

What Colour Paper Should I use? **Is paper colour Important?**

For the Full Colour painting method

This is where the paper or surface is eventually covered. This question is still the one which bothers artists of some experience - let alone beginners. The full colour method of pastel painting is usually completed with a high percentage of soft pastels, so the advice I give with the benefit of teaching pastel for over 30 years (not just my own painting experience):

Criteria for choosing paper (substrate) colour:

1. What is the dominant colour of your painting?

Consider a typical green English landscape. The colour paper most people find hardest to use is 'green', why? It is difficult to balance your green pastels against a green background. The colour I usually advise = red or burgundy. Both of these colours are a form of complimentary colour to green, and both are to be found in the shadow areas. By using one of these colours just about every green pastel in your collection can make its mark.

2. Is your painting high key or low key. The question of Tone.

A painting which will be darker in tone than usual - consider using a darker paper, where it can be easier to bring out the lighter tones with lighter pastels. A painting which will be lighter and higher in key - think twice before using a white or light paper. In a high key painting the tonal values that do exist become quite important, and can be more difficult to control on

white paper. Why? Because pastels work from dark to light. The wonderful spectrum of colours you get from adding a lighter colour to a brighter colour (or a bright colour to a dark colour) is very difficult to replicate on light or white paper.

3. Are you seeking bright colour contrasts or a more gently harmonious effect.

For Contrast: Understand Colour Theory is a vital tool for artists in any subject or medium. For contrast, choose a paper which is the *compliment* to your painting. This applies when using red paper for a predominantly green (landscape/trees) painting. When painting Autumn - consider using a blue paper to show off the oranges. Or a purple surface to show off the golds. I favour warm coloured surfaces for most cool predominantly 'blue' or grey paintings.

For a *harmonious* 'analogous' effect - such as a gentle Lake Windermere scene on a misty day - I would perhaps hold back on too much paper contrast, or bright colour backgrounds.

So - if you are going to paint a bunch of daffodils - what paper colour would you use?

4. Is your paper or surface highly textured?

If so you will probably have the background showing through in places - some people choose paper colour knowing it will show through to good effect.

5. Do you use fixative to seal your layers of pastel?

If so - be aware that fixative renders the lightest pastels less opaque than usual - the cheaper pastels can appear quite 'transparent' and therefore the brighter colour papers may show through. This is why it is said that fixative 'darkens' a painting -

due to the effect of the chalk in lighter pastels appearing to be *dissolved* in effect.

So - Is Paper Colour Important?

Yes - if the paper colour is to be a visible component of your finished painting.

Yes - if you enjoy painting on a surface which is the complimentary colour.

Yes - If you are trying to get to grips with the variety of greens in the landscape.

Yes - If you are using pastel pencils for portraits - and dont use the full colour (covering the paper) method.

Yes - if you are a fan of fixing between layers.

BUT: without doubt it is the tonal value of the paper/support which is by far more important. How light or dark it is.

Why? Because a paper which is too light or too dark is a bigger battle than choosing 'the wrong' colour. In effect - if the tonal value of the paper is correct for your painting the colour is less important to the success of the painting. If you use a photo reference - you have probably already tried placing the photo on a variety of paper colours - and maybe 2 or 3 or more would do. Sometimes it just isn't a critical choice. Try painting the same painting on two different colours which may be close to each other on the tonal scale.

Consider opening a brand new box of pastels - eg. 70 landscape colours. Squint at the box - maybe half the colours will appear light, and the remainder will appear to be bright/dark. Of course the light ones stand out when you squint. SO think of it this way, your painting will consist of a mixture between dark and light pastels. So - particularly important for beginners: use a paper which shows off both the darker pastels and the lighter

ones. A mid tone (grey perhaps) to begin with. The only poor choice for a beginner is white (or very light cream etc). Why? Because so many of the light colour pastels in your box won't show up against white – and so half of your box is rendered ineffective against white - and you will probably need to use a disproportionate amount of dark pastels to even attempt at getting your tonal values correct.

White paper has put off more budding pastelists than I can count. And it is usually a sign to me that they have perhaps begun their pastel studies with a watercolour tutor. Why? Because in its simplest form pastels work from dark to light - the same as oils. (watercolours are the total opposite - they work from light to dark).

Using white paper means you are working in darks most of the time only to find your lights look too bright on white or won't show up at all. (For similar reasons oil painters prepare their canvas with a tone before painting - especially portrait painters.) However; black paper is a better choice simply because pastel works from dark to light - black paper means you might not have to use too much dark pastel - and every light or bright pastel will register against black.

Most failed paintings I have seen - have been because of choosing the wrong tone - not the wrong colour of paper. When is white paper useful? For Mixed media methods, or when a background colour - an underpainting - is going to be used first.

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