

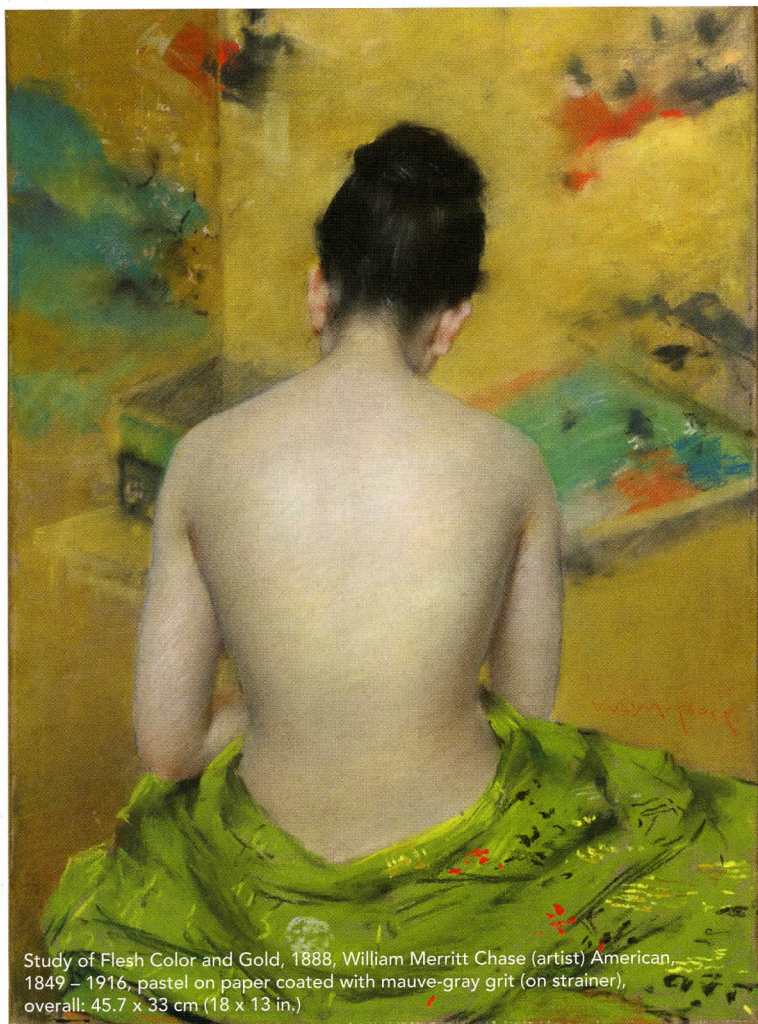
# PASTEL SPOTLIGHT

By: Katherine Jennings, Contributing Writer

Prized for its beautiful, velvety texture and brilliant colors, pastel has been used over the centuries by such prolific and diverse artists as Degas, Whistler, Millet, Redon, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, and Cassatt. Contemporary pastelists following in the footsteps of these masters are creating outstanding works that would be a fine addition to any art collection.

Pastel may be used to sketch preparatory studies or to create finished masterpieces. The origins of pastel can be traced to the Renaissance, when Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea del Sarto, Michelangelo, and others used natural chalks for drawing. The 18th century was considered the "golden age of pastels" when the medium became fashionable for use in portrait painting.

After falling out of fashion, pastel had a revival in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. In the 1860s, Degas exhibited 10 pastels of female bathers at the eighth Impressionist Exhibition. He experimented with the use of fixatives to preserve the layers, thereby creating what Christie's has described as a "scintillating optical mix." Degas was also known to use steam to blur the edges of his pastel markings. His magnificent renditions of ballerinas in rich, sumptuous pastel hues truly brought the medium to a new height.



Study of Flesh Color and Gold, 1888, William Merritt Chase (artist) American, 1849 – 1916, pastel on paper coated with mauve-gray grit (on strainer), overall: 45.7 x 33 cm (18 x 13 in.)



The Rehearsal Onstage, Edgar Degas (French, Paris 1834–1917 Paris), ca. 1874, Pastel over brush-and-ink drawing on thin cream-colored wove paper, laid down on bristol board and mounted on canvas, 21 x 28 1/2 in. (53.3 x 72.4 cm)

Improvements in archival pigments, pastel supports, and fixatives by such revered companies as Sennelier have ensured that today's potential collector may feel confident in the purchase of a pastel painting. Archival considerations include the use of lightfast pigments on an acid-free archival-quality support. Pastels are generally framed under glass to preserve the delicate surface. This type of preservation does not affect the original look.

Pastel exhibitions at galleries and museums are a visual treat for any potential collector. In January 2020, just before the advent of the life-changing pandemic, William Merritt Chase's Study of Flesh Color and Gold (1888) was exhibited in The Touch of Color: Pastels at the National Gallery of Art. With its exquisitely rendered flesh and vibrant, apple-green fabric juxtaposed against a suggestive, velvety background, this exemplary work reveals the true range of color, technique, and texture available in this versatile medium.

With the pandemic now coming to a close after three long years, deprived pastel aficionados have the opportunity to view other pastel exhibitions springing up all over the country and the world. An outstanding exhibition, Pastel from Millet to Redon, is on view at the Musée D'Orsay from March 14 to July 2, 2023. The exhibit showcases around 100 pastels from the museum's collection including works by Millet, Degas, Manet, Cassatt, Redon, and Lévy-Dhurmer, among others. The last exhibit of this type at the D'Orsay was in 2009.

If a trip to Paris is not in your near future, please be sure to check out nearby pastel exhibitions. Pastel is often considered a challenging medium because color is applied and mixed on the painting surface instead of on a palette. But accomplished pastelists are producing high-caliber works that would complement and enhance any sophisticated art collection! Enjoy perusing the tempting examples on the following pages to whet your appetite.

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*Late Afternoon Waves at Leo Carrillo Beach,  
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12 x 16 in., pastel on paper

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