

The Complete Beginners Guide to

Soft Pastels & Pastel Pencils



By Shaymus Art

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I created this beginners guide as I know how confusing the world of soft pastels can be, but it doesn't have to be! My name is Shay and I have been a professional artist using soft pastels & pastel pencils for many years. I have drawn a wide range of subjects from pet & people portraits, all the way to botanical studies & seascapes to name a few. The possibilities with soft pastels are endless and I can't wait to introduce you to them! I have collected together all that I have learned over the years and put everything that you need to know in this helpful guide to get you started. I absolutely love working with this medium, it's very fast and easy once you're equipped with all the knowledge. I can't wait to see what you create!



What Are Soft Pastels & Pastel Pencils?

Soft pastels & pastel pencils are the same medium, just in a different form. Both are simply pure pigment mixed with a binder to keep their shape.

Rule: The softer the pastel, the more pigmented it is as it contains less binder. Where there is less binder, there is also less resistance to deposit the pigment on the paper. Softer pastels tend to feel buttery smooth when applied to the paper where as harder pastels often feel hard & scratchy.

Soft pastels come in a stick form and like their name suggests, are much softer than the pencils. Because of this, they are more pigmented and leave much more opaque marks.

Pastel pencils come in a wood encased pencil form. As they are small and thin, they are made with more binder to ensure they don't break easily. This means they are less pigmented but they allow for excellent control and precision which is very useful for details. Some brands are softer or harder than others, providing different levels of opaqueness.

As both the sticks & pencils are made out of the same material, both work great when put together & can be used together to create really impressive, dynamic artworks. See pages 11-13 for methods & techniques.

Quick Tip:

Opaque means less transparency. More opacity = stronger and bolder marks.

Recap:

- 1. Soft pastels & pastel pencils are pigment mixed with binder to keep their shape.**
- 2. Soft pastel sticks are more pigmented than any brand of pastel pencil as they always contain less binder.**
- 3. Softer pastel pencil brands will produce more opaque marks compared to brands that make harder pastel pencils.**
- 4. Soft pastels & pastel pencils work wonderfully together.**

My Favourite Brands of Soft Pastel

Unison Colour soft pastel sticks are one of my favourites to work with, they are such a great size and they're very smooth to apply to the paper. They're not as intense as some of the other brands such as Schmincke which I actually find very useful in certain situations. **Unison Colour** has a huge range of **374** different colours to choose from!

Available on JacksonsArt: Unison Colour Soft Pastels *(single orders)*

Available on Amazon: Unison Colour Soft Pastels *(there are other sets also)*



Schmincke soft pastel sticks are another favourite brand of mine, these soft pastels are such high quality & they make the creating experience more enjoyable. They are smaller than unison colour soft pastel sticks but I also find them to be more intense so less is needed. Like Unison Colour, they also have a huge number of colours to choose from, **400** in total!

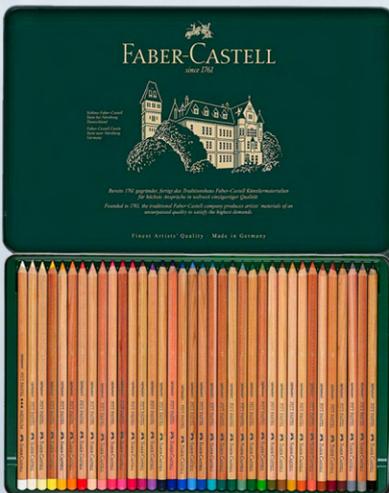


Available on JacksonsArt: Schmincke Soft Pastels *(single orders)*

Available on Amazon: Schmincke Soft Pastels *(there are other sets also)*

My Go-To Brands of Pastel Pencil

Stabilo Carbothello pastel pencils are some of the first pastel pencils I have purchased and they have remained one of my all time favourite brands. These pencils are excellent quality & on the cheaper side. I find that they break less than other brands which is very important, they also come in a huge range of colours and they're a perfect mixture of being in-between soft & hard.



Faber-Castell Pitt are another strong brand of pastel pencils that I use. They are on the harder size so I like to use them for a lot of the thin lines that I need, such as some of the final details for fur. They are very easy to sharpen and they're probably the brand of pastel pencils that is least likely to accidentally break in my opinion. They come in a wide variety of colours to choose from.

