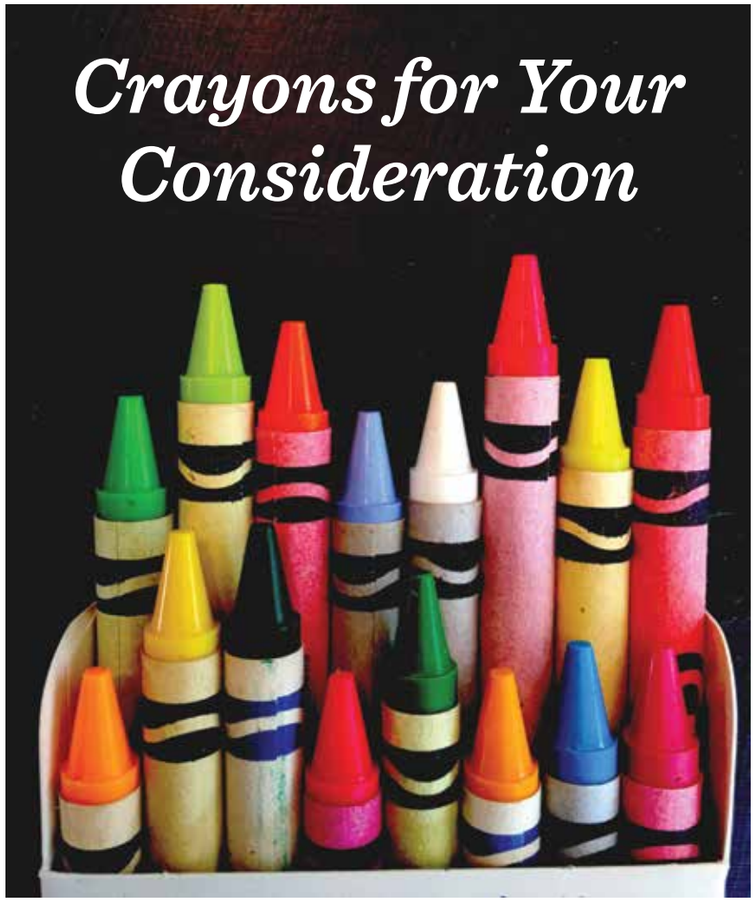
MATERIAL WORLD

Getting the most out of drawing media

BY SHERRY CAMHY



What are crayons? It's not surprising if the image that immediately pops into your mind is the memory of the crayons you had as a child. What is surprising to learn is how long crayons have been around and how early ones evolved into the sophisticated archival drawing and painting media that exist today. Crayons are not only for kids.

Crayon is more of a category than a medium proper. We can define *crayon* as any dry medium (including charcoal, graphite, clay, chalk or pigment) combined with a binder (such as gum Arabic, resin, paraffin, soy or beeswax, oil or grease) molded into a solid form to be applied directly to a surface. In this installment of "Material World" we'll discuss the distinctions between several types of crayons and their uses for fine artists.

HISTORY

Although the word "crayon" began to appear in literature around the mid-1600s, no one is quite sure how far back in history crayon-like materials were used. Charred sticks lifted from a cave dweller's cooking fire can be thought of as the first crayons. The scorched wood used for drawing on stone may or may not have been warm or splattered with animal fat, but the burnt charcoal made dark marks that adhered to cave walls. The results were crayon-like images.

Centuries later, in the 1400s, solidified cylinder-shaped sticks made of charcoal and oil began to be used by artists, and crayons have existed as a drawing tool in various forms ever since. Museum visitors are often somewhat taken aback when they look at drawings by artists ranging from Raphael to Mary Cassatt to Pablo Picasso and find "crayon" noted as the medium. You might at first think they were created with charcoal or chalk, But on closer inspection the marks appear to be darker, bolder, sharper and less matte than expected because of the oil, wax or hardened grease added to the essential elements of the drawing implements. It's those additional ingredients that cause the medium to slip into the crayon category alongside Conté, grease pencils and lithographic crayons.

Early in the 20th century, wax-based crayons started being produced and marketed for children. In 1903, the first box of Crayola crayons, containing eight colors, could be purchased for a nickel. The crayons came sharpened, neat and ready to be used on a blank sheet of paper or in a coloring book. Over the years Crayola's line expanded to include more than 100 colors with names like "Blizzard Blue" and "Outrageous Orange," and Crayola's iconic paper-wrapped crayons still dominate popular perception of the medium. Today more than 8,000 crayons are manufactured every minute, with Crayola alone producing around 3 billion crayons a year. Many adults who grew up with crayons are revisiting the medium through the wildly popular phenomenon of adult coloring books.

My Sunshine House
by Sherry Camhy, 2015, Crayola crayons, 20 x 16.

But for artists who want to look beyond those flip-top Crayola boxes for something more archival and suitable for use with other fine-art media, there is a world of possibilities to explore. Options include Cray-Pas, crayon pencils, encaustics, water-soluble crayons and oil pastels.

