

February 26, 2011

What is ASTM and why it is Important to Artists

As your International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS) representative to this important organization I wanted to let you know what is going on based upon our recent meeting in Baltimore.

You might have seen the phrase, “*Conforms to ASTM-4236*” on your art materials - do you know what that means? Broadly speaking, ASTM International is one of the world’s largest voluntary standards-writing organizations. Organized in 1898 as the American Society for Testing and Materials, it brings together users, consumers, producers and others to develop voluntary consensus standards. It creates standards for everything from the petroleum industry, to sports equipment, to toy safety, even to the stripes painted on our roads. These standards are written by the voluntary membership -- no one is paid to develop or write the documents.

More directly to the art community, the ASTM subcommittee D01.57 works to write voluntary standards for the health labeling, performance, and quality of artist materials. For instance, this subcommittee wrote ASTM-4236, Standard for Labeling Art Materials for Chronic Health Hazards, which became a federal law as part of the Labeling of Hazardous Art Materials Act of 1988. This Act says is that if a product (for individual use) is labeled as conforming to ASTM-4236 it means that a toxicologist has reviewed the product formulation and the use of the product, and if there is an adverse health effect from such use, the label will give instructions for proper use. By US federal law, all art materials sold in the US must display an ASTM-4236 conformance statement. So when a pastel artist is looking for a brand of pastels to work with they should look for a product that has “*Conforms to ASTM-4236*” on the label or box. This means that the manufacturer is obeying the law. If there is no conformance statement, the manufacturer is violating US federal law - and important for artists to understand.

I joined ASTM, specifically the D01.57 subcommittee, a year ago to represent IAPS and speak for issues related to the pastel medium. We meet twice a year in different locations around the country and to be honest I find these meetings fascinating. The wonderful aspect about sitting on an ASTM subcommittee is that the standards development process is open and transparent. Anyone from an individual to a manufacturer to a government representative is welcome and we participate as equals in consensus decisions.

At this point D01.57 is winding up the revision of our standard for colored pencils (ASTM D6901) and are now embarking on developing the lightfastness standard for pastels. As pastelists we have heard that if properly framed pastels are one of the most permanent mediums - is this really true? Do you care? Is it important to you that your pastels will last not only a few years, but a lifetime and beyond? Would you like to know when making a purchase which pastels will last? I think most pastelists would shout a resounding YES!

That brings me to the following invitation. D01.57 needs some more artist members to sit on this volunteer committee. Specifically we are looking for qualified artists who might have a background in chemistry, statistics, materials science, or relevant experience. If you are interested, or have any questions please contact me at liz@haywood-sullivan.com and I will forward your name onto the subcommittee chair.

Volunteering to be a member of ASTM is a wonderful way to broaden your horizons as an artist and to have your voice heard on matters that will impact your artwork and your health. The artistic community will be grateful and getting out of the studio now and then isn’t such a bad thing either!

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ASTM D01.57 Subcommittee Member

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For more information, see www.astm.org > technical committees > Search for ASTM Committees > D01 > “Additional Information” > D01.57 Subcommittee on Artist’s Paints and Related Materials.