

Pastel

Artists Getting Their Hands Dirty

What Are Pastels?

A pastel consists of pure powdered pigment and binder in a stick. It's basically the same pigment that is used in all art mediums. In appearance, it's sort of a cross between a stick of chalk and a crayon. They are held in the same way that you would hold a pencil, crayon or paint brush. Pastels come in 4 forms: [hard pastels](#), [soft pastels](#), [pastel pencils](#), and [oil pastels](#) (these link to Blick Art Materials, and if you make a purchase I get a small commission that helps [support this site](#)). The hardness or softness of a pastel is determined by the amount of binder in the stick. Soft pastels have less binder and more pigment. They normally have a rounded shape. Hard pastels are usually rectangular and have more binder to keep the stick together. Each has different qualities and creates different effects. For example, soft pastels are easy to smudge and blend, whereas hard pastels are good for creating tight, precise details. Pastel pencils are pastels that are encased in wood, allowing for less mess and more control over details. They can be easily blended with regular hard or soft pastels. Oil pastels are great for creating painterly effects, but their wax binder means they're incompatible with other pastel types.

History of Pastels

We are all familiar with the 'chalky' substance known as pastel – many children use it as their first introduction to art creation – but what exactly is it?

Renaissance masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1510) and Michelangelo (1475-1564), used natural chalks for drawing, and it was from this that pastel developed. Originating in Northern Italy in the 16th century, it was produced from pure powdered pigments mixed with enough gum Arabic, fish or animal glue to bind them.

Initially, pastel was only available in red, black and white – a far cry from today. There are now more than 1600 different hues and shades available, all of which claim to have an almost limitless shelf-life.

- http://www.sennelier-colors.com/en/Pastels-ecu_89.html

First manufactured in the 16th century, pastel quickly found approval with many of the iconic masters of the day, including the German-born Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543), who settled in London in 1532 and received the patronage of Henry VIII.

However, it was from the mid-18th century in Britain that pastel truly came into its own. At that time, members of affluent society deemed it the very height of fashion to have their images captured in 'crayon painting', as pastel was then called. Leading exponents of the medium included names such as Daniel Gardner (1750-1805), John Russell, RA (1745-1806) and Francis Cotes, RA (1726-70), who is regarded as the father of English pastels. These artists could charge their clientele much the same prices as portrait painters working in oil.

Fashions came and went and, by around 1820, pastel fell from favor. Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758-1838), one of the great antiquarians of his day, considered pastel 'quite unfashionable'. Few professional artists used it and it became very much the domain of the amateur.

In some ways it is ironic that pastel has for so long been used by amateurs, because technically it is very difficult to master successfully. In the hands of a skilled exponent it is the most poetic and responsive of media.

The suppression of pastels was relatively short-lived. In the late 1860s Edgar Degas (1834-1917) started to use it. It is he who is generally recognized as having transformed the pastel from a sketching tool into a core artistic medium. It was not long before other greats such as Gauguin, Matisse, Monet, Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec were using pastel with huge success.

In Britain, pastel's reincarnation came in 1888, when the first London exhibition devoted to the medium was mounted. Although the show was dominated by French examples, British art was represented by artists such as George Clausen (1852-1944) and Bernard Sickert (1863-1932).

This event, coupled with a similar, much bigger show the following year, certainly inspired the art world - so much so that, in 1890, the Society of British Pastellists was founded. However, the Society's inaugural exhibition was not well received by the art critics – The Times described some of the exhibits as 'absolute jokes'. The demise of the Society came soon after.

That said, pastel remained a favorite medium of many professional artists and, in 1898, the Pastel Society was born. It flourished, and today, with over 50 members, the esteemed Society continues to promote the very best. It is undoubtedly a major force in the growing awareness and appreciation of the medium.

Throughout the 20th century leading artistic lights such as Augustus John (1878-1961) and Roger Hilton (1911-1975) have experimented with pastel. And this journey of discovery continues today. Some of Britain's most revered artists use pastel – Paula Rego (b.1936), Peter Howson (b.1958) and Royal Academicians Diana Armfield (b.1920), Elizabeth Blackadder (b.1931), Bernard Dunstan (b.1920) and Ivor Abrahams (b. 1935) are but a small selection.

Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757)

Rosalba Carriera was a [Venetian Rococo](#) painter. In her younger years, she specialized in [portrait miniatures](#). It is for this that she was able to build a career in portraiture. Carriera would later become known for her [pastel](#) work, a medium appealing to Rococo styles for its soft edges and flattering surfaces. She is remembered as one of the most successful women artists of any era. Carriera's mother taught her the art of lace making, but the artworks she became famous for were a result of her own self learning. Despite this, there is much speculation surrounding her education in art. It is said that the French painter Jean Steve encouraged her to make miniatures on ivory to decorate the lids of snuffboxes.^[7] Some also claim that she received initial instruction in oil technique from the Venetian painter [Giuseppe Diamantini](#).^[13] Despite this, Carriera would share her talents with her sisters Giovana and Angela and later in life had female students as [Marianna Carlevarijs](#), [Margherita Terzi](#) and [Felicita Sartori](#)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= VJWBn7fxcs>







Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789)

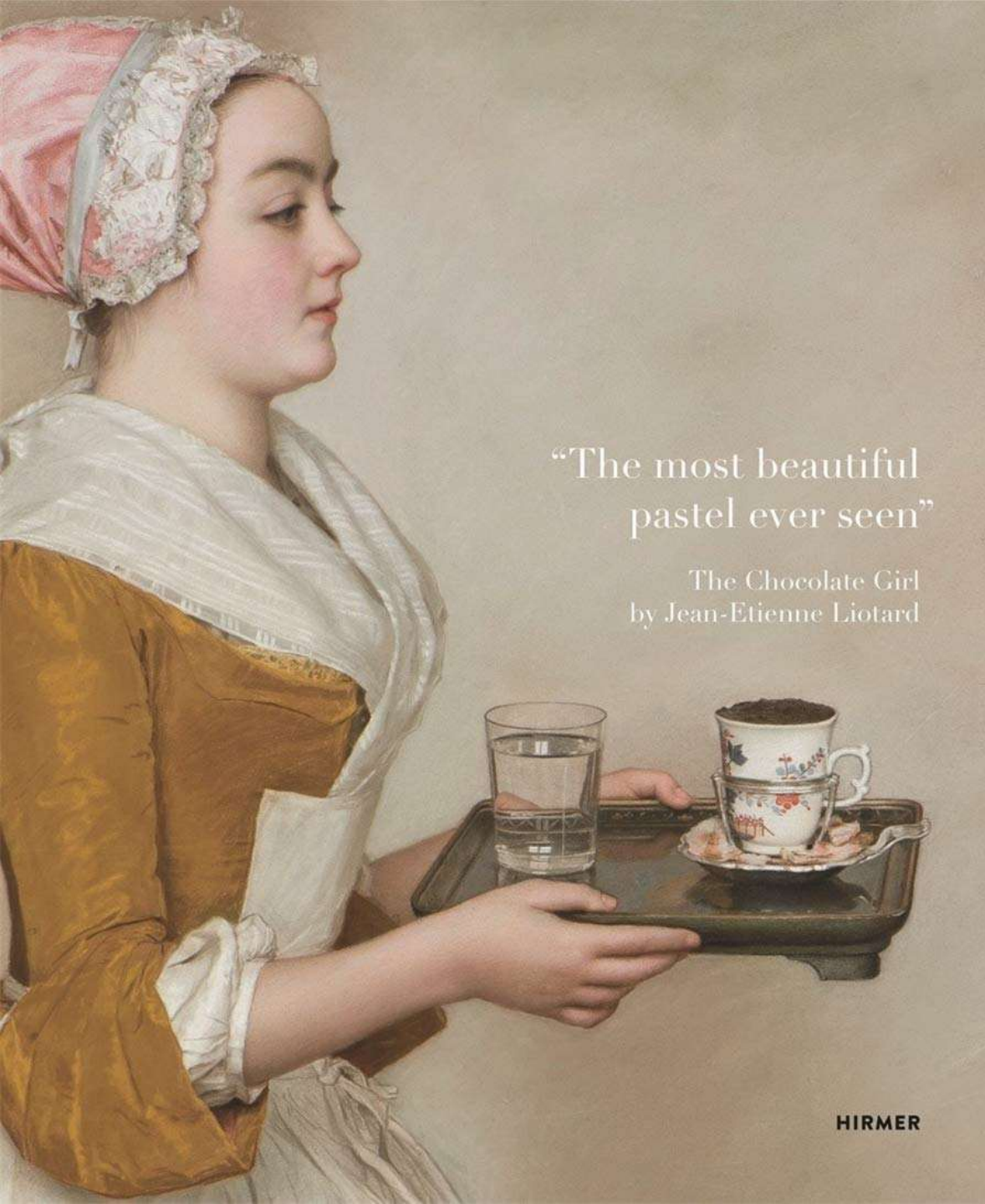
Jean-Étienne Liotard was a Swiss painter, art connoisseur and dealer. He is best known for his portraits in pastel, and for the works from his stay in Turkey.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkIJ9l1huqY>









