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PASTEL PAINTING TECHNIQUES WITH ARTIST DAILY:

Making Color Work in
Every Pastel Drawing

Making *Color* Work

MASTER PASTEL ARTIST AND
TEACHER FRANK FEDERICO
SHARES HIS DYNAMIC
APPROACH TO COLOR.

by **Collin Fry**

The subject of color—creating with color, controlling color, and making color work, behave, and contribute to a painting’s success—is of primary importance to almost every artist. The question of what to do with it, however, can be a considerable challenge to even the most experienced. “Color is a friend, not something to fear and dread,” asserts Connecticut artist Frank Federico. “It is a wonderful tool, but it can’t be ignored or put off. It must be met head-on and dealt with early in the painting process.”

Federico is an artist who loves color. His highly regarded landscapes and portraits celebrate color with a free, impressionistic handling of shimmering pastel pigments. Their textures, on the other hand, exhibit the tactile quality of an alla-prima painting in oils. “I have been called a contemporary Impressionist or an Impressionist-Abstractionist,” Federico reflects. “Those labels don’t mean very much, but they do make a nice reference to my rather uninhibited way of painting.”



Obidos Alley
pastel, 14 x 10. Private collection.

San Diego Fantasy
pastel, 30 x 40. Collection the artist.

The artist begins a painting with color, establishing his base layer of thin washes or glazes in yellow. “You start out with a real sense of excitement and color discovery that way,” Federico explains. “Glazing in yellow influences what colors will subsequently be laid over or next to it. In my workshops, I suggest that each person try other hues to see which color wash works best for them. A period of trial and error is invaluable to the development of one’s own color method and technique. Yellow just happens to be my personal choice. I also use the yellow-glazing approach with acrylics and oils.”

Federico usually applies thinned acrylic or watercolor for his washes, though he will occasionally employ gouache or pastel pigments mixed with water or paint thinner. The artist cites the latter, which he calls an “*imprimatura glaze*,” as a technique that dates back to the Renaissance.

“There are choices to be made,” Federico says. “For example, one can work with the yellow glaze, and use mostly warm, analogous colors, or one can work against the yellow glaze with complementary colors predominating, allowing the yellow to show through for subtle contrast. But these are just two of the many possibilities. I usually lay reds in first; it’s an ideal beginning, and it really works for me.”

Federico likes to conduct his underpainting with what he calls a triad of colors: two blues (ultramarine and phthalocyanine), two yellows (cadmium yellow light and medium), two reds (cadmium red and alizarin crimson), and white. “These will combine into a good range of hues and values,” he states. “Phthalocyanine, a greenish blue, mixed with yellow results in a variety of greenish hues. Ultramarine, a blue with a red cast, will be warmer and lead to brown tones. Likewise, cadmium red has yellowish, warm tones



in its mixture, and alizarin crimson is a bluish red that offers interesting violets when mixed with blue. Of course, with pastel, colors can be mixed with the eye as separate strokes, not just physically blended with a finger.”

After completing the underpainting over the yellow surface, the artist follows the classic practice of starting with hard pastels, such as Nupastels, gradually working into softer ones for broader strokes, broken color, and, finally, highlights. Federico finds that glazing—lightly dragging a hard pastel across a previously painted surface—is a valuable technique for blending, tinting, and softening edges. He emphasizes that although the basic skill and craft of his medium cannot be ignored, it should also not be pushed to the point of constricting creativity. “I like to see feelings of gesture in a painting,” he says, “beginning with a variety of strokes from the outset, including cross-hatching over the thin base washes. Real spontaneity!”

“When I lay in the reds, I create the initial stage in the development of a color plan,” Federico continues. “The development of a unity-of-color effect or tonality in the work is my goal. The end result should be a painting that has an overall color message, or a dominant hue, supported by exciting secondary colors. This is the step towards the goal of mastering color. I tell my students to experiment here, to see what works, and what doesn’t work, and to learn how colors change in juxtaposition. I encourage them to sample colors, to explore, to reach out and try everything, to fully realize one’s potential as an artist.

