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Topic: Painting with a Limited Palette

Yes, there are hundreds of tube and cake watercolor paints available to the artist, and yes, some of them are must-haves on your palette, but let me make the case for choosing just three to five colors for any given painting, rather than dipping your brush randomly into every color on your palette. Here's why: Many colors are made up of more than one pigment; some pigments are transparent, some opaque. Some pigments are highly staining, others can be easily lifted even when dry. Some colors are granulating (that is, their pigment particles tend to settle out of the water and create interesting textural effects in washes). Some hues are VERY intense and others are more subtle (lower intensity). If you are randomly painting with every hue on your palette, you may end up with muddy or chalky color, some passages that scream and overwhelm every other part of the painting, or simply a mishmash of color that has no plan or focus.

The palette I use most of the time has twenty-two colors on it, but I rarely use more than seven of these for any painting, and more commonly use three to five. I always start a painting with a set of primary colors - one red, one yellow and one blue. I choose these colors based on the needs of the painting. If, for example, I know that I will need to mix clean, clear violets/purples, then I will choose a purple-biased red and a purple-biased blue, because I know that mixing those will give me the cleanest purple mixtures. To the set of primaries, again depending on the needs of the painting, I may add an additional red, yellow or blue, or an earth pigment (one of the siennas or ochres for example), or a specific secondary hue (an orange, green or purple pigment). If I know that I will have lots of light-mid value washes in large areas that need some "pigment interest", then I will tend to choose paints that granulate. If I am going to do a painting that requires lots of glazing or layering one color over another dried one, I will choose colors that are transparent and staining so that they tend not to lift when glazed over. If the subject calls for an antique look or feel, I may choose a group of earth (low-intensity) hues for that painting.

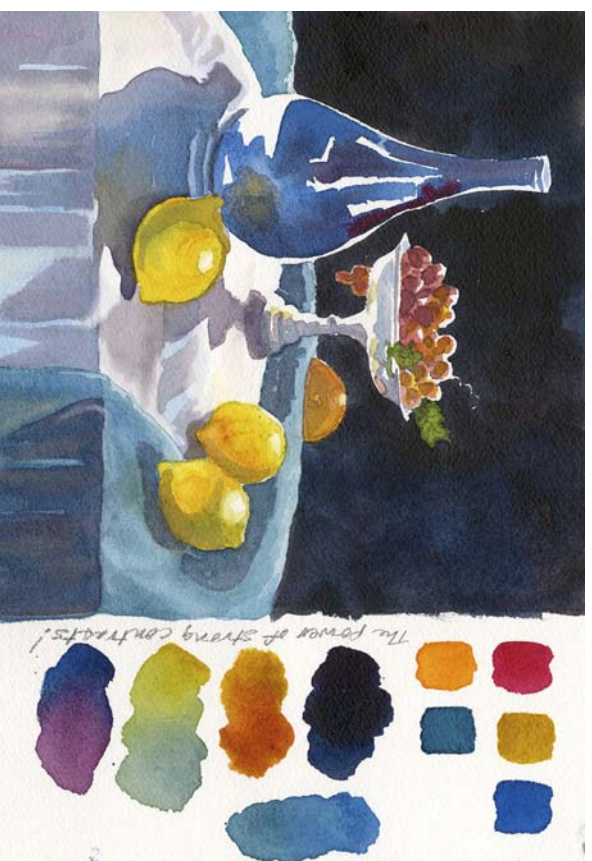
In addition to creating a painting whose colors work together in harmony, choosing a limited palette also helps you play up your subject matter, whatever it is, and in addition, helps you learn the particular characteristics of each of your colors, and how they work with each other in mixtures and glazes. Try using a worksheet like the one below for your primary choices (any red, yellow and blue), and see what mixtures you come up with for the secondary hues (orange, green and violet) and neutrals (made with a mixture of all three primaries). The results can be surprisingly rich.

