



American Portraits in Pastel

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with Sarah C. Ebel

*P*ortraits created using pastel crayons were a popular alternative to oil portraits in Europe and America from the mid 1700s to the early 1800s. Available in nearly all the same colors as oil paints, when drawn across paper the crayons left a smooth, powdery line, giving these portraits a light, airy quality.¹

Although executing a pastel portrait required a great deal of skill, the process took less time and used cheaper materials than oil portraiture. For example, James Sharples, Sr. (1751–1811) took about two hours to complete a pastel. He charged twenty dollars for portraits that portrayed a full face (Fig. 1), and fifteen dollars for profile portraits (Fig. 2).² In comparison, contemporary oil portraitist Thomas Sully (1793–1872) charged seventy dollars for a portrait painted over the course of two months in 1812.³ Artists enjoyed the use of pastel crayons because they resulted in quick likenesses. Sitters desired this medium because it was fashionable and, in comparison with oil portraits, more affordable.

When creating a pastel portrait the artist began with a sheet of paper—usually colored and with a slightly rough surface—attached to a wooden stretcher much like a canvas. He or she would then

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Fig. 1: James Sharples, Sr. (1751–1811),

Portrait of a Man, ca. 1795–1801.

Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont. 1957.1137.

This portrait was acquired with the portrait shown in figure 2. While the portraits are of the same size and rendered in a similar style, the differences in the positioning of these sitters, along with a lack of provenance, leads to the conclusion that this pairing was modern, rather than original.

Fig. 2: James Sharples, Sr. (1751–1811),

Portrait of a Woman, ca. 1795–1801.

Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont. 1957.1138.

The work of James Sharples, Sr. is differentiated from that of other members of his family by the fine execution of his sitters' bone structure and skin tones, as well as his use of a variety of poses.

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Fig. 3: John Singleton Copley (1738–1813),

Self-Portrait, ca. 1770.

Gift of Henry Francis du Pont. 1957.1127.

Fig. 4: William Joseph Williams (1759–1823),

Portrait of Effingham Warner At Five Years of Age, 1781.

Gift of Henry Francis du Pont. 1957.1145.

Two companion portraits of Effingham Warner's siblings, Sarah and Garrett Brass Warner, are not shown. Such family groups of pastel portraits were not uncommon.

render an outline of the sitter in pastel, graphite, or charcoal. Next, the pastels were carefully applied, either by brush or drawn on the surface of the paper. For each hue, the artist utilized a separate pastel crayon, as the colors become muddled when combined. Finally, the drawing would be smoothed with a blending tool called a "fitch" to create a unified whole. John Singleton Copley's (1738–1813) self-portrait exemplifies the range of exquisite detail and shading that could be achieved (Fig. 3).

Many American artists relied on traveling and networks of clients to obtain commissions. Pastelists in particular required a large network because they worked more quickly and thus moved through territories at a faster pace. Some artists, like William Joseph Williams (1759–1823), traveled from New York to the Carolinas seeking sitters (Fig. 4). Artists like James Sharples Sr. and his family of prolific pastel artists traveled from England to America to expand their business (Figs. 1, 2, 5).⁴ In contrast, some artists like Ruth Henshaw Bascomb (1772–1848) worked mainly within a single geographic area and knew the majority of their clients personally or through friends (Fig. 6).





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Fig. 5: Felix Sharples (1786–1844),
Portrait of a Man, ca. 1811–1824.
 Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont. 1957.1136.

Felix Sharples' work is differentiated from that of his father's by its soft-focus and blended appearance as well as his tendency to depict his sitters in a three-quarters view, rather than in profile or frontal portraits.

Fig. 6: Ruth Henshaw Bascomb (1772–1848),
Portrait of a Man, ca. 1828–1835.
 Gift of John A. and Judith Carpenter Herdeg in memory of Donald Fell
 and Louise Coolidge Carpenter. 2001.0036.
 Bascomb is only known to have created profile portraits.

When examining pastel portraits as possible additions to your collection, consider the condition of the portraits carefully. The fragile nature of these works results in their rarity in comparison with oil paintings. As pastel is very friable and flakes easily, be careful not to bend the paper or hold your pastels at an angle; this may result in surface damage and loss. Because of the nature of this medium, conservation is very difficult to undertake and pre-existing overdrawn or damage may be irreparable. Pastels should always be handled gently and should be stored flat when not hung for display.

Whether your interest in pastels stems from objects you have admired in museums or pieces you are considering adding to your art collection, we encourage you to examine these delicate and detailed works of art. A closer look can provide a wealth of information about



these portraits and their history.

For general reference on pastels consult Thea Burns, *The Invention of Pastel Painting* (Archetype, 2007) and Neil Jeffares' *Dictionary of Pastelists Before 1800* (Unicorn Press, 2006). @

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All images courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

1. Since the late 1600s, "color men" sold ready-made pastels. Although recipes for making pastels were widely available, most artists avoided this time-consuming task, preferring to buy their materials from commercial European manufacturers.
2. Katherine McCook Knox, *The Sharples, Their Portraits of George Washington and His Contemporaries; A Diary and Account of the Life and Work of James Sharples and his Family in England and America* (New Haven, 1930).
3. Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, and Stuart P. Feld, *American Paintings; A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (NY Graphic Society, 1965), 156–57.
4. While created by different hands, pastels drawn by members of the Sharples family share a similar style, palette, and size.