

pastel  
painting  
ATELIER

ESSENTIAL LESSONS IN  
TECHNIQUES, PRACTICES,  
AND MATERIALS

ellen eagle





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*Foreword by* MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Watson-Guption Publications  
New York



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Published in the United States by Watson–Guptill Publications, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

[www.crownpublishing.com](http://www.crownpublishing.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eagle, Ellen.

Pastel painting atelier : essential lessons in techniques, practices, and materials / Ellen Eagle. — First Edition.

1. Pastel painting—Technique. I. Title.

NC880.E23 2013

741.2'35—dc23

2012018761

eBook ISBN: 978-0-8230-0842-1

Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-8230-0841-4

Book design by Karla Baker

Jacket design by Karla Baker

Jacket art: Ellen Eagle

HALF-TITLE PAGE IMAGE:

Ellen Eagle, *Anastasio*, 2010, pastel on pumice board,  $8\frac{3}{8} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  inches (21.3 × 17.1 cm)

This is the first portrait I did of Anastasio. I selected the very close, frontal gaze because of his sharply intelligent observations.

TITLE PAGE IMAGE:

Mary Cassatt (American [active in France], 1844–1926), *Woman with Baby*, c. 1902, pastel on gray paper,  $28\frac{3}{8} \times 20\frac{7}{8}$  inches (72.1 × 53 cm), collection of The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Gift of the Executors of Governor Lehman's Estate and the Edith and Herbert Lehman Foundation, 1968.301

PHOTO CREDIT: MICHAEL AGEE

Cassatt was a superb draftsman, yet she did not hesitate to break through her fine drawing lines with vigorous strokes of pastel, and often left some areas of her paintings less finished than others.

CONTENTS PAGE IMAGE:

John Appleton Brown, *Old Fashioned Garden*, circa 1889, pastel on paperboard,  $21\frac{15}{16} \times 18$  inches (55.7 cm × 43.7 cm), collection of Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Bequest of Miss Mary Sophia Walker, Ac.1904.24

Notice the variety of strokes within this painting. They create a multitude of textures, and a depth of space. As do many of

Brown's pastels, this image features a buoyant, dance-like composition created by the play of light on distinct forms.

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v3.1

TO MY PARENTS, ROSLYN AND ARTURO T., MY BROTHER, DAVID, AND MY  
HUSBAND, GORDON

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*I would like to thank the following people and institutions for their generous contributions:*

*My brilliant editor, Alison Hagge, for her expansive vision and sensitivity. Senior editor Lei Porteous and editorial assistant Lisa Buch for their exceptional insights, attention, and support. Executive Editor Candace Raney, for inviting me to write this book. Maxine Hong Kingston for her genuine and sensitive foreword. Marjorie Shelley, Sherman Fairchild conservator in charge of Paper Conservation, and Katherine Baetjer, curator, European Paintings, both at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for the multiple conversations they granted me about the history and conservation of the medium. Katie Steiner, assistant curator, the Frick Collection, New York, for the private viewing of Whistler's *The Cemetery: Venice*. Neil Jeffares, author of *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*, for his encyclopedic book, and his help in seeking permissions for reproductions. I extend my gratitude to Jacklyn Burns, registrar, J. Paul Getty Center, Los Angeles; Michelle Henning, Bowdoin College Museum of Art; Mila Waldman and Stephen Fisher, the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College; Susan Grinois, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Kathryn Kearns, Smith College Museum of Art; Rachel Beaupr*



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# foreword

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by MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

I met Ellen Eagle the summer we taught at Art Workshop International in Assisi, Italy, she gave me a course in drawing with pastels, and I a course in writing the novel. Beauty surrounded us, held us in its embrace. From our rooms and studios, from the terrace where we ate our meals, we looked down upon the Umbrian plain and the city of Saint Francis. Day and night, bells rang the time.

Ellen gave a slide show of her portraits. One by one, people filled the screen: Mei-Chiao. April. Asha. Phyllis. Lee. Alfredo. Edwin. Mike. Ellen herself. Her mother and her father. I could feel each person's weight, his or her individual energy and beauty. A pull of affection rushed from my heart toward each one of them; it must have been the affection the artist felt when she painted them. I wanted to be beheld the way Ellen beheld these lucky people. Amid the crowd thanking her for the show, I blurted out, "I want you to paint me." At the same moment, she was saying, "I want to paint you."

