



How to Choose Watercolor Paints

There are hundreds of available tube colors from many different manufacturers, and none of them are inexpensive. Certainly you can buy every conceivable color you might use if money is not an issue, but you certainly do not need hundreds of different colors in order to create a successful painting. And, you will not learn much about color mixing or the particular properties of each color and how it interacts with other colors if you limit yourself to ready-made hues and never mix them.

Why limit your palette?

In addition to saving money, another reason for being selective about how many tube colors to buy has to do with your own personality and affinity for certain colors. Over time, as an artist instinctively or intellectually chooses some colors over others, their work begins to have a cohesive look that is part of their "style". Artists who mix their own colors instead of using a tube color also refine this process over time to create colors that become "theirs".

What function does a limited palette serve?

It guarantees some degree of unity in your painting, because secondary, intermediate, tertiary and neutral hues are all mixed from the same pre-chosen group of colors. A palette can consist of a single hue (monochromatic), two hues (diad), three hues (triad), etc. So, even though I keep 24 colors on my palette, I typically use just five to seven colors in a painting. Colors can be chosen according to their position on the color wheel (primary triads, split complements, complements, etc.), or because of certain characteristics they share (all sedimentary, all transparent, all intense, all opaque, etc.). Or an artist may simply choose a group of colors he or she is particularly fond of, or that suit their chosen subject.

What should you be concerned with in choosing tube watercolors?

Lightfastness (if longevity of your work concerns you), what else is in it besides pigment (the vehicle or binder and other fillers), what type of pigment it is (natural inorganic, synthetic inorganic, natural organic, synthetic organic), whether it stains or can be lifted once dry, how much tinting strength it has, and finally, how transparent or opaque it is.

Except for lightfastness, all other pigment characteristics relate to your painting approach (direct painting vs. glazing/lifting). In general, the more opaque and sedimentary hues are better suited to direct painting, as they do not work well for glazing except as the last color applied. If you like lifting color once it has dried, then you need to choose non-staining or nearly non-staining colors (and probably a paper that is designed for lifting colors as well). And for painters who like building color in thin glazes, letting colors dry in between each paint application, the most transparent colors you can find will work the best for this approach.

Book Reference on Watercolor Pigments:

Hilary Page's Guide to Watercolor Paints, 1996, Watson-Guptill; online updates of new paints she has tested since the book was written are available at www.hilarypage.com

Online Reference on Watercolor Pigments: (and in my opinion the very BEST source of information)

www.handprint.com/HP/WCL/water.html

Read the Label!

Manufacturers often give exotic and fanciful **common names** to their paints, and the same common name (*permanent rose*, for example) may actually be made from different pigments, depending on who manufactures it. Conversely, the same pigment (PB15) may be commonly named Phthalo Blue, Thalo Blue, Winsor Blue, Monestial Blue, Intense Blue, Prussian Blue, Old Holland blue, Bloxx blue, Phthalocyanine blue, Cyanine blue, and on and on!

So - don't depend on the paint's common name to tell you what it is - turn the tube over and read the label.

Good quality paint will have some or all of this information:

- 1) **The Color Index name** (this is how you compare paints from company to company, and is the most important piece of information you should look for on a paint label)

This is a letter+number code that refers to a specific pigment and its composition. The first letter in the code will always be "P" standing for pigment. The second letter denotes a general color family (PR=Pigment Red, PO=Pigment Orange, PY=Pigment Yellow, PB=Pigment Blue, PG=Pigment Green, PV=Pigment Violet, PBr=Pigment Brown, PBk=Pigment Black and PW=Pigment White.

Example: *Cobalt Blue* has the color index name PB28.

Some manufacturers also include the specific color number (CI#00000)

- 2) **Paint Composition**

This will be the actual pigment(s) used. In our example of cobalt blue, you might see this description: *Oxides of cobalt and aluminum*

- 3) **Vehicle**

This tells you what else is in the paint besides pigment that helps it spread easily and uniformly over your paper. Commonly these would include gum arabic and glycerine. Other additives are oxgall, water and sometimes honey or dextrin (a starchy glucose binder). Cheaper paints may also include inert fillers like calcium carbonate, china clay, or chalk. Better paints always include more pigment and only enough vehicle to facilitate painting with that pigment.

- 3) **Paint Category**

- Natural inorganic* (the "earth" colors and ground minerals)

- Synthetic inorganic* (cadmiums, cobalts, chromiums, some irons and processed mineral colors like ultramarine, manganese, sulphur and tin)

- Natural organic* (vegetable or animal matter pigments like rose madder genuine). Most are fugitive colors.

- Synthetic organic* (the largest group of colors, including most of the new, brightly colored ones recently introduced—the azo colors, phthalocyanines, quinacridones, dioxazines, pyrroles, etc.)

- 4) **ASTM Rating**

The American Society for Testing and Materials rates paints I or II when they pass rigorous and quantifiable tests for good or excellent lightfastness. I=Excellent, II=Very Good, III=Moderate, IV=Poor and N/A= No assignation (Not Rated).

- 5) **The Manufacturer's Lightfastness Rating**

Not as reliable as the ASTM rating. Manufacturers may rate their paints on a scale of stars, Roman Numerals, or Arabic numerals.

- 6) **The Manufacturer's Series**

Listed as stars or numbers, these ratings have to do with price categories. Generally, the lower number or fewer stars indicates a lower price for that category of paints.

- 7) **A Health Label**

Some simply say "non-toxic". Others will have a specific caution or warning that the paint contains a specific toxic element.