Tips & Demos

Watercolor and Watermedia

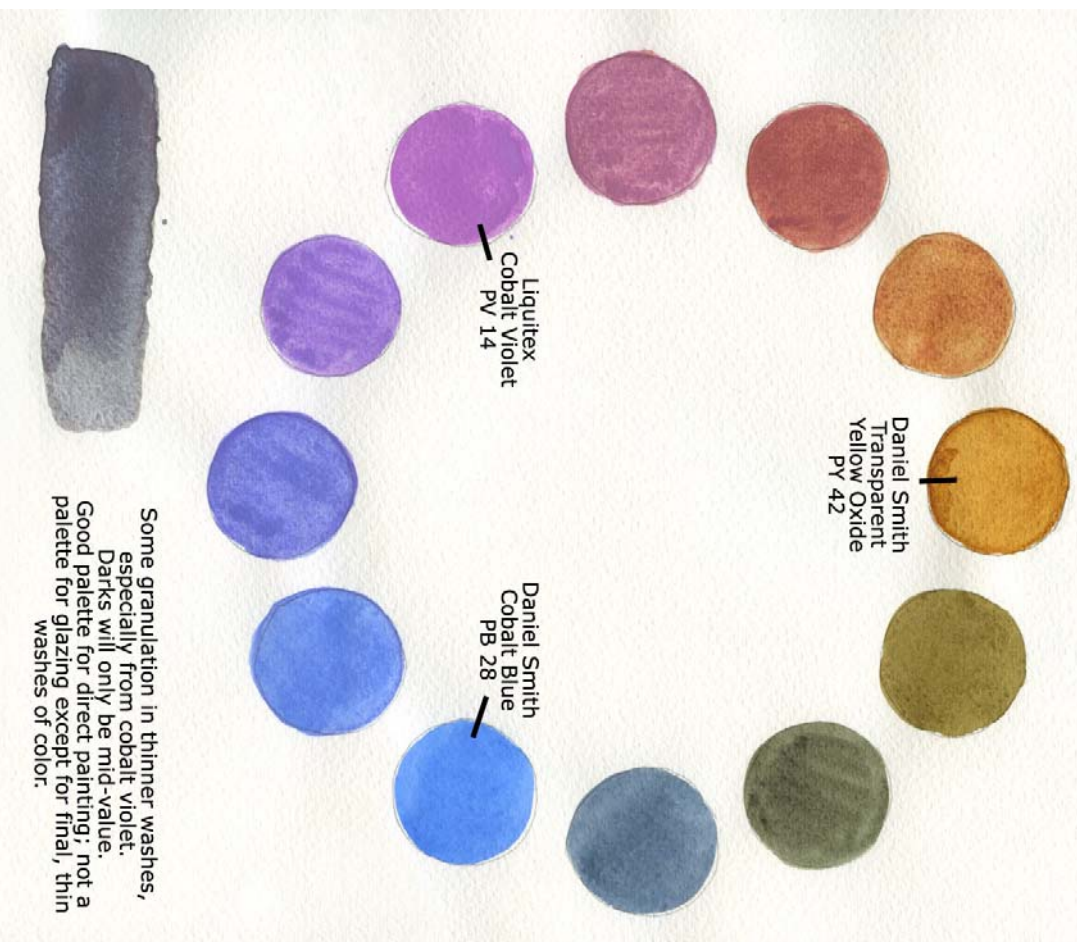
Painting Tips and Demonstrations

by Ellen Fountain, N.W.S.



In this painting, I used organic vermilion, transparent yellow, and cobalt blue as my primaries, and added new gamboge and thalo blue green shade. You see those swatches at the top, right. Quick test mixtures were made using these hues to make sure I could get (1) the local colors I wanted, (2) the intensity of color I wanted and (3) the rich dark I wanted for the background. You see those test mixtures on the right, below the pure color swatches.

