

PASTEL PAINTING.....A Clarification of Misconceptions

Pastel painting is the purest form of painting. The crayons (a term not exclusively claimed by coloured wax sticks) are made from pure pigments with virtually no additives, they contain no oils, glycerol, drying agents, extenders or adulterations which will alter or change chemically affecting the permanence of the painting.

In essence Pastel is the most permanent paint medium available to the artist. Properly framed under glass and handled with the care normally afforded to an artwork, a pastels durability is remarkable. If we consider a pastel painted two-hundred and fifty years ago and compare it with the condition of an oil-painting of a similar age, the pastel appears as fresh as the day it was painted, while the oil will be discoloured, cracked and in serious need of restoration, assuming that the restorer has not already re-worked the masters original image many times. Essentially, the prehistoric cave paintings of 30,000 B.C. are early pastel paintings, having been done with naturally bound earth colours and carbons.

The art of Pastel painting derived in part from the use of various earth-coloured crayons during the latter part of the 15th c. by artists like Leonardo, who used them for some of his studies for the Last Supper. The introduction of black and chalk along with other colours led to the development of pastel, and its popularity grew rapidly during the 16th and 17th centuries, especially in France.

The invention of Pastel painting in a full range of colours has disputably been ascribed to Johann Alexander Thiele (1685-1752) and also his contemporaries Mme Vernerin and Mlle Heid of Danzig. Although earlier essays on the use of pastel exist, it has become accepted that it was perhaps Thiele who set the foundations for the medium.

Rosalba Carriera, the leading Venetian portraitist of her day, another contemporary of Theile, worked almost exclusively in pastel and is often mistakenly given the accolade of introducing the technique to France, (it was Joseph Vivian (1657-1735) who preceded her) undoubtedly popularised its use. Visiting Paris in 1720-21 her success spurred Maurice Quentin de la Tour to adopt the medium he developed with such brilliance. Boucher, Chardin, Greuze, Liotard, Nattier, Perroneau, Drouais, Mme Vigee-Lebrun all worked in pastel and it was no surprise that it became an integral part of so many artists repertoire.

In England, Cotes was to popularise its use, extensively in his portraits (he having worked under Carriera) and I turn his pupil John Russell continued with others such as Cosway, Humphrey and Lawrence.

With the end of the great age of portraiture pastel suffered something of a decline, but was to be revived with renewed vigour and increased vitality by the middle of the 19th c. with many of the impressionists adopting its use. The much broader scope of subject matter and the appeal of the great immediacy afforded by pastel led to a re-emergence and in 1870 the Societe des Pastellistes was founded in Paris, followed by the first exhibition in London by the Pastel Society in 1880.

As with oil painting a fuller range of techniques began to be exploited, originally the pastel was blended with either fingers or stumps to create the subtle changes of light and colour on the sitter's face. With the onslaught of impressionism and their attitude towards subject matter and resolve to focus on the transient and casual, rejecting the enduring and monumental, pastel was about to be redefined.

The de-categorisation of pastel as the medium of the portrait painter demanded reappraisal of technique: the immediacy of the medium was found to enhance further the direct style that the impressionists revered. The use of broad areas of flat colour contrasted by a juxtaposition of unblended strokes created a heightened vitality, the eye became involved with a transient moment in time.

Among the many artists who have used pastel to different effect are MANET, MILLET, DEGAS, LAUTREC, RENOIR, REDON, CASSATT, BONNARD, MATISSE, WHISTLER and TONKS.

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