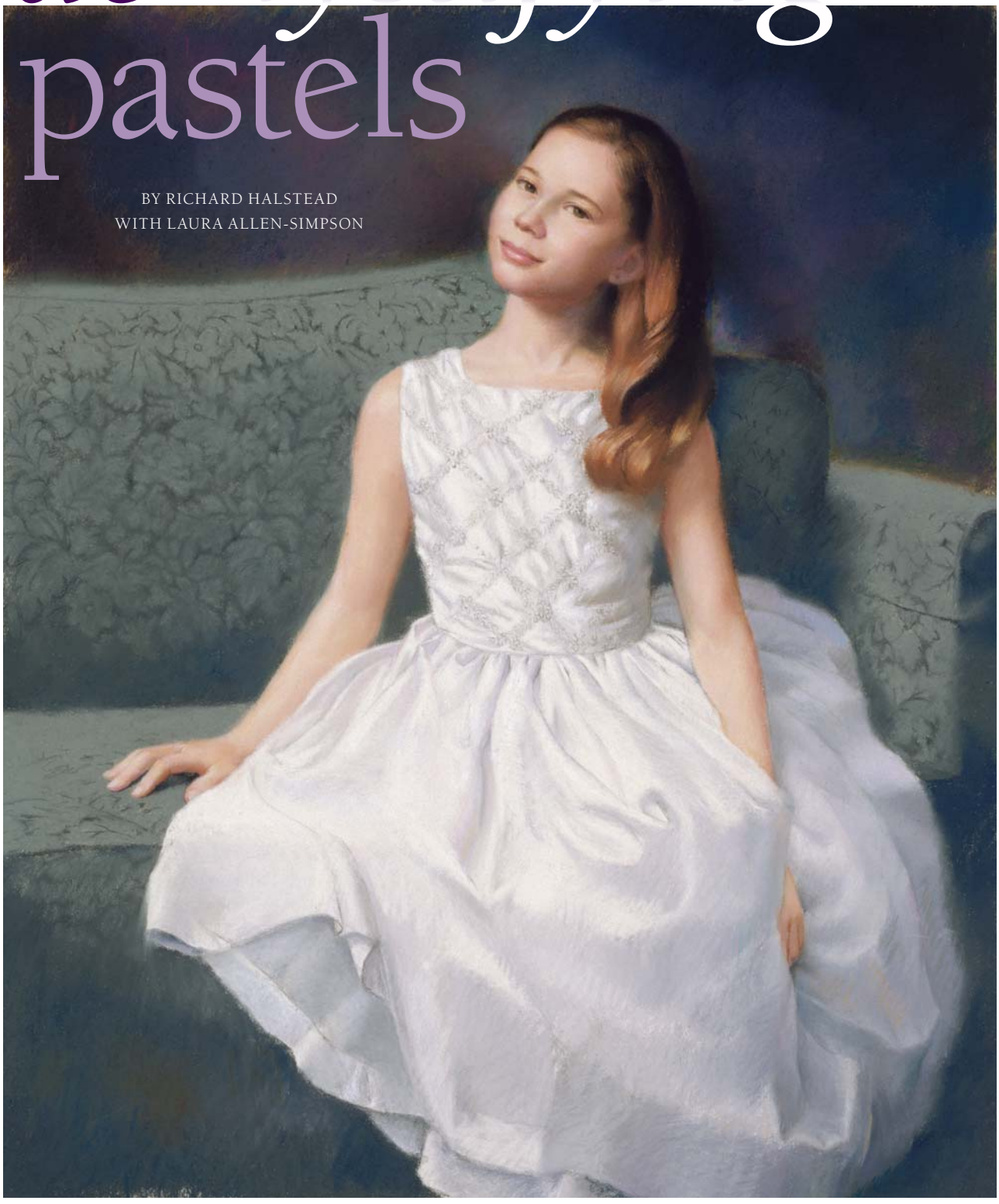
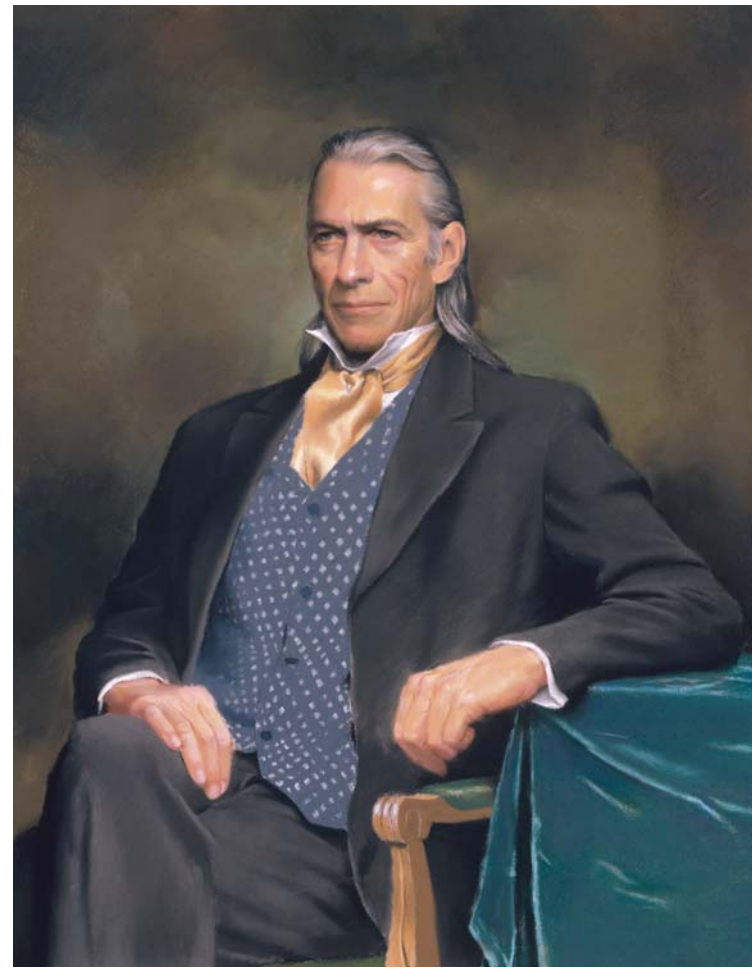
demystifying pastels

