



DESMOND O'HAGAN

Shapes are the key to this painterly approach to pastel

BY MAGGIE PRICE

DESMOND O'HAGAN is a Master Pastelist, Pastel Society of America. His work has won many awards, including awards at the Pastel Society of America exhibitions, the George Innes Jr. Memorial Award from the Salmagundi Club, and the Prix d'Pastel award from the International Association of Pastel Societies. His work is in numerous private and public collections around the world, and he teaches a few workshops each year. For more information, see his web site, www.desmondohagan.com

Some artists say they paint the light; some paint atmosphere, and some concentrate on mood.

Desmond O'Hagan's paintings contain all of these elements, but he achieves them by painting shapes. "It's a painterly approach," he explains. "I paint the same way in pastels as I do in oils. I concentrate first on shapes and masses, then connect areas and work towards defining them near the end of the painting." He's careful not to make

that definition too precise. "I like to loosely imply detail with edges and flicks of color," he says. "It allows the viewer to make up the detail, and I think it gives more of a sense of atmosphere."

Desmond works on Canson paper—"the smooth side," he says quickly. "I've experimented with a lot of papers and surfaces, but I like the smooth Canson paper, and I like the colors available. Using this surface allows me to create visual texture, by varying the pressure

on the pastel stick; less pressure allows a more transparent application of color, usually in the darker tones, where I let the paper show through. In the lighter areas, the highlights, the colors are more opaque and applied with more pressure."

Desmond says he's a strong advocate of the "less is more" theory. "The paper's not all that forgiving, so I apply just one stroke of color when possible, though some areas may have two or three strokes."

Although he enjoys plein-air painting, Desmond often works in his studio from photographs. When he travels, he sketches and takes photographs, unless he's staying in the same place for a week or so, allowing time for plein-air work.

"I've just gotten back from a trip to Scotland and Ireland," he says. "I have relatives in both countries. I've been to Ireland quite a few times previously, but this was the first time I got to Scotland. Although it was wet, I loved the muted colors of Scotland. I stayed with a cousin in Glasgow, and was able to travel around the country quite a bit, and did lots of hiking, sketching and photography."

Desmond says he is attracted to subjects with interesting shapes and colors, and, of course, light. The same things catch his eye whether it's outdoors or an interior scene.

"In Ireland, I loved the pub scenes. There would be people huddled together; generally the light was dim, but then there would be streaks of light across a figure, across a room. I took photographs to work from later. In a situation like this, I make sure it's okay to take pictures. Years ago, in north-western Ireland, I went into a pub with my uncle. You don't just walk into a pub in that area and start taking pictures. But he was local, so the people there at least sort of knew him, and he introduced me, explained that I was an artist, and that I wanted to take pictures. Some people left, but the rest were okay with it.

"I'm not painting portraits, anyway,



Above, *Evening Lights, Barcelona*, 24"x18"; below, *Morning Light, Spain*, 11"x20"
Opposite page, *Quiet Corner, Dublin Tavern*, 14"x18'





Above, *Night Reflections, Larimer Street*, 10"x19"; below, *Market Vendor, Seattle*, 18"x24"

in scenes like this. I like the shapes of the figures, and the atmosphere of the pub. They are complicated scenes, but the key is to simplify them into shapes."

Desmond says he's aware some artists are a bit apprehensive about painting figures. "It's really the same as painting a rock or a tree, though. If you have the shapes correctly represented, you don't need to know that you're painting eyes or a face."

He begins each painting with a loose, light charcoal sketch. "It's just a map," he says. "I don't put any detail in the sketch."

Then he begins placing abstract shapes. "I'm not drawing so much as placing masses and shapes," he says. "As I work, the areas of color and shape begin to come together. If it happens to be a figure, then the shapes tie together to create it, and at the end I can add a tiny indicator of an ear or another feature to complete it."

Desmond generally works dark to light, but says it's not a hard and fast rule. He adds that he likes to keep the colors clean, so avoids using dark over light, since that tends to muddy the colors.



