BLENDING

Blending is a means of achieving soft, melting color gradations by brushing or rubbing the edge where two tones or colors meet.

The softest blending effects are achieved in oils and pastels, although with fast-drying media such as acrylic, gouache, and egg tempera these effects are a little more difficult to obtain. Subtle gradations are made possible, even so, by the application of SCUMBLING or DRYBRUSH over the colors to be blended. In watercolor, a blended effect is achieved by allowing the colors to merge together WET-IN-WET.

The Great Masters such as Rembrandt (1606-69), Rubens (1577-1640) and Velazquez (1599-1660), achieved wonderfully subtle gradations from light to shadow through the careful use of this technique.

The delicate effects obtained by blending are very attractive, but the temptation is often to overdo it, with the result that all the life is taken out of the colors. When painting an object — say, an apple — it is not necessary to blend the entire area. From the normal viewing distance, the form will look smoothly blended if you blend just that narrow area where light turns into shadow or where one color melts into another. Always remember the old adage that flat color casually brushed looks brighter than graded color thoroughly brushed.

Acrylic
Because acrylic dries so rapidly, you don't have time to brush and rebrush a passage to achieve a subtle transition from light to dark or color to color as you do in oils. However, the addition of a little gel medium to acrylic paint gives it a consistency nearer to that of oil paint, allowing a smoother gradation

The simplest way to blend two colors is to wet-blend them: while the paint is still wet, quickly draw a moist brush along the edge where the colors meet.
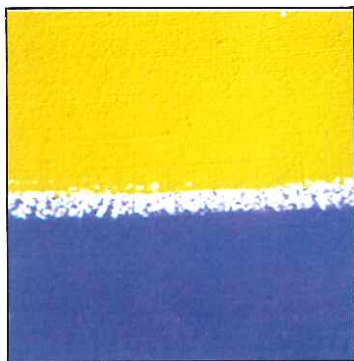

Blending • Acrylic
1 Using a No. 7 flat bristle brush, the artist applies cadmium yellow and cobalt blue, side by side but not touching.
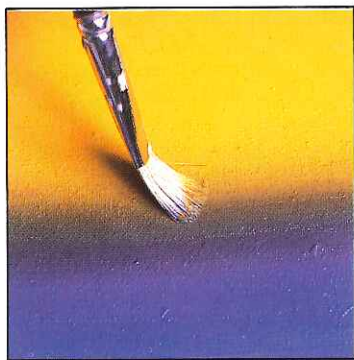
2 Working quickly before the paint dries, he uses a clean, wet brush to blend the two colors together lightly. Do not apply heavy pressure with the brush, because this tends to leave grooves in the paint.

4 The finished effect, showing a smooth transition from one tone to the other.
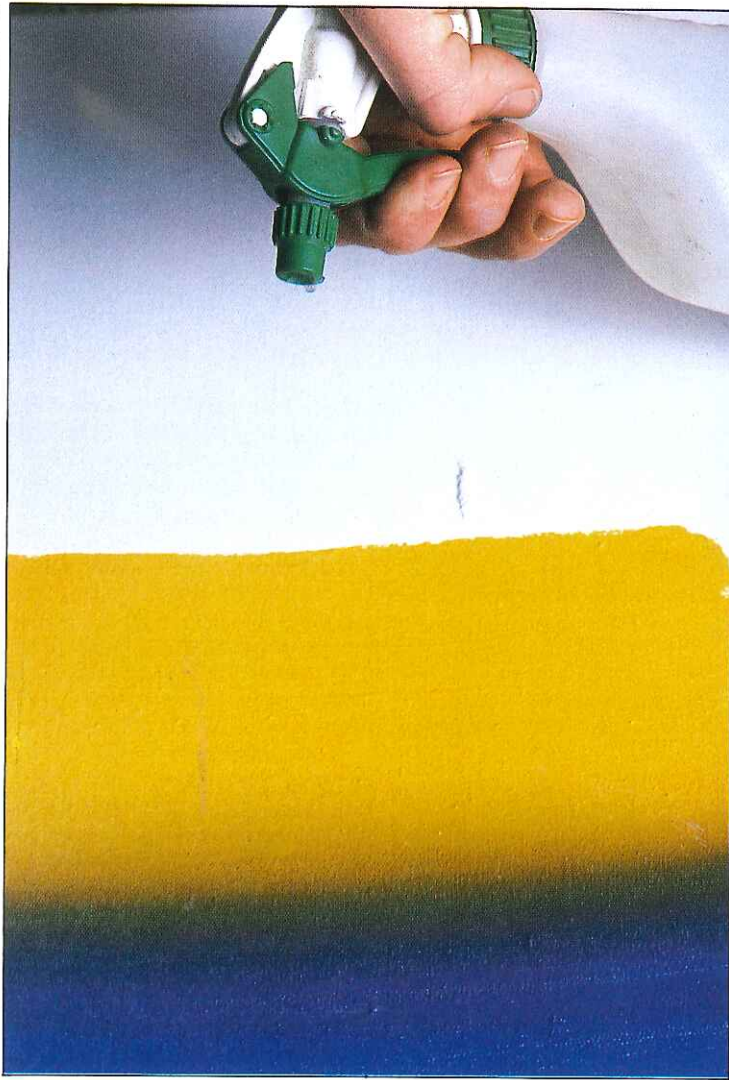
3 When you are working on a large area, if you spray the surface lightly with a spray diffuser this will help to keep the paint moist. Alternatively, add a little gel medium or retarder to the paint on the palette to lengthen the drying time.

