In this lesson I will be demonstrating how to develop a skyscape using blending, layering and scumbling techniques. Soft Pastels are a perfect choice for skyscapes such as this because you can balance soft edges and more clearly defined areas by varying the pressure and choosing how much to blend. Notice how the choice of paper texture, colour and tone affects the final outcome.

I have chosen this image showing the light breaking through dark clouds because I loved the drama and movement in the image.

I will be using it as a starting point for my pastel painting but am always prepared to let the painting guide me as it develops. Sometimes I begin to enjoy the way certain colours layer and so I allow myself to move away from copying the image too closely – that’s the fun of being an artist!
Materials

Paper:
I will be using a dark grey Fabriano Tiziano Paper. I selected the grey-green colour because I can allow it to show through in places across the whole image and this will create a sense of depth and harmony. Also, I felt that the strong “tooth” of the paper would result in a textured, broken effect which could help to suggest movement and atmosphere.

Pastels
Unison Handmade Pastels
1. Red 4 (warm red)
2. BE10 (raw sienna)
3. UG16 (muted yellow)
4. White
5. BV16 (blue violet)
6. Red16 (light red)
7. RE13 (v. light red)
8. UG18 (cream)

Daler Rowney Soft Pastels
9. Indigo Tint 7
10. Blue Grey Tint 4
11. Purple Grey Tint 4
12. Warm Grey Tint 6
13. Blue Green Tint 4
14. Crimson Tint 3
15. Purple Tint 3

*A note about pastels and colour selection:

You don’t have to rush out and buy the same pastels as I have used here or have exactly the same colours. Use the above range as a guide to the sorts of colours I used and then match them as closely as you can from whatever range you have (or buy). I like to work with the Unison and Daler Rowney ranges because of their softness and quality but you could get very good results from less expensive ranges of pastels like ‘Inscribe’ for example.

My online tutorials go through this in more detail and there I suggest a range of 48 Inscribe (half size) which will give you a decent palette of colours with quite a few subtle tints that you will often use. I also look at colour mixing using pastels – a tutorial that gives you an idea of just how many colours you can mix from a few warm and cool primaries (plus white).

Colour is personal and subjective and you might make different colour selections than me depending on your own perception and instinct.
I often find with skyscapes that rather than drawing an outline sketch, using the side of the pastel to gently map in the main shapes is better. This is because the edges of clouds are continually shifting and they are softened and so it is best not to ‘anchor’ them down with a line to begin with. If you do want to sketch a line then I would suggest using a pastel colour that can be absorbed into the cloud shapes easily and that you use very lightly.
Step 1: Mapping in the Colours

The first step is to lay thin layers of pastel down using the side. I used the blue violet here to establish the main cloud shape and then layered warm red over the top, followed by raw sienna. I avoided putting the blue violet under the raw sienna area because it would have turned green.

I also ‘floated’ a thin veil of purple grey over the background sky area to soften the effect of the grey green paper.

Initially I overlaid pastel onto pastel without blending as you can see in the upper areas. Lower down you can see the beginning of the blending process in the slightly more muted effect of the yellow.

Notice the tooth of the paper breaking through in those areas where I have not yet blended. It can be effective to combine blended and textured layers.
Step 2: Blending

Having laid down the colours, I blended them gently into the surface with my fingers. You don’t need to press on much at all for this stage – it’s just a question of easing the pastel into the grain rather than forcing it. Using too much pastel combined with heavy handed blending can limit the amount of layering you are able to do – building up gently offers you more scope and allows you to correct mistakes more easily.

For the fine detail at the edge of the clouds I blended using my little finger. You might also find blending tools helpful for fine control like a ‘torchon’ or a rubber ‘colour shaper’.
Step 3: Adding Depth

As you can see in the bottom right hand corner of this section, I then began to add some depth to the clouds by adding darker tones. These were created using a combination of indigo and warm grey.

In selecting these colours I had in mind two things - the warm/cool influence in each of these and the depth of tone i.e. the lightness or darkness.

If your painting is looking a bit 'lightweight', it may be that you have not been quite brave enough with your darker tones. So even if you don’t have a dark enough grey, for example, you may have to introduce a dark blue, brown or hint of black to create a sufficiently dark tone. You could then modify the colour by scumbling a thin layer of lighter grey (or another colour) over the top.