Caran d'Ache pastel pencils are very unique with how soft they are. If you need a wide range of bold, highly opaque pastel pencils, then look no further than this brand. The quality of each pencil is very high and I love that the wood casings are in the shape of a hexagon so that they don't uncontrollably roll away. I always use this brand of pencil for my most vibrant areas.





Derwent pastel pencils are another favourite brand of mine, they don't have the largest range of colours to choose from but the colours they do have fit perfectly in my collection as they differ greatly from the other brands. Their properties are somewhere in between Carbothello and Faber-Castell pastel pencils, they're not too soft or too hard and they feel very satisfying to put to paper with vibrant colours.

Bruynzeel pastel pencils are another pencil that floats in-between being soft & hard, they come in a limited range of colours but I find their colours to be very unique and therefore a very useful addition to my pencil collection. They are also very affordable and I find myself gravitating to them a lot of the time due to their high quality and ease of use.



Pastel Pencil Shopping List

Stabilo Carbothello

JacksonsArt | Amazon

Faber-Castell Pitt

JacksonsArt | Amazon

Caran d'Ache

JacksonsArt | Amazon

Derwent

JacksonsArt | Amazon

Bruynzeel

JacksonsArt | Amazon

The Perfect Paper

for any soft pastel masterpiece

The specific paper you choose to use matters a great deal when it comes to working with soft pastels & pastel pencils. We need to work on a paper that can grip and hold onto the pastel pigment. Because of this, pastel papers tend to have rough texture feel to them, so that the pigment can be pulled from the stick or pencil & be deposited & held in place on the surface of the paper. That rough texture is called the 'tooth' of the paper, each various brand of pastel paper has a different tooth quality & property.



After many years of trial and error with all sorts of pastel papers, I have come to love & only use Pastelmat paper by Clairefontaine. This seems to be the same for the high majority of other soft pastel artists too so I know I'm in good hands. This paper has a sanded surface texture & is very effective at allowing you to work in many different layers. The tooth of the paper can hold the pigment well enough that no fixatives are needed. This is important as all fixatives alter the colours & tones of a pastel artwork, I recommend avoiding them at all cost (see page 14 to learn how to properly store & frame artworks once they're finished).

Pastelmat comes in many different colours, my favourite are White, Dark Grey & Brown. You can also purchase Pastelmat Board which is simply Pastelmat paper attached to a 1.8mm board which makes it very sturdy. This is especially perfect for people who like to work vertically on easels.

Available at:

Pastelmat

JacksonsArt | Amazon

Pastelmat Board

JacksonsArt | Amazon



The Must Have Tools

for
Soft Pastels
&
Pastel Pencils

Sofft Sponge Tools are essential to blending out the pastel pigment on your paper. This tool is simply a handle that allows a small changeable sponge to be attached at the tip to then blend out the pastel as desired.

You can also use disposable eye-shadow sponges which are handy for small, detailed areas. However, the ergonomic handle on the Sofft sponge tool makes life so much easier & quicker when creating a soft pastel piece.

They come in a variety of shapes but my favourite is No. 3 Oval.

Available on: [JacksonsArt](#) / [Amazon](#)



Disposable Gloves are usually worn throughout the drawing process to protect myself & the artwork. They allow me to protect my hands from all of the pastel dust & stop them from getting dirty. They also protect the artwork from the natural oils on my fingers which is crucial for the longevity of the piece. During certain parts of the drawing process, I use my fingers to blend together the various pastel pigments to soften up any harshness, especially in the base colour layers.

Available on: [Amazon](#)

Kneadable Erasers are perfect for using with my favourite paper, Pastelmat. As the surface is lightly sanded, a normal eraser is not effective. However, a kneadable eraser can easily pick the pastel up from the surface when needed. You can also mould the eraser into thin points if you need to erase thin lines for example, there are many different techniques possible.

Available on: [JacksonsArt](#) / [Amazon](#)



Pencil Extenders are vital in assisting me when my pencils get too short. There's nothing worse than trying to work with a pencil that's nearing the end of its life. As soon as I put an extender on, I regain full control again. I highly recommend putting extenders on all of your pencils once they start to get too short, it will make your life a lot easier!

