities as a medium. In all their varied techniques and approaches, artists turn to pastel not only for its immediacy but also for its versatility, its velvety matte surfaces, its intense color, and most of all, its unique beauty.



Cover: William Merritt Chase, *Study of Flesh Color and Gold* (detail), 1888, pastel on paper coated with mauve-gray grit, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Raymond J. and Margaret Horowitz

## FURTHER READING

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*Brochure written by Stacey Sell, associate curator, department of old master drawings, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office, National Gallery of Art. © 2019 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington*

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Visitors can see more pastels in the collection of the National Gallery of Art by making an appointment in the print study rooms: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/prints/print-study-room-make-an-appointment.html>

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