

PAPERS

for PASTEL

Let's get down to the nitty-gritty. Here's help in decoding the variety of surfaces available—and in making your own!

BY MICHAEL CHESLEY JOHNSON

FORTY YEARS AGO, back when the Pastel Society of America (PSA) was founded, you didn't have a lot of options for surfaces to paint on if you were a pastelist. Either you used drawing paper, which had barely enough "tooth," or you made your own surface. Today, thanks to the explosion of interest in pastel, there are literally dozens of papers and boards available. And, of course, you can still make your own.

One quick definition: *tooth* refers to the surface texture of the paper. How much tooth a paper has dictates how much pastel can be applied on it. The more dominant the tooth, the more layers you can apply, and thus the richer and more beautiful the painting. In addition, pastel holds or grips better over time onto papers with more tooth.

Traditional Papers

Factory-made surfaces include traditional sketching or drawing papers and papers made specifically for pastel. These include the popular Canson Mi-Teintes, which has one side with an embossed, gridlike pattern and another side that's smoother. Many landscape artists, myself included, like using the smooth side, but many portrait artists prefer the textured side. When you use these traditional, unsanded papers, you often need to spray a workable fixative between layers of pastel so the additional layers will adhere to the surface. Without the fixative, the tooth fills, and you can't lay down any more pastel.

Velvety Surfaces

If you're looking for an unusual surface, some come with a suede or velour flocking. These velvety surfaces can hold a good deal of pastel. Portrait and animal artists favor this type of surface, which makes it easy to simulate hair and fur textures. One of these new surfaces, with a finer texture than velour, is Clairefontaine Rhodia Pastelmat.

Gritty Papers

Some papers have a coating applied that contains a grit to give the surface texture. These papers, designed to hold many layers of pastel, require little or no fixative during the painting process. A couple of examples are Wallis sanded pastel paper and Art Spectrum Colourfix pastel paper. These and some others stand up well to liquid washes with water, alcohol or mineral spirits; others, such as Sennelier La Carte, do not. Read all product details before using a liquid on any surface.

A number of these papers are also available in boards, or you can mount the papers on an acid-free backing board yourself. There are also boards made exclusively for pastel, such as Ampersand Pastelbord and Richeson Premium pastel surface. The latter is available on paper, hardboard or Gatorfoam board.

Colors and Values

Most papers and boards come in a variety of colors and values. When I paint landscapes on traditional pastel paper, I usually select a midvalue gray, such as the Canson Mi-Teintes steel grey color; if I'm painting on sanded paper, I like the Belgian mist version of the Wallis paper, which is a midvalue, warm gray-brown, akin to the color of raw Belgian linen. Other painters may choose wildly colored papers such as turquoise or hot pink. Dakota Art Pastels sells sampler packs of the more common papers and boards at www.dakotapastels.com.

By the way, the concept of a pastelist using a toned paper is no different from that of an oil painter using a toned canvas. Little bits of the initial color will show through in the finished painting, unifying the other colors in the piece. A tone can also modify a dominant color; for example, using red paper will help enliven a painting in which there's a lot of green. Finally, the value of the initial color can serve as one of the handful of values used in the painting, making the painting process more efficient. As an outdoor landscape painter, I rarely use more

Papers and Boards You Can Buy

Traditional Papers: Canson Mi-Teintes

Textured Fine Art Paper: Daler-Rowney Murano, Fabriano Tiziano paper, Hahnemühle Bugra pastel paper, Sennelier L'Esprit du Pastel (C4) paper, Strathmore 400 Series pastel paper

Suede & Velour Surfaces: Art Spectrum Colourfix suede pastel paper, Clairefontaine Rhodia Pastelmat card, Hahnemühle velour paper and board

Sanded Papers & Boards: Saint-Armand Sabretooth sanded pastel paper, Ampersand Pastelbord, Art Spectrum Colourfix Supertooth (paper, board, multimedia board), Canson Mi-Teintes art board, Canson Mi-Teintes Touch (paper, board), Richeson Premium pastel surfaces (paper, board), Sennelier La Carte pastel card, Townsend pastel paper, UArt sanded pastel (paper, board), Wallis sanded pastel paper

Gesso and Primer Products: Art Spectrum Colourfix pastel and multimedia primer, Golden pastel ground, Lascaux pastel ground

than four values in my painting, and I find that the midvalue of the Wallis Belgian mist is just perfect for one of my two middle values.

