

# Hot on the Trail of Roché Pastels

## A DETECTIVE STORY

BY BARRY KATZ

During a recent visit to Paris, I devoted a good deal of my time to tracking down what many people say are the world's best pastels.

Every pastel artist has a favorite brand, and it would be difficult to find even a dozen who agreed which one is the best. But I doubt anyone could dispute that the hand-made pastels of Henri Roché are one of the best-kept secrets in the world of art supplies.

I first heard about Henri Roché pastels several years ago from the painter Wolf Kahn. He spoke about the almost ridiculous difficulty of obtaining them. They were, he said, made according to an ancient recipe by an elderly Parisian lady who, along with her two elderly sisters, maintained the last vestiges of a family business that had catered to many of the great artists of the last couple of centuries. If you wanted to buy some, he continued, it was necessary to appear at her doorstep at a particular time on Thursday afternoons and hope that, if she were feeling well enough, you would be admitted to the sanctum sanctorum, the Lourdes of the serious pastelist. I thought he was exaggerating.

---

*My search for the elusive pastels during a short stay Paris the previous year had met with no success. But I wasn't about to give up.*

---

My search for the elusive pastels during a short stay Paris the previous year had met with no success. But I wasn't about to give up. On my next trip to Paris, I began making inquiries almost as soon as I had checked into my hotel and unpacked.

Once again, no one in the entire city seemed to have heard of the place. A

few days later I had a brainstorm. Surely, I thought, if anyone in the world knew where to find Roché pastels, it would have to be at the Sennelier shop on the Quai Voltaire, just across the Seine from the Louvre. I knew from past experience that they didn't carry the brand, but perhaps someone there would be willing to divulge the information I sought.

The salesmen at Sennelier are all very professional. They wear white smocks and take their jobs quite seriously. But they don't speak much English. So in broken French, I did my best to explain that I had, "*un question un peu extraordinaire.*" This raised a few Gallic eyebrows, but all I was able to ascertain was that none of them had

ever heard of Henri Roché.

Discouraged, I was about to give up when the owner, Dominique Sennelier, walked through the front door. I introduced myself and told him how much I liked his excellent pastels, which I have been using for several years. But I was curious, I said, after buttering him up as much as I thought decent, about the pastels made by the Roché



Sandwiched between a pharmacy and a café was the narrow entrance to a nondescript courtyard, which bore a small sign, "Pastels a la Gerbe, Henri Roché."

family. Had he ever heard of them, I asked?

"Well, yes," he said hesitantly, in clear but heavily accented English, sounding not altogether unlike Maurice Chevalier. "I know of them, but they are very difficult to obtain. Practically impossible. First of all, they don't make it easy, you know. Mme. Roché died last year and I don't know for sure if they are continuing the business. The shop is almost never open. And, *monsieur*," he continued, lowering his voice, "they are *trop chère*, very expensive."

I told him I knew all that, but was still curious. After a pause, he promised to make some inquiries. He handed me a business card bearing his private number, and instructed me to phone him at 4:00 pm. When I called at the appointed hour, he answered the phone himself. He was kind enough to furnish me with an address, and instructed me to go there on Thursday afternoon between 2:30 and 5:30 pm. I thanked him profusely for his assistance.

Thursday was to be the last day of my trip. I decided to spend the morning at the Musée D'Orsay, studying the Degas pastels one last time. They are displayed in climate-controlled, glass-front cases in two smallish rooms, where the lighting levels border on the crepuscular to protect against fading. It takes several minutes for your eyes to adjust. The rarified atmosphere of these rooms contributes to the viewer's feelings of awe and reverence, almost as if one were in a house of worship.

Edgar Degas created these images well over a hundred years ago using, at least in part, pastels he purchased from *La Maison du Pastel*, the establishment of Henri Roché, then located in the rue du Grenier St. Lazare, in the Marais district of Paris. These were the very pastels for which I had been searching.

So on Thursday afternoon, following my visit to the Orsay, and fortified by an excellent lunch with my family at *Jules Verne*, high up in the Eiffel Tower, I resumed my quest. I found my way to number 20 Rue Rambuteau, a small



Isabel Roché working in the store.

---

*Inside the courtyard there was a laundry, and nothing else that looked even remotely like a store. I went in and out several times, looking repeatedly at the sign and scratching my head. Finally, I had to ask three different people before someone directed me to an unmarked door in the corner.*

---

street near the Centre Pompidou, where the Roché shop had moved in 1912.

