

Chapter 1

The Lowdown on Pastel Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the historic and modern popularity of pastels
 - ▶ Diving into pastel materials and equipment
 - ▶ Thinking about your workspace
 - ▶ Making the most of your sketchbook
 - ▶ Developing your own drawing philosophy
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To make an artwork is to tap into the pursuit of creative expression that everyone has inside. Many people gain a true appreciation for the arts by making art. For some, the creative outlet is music or writing, but for others the drive to create a visual artwork is the outlet of choice. Many people's first experiences making pictures involved a crayon. The colors offered many ways to express the world around them. Sky and trees, mom and dad, brother and sister — each one was a different color.

And here you are as an adult now, feeling the same creative urge. Making pictures is a wonderful thing to pick up again; wax crayons are fine and can offer some satisfaction for color, but they don't offer a lot of possibilities for application. On the other hand, nothing beats pastels for ease of use and glorious color. You may have already had some experience with pastels because they're a popular art material for children and adults, but whether you've been working with pastels for a while or are just starting out, pastels are just plain fun. You can take classes that concentrate on pastel techniques, or just pick the sticks up and figure it out on your own with the help of our book.

Working with pastels is quite intuitive. A piece of pastel is just a powdery, sophisticated crayon, after all. Like any material, they can be a little tricky to work with, however, and the different brands of pastels and pastel-related materials vary tremendously. That's why we wrote this book: to give you a firm grounding in the many ways you can use pastels as an art material and offer some insider information about the various approaches to making images with pastels. In this chapter, we give you an overview of the book, walk you through the process of drawing with pastels, and point you to the right chapters for more details.

You and Toulouse: Why Artists Love Pastels

Pastels are a favorite of artists because they offer the rich color of oil painting but the ease of use of a drawing material. These qualities have made pastels popular through the centuries, with such diverse artists as Rosalba Carriera, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and R.B. Kitaj. As a matter of fact, whether the artworks produced with pastel are considered drawings or paintings is up for debate. For now, we can say that the results are beautiful, whatever you may call them, and they're an important part of an artist's materials and tools.

Pastels have actually been in use for many centuries. Making art with some sort of chalk dates back at least to the early Renaissance, where you can easily find drawings made by Leonardo da Vinci and his contemporaries in red, black, and white chalk. Over the centuries, the manufacturers of pastels have increased the number of colors available, and mass-production has standardized their quality to the great benefit of today's artist.

Now drawing with pastels is easier than ever. If you're new to the world of pastels, you may not realize what they have to offer you, so the following sections highlight some reasons why pastels are a popular *medium*, which is another word for *art material*. You may fall in love with pastels for the same reasons, or some of your own. We cover the various ways of working with pastels in Chapters 6, 9, and 10.



Pastels do have a few drawbacks. The sticks are fragile and break easily with too much pressure or if you drop them. The surface of the drawing is also fragile and can be easily smudged. Sometimes a novice is tempted to over-blend the applied pastel, which can muddy and dull the colors. Plus, the pastels can produce a lot of dust as you work. These characteristics can be frustrating for a beginner, but they're easy to deal with. We cover handling these and other problems in Chapter 6.

A love affair with color

Color is the foremost reason to use pastels. Pastels grab you when you first open your box and see all the luscious colors at a glance — and that doesn't even account for the variety of colors of paper you can choose from. The color of the paper becomes a part of the final effect of your artwork, deepening the range of colors possible. And because the pastels go on dry, the sparkling color stays true. Each applied color visually enhances the other colors to create a complex mosaic of color. We devote Chapter 11 to color theory.

If you need further proof of pastel's color prowess, consider its popularity with the Impressionists, who were known for creating artwork made up of color and light. Their interest in fresh, spontaneous marks and the juxtaposition of saturated color made pastel an ideal art medium for Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Mary Cassatt, among others.

The variety of stick pastels

Pastels are a part of a larger group of art materials that come in a stick. They all have different qualities and uses. Here we offer an overview to help you understand a bit of the history and variety of colored drawing materials that are applied in a stick form.

