

Fixative - the Great Debate.

Back in the 18th Century the great 'perfect fixative' hunt was on in Europe - this being the period of pastel's glorious heyday. Maurice Quentin de la Tour - the great French pastelist was a great experimenter - and for years tried to formulate the best fixative for pastels. Legend has it that he developed the perfect fixative and 'the recipe went with him to his grave!' Yeah right. But even back in the 18th Century artists were experimenting with whey products, varnishes, waxes, wine (!) and anything else they thought might work.

*Fixative is traditionally made of a shellac - (varnish) reduced in concentration so as to be allowed to be sprayed.

* There are now fixative products which are considered a real improvement for pastelists - especially the problem of darkening the painting.

One of these is Spectra fix - a casein based product - (a whey by product).

Why does fixative darken your paintings?

The pastels fixative will noticeably darken are the lightest ones. Pastels are made of pigment (the actual colour - powder which all artists paint are made of) a binder, and a carrier - usually a precipitated chalk, talc, or kaolin, china clay etc. Any of the 'chalks' are rendered almost transparent by fixative (a lightweight varnish). The pastel with less 'chalk' - the highly pigmented ones and the darks - contain a higher ratio of pigment and binder, and will not darken as much as the light (chalkier) ones. This is a general rule across all pastel brands - some are richer and creamier (Unison and Sennelier) and some are thinner and leave less of a mark - eg pastel pencils, Conte etc. The

higher the quality of the pastel - the less your paintings will darken with fixative - but they will usually darken to some degree. The 'binder' in your pastels will also have an effect on the very dark colours when fixed that tend to have a 'shiny' appearance.

How should you use Fixative

I usually explain the use of fixative thus: imagine you are painting the head of a tiger. You have finished the face and need to apply the whiskers. Now dragging a white or light pastel across all the colours already on the muzzle - you won't get a clean finish to your whiskers. So lightly 'spot' spray the muzzle - and you can get a cleaner whisker.

'Spot' spraying:

1) a useful method for repairing part of your painting. If you have to move an eye in a portrait (and I hope you never do!) - you would use a hog brush to remove as much pastel as possible and then 'spot spray' the area lightly. You might tear out a small hole in a piece of paper and spray through it.

2) In landscape - when building up layers of foliage in a dense undergrowth you might consider a light spot spray. If you are using a good support made for pastels it should definitely not be necessary to spray every layer! Just when you think the surface could do with a light refresh to take a lighter colour mark.

Why spot spray? Because you don't want to fix a beautifully painted sky - usually containing the higher 'chalk' content which will darken and the texture will also change.

3) Be aware of your paper colour. If you use a strong coloured paper and fix your painting - the paper colour will often dominate your painting - why? because the lighter pastel - contains more 'chalk' which will turn partly transparent when fixed.

The Big Misnomer I can't begin to count the amount of newbies to pastel who take the word 'fixative' on face value and believe that you paint your pastel picture - then at the end 'fix' it; believing as they do that a spray of fixative will stop the pastel from smudging. (It wont - you can still smudge your pastel with fingers after 'fixing'). Some even think that the fixative will mean no glass required when framing. Untrue.

The real key to using fixative - is to know what it will do for you and to understand what it wont do. Unfortunately this information isn't given on the tin! I know art teachers who don't give you the vital knowledge re fixative. One example being please don't fix indoors if you can avoid it; a class full of artists using fixative would be very unpleasant and a health hazard.

There is no 'use or not use' argument - use it when you need it. I had one spray can for nearly 17 years! What I would say is if you are using a lot of it - the chances are you need to rethink your techniques. It is toxic and it is *not* supposed to be used at the rate of one small can for maybe 2 or 3 pastel paintings.

* Don't run to your can of fixative if you have made a mistake and want to paint on top of it! Think of using a brush or a blade to remove the mistake first - and then see if you NEED the fixative.

* There is no point in using fixative to *finish* your painting - the idea of using it is '*in process*'; meaning when you use it, you know you will be adding pastel on top of it. It is not a liquid glass! You don't need to use it to put your work away in a drawer. You will still need a good pastel painting filing system - a way to keep your unframed work.

Fixative - use it only when it is necessary. It is just another tool.

