

Color and Value

Week 2

Emphasis: High Key Values

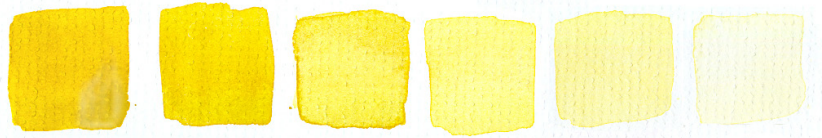
Value has to do with the quantity of light reflected from a color. Black absorbs all light waves—white reflects all light waves. Any given color reflects and absorbs light in various amounts. Dark blue, purple and brown absorb more light, while yellow, orange and pink reflect more light.

A color's VALUE is its relative lightness or darkness.

Each color in its pure, fully saturated state corresponds to a step on the black to white value scale. In watercolor, a nine-step value scale including black and white paper is more than adequate for most paintings.

High Key Paintings: Using Mostly Light Values

In transparent watercolor painting, making a lighter value of any color is easy...you simply add *clean* water (see the swatches below, right). The more water you add, the lighter the value of the color will be. You can also use opaque white watercolor to lighten the value of your colors [see sidebar]. These light values—or *tints*—when used predominantly, produce what is known as a *high-key* painting.



A high-key painting is appropriate for certain subjects: think mid-day summer beach scenes, or some desert landscapes at this same time of day. High-key colors might also be appropriately used to lend a light, tranquil or delicate feeling to a still life or flower painting.



Catherine Nash (Illinois), *Hydrangea*
An example of a high-key painting, where all the values are less than 50%

If you're not a transparent watercolor "purist", you can use white opaque watercolor (Chinese White, Titanium White or Zinc White) to lighten your colors. If you do, be aware that the any colors you mix using opaque white will lose their translucent glowing effect, and look markedly different than the other transparent watercolor passages in your painting. This is because all white watercolors contain chalk and/or other opaque pigments, and are not transparent, except in the thinnest application, and even then will have a rather chalky appearance.

Color and Value

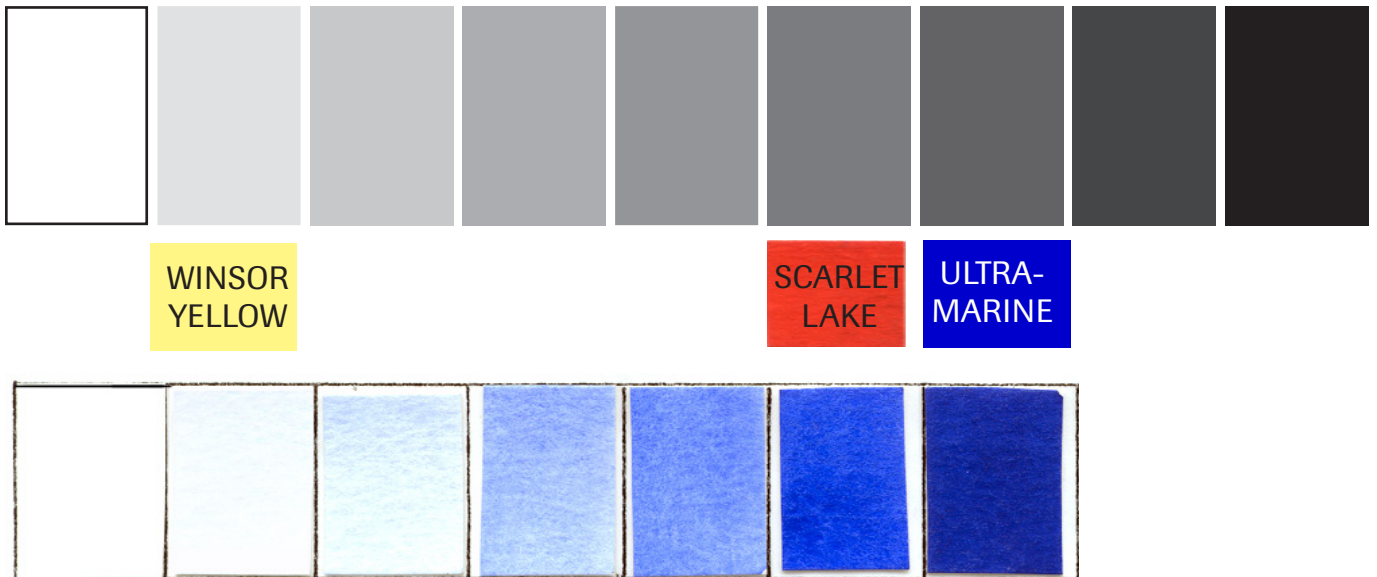
Exercise 1:

