SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Use Oil Pastels

Published: November 20, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction to Oil Pastels: A Versatile Medium for Artists

Oil pastels are a unique and vibrant art medium that bridges the gap between soft pastels and oil paints. They consist of pigment mixed with a non-drying oil and wax binder, resulting in a creamy, buttery texture that glides smoothly onto paper, canvas, board, or even glass. Unlike traditional soft pastels, oil pastels never fully dry or harden, which means they remain workable indefinitely—a feature that offers both creative flexibility and a few challenges. Whether you are a complete beginner or an experienced artist looking to expand your repertoire, understanding **how to use oil pastels**effectively can open up a world of expressive possibilities. This guide will walk you through everything from selecting the right materials to mastering essential techniques, layering, blending, and finishing your artwork.

Why Choose Oil Pastels?

Before diving into the practical steps, it is helpful to appreciate what makes oil pastels distinct. They are known for their intense color payoff, ease of application, and the ability to create both bold, opaque marks and delicate, translucent washes. You do not need solvents or water to blend them—you can mix colors directly on the paper using your fingers, a blending tool, or even by layering one color over another. Oil pastels are also relatively mess-free compared to oil paints, and they do not require a ventilated studio. Because they are water-resistant once applied, they can be combined with other media like watercolor or acrylic for mixed-media art. Mastering **how to use oil pastels** begins with gathering the right supplies.

Essential Materials for Oil Pastel Art

Choosing the Right Oil Pastels

Not all oil pastels are created equal. Student-grade pastels (like Crayola or Pentel) are more affordable but contain less pigment and more filler, making them harder to blend and layer. Artist-grade pastels (such as Sennelier, Holbein, or Caran d'Ache) have a higher pigment load and a creamier consistency, which makes them ideal for layering and achieving vivid results. As you learn **how to use oil pastels**, it is often worth investing in a small set of artist-grade pastels (12–24 colors) rather than a large set of student-grade ones. This gives you better performance and a wider range of mixing possibilities.

Selecting a Surface

Oil pastels need a surface with enough tooth (texture) to grip the waxy pigment. Smooth paper will cause the pastels to slide and may not hold multiple layers. Good options include:

- Pastel paper (sanded or textured side)
- Canvas (fine or medium grain)
- Cardboard (clean, non-glossy)
- Illustration board
- Watercolor paper (cold-pressed, 140 lb or heavier)

Avoid very smooth surfaces like printer paper or glossy magazine pages unless you intend to work thinly. As you

progress in **how to use oil pastels**, you may also experiment with wood, glass, or metal primed with gesso.

Additional Tools and Accessories

While you can create art with just pastels and paper, a few extras help:

- Blending tools: cotton swabs, paper stumps, soft cloth, or even your fingers (though clean hands are best).
- Fixative: Oil pastels do not smudge as easily as soft pastels, but a final fixative can protect the surface. Some artists use a spray varnish designed for oil pastels.
- Palette knife: For scraping back layers or applying pastel like impasto.
- Paper towel or rag: For keeping your fingers and tools clean.
- Masking tape or sketchbook: To secure paper and prevent movement.

Getting Started: Basic Techniques for Oil Pastels

Holding and Applying the Pastel

How you hold the oil pastel affects the mark you make. For broad, sweeping strokes, hold the pastel on its side and drag it across the paper. For fine lines and details, use the tip like a pencil. Apply gentle pressure for light colors and increase pressure for more opaque coverage. Experiment with different angles and pressures as you practice **how to use oil pastels**. Remember that oil pastels are soft and can break if you press too hard, so start lightly.

Layering and Blending

One of the biggest advantages of oil pastels is their ability to blend directly on the surface. Layering a lighter color over a darker one creates a mix—but be aware that applying a dark pastel over a light one can muddy the color. The general rule is to work from dark to light: lay down shadows and midtones first, then add highlights. Blend colors by rubbing gently with your fingertip, a cotton swab, or a paper stump. For smoother gradations, apply a base layer, then use a soft cloth to wipe and spread the pigment. This technique is especially useful for skies, water, or skin tones.

Sgraffito: Scratching Into Layers

Sgraffito is an Italian technique that involves scratching through a top layer of pastel to reveal the color underneath. Apply a thick layer of one color, then cover it with a contrasting thick layer. Use the tip of a palette knife, a toothpick, or the end of a brush to scratch lines or patterns. This creates beautiful textures and is a fun way to add detail, like tree bark or grass. It is one of the advanced moves in learning **how to use oil pastels** that yields dramatic results.

Blending with Baby Oil or Solvents

Although oil pastels are water-resistant, you can use a small amount of baby oil, mineral spirits, or odorless solvent to create a paint-like consistency. Dip a cotton swab or brush into the solvent, then gently stroke it over the pastel layer. The solvent dissolves the binder, allowing colors to mix smoothly into a wash. Use this technique sparingly and in a well-ventilated area. It works wonders for backgrounds or softening edges.