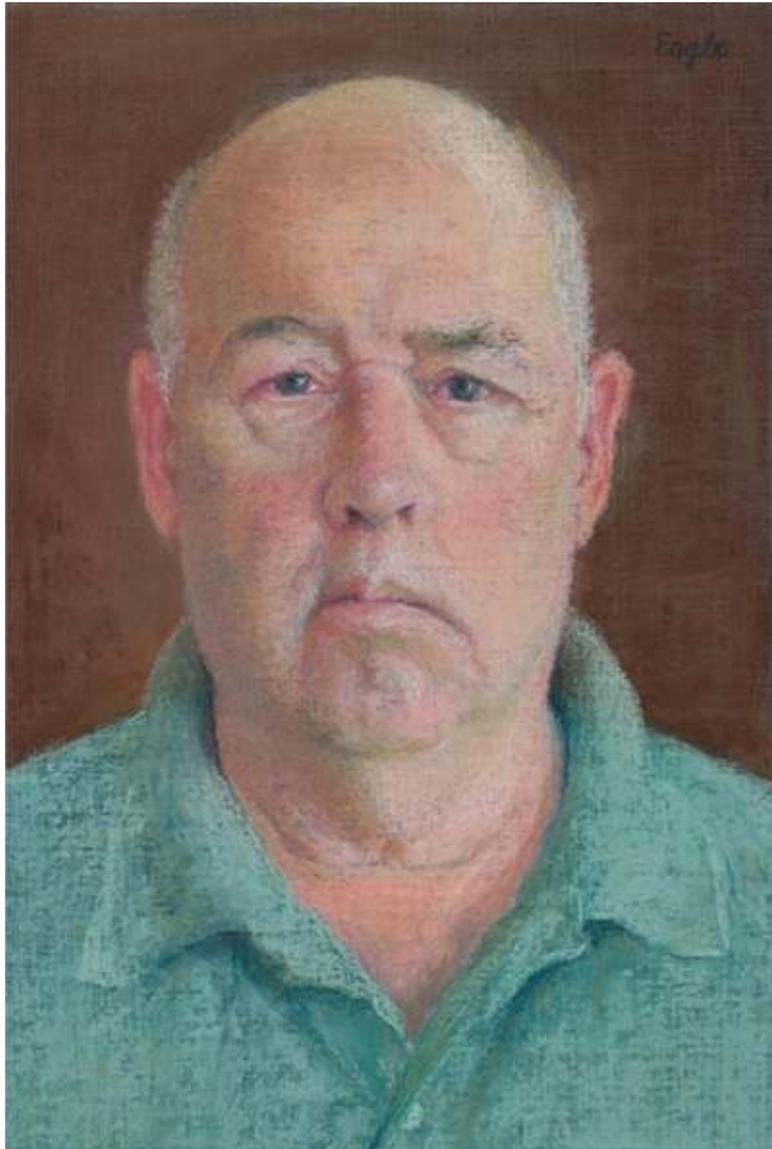


Ellen Eagle, *Mei-Chiao Resting*, 2010, pastel on pumice board,  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{7}{8}$  inches (14.5 × 9.8 cm)

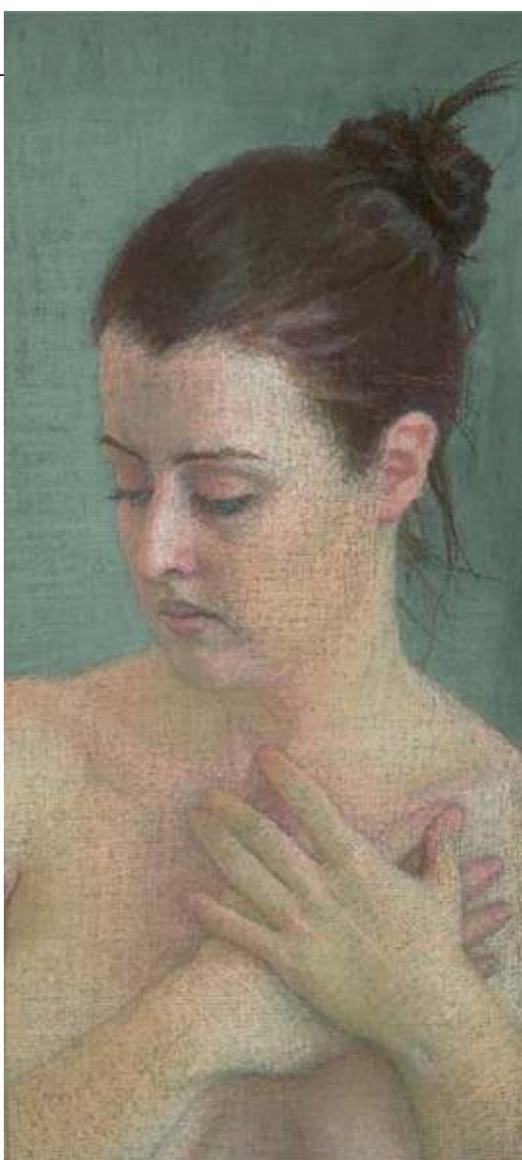
And so, I sat for Ellen Eagle. The painting took two years. She flew to California three times, and I flew to New Jersey once. But she did not paint me in her studio; we did not work on the portrait.

