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## Studio Craft: Are Pastels Paintings or Drawings?



Pastel painting by Manet, 1880s, executed in a manner similar to the French Impressionist's oil paintings

### Ask the Experts: “I have seen pastels referred to as “paintings”. Why do artists call them “paintings” if they are drawn on paper?”

**A:** The distinction between drawing and painting is seldom as simple as “drawings are dry media and paintings are wet media”. Many artists who use pastel as their primary medium refer to the craft as “painting” rather than “drawing”. But, lots of artists also refer to pastel as a drawing medium. Depending on the technique and pictorial objectives, either can be true (or both at once). If you are new to the medium, however, defining these terms for yourself can be a great way to find direction as you begin to learn the craft

So, why would an artist consider pastel- a dry medium, applied directly in stick form- to be painting and not drawing? We think the important distinctions are that drawing deals most directly with contour lines, while painting is most focused on color relationships. The way shapes and colors are applied in pastel have a lot in common with wet paint- marks can be diffused and blended, and brightness and hue can be especially emphasized.

Some pastels are formulated with a firmer consistency, more like compressed charcoal sticks. These lend themselves better to drawing techniques, where contours and hatched patterns are preferred over suave, blended passages. Soft pastels have a heavier pigment load and use smooth, inert fillers like porcelain powder, which facilitate creamy, gliding movement across paper for techniques most akin to painting.

The visual role of the paper surface in the finished artwork can also impact whether a pastel is considered a painting or drawing. The surface of a pastel painting is usually broadly covered with color, and if the paper is incorporated, it is normally a toned ground. A drawing, by comparison, usually reveals the bare paper throughout.

To most artists who include elements of both painting and drawing in their artwork, the distinction is not really all that important. Dealers and collectors, however, still tend to demote any works on paper to a lesser category, below paintings on canvas and panel. Even though it seems unfair, artists need to be aware of this bias in order to defend the value they place on their work.