Paschke Online

Designs Ink Publishing Article Archive and Reference Library

Articles by Chris A. Paschke, CPF GCF

"Friable Media"

August 2026







Friable comes from the Latin verbs friare meaning "to crumble", and fricare "to rub", used to describe something that is easily reduced to a powdered form, considered a delicate medium, or having a sensitivity to abrasion. There is potential friability with most dry drawing media including: natural chalk, pastel, charcoal, graphite, oil pastel, Conté, and waxy crayon. Many of these media also work well together to create mixed media art, both as base sketches and in final creations. **(photo 1)**



Natural Chalk

Natural chalks are available as white (calcium carbonate, lead carbonate, and calcium sulphate), warm red--also called sanguine—which comes from hematite (iron oxide), and black from shale, a mixture of carbon and clay, all being lightfast. They may darken or dissolve if wet, and turn yellowish orange if abraded. Cave dwellers, 30,000 BC, first used natural chalk as white, red, and yellow earth colors, and black from fire char.



Artists have used natural pigment chalk for many hundreds of year, as this Leonardo Da Vinci shows. **(photo 2)** It can be rubbed and blended, and makes soft, fuzzy lines that are not very dark allowing the paper to show through. It is nearly permanent, lightfast, and cannot be easily erased. **(photo 3)**

Pastels

Artwork made of pastel is called a pastel, pastel drawing, or pastel painting. They are sticks consisting of pure powdered pigment and binder available wrapped in paper as soft, medium, hard consistencies. Dry pastel began as pigment with a basic binder of gum arabic and gum tragacanth. Then methyl cellulose was introduced in 20th century, with chalk or gypsum components also present.
(photo 4)



Soft pastel is the most widely used form of pastel with sticks having a higher portion of pigment and less binder. Art may be easily smudged and blended, but produces more dust recommending sealed protection. Hard pastel has a higher portion of binder and less pigment allowing for finer detailing, which are favored for preliminary sketching of a composition as the colors are less brilliant than soft pastels. They have a light sensitivity and while pastels may be fixed by the artist, it can alter the appearance of the media colors and will not deter fading.



The Pastel Society, UK states that, "Pastels…including Oil pastel, Charcoal, Pencil (graphite), Conté, Sanguine, or any dry media," are all in the same category. Leigh Parry, senior member and past president of the Pastel Society UK who worked in oil, watercolor and pastel also states, "Pastels must be dry, durable and as permanent as the support they are applied to. The surface must not be rubbed or allowed to get damp, art may be safely stored between sheets of paper or board and secured not to move, may be blended with charcoal, Conté crayon, and ink, may be applied over watercolor, but not graphite pencil."



Oil Pastels and Crayons
Oil pastel has a soft, buttery consistency and intense colors. They are dense and therefore fill the grain of paper well. Though they are difficult to blend, they do not require any fixative. Also called wax oil crayon—it is a medium with characteristics similar to a combination of pastel and wax crayon made of a gum or methyl cellulose binder and dry pigment mixed with non-drying oil, making the surface less powdery and marks have a harder edge. **(photo 5)**



Conté stick or Conté crayon, is a drawing medium composed of compressed powdered graphite or charcoal mixed with a clay base, invented in 1795 by Nicolas-Jacques Conté. They are manufactured using natural pigments (iron oxides, carbon black, titanium dioxide), clay (kaolin), and a binder (cellulose ether). Conté crayons are most commonly found in black, white, and sanguine tones, as well as bistre--a rich, dark, yellowish-brown to grayish-brown pigment derived historically from boiled, soot-laden wood smoke--and shades of grey. They are frequently used on rough paper that holds pigment well or primed canvases as an underdrawing for oils and pastels. **(photo 6)**



Graphite and Charcoal
Graphite pencils were also invented by Conté in 1795. It is a grayish-black natural carbon formed into pencil lead. It is semicrystalline, flaky, and greasy, allowing it to smear, dust off, flake, or damage when roughly handled. Extreme friability is found with charcoal, which may only be partially fixed so smearing and dusting may still occur. **(photo 7)**



Charcoal is one of the oldest drawing media, as a stick or powder it is a black chunk made from willow or linden wood, slow-burned to reduce the wood to carbon. They are delicate, extremely friable, smudge easily, and require fixative to set. Charcoal is used as a dominant medium as well as by painters for preliminary sketches on canvas, which is then easily overpainted without affecting the color of the paint. **(photo 8)**

Fixatives and Varnish

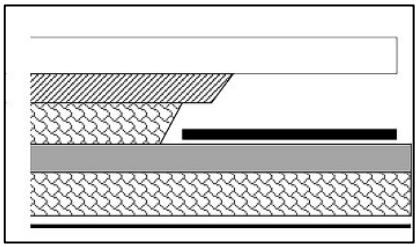
There are basically two types of fixatives: workable fixative designed to help set layers to prevent smudging, which allows for additional pigment layering, and final fixative which may be applied by the artist at the completion of the work as a shear level of protection. Both fixative and varnish discolor with aging, and colors may develop a harsh or saturated appearance over time. Matte surfaces may become shiny and smearing cannot be achieved without dulling and darkening the original medium. Also surface treatments may degrade other products, create halos, cause uneven paper aging, and is toxic.

Though protective spray coatings are being promoted in conjunction with assorted commercial panels in lieu of traditional glazed framing practices, fixatives appear to be only short term effective and conservators have unanimously cautioned that such coatings cannot take the place of proper mounting, glazing, and handling of the art. Ampersand Pastelbord is popular with artists because of its working surface, but always encourage your artist to glaze their pastel masterpiece. If the original pastel is on a 1-2" cradled Pastelbord the sink mount will just become deeper, but float frames sans glazing are not suitable for pastels.

