

The Renaissance of Pastel Societies

Elizabeth Vose Frey

Although pastel had been used for sketching, preliminary studies and portraiture since the 16th century, it wasn't until 1882 that a professional pastel society was founded. Most of the celebrated pastellists were historically English and French, or American expatriates, but it was a group of New York artists who formed the first pastel society, The American Society of Painters in Pastel. With only seven founding members and a total of four shows during their existence, the American Society of Painters in Pastel contributed greatly to a renewed interest in the medium, and inspired the formation of countless pastel societies in both the United States and abroad.

Pastel portraiture gained immense popularity in Europe early in the 18th century primarily from the influence of Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera (1675-1757). Along with French and English pastellists Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704-1788), Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842), Francis Cotes (1726-1770) and John Russell (1745-1806), Carriera demonstrated that pastel was a superior medium for capturing the glowing skin tones and fine costumes that defined commissioned portraiture during an age of increasing wealth. More practical factors also contributed to the demand for pastel: the production of commercially-made pastel sticks that were less expensive than oil, and ready availability of cast plate glass that offered surface protection for larger paintings.¹



The first American-born artist to adopt the medium was John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), who became an early champion of pastel in the United States, and considered his pastel portraits to be among his best. One of Copley's earliest known pastel portraits, sold by Vose Galleries and currently in the collection of the

John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) *Hugh Hall*, Pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 15 15/16 x 13 3/16 inches, 1758, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Image from Vose archives

Metropolitan Museum of Art, is dated 1758, and he went on to produce fifty-five known portraits until his emigration to England in 1774.²

By the middle of the 19th century, pastel had almost completely fallen out of favor with the general public-in both the United States and abroad-and was considered a sketching or preparatory medium. Fortunately, there were a few key artists who championed the medium and became the catalyst for pastel's renaissance after the turn of the century.

Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) and other members of the avant-garde French Barbizon School were some of the earliest artists to renew the use of alternative mediums such as pastel and watercolor in exhibition quality paintings. From 1865 until 1869, Millet worked almost exclusively with pastel, producing many large-scale paintings in a wide variety of subject matter.³ His pastel paintings displayed the medium's inherent diversity of effects, and were highly regarded by both critics and collectors.



Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), *The Sower*, Pastel and crayon on cream buff paper, 17 1/8 x 21 1/16 inches, ca. 1865, Collection of The Walters Art Museum

The French Impressionists were also a major factor in pastel's renaissance. Beginning with their first exhibition in 1874, many of the artists showed pastels alongside oil paintings. Edgar Degas (1834-1917) was one of the first



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Waiting*, Pastel on paper, 19 x 24 inches, ca. 1882, Owned jointly by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Norton Simon Art Foundation

Impressionists to paint more extensively with pastels. After 1875, he began using pastels for more than preliminary sketches, and by 1885, most of his important works were created with pastel.⁴ He experimented with varying treatments of the medium and surface texture, including hatching, pairing dry pastel with wet, adding gouache and watercolor, spraying fixative in between layers of pastel, and steaming the pastel sticks to create impasto effects.

Another prominent artist who explored pastel's expressive qualities was American expatriate James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). In 1879, Whistler began a fourteen month stay in Venice, where he captured the city in a



James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *San Biagio: Flesh Colour and Grey*, Pastel on paper, 5 1/2 x 10 1/8 inches, 1880, Collection of the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley

series of etchings and intimate pastel paintings. The resulting works were exhibited with great success in 1881 at London's Fine Art Society. About the pastels, a critic for the *Art Journal* raved, "One of the great secrets of their charm is the perfect frankness with which they are drawn. We never feel that the hands have stopped or hesitated for a moment. Problems of color and light, the most difficult which the artist has to solve, are grasped with a certainty seldom realized in such variety... the power which Mr. Whistler possesses of getting at, and presenting to us, the very essence and kernel of his subjects. This is the power men call genius."⁵ Whistler's innovative use of the medium would prove to be a strong influence on numerous American artists, including two future members of America's Society of Painters in Pastel, Robert Blum (1857-1903) and John Twachtman (1853-1902), who were painting in Venice at the same time.



Robert Frederick Blum (1857-1903), *A Gossiping Place in Venice*, Pastel on paper, 11 x 16 inches, 1882, Private Collection

Despite their immense contribution to the acceptance of pastel as a fine art medium, Millet, Degas and Whistler did not directly assist in the formation of pastel societies. The American Society of Painters in Pastel originated in 1882 as the brainchild of seven celebrated artists, including Robert Blum and William M. Chase (1849-1916). The Society held their first exhibition in 1884, and soon attracted some of the most illustrious painters in the nation, including John Twachtman, Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919), John La Farge (1835-1910), Irving Ramsey Wiles (1861-1948), Theodore Robinson (1852-1896), Childe Hassam (1859-1935) and Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942). Although they were met with great critical acclaim, the group hosted only four exhibitions before disbanding in 1890. One contributing factor of their early demise was that most of the members had active and demanding careers, with commitments to larger clubs such



John Twachtman (1853-1902), *Connecticut Landscape*, Pastel on paper, ca. 1889-1891, Private Collection



William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *Afternoon in the Park*, Pastel, 19 x 15 ¼ inches, Private Collection

as the National Academy of Design and the Society of American Artists.⁶ Blum, the Society's President and organizing force, left in 1890 to complete a three-year commission in Japan, and Chase, a potential successor, started a summer school in Shinnecock, Long Island, in 1891.⁷



Frederick Childe Hassam (1859-1935), *The Concord Meadow*, Pastel and gouache on canvas, 18 x 22 1/8 inches, ca. 1891, Collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Although short-lived, the American Society of Painters in Pastel had been instrumental in advancing the acceptance and appreciation of the pastel medium. In a review of the Society's third show in 1889, a critic for *Art Amateur* described their importance to the renaissance of pastel:

When...the Society of Painters in Pastel held its first public exhibition, it may have been a question whether the public would take kindly to the brilliant colors, the facile execution, the somewhat Impressionistic aims natural to the method and shown in most of the exhibits. The public, however, or that part of it which is really interested in art and which sets the rest in motion, was very agreeably affected, and this little coterie acquired at once a standing which is even yet denied to certain other associations of artists of more numerous membership and longer in existence.