on the East Coast. The light had to be the light coming into my dining room, which is like sunporch, with a bank of windows facing south. Ellen had found just the right light for me, medium, the light that has shone on me for most of my life.

Ellen wants to paint in silence; I'll need to sit silently. I never sit without doing something. But am not to speak, or write, or knit, or read, or watch TV. I am to be still.



Ellen Eagle, *Maurice*, 2005, pastel on pumice board,  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{3}{8}$  inches (21.6  $\times$  13.7 cm)

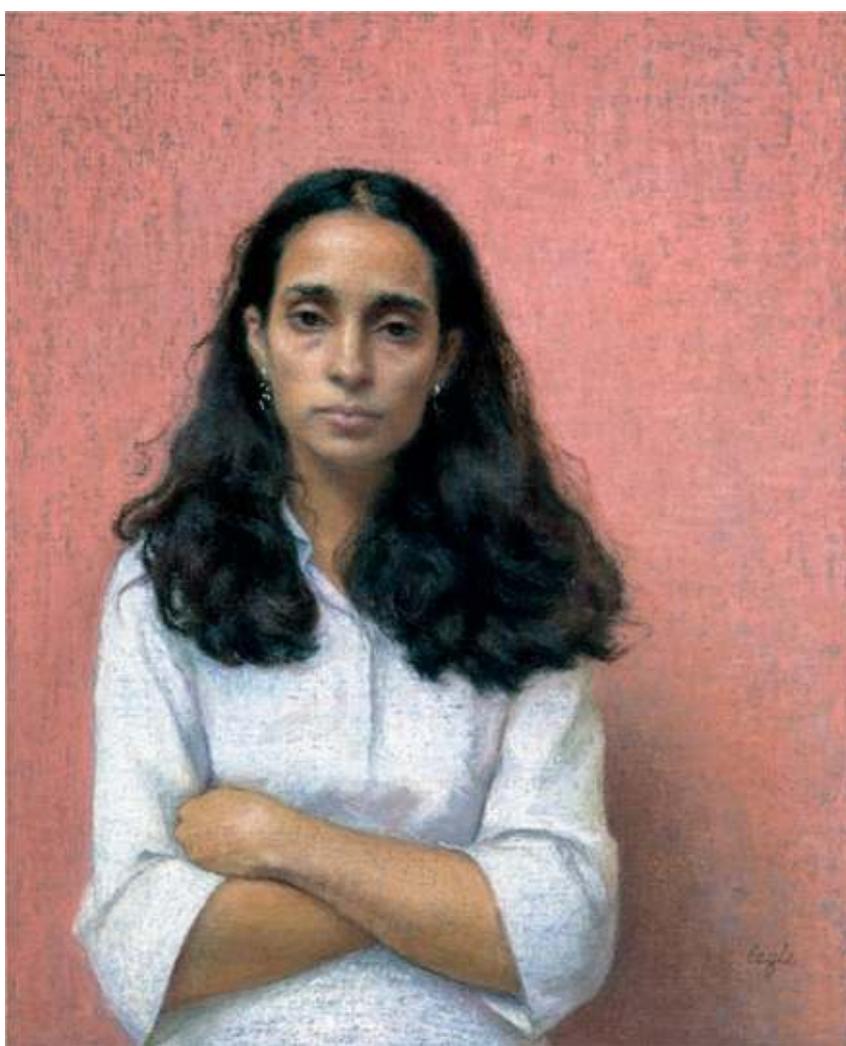


Ellen Eagle, *Nude with Hands Touching*, 2009, pastel on pumice board, 15 × 6½ inches (38.1 × 16.5 cm)

Ellen gave me a rare gift—rest. I rested, looking out at my garden, letting its beauty enter my awareness, and my being. I hardly ever stop working in it to simply love the garden. Modeling for Ellen, I observed the light, and the way the atmosphere changes according to time, long moments and short moments, and to the weather, clouds, fog. In the very late afternoon, we would end painting for the day. Ellen tells me that she has sat all day in front of a wall, and watched the movement and play of light.

