

The Canvas Option

Pastel on canvas? Why not? You're not bound to a paper surface, and with the right technique painting on canvas can produce beautiful results. Here's how.

By Sandra K. Jackoboice



Nature in Ruffles (30x24)

Throughout my travels to many galleries and art centers internationally, I've noticed the absence of pastel work. Being a curious person, I decided to find out why. So I asked many of these gallery owners if they ever showed works done in pastel.

Here are some of the replies I received: "We'd rather not receive or ship glass-framed works;" "We'd rather not deal with a picture that we might need to re-frame due to falling dust on the mat or the inside of the glass;" "Our customers generally don't like the glare created by glass;" "Customers don't consider pastel a fine-art medium." I'm sure most pastel artists have heard these excuses before.

Because my main reason for painting is the thrill of having others appreciate and enjoy it, I know my work must be out there where it can be seen. Necessity has driven me to use mediums other than pastel in order to get my work represented, and I've painted works on canvas because that's the surface most readily accepted by galleries.

A Better Idea

But I missed the softness, vibrancy and spontaneity of pastel. So for my acrylic paintings I began creating the composition and blocking in color on the canvas with pastel. It was a quicker way for me to get down the colors I needed and to

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correct perspective or position problems. I'd then seal the pastel with a fixative and proceed with acrylic paint.

Finally, however, I decided that if I could combine pastel and acrylic, then I should be able to do a pastel painting on canvas using only soft pastels and an acrylic fixative between the layers. A varnish could then be applied to the completed painting, and glass wouldn't be required for framing. On the preceding pages you can see how I do it.

Whatever It Takes

Each work on canvas is a whole new experience, depending on the touch of the artist, the color and the sealing technique. The process is quite challenging, but it's always exciting. I've had several of these works on canvas sold at two separate galleries. A canvas surface may not be right for every pastelist's style, but it's a very

valuable option, and it's a testament to the flexibility of the pastel medium.

They say necessity is the mother of invention. I'm not the first artist to work with pastel on canvas, but my experimentation with the process has been surprisingly well-received, and I'm thrilled with the results I've gotten. And it was my dedication to working in pastel that made it possible.

■ *Sandra K. Jackoboice, who splits her time between Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Naples, Florida, is co-founder of the Great Lakes Pastel Society and the founder of the Southwest Florida Pastel Society. An active instructor, her work has been honored with a long list of awards and has been featured in a variety of publications. For more information, visit www.skjackoboice.com.*

Yellow Hibiscus (30x40)





5. After the previous application of sealer, the painting lost its punch, so I applied more vibrant colors and more darks, leaving the pastel strokes more visible. (The spray darkens the image, so allowances need to be made by using very light pastels.) Then I added two more coats of sealer.



6. After the sealer was thoroughly dry, I applied two coats of acrylic gloss and matte varnish (half and half) with a large, soft brush. The brushstrokes were too obvious for my liking, so I reapplied a coat with a large sponge brush, and the painting was complete.

The Right Finish

The varnish process was a valuable lesson with this painting. I wouldn't use a brush for the final coats unless the varnish was thinned with water because the brushstrokes are too obvious with a thick varnish; the sponge brush was more effective. Because of the extra coat of varnish the painting appeared very "heavy," but the pastel still creates a soft-edged quality, and the pastel strokes are still evident. I've also applied the final varnish (with two coats thinned with water) to paintings by spraying instead of using a brush or a sponge. This prevents the brushstrokes from competing with the subject matter.

Pastel Painting on Canvas

I began *Hibiscus on the Rocks* (16x20) with Fredrix primed, Creative Edge canvas. I chose this floral subject for this demonstration so the pastel strokes could be more easily seen.



1. I sketched the flower on the canvas with Nupastel, blocking in much of the color. Then I sprayed the surface with workable fixative to set the pastel.



2. I blocked in the background with Nupastel in dark blues, purples and dark greens, and in the foreground I used some lighter, warm tones to hint at the rock where the flower was sitting. To get dark in the background I continued to layer on the pastel, and I added more color and detail to the flower. With so many layers of pastel, it's necessary to use a heavy consistency of sealer, heavier than workable fixative (see "A Strong Seal," below).



3. I continued to develop the flower, adding darks and more vibrant color using Unison pastels, and then sprayed with sealer again.



4. With light pastels, I better defined the petals and stamen. I added more color, mostly using Unison pastels, and highlights with Sennelier pastels. Because of the many coats of pastel, I applied three coats of sealer and let them dry thoroughly.

A Strong Seal

The sealer I use consists of a mixture of half gloss and half matte acrylic medium, mixed with 25 percent water. I mix it in a jar, which is attached to a pressurized air canister to evenly distribute the spray. Two coats is usually adequate and dries rather quickly. When it's perfectly dry to the touch, the pastel should not be removable. The sealer will dilute the pastel and cause it to look more painterly, and it will also somewhat darken the image. Reducing the number of layers would prevent some of the saturation when sealed, presenting a lighter, softer final image.