Depending on your preference and style, you can use a wide variety of pigment in a stick to create a masterpiece. Some of the varieties you may encounter when drawing with color include the following:

- ✔ **Chalk pastels:** We focus on this type of pastels in this book; in fact, when we refer to *pastels*, we mean these powdery wonders. Calling them chalk pastels also helps differentiate them from other types of materials, such as oil pastels, wax crayons, and colored pencils. Of course, many artists never refer to pastels as chalk, but the similarities between pastels and colored chalk can't be ignored. Both are dry drawing materials with powdery colored pigments. The difference is in the degree of intense saturated color and their intended use. Pastels intended for fine art are made of pigment and binder, usually gum tragacanth. They may also include some filler materials to modify the degree of hardness or to make the pastel more workable. Chalk is meant for blackboards and sidewalk drawings; we don't recommend using a set of Rembrandt brand pastels to make a hopscotch grid.
- ✔ **Conté crayons:** These old drawing materials have a more velvety texture than chalk pastels because they contain a clay binder. Years ago, conté crayons only came in traditional colors of white, reddish brown, brown, and black, but now they're available in many more colors, some of which are similar to chalk pastels.
- ✔ **Wax crayons and oil pastels:** Unlike chalk pastels, neither of these materials would ever be mistaken for a dry drawing material. These both have a lot in common; the difference is the degree of softness of the crayon. Where a child's wax crayon feels, well, waxy, an oil pastel has a greasy feel. You can blend and layer these materials like you can chalk pastels, but the appearance isn't as soft.
- ✔ **Other, newer items:** You may find other new items on the market: oil sticks that feel more like paint than a crayon and pastels in a pan that you apply with a sponge. Experiment to see what varieties speak to you.

Check out Chapter 2, where we discuss the different types of chalk pastels available in more detail.

The ease and intuitiveness of making art

Another great reason to use pastels is that they're super easy. You don't have to spend a lot of time preparing like you do with oil or acrylic painting. You just pick up and begin drawing! Although the working methods are similar to painting, other factors make pastels easier to use and different from traditional painting:

- ✔ They allow you, the artist, to quickly get down ideas and make initial sketches for work in other media.

- ✔ They're more portable than paints — no palette or brushes to carry along — and they travel very well when you properly store them in a secure case.
- ✔ They lend themselves to a variety of application methods. As with other drawing materials, you hold pastels in your fingers instead of applying from the end of a brush. This flexibility lets you apply pastel in a bunch of different ways — from the point of a pencil to the delicate powder of soft pastels.
- ✔ They allow you to do things that paint doesn't, such as work spontaneously without waiting for the work to dry and experiment with color easily by mixing right on the paper rather than on a palette.

Check out Chapters 8 and 9 for more on what you can do with your pastels.

Part of the joy of working with pastels is that you can do it very intuitively. Drawing with pastels isn't overly complex. In fact, essentially you really have only a few steps to create a drawing. Here are the basic steps to apply pastels to create an artwork. We cover these steps in detail later in the book.

- 1. Lay out the general sketch of your image.**
- 2. Apply the pastel colors to block in the value patterns in the scene.**

The *value patterns* are the areas of light and dark colors. This process creates the *underdrawing*, which establishes the color and where the light source is coming from in your scene.
- 3. After you complete the underdrawing, you can apply a light spray of workable fixative (see Chapter 3 for more on fixative) to set the image.**

Fixative also helps you beef up the *tooth* (texture) so you can put down additional layers of color.
- 4. Alternate the pattern of applying pastel and sealing it with workable fixative until you complete the image.**

We cover the ins and outs of layering color, applying fixative, and working with different papers in Chapters 7 and 8.

Perusing Pastels and Paraphernalia

Pastels are easy to work with, but they do require some special equipment and supplies to make the most of their features. They're similar to painting in their color, but they go on dry and powdery like charcoal. You have to pay attention to the different hardness of the pastels and the type of paper you apply them to. You also have to take care of the artworks after you're done, which involves some specialized materials and equipment. We cover a lot of these particular materials and equipment in Chapter 3, but the following sections give you a preview.