I did not get to watch my portrait form. Maybe Ellen does not want me to see the false starts and the experimental tries.

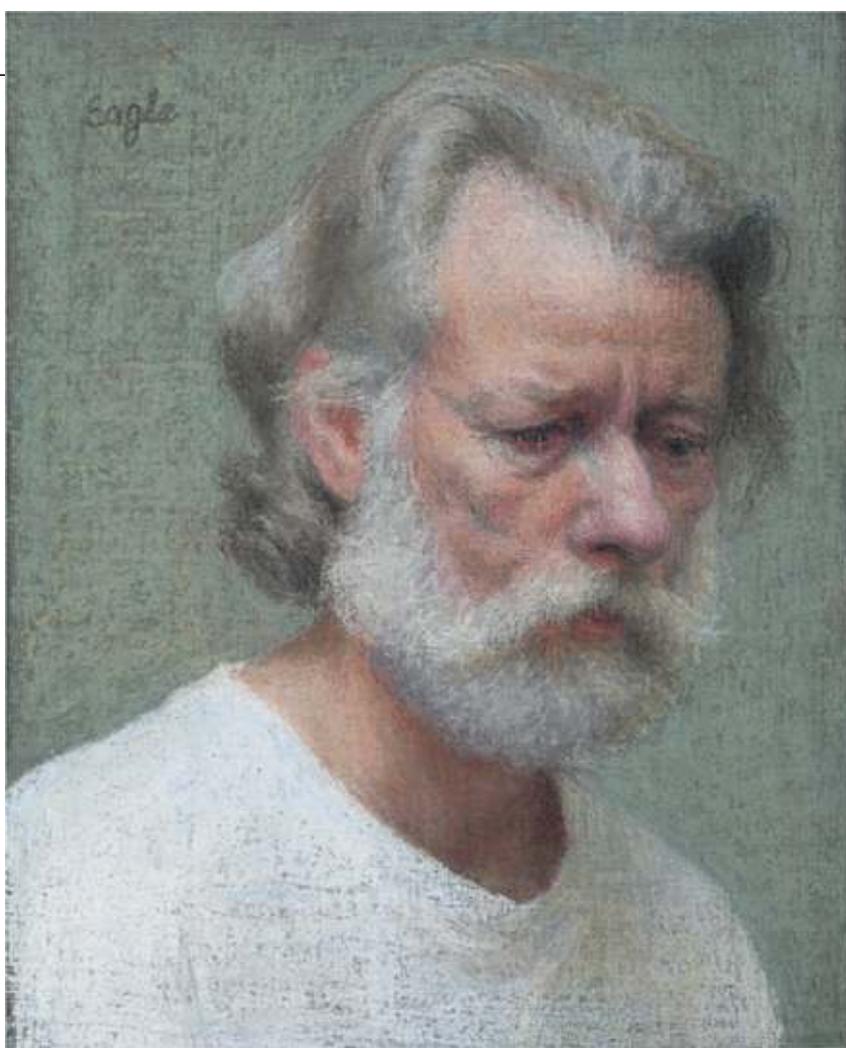
One day, she turned the picture toward me. (The final image appears on [this page](#).) Voil



Ellen Eagle, *Evelyn with Arms Crossed*, 2003, pastel on pumice board, 11 × 9 inches (27.9 × 22.9 cm)

She pointed out to me the beauty that she'd discovered: the range of mountains that is my cheekbone. Yes, I see the magnificence, my cheekbone the Sierras.