WAX CRAYONS

Children's crayons were designed to be safe, neat and inexpensive. They are made more of wax than pigment, and the pigment used is not of the best quality. Wax crayons' colors are often pale, and mistakes are not easily corrected.

Art-materials manufacturers have realized there is a market for high-quality, archival crayons suitable for fine artists. One such product is Cray-Pas, a line of crayons that combine characteristics of pastel and traditional wax crayons. They're composed of better pigments than children's crayons and use a combination of oil and wax as binder.

Other high-quality crayons have arrived on the scene in recent years, although many of the inherent limitations of wax crayons remain unchanged. It's easy to make clean lines, but shading smoothly is a challenge. Mistakes are easy to make and difficult to correct. Crayon colors are generally not mixed but rather just chosen—mixing additional hues and tints, so essential with paint, is problematic with crayons—and no matter how many colors are provided, the right one sometimes cannot be found. Layering is also difficult, because the rapid buildup of wax makes it hard for colors to be placed one on top of the other.

Fortunately, artists excel at turning apparently limiting features of art materials to creative ends. In this tradition, some artists utilize a *resist technique* combining crayon and watermedia, taking advantage of the fact that wax is water-repellent and that wet media will slide over a waxy area but soak into any part of an absorbent surface left uncoated. To try this technique, draw with wax crayons on watercolor paper, then apply any water-based medium over the drawing. The fluid will not adhere to the areas protected with wax but will fill in the unsealed absorbent spaces, creating striking results.

Secret Garden
by Sherry Camhy, 2015, wax crayon, 10 x 8.

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ABOVE
Study in watercolor crayon.

RIGHT
Encaustic crayon blocks.

CRAYON PENCILS

Pencils can be considered crayons of sorts—colored pencils and black pencils with oil or wax binders are actually called "crayon pencils" in Canada and Europe. (The terminology can be confusing. For example, a Stabilo pencil, meant for use on surfaces such as metal or glass, is sometimes called a "crayon.") These types of pencil-crayons are often found in the craft sections of art stores. They can be sharpened to fine points for details, and they make remarkable darks, perfect for the pupils of eyes and strands of hair. But be careful, and introduce dark accents with caution. They can unexpectedly unbalance a carefully established range of values, and their marks are not easy to blend or erase.

ENCAUSTICS

Although wax binders add strength, gloss and glow to pigments, they also make the results stiff and hard to manipulate. In order to turn this potentially negative feature into a positive, artists since ancient times have experimented with heated wax. Around the 5th century B.C. Greek artists warmed the cold beeswax binder they added to their pigments, using heat to make the results soft and fluid. *Encaustic* techniques—in which melted wax is applied and then fused to form a solid surface—were used as early as the 1st century A.D. by Greek and Roman artists to create funeral portraits that have remained remarkably fresh and brilliant throughout the ages.

During the 20th century several factors combined to renew interest in encaustic. One was the availability of safe, portable heating devices. Another was high-quality, commercially manufactured crayon-like blocks designed specifically for the encaustic process. Jasper Johns, among others, became enchanted with the thick, rich, translucent simmer of encaustic crayon color, and his work inspired many others.

To experiment with the encaustic process in a simple inexpensive way, unwrap any wax crayons you have on hand and melt them with a candle, or separate the different colors into metal containers and warm them on a heat-controlled grill. You can apply the melted crayons onto an inflexible absorbent surface with palette knives, brushes or by pouring them straight onto the surface. A hairdryer can sometimes be used to rewarm wax to manipulate it further. Experiment, but remember to take care when working with a flame and hot wax.

Kirstin in Knit Gown
by Steven Assael, 2012, colored crayon with graphite, 14 x 11½.

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WATER-SOLUBLE CRAYONS

In *water-soluble* or *watercolor crayons*, emulsifiers are added so that the crayons behave like regular wax crayons when dry, but yield intense transparent colors that can match even the best traditional watercolors when wet. You can apply them on a dry surface then brush them with water, or you can draw straight onto a wet surface for quite different effects. Pigment can also be gathered off of a crayon's tip with a brush and applied like traditional watercolor.

OIL PASTELS

Watercolor crayons are one way to merge drawing and painting, and Picasso envisioned another—a crayon made of oil paint. In 1947, Picasso declared, "I want a colored pastel that I can paint on anything, wood, paper, canvas, metal, et cetera, without having to prepare or prime the canvas." Two years later, in answer to his request, "oil pastel crayons" arrived on supplier's shelves in an impressive range of colors.

Oil pastels have a glossy painterly look, with a luminous glow all their own, but they do not smell like oil paint, are not messy and leave no brushes to clean or wasted paint to be thrown away. Artists can simply stop and start again when inspired. Unlike regular matte pastels, they are not dusty and need no fixative.

Give crayons a try. By drawing with clean sticks of pigment, you may find yourself re-discovering a pleasure you first knew when you were very young. ❖

Henry
by Sherry Camhy, 1990,
oil pastel, 20 x 16.