Basic acrylic sheets are not recommended for friable media because of static electricity. Anti-static cleaners and rags are designed to reduce static charges during cleaning and assembly, not on a day-to-day basis.

Framing Guidelines

The Pastel Society of America (PSA) and Sherman Fairchild, Conservator at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, state that there is no ideal fixative, allow at least 1/4" space between the surface of the art and the glazing with a mat between, and that all mat materials should be 100% rag. Glazing should not be in direct contact with the art, and static-free acrylic glazing now accepted include Optium, Museum Optium, and Static Guard.



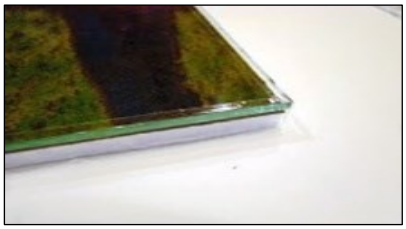
A reverse bevel preservation frame package is standard for friable media. Use a 4-ply rag boards for a reverse bevel bottom window mat and board backing.
(photo diagram 9) A reverse bevel spacer–usually as a pinwheel to the outer edges of the mat back, with optional multiple mats for added depth and drama.

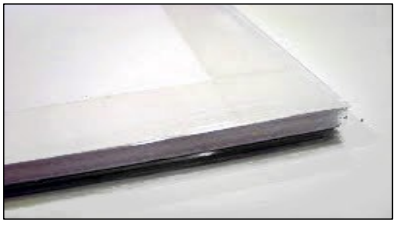
The design concept is open as long as the mounting and pigment management remain correct. All reverse cut bevels are designed to prevent pastel dust from landing on a bevel reveal if loosened from the sanded paper. A spacer behind the mat helps

allow for loose pigment to settle unseen behind it. Artist quality pastels applied to a sanded paper substrate correctly do not require fixatives because they will not dust off. **(photo 10)**

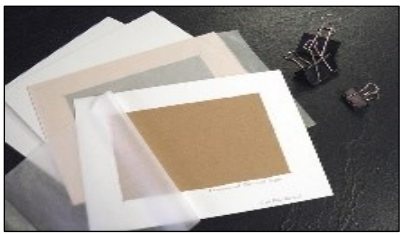


Passe-Partout
Passé partout (pas' pär too') is a French method of stacking glass, art and backing, held together by strips of gummed paper or tape to seal the edges. Artist Richard McKinley promoted the practice in 2001, 2008, and 2011 on the internet as a viable option for glazing pastels, but it is still not sanctioned by the PSA. To be done correctly the materials require stabilizing to the preferred 50-55% RH. **(photo 11)** Although glass sandwiches are not the advised method for framing pastels they may be used to safely transport or save, prior to framing. Stabilize the boards, install Art-Sorb humidity indicator, press glass directly against the surface of a pastel, and seal edges to prevent shift and humidity changes. **(photo 12)**

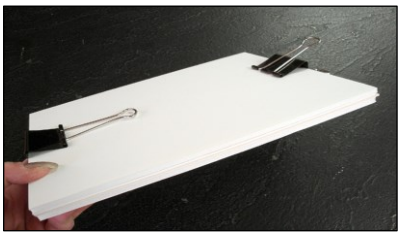




Transport
Unframed pastels may be covered by flange hinging a same size sheet of glassine paper covering the entire face, then gently affix the bottom edge to prevent shifting. Stack only same size originals together, cover the front and back with foamboard and clip together to safely transport. **(photo 13)**



Unlike the vintage gummed tape method, today using Shurtape JLAR clear tape for book repair, paper mending, and bonding is a solvent based acrylic tape on polypropylene carrier, which will not yellow with age or discolor after application, being a good alternative. Seal all four sides of the glass package with 1/8" tape on the surface glass, then wrap to the support back glass or rigid Gatorboard painting support to prevent shifting. Pastels edge sealed in this manner may be stacked and spring clipped for travel. **(photo 14)**



Final Word
Never fear handling and framing friable media, just be vary careful, be able to discuss the options with your client, and know your limitations.
END
Copyright © 2026 Chris A. Paschke

Header - Friable media includes: pastel, charcoal & graphite, oil pastel, Conté, & waxy crayon.
Photo 1 – Mixed media of a charcoal sketch overlaid with pastel, *The Dancers,* Edgar Degas.
Photo 2 - Natural Red Chalk sketch *Self-Portrait*, by Lonardo Da Vinci.
Photo 3 – Black, red, white chalk on blue paper, *Scene from Krispijn Medicijn,* Cornelis Troost.
Photo 4 – Pastel, *A Girl with a Kitten*, Jean-Baptiste Perronneau.
Photo 5 –Oil Pastel, *Portrait of a Child*, artist unknown.
Photo 6 - Conté crayon, *L'Echo*, Georges Seurat.
Photo 7 – Pencil drawing, artist unknown.
Photo 8 - Charcoal, *Drawing No.2*, 1915, Georgia O'Keeffe.
Photo 9 – (diagram) Reverse bevel profile.
Photo 10 – Reverse bevel frame corner detail.
Photo 11 – Passe-partout is a traditional French method of stacking glass, art and backing, held together by strips of gummed paper to seal the edges.
Photo 12 - Stabilize the boards, install Art-Sorb humidity indicator, press glass directly against the surface of a pastel, and seal edges to prevent shift and humidity changes.
Photo 13 – Stack only same size originals, cover the front and back with foamboard and clip together to safely transport. This shows mounted sanded paper as a sample.
Photo 14 - Pastels edge sealed in this manner may be stacked and spring clipped for travel.