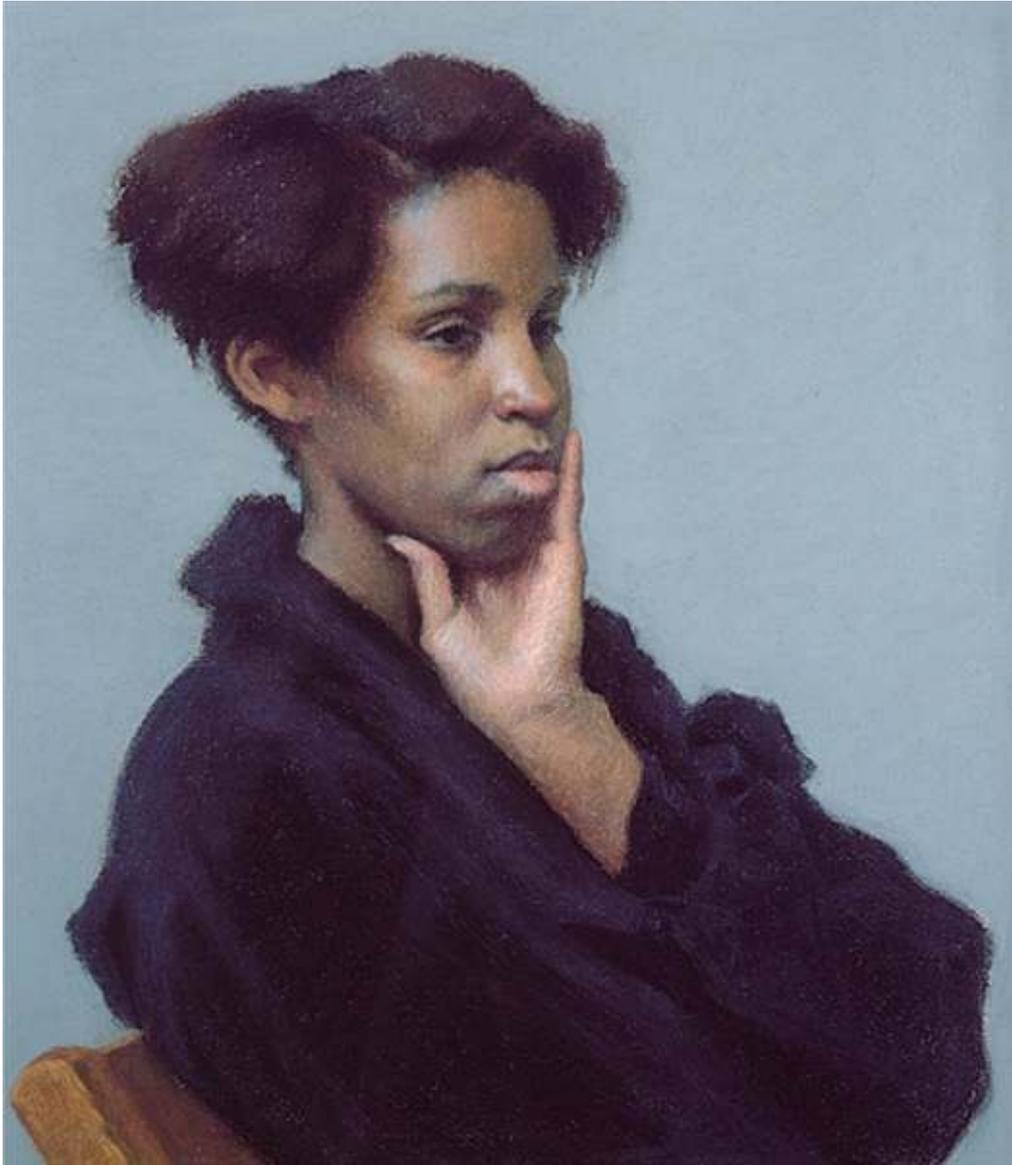
As I write this, Ellen is touring China with an array of portraits. She and they are being feted all over the land. She is a star artist. Spangly motley confetti rain upon her. Happy New Year of the Black Water Dragon! She sends me a picture of herself among a panel of artists; behind them is a big screen with the portrait of me. Ellen has brought me to China, land of my ancestors. My face is full of feeling and thoughts. I am beholding China and the Chinese people, and saying to them: hold you in my full heart.



Ellen Eagle, *Edwin*, 2003, pastel on pumice board,  $5\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$  inches (14 × 11 cm)

## CLARIFYING THE TERM *PASTEL PAINTING*

Pastel can be used as a drawing medium and as a painting medium. When the artist uses pastel to highlight a drawing, or uses it in a sketchy, loose, linear manner in which much of the paper is left untouched and remains as a component of the finished work, the work is considered a pastel drawing. When the forms of the subject are fully rendered via shifts of color, and pastel covers the canvas corner to corner, the work is a pastel painting.



