

Masterclass: Realistic skin tones

American artist **Cuong Nguyen** is a member of the International Guild of Realism, so who could be better to show you how to create accurate flesh colours in your paintings?



One of the most challenging tasks for a figurative painter is creating realistic skin tones. The difficulty lies in capturing the subtle changes in colour temperature across the face and the body while also representing the lighting and shading of the form.

After many years of practice and experimentation, I've devised an approach to layering pastel colour that works very well. In the painting I made for this masterclass, *Ophelia*, and many of my other pastel works, I used a Wallis sanded pastel paper, because it has a sufficient tooth to hold many layers of pastel. Wallis paper is less

common in the UK, so you could try the UART Premium Sanded Pastel Paper range instead.

For my colour, I mainly use Stabilo CarbOthello pastel pencils, along with Prismacolor NuPastel colour sticks for the foundation and some background areas (the latter are a harder 'soft' pastel, similar to the Conté à Paris carré crayons or Faber-Castell Polychromos stick pastel ranges that are more common in the UK). To prepare both the pencils and the sticks, I sharpen them to a very defined point. This is required to achieve the high level of detail.

I was inspired for this particular painting by a number of variations of *Ophelia* painted by the Old Masters. When I first met the model for this demo, Siri, I knew that I had found the perfect subject.

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"I'VE DEvised AN APPROACH TO LAYERING COLOUR THAT WORKS"

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

• PAPER

Wallis sanded paper, Belgian Mist colour, 76x61cm

• PASTEL PENCILS

Ivory, Carmine Red, Magenta, Violet Deep, Leaf Green, Olive Green, Leaf Green Deep, Burnt Ochre, Burnt Umber, Burnt Sienna, Bister, Caput Mortuum Violet Light, Dark Flesh Tint, Light Flesh Tint, Light Ochre, Warm Grey 1, Neutral Black and Lamp Black, all Stabilo CarbOthello

• SOFT PASTELS

Sandalwood, Maroon, Burnt Umber, Black, Raw Sienna, Light Ochre, Blue Violet, Cocoa Brown, Crimson, Indian Red, Tuscan Red, Ivory, Bottle Green, Nut Brown, Old Lilac, Old Rose and Citrine Green, all Prismacolor NuPastel

• MASKING TAPE

• CRAFT KNIFE



1 DRAW THE OUTLINE

I scheduled several sessions with a model so that I could make sketches and take photos. This demo is based on one of the photos I captured of her. To begin this drawing, secure your sanded pastel paper smoothly to a drawing board with masking tape. Draw the outlines with a Burnt Sienna pastel pencil. Be patient while you do this, because the quality of your initial drawing will determine the quality of your finished painting.



2 LAYER SKIN TONES

I borrowed a technique common to Old Master oil paintings by using green as the foundation of the skin tones. I applied an Earth green soft pastel first, trying not to press too hard so that the pastel would be free to blend with subsequent colour layers. The subsequent layers were applied with the pastel pencils: first Yellow Ochre, then Light Purple, Light Pink and Light Yellow. Vary the proportions of these colours at different points to achieve the different tones of the skin.



3 COMPLETE THE FACE

I work by completing one region at a time in full detail. Each region requires subtle differences in tonal values and colour temperature, such as the pink on the nose and both cheeks. For the highlights in her eyes, I used White and Light Grey. For highlights on the nose and lips, I used both Light Grey and Light Pink to create a much softer highlight compared to the one in her eyes.



TOP TIP

When you are completing a painting one section at a time, pay careful attention to how each area blends with the next. Vary the edges for added realism

4 VARY THE EDGES

As I worked on the face, I also worked on the adjacent background a little. I wanted to make sure that the area in which her face met the background was softer than the point where it met the hairline, so as to create an illusion of depth.



