

Stick Pastels vs Pan Pastels

Q. What are the advantages and disadvantages of pan pastels as opposed to regular pastels?

A. Artists who use traditional stick pastels have long been enamored of the rich colors and versatility of the medium. They hadn't noted many gaps in performance—until pan pastels came along. By nature, pastels are opaque, but pan pastels have shown us that the medium can be applied in a gossamer-thin veil of semitransparent color as well.

Pan pastels—very soft pastels in a cake form resembling a cosmetic compact—require few fillers. The result is a much greater pigment load, allowing the artist to control the amount of color applied to the surface by using sponge applicators. The artist may choose to apply pan pastels in a stroke as rich as lipstick or in a layer so thin that the color of the support flavors the hue.

Another advantage of pan pastels is that they allow the combining of pigment colors, thus multiplying the range of hues. Several large washy layers may be easily and quickly laid down, each isolated

with a fixative spray, to achieve compelling subtleties.

Artists challenged by the messiness of stick pastels appreciate that these insubstantial layers result in lower dust, extending the life of the product over that of softer, dustier sticks. The long handle and crooked end of PanPastel's sponge-tipped Sofft knives (below, left) keep fingers out of the pastel altogether, putting to rest the health concerns of those accustomed to avoiding contact with pigments through the use of a paintbrush or palette knife.

Sponge tools for pan pastels come in various sizes and shapes, allowing the artist to choose the nature of his or her stroke. However, achieving tight detail takes practice with pan pastels, and although it can be done, this is an area where stick pastels often outshine the newer form of the medium. Sticks produce lines, edges and smaller details more quickly and efficiently.

Most pastelists could get along fine without pan pastels, but those who add this product to their lineup will find it quite useful. —D.S.

PROPER VARNISH REMOVAL

Q. I follow the general rule of varnishing oil paintings six to 12 months after completion. Recently I've heard of artists who rework oil paintings, sometimes years after they originally painted them. What are the risks of removing varnish with turpentine or mineral spirits so as to rework a painting? Can an oil painting be reworked on top of the varnish?

A. If the artist applied high-quality paints to a correctly planned, stable surface and did not mix varnish-based materials into the paint when the work was executed, then the varnish removal shouldn't pose a significant problem; however, some pigments are susceptible to becoming soluble when subjected to solvents, so a certain level of care must be exercised when removing varnish.

Some artists are willing to take the risk of removing varnish themselves, but those who fear they'll compromise their paintings should seek the assistance of a trained conservator. A good indicator that professional help should be sought is the unspoken question suggested here: What solvent provides an adequate amount of power to dissolve the varnish without harming the paint film?

Conservation training programs teach the use of the proper solvent and the right techniques for delivering solvent to the surface of the painting and removing the varnish from the surface. These are acquired skills that take considerable time to master. On the painter's part, choosing an easily removable varnish will help keep the cost to a minimum for any varnish removal done by a trained conservator.