Of course, you don't have to stick with a single color and value. You can create an underpainting of many colors and values in many different ways. Representational painters often create an underpainting that closely follows the scene; some, however, simply apply color randomly as a way to jump-start the painting process. Almost any medium can be used for this underpainting—dry pastel, pastel washed in with liquid, acrylic, gouache and even a thin wash of oil paint.

DIY Pastel Surfaces

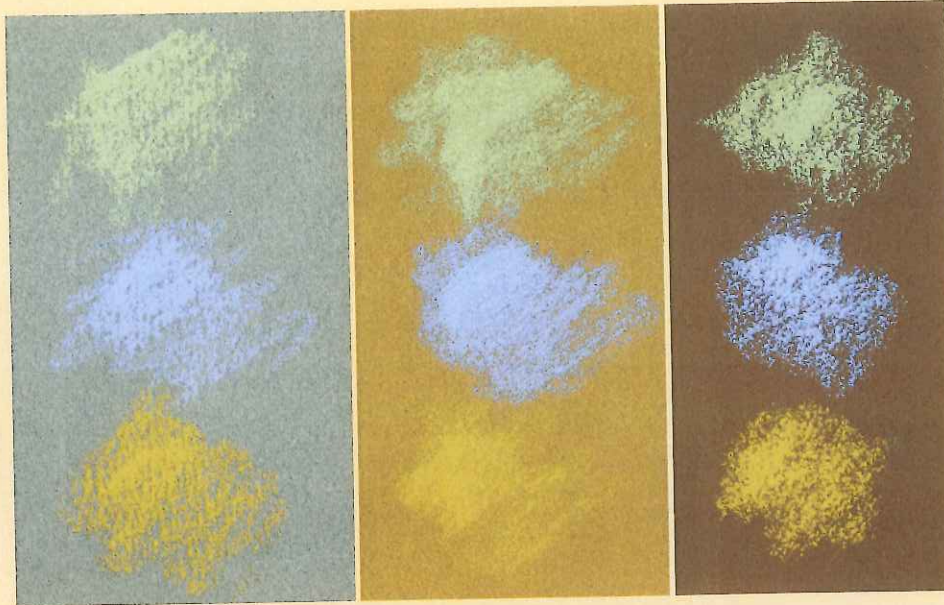
With so many papers and boards, why bother to make your own pastel surface? I know many pastel painters who are perfectly happy—and successful—with factory-made surfaces. But the advantage of making your own surface is total customization. If you want to make a painting the size of a full sheet of plywood or even create a custom surface texture, you can.

To make your own surface, you first need to decide two things: what type of substrate you'll use for stability and what type of painting surface you'll affix to the substrate. Substrates run the gamut from papers to boards to panels of all kinds. Whatever you choose, the substrate should be acid-free and archival. Some examples you might use are matboard, etching paper, Gatorfoam or