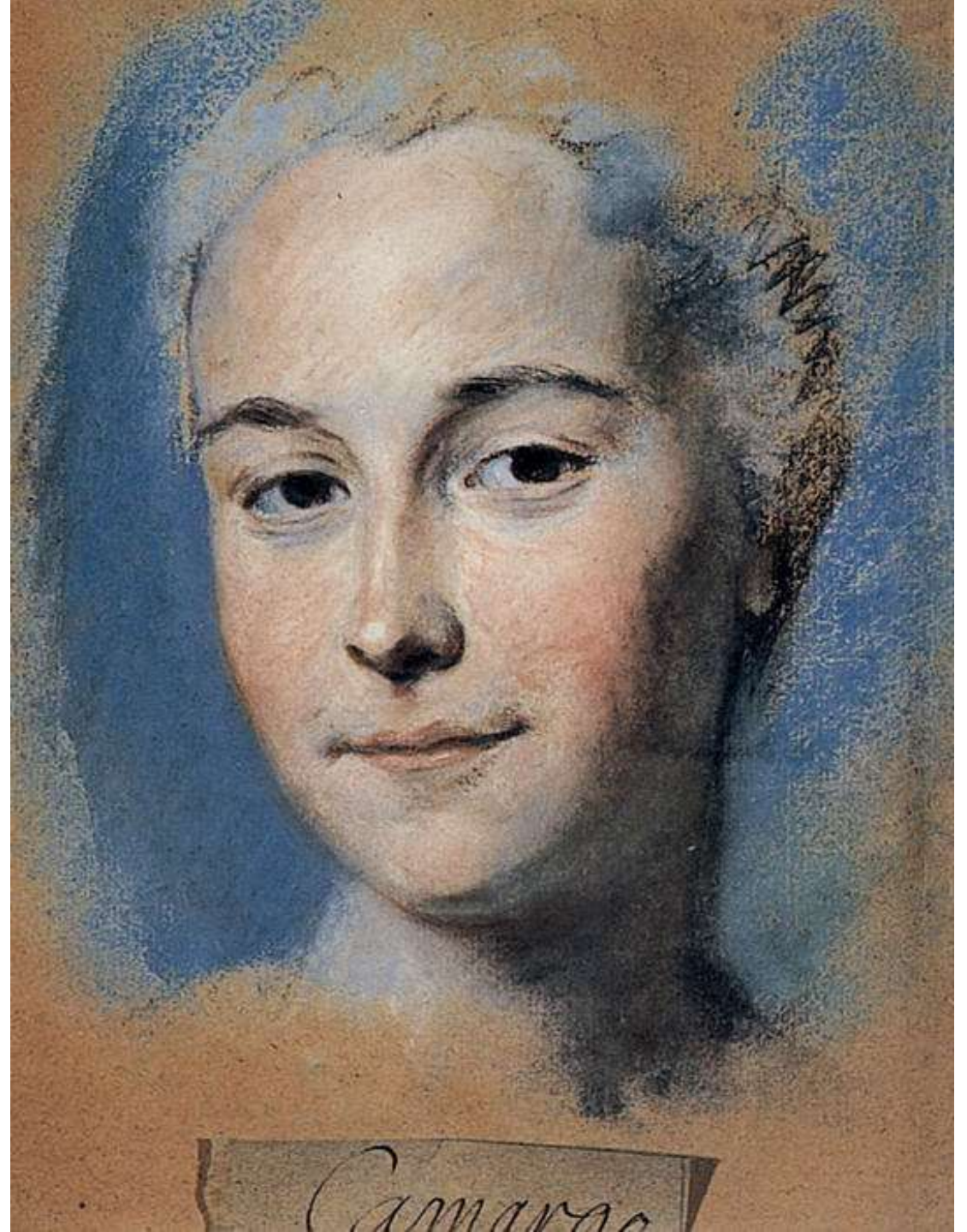




Maurice-Quentin de La Tour (1704-1788)

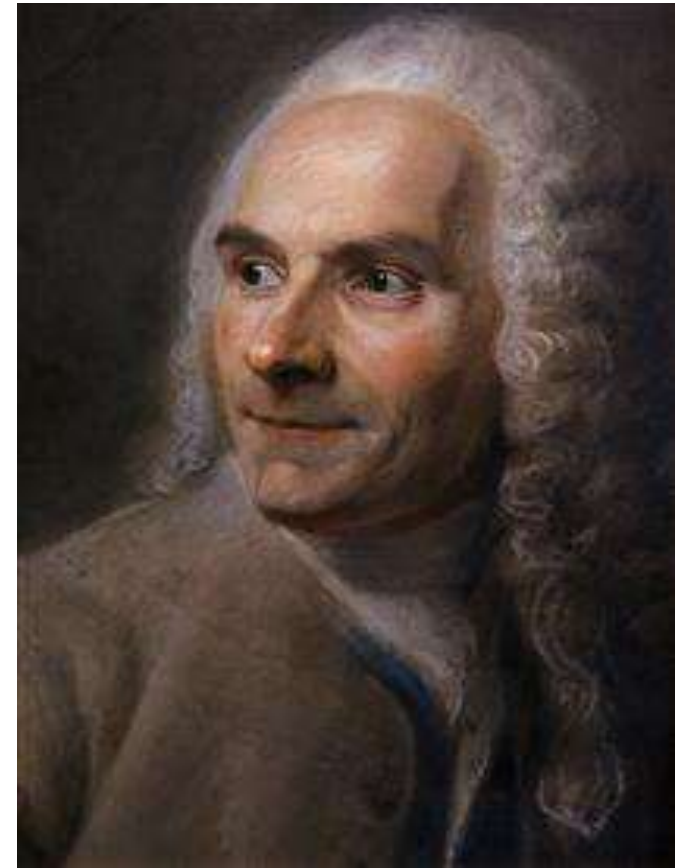
Maurice Quentin de La Tour was a French Rococo portraitist who worked primarily with pastels. Among his most famous subjects were Voltaire, Rousseau, Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRMPhvW31mc&t=35s>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usG5hifmRK8>









Jean Francois Millet (1814-1875)

Millet is considered the first artist to draw with pastel aside from painting with the medium. More or less 90 artworks on his name are all made from pastel paints; his collections promise the perfect mixing of pastel paints that produce their rich and vibrant colors in different applications and techniques.

- *His popular pastel artworks include:*
- The Angelus (1857-59)
- Ploughing a Lonely Furrow (1856 – 1861)
- Dandelions (1867-68)
- The Gleaners (1857)
- Autumn Landscape with A Flock of Turkeys

From 1865-1869 Millet painted almost exclusively in pastel for a collection that would eventually include 90 works. With this collection, the artist explored the possibilities and limits of the medium. He was one of the first to really draw with pastel and use broken strokes of color, rather than blending the colors extensively the way many early pastellists did.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5w_ObRLlIFI













Paul César Helleu (1859-1927)

Paul César Helleu was a French oil painter, pastel artist, drypoint etcher, and designer, best known for his numerous portraits of beautiful society women of the Belle Époque. He also conceived the ceiling mural of night sky constellations for Grand Central Terminal in New York City.

Helleu made his last trip to New York City in 1920 for an exhibition of his work, but he realized that the Belle Époque was over. He felt out of touch, and shortly after his return to France, he destroyed nearly all of his copper plates, retiring to family life. While planning for a new exhibition with Jean-Louis Forain, he died of peritonitis following surgery in Paris, in 1927 at age 67. Among many of Helleu's friends was Coco Chanel, who picked beige as her signature colour upon the advice of the artist the colour of the sand on the beach of Biarritz in the early morning. Both his son Jean Helleu and his grandson Jacques Helleu became artistic directors for Parfums Chanel.