5 DRAW THE HAND

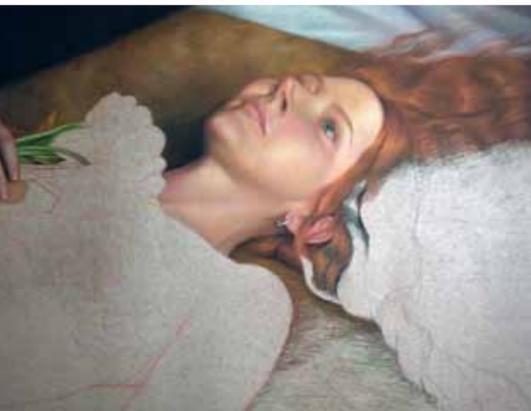
After finishing the head, the next step is the hand. Begin with the same Earth Green colour as the face. To create the softness of the hand, avoid creating sharp outlines. I also achieved a more life-like appearance by adding more warm colours to the tips of her fingers. I added a light pink to the highlight on her fingernails as a final touch.



6 DEVELOP THE FUR

To paint the beautiful warm tones in the fur blanket, I layered several colours again. I applied soft pastel for the foundation: Cocoa Brown, followed by Bottle Green in the shadows and Citrine Green in the illuminated regions. Then I created the details with pencils, using mainly Burnt Sienna and Yellow Ochre, with Light Purple and Light Grey for the highlights.

TOP TIP
When painting hair or fur, apply all of your pencil, pastel or brush strokes in the same direction to create the illusion of individual strands



7 LAYER THE HAIR

To paint Siri's gorgeous red hair, I used the following pastel pencil colours: Lamp Black, deep blue, Leaf Green Deep, dark brown, Burnt Sienna, Carmine Red and Yellow Ochre. Working from dark to light, I filled the shadow areas first with Lamp Black, deep blue, and Leaf Green Deep, and then added the other colours accordingly in the regions that catch the light.



8 PICK OUT HIGHLIGHTS

For the final touches to the hair, I added highlights using Light Yellow and Light Purple pastel pencils. I gently laid down the strokes in the direction of her hair as it fell on the blanket. These fine strokes create the wavy strands of hair.



9 ASSESS YOUR PROGRESS

It's really important throughout the process to step back periodically and consider the painting as a whole. Of particular significance to the success of the painting are the colour relationships. I used green and Burnt Sienna as the main colours to pull most of the painting together. These two dominant colours create harmony between the skin, the hair and the background, as well as providing a contrast to the tulips that are coming up next.



10 COMPLEMENT COLOURS

I chose yellow and purple tulips because these colours are complementary to each other, while also serving as a vibrant contrast to the rest of the painting. I painted the stems with Dark Brown, Dark Green and Light Green, before then adding highlights with Light Grey and Light Yellow. For the flowers themselves, I applied multiple layers from dark to light with flowing strokes.



11 LAYER MORE COLOUR

As with the hands, I was careful to avoid making the tulips' outlines sharp, so that they would appear softer. For the yellow tulips, I started with Light Brown and Purple pencils in the shadows, working them up into Yellow Ochre and Yellow, followed by Light Yellow and Light Grey highlights. The shadows of the purple tulips were Black and Deep Purple, working up into Red Violet and Light Magenta with Light Pink and Light Grey highlights.



12 DEFINE THE BODY

After the flowers, I continued work on the torso, using the same method for skin-tones as I did in for the face and hand, starting with a foundation of Earth Green soft pastel. I paid special attention to the anatomy of the upper body, using Dark Brown and Green to contour the shadows around the rib cage.



13 SHIFT TEMPERATURES

I used mostly light strokes to create the soft skin texture of the body. The pastel pencil colours I used were the same as for the face and hands, but in different proportions to reflect the changing colour temperature. I highlighted the skin with Light Pink, making sure that my pencil was especially sharp so that I could produce the finest possible lines.



14 FINISHING TOUCHES

With the painting almost complete, I stood at a distance of three to four feet to assess the tonal values and colours, before making final revisions. I decided I needed to add some more highlights in her forehead, some additional greens on her hair and some purples on her body.