Text continued on page 38



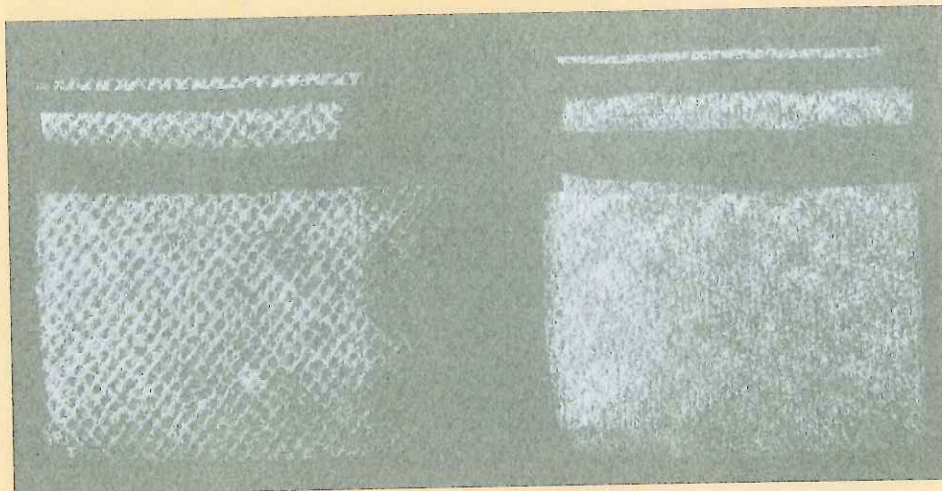
Effects of Paper Color and Texture on Pastel



Notice how the value of the paper surface greatly affects the appearance of the applied pastel. Light values make the pastel appear darker; dark values make it appear lighter. I try to use the value of the paper as one of the values in my composition.

It's important not to cover the toned paper surface completely with pastel. If you do, you defeat the purpose of using a toned surface, which is to enhance the look of the final painting.

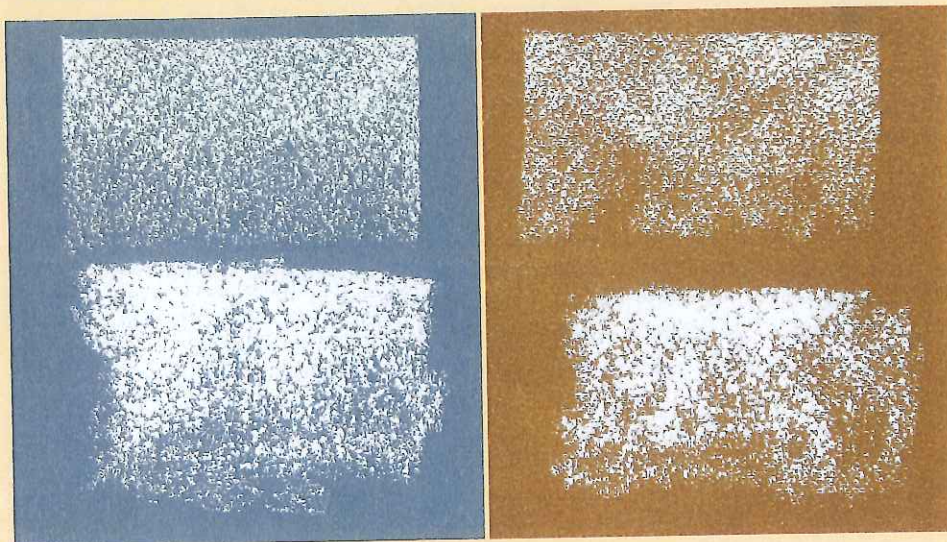
TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Canson Mi-Teintes paper, Sennelier La Carte paper, Richeson Premium pastel surface

