



## Colored Pencil Primer



Perhaps no other drawing medium has seen its stock rise so dramatically in recent years as colored pencil. The medium has only lately been adapted for use by fine artists, but colored pencil artworks are now purchased by collectors and exhibited in museums the world over. If you love drawing and love the feeling of a pencil in your hand, colored pencil might be worth exploring.

Colored pencil goes by several names, including *pencil crayon* and *crayon de couleur*. Whatever it's called the medium is typically composed of pigment or dye and a cellulose-gum binder compressed with a base of either paraffin, beeswax, vegetable gum

or oil into a hard, dry cylinder encased in a wood holder.

Although the colored pencil as we now know it is a fairly modern invention, evidence of these materials has been found in ancient Egyptian, Roman and Greek art, as well as in primitive art on cave walls. Similar materials were molded into crayon form in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1800s basic colors were first incorporated into wooden writing pencils. In the 1920s more and better pigments were introduced into their manufacture, but it was only in 2003 that the American Society for Testing and Materials published lightfastness standards for the medium, with which many manufacturers now comply.



**Sisters**

by Bill Vuksanovich, 2006, colored pencil and Nero pencil, 36 x 33. Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.



### Portrait

by Sherry Camhy, 1997, colored pencil on Mylar, 10 x 8.

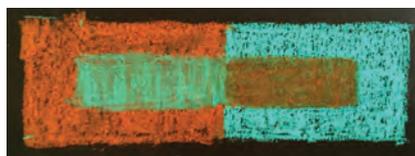
I drew this portrait on transparent Mylar. In the photo at left, the drawing was placed over black paper. At right, it was placed over red paper.

In response to growing demand, manufacturers now make numerous varieties of colored pencils. Grades range from student (the least expensive) to museum-quality (more expensive and longer lasting). Many sizes and shapes are available, as are various levels of transparency, hardness, solubility, erasability and water resistance. Some colored pencils are wax-based, others oil-based. Wax-based pencils tend to be less expensive but more difficult to erase, layer and blend than oil-based pencils. Wax- and oil-based pencils can usually be used together, and both come in a large range of translucent colors.

Colored pencils are lightweight and convenient for quick sketches but also capable of creating rich color, intricate details and complex painterly images. Here, we present a brief guide to this relatively new medium, with advice about color layering, choosing a surface and techniques that can be used to explore colored pencil's many surprising possibilities.

## COLOR AND LAYERING

Many pencil colors are made from several pigments combined into one homogenized color and then given imaginative descriptive names. It is an advantage of the medium that the



Swatches of yellow-orange and blue-green colored pencil layered over each other on (from top) white, black and blue paper.

colors are premixed and consistent; the accompanying disadvantage is that it can be difficult to find a pencil of the exact color you need. Other colors are achieved through *layering*, placing one color over another until the result comes as close as possible to the desired color and value.

The challenge, then, is to know the effect that layering particular colors will produce. What will an intense, warm, medium-value yellow-orange look like when layered over a cool, light blue-green on black paper? The answer in any given case depends on the individual elements of each pencil's color, such as hue, value, intensity, temperature and opacity. You can always test pencils on a surface similar to the one you'll be using for your finished drawing, and with experience you'll become better at predicting the results of layering different colors.

But it also helps to know some broad principles of color layering. A few of the basics:

- Layering complementary colors darkens both colors and reduces their intensity.
- Pressing harder intensifies a hue but does not darken it.
- You can darken a color by layering its next-darkest neighbor over it, for instance, purple over red. Use dark brown or dark blue before black, and avoid leaving black as the top layer of any color.
- To lighten a color, layer over it with a lighter hue of the same color before resorting to white.
- To intensify a color, blend it using a tortillon or stump.
- Burnishing any color with white will make it lighter, shinier, cooler and hazier.

The number of layers possible with wax-based colored pencils is limited by the amount of wax buildup that occurs in the layering process. At a certain point the wax surface will not allow more pigment to adhere to it, although thin amounts of workable fixative can

# MATERIAL WORLD



Colored pencil scribbles on black paper.

be applied to create a new surface. Wax buildup may lead to “wax bloom” (a hazy gray film) around 4 to 7 days after a drawing is finished. This can usually be buffed away, but it may return unless you protect the drawing with fixative. Fixatives alter some colors, so before you apply it to your drawing, you may want to do a quick test by spraying half of a test sheet, letting it dry and comparing the sprayed and unsprayed portions.

## SURFACES

Colored pencil can be used on a range of surfaces. A smooth surface invites sharp detail and delicate color. A rough surface will hold more pigment. A medium-white surface gives the fine grainy texture often associated with colored pencil. Toned paper intensifies color harmonies. Watercolor papers make it possible to add wet media. Illustration board, prepared wood and canvas allow colored pencil drawings to more closely resemble glossy oil paintings.