On a separate piece of watercolor paper, paint a swatch of pure, fully saturated color for each of the colors on your palette. Be sure to rinse your brush thoroughly between colors. Let each swatch dry completely, then cut out a small sample of each one and paste it underneath the value step below that it most closely matches. Colors whose fully saturated value is 50% or greater have the largest *value range*.

Once you have the fully saturated patch in place, use water to make lighter values for any steps toward the LIGHT/WHITE end of the value scale. Some colors may only have one or two steps before they appear “white”. The ultramarine blue sample below, for example, has many more steps to “white” than the yellow sample on page 1.

Why this matters:

Learning to adjust the lightness of a given pigment takes some practice mixing the proper pigment to water ratio. This exercise will help you start getting familiar with how much water it takes to dilute any given pigment to the lightness value you want. Remember: watercolor dries lighter than it looks when wet.



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High-Key Monochromatic
Use a single hue (ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, or winsor green) Plan to keep white paper in some places.

Color and Value



High-Key Full Color
Use no more than four hues. Plan to keep white paper in some places.

Color and Value



*The Desert Life, watercolor, 7½"x10" image, © Ellen Fountain
This is an example of a high-key painting*



Compare this black and white version of "The Desert Life" to the color version. You can see there are no really dark values in this painting.

Painting in High Key

Most beginners should find this approach easier than painting in low key, or painting in saturated, high intensity hues, because many beginners typically use a pigment to water ratio that contains too much water and not enough pigment.

In a successful high-key painting, you will still have enough contrast to differentiate the various forms in your composition, where you want them differentiated, but you will have *no or very few darks* (values greater than 50% on your value scale). The single most important aspect of painting in high key watercolor is taking advantage of your white paper. There usually will be a greater percentage of unpainted paper or paper that is "barely" tinted with color in a high-key painting.

EXERCISE ONE:

Use the first sketch (page 3) titled [Monochromatic High-Key](#), and transfer it to your watercolor paper (a 1/8 sheet is fine - approximately 7.5 x 11 inches). Choose a single hue from your palette that has a saturated value of 50% or greater to paint it with. Think ahead about where you will keep unpainted white paper. Keep your value scale where you can see it, and keep all your mixtures lighter than 50% on the value scale **WHEN DRY**. If unsure, paint a swatch of the color you want to use, and test it first to see how it looks when dry.

EXERCISE TWO:

Use the second sketch titled [Full Color High-Key](#), and choose no more than four colors from your palette to paint it with. Again, plan to use white paper and areas that are barely tinted with color. Your greatest contrast (white paper and your 50% value) should be next to each other in the area you want to emphasize (have as a focal area).

Color and Value

Optional Assignment(s):

Do these if you have more time and want to have some additional practice with these concepts.

[1] Do a larger **high key full color** painting with your choice of pigments and subject matter - the painting at right is an example of a high-key painting.



Although Old, Horse May Still Have Passion by Takayama.

[3] Do a larger **monochromatic** painting using a single color that is 40%-50% at full saturation (burnt sienna, scarlet lake, cobalt blue are some examples). Aim for as many values between its fully saturated state and white paper as you can get. [see sample below]. This is from a sketch of mine using burnt sienna. Notice how much white paper there is.