Ellen Eagle, *Andrea*, 2001, pastel on pumice board, 14 × 12¼ inches (35.6 × 31.1 cm)

# preface

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I am writing this book in my pastel painting studio. I look at my easel, yellowed pieces of paper taped to its wooden beams like little flags fluttering from a ship's mast. The papers contain notes to myself written in the act of painting; statements by Hopper, Thoreau, Tolstoy; reproductions of paintings by Degas, Eakins, Vermeer. Joyful reminders of my painting encounters, they bid me return to the easel.

I look around my studio and see trays of color, boxes and boxes of pastels everywhere. Pastel sticks, pastel shavings. Pastel fingerprints here on my keyboard. Stacks of pumice boards ready for pastel. Boards in the making taped to the floor. I am always ready to work.

I completely embraced pastel the first moment I touched it, years ago. I loved the crumbly, powdery texture of the stick itself. Then I drew my stick, my baton of color, across my board. Tiny granules of pigment dislodged and mingled with other granules on my surface, transforming powder into image. I was hooked.

My love for pastel has only deepened through the years. I take the material very seriously. I use it to build form much like a carpenter builds a house, each stroke providing a foundation, support, a jumping-off point, for the next stroke, each shape essential to my image structure. I have also delighted in the playful aspect of pastel, which I discovered in the course of my research for this book. Mixing it with water, for example, and applying it with a brush, achieves an entirely different outcome than applying it dry. Pastel invites experimentation. It is like having a close friendship that exists within a particular context, and then being invited into another, very different, corner of the friend's life. The subsequent discoveries provide a whole new, and richer, appreciation for that person.

When working, I aim to record the feelings stimulated by my subject as I look, carefully, into her forms in space, in light, in the moment. I reach for the color I need the instant I see it in my subject. I place it directly into the painting. I move quickly, trying to keep up with the constellation of shapes and colors I see. My bliss animates my strokes.

At the same time, I love to build my paintings slowly, over a period of weeks, and often, months. It is important to me to be faithful to my subject's qualities, and I have to find a way to coalesce all the moments of looking, all my revelations, into a single point of view. Pastel, dry pigment whose color and texture do not change once on the surface, permits my perception to evolve at its own pace. Working with a light touch, on a surface that can take layer upon layer of pastel, I seek the emergence and full crystallization of harmony. Pastel is perfectly suited to my temperament.

All artists share an ever-deepening fascination with the questions we are driven to explore, and the revelations that replace them and lead to new questions. It is my deepest joy to participate in that tradition. My goals in creating this book are twofold: first, to provide some history of approaches to pastel; and second, to share with you my experiences of working with this brilliant medium. I hope that you will find notes that ring true for you and that our differences will help you clarify your own priorities.



Ellen Eagle, *Winter 2006–2007*, pastel on pumice board,  $17\frac{1}{4} \times 16\frac{5}{8}$  inches (43.8 × 42.2 cm)

The dress I wear represents my respect for classical traditions, and the bandage (with pastel smudges) on my hand acknowledges my love for observing everyday reality. I worked through several seasons on this painting. The light changed drastically as the leaves fell from the trees, snow drifted onto the windows, and the leaves returned. My neck was stiff for months from being turned, and my working arm ached from being suspended for so long. But I really wanted to paint this gesture.

# introduction

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*a luminous history*, A LUMINOUS FUTURE

In the year 1495, in Milan, an artist wrote in his notebooks of his desire to “make points for coloring dry.” He described his recipe, which included pigment, wax, and water. He was to be one of very few artists to document a recipe for pastel sticks—or anything else about pastel—in the first three hundred or so recorded years of the medium’s use. But this artist is known for his brilliant investigations and writings. He was Leonardo da Vinci.

Leonardo (1452–1519) was curious about pastel largely due to a visit to the Milanese court by the French pastelist Jean Perr

the aristocracy. Carriera's intimate, airy, casual approach was a crucial precedent.