Pastels

When you walk into an art supply store, you may be intimidated by all the different types of pastels available. Like we mention earlier in this chapter,

we help reduce your anxiety a bit and focus just on chalk pastels in this book. You can find three general types of chalk pastels:

- ✓ **Hard pastels or semi-hard pastels:** They usually come in square sticks. They're used in the initial stages of a drawing to lay down basic shapes and colors.
- ✓ **Soft pastels:** They're fragile and delicate. They put down a lot of color quickly and are used later in a project.
- ✓ **Pastel pencils:** They're hard or semi-hard pastel in a pencil. They can be sharpened to a point and are used for the initial drawing of an image and for final linear marks.



TIP

Pastel sets range from simple collections to big sets in fancy boxes. Pastels come in preselected sets of 12, 24, 30, or up to hundreds. You can also buy the pastels individually, but that's way too many decisions if you're new to the material. Your best choice for a beginning selection is a set that offers a broad assortment of colors. We advise you to buy a set of 24 hard pastels (Prismacolor's Nupastel line is perfect for this), a set of 30 to 60 half sticks of soft pastels, such as Rembrandt brand, and a set of 12 pastel pencils (CarbOthello is a good brand). We cover this topic in more detail in Chapter 2.

Papers and boards

The paper or pastel board that you use for your work is also a big deal. The names of the various papers may sound like a lot of insider lingo, but we give you the information to make good choices.



REMEMBER

Pastels require papers that have a rough surface. If your paper is too slick, the pastels are going to just fall off as dust. For the pastels to properly adhere to the paper, it must have a rough texture or *tooth*. Sometimes the roughness feels like the texture of a soft paper towel, and other times it feels more like sandpaper (see Figure 1-1 for an example).



Figure 1-1:
A drawing
on sand-
paper.

Paper choice is a key decision in making a drawing. As you draw a pastel stick across the surface of a sheet of paper, pigment becomes imbedded in the fibers. Depending on the types of paper you're working on, the pastels reveal the texture of the surface, whether that's a waffle pattern, a soft film of powder, or a rough and gritty buildup of color. For starting out, you can't go wrong with buying charcoal paper. The texture holds onto the pastel particles and the papers are offered in a variety of colors.

You can work on white paper, but a deep paper color adds to the overall effect of your finished piece. Little bits of paper color show through the pastel and contribute to the overall color of the work. You can select a color that harmonizes with the subject, such as blue for a scene with water, or you can select a contrasting color, such as red for a green landscape. Check out Figure 1-2, which uses a different paper color.



Figure 1-2:
A drawing
on blue
pastel
paper.

Pastel boards are rigid pieces of cardboard, foam core, or hardboard with a surface suitable for pastels. Sometimes the surface is pastel paper that is adhered to the board and sometimes the board has had a gritty surface applied to it, making it ideal for pastel artworks. Pastel boards provide a more stable surface for your artworks and aren't as likely to be damaged as paper. You can read more about picking papers and boards for pastels in Chapter 7.

Basic equipment

Aside from your pastels and paper, you need a bit of other equipment. You can get by with minimal supplies, but at some point, you may want to invest in a few extras to make the process easier, keep your materials undamaged, and explore additional options for application. Pastel artists have drawing boards to support the paper; artists' tape or clips to secure the paper; and sprays to set the drawing. All these items allow you to work on a steady surface, build

up charming layers of colors, and keep your equipment clean and undamaged. Many artists also use tools for blending such as soft sponges, blending stumps (also called *tortillons*), cotton swabs or paper towels twisted into points. You can't help but use your fingers from time to time, though.

Keeping your pastels organized is an important consideration as well. If you have a large number of pastels, storing them in a box keeps the sticks cleaner, unbroken, and more organized. A piece of terry cloth allows you to lay out your sticks and keep them from moving around. We cover all the details about supplies in Chapter 3.