"I pay attention to warm and cool colors," he says. "If a painting starts to get too cool, then I warm it up, using more oranges and reds."

"I never use white to represent light in a painting. The nature of light is that it is always made up of colors, both cool and warm. I use color temperature and a little contrast to make a vibration that reads as light."

"You can get the most out of color by putting more intense colors up against more mundane colors. For example, I use a subdued color in an area and then place a strong color next to it for an interesting combination."

Desmond paints a wide variety of subjects. "You should be able to paint anything with pastel," he says. "It's very versatile." He indicates a painting of a rain-drenched street, which at first glance appears quite complex. "I painted the rainy street using blocks of color. Reflections bring an image to the simplest forms."

"I use contrasting colors and pay attention to edges. If I use a hard edge, I let it fade off somewhere to create lost and found edges. The viewer's eye will always go to a point of distinct edges and contrast. Although the painting starts out very loose, the final use of edges and highlights will crisp it up."

He likes fleeting scenes—dusk and twilight, light that only lasts for a few minutes, the action of a street or a restaurant scene. "It is fascinating, the way the light from headlights or streetlights bounces around. It seems like the scenes are dark but there is actually a lot of color there. When I paint it, though, I have to be careful not to have too much light bouncing around or I can lose track of where the painting is going."

Using a camera is necessary for recording those fleeting moments, he says. "Cars don't stop, restaurant or pub scenes don't freeze the action so I can paint. But I can take photographs."

Recently, Desmond began taking his photos with a digital camera. "I have only grudgingly accepted technology,"

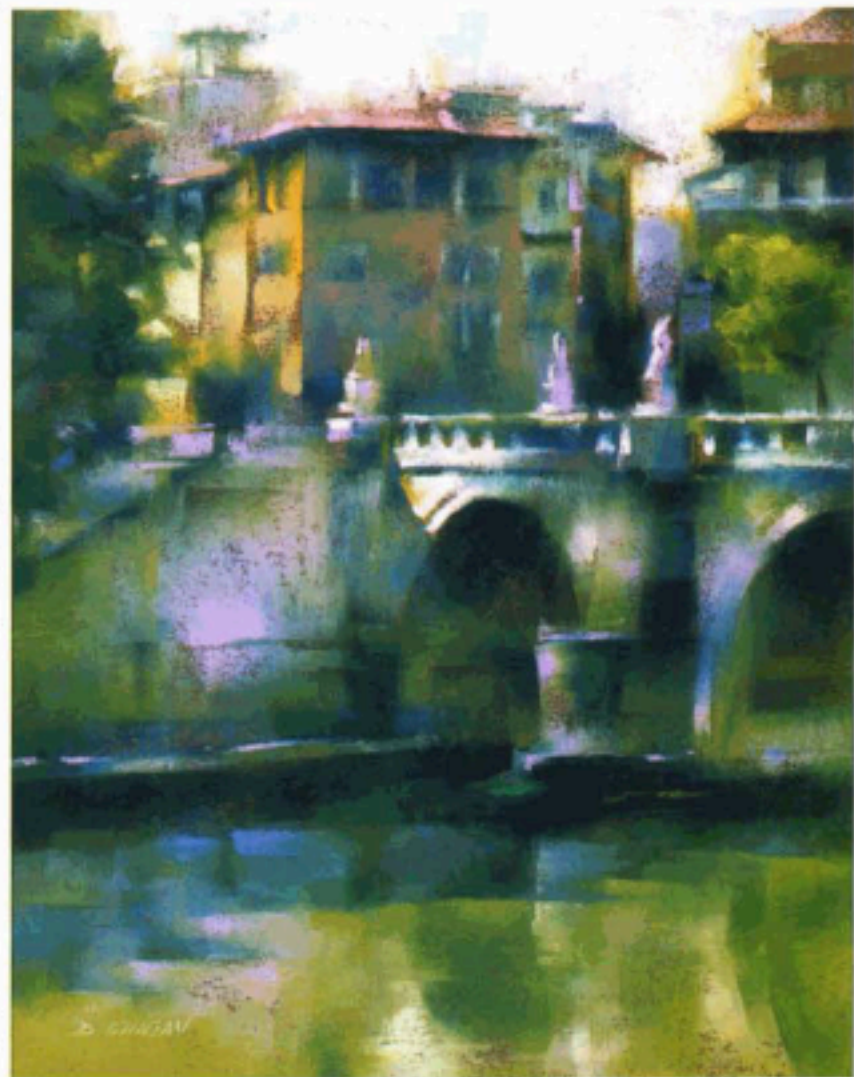
he says. "Originally, I got the digital camera to photograph images of completed paintings for my web site. Then I began to use it for other things, and once I got into it, I began to really like it.