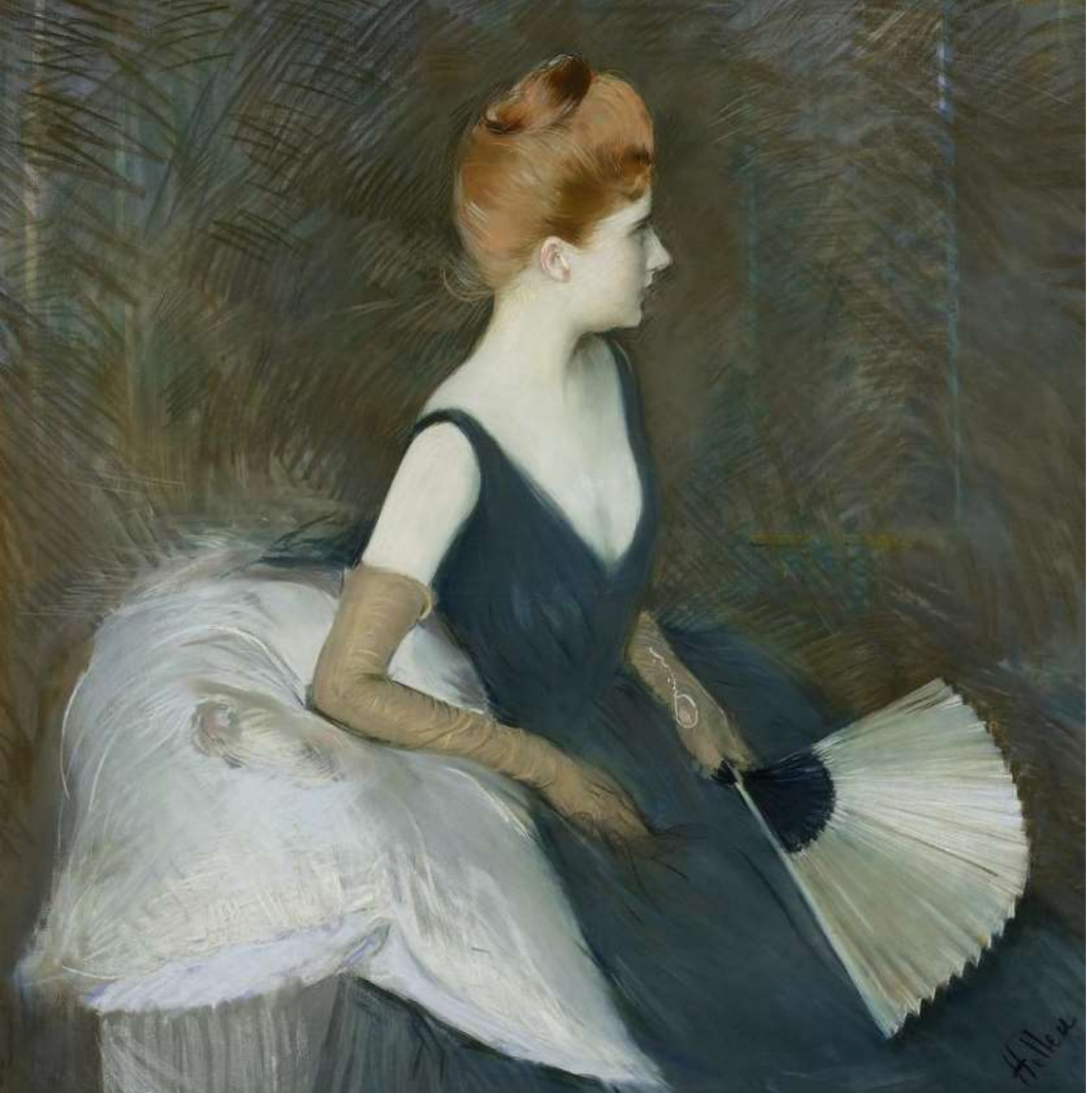
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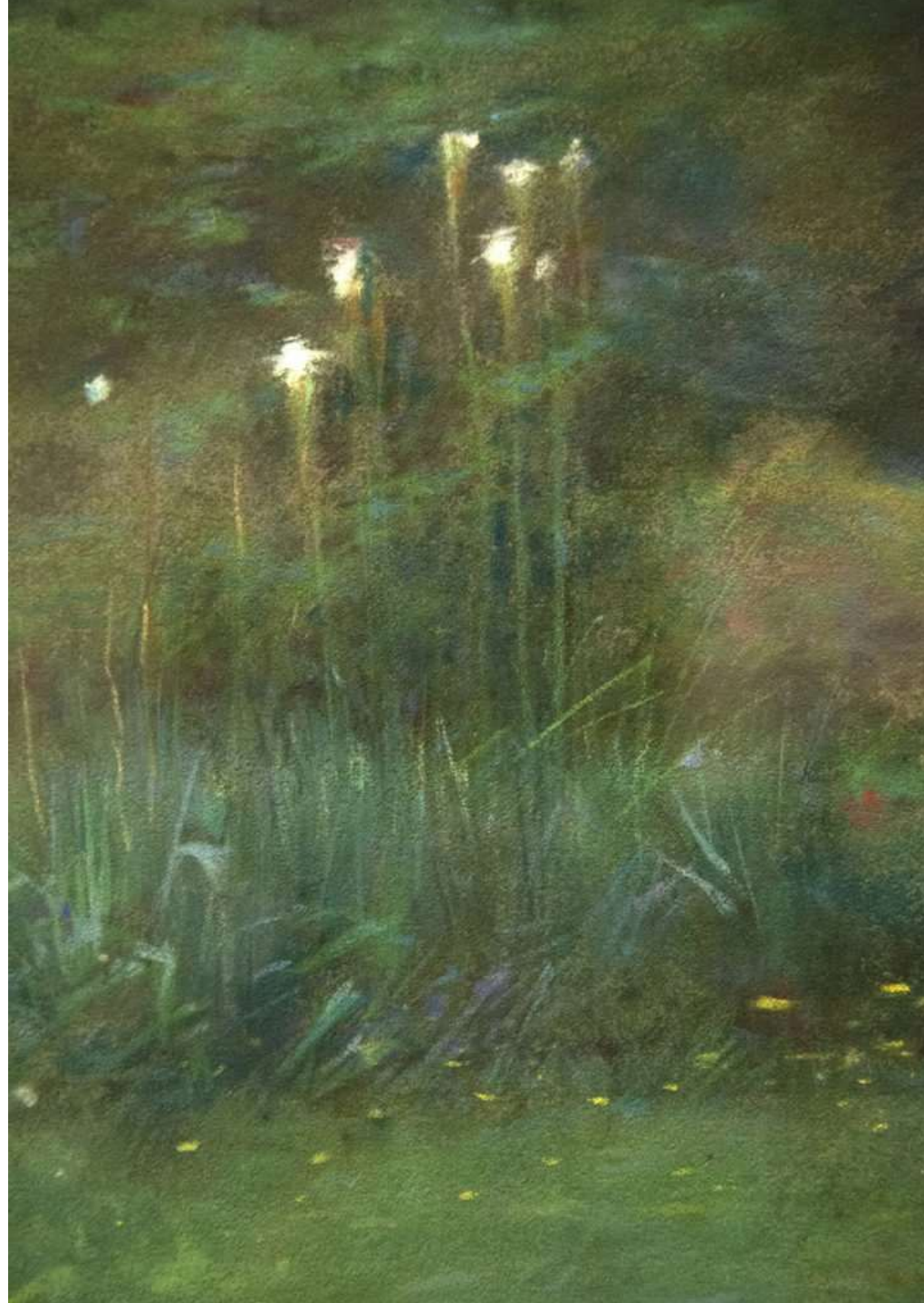


Charles Léandre (1862-1934)

Charles Lucien Léandre was a French caricaturist and painter. He was born at Champsecret, and studied painting under Émile Bin and Alexandre Cabanel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDvuVoSN-6I> (no words)





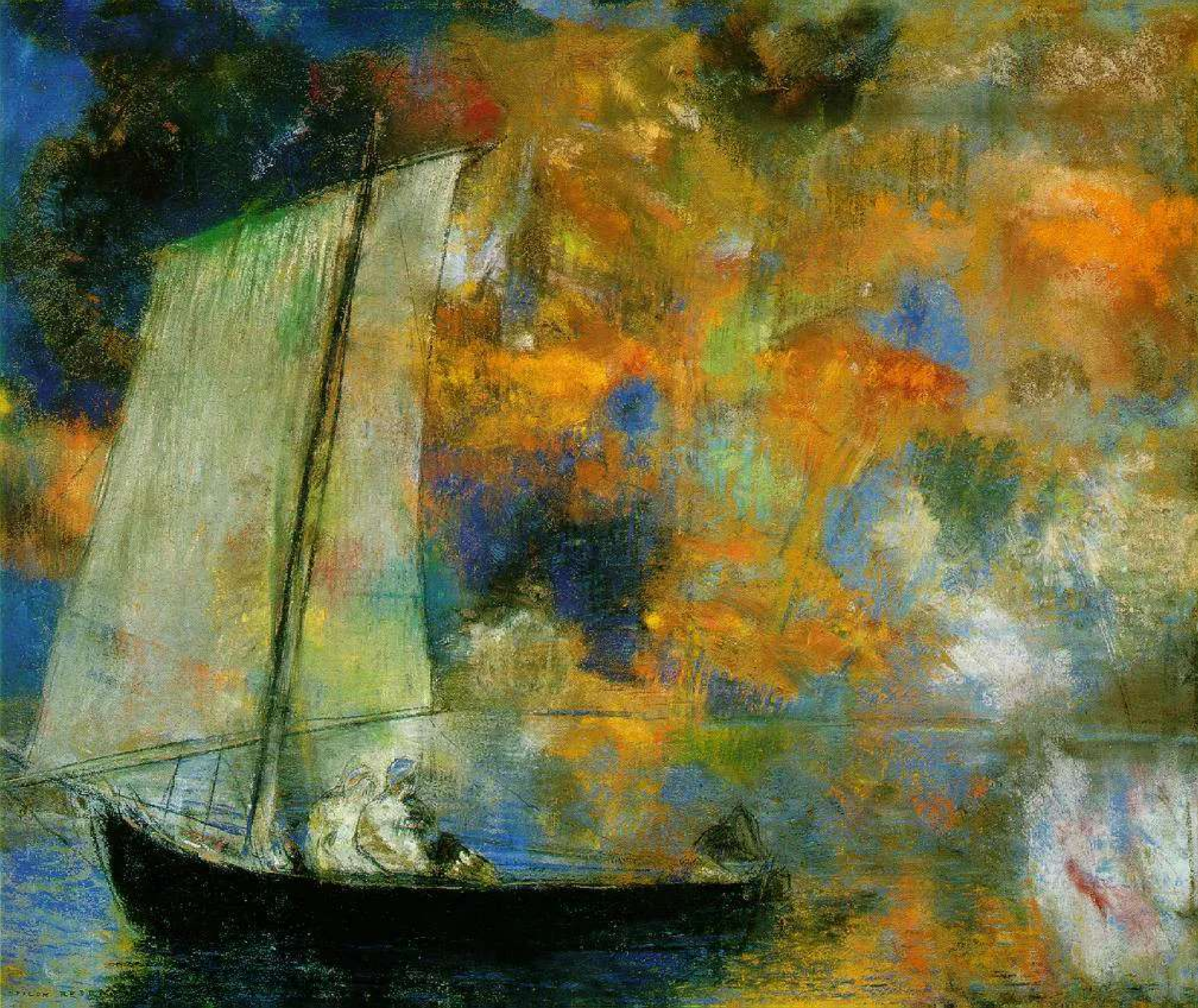


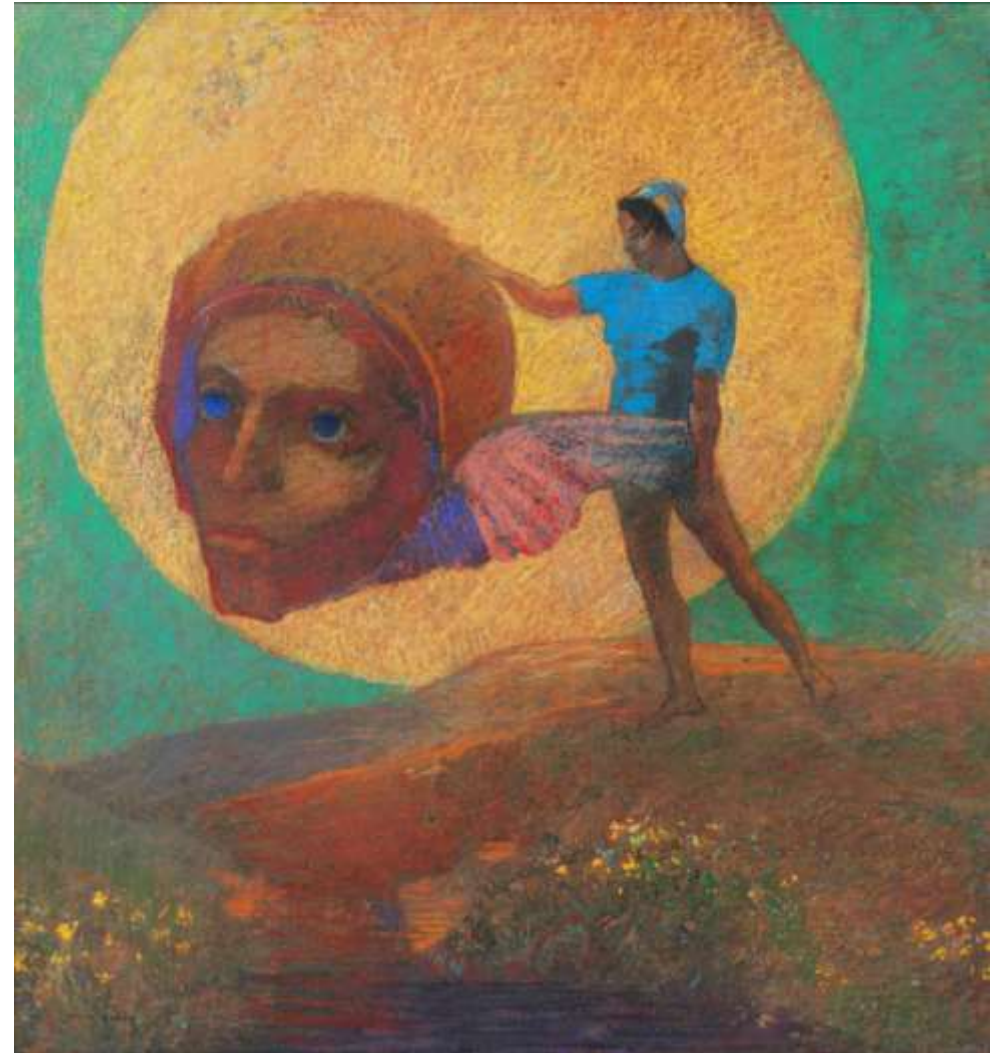
Odilon Redon (1840-1916)

Odilon Redon was a French symbolist painter, printmaker, draughtsman and pastellist. Early in his career, both before and after fighting in the Franco-Prussian War, he worked almost exclusively in charcoal and lithography, works referred to as noirs.

