

# PASTEL

# BASICS

Everything you need to know about Soft Pastels



## Getting Started - What materials do I really need?

My advice to anyone getting started in soft pastels is "It's all about the paper!" You really need a good quality, sanded pastel paper to make life easier for beginners. It's no use trying to learn pastels on an inferior paper that just gets you frustrated and wanting to give up.

So I would rather you save money on less expensive brands of pastel sticks and spend your money on the paper. It's actually a good idea to have a variety of different pastel stick brands because they vary in hardness which can be very handy at times.

Just make sure everything you buy is artist quality.

### Pastel Paper

Claire Fontaine Pastelmat  
Canson Mi Tientes Touch  
Uart 500  
Art Spectrum Colourfix  
Hahnemuhle Velour



### Pastel Sticks

My favourite pastels are Schmincke and Unison, but there are a number of others on the market that are very good. I usually look for the colour, rather than the brand in a lot of cases. So you really need to buy the colours you need, depending on what you are drawing. Don't forget you can mix colours as well, so you don't need every single colour you see in your reference photo, for example, if you need a pink, you can mix white and red.

*Now we could stop there with the pastels, but I use a variety of different types myself so I will mention them, but there are many artists that solely use soft pastel sticks alone to create their artwork, the more you start painting you will come to figure out what you like to use in your own work.*



## Pan Pastels

These are fairly new to the market and you can quite easily create a painting just with these. They come with Sofft tools which are similar to makeup sponges, You need some sort of tool like this for laying them down and to be able to get any kind of accuracy. I like them because they are a very fine pigment which doesn't fill the tooth of the paper much, so I use these a lot for backgrounds and blocking in.

## Hard Stick Pastels

Hard stick pastels are limited to only a couple of brands, although they are handy to have in your tool kit because they are compressed into quite a hard pastel stick, which are ideal for finer details.



## Pastel Pencils

I use pastel pencils the most out of all. But in saying that I actually use every one of the above types of pastel in each of my drawings. The pencils are the best for the details. Again colours are hard to pick because it will depend on what you are drawing. You can buy them individually or I prefer to have a whole set of my favourites (Stabilo Carbothello), but to start out I would recommend buying separately as you need them.

So I usually do the background in soft sticks, then the block in with pan pastels and then the face details with the pencils and I use the pencils and hard and soft sticks for the fur, then finish off with the soft sticks to add highlights and darks.



# What I use and what you need to get started...

## Soft Pastels..

- \* Stick Pastels - The softest and therefore brightest/darkest of them all, perfect for blocking in backgrounds and adding highlights and darks at the end.
- \* Pastel Pencils - My main drawing medium, these are perfect for adding details eg. eyes
- Pan Pastels - Perfect for backgrounds without filling the tooth of the paper.
- Hard Stick - These are your hard square sticks, good for fine lines.

## Papers..

- \* Pastel Mat - Everyones favorite, holds many layers of pastel and a joy to work on.
- Mi Teintes Touch - Seems to be easier to get, can't hold as many layers as pastelmat but better than non-sanded papers and easier for blending.
- Uuart - Comes in various grades - course to smooth, can chew through your pastels quickly because it is more like sand paper, holds pastels well.

## Other..

- Tracing Paper - To trace your image from a reference image  
This is not needed if you plan on using the grid method to get your outline onto your pastel paper.
- Pencil - Any pastel pencil will do, usually a mid-tone colour that's in your drawing.  
This is used to transfer your image using either tracing or grid.
- Tape - This is a must for holding your paper down without the edges curling.  
The best tape that works on most Pastel Papers is wide clear celotape.
- Rubber - Always handy to have, either a standard rubber, or kneadable eraser.  
I use a Tombow Mono Eraser because I like how small they are.
- Glassine Paper - For resting your hand, to stop oil transfer from your skin, tracing paper or baking paper would work just as well.
- Backing Board - I use a thin MDF board because it is rigid, but even a heavy cardboard or masonite etc would be fine.
- Printer - For printing out your reference photo that you can transfer from

\* starred items are the very basics of what you would need to get started

# A COMPLETE GUIDE TO SOFT PASTELS

Pastels are an artist material with a long history. Sometimes referred to as “dry painting,” the medium offers an incredible range of colour (over 1600 hues) with the ability to blend colours in the same way that you would paint pigment. When you learn about the history and the versatility of pastels, it’s no wonder that they have been popular for so long

## What on earth are pastels?

No their not just pale pretty colours that look nice in a baby nursery, Pastels are a painting medium made of powdered pigments and a binder of either gum, clay, or resin. Which are then mixed together to form a thick paste, this is then fashioned into sticks and allowed to dry, Unison have a beautiful range of soft pastels that are all hand rolled so no two are the same shape. Each is created with the same pigment you’d find in other art media, like oil paints and watercolours.