Sandwiched between a pharmacy and a café was the narrow entrance to a nondescript courtyard, which bore a small sign with the faded inscription, "*Pastels a la Gerbe, Henri Roché.*" Inside the courtyard there was a laundry, and nothing else that looked even remotely like a store. I went in and out several times, looking repeatedly at the sign and scratching my head. Finally, I had to ask three different people before someone directed me to

an unmarked door in the corner.

Once inside, I found myself in a small, dimly lit shop with faded walls that appeared not to have been painted since shortly after the First World War. The only other customer in the store was being waited on by a young woman behind a simple wooden counter. There were no display cases of any kind. The pastels were kept on narrow shelves in closed wooden boxes which she opened one at a time, like a jeweler presenting precious gems for inspection. As I waited for the customer to complete his transaction, I tried out a few of the colors he was buying, making mental notes of the ones I particularly liked. There was definitely something special about them.

Once he left, I began to explain myself to the woman in French. Fortunately, she answered in perfect English. She introduced herself as Isabel Roché, a cousin of the Roché sisters. In response to my questions, she explained that she had been trained in the art of pastel-making by the two younger sisters after the death of the eldest, the one who managed the business. When the surviving sisters, who are now in their eighties, announced their intention to retire,



Isabel Roché, heir to the family business of Roché pastels.

Isabel decided to abandon a successful career in engineering and save the family business from extinction.

As she helped me select an assortment of colors, she recounted some of the family's history. La Maison du Pastel had been in business in one form or another since the early eighteenth century. Sometime around 1875, it was taken over by a chemist named Henri Roché, who had been introduced to the firm by his friend and former teacher, none other than Louis Pasteur, who was a part time painter.

Roché began to experiment with the formula, making continual improvements, with advice from the likes of Degas, Sisley, Vuillard, and Whistler, who were all his customers. By 1887 he was producing a range of nearly 500 colors. With the help of his son, Henri Roché II, a physician, the business expanded, and by the eve of the First World War artists could choose from among 1,000 available tints.

Dr. Roché continued to run the business after his father's death in 1925. At the peak of production, La Maison du Pastel offered an astonishing array of 1,650 colors. But during the Second World War, the family was forced to close the shop and flee to the

south of France, where Dr. Roché resumed his medical practice.

After the war ended, he reopened the shop, which had been looted, occupied by the Germans, and bombed during the liberation of Paris. Following his death in 1948, the business was carried on by his wife and three daughters,

right up until the death of the eldest sister in 1999 at the age of 85.

Since then, Isabel Roché has dedicated herself to rebuilding the company. Production had sharply declined in recent years, and by the time she took over, the stock of pastels was largely depleted. She showed me a rare treasure; one of only four complete sets known to exist of all 1,650 colors, packed in a wooden chest with shallow drawers, which she keeps for reference.

---

*She showed me a rare treasure; one of only four complete sets known to exist of all 1,650 colors, packed in a wooden chest with shallow drawers.*

---

(Of the other three complete sets, two are in museums and one is in private hands.) At present, Isabel sells about 700 colors, 370 of which have been made since she took over.

Will La Maison du Pastel ever sell 1,650 colors again? She doesn't know, but her plans are to continue increasing the range.

Now, what about the pastels themselves? Do they live up to their reputation? I returned home with a small fortune's worth of pastels in a disconcertingly small box, but with no regrets. There is undeniably something about them quite unlike any of the numerous brands I have tried.

For one thing, they are made with very little binder and no fillers, so the colors are pure and intense. And the texture is unique. The addition of some very fine pumice gives them a gritty quality which enables them to "bite" into the surface of the paper. They are firm, yet yielding. The pigment transfers effortlessly to paper in a thick, velvety layer, or a thin veil of shimmering color, depending on the amount of pressure used, and the colors blend easily with each other.

Are Henri Roché pastels truly the best in the world? American artists will finally get the chance to find out for themselves, as Rochester Art Supply has just become Roché's first American distributor. They are not inexpensive, even for hand-made pastels, and budget-conscious artists are sure to flinch at the price. But once you try them, you may begin to feel, as I did, that the price is not so much of an issue. In my opinion, adding at least a handful of them to one's pastel box is a rare treat, and one not to be missed.

■ Barry Katz is a part-time painter and full-time home builder in Westport, Connecticut, where he lives with his wife and two teenage children. His work can be seen at [www.katzhome.com/gallery.htm](http://www.katzhome.com/gallery.htm).