Art Amateur (June, 1889)⁸

The influence of the American Society of Painters in Pastel extended beyond the borders of the United States. In 1885, the Société des Pastellistes de France was formed in Paris. Their inaugural show included paintings by early pastel masters such as Carriera, de la Tour and Millet, and regular exhibitors included Jean-Charles Cazin (1841-1901), Émile Lévy (1826-1890), Léon Lhermitte (1844-1925), and Paul-Albert Besnard (1849-1934).⁹ The Société des Pastellistes de France has been active since their founding, and is the world's oldest pastel society in existence.

In 1888, Sir Coutts Lindsay (1824-1913), owner of Grosvenor Gallery, founded the London Pastel Society. Their first exhibition included Venetian scenes by Whistler and works by members of the Société des Pastellistes de France, which highlights the strong bond which pastel societies have historically shared on an international level. The group held three large exhibitions (the third show included 375 works) before disbanding in 1890 due to financial constraints.¹⁰

Inspired by the earlier pastel shows in London, a new pastel society was formed there in 1898, and called themselves simply The Pastel Society. The group was organized by George Frederic Watts (1817-1904) and several other accomplished painters, including Sir George Clausen (1852-1944), Hercules Brabazon (1821-1906) and William Holman Hunt (1827-1910). In 1970, the Society joined the Federation of British Artists at the Mall Galleries, which has remained the venue for their annual exhibitions.¹¹

In 1910, twenty years after the demise of the American Society of Painters in Pastel, a second American pastel society took its place in New York City. The Pastellists, led by Leon Dabo (1864-1960) and Elmer MacRae (1875-1953), also had a lengthy roster of prominent members and exhibitors, including Twachtman, Hassam, Weir, Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Maurice Prendergast (1858-1924), Joseph Stella (1877-1946), William Glackens (1870-1938), George Bellows (1882-1925), Everett Shinn (1876-1953), Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851-1938) and Robert Henri (1865-1929). Like the American Society of Painters in Pastel, The Pastellists hosted only four exhibitions, all well received by the press, before disbanding in 1915. Its short existence might have been partially due to the American Watercolor Society's decision in 1915 to include pastels in its annual exhibition.¹²

Although many modernists such as John Marin (1870-1953), Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) and Joseph Stella, all students of Chase, used pastels extensively during their careers, there was a pronounced absence of pastel societies in America until 1972, when Flora Giffuni (1919-2009) founded the Pastel Society of America. After studying with Robert Brackman (1898-1980) at the Art Students League, Giffuni devoted herself to pastels, and began to realize the lack of knowledge and appreciation for the medium. In the early 1970s, the American Watercolor Society banned pastels from its annual exhibitions, a decision that encouraged Giffuni to start her own organization and stage pastel exhibitions at the National Arts Club. The Pastel Society of America is the oldest existing pastel organization in the United States, and has also been influential in



Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), *After the Bath*, Pastel, 26 x 39-1/2 inches, ca. 1901, Collection of The Cleveland Museum of Art

providing guidance and avenues for future pastel societies to flourish, increasing the reach of pastellists to connect with like-minded artists across the globe.¹³

Giffuni was also instrumental in the creation of the first museum gallery in America devoted to the pastel medium, the Flora B. Giffuni Gallery of American Pastel Art at the Butler Institute of American Art. The Giffuni Gallery displays pastel works from the Butler's prestigious collection, and offers exhibitions of accomplished contemporary pastel artists.

Another groundbreaking development in pastel's history was the formation of the International Association of Pastel Societies, the first and only international umbrella organization for pastel societies. Founded in 1994 by Urania Christy Tarbet, it currently represents over 70 pastel societies, and sponsors international juried exhibitions in galleries and online.

Notes:

- 1 Marjorie Shelley, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge, Sherman Fairchild Center for Works on Paper and Photograph Conservation, Metropolitan Museum, "The Rise of Pastel in the Eighteenth Century," online post at metmuseum.org (July 5, 2011).
- 2 Marjorie Shelley, "Painting in Crayon: The Pastels of John Singleton Copley," in Rebora, Carrie, ed., *John Singleton Copley in America* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995], p.127.
- 3 Dianne H. Pilgrim, "The Revival of Pastels in Nineteenth-Century America: The Society of Painters in Pastel," *American Art Journal* (Nov., 1978), p.45.
- 4 Ruth Schenkel, "Edgar Degas (1834-1917): Painting and Drawing." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000]. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dgsp/hd_dgsp.htm (October, 2004)
- 5 "Art Notes and Reviews," *The Art Journal* (March, 1881), p.93. As quoted in Pilgrim, p.46.
- 6 O'Neill, John P., ed., *American Pastels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989], p.11.
- 7 Pilgrim, p.61.
- 8 "The Pastel Exhibition," *Art Amateur* (June, 1889), p.4. As quoted O'Neill, p.10.
- 9 O'Neill, p.12.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 "The Pastel Society UK." Web. 28 Mar. 2014. www.thepastelsociety.org.uk
- 12 O'Neill, p.21.
- 13 Duane Wakeham, "Flora B. Giffuni (1919-2009), Founder, Pastel Society of America," *Pastelagram* (Winter/Spring, 2010), pp.4-5.