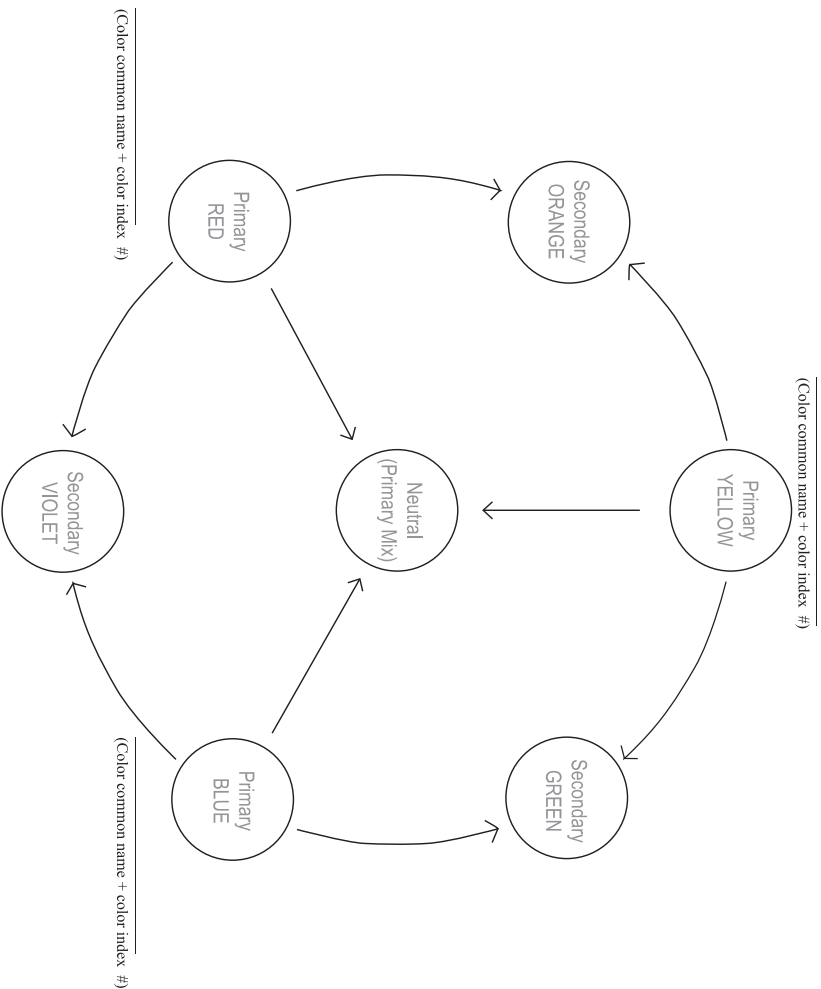
SEMI-TRANSPARENT - LOW INTENSITY PALETTE



Sample Painting using a
 Semi-Transparent, Low-Intensity Palette:
 • Transparent Yellow Oxide
 • Cobalt Violet
 • Cobalt Blue



You can be creative in how you define a primary color. In this case, I used cobalt violet as my red - it's red-ish, but certainly not what you would normally consider red. The yellow is a very low-intensity hue from the earth family of colors, but using a more intense yellow would have overwhelmed the other two primary hues. I can get a wonderful neutral from the three colors, and while the oranges and greens are low-intensity, they still work here, and because two of the three pigments are granulating, I got some interesting multi-hued washes in the background. I also took advantage of the paper, leaving lots of white unpainted areas for contrast.



Mixed ORANGES

Mixed GREENS

Mixed VIOLETS

Mixed Neutrals (Some combination of Red/Yellow/Blue)

< Dark/Saturated (less water) ----- Light/Unsaturated > (more water)

YELLOW

RED

BLUE

This is a sample of how the worksheet might look when completed with Hansa Yellow Light (PY3), Cobalt Blue (PB28) and Quinacridone Rose (PV19). A different set of primaries would yield different results. Blank worksheets can be printed out on letter size 90 lb. watercolor paper (I recommend Bientang, cut to 8-1/2 x 11 inches) and run through a laser printer. **Painted with your choice of primaries**, they make an excellent reference for quickly seeing what mixtures you can make from just three hues. They can be hole-punched and filed in a looseleaf notebook if desired.