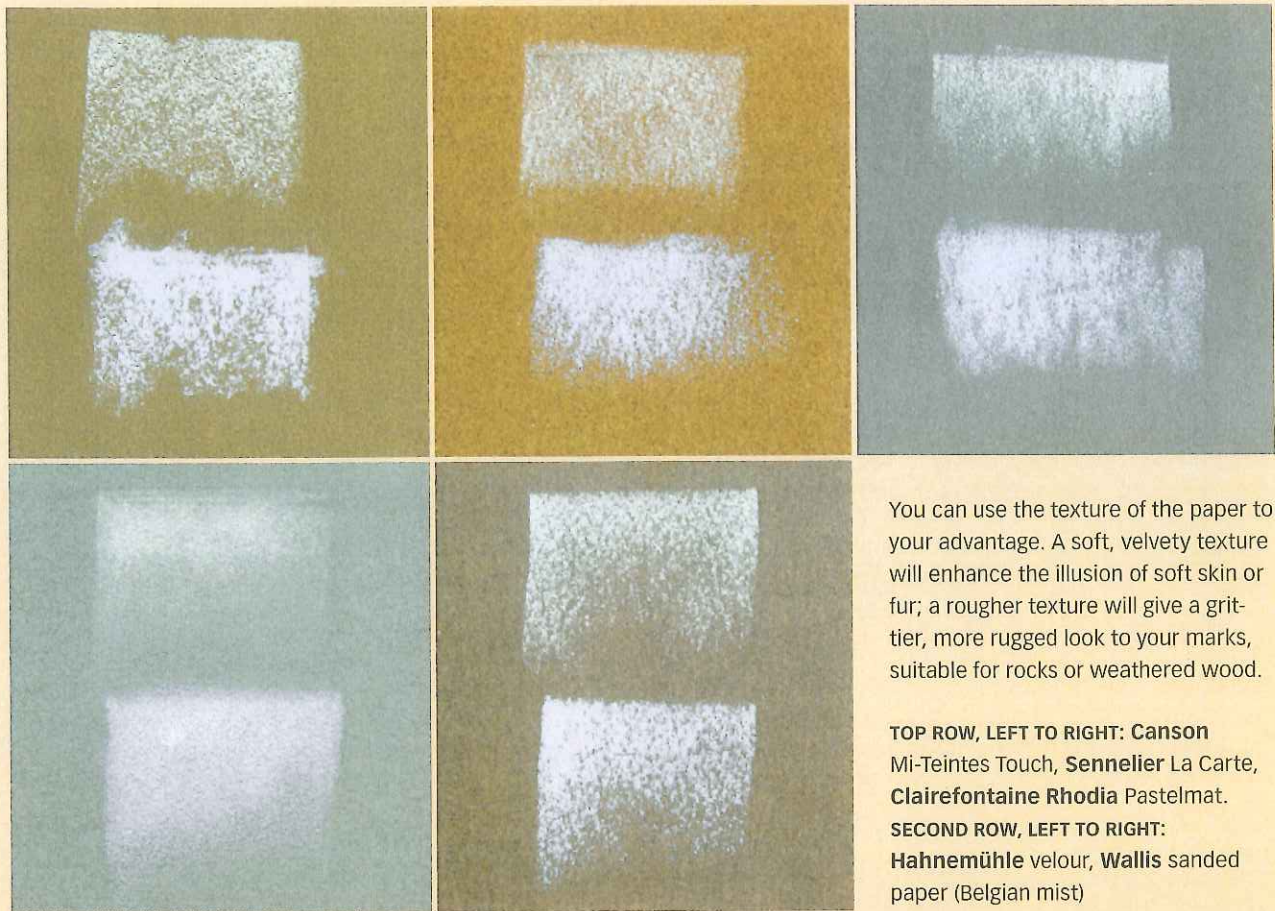


The following sequences of images show the variety of pastel paper textures.

SECOND ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Canson Mi-Teintes paper, rough side; Canson Mi-Teintes paper, smooth side

