



Tips & Demos

**Watercolor and Watermedia
painting tips & demonstrations
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Choosing a Palette of Colors

With the hundreds of colors available to watercolor painters from so many different manufacturers, it can sometimes be overwhelming to choose a palette of colors. Nearly every watercolor book has the author's "favorite" tube colors, and that can be one way to choose. If you want to know what my standard group of colors is, you will find my palette at the end of this tip.

A couple of comments on choosing paints: First, buy the very best you can afford. Many times, less expensive or "student grade" watercolors will have so little pigment in them in relation to the binding/filler agents that you will end up either using more paint to get the level of saturation you want, or you will simply not be able to get rich saturated colors at all. Some cheaper brands will use chalk as a filler ingredient or add an opaque white pigment to the colored ones, giving the resulting blend a pastel or flat look when painted on paper. In addition, in order to make these paints less expensive, paint manufacturers may use pigments that are not as lightfast as those used in the "artist" or "professional" grade paints. That's not always true, so it pays to know which pigments are being used in the paint color you're considering buying. All the information you need is right on the label, and if it isn't, look for a different brand that is labeled correctly so you know what you are buying!



A well-labeled paint tube will tell you everything you need to know. Don't go by the common color name that the manufacturer uses—read the label!

Above is the front of a tube of paint from Daniel Smith. It tells you the name of the company who made it (like Winsor & Newton, or Holbein, or in this case, Daniel Smith). It says *Finest Watercolors*, which probably means that this is "professional" quality paint. Then it gives you the common name of the color. This sample is Quinacridone Burnt Scarlet, but another tube might say Cobalt Blue, or Lemon Yellow. Finally, it tells you how much paint is in the tube. This can help you determine which size tube is the "better buy" if price is a concern.

But....don't stop here. TURN OVER THE TUBE. The stuff you really need to know is usually on the back!

Somewhere on well-labeled paints (usually on the back), you will find some or all of the following information:

- The **Series number** (relates to price and the cost of ingredients),
- The **ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials) Lightfastness Rating number** (I = excellent lightfastness, and II = very good lightfastness.

You shouldn't consider

buying any pigment that doesn't have a rating of I or II if you care about the longevity of your work.)

- The **color index name(s)**, expressed as Pigment Color 000, or PX000, where X is the first letter of the color family name—like red(PR), blue(PB), yellow(PY), green(PG), etc. In our sample tube shown on the following page, the color index name is PR06 (Pigment Red 06), and it's common name is Quinacridone Burnt Scarlet.

- The **color index number(s)**, five digits long, which tell you the precise chemical composition of the paint color.

- The **vehicle or binder** for the pigment, usually gum arabic. Other vehicles or binders may include honey or glycerin.

For me, the single most important piece of information is the lightfastness rating, but some manufacturers do their own testing, so even this isn't always reliable. You should do your own color tests on the



paper you use the most. The color index name (the PY000, or PBOOO) can be looked up in either Michael Wilcox's book, *The Guide to the Best Watercolor Paints*, or Hilary Page's book, *Guide to Watercolor Paints*. **Handprint.com has the best information on pigments available anywhere.** Click this link, choose the watercolor section, and then look for instructions on how to test your paints.

I chose my particular palette of colors first for their permanence, second for their transparency (because I do a lot of glazing, I prefer the most transparent pigments), and third for their color mixing abilities. Finally, I have a few colors on my palette that I like because of their granularity/sedimentary qualities in paint mixtures. These granulating pigments are Transparent Yellow Oxide, Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, Lunar Earth, Manganese Blue Hue, Cerulean Blue, Cobalt Green, Cobalt Violet and Lunar Black. I particularly like them combined with non-granulating pigments (like the quinacridones or thalos), as they create two-tone washes. See the tip on sedimentary pigments.

These are my current recommendations for the "BASIC SIX" colors a beginner needs:

- **For purple-biased Red**, I am using Daniel Smith Carmine instead of Winsor & Newton Permanent Alizarin Crimson
- **For orange-biased Red**, I am using Daniel Smith Organic Vermilion (PR188) instead of Winsor & Newton Scarlet Lake
- **For orange-biased Yellow**, I am using Daniel Smith Nickel Azo Yellow (PY150) or Daniel Smith Hansa Yellow Medium (PY97) instead of Winsor & Newton Transparent Yellow (PY150)
- **For green-biased Yellow**, I am using Daniel Smith Hansa Yellow Light (PY3) instead of Lemon Yellow
- **For purple-biased Blue**, I am using Daniel Smith French ultramarine blue or ultramarine blue (PB29) instead of Winsor & Newton French Ultramarine Blue
- **For green-biased Blue**, I am using Daniel Smith phthalo blue GS (PB15) instead of Winsor & Newton Winsor Blue



The colors on my palette (below) list the common color name and a particular manufacturer. All of these pigments have an ASTM lightfastness rating of I or II (most are I). If there are two colors listed, my preference is for the first one. Although I currently have 24 colors on my large palette, I rarely use more than five in a painting. I select a group of colors to use based on what the painting calls for. My group will normally include a red, yellow and blue of some kind (so I can mix other hues), and then one or two additional colors chosen for their specific characteristics and/or their harmony with the red, yellow and blue I've chosen.

I have removed all non-lightfast colors from my palette, including Rose Madder Genuine, which is a beautiful but fugitive hue. If you choose to use that pigment, know that Winsor & Newton is the only manufacturer that makes a true Rose Madder Genuine paint of quality, but it is NOT lightfast.

