

# Shades of Success

*It's been all black and white for artist John Hersey—even the bit about starting his own art materials business is based on the subtlest of color variations.*

BY RICHARD ENGLING

**W**hen British artist John Hersey became frustrated with pastels available on the market, he did the logical thing... he made his own.

Hersey had become an award-winning artist using soft charcoal. He loved the texture of the medium as well as the boldness of the absolute black. "My work in black and white gave me a keen awareness of light and shadow," says Hersey, "but I was at a point where I felt it lacked vibrancy. I longed to express the true nature of color, so I decided to try pastels because of their brightness and directness of execution. I don't like too much to come between my hand and my canvas, and rendering with pastel is much like drawing with charcoal."

Hersey quickly became frustrated, however, because the color sets had no logical range of color to them, and most of the sticks were very thin and wrapped in paper, which disguised any cracks or splinters until it was too late.

Realizing that these problems probably weren't unique to him, Hersey decided to find a solution. "Artists today seem to be looking for intense and darker pastels," he says, "you can get sick of the endless array of pale pastel shades." Pale pastels are simply single pigments added to black or white and a small amount of gum to make a paste. Hersey set out to create some really strong colors. "I wanted to develop colors in terms of how our eyes actually see things," he says. "In nature you see centers of intense color, and all the varieties of that color,



*John Hersey carefully measures and mixes his pigments, then rolls and cuts each pastel stick. Finally, he lets them dry and boxes them in ranges of integrated shades.*

until it's influenced by something and becomes yet another color. If you look out of the window, you'll find that what was once a beautiful pale green is now a dark bluish green. The color changes as light changes. These changes are what I attempt to reflect in my unified color sets." He's now developed a series of 240 color pastels that are packed into integrated sets.

In Hersey's pastels, the grades of colors aren't made by the addition of simply black or white. Instead, he's developed cycles of related hues from many pigments to reflect the unison he sees in nature. One pastel stick can contain blends of many pigments.

Despite his impressive efforts, this isn't a big-time operation. Hersey makes his pastels in an old manor house in Thorneburn, Scotland.

There he mixes his pigments in clay baker's equipment and employs villagers to weigh the parcels and roll them by hand. "In our handmade process, the pigment barely gets pressed at all. The sticks are rolled lightly, which makes the color extremely rich and vibrant. The process also creates thicker pastels, which causes them to render fluently as they glide across the paper... like soft charcoal."

He took his frustration with current products a bit further than most, but Hersey never believed that his solution would be so successful. "I didn't expect to be in the pastel business. I created these crayons because of my own frustration with the existing products, and it turned out that many other pastelists felt the same disappointments in the medium as I did."



As for the direction Hersey expects his art to take him in the future, he admits, "I'd like to get around to actually using these pastels myself. Developing them and starting the business has taken all my time. I need to find more people who would like to spend the day rolling pastels. Then I could spend more of my day drawing with them." ●

*Richard Engling is a Chicago-based freelance writer, novelist and multimedia performance artist.*

## EDITORIAL NOTE

To locate a local art supply retailer who carries Unison Soft Pastels, contact Unison USA at P.O. Box 118, Kimberly WI 54136; tel: 800/233-2404.