Pastel was one of Redon's favorites. Whether painting portraits, still lifes or imagined landscapes, he made pastels feel rich, powerful and yet honest to the medium.

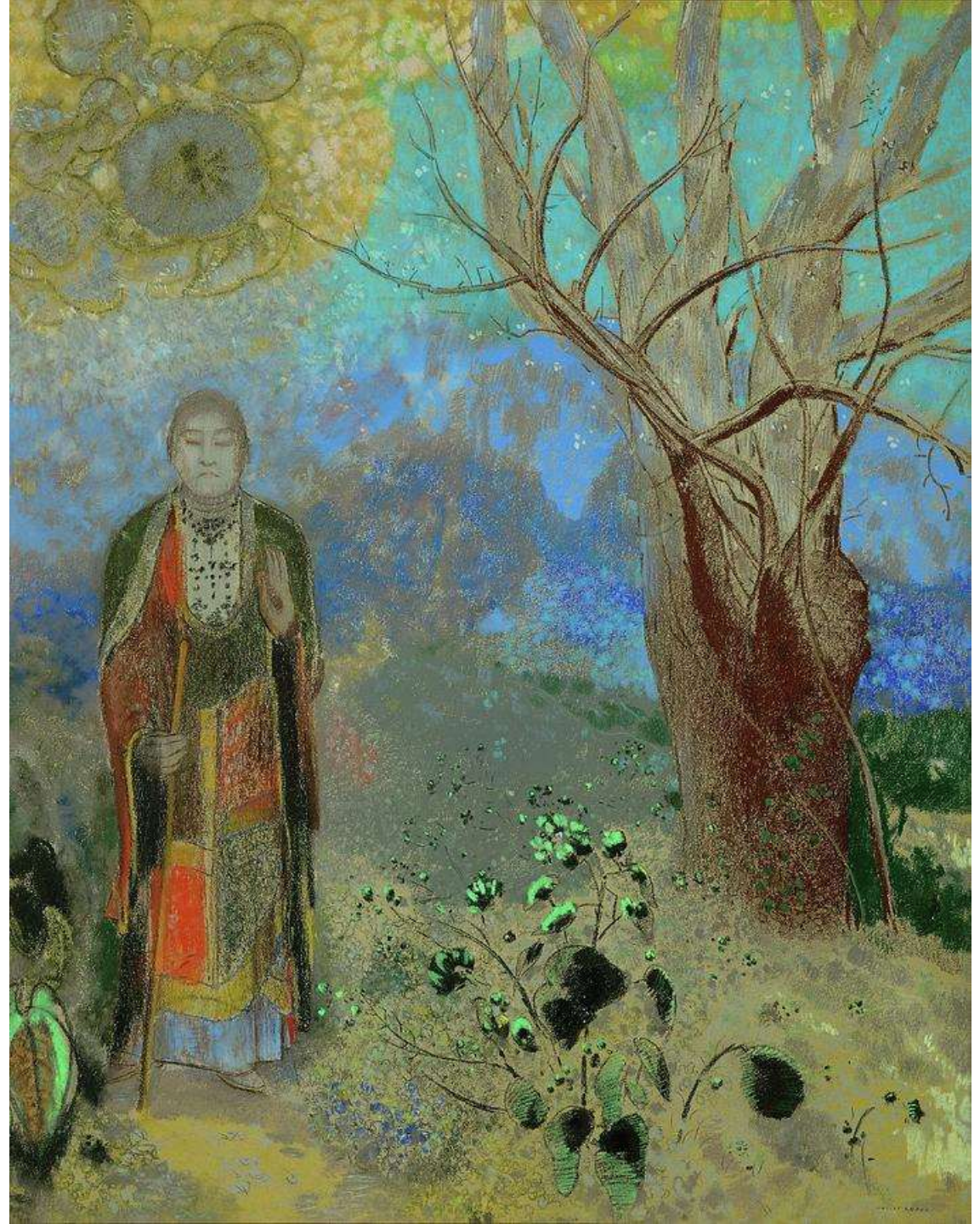
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp4cKh5C9dI>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0LSI1hBo90>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e49vDDoUjDM>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7pzN3DowHQ>