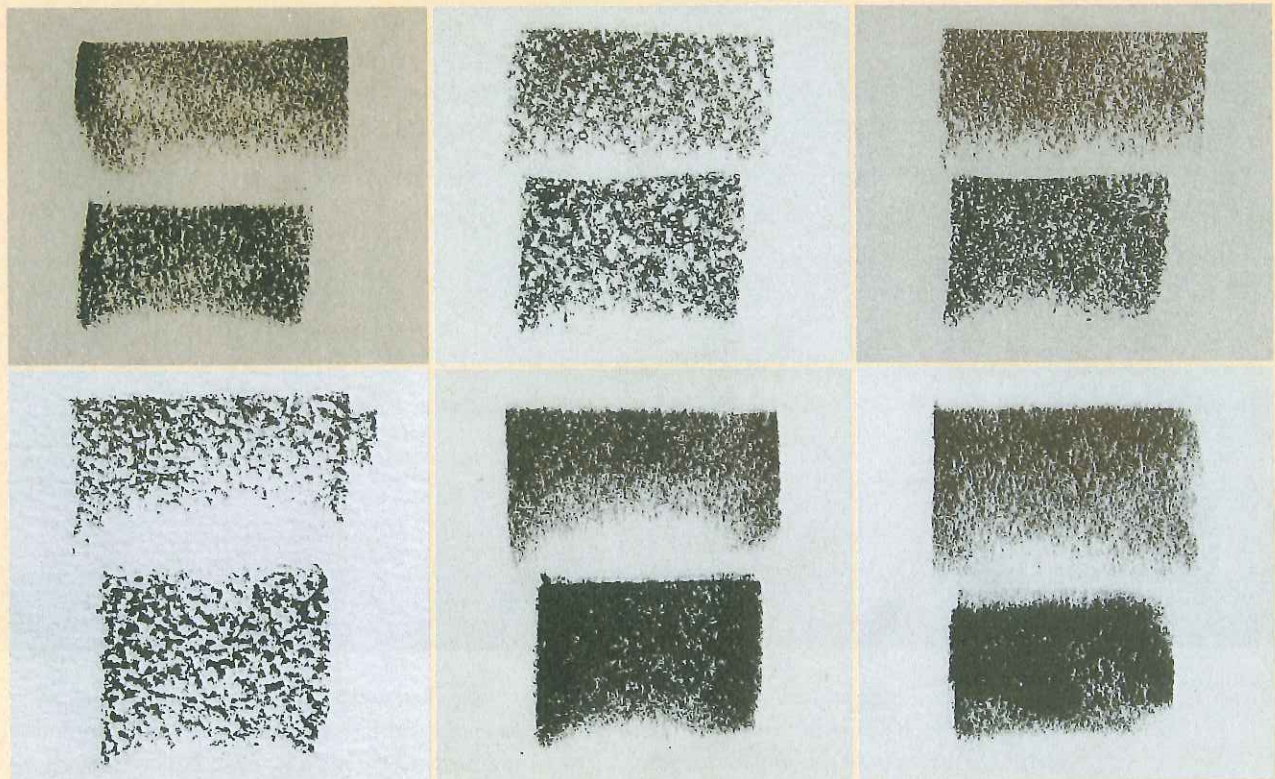
THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Art Spectrum Colourfix, Richeson Premium pastel surface





You can use the texture of the paper to your advantage. A soft, velvety texture will enhance the illusion of soft skin or fur; a rougher texture will give a grittier, more rugged look to your marks, suitable for rocks or weathered wood.

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Canson Mi-Teintes Touch, Sennelier La Carte, Clairefontaine Rhodia Pastelmat.
SECOND ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Hahnemühle velour, Wallis sanded paper (Belgian mist)



THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Ersta (400-grit), Art Spectrum Colourfix Supertooth, Art Spectrum Colourfix Suede
FOURTH ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Saint-Armand Sabretooth, Wallis sanded paper (professional-grade, white), Wallis sanded paper (museum-grade, white)

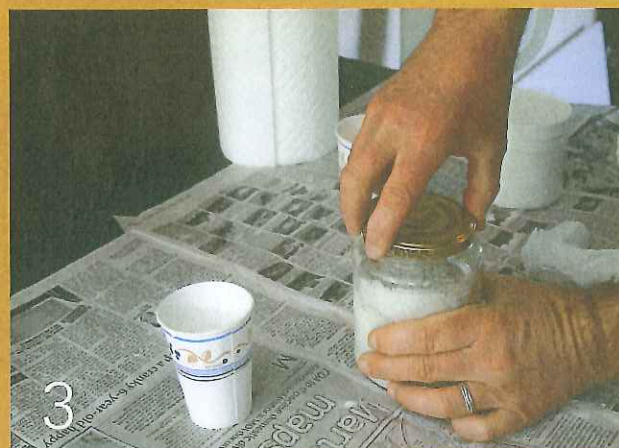
Making Your Own Pastel Surface



Here's how to make your own pastel surface using Doug Dawson's recipe (see Doug Dawson's Pastel Surface Recipe, page 39). For this particular demonstration, the products I used were Golden acrylic gesso, Soho Urban Artist acrylic paint, Dakota Art Pastels pumice (4F grade—very fine) and etching paper. I also used paper cups for measuring, a wide-mouth jar for mixing, and a 2-inch gesso brush for the application.



