

Composing with Color

*I've never seen a purple cow — I never hope to see one
But I can tell you anyhow, I'd rather see than be one!*
— Gellet Burgess

Arranging the elements or parts of your painting is something that I think of as akin to being a musical conductor. You pay attention to the music both as it's being played and alter your direction accordingly, while keeping in mind how the composer wanted the music to sound. Stated another way, have a plan in mind for your painting, at least in your head, but better yet in your sketchbook, but be prepared to adjust it as the painting develops. Depending on your painting style, these adjustments may be minor or major!



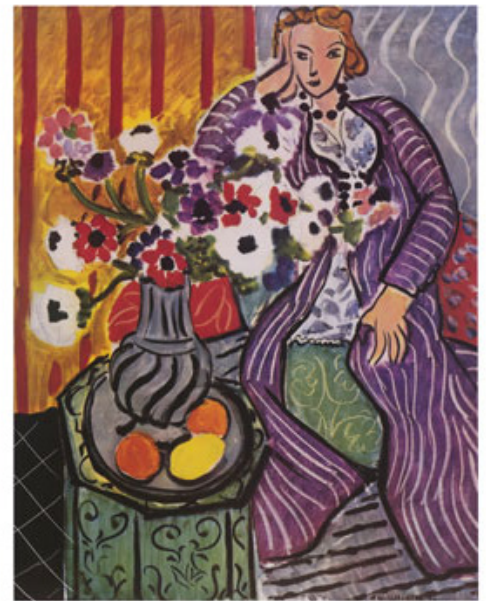
Doing a painting over again, and changing something about it with each version is something many artists do. What did Matisse change in these two versions of a model in a purple robe? What effect do his color choices for each version have? Did he subdue or enhance any other element(s) in the more highly colored version?

Exercise:

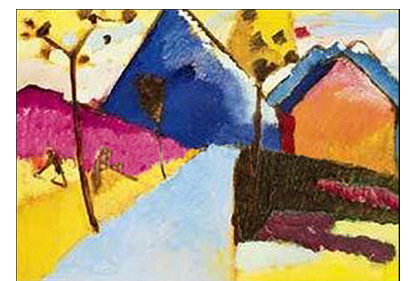
Use one of your most subdued paintings as a starting point, and redo it using high-intensity colors. Include some black linework and some unpainted white paper.

The early Expressionists (Kandinsky, Marc, Macke, and others) were interested in color for its own sake, and for its power to evoke emotions. Their paintings often used arbitrary color—color that did not necessarily correspond to the "real" color of the objects they painted.

Some contemporary artists continue to use either arbitrary color and/or heightened, or "pushed" color in their work. Doing it successfully requires planning so that any given color is not just used in one spot, but is repeated elsewhere in the composition in a different form (lighter, darker, warmer, cooler, brighter or duller). This is a necessary part of the compositional process to keep everything from being equal, because when that happens, the result is usually chaotic. In these more colorful works, because there are not as many neutrals to provide resting or quiet places, artists instead must create quieter shapes or areas of color played off against the staccato rhythms of the more distinct, pure color areas.



HENRI MATISSE
1905



Above: Wasily Kandinsky, *Kochel-Grade Strasse*
Below: Franz Marc, *Yellow Cow*





Both of these paintings have a strong horizontal near the center. How does the artist resolve this so that the paintings aren't cut in two? In other words, how does the artist keep us looking back and forth across that strong horizontal division?

Exercise:

Deliberately set yourself a compositional problem, and then resolve it. Paint something where there is a strong vertical, horizontal or diagonal in your image, or place a dominant element dead center and then make the rest of the painting work.

Hint: Use a limited palette of colors but also use them throughout their full range (light to dark and bright to dull), or repeat a shape or color in strategic places. Relative size(s) of objects can also play an important role.

