

# A Matter of Touch

Explore the similarities, differences and benefits of various paper types when working in pastel.

By Jeanne Rosier Smith

For artists who are drawn to pastel, it's love at first touch. The tactile medium leaves behind crystals of pigment as it's scraped along or pushed into the surface, reflecting light and color in different directions. As a pastel artist, my arm is my paintbrush, my pastel sticks my paint. The size, shape and texture of each stroke depends on the pressure I apply, the angle of the stick and, most crucially, the characteristics of the surface receiving the mark. The unique properties of pastel as a dry medium make an artist's choice of surface especially important. Each type of paper has its own personality, so to speak. Therefore, it's worth taking some time to get to know the upsides and downsides of working on different surfaces.

Thanks to the rising popularity of the medium, there's a dizzying array of surfaces available for working in pastel—from traditional uncoated papers, such as Canson Mi-Teintes and Rives BFK, to coated surfaces in varying grits and textures designed to hold multiple layers of pigment and even take wet media. With so much choice available, it can be daunting to know where to begin. We each have a different touch, and no one paper fits all.

I've developed a few personal favorites over the nearly 30 years that I've been painting in pastel. The light, grippy surface of UART and LuxArchival papers is fantastic for underpainting. And both papers come in large rolls, making them my surface



Peony I (pastel on LuxArchival museum board, 7x5)

of choice. There's also muscle memory and a sense of ease that comes with working on a familiar surface, so it can be tempting to want to stick with one's "best match."

Given the sheer variety of new pastel surfaces that are now available, however, I decided it was time to take a fresh look and invite some new friends to the easel. Painting on these new surfaces excited and challenged me in ways I never expected.

My encounter with Rives BFK paper was revealing. It's much toothier than I'm used to and it wouldn't allow me to impose my usual techniques. I was feeling inept and frustrated, until

I realized I needed to bring out the beauty of the surface. When I allowed myself to appreciate and play up the paper's texture, I began to really enjoy it. Fabriano Chromia is another quality rough, non-coated paper that accepts wet media.

The new Canson Velvet paper is smooth to the touch, but with a slightly visible grainy texture. It takes many layers and works well for creating soft edges. Despite its name, I find it comparable to Clairefontaine's PastelMat.

Pastel Premier papers offer the same gritty texture of LuxArchival or UART with the convenience of a toned, sanded surface.



When painting food still lifes, panoramic skies and garden flowers, such as **Forsythia II** (pastel, 8x6), I prefer to work on PastelMat for its smooth receptivity and lovely, rich tones.



Working on Ampersand's Pastelbord was a delightful surprise; I hadn't used the surface in years because the boards tend to be heavier than other surfaces, but it grabs the pastel in a way that allows for incredibly expressive and clean mark-making, as seen in **Forsythia III** (pastel, 7x5).



I love UART 400 paper for its underpainting flexibility and texture, and I use it for most of my work requiring underpainting, as with **Cottage Roses I** (pastel, 6x8).



Working on Rives BFK paper to create **Cottage Roses III** (pastel, 6x8) was a wonderful way for me to loosen up.



The soft nap of Hahnemühle Velour paper feels incredibly luxurious to paint on and allows the buildup of many layers. As seen above in **Hydrangea III** (pastel, 6x8), it works best for achieving soft edges and a smooth application.

Sennelier La Carte now makes a Mixed Media pastel card with cork powder that retains the lovely texture and feel of the original Sennelier La Carte paper with the added benefit of accepting water media. I love the expressiveness I was able to achieve on this surface to create **Hydrangea I** (pastel, 8x6), at left. It allows for really soft edges and wonderful nuance based on the quality of the artist's touch.



Clairfontaine has introduced a new paper to its range, called Pastelgrain. It has more texture than PastelMat, allowing more of the paper color to show through, as seen at left in **Lilacs** (pastel, 8x6). It takes thick layers easily, but be aware that it's far easier to get a soft edge than a crisp one when working on this surface.

If this brief survey of pastel surfaces strikes you as unscientific, I agree. For pastel artists, the surface isn't simply a blank sheet; it's part of the painting process. The more time you spend getting to know your surface, the more comfortable your interactions will become. You may form an instant connection with some, while others could take a little longer to warm up to. Take the time to explore all the possibilities and then choose a few to rely on. The rewards will be well worth it.

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## TRY THIS!

Whether you're new to pastel or settled into a routine with a favorite surface, this paper-testing exercise can be a great way to survey what's possible, discover a new favorite and deepen your practice. Here's how:

- 1. GATHER YOUR MATERIALS.** Dakota Art Pastels offers ready-made sampler packs of up to 22 different pastel papers and boards, which are perfect for experimenting with different pastel effects.
- 2. CHOOSE A SUBJECT.** Painting in a series allows you to compare underpainting techniques, layering, blending, edges and details with a consistent subject across various surfaces.
- 3. KEEP AN OPEN MIND AND NOTE YOUR REACTIONS.** Relax, have fun and simply observe what works well on each surface and what doesn't. Some papers result in beautiful soft edges; others allow for effortless crisp marks. Every surface has its own unique strengths and drawbacks. Keep experimenting until you find the one that works best for the effects you want to achieve in your pastel works.