The binder is neutral colouring and low in saturation to avoid diluting the vibrancy of the pigment. Pastels have the least amount of binder added as opposed to any other medium and because they are almost pure pigment, pastels produce intense colours that most other media can’t match.

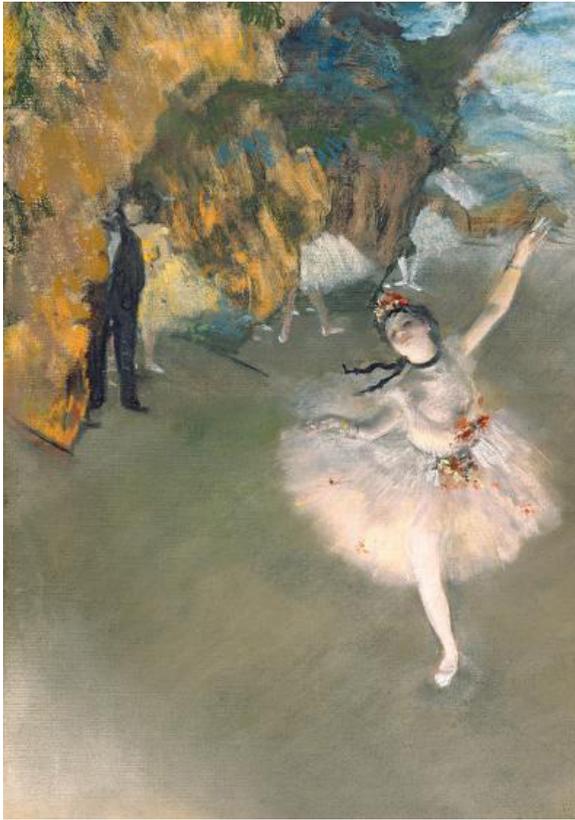
## Quick History of Pastels

The history of pastels can be traced back to the [Renaissance](#). The medium is said to have originated in [Northern Italy](#) during the 16th century, and it became a favourite of the masters, including [Leonardo da Vinci](#) and [Michelangelo](#).

They used the chalks for sketching. At that time, there were only a few colours in their palette—black, white, and red. If they were painting today they would have more than 1600 hues available to them.

Leonardo da Vinci [Public domain]  
(Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#))





They went out of favor for quite a long time until the 1800's when Edgar Degas famously used them to depict his dancers. Gauguin, Monet, and others followed suit.

Today, they remain some of the most popular examples of artists that use pastels, but there are many modern masters using them to great effect.

'The Star' (1878)

(Photo: [Edgar-Degas.net](http://Edgar-Degas.net) Public Domain)

Zaria Forman and her haunting depictions of icebergs, Eric Wilson (my personal favorite) and his masterful approach to wildlife painting, Chuong Nguyen with his outstanding portraiture work, to name just a few.



[Zariaforman.com](http://Zariaforman.com).

(Photo copyright Zaria Forman)



[Ericwilsonsart.com](http://Ericwilsonsart.com)

(Photo copyright Eric Wilson)



[Icuong.com](http://Icuong.com) (Photo copyright Cuong Nguyen)

## What about Quality?

Due to the minimal use of additives in the making of pastels, paintings do not crack or yellow and last for a very long time. In saying that their definitely are varying degrees of light-fastness in the different pastel brands. I only use the highest quality pastels available in my artwork for the piece of mind of creating a painting that will last a lifetime.

## How do I store my pastel paintings?

Pastel paintings are very fragile, similar to a charcoal drawing. Pastel is like paint that never dries: when you touch it, the colour comes off. Because of this you have to store and frame pastels in specific ways, to make sure the painting does not smear or smudge. The best way to store paintings is flat with Glassine sheets between. Make sure the sheets of glassine are taped to the painting so it won't move. I always recommend trying to frame as many of your paintings as possible, even if its just a very cheap frame from the local thrift shop.