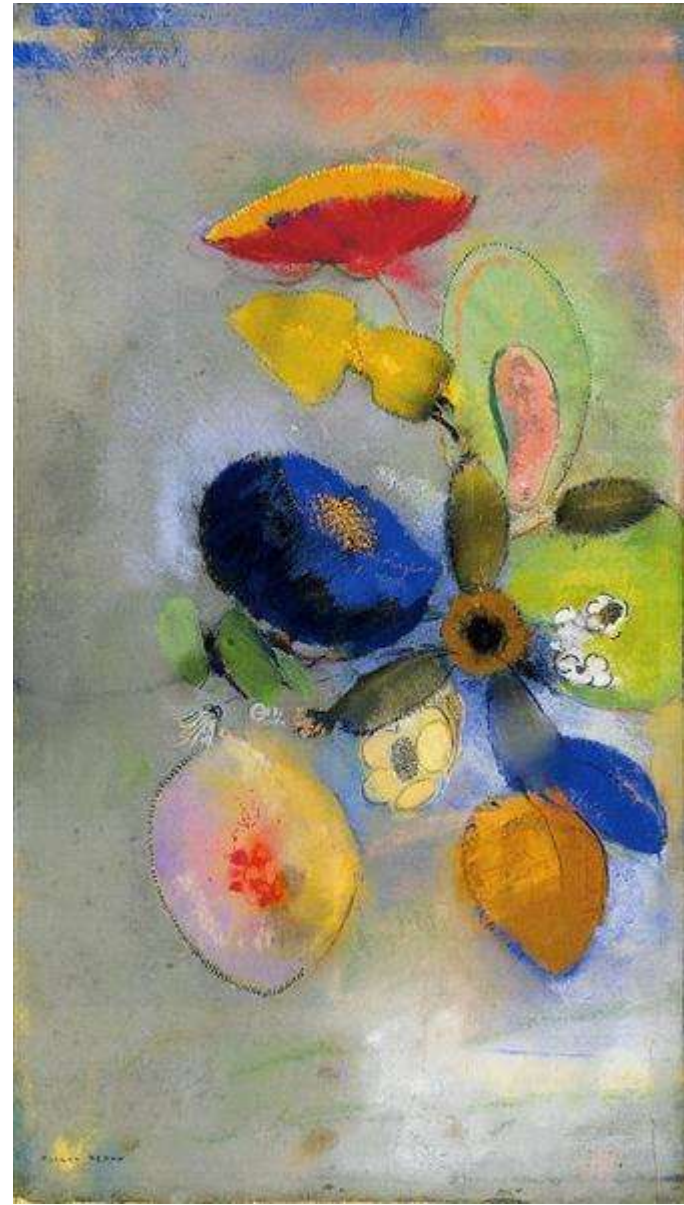










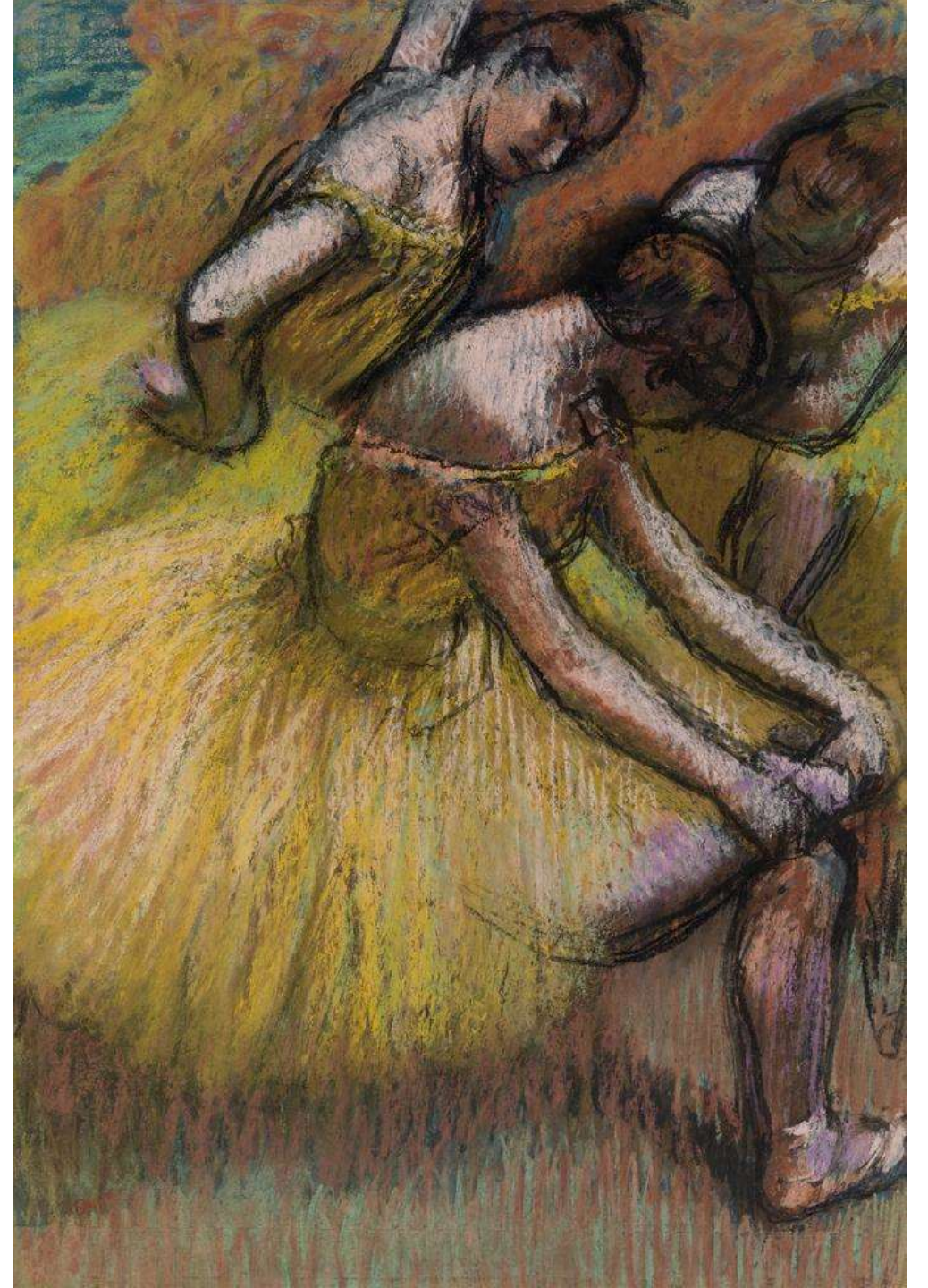
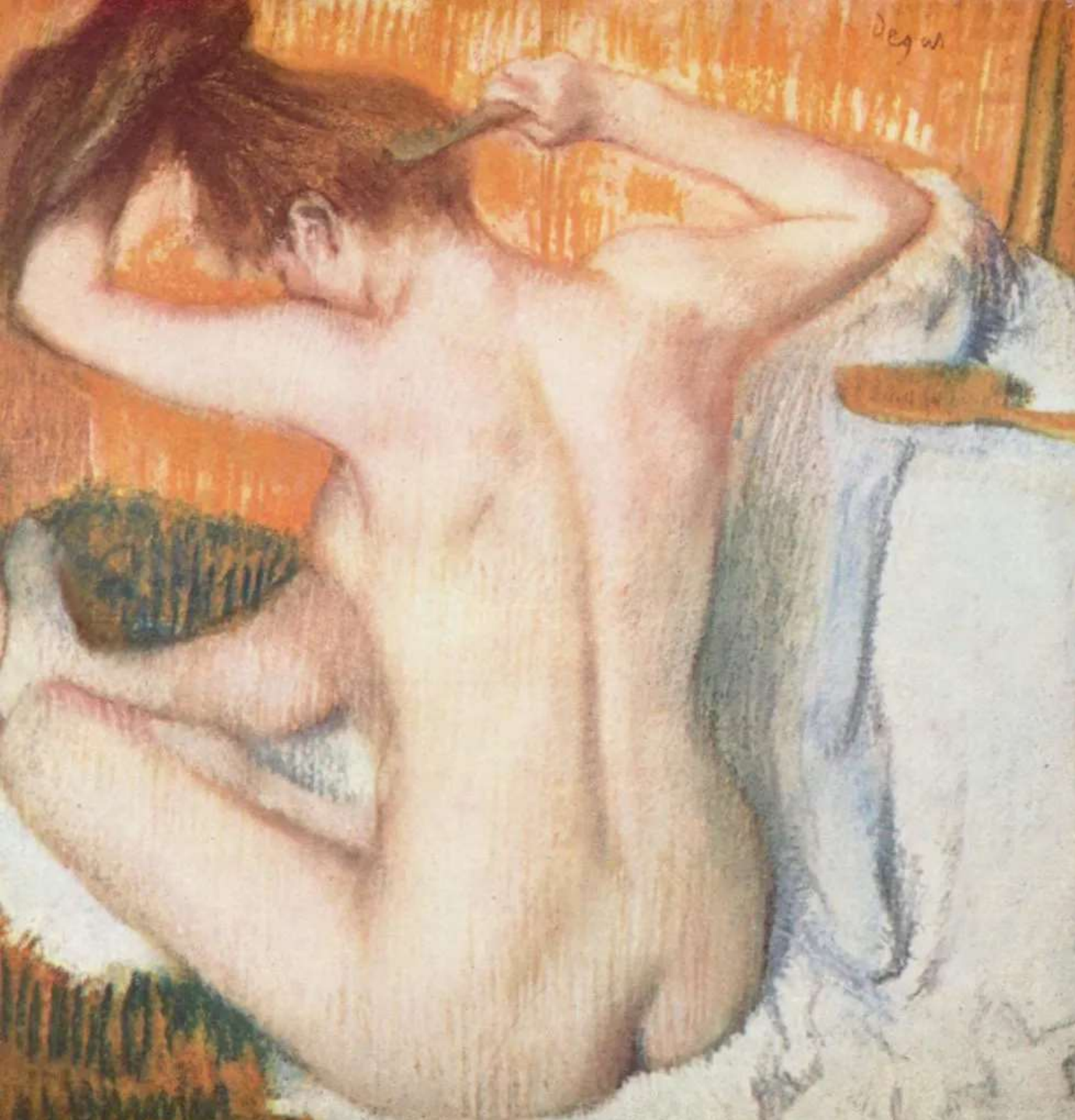


Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

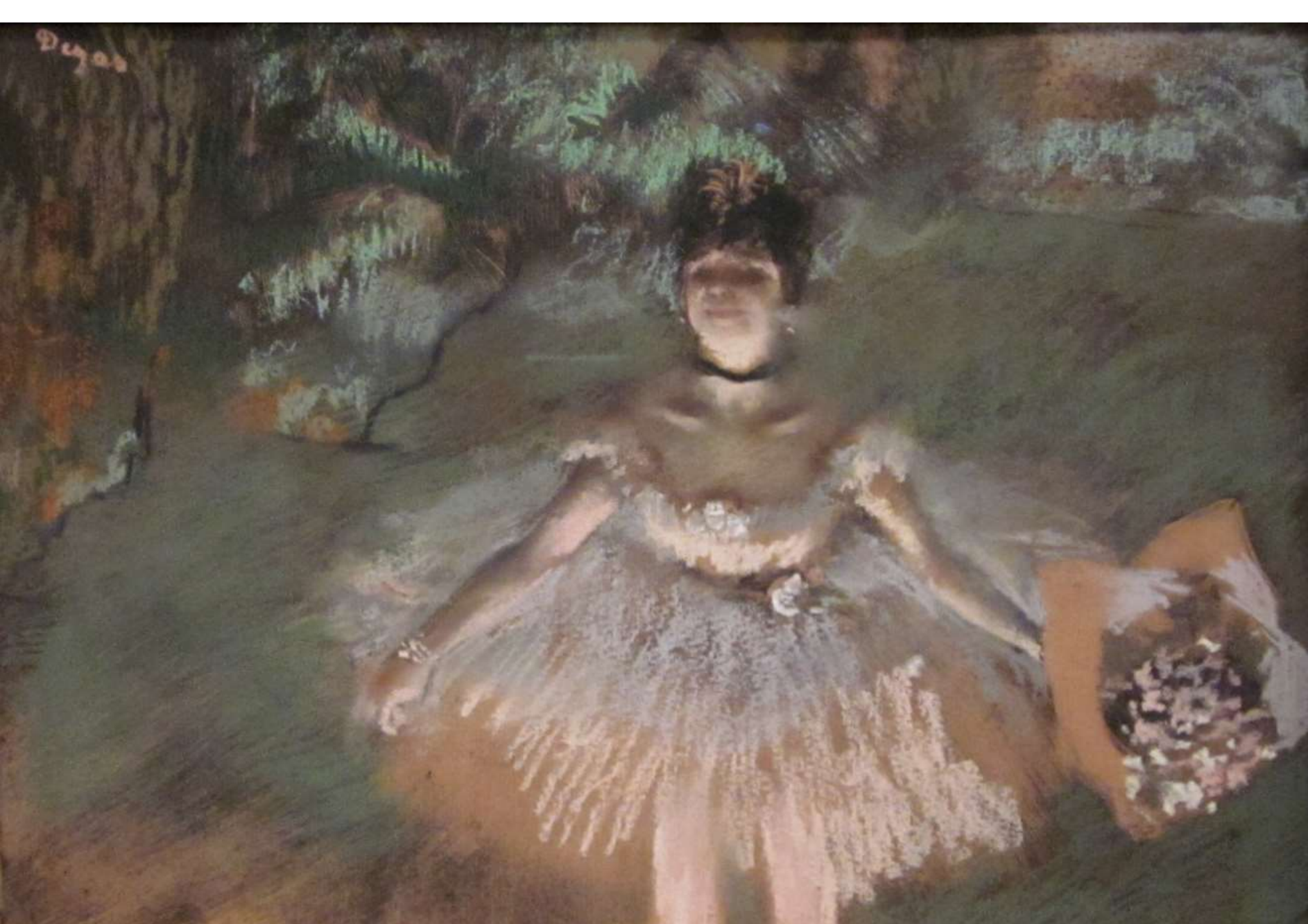
Degas is the famous artist who is historically most connected with pastel. He is considered the artist most responsible for its transformation into a major medium. When he began working with pastels, they were primarily used for portraits and often as precursors to complete oil paintings. Degas, however, created a very large body of finished pastel drawings. He worked in pastel throughout his career and in 1880 it became his primary medium. The artist often combined it with other media such as watercolor, oil, and monotype, creating rich surfaces with a variety of paint qualities applied in complex layers.

