



TALKING TECHNIQUE *with* Felicity House

As a member of the Pastel Society and an experienced art tutor, the expressive qualities of pastel suit Felicity's busy lifestyle. She tells Jenny White how to get the most from the medium



ABOVE Felicity's colour coordinated pastel pots
BELOW Making Marmalade, pastel on paper, 59x50cm
LEFT Felicity in her studio
Photos: Philip Hartley

For a busy artist, pastels are an ideal means of expression. Felicity House is a case in point. The Bournemouth-based artist is an experienced art teacher and a member of the Pastel Society, and she thrives on the immediacy of her chosen medium. "I was drawn to pastels because they're fast. I'm just a busy person, always have been," she says. "The colour is very immediate because you are holding dry pigment and placing it directly on the paper – you don't even have a brush between you and the paper. I started working in pastel because it was so closely linked with drawing, which I always loved, and then I realised you could make paintings with the pastels – it wasn't just line work."

One of the biggest challenges Felicity faced when learning how to use pastels was how to get the tones right. "It's taken me years to understand about tone because I've always been a very linear drawing kind of person," she says. "To work in pastels, you need to understand the tonal qualities in the composition, tonal arrangements and graduations of tone."

For anyone facing a similar challenge, she recommends forgetting about colour for a while and working in charcoal: "I like charcoal tonals, which are little exercises I might do on a small piece of paper. You make a charcoal wash (not a wet wash, a rubbed-in wash) and then pull out the highlights, starting with the mid-tones. If you start with soft grey paper, then the highlights can be extracted with an eraser and the darker tones can be put in using charcoal." Once you've grasped this technique, you can turn to your pastels with added confidence.

When buying pastels, Felicity recommends steering clear of large boxes of cheap pastels; it's better to invest in a smaller number of top quality pastels. "Buy lovely pastels – don't expect to get a wonderful piece of work if you are using cheap pastels. The problem is that people are given these cheap boxes that are labelled 'soft pastels' but they are hardly any better than blackboard chalk."

Instead, she recommends buying brands such as Unison Colour, Daler Rowney, Sennelier and Schmincke. "Rather than having a whole box of cheap pastels, you're better off having 10 quality pastels. It doesn't matter that you have less of them because you can mix them on the paper. You'll gradually build a collection and you'll find the ones you need depending on what your subject matter is. If you're a landscape painter, you'll go for the greens and browns but you'll always need a range of tones, and you should make sure you've got some nice juicy darks."

Another important consideration is your choice of paper. Some pastel artists paint on sandpaper because it can hold many more layers of pastel than >



INFLUENCES

The late John Ward's fine mark making had a great impact on Felicity's work, as has Edgar Degas' use of pastel. She has also been inspired by Tom Coates, the former president of the Pastel Society, having attended a number of masterclasses led by him.

TECHNIQUES

Felicity uses coloured paper or applies a coloured wash to mount board, before applying pastels using a variety of techniques, including scumbling. She always works from dark to light and warns that artists should "go easy on the lights or it will look as though you have spilled flour on your painting!" She also recommends restraint with fixing spray, because it can take the bloom from your painting.

MATERIALS

Felicity recommends investing in top quality pastels – try Unison Colour, Daler Rowney, Sennelier and Schmincke. She works on mount board or Colourfix paper. "If you're going somewhere, it's a good idea to take to take a selection," she says. "It's not until you're in front of the subject that you know which might be the right paper for the job."





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ordinary paper, but Felicity favours mount board or Colourfix pastel paper. She often begins her work with a watercolour wash which helps give the surface a bit more texture (or ‘tooth’ as pastel users call it).

“The paper is quite a big part of the process,” she says. “You have to explore all the different papers until you find some that you really like. I like the mount board because you can prepare it in different ways: you can roughen up the surface with some water to bring up a knap, or use paint on tissue to make it a bit more textured. Alternatively, you can apply a layer of gesso to create texture.”

Colourfix paper can also be underpainted, but it has the added advantage of coming in a wonderful range of colours. Felicity recommends making the most of these to boost the impact of your work. “Sometimes a complementary colour works, other times a yellow paper will give you the warmth of a place – so if you’re going somewhere, it’s a good idea to take a selection of papers with you. It’s not until you’re in front of the subject that you know which piece of paper might be the right one for the job.”

When applying pastels, Felicity always advises her students to work from dark to light. “Block in your darks first – I might do this with watercolour – and then you add your lighter colours at the end. Let the paper work for you: it can show through in the finished piece.”

One of the delights of working with pastels is the variety of marks you can make with them: “You can apply pastels in so many different ways,” says Felicity.

“You can turn the pastel on its side and apply it in a broad sweep, and then you can hatch it in zigzag, quite excited marks. If you haven’t quite got the right colour, you can use a technique called ‘scumbling’, which is where you put on one colour and then you sweep another colour over the top in a thin, fine layer. Hatching is another way to mix colours: by making slanted or vertical marks, one colour over another, you optically mix them – hatched lines in blue over a yellow area will give an impression of green, for example.

“I don’t often complete a piece broadly; it may begin broadly with established tones and colours but I get to a point where I’m refining it with pastel pencils in the end.”

Felicity warns that one of the biggest challenges for a pastel artist can be knowing when to stop. It’s all too easy to overload your paper with pastel or to lose the freshness of your painting, creating something that looks tired and over-worked.

“If you go on with pastel you can tweak it to death,” she says. “I always have a window of time within which to work. To keep the speed

and freshness of it, you could set yourself 15 minutes to work on a landscape.”

Felicity actively seeks out subjects that are ephemeral: a shop whose grocery display will be removed at closing time, a fish that will only keep till dinner; or a model who is holding a pose for a set period of time. She thrives on the sense of urgency that a time limit creates, and is keen to point out that, contrary to what some people think, it is quite easy to work *en plein air* with pastels. Here, the changing light can impose its own healthy time constraints.

Felicity makes her pastels portable by breaking off a small piece of each colour and keeping them in recycled body cream tubs. “The four tubs are divided so I have all the lights in one, all the darks in one, and the other two are mid-tones – one is warm and the other is cool, greens and blues. So there are four tubs in all; lights to darks. When I’m starting work, I pick up the dark tub and establish all the dark tones then move on to the mid tones, and finish with not too much of the light, otherwise it can look too chalky.”

Once a work is deemed complete, she warns that it’s advisable to steer clear of fixing spray, which can dampen the impact of the painting. “It’s always better not to put fixative on the final surface because it can take away the lovely luminosity of the pastel. You can make a paper folder to store them so they don’t smudge. I leave them to set on an open shelf because the chalk content will pull in a little bit of moisture from the air, which sets it slightly.”



BELOW *Music at Roop Niwas*, pastel on paper, 46x34cm

OPPOSITE PAGE *Barbotine Antiques*, watercolour and pastel on paper, 46x34cm
INSET An example of Felicity’s tonal sketches in charcoal