In 1720, Carriera journeyed with her pastel paintings from her native Venice to Paris. Her visit coincided with an explosion of education, research, manufacturing, and marketing throughout Europe and the United States. It was the Age of Enlightenment. The imperatives of the era had a greater impact on the sciences than on the arts, but pastel was positioned at the convergence of the two disciplines. Sets of pastels, which featured an ever-increasing range of colors, tints, and shades, were now widely manufactured. This freed professional artists, who had been devoting a great deal of time to the enigmatic fabrication of their own pastels, to spend more time at their easels. An increased range of tones enabled portraitists to create the incremental color and value shifts that they saw in their subject's flesh.



Robert Nanteuil, *Portrait of Monseigneur Louis Doni d'Attichy, Bishop of Riez and Later of Autun*, 1663, pastel on paper, 13½ × 11 inches (34.3 × 27.9 cm), collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, 98.GG.13

This elegant 1663 pastel painting is a study for the artist's engraving. The strokes of pastel and color selection are exceptionally delicate.

For much of the eighteenth century, the Parisian aristocracy, having fallen in love with Carriera's work, clamored to have their portraits painted in pastel. The demand further fueled the manufacturing industry. New binders were sought, fixative ingredients were explored, and paper with a fine tooth was introduced. Some artists, including Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789) and

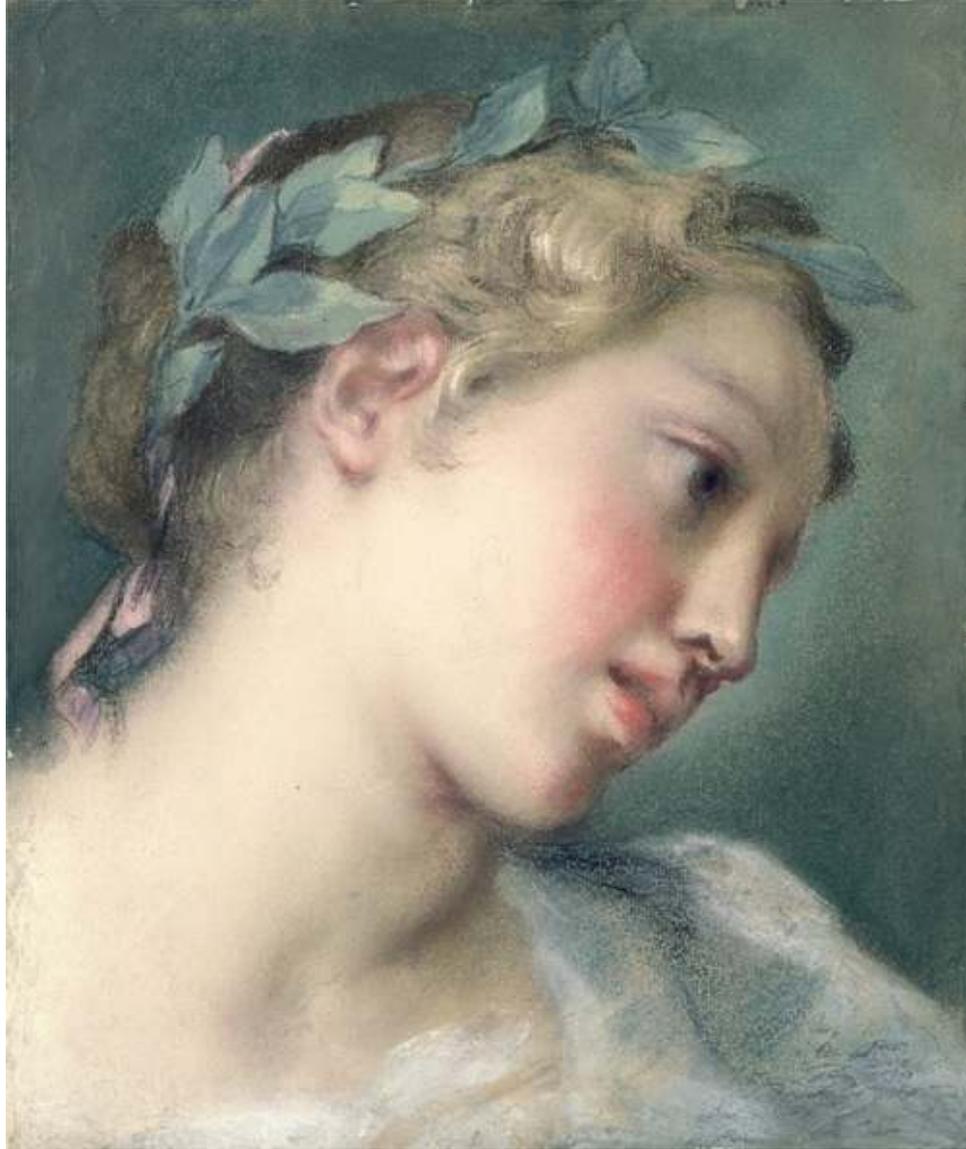
Maurice-Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788), experimented by altering their supports—for example by smoothing the texture or tinting the surface—to suit their personal styles of pastel application.