Available on: [JacksonsArt](#) / [Amazon](#)

Sharpening your Pastel Pencils

As the pastel within a pastel pencil tends to be on the softer side, especially when compared to graphite or coloured pencils, it means they also break & snap off more easily. You may use a conventional sharpener if you wish, however the softer brands such as the Caran d'Ache will almost always break being sharpened this way. This can be extremely frustrating as pastel pencils aren't cheap & constantly sharpening pencils can be very time consuming.



My go-to method for sharpening my pastel pencils involves shaving the wood casing off & sanding down the tip to a point. To shave the wood casing, I carefully use a Stanley knife by guiding it with both thumbs in an angle towards the end, making sure not to press too hard so that the pastel doesn't snap off in the process. This will take some practice to get used to but you will improve overtime.

To sharpen the tip, you can use sand paper for a safe option & also for when you need a quick sharp tip. I keep some sand paper taped down near my working area to touch up when needed. If I'm sharpening many pencils at a time & need a quick method to sharpen all the tips, I use a belt sanding machine. These can be very loud, dusty & dangerous so I'm not suggesting that you should use one of these, this is simply what I use & what works well for me. If you don't plan on using one, sand paper will do the same job, just slower.

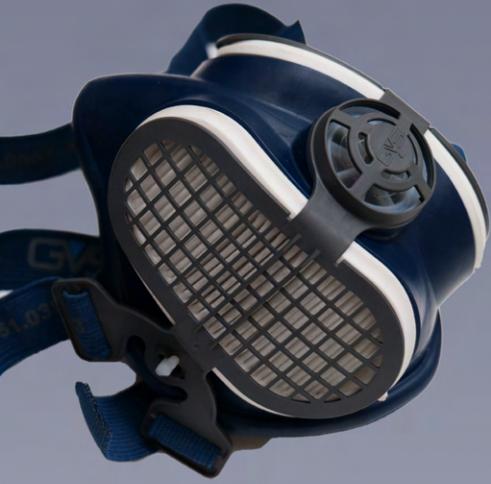


If you would like to find out how I stay as safe as possible while using a belt sanding machine to sharpen my pastel pencils, please view the next page.

Staying Safe

with

Soft Pastels & Pastel Pencils

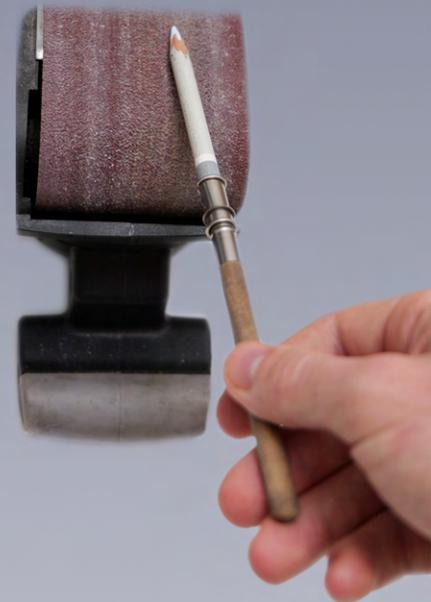


Respiratory mask

I keep my mask in the area of my studio where I sharpen my pencils, this is due to the fact that sharpening and sanding down my pencils is the task which usually creates the most amount of dust. I will wear a respiratory mask when using the belt sanding machine for example which will help prevent the high majority of the small pastel dust particles from entering my lungs.

Pencil extenders

While using the belt sanding machine to sharpen my pencils, I will also use pencil extenders on my shorter pencils. This simply keeps my hands at a safe distance from the machine. The same also goes for shaving the wood casing with a knife, a pencil extender will allow me to regain a full grip & control of my pencil to avoid any unfortunate mistakes.



Air purifier

To keep my lungs even more protected, I keep an air purifier in my studio. This device essentially sucks in air through a filter to catch any dust particles. When working with soft pastels & pastel pencils, artists will inevitably produce fine pastel dust in the work space & small particles will float through the air. To reduce the amount I breathe in, I keep on an air purifier at times to help clean out this fine dust.



Hoover with HEPA filter

For the excess pastel dust that falls to the floor around my drawing area or gathers on the drawing itself, I use a household vacuum to vacuum it all up. Household hoovers contain a HEPA filter which catch any fine particles such as pastel dust. It would be pointless to buy a small hand-held hoover which just blows the fine dust back out into the room. Check that your hoover has a HEPA filter & you can rest assured that it's keeping in the dust.



