Painting in the Dry Manner
The Flourishing of Pastel in 18th-Century Europe

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Charles Antoine Coypel
(French, Paris 1694–1752 Paris)

Double Portrait Presumed to Represent François de Jullienne and His Wife, 1743

Pastel, black chalk, and watercolor on four joined sheets of handmade blue laid paper, laid down on canvas; 39⅜ x 31½ in. (100 x 80 cm). Signed and dated at right on chair frame: *C Coypel 1743*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, in honor of Annette de la Renta, 2011 (2011.84)

The academician Charles Antoine Coypel was appointed first painter to King Louis XV of France in 1747. His oeuvre includes portraits, satirical caricatures, and genre scenes, in addition to historical and religious subjects in the grand manner. His exceptional pastels are few in number (see also nos. 9, 10). This double portrait, a recent acquisition, is among Coypel's latest and most accomplished: it displays his dazzling and unerring control of a variety of materials, principally pastel but also chalk and watercolor. Traditionally, the sitters are identified as François de Jullienne (1722–1754) and his evidently very young wife, Marie Élisabeth de Séré de Rieux (1724–1795). They married in 1741. François was the son of Jean de Jullienne, a wealthy textile merchant, collector of paintings, and patron of Antoine Watteau.

Everyone has a crayon in his hand—as with all that is fashionable, the public has embraced it with a frenzy," Étienne La Font de Saint-Yenne wrote in August 1746 in a review of the Salon paintings on display at the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Indeed, by the mid-eighteenth century pastel had reached an unprecedented level of acclaim as an artistic medium. It was appreciated for its stylistic diversity, the naturalism it evoked, its strength of color, and its suitability for informal portraits, the subject matter for which it was most frequently employed. Many material and practical factors also contributed to this resounding reception: the distinctive surface light and brilliant, nonyellowing colors of pastel portraits, the simplicity of the tools they required, the relative speed with which they could be executed, and their agreeable scale all underlay the ubiquitous demand for these likenesses. And each of these features was inseparably tied to the dustlike nature of pastel—powdered pigment formed into small sticks of opaque dry color—which in turn dictated the distinctive palette and techniques of the medium as well as the supports on which the fragile material was applied and the protection given its surface.

That pastel flourished in the eighteenth century must be ascribed not only to its aesthetic desirability but to the emergence of a prosperous buying public, a cultural climate that encouraged technology and innovation, and a burgeoning trade in artists' materials, notably crayons, paper, glass, and fixatives. During the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) pastel had been employed for grand royal portraits, but in the early 1720s a shift occurred, sparked by the intimate crayon likenesses introduced by Rosalba Carriera during her brief sojourn in Paris in 1720–21. The smaller works Carriera inspired suited the taste and elegant decor of the new aristocracy.

Perhaps the most fundamental material factor that accounted for the widespread popularity of portraits in pastel was the increased availability of ready-made crayons. As famed Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens noted in a letter of May 30, 1663, and French painter and theoretician Roger de Piles remarked in his *Premiers élémens de la peinture pratique* in 1684, it was possible to purchase ready-made crayons in the 1660s. Their commercial production was limited, however. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, trade in crayons had proliferated. As pastelists steadily gained in stature and dissociated themselves from the mechanical tasks of their métier, the fabrication of the colors, once carried out in the ateliers for the artists' own use, was handed over to independent

artisans. Responding to both artists' and sitters' desire for portraits in pastel that emulated oil paintings, specialist pastel makers producing an ever broadening palette of crayons established themselves in cities across Europe.

Advances in glass technology also helped fuel the demand for portraits in dry color. Although they were never executed on panel or directly on canvas, works in pastel were regarded as a type of painting. The need to protect these powdery surfaces, however, had limited their dimensions to the small size (rarely exceeding 29 by 17 inches) of the sheets cut from hand-blown crown glass. During the late 1680s a pouring process developed by the French royal glassworks (established in 1665 as one of the economic reforms of Louis XIV's minister of finance, Jean Baptiste Colbert) enabled the manufacture of clear cast plate glass measuring more than 60 by 40 inches, allowing pastel portraits to be executed on the same scale as those in oil. The luxury implied by the costly glazing made pastels viable alternatives to easel paintings and well suited to display the wealth and prestige of their owners, exemplified by the well-heeled young couple in Charles Antoine Coypel's double portrait (frontispiece, page 4).

