

**Update: September 19, 2019** (original release date: June 14, 2019)

Major Exhibition Traces the History of Pastel in Art at National Gallery of Art, September 29, 2019, through January 26, 2020



William Merritt Chase

*Study of Flesh Color and Gold*, 1888

pastel on paper coated with mauve-gray grit (on strainer)

overall: 45.7 x 33 cm (18 x 13 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Raymond J. and Margaret Horowitz

Washington, DC—In a major new exhibition opening this fall, the National Gallery of Art will examine the beauty and depth of pastel, tracing its rich history from the Renaissance to the present day. ***The Touch of Color: Pastels at the National Gallery of Art*** will feature some 60 exquisite examples drawn entirely from the Gallery's permanent collection, including many works never before exhibited. ***The Touch of Color*** opens on September 29, 2019, and continues through January 26, 2020.

“***The Touch of Color*** is a chance for our visitors to experience the marvelous qualities of pastel in the hands of great artists,” said Kaywin Feldman, director, National Gallery of Art. “The Gallery’s pastel collection is remarkably deep, with nearly every major period in the medium’s long, full history represented. The strength of the collection gives us a rare opportunity to present an exhibition of this scope and significance.”

## **Exhibition Organization**

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust.

## **About the Exhibition**

***The Touch of Color: Pastels at the National Gallery of Art*** examines how artists through the centuries adopted different techniques and approaches to pastel, experimenting with this colorful and versatile medium to achieve exciting, often unexpected effects. With a single stroke of a pastel stick, the artist applies both color and line. The line can be left intact or smudged to create passages of velvety tone. Finished works range from the richly illusionist pastel “paintings” of the 18th century to the diaphanous sketches and colorful abstractions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The origins of pastel date to the Renaissance and are linked with colored chalk, a naturally occurring substance mined in a limited range of colors. Pastel is formed using powdered pigment and a binding medium. The exhibition opens with a section on this early period, including preparatory sketches by Federico Barocci and Jacopo Bassano who used pastel and colored chalk to plan the distribution of light and color in their studies for oil paintings.

Artists found pastel ideal for depicting the soft textures of human skin and sumptuous fabric. Early 18th-century artists such as Rosalba Carriera used the medium almost entirely for highly finished portraits. Carriera’s studio in Venice became a tourist attraction as aristocrats on the Grand Tour visited to commission portraits or admire the examples on view. Two of her works—*Allegory of Painting* (1730s) and *Sir John Reade, Bart.* (1739) are featured in the exhibition.

By the mid-18th century, French pastelists had reached unprecedented levels of technical brilliance. Foremost among them was Maurice-Quentin de La Tour, whose portrayal of his teacher, *Claude Dupouche* (c. 1739), exemplifies his dazzling skill. La Tour was renowned for his ability to mimic textures ranging from the glint of metal to the glow of satin and for the immediacy of his portraits, which appear to capture his sitters in mid-conversation. Several French women, including Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, followed Rosalba’s example and became successful pastelists.

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The craze for pastels spread to Britain where it was fueled by travelers as they arrived home from the Grand Tour with portraits by Rosalba or Hugh Douglas Hamilton, who is represented here by the spectacular full-length *Frederick North, Later Fifth Earl of Guilford* (1780s). Artists such as John Russell later marketed smaller and more intimate pastels to middle-class patrons. Pastel was perfect for portraits: as a dry medium, it was faster, cleaner, and more portable than oil paint; fewer sittings were required and artist could easily travel to patron. Finished works, their entire surfaces coated with velvety pastel, were considered paintings rather than drawings. Although nearly all pastels from this period are portraits, this section includes a pair of rare still lifes by Antoine Berjon, acquired by the Gallery earlier this year.

Pastel fell out of favor early in the 19th century. When artists returned to it later in the century, they broke with traditional approaches. Among the most influential figures was Jean-François Millet, represented in the exhibition by two drawings from the 1860s. The muted colors and expressive hatching of his pastoral scenes represented a radical departure from the meticulous “paintings” of the previous century. Millet’s work helped to inspire an international pastel revival. Pastel’s immediacy appealed to plein-air artists as well as to the impressionists. Claude Monet’s *Waterloo Bridge* (1901) is one of a series made to study the effects of winter fog on the Thames. Edouard Manet used pastel mainly for portraits, such as *Madame Michel-Lévy* (1882). The Gallery is particularly rich in the works of Edgar Degas, one of the most creative pastelists. Degas experimented with a wide range of wet and dry techniques and sometimes combined pastels with printmaking, as in *Café Concert* (1876/1877). Among his other works included here is the breathtaking *Young Woman Dressing Herself* (1885). Mary Cassatt, Camille Pissarro, and Paul Gauguin are all represented in this section of the exhibition.

The dual role of pastel as a medium for both painting and drawing inspired new enthusiasm in the works of American artists of the late 19th century. James McNeill Whistler’s ethereal colored sketches of Venice, such as *The Palace; white and pink* (1879/1880), show how pastel lends itself well to providing highlights of color to subjects sketched in simple lines of graphite or ink. William Merritt Chase and his followers, in contrast, embraced a more painterly approach. In *Study of Flesh Color and Gold* (1888), Chase took full advantage of the lush texture of pastel by blending it into passages of seamless tone.

By the 20th century pastel had broken free of the expectations of earlier centuries. Artists turned to its intense color and soft opacity in countless different ways. Some 20th-century artists experimented only briefly with pastel before turning to other media, and ***The Touch of Color*** includes rare pastels by Käthe Kollwitz, Henri Matisse, and Roy Lichtenstein. Jasper Johns sometimes uses pastel to explore the themes of earlier paintings, as in *Untitled (from Untitled 1972)* (1975/1976). Finally, in the latest work in the exhibition, *Breach* (2009), G. Daniel Massad uses this fragile medium to depict crumbling autumn leaves and to evoke his recurring theme of the passage of time.

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## Exhibition Curators

The exhibition is curated by Stacey Sell, associate curator, department of old master drawings, National Gallery of Art, and Kimberly Schenck, head of paper conservation, National Gallery of Art.

## Related Activities

### Lectures

*Introduction to the Exhibition—The Touch of Color: Pastels at the National Gallery of Art*

September 29, 2:00 p.m.

East Building Auditorium

Kimberly Schenck, head of paper conservation, National Gallery of Art, and Stacey Sell, associate curator of old master drawings, National Gallery of Art

*Framing Pastels*

September 30, 12:10 p.m. and 1:10 p.m.

West Building Lecture Hall

Shan Linde, preservation framer, paper conservation, National Gallery of Art

Update: June 25, 2019

*This update includes a revised exhibition description.*

Update: September 11, 2019

*This update includes additional related activities.*

Update: September 19, 2019

*This update includes a change to the object count.*

### Press Contact:

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## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt), Twitter at [www.twitter.com/ngadc](http://www.twitter.com/ngadc), and Instagram at

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<http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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PRESS KIT ▼

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## Exhibition Press Release

[Exhibition Checklist](#) (PDF 621.3 KB)

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The public may call (202) 737-4215 or visit [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov) for more information about the **National Gallery of Art**.

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