5 Alternatively, tones or colors can be blended rapidly with vertical strokes of a soft, moist brush.

Blending dry color

When painting with fast-drying media such as tempera, acrylic, or gouache, remember that blended effects can be achieved even when colors have dried completely. Simply apply loose, scumbled strokes of fresh color across the point where two colors or tones meet. Here the artist blends two tempera colors (yellow ocher and ultramarine) which have dried; he creates a mixture of the same two colors and scumbles the paint roughly over the edge where the dried colors meet. The scumble allows some of the original color to break through. This "disguises" the hard edge and creates the illusion of a soft blend.

Blending with a Fan Brush

Fan brushes are specially adapted for blending. While the paint is still wet, use a gentle sweeping motion with the brush to draw the lighter color into the darker one. Then, with a light touch, keep working along the edge between the two colors until a smooth, imperceptible blend is achieved.

Blending • Oil

The buttery, viscous quality of oil paint makes it perfect for achieving softly blended tones. Oil paint for blending should be fluid but not too runny.

1 Here the artist uses a No. 4 flat bristle brush to apply two broad bands of color (cadmium red and cadmium yellow) adjacent to each other.

2 Using a soft, long-haired brush, the artist "knits" the two colors together where they meet, using short, smooth strokes. For best results, always work the lighter color into the darker one.
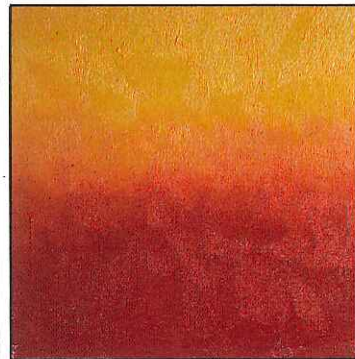

3 The finished effect. The colors are blended together softly, but the liveliness of the brushmarks prevents the area from looking too "perfect" and monotonous.

Pastel

In pastel, colors or tones are fused by rubbing the two adjoining edges with a finger, a paper stump, a rag, or a brush. For best results, use a fairly smooth, sanded paper and build up the first layers with hard pastel so that the grain of the paper doesn't become too clogged.

The soft, painterly effects obtained by blending in pastel are very pretty, but don't allow yourself to be seduced into excessive blending. Use it sparingly, otherwise the colors lose their vibrancy and the surface looks slick and mannered. However, a passage that has been overblended can usually be revitalized by the application of a few strokes of broken color (see FEATHERING and SCUMBLING).
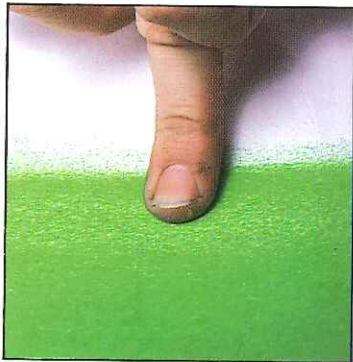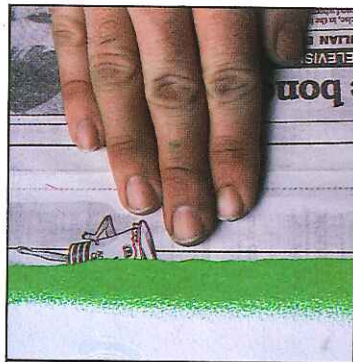
Blending • Pastel

