

Fixatives

There are cases both for and against the use of fixatives. When used correctly, fixatives can be of great benefit.

Workable fixatives, when used during the process of painting, help to prevent smudging and put a stop to particles of pastel from coming loose. It is helpful when you want to add extra layers and it is an excellent aid when you want to add fine details and finishing touches.

Fixed pastels and charcoal are safer to handle and transport before and after framing. Fixative is always applied when a conservator works on a pastel painting to protect and lengthen the life of the piece. The use of fixative does not remove the need to always frame pastel paintings behind glass, with a suitable matboard and/or spacers to keep the glass away from the surface of the painting. Note that glass alternative (Perspex) is not suitable, as being plastic it is electrostatic and therefore attracts pastel particles to it. Always advise your framer of whether-or-not the painting has been sprayed with fixative. We recommend you discuss the specific framing needs of your art with your picture framer who can advise of the best options.

Fixative may darken and deaden the colours because when pastel particles are over-wetted they become flattened. Subtle tonal variations and details are soon lost if they are saturated with fixative. As with all art products, you will be best served by those of best quality – so choose the best quality you can afford, and always follow the instructions on the can. Holding the can too close may blow loose pastel pigment off the support.

Without fixing, pastels on paper remain very vulnerable to any knock or vibration, which will cause some of the dry pigment to drop off. Unfixed pastels are easily smudged and will often shed no matter how carefully they are handled – and will continue to shed even when framed.

As with other aerosols, always use spray-on fixatives with care. Always use in a well-ventilated area and follow the instructions on the can to prevent fixative runs or a blocked nozzle.

Options to using fixatives in the standard way include spraying the back of the support paper so that the fixative soaks through to hold the lower pastel layers without affecting the top layer. Also, you can spray the next-to-last layer of pastel to leave the final layer fresh.

Another alternative is to lay a large piece of tracing paper on a board over the pastel painting and press down hard to embed the pastel into the paper support. Or you could try leaving a completed painting on a shelf with good air circulation for 3 – 4 weeks to allow the natural humidity of the air to “fix” it.

Artists are sometimes tempted to use hairspray as a fixative. Some hairsprays will have the same ingredients as art fixatives, but be wary of the dispersal system. The nozzle or sprayer may not spray evenly and the formula may not deliver as a fine mist. Also, be aware that many hairsprays contain hair conditioner, which is usually comprised of natural or synthetic oil. This conditioner could leave grease spots on your art. The oils to avoid are dimethicone, silicone, anything labelled as “oil” or “lubricant”, vitamin A or E (both are oil-based), and anything ending in glycol. Finally, many hair sprays will, in time, yellow and flake off, leaving the artwork in a deteriorated condition. For all these reasons, we do not recommend the use of hairspray as a fixative.

“Friend or Foe?” As with all art products, it comes down to knowing the characteristics of the materials you are using. Get to know your art materials – practise pieces are always a good idea when using products/brands new to you. Then you will be able to manipulate the material’s qualities to get the result you really want.

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