‘Scumbling’ is a technique where you drag a thin broken layer of colour over a previous layer allowing the first colour to show through to a certain extent. It can be used to create subtle misty effects or to create a sense of layered texture in parts of a painting. Often the previous layer is blended into the ‘pits’ of the surface and the new layer catches on the ‘tooth’ creating a sense of depth. Again, these techniques are shown in more detail in my online tutorials.
Step 4: Developing the Detail and Contrast

At this stage in the painting, I began to develop the lightest area using white and cream pastels. I used the end of the pastel and gently rolled it to create the shape. When going over previous layers that are darker, you may be better brushing off a little of the previous layer using a small bristle brush. This will keep the white a little cleaner when it is applied.

I usually put white/cream on and blend it into the grain before putting a second layer of the same to freshen it up and strengthen the effect.

I continued to draw the broken shapes around the light source and just pressed them into the surface a little rather than trying to blend them as this would have distorted or lost the shapes that I had drawn.

I then added further layers of dark tone using purple grey and warm grey. Although not listed on my palette above, I may also have used an Autumn Brown (tint 8) from the Daler Rowney range to add a little more depth.

Towards the top of the pillar of cloud, I added a little of the light red, very light red, cream and muted yellow to create further layers. This enhanced the sense of form.
Step 5: Step Back and Take a Look

At a certain point, walk away, stretch, breathe and make yourself a brew - perhaps even allow yourself a biccy or two – you’ve earned it. Put the painting where you can see it and assess it both next to your source photograph and apart from it.

When compared to the photograph, you get an idea of what needs doing generally from this point. For example, I can see that the lighter areas in the picture need further development and that the shapes of the whiter areas need to be softened and integrated into the whole. Also the bottom right hand side of the photograph is quite a lot deeper in tone.

Seen independently from the photograph, I noticed areas that I felt just worked whether they were an accurate portrayal of the original image or not. For example, the way the cloud forms almost disappear into the surface down towards the left hand corner. So I decided not to overdevelop that area.

I was quite happy with the way it was coming together at this point and could see that it was developing into quite a dramatic image.
Step 6: Refining the Detail & Bringing it all Together

Following my assessment of the image, I developed the lighter areas across the painting by laying in very light red, muted yellow, cream and white. Again I blended or pressed these into the surface as appropriate and then put further layers over the top, sometimes leaving these unblended to add a heightened sense of texture, movement and atmosphere.

This stage is about subtle refinements and you will find yourself going backwards and forwards with it until you hopefully get to a stage where the whole thing feels as if it is coming together.

Be prepared to take your time with this stage – don’t try to get there too quickly. The quality of the final piece is often dependent upon the patience shown, particularly at this stage of a painting.
Step 7: Final Refinements

Often by this stage of a painting, I am completely absorbed in the process and ideally I need not to be interrupted as it can break the flow. You will have tuned into the subtleties of a piece by this stage and your instincts for what needs doing to finish it off will hopefully become clearer (though this also comes with practice and experience).

I clarified some of the shapes, blended and softened certain areas and added a few further highlights where I felt appropriate. The most challenging area was the area of broken light – at various points the shapes seemed too separate from the surrounding areas so I blended over them lightly and then took a small round sable brush and brushed back the narrow darker channels between the shapes.

I also added more yellow into the white highlights to soften the brilliance of the white and integrate these highlights into the yellower highlights of cloud shapes across the picture

It is important to keep stepping back at this point and seeing how the whole thing is looking. If you work too closely, there’s a chance you will try to smooth everything out and lose some of the interesting textural elements which work well from a slight distance.
So here is the final piece. I was satisfied with it because it captures the spirit of the original image without being a slave to it. As you will have experienced, the process involved sketching it out using the side of the pastel, mapping areas of colour in, blending and further layering, adding tonal depth, developing contrasts of light and dark followed by assessing, refining and finally 'tweaking' until you are satisfied that the piece is finished.

I hope you've enjoyed having a go and that you have found this guide helpful. If you struggled, that's okay too – anything worth doing takes a little practice!
About Michael Howley

Born in Burnley in 1964, I have taught and painted around the North and Pendle area for over 25 years. Soft Pastels is my favourite medium and I particularly enjoy applying it to the subtleties of Landscape painting.

I try to capture a sense of the mood and atmosphere of the moment.

See my full profile at: www.ArtTutor.com/artists/Michael-Howley

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