

# Bright Lights, Big City

Janet A. Cook pours her love of the urban environment into illuminated pastels.

By Michelle Taute

Though much of her work falls into the landscape category, Janet A. Cook admits that she doesn't have much affinity for trees. Instead she's more likely to find her muse lurking somewhere in the urban jungle. As a New York City dweller, she's inspired by the city's tall buildings, bustling streets and bright colors—especially after the sun goes down. "There's something very appealing to me about the magical quality of night scenes," she says. "They're very dramatic."

Cook's pastels show off her talent for capturing the glow cast by windows, street lamps and neon lights in the city's skyline. These elements

jump out in a way that's warm and realistic without being overwhelming. Set against the shadowy buildings and night sky, these points of light create a stark, riveting contrast. Cook builds these engaging paintings layer by layer, starting with an underpainting of watercolor or gouache and working her way to pastels overtop. This considered approach helps her achieve a glow reminiscent of that found on a city sidewalk at night.

## New York Times

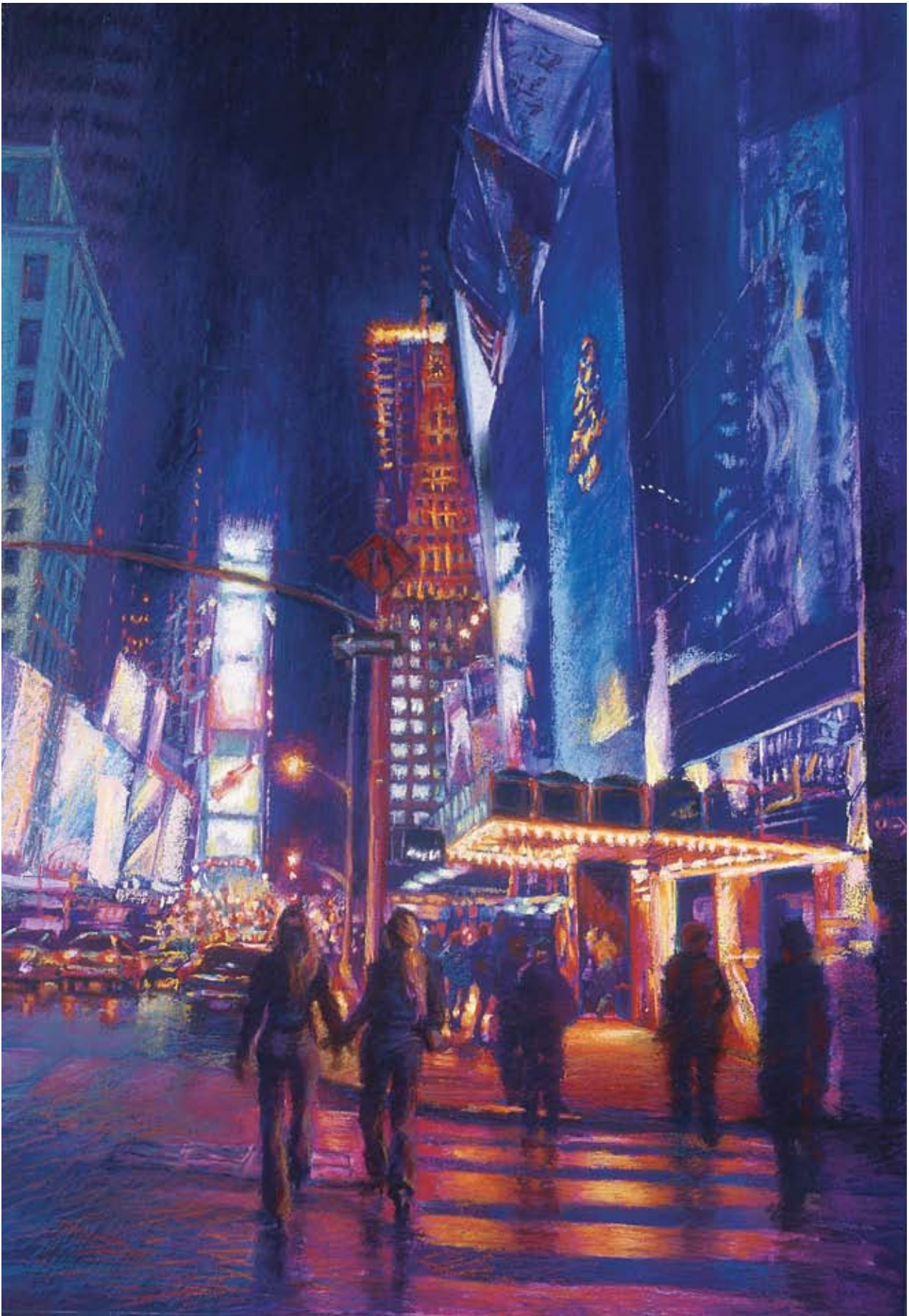
While she's been working at least part-time as an artist since 1992, Cook didn't paint her first night scene until a decade later. She was participating in Pratt Institute's Venice summer program at the time, and a friend suggested she try the subject matter. "Now my friend says she unleashed a monster," Cook says. Though a native of Great Britain, Cook finds that a good deal of her work is intimately tied to her current surroundings. "New York has been a real inspiration," she says, "more than anywhere else I've lived. It's bright and colorful. It's almost overwhelming if you're a visual person. You go to Times Square and you don't know where to look first."

In addition to her late night scenes, Cook also likes to capture the moment when the sun is sinking behind the city—when the sky puts on a light show all its own. Cook stockpiles reference material for her night scenes with one or two photography outings a year. Sometimes she'll take the time to do a quick sketch and make a few color notes along with snapping a photograph.

