

PAPERS for PASTEL

Let's get down to the nitty-gritty. Here's help in decoding the variety of surfaces available—and in making your own!

BY MICHAEL CHESLEY JOHNSON

FORTY YEARS AGO, back when the Pastel Society of America (PSA) was founded, you didn't have a lot of options for surfaces to paint on if you were a pastelist. Either you used drawing paper, which had barely enough "tooth," or you made your own surface. Today, thanks to the explosion of interest in pastel, there are literally dozens of papers and boards available. And, of course, you can still make your own.

One quick definition: *tooth* refers to the surface texture of the paper. How much tooth a paper has dictates how much pastel can be applied on it. The more dominant the tooth, the more layers you can apply, and thus the richer and more beautiful the painting. In addition, pastel holds or grips better over time onto papers with more tooth.

Traditional Papers

Factory-made surfaces include traditional sketching or drawing papers and papers made specifically for pastel. These include the popular Canson Mi-Teintes, which has one side with an embossed, gridlike pattern and another side that's smoother. Many landscape artists, myself included, like using the smooth side, but many portrait artists prefer the textured side. When you use these traditional, unsanded papers, you often need to spray a workable fixative between layers of pastel so the additional layers will adhere to the surface. Without the fixative, the tooth fills, and you can't lay down any more pastel.

Papers and Boards You Can Buy

Traditional Papers: Canson Mi-Teintes

Textured Fine Art Paper: Daler-Rowney Murano, Fabriano Tiziano paper, Hahnemühle Bugra pastel paper, Sennelier L'Esprit du Pastel (C4) paper, Strathmore 400 Series pastel paper

Suede & Velour Surfaces: Art Spectrum Colourfix suede pastel paper, Clairefontaine Rhodia Pastelmat card, Hahnemühle velour paper and board

Sanded Papers & Boards: Saint-Armand Sabretooth sanded pastel paper, Ampersand Pastelbord, Art Spectrum Colourfix Supertooth (paper, board, multimedia board), Canson Mi-Teintes art board, Canson Mi-Teintes Touch (paper, board), Richeson Premium pastel surfaces (paper, board), Sennelier La Carte pastel card, Townsend pastel paper, UArt sanded pastel (paper, board), Wallis sanded pastel paper

Gesso and Primer Products: Art Spectrum Colourfix pastel and multimedia primer, Golden pastel ground, Lascaux pastel ground

Velvety Surfaces

If you're looking for an unusual surface, some come with a suede or velour flocking. These velvety surfaces can hold a good deal of pastel. Portrait and animal artists favor this type of surface, which makes it easy to simulate hair and fur textures. One of these new surfaces, with a finer texture than velour, is Clairefontaine Rhodia Pastelmat.

Gritty Papers

Some papers have a coating applied that contains a grit to give the surface texture. These papers, designed to hold many layers of pastel, require little or no fixative during the painting process. A couple of examples are Wallis sanded pastel paper and Art Spectrum Colourfix pastel paper. These and some others stand up well to liquid washes with water, alcohol or mineral spirits; others, such as Sennelier La Carte, do not. Read all product details before using a liquid on any surface.

A number of these papers are also available in boards, or you can mount the papers on an acid-free backing board yourself. There are also boards made exclusively for pastel, such as Ampersand Pastelbord and Richeson Premium pastel surface. The latter is available on paper, hardboard or Gatorfoam board.

Colors and Values

Most papers and boards come in a variety of colors and values. When I paint landscapes on traditional pastel paper, I usually select a mid-value gray, such as the Canson Mi-Teintes steel grey color; if I'm painting on sanded paper, I like the Belgian mist version of the Wallis paper, which is a midvalue, warm gray-brown, akin to the color of raw Belgian linen. Other painters may choose wildly colored papers such as turquoise or hot pink. Dakota Art Pastels sells sampler packs of the more common papers and boards at www.dakotapastels.com.

By the way, the concept of a pastelist using a toned paper is no different from that of an oil painter using a toned canvas. Little bits of the initial color will show through in the finished painting, unifying the other colors in the piece. A tone can also modify a dominant color; for example, using red paper will help enliven a painting in which there's a lot of green. Finally, the value of the initial color can serve as one of the handful of values used in the painting, making the painting process more efficient. As an outdoor landscape painter, I rarely use more

than four values in my painting, and I find that the midvalue of the Wallis Belgian mist is just perfect for one of my two middle values.

Of course, you don't have to stick with a single color and value. You can create an underpainting of many colors and values in many different ways. Representational painters often create an underpainting that closely follows the scene; some, however, simply apply color randomly as a way to jump-start the painting process. Almost any medium can be used for this underpainting—dry pastel, pastel washed in with liquid, acrylic, gouache and even a thin wash of oil paint.

DIY Pastel Surfaces

With so many papers and boards, why bother to make your own pastel surface? I know many pastel painters who are perfectly happy—and successful—with factory-made surfaces. But the advantage of making your own surface is total customization. If you want to make a painting the size of a full sheet of plywood or even create a custom surface texture, you can.

To make your own surface, you first need to decide two things: what type of substrate you'll use for stability and what type of painting surface you'll affix to the substrate. Substrates run the gamut from papers to boards to panels of all kinds. Whatever you choose, the substrate should be acid-free and archival. Some examples you might use are matboard, etching paper, Gatorfoam or

Text continued on page 38