1. I customarily create my own pastel surfaces this way: After adding enough water to the gesso to make it the consistency of heavy cream, I pour out two measures (in this case, two paper cups' worth) and put it in the wide-mouth jar.



3. I cover the jar with the lid and shake it until the pumice is evenly distributed in the gesso. Shaking prevents the pumice from forming clumps.



4. I add a few squirts of yellow ochre acrylic to color the gesso. You can use as much of any color as you want. I add this after first mixing in the pumice to prevent clumping. I shake up the gesso again until the color is evenly mixed.

Text continued from page 35
hardboard such as medium-density fiberboard (MDF). The color of the substrate doesn't matter, unless you intend to apply a surface of clear gesso, which would allow the color to show through.

After you've chosen your substrate, you'll

need to know what kind of painting surface to apply and how to apply it. If you're looking for convenience, you can buy a premade surface such as Art Spectrum's Colourfix pastel primer, which is an acrylic gesso with grit and color already added (the product comes in Colourfix paper colors). If you

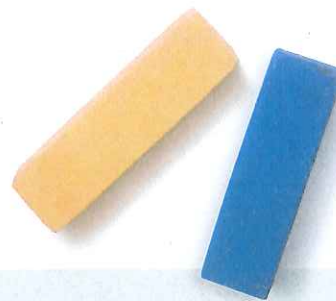


2. I pour out one measure (paper cup) of pumice and add it to the gesso in the jar.



5. Using my gesso brush, I apply the mixture in a random fashion to the paper. Once the surface is dry, I flip over the paper and give it a coat on the reverse side. Although the etching paper is dimensionally stable, it will still curl at the edges; applying gesso to the back removes the curl. I may add another coat of gesso on the front for more "tooth." For a more consistent tooth, I might add more than two coats.

want to control the amount of tooth and the color, you can start with a jar of white acrylic gesso and tailor it to your own needs (see Doug Dawson's Pastel Surface Recipe, top right). Or, if you want to let the color of the substrate show through and influence the finished painting, you can use something



Doug Dawson's Pastel Surface Recipe

PSA master pastelist Doug Dawson makes his own pastel surfaces. He uses a mixture of acrylic gesso, pumice and acrylic paint: one part pumice (2F grade) to two parts acrylic gesso (thinned with water to the consistency of heavy cream), mixed with a bit of acrylic color (either alizarin crimson, red oxide or yellow ochre).

Dawson says that the easiest way to combine the ingredients is to shake up the mixture in a wide-mouthed plastic bottle. Then, using random brushstrokes to get "interesting rhythms and textures," he applies the mixture to the etching paper with a 2-inch gesso brush (etching paper is rugged and dimensionally stable when wet). "The more coats I apply," he says, "the more consistent the tooth. I don't sand between coats because I want the little textured ridges to change the way the pastel 'grabs' the surface—and the resulting look."

(See Making Your Own Pastel Surface, at left.)

like Winsor & Newton clear gesso base. Although it was developed for oil and acrylic painters, it has enough texture for pastel.

If you're just getting started in pastel, I recommend that you experiment on several surfaces with different techniques until you find the combination that's right for you. Choose the tooth or texture, color and value of your pastel surface to best showcase your pastel art!

MICHAEL CHESLEY JOHNSON is a contributing editor to *The Artist's Magazine* and the author of *Backpacker Painting: Outdoors with Oil & Pastel*. He has two instructional videos available at artistsnetwork.tv. Visit his website at www.michaelchesleyjohnson.com.