BY RICHARD HALSTEAD
WITH LAURA ALLEN-SIMPSON



Emily Nesler (32x27)

Find out why some rules regarding proper pastel practice are meant to be broken.



Allen Monroe as Andrew Jackson (38x31)

YOU'VE PROBABLY BEEN LEARNING rules about how to make art since you were old enough to hold a crayon. As you matured as an artist, defying some of those rules, such as "don't color outside the lines," and "grass is always green," was a liberating right of passage. But the arbitrary nature of some of the ideas expressed to you as absolutes may not have been as apparent as others; some may have slipped into your psyche without examination or challenge, quietly joining the ranks of your assumptions. It's important to address these assumptions because they so often become obstacles to an artist's development.

The Major Pastel Debates

A common example of a pastel "rule" that often goes unchallenged is the belief that it's essential to begin with a layer of hard pastels and follow up with soft pastels in subsequent layers. This approach does have its advantages: It more or less prevents the later layers from disturbing the first, allowing the colors to interact separately. The stable underpainting helps to maintain rich coloring in the final piece. That said, however, the rule is far from absolute.

You may defend it based on the premise that it follows the same principles as 'fat over lean' (oily over less oily) in oil painting. On the surface, this does appear to be a well-reasoned analogy. Upon closer examination, however, it falls apart. The reason for putting fat over lean in oil painting is because paint with less oil in it dries faster than oilier paint. Consequently, if you were to put a lean layer over a fat one, you would run the risk of that lean layer drying first and then cracking as the lower layer dried. But there's no drying factor in pastel painting and therefore no risk of the painting cracking should you fail to proceed with soft over hard.

Blending or not blending and smudging or not smudging are similar areas of debate about which pastel artists are often adamant, but these are really matters of personal taste that differ depending upon the materials used. On a smooth surface, for example, smudging might create a look that's too smooth or polished. On a coarse, sanded surface, on the other hand, not smudging at all might create too much of a textural effect to represent the delicate skin of a young woman. A mix of both techniques might create the perfect balance between smooth and coarse textures that could be especially suitable for, say, contrasting foliage against a sky. In other words, there are no absolutes.

