

Written Evidence from National Galleries of Scotland

Pastel is perhaps the most delicate and vulnerable medium used by artists since the 17th century. It is made by crushing pigments with white chalk and a binder such as resin - the ingredients are formed into a dough, then rolled into crayons. Soft or hard pastel can be achieved by varying the ratios of these ingredients.

The pastel medium is, of course, the most important element of any pastel artwork, however the support paper/card/parchment etc. must also be considered when assessing this form of artwork. Artists often 'roughened' the support paper in order for the pastel to adhere firmly, indeed some artists used pumice paper as their preferred support. This helps hold the pastel in place and reduces the likelihood of any loss.

Protecting the pastel artwork is the main consideration at all times whether storing, exhibiting or transporting the artwork. Appropriate mounting, framing and glazing must be used and specifically a glazing material with no tendency to produce static, as this may encourage pastel particles to detach.

If the artwork is to move to another institution, a full facilities report must be completed by the borrower and strict adherence to agreed standards must be guaranteed.

In my role as Senior Paper Conservator in the National Galleries of Scotland, I have, in the past twelve months, assessed two pastels for their suitability to travel for exhibition abroad. I have recommended declining the loan of a Sisley pastel to Switzerland and at the same time advised that a Degas pastel was fit to travel: firstly to an exhibition in Auckland and later to an exhibition in Copenhagen.

The Sisley work was declined because microscopic traces of white pigment could be seen on the inside of the glazing, which indicated a tendency for the pastel to detach from the surface of the artwork. It was decided that evidence of detached pastel particles was sufficient to decline the loan of the work.

The Degas showed no displaced or detached pastel particles – this, and an understanding of Degas' working methods led me to recommend that this artwork was fit to travel. On return from loan to both New Zealand and Denmark, no trace of detached pastel was visible. Degas often used fixatives between layers of pastel and frequently mixed the pastel with water, which lessens the likelihood of the pastel particles detaching. It might be worth recording that over twenty pastel works were loaned internationally to the exhibition in Copenhagen, held at the NY Carlsberg Glyptotek. I am not aware of any condition problems encountered by the artworks loaned to this exhibition.

The pastel artwork was packed into a custom-made box designed to protect the pastel from excessive vibration and any adverse environmental conditions

encountered en-route. The mode of transport for the Degas was an air-ride, environmentally controlled truck from the National Gallery of Scotland by road to Heathrow Airport followed by onward flights. I do not consider the time in the air on-board the aircraft to be a particularly vulnerable leg of the journey: I regard the road travel, the time spent in the Cargo Shed at the airport and the handling of the custom-made box potentially carries greater risk to the artwork. These risks are mitigated by ensuring the artwork is accompanied at every stage of the journey by an experienced member of conservation or art handling staff.

In summary, I would not recommend a broad-brush approach to assessing the suitability of pastel artworks for loan. Rather, every artwork should be independently assessed to consider the various factors which go towards making up the unique characteristics of this art form.

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Senior Paper Conservator
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