<https://www.christies.com/features/Two-Degas-pastels-are-offered-at-Christies-London-11734-3.aspx>

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXB187Gpz6I> (overview)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUuqrLawzjo> (overview)

















Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec 1864-1901

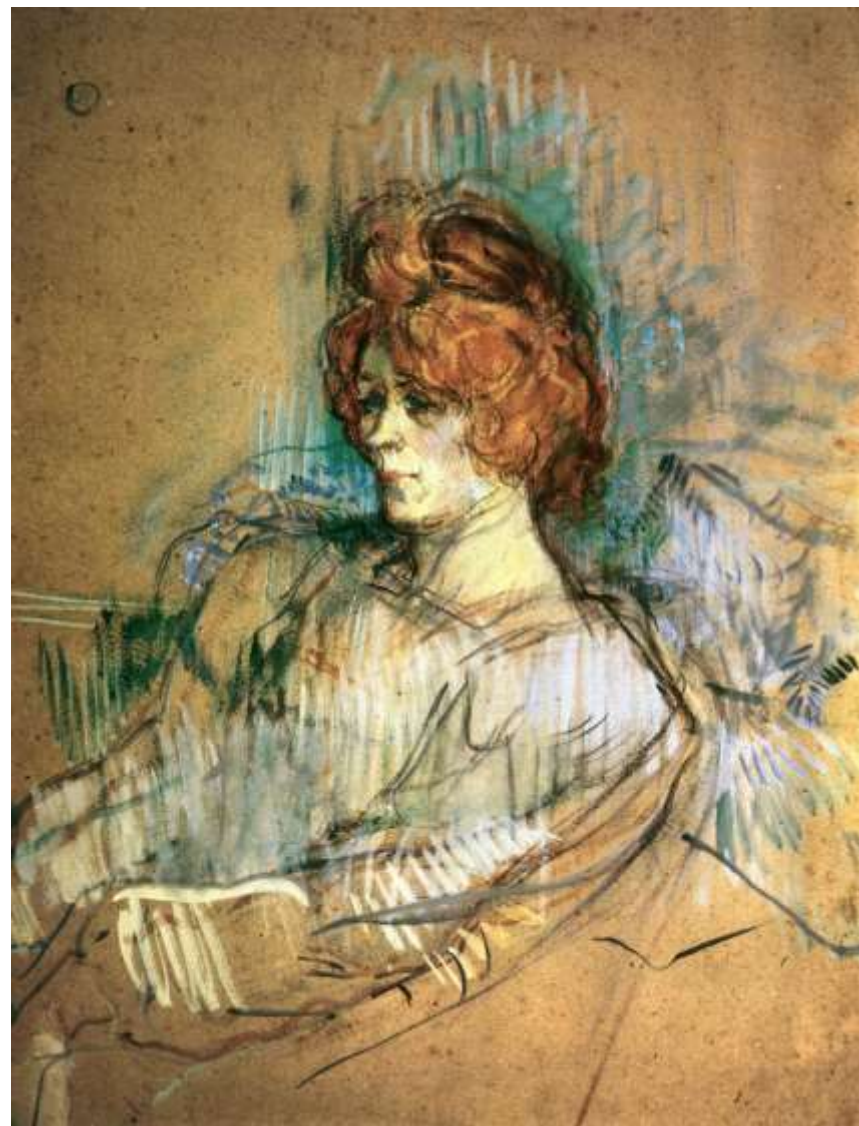
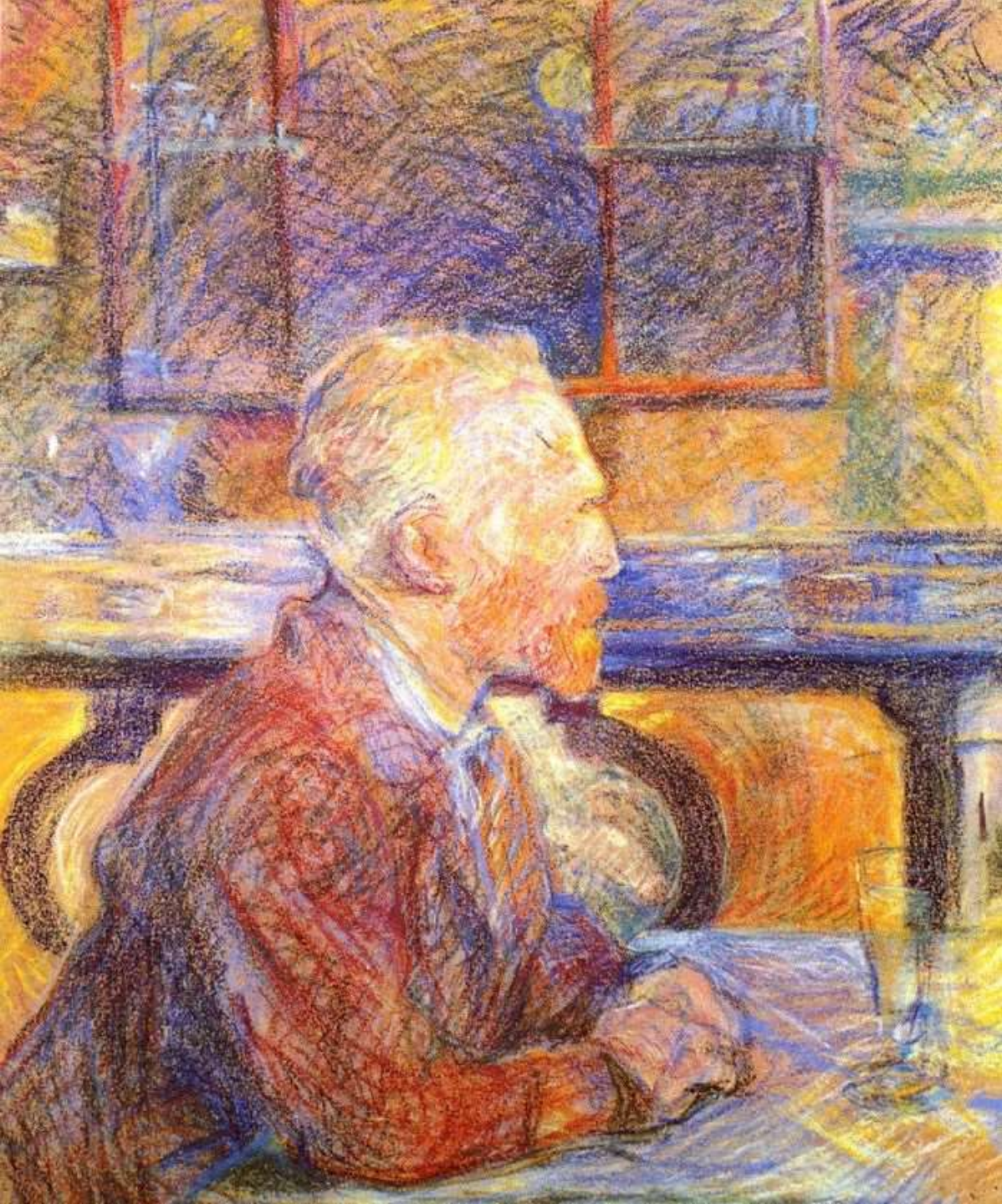
Comte Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa (24 November 1864 – 9 September 1901) was a French [painter](#), [printmaker](#), [draughtsman](#), [caricaturist](#) and [illustrator](#) whose immersion in the colorful and theatrical life of Paris in the late 19th century allowed him to produce a collection of enticing, elegant, and provocative images of the modern, sometimes decadent, affairs of those times.

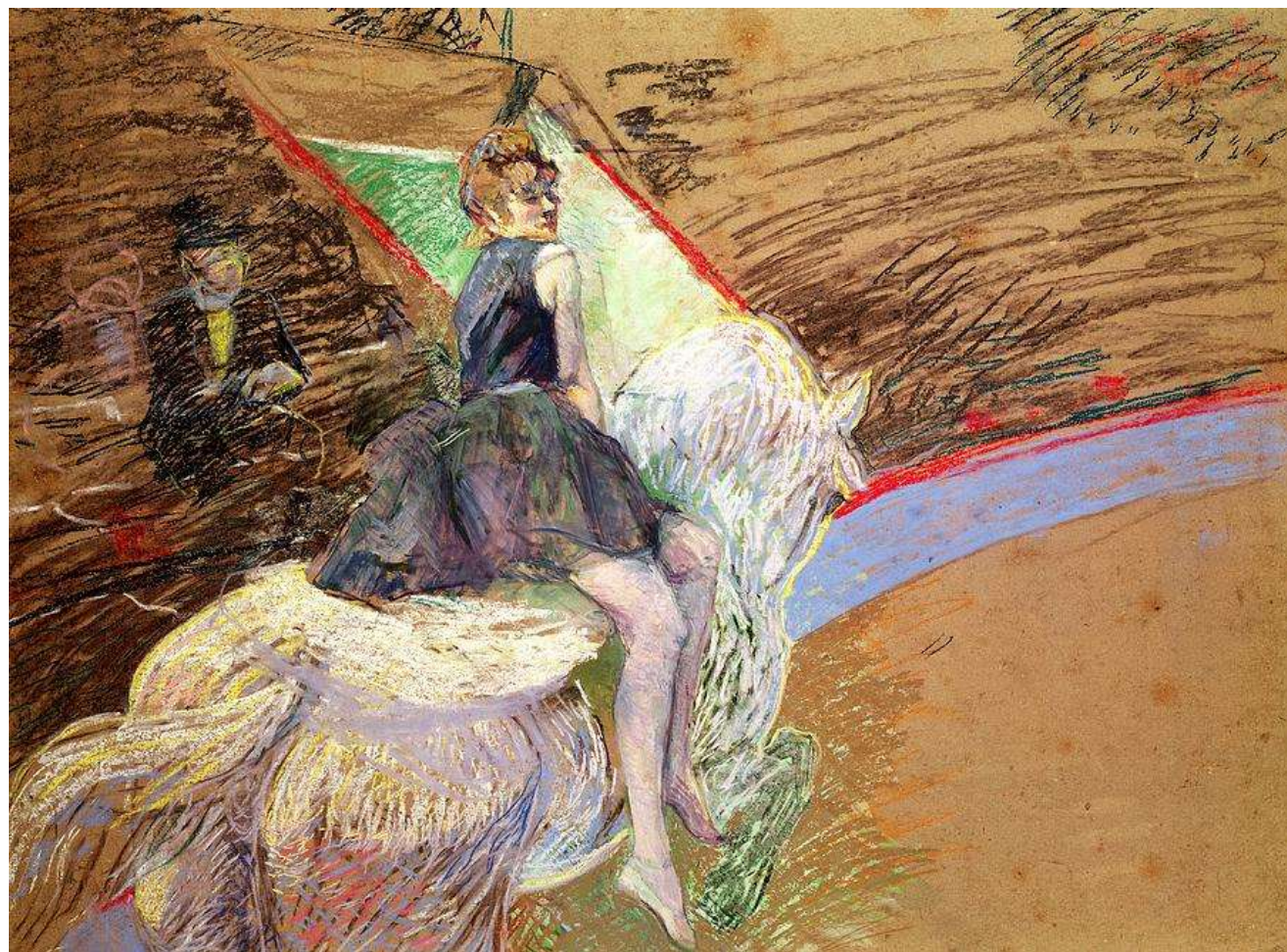
Toulouse-Lautrec is among the best-known painters of the [Post-Impressionist](#) period, with [Paul Cézanne](#), [Vincent van Gogh](#), [Paul Gauguin](#) and [Georges Seurat](#).