Methods & Techniques



Applying soft pastel pigment to your paper using your sticks may seem straight forward at first, but there are definitely right & wrong ways to do it. You'll want to avoid putting down too much pigment so that the tooth of the paper doesn't fill up. Doing this will make it very hard to add any other pigment colours or even create a new layer with sharp, clean details on top. Less is more & a little goes a long way!

Once you have pastel pigment on your paper, you can use different sponge tools to blend & soften that pigment. Using different pressures will also give you a different effect, less pressure will give a more subtle, gradual blend. When using papers made specifically for soft pastels, the paper texture can be damaging to sponges & tools overtime, try not to press too hard.



As long as you haven't applied too much pressure, you will be left with a light layer of pigment which you can then easily add another layer on top. Using a high quality pastel paper such as Pastelmat will allow for many light layers on top of one another. In this example, I am using a dark brown pastel to create a gradient of the initial layer.

To ensure this gradient is successfully blended, I will use a light pressure throughout, going back and forth the two different pigment colors. To avoid ruining the gradient, don't jump from one color to the other. This will transfer the pigment from the sponge to the wrong section. Instead, carefully go back and forth the 2 sections, going side to side as you travel up and down.



To enhance the gradient and bring in a 3rd colour, I can also use my pastel pencils to shade in another light layer. Here I am using a light golden brown colour to enhance the lighter side of the gradient. As pastel pencils are less pigmented than sticks, it's important to be more patient and gradually build up the layers to create a smooth, even layer. Remember to Hoover up that pastel dust!

As the pencils contain less pigment, that also means that the sponges are not great at blending them. Using your fingers to blend pastel pencil pigment is much more effective, especially if there is also a layer of pastel pigment beneath it. To blend with my fingers, I like to use a disposable glove to protect my hands & the artwork.



Gradients & Creating New Colors

To expand on the gradient creation from the previous page, I thought it would be useful to give a more detailed explanation on how to create gradients with soft pastels. This is simply because I believe that understanding how to create gradients will give a good understanding of how soft pastels fundamentally work and this skills can transcend into many other areas.

First, I start by applying more pigment at the top end of the gradient, to do this I simply apply more pressure when going side to side with my pastel stick. As I come down the paper, I gradually lift that pressure off my stick to deposit less and less pigment.

I do the exact same in the opposite direction with the other color, creating a light layer pass over in the middle of the gradient. A little goes a long way with soft pastels, so if there is a bit of paper showing through, that's fine as it will get covered in the blending process.

To blend this pigment, I'll start at one end going side to side with my sponge and gradually come down the gradient. Being sure not to apply too much pressure, I go slowly back and forth the 2 colors to blend them together, paying more attention to blend the middle and making sure not to transfer the opposite color to either end.

Creating new colors by combining 2 or more pigments together is also very easy with pastels. You might not have the largest pastel collection so it's important to take advantage of the blend-ability of pastels. Throughout my artworks, I am constantly combining multiple pastel pigments to achieve the exact tone I am looking for.

In this example I am showing how you can take a red pigment and blend it with a blue pigment to create a purple color. First, I want to make sure I have a light even layer of the red pigment. Again, not pressing too hard because I only want a light layer. Pressing down too hard and applying too much pigment will fill in the tooth of the paper and create difficulties adding in more layers. This would be an issue as this 2nd blue layer needs to go on top evenly. As I only applied a little pressure and have a light even layer, I can easily draw in a 2nd light layer of blue.

The magic then happens when I take my sponge and blend these two layers together. I also need to use a light pressure with my sponge to gradually blend the 2 pigments together. If I press too hard, the layers will become uneven and most likely look blotchy. I challenge you to experiment with many different color combinations and practice at creating completely new colors. This is also a great exercise in color theory.

→ [Watch the video demonstration](#) ←

Sponge Transfer & Mark Making

Sponge transfer is a very useful technique in my practice. Whether blending a section, or simply applying pastel pigment to a scrap piece of paper to pick up with my sponge, the pigment left on the sponge can create a very light even layer of its own. This is the perfect technique for subtle color deposits and can also enable the avoidance of using sticks directly on the paper.



