

Color and Value

Week 2

Emphasis: Low Key Values

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

Black absorbs all light waves—white reflects all light waves. Any other given color will reflect and absorb light in various amounts, and the color we end up seeing (red, blue, purple, etc.) are the light waves that are reflected (not absorbed) by the surface of the object we are looking at.



Jack Brower, "Misty Morning" watercolor, 15" x 22" image, a good example of a painting done with a low-key color scheme.

Low Key Paintings: Using Mostly Dark Values

A low-key painting can have a somber, eerie, silent, pensive or even threatening atmosphere or mood, or it may simply represent a particular lighting situation.

In transparent watercolor painting, making a darker value of a color isn't as straightforward as making a light value (which we usually do by simply adding clean water to our wash). Dark values, called shades, are more complex to mix because pigments don't all require the same color to be added in order to make a darker hue. It might seem intuitive to simply add black or gray to each color to make it darker, but there are several problems associated with this simplistic approach.

First, there are many different "blacks" (ivory, lamp, vine are some) and "grays" (Payne's gray, Davy's gray, neutral tint are some). Each has a different bias—some toward purple or blue, some toward brown or green, so if you use a black or gray that has a greenish, or bluish bias and try to darken yellow or yellow-orange with it, it will darken the yellow or yellow-orange, but it will also turn it into an obviously greenish hue, rather than simply a darker value of yellow or yellow-orange. Using a blue biased black or gray to darken a blue (Ultramarine, cobalt or a blue biased purple) can work successfully, however.

Second, all the blacks and grays are quite staining. If overmixed, they will actually stain and muddy any other hue with which they are combined.

So, how can we get darker values of the colors we want? **First, know the bias of the hue you are starting with.** For example, scarlet lake is an orange-biased red. If I want to darken it, I need to choose another darker value color with the same bias toward orange. I might try burnt sienna (an orangey-brown), or a cadmium red deep (inherently darker in value in its pure saturated state). If neither of those darkened my scarlet lake enough, then I would turn to its near complement, a dark yellow green like Hooker's green, permanent sap green, or thalo green (yellow shade) because all of those greens are biased toward yellow (closest to the orange bias of my scarlet lake that I want to darken).



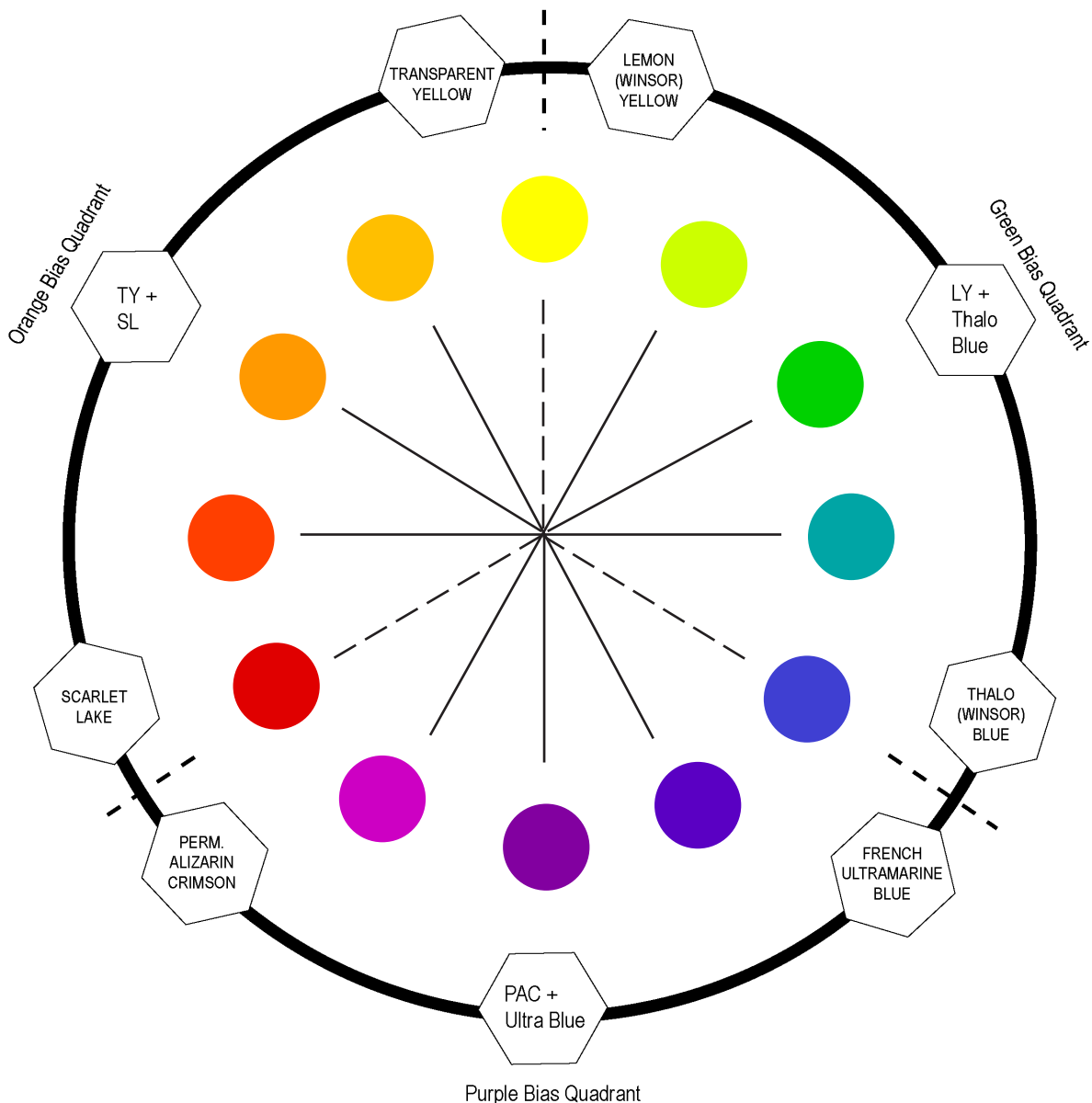
Yellow can be darkened with raw or burnt umber or with its complement, purple.