“At this point, I work with light and middle values,” Federico explains. “The layering of color continues with deeper values and colors, which play off the first yellow washes, allowing the yellow to show through. The combination of my triad of colors gives me a full range of violets and browns. Tonality is enhanced. Detail is suggested, rather than fully indicated. Maintaining strong

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FEDERICO'S GUIDE TO PAINTING WITH DYNAMIC COLOR

1. Pick a colorful subject that challenges your creativity.
2. Choose a surface texture that excites you.
3. Compose carefully, using the greatest color and value contrasts to establish your center of interest.
4. Glaze and underpaint with intense color, allowing some of the color to show through at the finish.
5. Overpaint with contrasting or complementary hues. Create excitement!
6. Vary stroke type and direction. Keep some of the exciting, energized strokes, as they become your personal trademarks.
7. Use colors as shapes and values, place them well, and let them interact with one another.
8. Remember, cool colors recede (toward the distance), while warm colors come forward.
9. Vary the size and shape of masses. Balance and contrast the large and small, dark and light, intense and subdued.
10. Refine only as much as necessary. Don't over-finish, or you may lose the passion of the painting.



value structure, controlling the juxtaposition of shapes and applying color effects are paramount steps to creating a good painting. Crisp values really set the design of the painting. They are the bones of the piece and have to be resolved early in the process.”

The development of shapes and color relationships takes the painting forward. Final value adjustments, the addition of highlights, and final touches

with calligraphic strokes complete the work. For Federico, the degree of finish is crucial. “As long as there is enough structure in the composition, and the drawing is solid, with values and colors working well, the painting is a success,” he says. “Where one stops is up to the individual, but too much emphasis on ‘tidying up’ can ruin the joy and energy of a piece.”

Federico has had a long and varied career. He began as an artist on the streets of New Orleans and has gone on to become a nationally recognized teacher and painter. Federico’s popular domestic and international workshops feature his legendary demonstrations, wherein he frequently will work upside down. “It helps me to objectively view abstract and compositional relation-

Times Square
pastel over
gouache, 48 x 40.
Collection the artist.

DEMONSTRATION: BOOTHBAY MOMENT



Reference

Federico works from reference photographs, such as these color and black-and-white images of storefronts in Boothbay Harbor, Maine.



1

Step 1

The artist outlined the shapes of the composition with a red Conté pencil.



2

Step 2

The gouache underpainting began with warm and cool reds.



3

Step 3

Dark areas were strengthened with ultramarine and phthalocyanine blue. Re-entering the middle values with violet, blue, and yellow tints, the artist created warms and cools that would form the base for local colors and values.



4

Step 4

Local color was indicated with Nupastels and Unisons. Federico then added finishing touches to the light areas using soft Unisons.



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
Boothbay
Moment
2001, pastel, 28 x 36.
Private collection.

ships early in the painting process,” the artist explains. “My ultimate aim is to create a powerful, emotional statement, with a colorful, tonal rendering of the subject.” Federico’s dynamic painting Times Square won the 1999 Program Cover Competition at the International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS) convention, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 2003, the artist was one of the conference’s program presenters.

The artist cites colorists such as Henri Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, Vincent van Gogh, Maurice Vlaminck, and Wayne Thiebaud as influential to his work. “They really fill me with respect and awe,” he remarks. “There are many ways to use color creatively, and masters such as these and others have much to teach us. Study them. Analyze how they each used color in their own individual ways.

“I often tell my students to seek freshness and newness,” Federico continues, “to paint from the inner self, not to hold back, to be expressive, and just to have fun. Try to create an emotional

response to what nature provides. There is always another color adventure around the corner. Try pastel on canvas and different board surfaces. Try shocking colors. Keep that spontaneity of self-expression and gesture that all good artists should strive for.

“To reach your full potential as an artist, one must experiment,” Federico emphasizes. “The main thing is to try different combinations, to learn, to discover. It is really great fun to develop one’s own color intuition, and to develop a personal visual language. Break rules! To me, this is what art and creativity are all about.” ■

ABOUT THE ARTIST

FRANK FEDERICO, of Goshen, Connecticut, is a signature member of Allied Artists of America, the Pastel Society of America, the Degas Pastel Society, and the National Watercolor Society; an honored member of the Master Pastelist Circle of the International Association of Pastel Societies; an active member of the National Society of Painters in Casein and Acrylic; and a for-

mer president of the Connecticut Pastel Society. The artist has also won numerous awards in a variety of media and teaches workshops throughout the country and overseas. He is represented by Branchville Soho Gallery, in Wilton, Connecticut; Outsider’s Gallery, in Litchfield, Connecticut; Elaine Beckwith Gallery, in Jamaica, Vermont; and The Gallery, in Burlingame, California.

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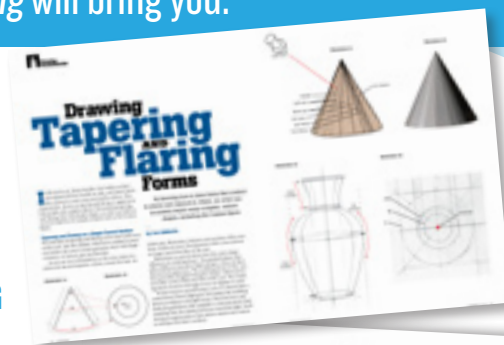
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