Richard Halstead (www.halsteadportraits.com) founded the Halstead School of Portrait and Figure Art in 1984 after teaching at the Ontario College of Art and the American Academy of Art. His paintings appear in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute, the Illinois State Hall of Governors, Yale University, University of Toronto, University of Melbourne Australia and the Episcopal Diocese of New York. The Halstead School of Portrait and Figure Art (www.halsteadportraits/portraitschool.com) is located immediately north of Chicago in Evanston.

Painting Methods (22x36)
Here I've illustrated three different approaches to pastel application, demonstrating that there is never "only one way."

arsenal of approaches

There's never only one approach to painting. I'd like to offer three ways to begin a portrait that you may wish to add to your arsenal of application techniques:

First, you might model the forms with a series of simple, colored hatch marks that conform to the contours running away from the edge of the form as shown in the first illustration (on the left).

You might begin with large masses of light and dark values that you then refine to subtle expressions of form and likeness in later stages—as represented in the second illustration.

Alternatively, you can interweave lines of colors directly from your sticks and later, after the image becomes more apparent, blend—either by smudging or by working more pastel into the area directly from the sticks—to create a more unified and refined representation of the subject, as demonstrated in the third illustration.

Each of these methods is a suitable and effective way to start creating an image; each one of them can be applied on top of any of the others; and all of these and their variations are perfectly sound and permanent practices.

In fact, pastel is so flexible and forgiving that there are fewer technical absolutes for this medium than others. Yet, artists tend to pass along techniques that work for them as though they're rules that should always be strictly obeyed. Students, eager to gain some modicum of control over the medium, too new to be able to discriminate between an effective technique and a Rule for All Time, and awed by the prowess and authority of more experienced artists, often accept these dictates without question.

To be fair, it may be the case that translating effective techniques into hard-and-fast rules is just an inherent drawback of teaching. After all, teachers must speak with authority. New students want guiding principles. And so the dynamic between teacher and student leads more experienced artists to distill what works for them into rules of thumb and less experienced artists to forget the situational part of those "rules" while they're taking dictation.

A technique that's best or wisest for one pastel artist shouldn't necessarily become a technical dictum for all pastel artists. The one essential requirement in using pastels is that the colored "dust" adheres to the surface, or the ground. That's the long and the short of it. Ideally the artist chooses this surface for the effect it helps to create, but not even that is absolutely essential.

Furthermore, there are no mysterious or complicated processes that determine the permanence of the finished piece. It's the quality

Worth Repeating

ON TAKING RISKS

Taking artistic risks is not the same as merely allowing accidents to happen. Successful risk-taking is usually calculated. Anything that interferes with your concentration can hamper your ability to be calculating, intuitive and creative, and you must be all three.

Degas thought that the creation of great art required as much malice, as much cunning, as much daring as the perpetration of a crime. Plan accordingly.

— Margot Schulzke
Artist's Viewpoint June 2001

of the materials and care of the piece after it's done that determine how long it's preserved.

I'm not suggesting that artists should ignore logic or abandon their good sense. I'm not even recommending that they cast aside or dismantle systematic approaches that have proven successful. Instead, I'm recommending that artists consider whatever process they have adopted for creating a pastel painting to be just one way among many for doing so—not the only option and quite possibly not even the best approach for them.

Whatever Works

Whenever you stop yourself from trying something with pastels because you think you're not supposed to or you believe you can't, try plunging ahead anyway. Experiment with styles and techniques, mixing different methods—even overlapping your drawing and painting in the same creation.

The key to gaining the maximum benefit of pastels is in understanding their limitless range and then creating a hybrid of approaches that works best for you. Give yourself permission to test the lines that you have come to assume exist and should never be crossed. And if you need a rule, or maxim, to counter all those teachers whose messages are still in your head, try this one: Whatever works, works.

Laura Allen-Simpson is a writer and an editor with more than 25 years of experience in the field. In 2008, she rekindled her interest in art by taking classes at the Halstead School of Portrait and Figure Art. She now co-authors articles with her teacher, Richard Halstead.

Anne Goodman
(38x28)

Nate Judge
(28x18½)