



The Art Students League of New York

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ELLEN EAGLE

Painting in Pastel from Life

Most of the following supplies may be purchased at the League's art supply store, located in the lobby. It is advisable to speak with the instructor before buying supplies.

PASTELS

Because we never know what colors we will see in our subjects, it is important to have available for our use as many colors as possible. A large set of pastels can be financially daunting, but a set is a one-time purchase: each stick has a very long life, and the replacement of even frequently used individual sticks is necessary only on occasion.

REMBRANDT SOFT PASTELS

I recommend the largest set of REMBRANDT soft pastels that you can afford. (The largest set contains 225 sticks; the 150-stick set is also excellent.) If you choose to begin with a smaller set, it is advisable to supplement it with some individual Rembrandt sticks, so that your total selection includes at least a few shades of the widest range of colors possible.

NUPASTELS

It is important to have Nupastels, the largest set you can afford. (The largest set contains 96 sticks.)

PAPER AND BOARDS

- Of the pastel papers, I like Canson for the weight and texture. Canson makes a Steel Grey and a Felt Grey, which are both good neutrals. Bring about 5-7 sheets. The paper measures slightly larger than 19" x 25". (Larger sheets can be cut from a roll.) or Art Spectrum Gray paper
- Two pieces of white foam core board, same size or slightly larger than your paper. One will be your back board, one will be an overnight cover.
- If you prefer to work on boards or canvas, that's fine.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

- X-acto knife or mat cutter, ruler and straight-edge to cut your paper and backboard down to size, if you wish to work smaller than the paper and board are manufactured.
- Four clips, such as bulldog (approximately 3" size), or the long, slide-on type
- Charcoal, hard and soft
- Charcoal sandpaper block
- Razor blades, single edge
- Paper towels
- Drawing pad
- Any pencils you like to use. I like Faber Castell. Bring a few, from B to 8B
- Kneaded eraser
- Hand-held mirror

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HOW TO PREPARE A BOARD

1. Use an acid-free cold press heavy weight illustration board
2. Mix 2/3 cup acrylic gesso and 1/3 cup water. Mix well. To this mixture, add 4 level tablespoons of finely ground pumice (available in hardware stores) and mix well. Keep the mixture in a covered plastic container. Marble dust or quartz can be used in place of pumice.
3. Tape the illustration board to a smooth, clean surface such as a table or floor. Using a foam brush, apply the mixture as evenly as possible. It will dry fairly quickly – about 45 minutes. Test a tiny, out of the way spot with your finger. When you are certain that the entire board is dry, apply a second coat brushing at a right angle to the direction of the first layer.
4. When the surface is dry tint the board with a mid-value acrylic paint which has been diluted with water or watercolor. You can choose a color that is relevant to your painting. A neutral gray is often very useful. Use a clean foam brush, not the one used for the gesso/pumice mixture. Several layers of paint may be required to obtain an even surface, and the paint takes several hours to dry. It is also possible to mix the paint directly into the gesso/pumice mixture and apply a toned ground in one step.

Experiment with adding more pumice (or marble dust, or quartz) to the gesso mixture to see how rough a surface you can create that may serve your needs for specific paintings.

5. Untape your dry, tinted board from the table or floor and tape to a back board, such as foam core, to keep it from warping.
6. Use a grade of fine sandpaper to smooth and even the surface to the desired texture.

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FRAMING PASTEL PAINTINGS

All supplies should be acid-free.

Pastel paintings must be framed under glass. Reflective-free glass is dull (matte). Use “regular” or “picture frame” glass. If your budget allows, use “museum” glass.

The glass must be separated from the painting because contact with the surface of the painting could smudge your strokes and damage the image you have created. A mat between the glass and the painting creates the necessary space. A “spacer” or “pocket” behind the mat can also be used. The spacer is optional, but it creates a space for pastel particles, which may dislodge from your painting in the course of transporting or handling, to drift down and rest behind the mat rather than on the mat.

The painting, mat and glass are held together by a frame and backing material. The frame can be made of wood or metal (or other material) and should be chosen for strength, color and texture – all in relation to the painting itself. My own preference is for very simple wood frames. Metal frames are usually glitzy and reflect light. Wood is of the earth and has a “dry” texture consistent with the properties of pastel. The backboard can be made of lightweight foam core. This is usually covered on the outside with a type of brown wrapping paper.

The color and size of your mat are determined by the color and size of your painting. Some artists choose a value that matches the middle tone areas of the painting, so that the darks and lights in the painting remain the darkest and lightest elements of “the package.” Other artists choose a very light mat to “isolate” the image. I think each painting requires its own solution and it helps to look at several choices of mat and frame against the artwork.

In my opinion, the purpose of the mat and frame is to protect the painting and to make it possible to hang the painting on a wall, period. The purpose is not to dress-up the painting. However, museums clearly exhibit paintings in elaborate and often gorgeous frames that somehow do not take away from the art. I recommend keeping your choices simple and giving yourself time to experience how simple choices look when assembled. You can always get more complicated later, after you develop your own eye.

Another thing to keep in mind: framing for an exhibition is different than framing for private home display. A group exhibition of wildly varying frame types can look chaotic and upsetting, cheap and distracting. Simple frames all around keep the focus on the art.

The layers from back to front:

- Protective paper, taped to...
- Foam core back board
- Art
- Spacer (optional)
- Mat
- Glass
- Frame