1 Blended areas are a quick way of laying a foundation of color in a landscape or a background for a portrait. The artist lays in an area of thick color with the side of a soft pastel stick. He then spreads the color out lightly from the center outward, using his fingertip. (Always make sure your finger is clean and free from grease.)
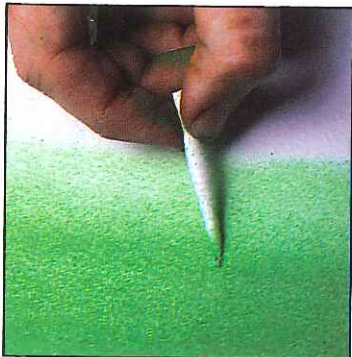
2 Use a torchon (paper stump) to refine the blending further. Paper stumps are made of tightly rolled paper, finely tapered at one end, and are ideal for blending small, tricky areas. You can also use the side of the stump to soften and blend larger areas.

3 To set the color and prevent smudging, the artist places a sheet of newspaper over the blended area and rubs it gently to push the pastel into the grain of the paper.

Blending large areas • Pastel

Pastels can be blended quite easily on paper with a good, smooth surface. Using a piece of cloth or tissue paper, you can cover large areas much quicker than if you were to blend the color with your fingers.
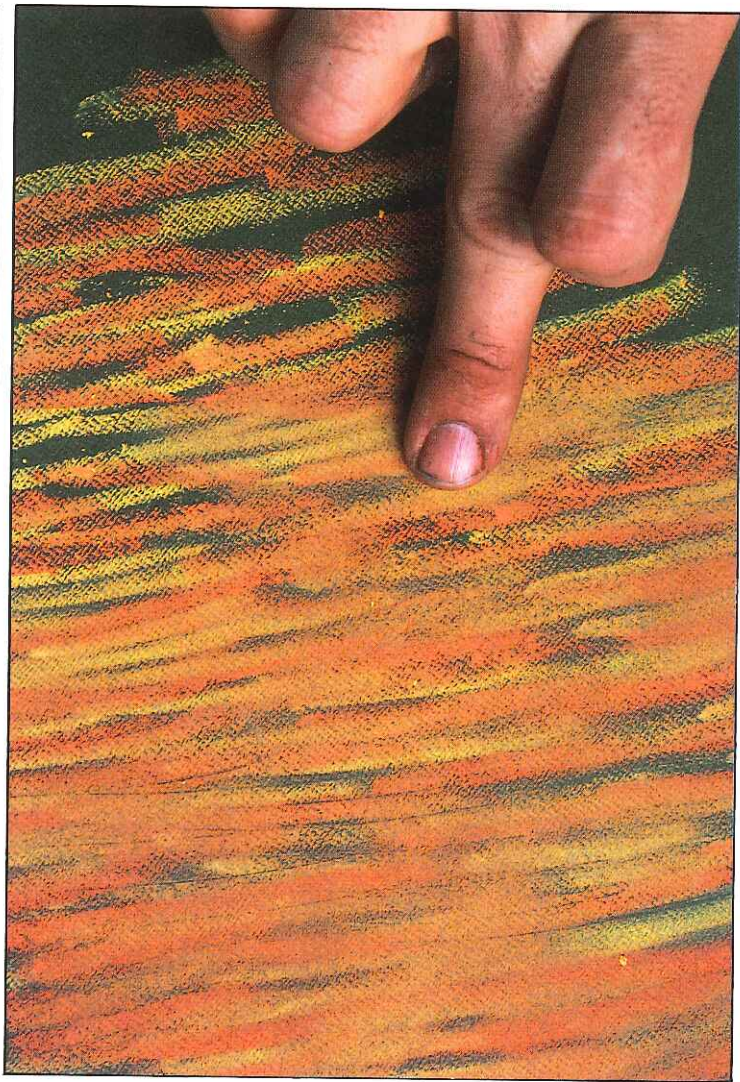
Rough blending • Pastel

In contrast to the highly finished, smooth blending technique shown above, some artists prefer to keep rubbing-in to a minimum. Certainly, if pastel is overblended it loses its freshness and bloom (this bloom is caused by light reflecting off the tiny granules of pigment). Here, the artist has applied hatched marks in orange and yellow pastel on a dark-toned paper. Using the tip of his finger, he softens the lines just a little to give a rough-blended effect which retains the sparkle and freshness of the colors. In most pastel paintings a combination of smooth areas and rough-textured passages gives the most satisfactory results.