It's not always possible to frame your work so the next best thing is to create a storage box out of gator/foam board, with a glassine sheet over the top. This is a very handy box worth your time and cost to make as it can be used to store a few paintings at a time. It is also ideal if you need to send a pastel painting to a customer which isn't framed.

## Is their a correct way to apply pastels?

There are so many varied ways of applying pastels, with no wrong or right. Although some will have you believe that blending with your fingers is a real no no. But that's exactly what I do and many other master pastellists I know of do the same. So however you apply your pastels to achieve your finished look is fine. Depending on your style will also depend on how many different colours you need, if you are applying varied strokes without blending or layering, then a much larger range of colours is needed. But if you are blending and layering colours then it's kind of similar to oil paints in that you need lesser colours because you can create more by blending.

Also just because the stick is shaped like a piece of chalk, does not mean you need to use it like one, for larger areas you can use the stick on its side and for tiny details it's quite normal to break the pastel stick to give yourself a fine sharp edge, so don't be disheartened when you drop your nice new stick on the ground and it shatters into a number of pieces because everyone of those will be very useful to you.

## How do I clean & organize my soft pastel sticks?

Cleaning your soft pastels is relatively easy, all you need is a bowl and a bag of Polenta (cornmeal if your American). Just place your dirty pastels in the bowl of Polenta and swirl around. The Polenta rubbing against the sticks will remove any dirt.

Now to organize your pastels is best to have the colour families in separate compartments. And each colour group sorted from dark to light values. You can even go as far as separating them into cool and warm tones as well. This all just makes it easier while painting for selecting a colour. Try to think of Pastels as oil paints that the colours are already mixed.



## How to work on different papers?

Ok so there are a few different papers as I mentioned earlier, and each paper I listed has its own use for different pastel paintings. They are all great papers and you will learn over time and using them which ones you prefer.

**Pastelmat** - Pastelmat is my favourite for drawing wildlife, due to it being able to hold the most layers of pastel compared to any other paper on the market, this lends itself perfectly for building fur layers up. However it is not the best for blending colours together.

**Mi Tientes Touch** - This was the first good pastel paper I discovered, this is the one that changed my mind on pastel painting. It has a light sanded feel and the pastel glides smoothly over it which is why I love this paper for when I have a lot of background to do or oceans etc. because it is the best for blending pastels together.

**Uart 500** - Uart is very much like sand paper and comes in different grades of roughness, the lower the number, the rougher the texture. Due to the sanded quality, it takes pastel brilliantly however it can chew away at your pastels very quickly. The main advantage is that it comes in a roll, so is perfect if you want to create a painting that is bigger than standard.

**Colourfix** - Very similar to Mi Tientes Touch, although they do produce textured paint in the same colours, so it is possible to cover up any really bad mistakes using the paint.

**Velour** - An absolutely beautiful paper, velour gives your paintings a soft feel but it can be a bit tricky to work on, it really only takes soft sticks, not pencils and you need to rub in each layer as you go.

## How to prepare my pastel paper?

It is always best to tape your pastel paper to a board before you start. The best way is with just a 3mm thin MDF board, cut about an inch bigger all around than your paper size. The best tape to adhere your paper to this board is a wide clear celotape. It holds well on all pastel surfaces that I have tried. This also creates a nice edge once you peel it away after your painting is finished.

Another great use for wide celotape is to clean your paper before you start, sometimes because the surface is textured, a lot of dust etc can stick to it. So just peel off some tape and go over your paper sticking it down and peeling it back up, this will remove any bits on the surface.

## How do I transfer my outline to my paper?

The best way I have found is to use a grid method on larger works and a tracing on smaller works.

**Grid** - Draw a fine line grid over your reference image and then draw the same grid but scaled up onto your drawing paper. Then focus on each square of your reference image and draw that into the larger corresponding grid square on your drawing paper.

So for example, if my reference image is 20cm x 30cm and my drawing paper is 40cm x 60cm, then my grid will be double the size (scale 2:1)

So on the reference image I will draw a grid with 2cm x 2cm squares and then on my drawing paper the grid will have 4cm x 4cm squares. This can be done with any size paper, you just need to work out the scale first.