One especially versatile option is translucent Mylar. A drawing done on Mylar can be exhibited with light flowing through the image or mounted on

different toned backings to produce different effects. You can create a basic value drawing on one side of a sheet of Mylar and then add color to the other side. Multiple layers of Mylar images can be matted together with interesting results. You can also use Mylar to

test colors by placing a Mylar sheet on top of your drawing and experimenting with different colors, allowing you to preview the results of a color mixture without risk to your drawing.

## COLORED PENCIL TECHNIQUES

### *Sgraffito*

When a surface is covered with layers of wax-based colored pencil, a scratch-board or *sgraffito* technique is possible. Carefully use a razor blade or sharp tool to scratch through the top layer of pencil to redraw and create highlights and textures by revealing the layers of pencil or the original surface below.

### *Embossing*

You can make grooves in the surface of the drawing using a pointed chopstick, the sharpened end of a wooden paintbrush handle, a metal skewer or a fingernail. These impressed marks will remain blank and crisp when the areas surrounding them are gently covered with colored pencil.

### *Resist*

Many colored pencils are water resistant. If you apply them to part but not



**Homage to Leonardo**

by Dennis Angel, 2014, colored pencil, 40 x 22.

all of a drawing, you can then apply watercolor, ink or other wet media, which will be absorbed only in those areas that lack water-resistant pencil.

### ***Masking***

Applying artist tape or painter's tape around an area to keep it clear of color results in crisp edges when the tape is removed.

### ***Encaustic Blending***

Resting a drawing made with several layers of wax-based colored pencil on a warm surface such as a hot water bottle, heating pad or encaustic-painting device will soften the wax. You can then use a paint pusher, blender or finger to manipulate the color with painterly results.

### ***Solvent***

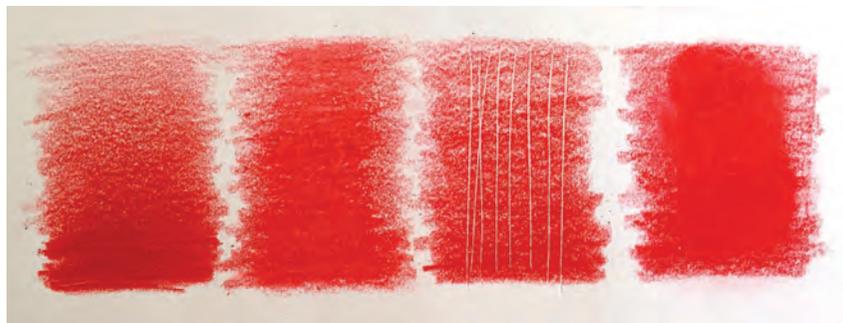
Oil-based colored pencils make it easier to use more levels of intense color. The layers can be safely



**Monkey**

by Sherry Camhy,  
1996, colored pencil,  
15 x 15.

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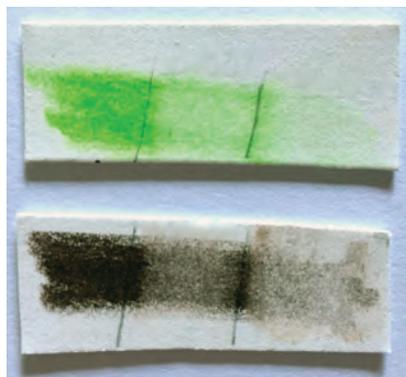


Four swatches of red oil-based colored pencil. The swatches were, from left to right, intensified by drawing with strong pressure, burnished with a colorless blender pencil, drawn over impressed lines, and spread with turpentine.

smoothed, mixed and spread thick or stretched thin with the use of blenders and solvents. These include turpentine and mineral spirits alone or combined with cold-pressed linseed oil, as well as Liquin. If using solvents, your surface must first be protected with gesso, rabbit-skin glue or gelatin size. (To prepare a gelatin size, soak half a package of gelatin in one pint of water, heat slowly for about two hours, and apply at room temperature to any absorbent surface. Wait six or more hours before use.)

## ***Erasing***

Erasing is an iffy option with colored pencil. Wax-based pencils are usually more difficult to erase than oil-based ones. To allow flexibility, it's often best to begin an image by establishing the composition with the tentative use of a middle-value colored pencil—avoid starting with graphite.



Oil-based pencils (top color strip) are often more erasable than wax-based pencils (bottom strip).



## **Yellow Leaf**

by Sherry Camhy, 1997, colored pencil on card-board, 24 x 20.

Rubbing with a kneaded eraser will often smear pigments, possibly making a problem worse, although with practice that smudging technique can lead to pleasant effects. A kneaded eraser can be used to lift excess color from an area by stretching a clean eraser thin, placing it gently down on the area and quickly pulling it up. Frisket film, Scotch tape and making tape work similarly, but artist tape is safest. A plastic or electric eraser may remove enough pigment for the drawing to be reworked. If the artwork has been done on heavy prepared paper or board, an area can be sanded and resurfaced. ❖

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