What you need to get started: Your basic list

Pastels vary quite a bit in hardness and texture from one brand to another. We advise that you start with a few sets of different hardnesses and then decide which suits your individual working style. Three different sets cover most of your needs as you begin: hard or semi-hard pastels, soft pastels, and pastel pencils, in a general assortment of colors. You can complete most of the projects and exercises in this book with the following supplies:

- ✓ Set of 60 half sticks of Rembrandt brand soft pastels in assorted colors
- ✓ Set of 24 Prismacolor Nupastel hard pastels in assorted colors
- ✓ Set of 12 CarbOthello pastel pencils in assorted colors
- ✓ Workable spray fixative (which we discuss in Chapter 3)
- ✓ 23-x-26-inch or similar-sized drawing board
- ✓ Pastel or charcoal paper
- ✓ A sketchbook with at least 30 pages (50- to 100-pound paper — see Chapter 7 for more on paper weight)

In the beginning, assorted color sets are more useful than the specialized sets you can get for landscape or portrait work. Later, you can purchase individual sticks of colors as you need them or special sets for different subjects. For example, you may find that you always run out of yellow or that you need several different types of violet. These preferences reflect your own working style, and you want to be able to respond to it easily without running out to the store again. You can find more information about pastels in Chapter 2.

Where to Work: A Room (or Table) of Your Own

When you're ready to start drawing with your pastels, you need a designated space where you can spread out your supplies and start sketching. Having a room devoted to your art making is ideal, but don't let not having a dedicated studio space stand in your way. Working with pastels doesn't require a lot of space — all you need is a work surface for the drawing, a place to lay out your pastels, and a table and light for your setup.

If you don't have a dedicated studio space, you can create a work surface in a shared space, such as an office or kitchen. Pastels are very portable, and the equipment is easy to stow away when you aren't working with it. Plus, cleanup is a snap. A table or desk works fine for a temporary space to work.

Working in shared spaces with pastel presents few problems. Pastel is a dry medium, and pastels have no smell. They may attract small hands if you have children, so find a secure place to store your work and materials if you're working in an area with curious young fans.

Pastels work very well on the road as well. Your supplies and equipment are portable and you can take your equipment where you want to work. *Plein air* work — making art out in the open air — requires a bit of planning, much like camping. You need to be able to work comfortably and to see your subject clearly. In Chapter 16, you can read about how to plan and create pastel landscapes on-site.



Although pastels are safe materials to use and don't require any volatile chemicals for cleanup (unless you consider soap and water volatile), you still need to consider two safety issues when setting up your workspace:

- ✔ **Pastel dust:** Pastels create a lot of dust, and breathing in the dust and pigments isn't healthy for anyone. For those with breathing problems, allergies, or asthma, the dust can be irritating. Resisting the temptation to shake or blow on the drawing to remove excess pastel is the best way to avoid getting dust in the air.
- ✔ **Ventilation for using spray fixative:** *Spray fixative* is a sealer that allows you to add more tooth to layers of pastels for continued work or to apply a final finish spray to fix the pastel artwork and make it less prone to smudging. Using fixative is an optional step, but be sure to use it with proper ventilation. Spraying fixative in an open garage or porch or outside in decent weather works fine. You can read more about safety issues in Chapter 6.

Starting a Sketchbook

Keeping a sketchbook is a time-honored activity most artists participate in. As a beginner, you can use your sketchbook in two ways:

- ✔ **Skill building:** You practice drawing objects and people in quick sketches so that you don't struggle with them when you make your pastel drawings. Spending as little as 15 minutes a day drawing objects in your sketchbook *from observation* (based only on what you see, not on what you think the object should look like) can make a huge difference in your skill level.
- ✔ **Idea generating:** Sketchbooks are also receptacles for ideas, which is what seasoned artists use them for. You can sketch and write about your ideas, but you can also cut and paste articles and pictures into it. After you have used your sketchbook for a while, it becomes a rich journal, reflecting and recording your thoughts and attitudes about your life and view of the world.