"When I'm photographing people, pub scenes, for example, it's less intrusive. The camera is the kind that you can angle the lens and look down into it, rather than through a viewfinder. I'm not looking at people that way, so they are not so self-conscious as when I point a camera at them. Generally people don't pay any attention. They think I'm fiddling with the camera and not taking pictures.

"There's also the advantage that I can look at the image and see if it's what I want, and if not, delete it. Sometimes when shooting film I'd shoot two or three shots of the same thing to make sure I got it right, which was a waste. Now I can tell right away. And the camera's lighter weight and more compact—and of course, I don't have to carry all that film in lead-lined bags when I travel. On this last trip to Ireland and Scotland, I came home with 1100 shots, and that wouldn't have been practical with film."

In addition to photographing finished work for the web site, Desmond takes slide images of every painting he completes. "Even if I later decide it doesn't work, I have documentation of the piece," he says. "I shoot the paintings outside in bright sun with Fuji 100 speed film and a sunlight filter. Later, if I need images for publication, I get transparencies done professionally."

He's disciplined about the business side of his art. "I keep good records and documentation, and I work steadily in a disciplined way. I think my background working as a designer and art director for advertising agencies helped create discipline. If you can do that kind of work, you can do anything." He spent about four years in that business, and says he "enjoyed the work; being under the gun, meeting deadlines." But when the economy slumped after the oil boom, he took the opportunity to work



Above, *Bridge Reflections, Rome*, 14"x11"; below, *Rooftops, Paris*, 9"x12"





Above, *Place Vendôme, Paris*, 12"x9"

Right, *Desmond O'Hagan*
in his studio.



on his painting full time. It's been 17 years now, and he says working every day has honed his craft.

Desmond works in a studio room added on to his home in Denver. He likes being able to work at home, and he enjoys having his small children playing in his studio when he's not concentrating on a painting.

His set-up is simple; a large easel with a sturdy board to attach his paper, a tray of pastels in front of him and one to the side. He says two things are important in his set-up: a strong support, and space on the paper outside the image area to test colors and experiment with color combinations.

Desmond is not picky about his palette organization. "There is no organization," he says with a laugh. "I like that, because it encourages experimentation. I may end up using a different color than I'd planned."

But, in spite of the disarray and generally gray hue dusting over all the pastel sticks, he admits he does know where many of his favorite colors are. "I clean each stick on a towel before I use it," he says. "And in a way, the disorganization is comfortable. I get into a zone, a rhythm of painting, where I know intuitively where the color is."

Desmond points out that in spite of the numbers of pastel sticks, he really doesn't use very many. "When I take a trip, I take only what will fit in my French easel," he says. "When you use overlapping color, you can achieve any color; then you remember the combinations you used to get there. I think using the overlapping color makes a painting more interesting."

"I think it would hamper my spontaneous approach to have a palette that was more organized, or too many pastels. When I paint, I don't want to be tied up in knots—I like to enjoy myself."

■ *Maggie Price is a pastel artist and writer, and editor of The Pastel Journal.*