

# THINGS THAT GO WRONG WITH YOUR PAINTINGS

# DIRTY LIGHTS

A new series on **COMMON PROBLEMS** with **SIMPLE SOLUTIONS**

by Christopher Schink

Most of us would like to think of ourselves as unique—different from others in what we like, think and feel. And while we strive to make the expression of these ideas in paint unique, we may in the process of painting suffer from some very common problems and misconceptions. As a workshop teacher, I encounter these same problems again and again in my students' work. One is **dirty lights**.

## THE PROBLEM

When the lightest areas in a painting are "dirty," or muted, or neutral in color, the whole painting will appear dreary and unattractive. If you've ever started a painting of a rose or a figure with a dirty pink, you're aware of how disastrous this careless first-step can be.

Most color schemes depend on clean color in the lightest areas — either white paper, pure spectrum color, or clean tints of pure color.

## THE CAUSE

Your dirty lights may result from your starting with a dirty palette, brush or water. Some beginning painters mistakenly think having grungy equipment will make them look arty or more creative. But a dirty palette invariably leads to a dirty painting. Even a small amount of neutral or complementary color can contaminate your tints and pure colors.

You may have used muted or slightly neutral colors (such as burnt sienna or yellow ochre) for your initial washes in an attempt to accurately capture the local color of your subject. Again, **dirty lights**.



*To illustrate this common problem, I began this painting with light washes of dirty color — a grayed permanent rose, a muted lemon yellow, a washed-out brown green. The color appears dreary. The painting's effectiveness depends entirely on value contrast. See how different the painting on the next page looks when my initial washes are kept clean.*



## THE SOLUTION

It's simple: start with a clean palette and fresh pure color and make sure your initial washes are clear and clean. If these initial washes of pure color or clean tints seem too intense or badly placed, you can always modify or gray them. If you start with dirty color, you can't modify it later to make it cleaner or more intense. Once you've applied dirty lights — painted a dying flower or a cadaverous fleshtone— you have only one solution: turn the paper over and start again.

*Here I began with clean tints of permanent rose, lemon yellow, and yellow-green for my lightest areas. Compare this to the first painting.*



## A LESS EFFECTIVE SOLUTION

In order to avoid dirty lights, many beginning painters have been taught to leave unpainted, white paper on objects or areas of importance. It **sometimes** works. White is an appealing color when surrounded by clean tints or, occasionally, gray. But, when surrounded by “dirty color”—muted tints or shades — white paper will appear cold and raw.

*There's an alternative to this unsatisfactory solution, but you're still going to have to clean up your palette to apply it.*

## TRY THIS

For your next painting thoroughly clean your palette. If it's too old and dirty to clean, throw it away and buy a new one. Next, squeeze out plenty of fresh, pure color. Forget about the earth tones and dark shades — you won't need them until later.

Start your first washes using clean tints made from pure colors and cover most of the paper with them. Make sure to use only tints on areas or objects of importance. Then leave those areas alone; don't be tempted to go back and work on them. Remember: you can always strengthen a tint into an intense, pure color, but once you've grayed an area, you can never change it back to bright, fresh color. ■