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The Colors of Childhood

Crayola crayons take us all back with their fondly remembered look, scent and feel on paper

®

By this time, they were doing a brisk business selling their products in America's classrooms. Besides chalk, they made slate per schools couldn't afford artist's crayons. The Easton, Pennsylvania, plant was already making an inexpensive industrial marking of carbon black and a durable paraffin.

Well, the rest is history. Color came to the classroom. It was Alice Binney, a former schoolteacher, who came up with the name (combined the French word craie, meaning "chalk" with "ola," derived from "oleaginous," or "oily."

One of the first customers was the United States government, which began shipping crayons to schools on Indian reservations. formulation of the nontoxic pigments and the wax, as well as how they give the crayons their distinctive smell, is a closely guard But some basics are clear.

Pigments, produced from natural sources — slate yields gray; metals, such as iron, yield reds; various types of earth yield yellow browns — start off as powders that are pounded, ground, sieved, then refined and heated. The temperature determines the shad Since 1903, more than 600 shades of Crayola crayons have been produced.

In June 1990 Binney & Smith decided to retire eight of its old colors to make some of the more modern, brighter colors that children seemed to be searching for in their artistic palettes. Not so fast, said a few of Crayola's veteran fans. One morning, a few weeks later, Binney & Smith executives arrived at their headquarters to find picketers protesting the decision. The RUMPs, or Raw UMBER and MAISE Preservation Society, and the CRAYONS, or Committee to Reestablish All Your Old Norms, had quickly mobilized their constituents. When the old colors were re-released later that year in a special holiday commemorative collection, the groups were mollified. Not too long ago, "indian red" became the third Crayola color ever to be renamed, when Binney & Smith decided that even though the name referred to the pigment from India, sensitivity required a new name. The new name, "chestnut," selected by Crayola customers, seems rather dull when you compare it with the names that came in as close seconds — "baseball-mitt brown" and "the crayon formerly known as indian red." In 1958 "Prussian blue" was renamed "midnight blue," since most children had never heard of Prussia. And in 1962 was renamed "peach."

Back at the National Museum of American History, a large storage-room drawer reveals the museum's extensive crayon collecti from the very old to some of the more recent, even including fruit-scented versions. There's a box, dated 1912, with a picture of J Rubens. "Unequaled for outdoor sketching," it says on the side, reflecting Impressionism's emerging popularity. Binney & Smith marketed in two directions: to artists and to schoolchildren. Here's the schoolroom version: "Good in any climate, certified non-

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