The innovations that spurred the rising popularity of pastel were products of the Enlightenment, an era that held great respect for the manufacturing trades and crafts and had faith in the practical application of science and the arts to advance commerce and industry. The many newly established and reinvigorated philosophical-scientific organizations in Europe and America, among them the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and the Académie des Sciences in Paris (founded in 1648 and 1699, respectively), the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia (1743), and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce in London (1754), urged craftsmen and inventors to revive neglected practices, abandon secretive ones, and improve their products for the public good. The societies also provided channels for the dissemination of the results of those efforts. In the spirit of fostering progress and the commercial advantages resulting from it, makers of crayons, paper, and fixatives experimented with increasingly softer pastels, more tenacious supports, and invisible, nondarkening coatings. To stimulate innovation, premiums were offered for "useful" products that would be tested by committees of artists or other qualified reviewers. Practical information poured forth as well from encyclopedias, dictionaries, journals, and manuals on the artisanal aspects of pastel. Robert Dossie's *Handmaid to the Arts* (1758), John Russell's *Elements of Painting with Crayons* (1772), and P. R. de Chaperon's *Traité de la peinture au pastel, du secret d'en composer les crayons & des moyens de le fixer* (Treaty on Painting with Pastel, the Secret of Making Crayons, and the Methods for Fixing Them; 1788), for example, nurtured and reflected the widespread enthusiasm for the medium and inspired the many connoisseurs and amateurs who sat for portraits or took up crayons as a pleasurable diversion.

The appeal of pastel was also one of economics and convenience. For artists, crayon portraiture was a lucrative business that could compete in the same marketplace as oil painting. As George Vertue, the engraver whose notebooks were

the basis for Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762–71), observed, for most practitioners pastels were "much easier in the execution than Oil colours," as the costs were lower and the handling more rapid. It being customary to price portraits according to their dimensions, the larger formats made possible by the new larger glazing allowed pastelists to charge higher fees than in the past, while for their patrons pastels remained less expensive than oils. Pastel required no drying, and there were thus no color shifts, no varnish, no offensive fumes, and fewer sittings—all features valued by patrons. A portrait in pastel, "the most commodious type of painting" according to Roger de Piles, required relatively little preparation, no assistants, and few tools: a box of crayons, paper, a drawing board, and stumps for blending. The work was readily transportable and thus as easily accomplished in a painting room in a city or spa town as in a sitter's residence. Such practicalities made pastel versatile, and well suited to studies like Labille-Guiard's *Madame Élisabeth de France* or Wright's *A Boy Reading* (nos. 27, 38), independent sketches like Vigée Le Brun's *Lady Ossulston* or Prud'hon's *Nicolas Perchet* (nos. 30, 31), highly finished works like Capet's *Jean Pierre Demetz* or Cotes's *James Rivington Sr.* (nos. 32, 36), or the replicas commonly made in this medium.

Artists and their patrons also appreciated the distinctive optical properties of paintings in dry color, their nonyellowing brilliance and the unmistakable bloom, or *fleur*, that enlivens the complexion of the sitter. This effect, a characteristic of all powders, is produced by the innumerable irregular particles of pastel, each of which reflects light diffusely. Described by Sir Isaac Newton in his widely read *Opticks* of 1704 as far brighter than the light emitted from most any other surface, scattered light confers on pastel an unmistakable matte, velvetlike quality, a unique, immediately recognizable sense of white light. The scintillating reflections from pastel portraits, along with their glazing and gilt frames, harmonized with the flickering light reverberating from glass-paneled windows, mirrors, crystal chandeliers, brass buttons, upholstery tacks, and the myriad other polished surfaces in the newly fashionable small reception rooms in which they were hung. In his "Notes on Crayon Painting" (published in the *European Magazine* in February 1797, twenty-seven years after his death), Francis Cotes, the most renowned British pastelist of the mid-eighteenth century, described crayon pictures as "superlatively beautiful, and decorative in a very high degree in apartments that are not too large; for, having their surface dry, they partake in appearance of the effect of Fresco, and by candle light are luminous and beautiful beyond all other pictures."

The exquisite luminosity of pastel is alluring, but it is also vexing, for the powdery nature and fragility of the medium dictate the unique method by which it is fabricated and the specific techniques for its application and protection. Unlike oils, crayons cannot be blended on a palette or on a support to produce a new tone, lest they become compressed and lose their optical and chromatic brilliance. And because pastel is both powdery and opaque, it cannot be applied in glazes to modify the hues. Thus, to achieve maximum purity of tone in the final composition, each color must be available before the painting process begins (a distinctive feature of the medium), hence the artists' need to work with innumerable crayons.

Making the preformed colors that comprised the pastelist's palette was a laborious and often secretive process, seeming to verge on alchemy. Unlike red, white, or black chalks, natural materials that are mined from the earth, cut into sticks, and used without alteration, pastel is a fabricated medium. It is composed of three ingredients: colored pigment, a white mineral or pigment (called the filler or base), and a binder. In the eighteenth century, to create crayons of a uniform and soft consistency the pigment and filler had to be levigated to remove gritty particles, reduced to a fine powder, combined with a binder, ground to a paste with a muller in water or spirits of wine, tempered with a knife, drained on a chalk stone or set on a glass plate to maintain the correct amount of moisture, rolled into cylindrical sticks, and dried. That each component had particular properties that needed to be accommodated by trial and error and that each color had to be created in a separate operation made the process even more demanding. To produce painterly strokes with excellent covering power, the ideal crayon (as prescribed by artists' handbooks) was texturally homogeneous, opaque, and soft; it was solid when grasped between the fingers; and it spent freely when stroked across the support.