In a 2005 auction at [Christie's](#) auction house, [La Blanchisseuse](#), his early painting of a young laundress, sold for US\$22.4 million and set a new record for the artist for a price at auction

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kb1atN-w5Q>









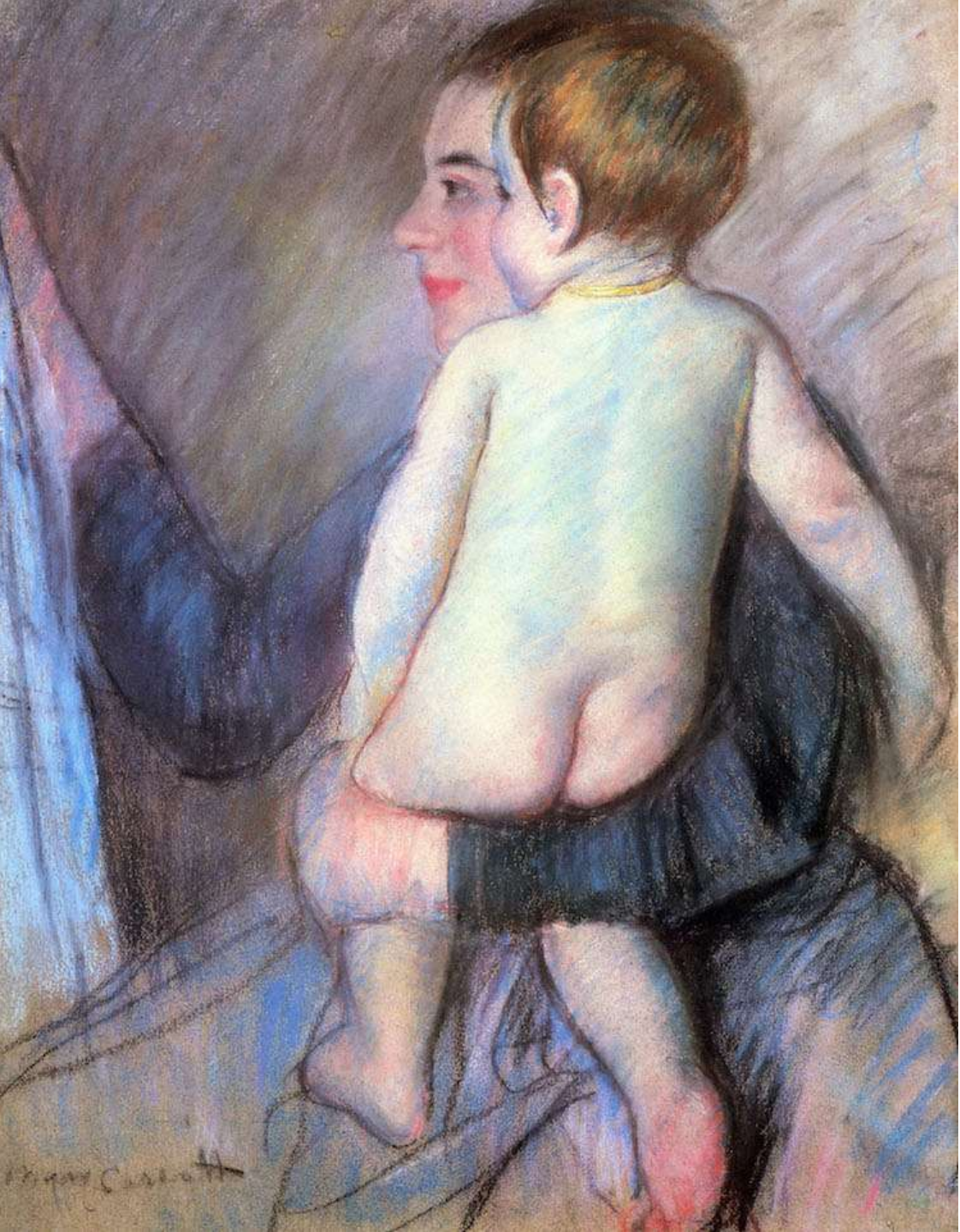
Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)

Mary Stevenson Cassatt was an American painter and printmaker. She was born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, but lived much of her adult life in France where she befriended Edgar Degas and exhibited with the Impressionists.

Mary Cassatt was one of the most influential artists of 20th-century American art. Her friend Edgar Degas was the one who first inspired her to work in pastels and painting portraits using this medium was eventually how she made a living in Paris. Pastels could be manipulated with greater speed and ease, had no odor and allowed for frequent interruptions. For Cassatt, who did many portraits of children, that was essential. Her pastels are most noted for their bold linear strokes that create sensitive, substantive forms.

- <https://www.npr.org/2014/09/23/350650986/now-thats-an-artifact-see-mary-cassatts-pastels-at-the-national-gallery> (physical pastels)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI9KGH_H8tw Pastel







William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)

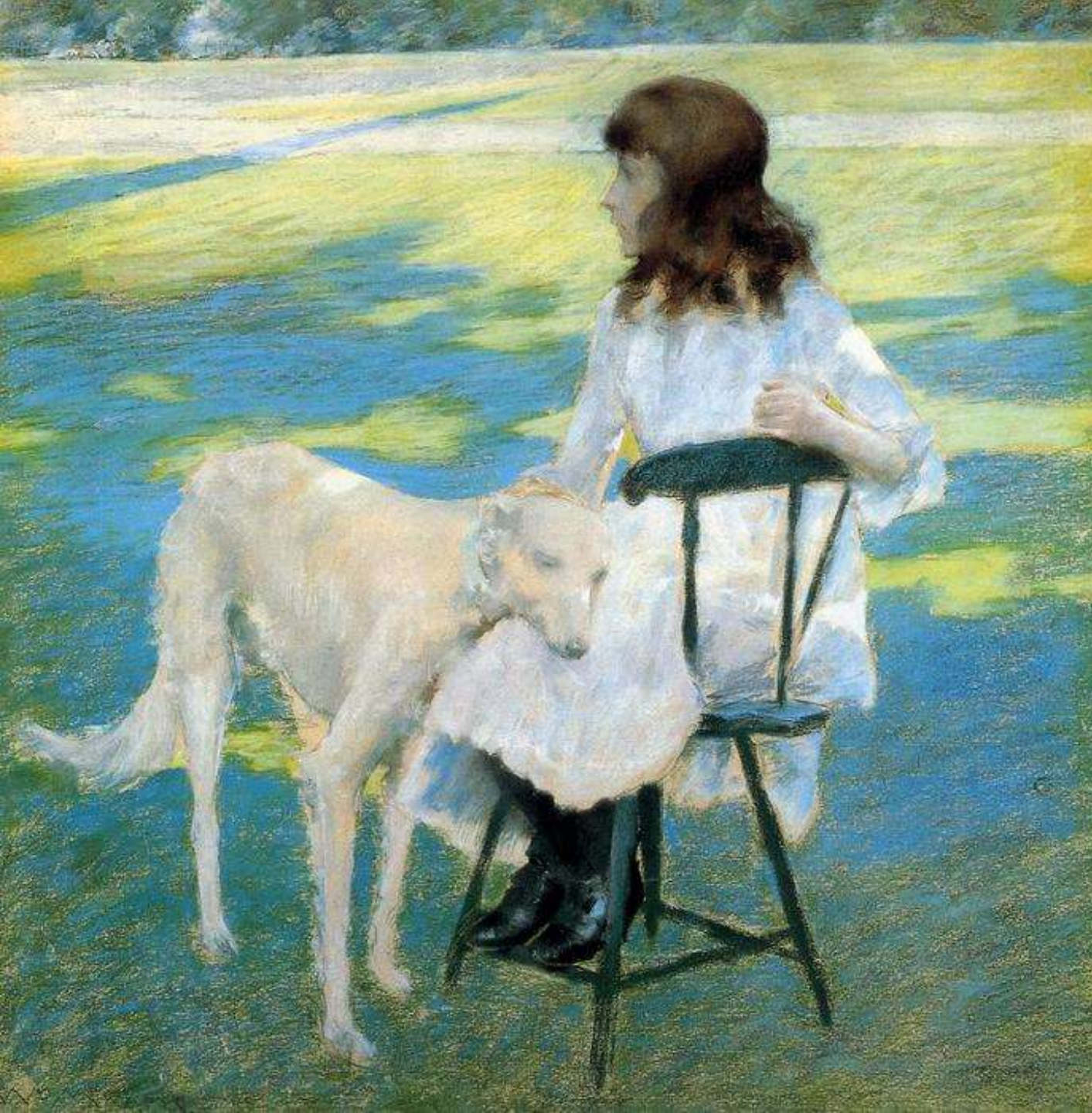
William Merritt Chase was an American painter, known as an exponent of Impressionism and as a teacher. He is also responsible for establishing the Chase School, which later would become Parsons School of Design.

Notable portraitist William Merritt Chase founded the Society of American Painters in Pastel in 1882, which included such artists as John Henry Twachtman, Childe Hassam and Robert Reid. The Society only lasted eight years and held four exhibitions. But it drew attention to pastel and helped it gain respect as a medium. Chase worked in a variety of media, including oil, pastel, watercolor and etching. His pastel drawings were sometimes very large, up to six feet high, and done on canvas.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYzzibt4uO0>

<https://www.pbs.org/video/nyc-arts-curators-choice-william-merritt-chase-parrish-art-m/>













Childe Hassam (1859-1935)

Frederick Childe Hassam was an American Impressionist painter, noted for his urban and coastal scenes. Along with Mary Cassatt and John Henry Twachtman, Hassam was instrumental in promulgating Impressionism to American collectors, dealers, and museums.

