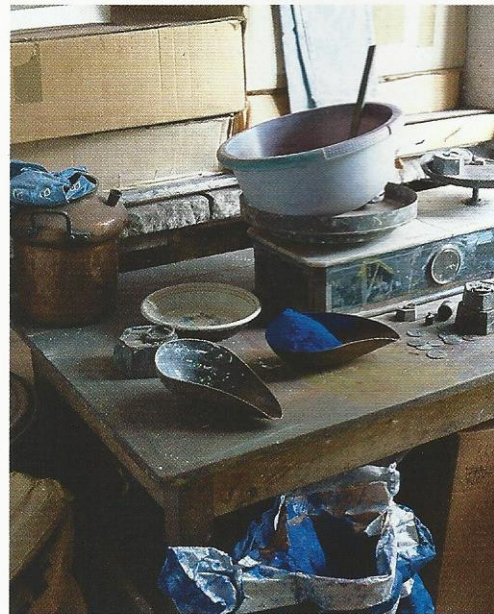
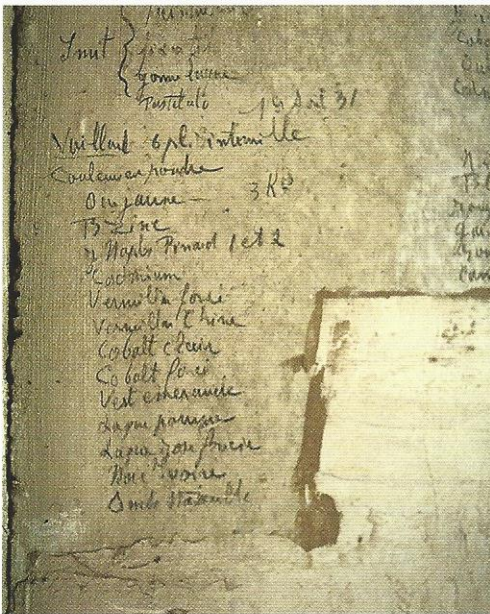


RAINBOW COALITION

Once patronised by Degas and Vuillard, La Maison du Pastel was venerable but struggling when Isabelle Roché inherited it from three elderly sisters in 2000. After spending a decade getting the family workshops back on their feet, she was joined by young American Margaret Zayer, who came ready to scrub floors but now researches new pigments and formulates colours. Together, as Valérie Lapierre discovers, they hope to build up the company's range to the prewar peak of 1,650 shades. Photography: Bruno Stuet

The atelier's main
workroom is
the only one that's
heated – by
an ancient wood-
burning stove.
Here the pastels
are rolled, dried,
then stored in
drawers. A
graduated range
of purple-blue
pastels dries on
ceramic tiles,
prior to being
made into sticks



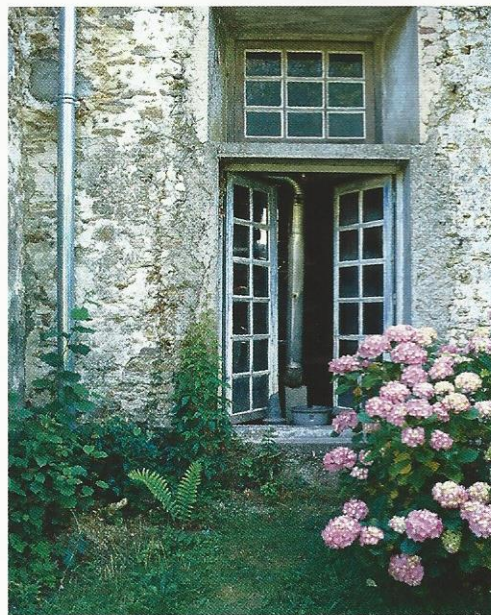
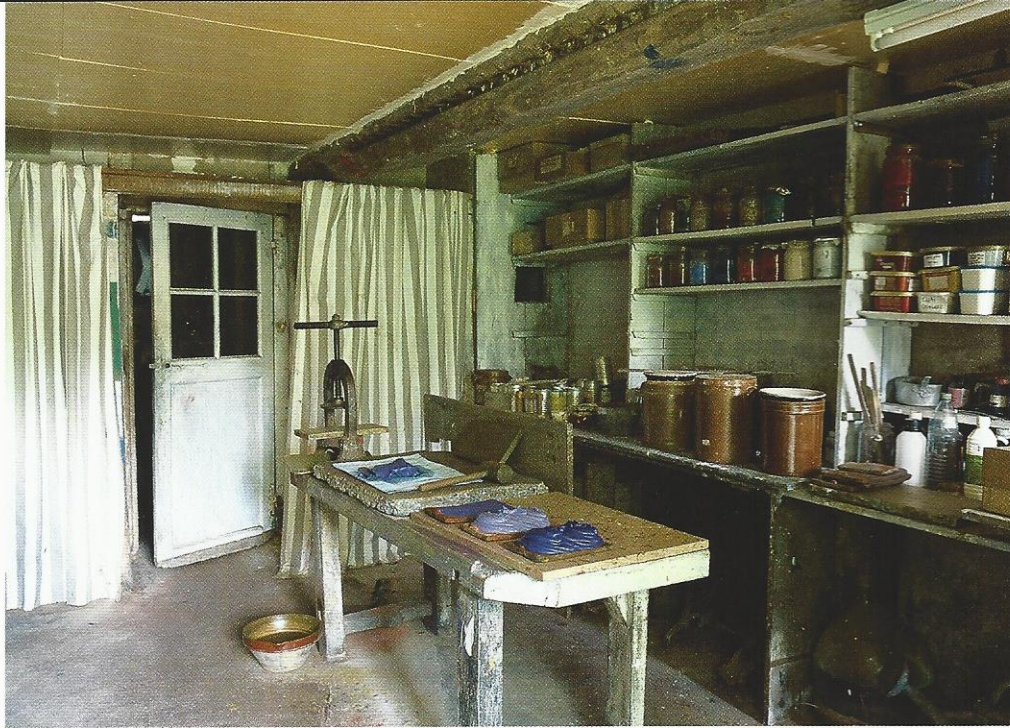


