

Starting a Pastel Painting ... Suggested Sequence

A fellow artist and friend once said to me that the best thing to do when you have decided that you are going to paint, thought about the subject and collected up all the resources you need ... or gone out on location, was to pour a glass of sherry (or wine if it was before noon!) and gently sip it whilst contemplating the blank sheet. Well, perhaps you wish to adopt the same philosophy so we'll start from that point!

- 1 Planning ... out with your sketch book and produce some small (thumbnail) sketches, show the main tones and linear outlines. Think about the different of formats you could use ... how would it look best, would it look better in the landscape or portrait shape – how about long and thin, tall and narrow or perhaps square? Make several sketches, then the one you feel suits the subject best develop it a little further by adding more detail and tonal values (up to 4) leave the white of you paper for the lightest.

Now consider your surface – the type of paper or board and colour, remembering that although you will completely cover the surface your painting will be influenced by the colour and tonal value of the surface you are starting with. If in doubt select a medium tone in either a cold or warm colour. Do consider the size – it is great to produce massive pictures BUT they are costly to frame, take up an enormous amount of wall space and can be very overpowering.

- 2 On your pastel paper or board lightly draw in just the outlines of the main and largest elements of the image, use a pastel pencil NOT lead as pastel just slides off! Remember this is just a basic plan to help you know where you are and check that you are comfortable with your proportions – no details at all. For portraits - just include the shape of the head and shoulders, the positioning of the features eg eyes, nose, mouth, chin; for a landscape the main features only ... not every individual house and bush!
- 3 Select a possible range of colours from your main selection – it is a good idea to begin with a fairly limited palette you can always add more if you need as you go along. For a landscape I am careful to select different greens and blues for foreground, middle and distance.
- 4 LIGHTLY block in the darkest and the lightest areas of the scene (I always use the next to darkest dark and the next to lightest light – saving the very darkest and lightest for the finale!

Screw up your eyes and squint at the scene to simplify and eliminate detail. Vary your colours but keep the tones the same – this will add excitement to your picture; for example if I am blocking in a tree I will add greens, blues, purples and browns all of the same tone and the image will still read as a tree. On a white swan I painted recently I used pale blues, greens, yellows and pinks.

- 5 Look carefully and consider the medium tones, and add these. Keep checking the tones – is this part darker or lighter than that part. It is so easy to adjust with pastel if you have too much on the paper just brush some off and add more. Think about your technique, do you wish to use broken colour? Or areas of overlaying colour to create interest and texture? If I am working on glass paper I will blend all the areas together to leave a blurred fuzzy image, on other papers tend to blend each area with more care.
- 6 Now for the exciting part gradually define your areas and slowly bring the image to conclusion – keep standing back and LOOKING – adding (and subtracting if necessary) small details. Use your darkest darks and lightest lights to define important parts, subdue and soften other areas so that the viewer is drawn first to the focal point of your picture and then can move around the picture.
- 7 Finally – stand it up somewhere where you can see it, preferably in a mount or mount and frame and just look at it for a while before you sign and seal it ... encourage opinions if you can too as it is so easy to make adjustments with soft pastel.