The appeal of pastel to professional artists, their patrons, and amateur artists was deeply layered. Due to the light-reflecting properties of the granular pigments, pastel offered a brilliance of color not to be found in oil paint. Its dry body enchanted Paris in numerous ways. Artists and patrons saw the color the moment it was applied as it would appear forever. Artists were able to rapidly apply the medium, which allowed them to convey an intimate spontaneity. They also found pastel relatively easy to travel with, so their portrait patrons could sit in the comfort of their own homes without the fumes and mess of oil paint to disrupt the well-appointed order of their domesticity. And the rapid resolution of the portrait meant that busy aristocratic patrons had only to sit briefly before dashing to their other pleasurable exploits. Pastel painting became all the rage in eighteenth-century Paris, and its impact was felt particularly in England, Ireland, and Germany.

Amateur artists, who were attracted to the odorless, relatively clean, and portable pastel set, adopted the medium as a hobby. In 1772, the English pastelist John Russell (1745–1806) published an instructional booklet entitled *Elements of Painting with Crayons*, which became an important guide to materials and techniques, but, because so little had been written about pastel, amateurs had no long-standing authorized coda to intimidate them. They were free to experiment, and some became quite proficient, as I observed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I had the joy of visiting the Met's exhibit *Pastel Portraits: Images of 18th-Century Europe* in May 2011. Displayed were some forty-four portraits approached in every style imaginable, testaments to the complete adaptability of our medium to the spirit and intent of the artist. I saw works by Rosalba Carriera. In her *Young Woman with Pearl Earrings*, Carriera mixed her pastel with water and blended it on the surface with her finger, creating, in essence, a thick gouache. In *Pleasure*, Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779) created color and value shifts of such subtlety that the pastel powder appears to have been breathed onto the paper. In contrast, Jean-Baptiste-Sim

considered to be the more gifted of the two artists, was forced to seek commissions outside Paris and—even outside France. His use of color was expressive, and foreshadowed that of the Impressionists. Fidelity to his sitters' likenesses was very important to him, as was capturing the textures of their clothing. His portraits are deeply affecting in their delicacy of color and facial expression.



Rosalba Carriera, *A Muse*, circa 1725, pastel on laid blue paper,  $12\frac{3}{16} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$  inches (31 × 26 cm), collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, 2003.17

Intimate compositions, exquisite blending of pastel, and the incorporation of mythological symbols characterize the portraiture of Rosalba Carriera.

As illustrated in Neil Jeffares's definitive *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800*, pastel was employed mostly for portraiture; however, many artists used pastel for nonfigurative compositions. France's Jean-Baptiste Nicolas Pillement (1728–1808) was considered the eighteenth century's greatest landscape pastelist. He developed a particular interest in seascape painting, and often explored the dimensions of nature's powers in series of two: one, a painting of a peaceful harbor; the other, an ocean whipped by darkened, stormy skies. A series of landscapes in which mythological themes are pictured is attributed to the portrait painter Louis Vig

origin. He is believed to have been self-taught despite having had limited-to-no exposure to actual pastel paintings. It is possible that he saw a pastel portrait by England's Francis Cotes (1726–1770) of Boston resident James Rivington Sr. It was the only known pastel painting to have been in the United States in the late 1750s. He may have gleaned some information in the mezzotint manuals he studied or seen prints of pastel paintings by Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789). In 1762, Copley wrote a letter to Liotard, asking him to please help him procure “Swiss crayons for drawing of Portraits.”

While the eighteenth century drew to a close in Europe, the taste for a spare and stable classicism prevailed. The Rococo sensibility was now deemed shallow and excessive. Despite the restraint so many artists had displayed in their color work, pastel, having first gained prominence during the affectations of the period, became a casualty of the indictment.

During the early years of the nineteenth century, when pastel was not particularly in favor, especially in Europe, many important artists nonetheless employed the medium, making valuable contributions. In France, the Romantic movement's Eug

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