**Tracing/Transfer** - This way is similar to what we learnt in primary school. We use tracing paper to get an outline of our reference image, then turn it over and colour in the back with a pastel pencil. You only need to go over the lines we drew on the other side. It's best to use a pencil colour that suits your drawing you are about to do. Then flip it back over and go back over your lines with a pen or pencil which will then leave the pastel from the other side on your drawing surface. I find this quite simple and is my preferred method of getting an accurate outline of what I am going to draw.

## How do I sharpen my Pastel Pencils?

This is a question that is asked over and over again, as the pastel inside the pencils is soft, it is known to break when sharpening. I have tried a number of different pencil sharpeners, even bought a high quality handle sharpener but they always break. So the best thing i have found is just a hobby knife and a piece of sand paper. You cut away the wood from the pastel with the knife and then use the sandpaper to create a point. Yes it is time consuming but it is all part of the process.

## Best way to frame & post your pastel art?

As pastel is such a delicate medium, all your finished work should be framed behind glass to protect it. You can just use a standard frame but if you can afford a professional framer, then they will put a gap between the matt board and the pastel to catch any pastel dust. Without this gap, the dust can over time accumulate on the edge of the mattboard and become noticeable.

As for posting a finished artwork, if the piece is framed, I always use a professional art courier because I want my artwork to remain upright throughout the journey to avoid any pastel dust getting all over the glass and mattboard. Only proper art couriers allow for this. A cheaper option is to send it un-framed. This way you need to really protect your work from being bent or rubbed. I build a custom box from foam board and then attach a piece of glass-ine paper to the face for protection.



## Should I use a Fixative?

This is bought up a lot by beginners. And the answer is no. I never use fixative because my style of painting is to apply many layers and as soon as you use fixative on this it seems to bring some of those hidden layers to the front, ruining the colour you wanted and achieved through that process of blending. I also find that it is not needed because all pastels really need to be framed behind glass so sticky fingers can't reach it anyway.

## Are pastels lightfast?

There are no official lightfastness codes for soft pastels that apply to other painting mediums, however being that there is hardly any binder added then their lightfastness are generally rated as superb. Which in terms of years, the majority are 100+. This is proven by looking at some of the masters work from the 1800's which are still as bright and beautiful today as they were when painted.

## Are pastels toxic to use?

Some pastel brands don't use any toxic pigments such as cobalt and cadmium but it can greatly affect their brightness of colours. And it has been shown that the level of toxins in these pigments are not high enough to be absorbed through human skin anyway.

The international Art and Materials Institute ([ACMI](http://www.acmi.org)) has been making efforts to encourage safety in art materials since 1940. Their seal of approval can be found on many art materials in the form of labels.

The AP (approved product) label means the products "are safe and that are certified in a toxicological evaluation by a medical expert to contain no materials in sufficient quantities to be toxic or injurious to humans, including children, or to cause acute or chronic health problems."

You will find that most of the higher quality pastel brands will have this logo on their products. So all in all the major health threat with pastels would be breathing in the dust which can be prevented by not blowing on your painting. Try to have your pastel painting angled either on an easel or against a pile of books so that any dust will fall down to the bottom and then you can either use a damp cloth or vacuum to remove this. I know a few artists that use gloves to avoid the pigments going into their skin (I don't because I haven't found any yet that enable me to blend well, but i'm still searching). You could even wear a face-mask if you really had breathing problems such as asthma. So really there is nothing to stop you from picking up pastels and giving them a go.

I hope you enjoyed this guide on Pastel Basics and it's helped take the mystery away from this wonderful medium.

If you would like to keep up to date with any workshops or online trainings I have coming up, then I would love for you to follow me on my social media accounts.

[www.facebook.com/kerridixonart](http://www.facebook.com/kerridixonart)

[www.instagram.com/kezart](http://www.instagram.com/kezart)

[www.kerridixonart.com](http://www.kerridixonart.com)

I also have a private facebook group that is a growing community of fellow artists called "Drawing Wildlife & Nature - Beginners to Advanced"

Kerri xx



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Drawing the natural world



NOTES.....

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