

## History- Impressionism: Misconceptions vs Reality



Claude Monet "Poppy Field" 1873

**Ask the Expert:** "I work in what I have always called an impressionist style, but when I took my paintings to a gallery, the owner said I had too much black in them, and true impressionists don't use black. Am I wrong about this?"

**A:** You don't need to go any farther than the nearest art museum, library or bookstore to debunk that gallery owner's assertion. A quick look at the work of Impressionist painters like Monet, Renoir, and Manet reveals unrestrained use of black and other neutrals. Even the brightest, sunniest landscapes include flecks and passages of black.

Your gallery owner isn't alone in holding a wrong assumption that only bright colors can be included in a "pure" Impressionist painting. Essentially, the Impressionist painting system communicates the "impression" of light on a subject, rather than focusing on

contours and details. Earlier painters often used different techniques for skin, fabric, hair, sky and other materials. Since the Impressionist subject is light, all subject matter is handled the same, with flickering "tache" strokes of bright, unblended color.

Impressionist art features distinct strokes of color which mix in the viewer's eye, as opposed to mixing gradations and neutrals on the palette. Sensitive use of neutrals including black allows the artist to control contrasts and values while still using luminous color.



Henri-Edmond Cross "The Evening Air" ca 1893

Later artists inspired by Impressionism sometimes used high-intensity colors to the exclusion of neutrals, juxtaposing complementary colors to visually neutralize each other in the viewer's eye. This often gave a "gray carpet" appearance, as seen in many Pointillist works. This occurs because bright colors need neutrals to emphasize brightness; when all colors are similarly bright, the lack of contrast makes each individual color less brilliant. The Impressionists understood this, and did not hesitate to use browns, black and gray where the desired effect required them.