This page, clockwise from top: pigments are stored and weighed in this workroom, the one first seen on entry; to make the colour mixtures, the women weigh out pigments before blending them with a binder, itself a jealously guarded family secret; little balls of colour are rolled into cylinders before being cut to the precise length with a *chaveta*, a semicircular axe used in Cuba for chopping tobacco leaves; amid the scribbled orders on the walls is this one, dated 19 April 1931, from the painter Edouard Vuillard for several kilos of colours in powder form. Opposite: this chest of drawers contains historic collections of Roché pastels





3111 Liquor	I	4541 Liquor	F		
3211 Liquor		4551 Liquor	F		
3311 Liquor		4561 Liquor	H		
3411 Liquor		4571 Liquor	H		
3511 Liquor		4581 Liquor	H		
3611 Liquor		4591 Liquor	L		
3711 Liquor		4601 Liquor	F		
3811 Liquor		4760 Liquor	K		
3911 Liquor		4780 Liquor			
4011 Liquor		4820 Liquor	E		5771
4111 Liquor		4840 Liquor			5791
4211 Liquor		4860 Liquor	D		
4311 Liquor		4880 Liquor	E		
4411 Liquor		5121 Liquor			
4511 Liquor			G		



This page, clockwise from top: in the third workroom, in a separate building, sits an old press used to squeeze out excess water from the colour mixtures, thereby achieving the correct consistency for modelling into sticks; in this garden view, one can see the stovepipe of the atelier's sole heating source; once rolled, the perfectly aligned *bâtons* dry near the woodburner on racks; hundreds of shallow oak drawers store the finished crayons. There are nine shades, light to dark, in each labelled drawer. Opposite: Isabelle Roché (left) took up the reins of the family business in 2000, while Margaret Zayer arrived from Long Island in 2010



THE WORKSHOPS of La Maison du Pastel are hidden away behind a large woodworm-infested door in a small village an hour from Paris. Here Isabelle Roché and Margaret Zayer are carrying on the tradition of Roché pastels, made entirely by hand and acclaimed for their intense colours as well as their unique dry and grainy texture.

But in 2000, the lights very nearly went out at La Maison du Pastel. The owners, three sisters in their eighties with no descendants, were looking for someone to take over. Their cousin Isabelle Roché was 28, working as an engineer in the oil industry, and experiencing something of an existential crisis. Fascinated by pastels, she grasped this opportunity to change her life. Her elderly cousins passed on their skills and knowledge and, for ten years, she worked to put the business back on its feet. 'There were practically no clients or suppliers left. It was difficult on my own.'

Since 2010, she has been joined by Margaret Zayer. A 25-year-old American, Margaret is as exuberant as Isabelle is restrained. A student of fine arts in the USA, and a great admirer of Roché pastels, she was willing to do a work placement there at any cost. 'Margaret was prepared to wash the floors,' Isabelle laughs. 'Today, she's the one who researches the pigments and formulates the new colours. On my own, I couldn't manage more than 600 shades. Thanks to her, we have 913.' No other manufacturer – and there are fewer than 20 worldwide – has more than 525 shades.