Your sketchbook can be spiral bound or hardback, but choose one with good-quality paper that works well with your regular graphite pencil as well as with pastels. Everyone has his or her own preferences for size and shape. Some artists prefer small sketchbooks that fit in their back pocket or purse, and others carry around larger versions. After a bit of experimentation, you develop your own preferences based on your own life and work methods.

Your sketchbook is a volume of blank pages just waiting for you to fill them up. Throughout this book, you can find exercises to help you do just that. They provide directed practice that supports the longer projects and helps you build your skills. The following are a couple of sketchbook exercises to get you started and acquainted with your new friend.



Start your sketchbook with drawings of simple objects from around the house. These drawings are quick, no more than 20 to 30 minutes each. Use regular pencil (or pastel pencils if you have them already) and draw each of the following objects on a separate page: a ball, a book, and a cup. Be sure to work from the actual objects and not from what they look like in your mind. (See the following section for more on working from observation.) Refer to Figure 1-3.

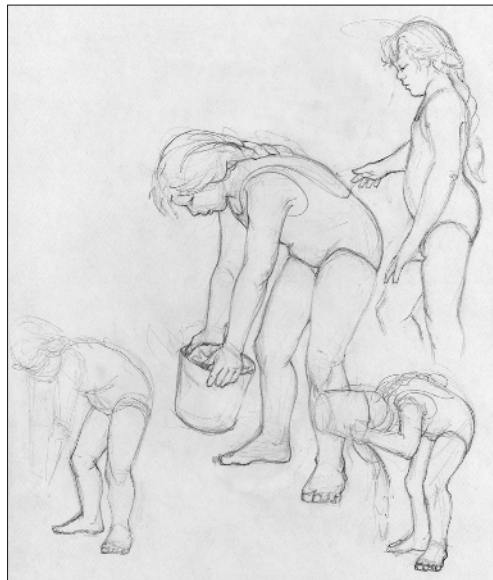


Figure 1-3:
A sketchbook allows you to practice drawings.



A sketchbook is for notes as well as drawings. Make two columns on a page in your sketchbook. In one, write what you think your strengths are as you begin making pastel drawings. In the other, write what you think you may struggle with.

Finally, include a specific goal for your work in pastels. That may just be to find a pastime that you enjoy, or it may be something loftier like exhibiting your work in a local gallery. Making a note of this goal helps you plan your journey as you work.

Embracing a Drawing Philosophy

Many artists started drawing by copying cartoons as children. They drew images from their imaginations and later, when they wanted to make their work look more “real,” they graduated to working from photographs. Interestingly, few ever did what they really needed to do, which was draw from the real objects.

Drawing from observation is a critical philosophy for developing skills in drawing because it increases the kind and quality of images you can make. If you don’t push yourself to widen your boundaries, you stagnate.

When you draw from observation, you translate the three-dimensional image you see into a two-dimensional image on your paper. You look at the image, determine how to turn it into two-dimensions, and then rely on hand–eye coordination to draw the image the way you want. When you draw from photographs, however, you look at a two-dimensional image and then draw a two-dimensional image on paper. The translation has already been done for you. That may sound easier, but you don’t get the experience of critically thinking about how to recreate the dimensions, so in the long run, you’re making your drawing harder. The camera is also very selective and incomplete in the information it records. Your eyes are much more reliable and complete as a tool, so committing to using them as part of your training is an important prong in your philosophy for drawing.

Another important point in your drawing philosophy is making a habit of working from *general to specific*. When you work general to specific, you find the big, general shapes and go through a process of breaking the shapes down to the more specific forms. It also leaves you the flexibility to adjust your methods as problems arise in the early stages. (Check out Chapter 6 for more info.)

You can apply this process in many ways in your typical pastel drawing. You begin your initial drawing with big, general forms and then go through a process of refining and defining them. You block in your colors generally and then go through a process of refining and developing them. Every part and stage of the drawing goes through this process. Working on small areas at the expense of the rest of the drawing makes those areas too precious and limits your ability to make decisions about your work. Though you should be willing to sacrifice any part of the drawing for the good of the whole, the decisions you make while working the layering process helps keep those tough choices to a minimum.