

# Design Fundamentals

## Color

Color is the first thing most people notice about a painting, and the color combination is probably the reason they buy it. Color is emotional, evocative and expressive. Color can be used to express moods from calm to energizing. There have been hundreds of books written about color and color theory and there are many exhaustive resources available for your use. I should point out however, that color is not learned from books. Color is learned by spending time in the studio mixing all of your colors to see what happens with the mixtures. You should mix each color with every other color and make a chart to record the results. I have done this for years and it really helps you understand what works and what does not work.

Most students I have in workshops don't know much about color harmony or how to attain it in their paintings. Most just copy photographs when painting. I have said this many times – copying photographs is the worst way to paint. Photographs beg for you to replicate what is in them – and this is not painting, merely copying. This approach teaches you nothing about color harmony. You must understand as a painter that the colors in photographs don't have color harmony. Color harmony must be designed into a work of art just like the composition. Color harmony is obtained in a work by utilizing the Color Wheel as a guide. I have found most wheels available from art suppliers are complicated and confusing leading to a student not using them because they don't understand them.

The color wheel was developed centuries ago to illustrate how colors, and combinations of colors work together to create color harmony. The harmony is built-in, all you have to do is use it!

There are several terms that are helpful to understand as we begin this discussion of color:

**Hue.** Hue is the easiest to understand because it is actually the color of the paint or pigment to be used. For example red, yellow, blue. **Value.** Value of a color is the relative lightness or darkness of a color.

**Intensity.** Color intensity refers to the brightness or dullness of a color, or its strength or weakness.

**Temperature.** The temperature of a color is its relative warmness or coolness. All primary colors have a warm version and a cool version. The warm versions tend to contain more red and the cool versions more green. A painting should have a dominant temperature of either warm or cool.

**Tint.** Tint is a light value of a hue usually created by adding white. Watercolor painters use the addition of water to dilute and lighten the value of color.

**Shade.** Shade is a dark value of a hue sometimes created by adding black paint. Often adding the complement of the color will shade it.

## **The Four Major Color Combinations from the Color Wheel**

Now let's take a look at the most commonly used color combinations. These are the four major color combinations found on the typical 12-color, color wheel. They have built-in color harmony and can be found in thousands of pieces of art. The great masters all used these color harmonies: Monet, Manet, Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, Pissarro, Van Gogh, Delacroix, etc. Study their paintings with a fresh eye after going through this module, and you may be very surprised at what you find!

**Monochromatic.** A monochromatic color combination is not a combination at all but the use of a single color, plus white to tint and black to shade.

**Complementary.** Complementary colors are those directly opposite each other on the color wheel. Because the colors reside on opposite sides of the wheel, one color will be warm and the other will be cool. I love complementary color combinations and use them often.

Complementary colors are very interesting because if they are mixed together equally they will produce a neutral gray. Mixed unequally, they will produce a beautiful range of warm or cool grays. Many students make mud with complimentary colors because they mix them equally. For example equal parts orange and blue. I utilize a structural hierarchy in my paintings to keep this from happening to me, and I advise you do the same. I use one of the two colors as my dominant color and the other for my accent color:

**Dominate**

**Accent**

For example, if I am using blue and orange for a painting, I would pick one of the two, let's say blue to be my dominant color for the painting. In other words, when I look at the painting it will be a blue painting. I then use orange as the accent "pop" color at my center of interest to draw attention to that area. It is just that simple!

This approach is so successful and keeps you from making a muddy painting. Study the old masters paintings and you will find this hierarchy/structure in many of their works. If you use each color equally in the painting – 50-50 – your eye will begin to mix the painting with lots of gray, just as if you are mixing them 50-50 on your palette. You can't fool the eye! You must mix complementary color unequally to keep from getting mud, and this dominant/accent approach is a great way to accomplish that. You will never have a muddy painting using this approach.