It was Louis Pasteur, an amateur pastellist himself, who introduced the young pharmacist Henri Roché, a former student of his, to the artisans at Maison Macle in 1865. The company's pastels had been highly regarded since 1720. Roché developed a keen interest, and in 1878 he bought Macle, renaming it Maison du Pastel. In contact with artists such as Degas, Redon, Whistler and Sisley, he perfected his pastels and – the height of sophistication – even manufactured a special paper. On his death in 1925, he was succeeded by his son, also named Henri. In 1930, Roché Jr moved his Paris workshops to the countryside, keeping only a small shop in town, which is still there. He too worked with the artists of his time, such as Vuillard and Poliakov, and before the war created a range of 1,650 shades. After his death in 1948, his widow and then his three daughters ran the business until Isabelle came on to the scene.

The premises consist of an old stone farm building, extended by a misshapen and dilapidated concrete house dating from the 1930s; in the garden stands a once-elegant pergola. Lacking the means, the two women have not renovated the place beyond the small part they live in. Left just as it was, the workshop consists of three rooms. One is in the main building. A machine from the 1940s is used to grind the pigments and an old press is used to squeeze out excess water to obtain the perfect consistency. The rest of the workshop occupies the adjacent building. On the door, a panel reads 'No Admittance'. 'My cousins were big on secrecy,' explains Isabelle. 'It feels like committing sacrilege, but you really do have to draw attention to pastels.' We enter a large room

filled with clutter that's not easy to identify: piles of cardboard boxes on the floor and on several tables, shelves full of pots, boxes and drawers, and in one corner, a number of scales. Here the pigments are stored and weighed out to make the colours. The brilliance and special texture of Roché pastels are due to the quality of these pigments and to the manual measurement of the binder, which allows the powder to be formed into sticks, whose formula is a jealously guarded secret.

The last room, the only one with any heating, is the one used most. The maxim *ora et labora* (pray and work) is still scribbled on the door, along with old lists of orders, including one from Vuillard in 1931. Here Margaret carries out her experiments – today she is working on gold pigments – and the sticks are rolled. The walls are lined with hundreds of flat oak drawers, whose black ink labels combine a number code with an evocative colour name such as '3250 Volcanic Orange' and '8360 Imperial Purple'. Each drawer contains sticks arranged in nine graduated shades of the same colour, obtained by progressively mixing the pure colour with white. On a long table cluttered with jars, after dividing a green paste into little balls, Isabelle and Margaret roll cylinders about 10cm long between their expert hands. With their overalls spattered with blotches of colour, they could almost be bakery workers making biscuits. 'Some colours are difficult to roll,' Margaret points out. The sticks are laid out on a tray, evened up by a remarkable semicircular blade and stamped before drying. The labels, featuring a sheaf of wheat and a dragon, will be applied later.

Inspired by their collections of pastels from 1930, 1910 and even 1887 – all still in perfect condition – these hard-working women recreate or invent new colours at a steady pace. 'We wanted to

have 1,000 colours to celebrate the firm's 300th anniversary in 2020, but now it is looking like 1,200. We are hoping one day to remake the prewar range of 1,650 shades.'

On Thursday afternoons, they receive professionals and amateurs in their minute Paris shop, hidden at the back of a paved courtyard in the Marais. The newly repainted décor has been the same since 1912, with a wall of drawers behind a wooden counter. Artists Sam Szafran, Irving Petlin and Pierre Skira are among their loyal customers. Sold singly or in sets in beautiful wooden boxes, a Roché pastel costs around £15, a fortune compared to the competition, but it is blue-ribbon quality. Isabelle has long wondered whether there is still a place for such an expensive product. 'But since we took part in a documentary on the Impressionists that was broadcast internationally, new clients have been appearing and word has got round.' This Thursday, an Australian woman who came to buy 'Monet-style' colours went into raptures over Margaret's latest creation: the gold pigment spotted in the workshop has been transformed into magnificent pastels, perfectly aligned like miniature ingots ■

La Maison du Pastel, 20 Rue Rambuteau, 75003 Paris, is open Thurs 2-6 and by appointment. For more information, ring 00 33 1 40 29 00 67, or visit lamaisondupastel.com





Opposite: the façade of the Paris boutique, tucked away in a little courtyard in the Marais. This page: unlike the country atelier, the city

boutique has had its furniture refreshed in recent years, although the décor still closely resembles its original appearance in 1912