Advanced Techniques and Creative Approaches

Impasto: Thick, Textured Application

Oil pastels can be applied so thickly that they stand up from the surface. This is called impasto. Use the side of the pastel and apply heavy pressure to build up layers. You can also use a palette knife to scoop pigment from the pastel stick and spread it onto the paper. Impasto works well on sturdy surfaces like canvas or board. The resulting texture catches light and gives a sculptural feel to your work. As you explore **how to use oil pastels** for impasto, remember that thick layers take longer to "set" and may require a fixative to avoid smearing.

Scumbling and Hatching

Scumbling involves applying a thin, broken layer of a lighter pastel over a darker one by dragging the pastel gently at an angle. This creates a textured, optical mix. Hatching and cross-hatching—making parallel or intersecting lines—are excellent for shading and adding dimension without blending. These techniques allow you to create controlled gradients and are especially useful in detailed drawings. Practice them side by side as part of your **how to use oil pastels** skill set.

Combining with Other Media

Oil pastels are a great addition to mixed-media projects. They stick well to dried acrylic or oil paint, and you can draw over watercolor washes. Because oil pastels resist water, you can also use them for "resist" effects: draw with pastels on paper first, then wash over with watercolor or ink—the pastel will repel the liquid, leaving your lines intact. Experimenting with collage, ink, or charcoal alongside oil pastels can yield unique results.

Step-by-Step Project: Creating a Simple Landscape with Oil Pastels

Let's walk through a practical exercise to reinforce everything about **how to use oil pastels**. This landscape will focus on layering, blending, and sgraffito.

1. Choose a reference image or sketch lightly with a pencil on textured paper. A sunset over a field with a tree works well.
2. Start with the sky. Use a dark blue or purple pastel on its side for the top of the sky. Below that, apply a mid-tone blue, then orange, then yellow near the horizon. Blend each band with your finger or a tissue in a circular motion, keeping the horizon soft.
3. Add the sun or moon. Use a bright yellow or white pastel, pressing firmly. Blend outward slightly to create a glow.
4. Work on the land. For the field, use dark green or brown at the bottom, then layer lighter greens and yellows on top. Use short, vertical strokes to simulate grass. Blend lightly but keep some texture.
5. Draw a tree silhouette. Use black or dark brown pastel to draw a trunk and branches. Add leaves using small circles and dabs. Then, using sgraffito, scratch thin branches and highlights into the dark tree trunk with a toothpick.
6. Add foreground details. Use orange and yellow on the field to suggest flowers or sunlight. Sign your artwork in a corner with a thin line.
7. Set the piece aside. If you want to protect it, spray with a fixative or place a sheet of wax paper over the top before storing.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Muddy Colors

Blending too many colors together or using too much pressure can lead to dull, muddy hues. Always work from dark to light, and clean your blending tools between colors. Limit your palette to a few families per section. Understanding **how to use oil pastels** without creating mud is largely about patience.

Overworking the Surface

Because oil pastels never fully dry, you can keep adding and adjusting. However, too much manipulation can cause the paper's tooth to become saturated, and the pastel will stop adhering. At that point, you cannot add more layers. Try to plan your layers and use a fixative between stages if you need to build up thickly.

Smudging and Transfer

Finished oil pastel artworks can smudge easily, especially if stored improperly. Place a sheet of glassine or wax

paper between pages if you use a sketchbook. For framing, use a mat that keeps the glass away from the surface. Consider a spray varnish designed for oil pastels to lock the pigment.

Caring for Your Oil Pastel Artwork

Because oil pastels remain soft, they attract dust and can smear. After completing a piece, let it sit for a few days so the oils settle. Then, apply a thin layer of fixative (several light coats are better than one heavy coat). Store flat or upright in a portfolio with protective sheets. Avoid direct sunlight for long periods, as the pigments may fade over time, though artist-grade pastels are lightfast.

Finding Inspiration and Continuing Your Practice

The best way to improve your **how to use oil pastels**skills is to practice regularly. Try different subjects: portraits, abstracts, still life, or urban sketching. Watch online tutorials, join art communities, and experiment with surfaces. Each new project will deepen your understanding of how the medium behaves. Remember that mistakes are part of the process—scrape off a failed area with a palette knife or cover it with a new layer. The forgiving nature of oil pastels encourages bold experimentation.

Conclusion

Oil pastels offer an accessible yet sophisticated medium for artists of all levels. Their richness, blendability, and versatility make them a wonderful choice for anyone eager to express color and texture. By selecting quality materials, learning fundamental techniques like layering, blending, and sgraffito, and avoiding common pitfalls, you can create stunning works of art. As you continue to explore **how to use oil pastels**, remember that practice and play are your best teachers. So gather your pastels, choose a surface, and let your creativity flow—the world of oil pastels is waiting for your touch.

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