An illustrator by trade, Childe Hassam was one of the most notable American Impressionists working in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He is also one of the most famous American pastellists. He exhibited in the fourth, final, show of the Society of Painters in Pastel in New York in 1890. The urban landscape, summer gardens and abstracted night skies all were captured by his hand, working in this medium.











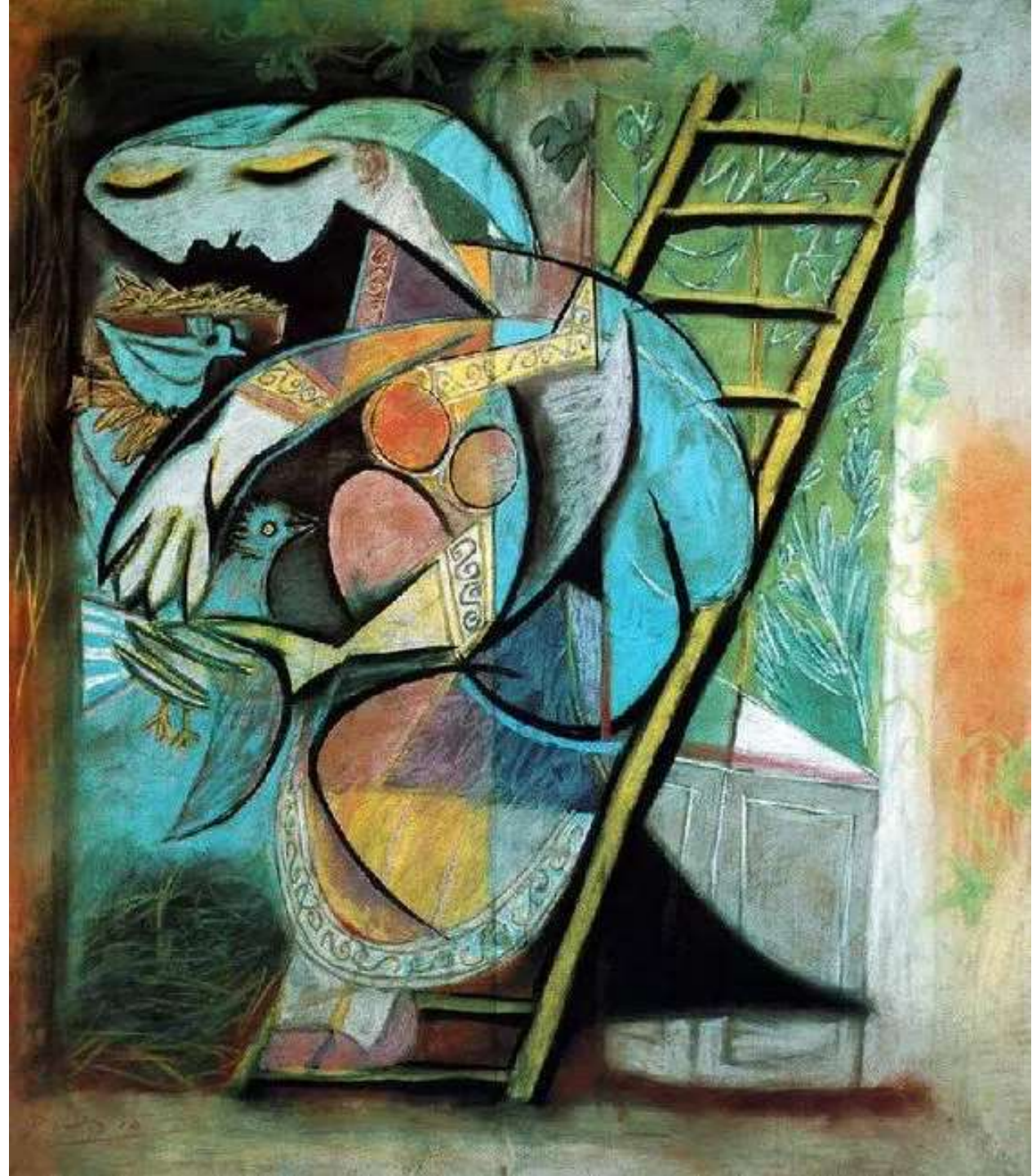
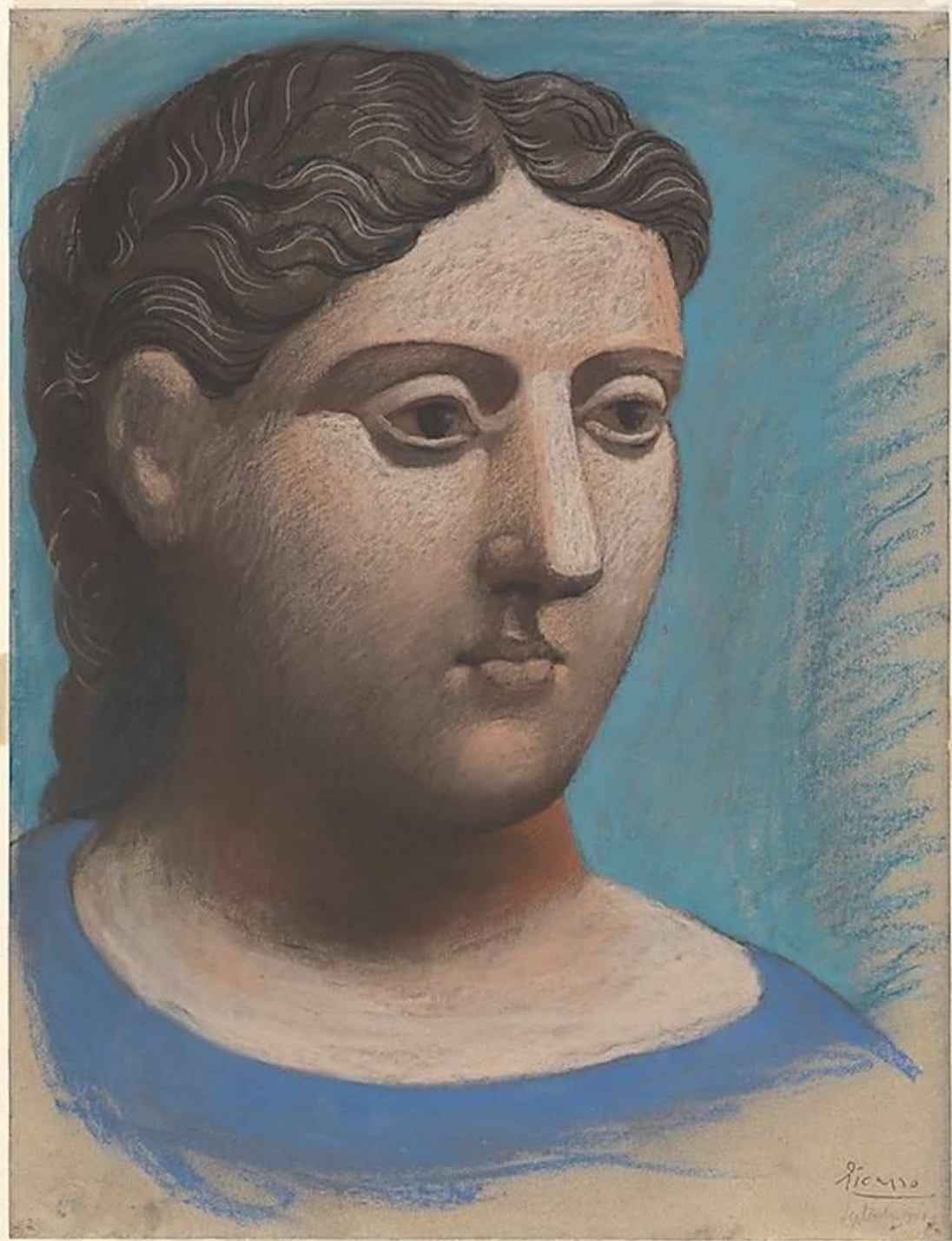


Pablo Picasso

Modernist master Pablo Picasso wore many artistic hats. While he is predominantly known for his stylistic paintings, avant-garde sculptures, and even collage work, he also dabbled in **professional-grade oil pastel**—an implement he himself helped pioneer.

While oil pastels had been on the market since 1925, they were typically low in quality and intended for younger artists and students. In 1949, Picasso—seeking a high-quality version that could be used on a variety of surfaces—approached his friend and fellow painter Henri Goetz with a request: ask art supply manufacturer Henri [Sennelier](#) to create a new and improved oil pastel.

The Sommelier shop created and started selling their famous [oil pastels](#) shortly after this meeting, and the rest is history.





Paula Rego (1935)

Dame Maria Paula Figueiroa Rego DBE GCSE GOSE RA is a Portuguese-British visual artist who is particularly known for her paintings and prints based on storybooks. Rego's style has evolved from abstract towards representational, and she has favored pastels over oils for much of her career.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yb70PdKX9tM>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/who-is/who-paula-rego> (for kids)











Elizabeth Blackadder (1931-2021)

Dame Elizabeth Violet Blackadder, Mrs Houston, DBE, RA, RSA was a Scottish painter and printmaker. She was the first woman to be elected to both the Royal Scottish Academy and the Royal Academy. In 1962 she began teaching at Edinburgh College of Art where she continued until her retirement in 1986.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ff_dZVPzE8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkC28Bvfa-w&t=40s> (print making)





Zaria Forman

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VF7kffCgJU>

Assignment Suggestions...

- <https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-mediums/pastel/10-dos-donts-pastel-art/>
- <https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-inspiration/pastel-works-20-award-winning-artists/>
- <https://www.howtopastel.com/2015/06/iaps-landscape-interviews/>

Play with pastels (oil or dry/soft). Use them on textured surfaces, cardboard, construction paper, sand paper, newsprint, paper bag. Use paper or canvas that is colored. Experiment by adding pastel to a monoprint or other previous artwork.