*Sidewalk at Night*  
(opposite; 27x19)



*Day Glow on 50th Street* (19x27)





*Glow on Broadway (19x27)*



## About the Artist

Originally from Great Britain, Janet A. Cook moved to the United States with her husband in 1990. They've lived in many cities, including Miami and San Francisco, but now call New York City home.

"I've always drawn—from the age of 12," she says. Discouraged from going to

art school, though, Cook steered her career to graphic design. In 1992 she turned her attention back to painting and has been a nearly constant student of art ever since, studying at such places as the Art Students League in New York and the San Francisco College of Art.

Today Cook works in both pastel and oils to create her city-scapes, as well as portraits and more abstract, conceptual pieces. She's exhibited her work in New York at venues such as The National Academy Museum and Lincoln Center. Her paintings—one of which was recently acquired by the Trenton City Museum in New Jersey—also have appeared in exhibitions and juried shows across the country. In 2005 she was a featured artist on NBC's *Dateline* when the program focused on the secrets of *The Da Vinci Code*; she was recommended by a professor when the show's organizers contacted The National Academy of Design School in search of an artist to reproduce a Dante Gabriel Rossetti drawing of Mary Magdalene. In 2006 she appeared in *The Pastel Journal* as one of the Pastel 100 honorable mention winners. Learn more about the artist online at [www.janetacook.com](http://www.janetacook.com).

An image's journey from reference photo to work of art follows a graphic path. The preliminary work begins on Cook's computer. She marks the vanishing points and horizon line on the image in Adobe Photoshop and places a grid over the whole image, which helps define valuable reference points once she moves to paper. Previous professional experience in graphic design (Cook still designs fellow artists' websites) benefits the artist greatly in this early stage. She might take a pair of figures from one photo, for instance, and drop them into a scene depicted in another image. Once she finishes with an image, she'll print out both a black-and-white copy with the grid and a gridless color copy.

### Working Order

Cook arrives at her studio around 9 a.m. on a typical weekday morning. She spends roughly three to six hours a day at the easel, and sometimes logs a portion of those hours at night. Her 500-square-foot Manhattan studio space receives north light, and for those nighttime painting sessions, she simulates daylight by turning on her Tungsten and Kino (lights used in video production). Together the lights provide a brightness that's as good as it gets, according to Cook.

For a night scene, she starts by creating a grid on her Art Spectrum paper that roughly

corresponds to the one on her photo. These marks help her figure out what value each area should be as she continues to work. Next Cook loosely lays down a bright underpainting with watercolor or gouache (sometimes both), using everything from fluorescent pink or yellow to a bright green. “It establishes a mood,” she says. In *Glow on Broadway* (on page 00), for instance, she established the values with an underpainting in neon pink gouache and purple watercolor, creating a feeling of energy. Some of this exposed ground helps achieve the luminosity in the final piece.

Next, Cook covers up much of this bright color as she essentially creates a detailed underpainting in watercolor or gouache. This stage allows her to start defining shapes and laying down the dark values; the paint allows her to achieve darker darks than pastels alone. Although this “drawing” is done in shades of blue and purple, Cook does allow some of the brighter color to show through. She’ll then go back and scrub out areas where she wants highlights or add more watercolor or gouache over the pastel for darker areas.

### In the Spotlight

After these first layers of color, which might take Cook about a week to complete, it’s finally time to move on to pastels. She starts with the background first and works forward as she builds up layers of color. There might be three to five layers when she’s done—enough to capture the scene but not so much that it doesn’t stick to the paper. To give her more control, she primarily uses the ends of her sticks, but sometimes she applies colors with the sides as well. She’ll also turn to pastel pencils to add fine details.

Cook nearly completes each area of her painting before moving on to the next, and as the piece progresses, she checks to make sure the elements line up with the vanishing points and horizon line. At this stage, she’s only using her black-and-white photo for reference. “I don’t want to be distracted by the way the color really is,” she says. “I want to use my imagination.” This might include adding interest to a dark sky with color—perhaps a Prussian blue with ultramarine over the top.

Then there are those vibrant, glowing lights.

“I had a very good art teacher who helped me learn about night scenes,” she says. “He said I should go through the whole [color] spectrum.” Following this advice, she makes the center of her lights white, then moves through yellow, orange and red as color radiates out. Sometimes she’ll add a little blue to the yellow to



*Wiggles* (19x27)



*Horse & Buggy* (19x27)

**Quick Tip:** For easy clean-up, Cook folds a piece of cardboard in half and sticks part of it behind her working surface. This creates an L-shaped tray at the bottom of her piece where the majority of the pastel dust collects. When she's finished, she simply throws the cardboard in the trash.




*Luminescence in Times Square* (18x12)

tone it down, making sure to keep both colors at the same value. Cook also makes certain to keep those nighttime lights warmer than the surrounding buildings.

In addition, she creates interesting interactions and contrasts within the subject matter of her pieces. In *Horse & Buggy* (on page 00)—which won an honorable mention in the 2006 Pastel 100—for example, the horse-drawn carriage against the backdrop of the traffic and city provide a compelling contrast between old and new. Another piece, *Wiggles* (on page 00), draws strength from an unexpected composition. The foreground features the red-and-black railing running down the center of Times Square while this landmark's high-rises and glitzy

signs form a fascinating background.

*Luminescence in Times Square* (above), Cook's first painting of the lively theater district, helped her discover her passion for painting night scenes. "This was only my second night painting," she says. "I immediately fell in love with the genre. I love the colors and excitement generated by the vivid neon and cadescent lights."

By focusing on the color and kinesis of the nighttime lights, Cook is able to capture the pulse of the city. 

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