

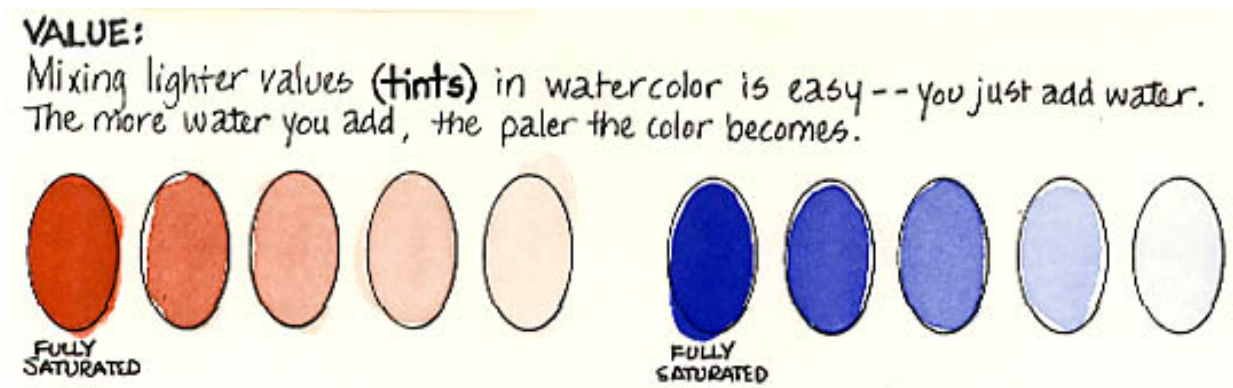


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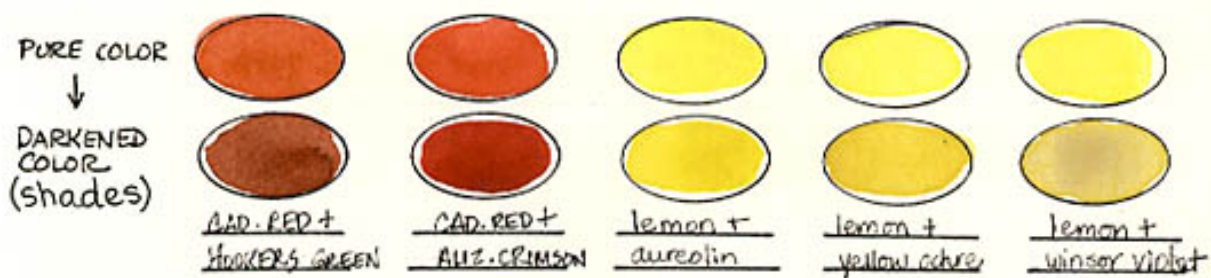
Using Value Contrasts Effectively

Value contrasts are critical to successful watercolor paintings. Using a full range of values is sometimes difficult for beginning painters, because watercolor pigments dry lighter than they look when wet, and because too little pigment is used when mixing. Why are value contrasts so important? Because they help structure the painting, establish a center of interest, and lead the viewer into and around the painting in an interesting, orchestrated and planned way. Value patterns also help describe forms, and tell us where the light is coming from. Finally, value contrasts help create the illusion of distance (depth) in our paintings.

How well are you using value contrasts? Here's a tip. Take some of your paintings (or color photos of them) and have black and white photocopies made of them. If you are losing many of your forms, or if everything looks nearly the same shade of gray, then you probably need to focus a little more on value contrasts.



Mixing darker values of colors (shades) is not as straightforward. You can add black to many pigments to darken them, but in some cases, this creates surprising results (particularly with yellows which turn green when black is added to them). A way to darken some hues successfully is to add a little of their complementary color, or another pigment in the same family that is inherently darker in value. Yellows can be darkened with browns. See the examples below.





Why are value contrasts important? They help structure the painting, create focus, and also can help establish a mood.

Demonstrated in the samples at the left are hi-key values (top), low-key values (middle) and full value range (bottom).

Note how both the hi-key and low-key paintings seem flatter than the one with the full range of values. That's because they lack strong contrast. All of the values are very similar, with the exception of the unpainted white areas and the black illustration outlines.

In the bottom painting, each object has been painted using changes in value from dark to light. As a result, this gives the individual objects 3-dimensional form, and also adds depth to the painting.

Finally our eye tends to focus on the lightest values where they juxtapose the darkest values (in the center of the painting).



In more complex compositions, value patterns of light and dark help lead your eye through the painting. The image at the right is my simple monochromatic value plan for the subject. Note how your eye is drawn to the lightest values first, and to the places where the light/dark contrast is greatest. Areas where the value contrasts aren't as far apart read as a larger, simpler shape. Squint at the completed painting and you will see what I mean.



Overcast Day – Honeybee Canyon
 ©2008 Ellen Fountain
 7½" x 10" image
 plein air watercolor on Fabriano rough paper



In my sketchbook, I made a more complete value plan for the painting below. In pencil I used the light values in a lazy “S” shape to move you through the painting from the foreground (where the value contrasts are sharper) to the background slope on the distant mountain.

When you have the time to plan a value structure for your painting, it pays off when you begin to apply the paint to paper, as you’ve already made decisions about where the darkest darks, lightest lights and mid values are to be.

Pima Canyon, ©2008 Ellen Fountain
image 10” x 14”, plein air watercolor on paper
private collection