Applying sharp pencil details on top of pastel layers is vital to my practice. To do this, a combination of high quality pastel paper, sharp pencils & a light pastel base layer is needed. In the photo examples here, I have applied the same pressure with my pastel pencil to both sections. The top photo shows how too much pastel pigment makes it near impossible to add any pencil details on top. The bottom photo containing the light sponge transfer layer shows how light layers allow for vibrant, sharp pencil details. This is why it's so important to not fill in the tooth of the paper with too much pigment in your initial layers. If the tooth of the paper is filled in too much, it will be clogged up with pastel and unable to pull anymore pigment from the pencils.

If your base pastel layer is too filled in, not all is lost. When this happens, I like to take a kneadable eraser and lift the excess pastel dust from the layer. To do this, I dab and press in the eraser onto the layer and lift up. You will see a layer of pigment transferred onto your eraser. I like to imagine that the sticky eraser is going in between the tooth of the paper and pulling the top layers of pastel up. This will re-allow the tooth of the paper to pull pigment from your pencils to create those sharp, vibrant lines that we're after. You can see the huge difference in the 2nd photo example here!

For the sharpest, thinnest lines, I like to sharpen my pencils to a flat point, see the bottom photo for an example. To do this, I shave off the wood casing like normal with my knife, but instead of sanding down the nib to a circular point, I have a slightly different method. To achieve the fine lines, when sanding down the pastel nib, I focus only on 2 sides to create a flat point. When I then make marks with this nib, I'm sure to use the thin side. This method allows me to create incredibly thin lines without the tip becoming blunt quickly.



How to Store & Frame Soft Pastel Art

Once you have finished your soft pastel masterpiece, it's important to know how to properly store it.

The pastel paper I use is Pastelmat which is very high quality, it holds the pastel firmly in place so that I don't need to use a fixative spray. I will always recommend avoiding the use of a fixative on soft pastel artworks as every brand I have tried has always ruined or altered the colours and tones in some way. As the pastel is still technically loose on the paper, I need to take extra care in how I store and frame my pieces. To store my artworks, I custom cut a sheet of glassine paper to cover the artwork. This will protect the artwork from being smudged or disturbed in some way. I then place the artwork with the glassine paper on top into an acid free plastic sleeve. For large artworks that don't fit into a plastic sleeve, I carefully tape the glassine paper to cover my artwork and then wrap it in acid free tissue paper. I will often then sandwich it between foam board for extra protection, this is also how I package up artworks for shipping. It's then important to store your artworks flat so that gravity keeps it from bending or warping. Large drawers are really handy!



[Shop glassine paper](#) [Shop plastic sleeve](#)

If you're ready to display your work of art, here are the steps you need to take to safely **frame** your piece.



As previously mentioned, no fixative sprays are used on my artworks which means the pastel is still technically loose on the paper. To avoid any smudging or damage of the artwork, it's important to always frame your soft pastel artworks with a picture mount inside. Apart from elevating the appearance of your artwork, it will also leave a gap between the artwork and the frame glass. Doing so will avoid any smudges or deposits of pastel onto the glass. The picture mount should have an aperture size roughly 1 or 2 cm's smaller than your artwork to easily cover all sides. On the back, the artwork should then be secured to the mount using acid free tape. I always recommend to my clients to keep the artwork out of direct sunlight and humid areas. When using high quality brands, soft pastels are said to be one of the most archival mediums available to artists. Because soft pastels are simply pure pigment mixed with binder, they're unlikely to deteriorate or change their colors over many lifetimes if stored & framed correctly with care.

Are You Ready to Take Your Art Skills to the Next Level?

I really do hope this guide has been useful if you are new to the world of soft pastels & pastel pencils! My aim is to bring you easy to understand content so that you can new learn art skills as quickly as possible.

For me personally, I have best learned new techniques & methods from watching other artists at work. That is what I offer over on my Patreon channel, I know how frustrating it can be when trying to draw realistically so I'm here to help you expand your skills & understanding.

Over the past few years, I have built up a large library of video tutorials & real-time lessons to guide students on how to create incredibly realistic art using soft pastels & pastel pencils.

On Patreon you will find videos on many subjects such as realistic animal & human portraiture, detailed stills, dynamic seascapes & more. With each tutorial you will also receive a complete materials list so that you're not left guessing what supplies you need to start with.

As soon as you subscribe to a specific tier on Patreon for as little as \$5 a month, you instantly gain access to ALL the past & future lessons. You can cancel your subscription at anytime that suits you.



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