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When time permits, make a value scale for each color on your palette that matches the value scale from the previous lesson on high-key values. Make notes of the other color(s) you used to **darken** each of your palette colors.

Although the standard color wheel doesn't help you with choosing precisely which tube colors to mix for predictable results, it will help you to identify a color's approximate complement, which you may use to either darken a color or change its intensity or both. If you haven't done in a previous class, make a color wheel with the colors you currently have on your palette by painting small swatches of saturated color, letting them dry, and then placing them on the color wheel below where they belong.

THE COLOR WHEEL FOR WATERCOLOR

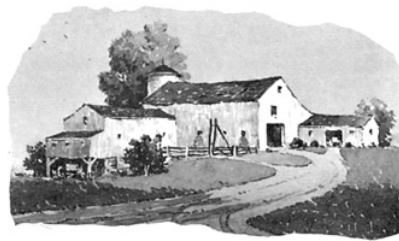


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If you superimpose the “standard” color wheel on my color wheel for watercolor, with its biased primary colors, you can see that the true complement of permanent alizarin crimson, for example would be a hue somewhere between yellow-green and green (sap green, perhaps), but that the complement of scarlet lake would be a cooler green, between green and blue-green (thalo green blue shade perhaps, or viridian). You can either mix the complements you need from the colors you already have, or buy a specific tube color that is closest to what you need. My recommendation for beginners is to mix from the basic six plus the optional colors, and get as comfortable with those few colors as you can before you add anything else to your palette.

Value contrasts & mood

These simple wash drawings illustrate how the value contrasts you choose for your painting have a profound effect on the mood of the piece. The top two clearly define different but strong, light directions, while the bottom two, with their closer values suggest late afternoon or early morning, and early evening.



Value Contrasts & Focus

Similarly, a shift in value contrasts (where you place the greatest contrast between light and dark) also effects your center of interest or focal area. In the drawings below, the focal point shifts from



the figures in the foreground and in the lower archway in the first sketch, to the upper arch and pediment in the second sketch, simply by orchestrating the values, and reserving the strongest contrasts for the area where you want the most attention.

These small sketches are a good way to begin a painting. They don't have to be this detailed, but the basic value pattern or structure should be evident. When you go to paint, if you can match your painted values to your sketch values, your painting will be successful.

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Optional Assignment:

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

Do a larger **low key** painting with your choice of pigments and subject matter - the painting at right is an example of a low-key painting. Choose a subject whose mood or feeling would be enhanced by using a low key color scheme.

Remember that a low key painting still needs contrast, but the contrasts will be much less than if you were painting a full range of values from white paper to nearly black.



*Bird's Nest by Harriet Kazinski
watercolor and gesso on board, image 20" x 15"*

Low-Key Monochromatic

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



Low-Key Full Color

Use no more than four hues. All values should be 50% or darker.

