

Studio Craft: Monochromatic Paintings

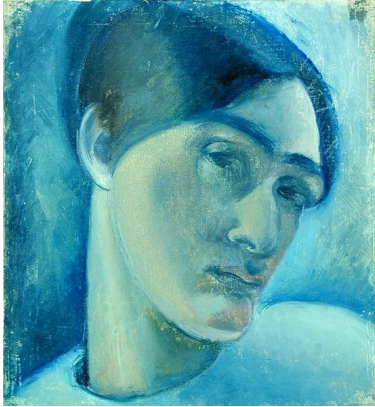


Image: Self-portrait, Anita Rée 1915

A monochromatic painting can express subjects and ideas in ways that a full palette cannot. Individual colors evoke emotions, and a monochromatic painting can create a strong mood around that emotional content. Artists often use this property of color to express feelings and sensations in a way that narrative content alone may not achieve. Working in monochrome can also serve as a good training exercise, for focus on aspects of paint that don't involve color harmonies or contrasts.

Chromatic intensity

Each color has a different maximum intensity or brightness, and that can determine what effects you're able to achieve when using just a single color. Green, which is less intense at its brightest, gives a more subtle appearance. Green mixtures with white tend to look very neutral and lose their green character with only moderate dilution. Red, which is very strong, can produce powerful tints that have considerable color even when mixed with a lot of white. Yellow provides strong color at relatively light values, but lacks dark tones, while blue and violet are naturally intense at darker values, and pale when mixed with white.

Color temperature and perceived complements

Even if you are only using one color, mixtures with white and thinned washes can produce variations in color temperature. An intensely bright hue presented on its own can produce the illusion of complementary colors in neutrals, so a monochromatic painting in an intense color can give the impression of a broader range of colors than

are actually present. Surrounding a neutral passage with a bright color can evoke the impression of the complement, so red, for instance, can give the impression of the presence of green, even if no green is used on the palette.

These effects occur all the time in painting, but are not always obvious in a full palette. When all focus is on one color, it's easy to emphasize those variations. Once you are able to identify and reproduce those effects in a controlled, deliberate manner, you can use them in interesting ways in any painting.



Monochromatic landscape with subtle warms and cools

Explore value without color

Instead of using a single, bright color, artists can work in a gray scale to hone painting technique and ability to use light and dark. This presents an opportunity to focus more intensely on light and shade, and to explore how best to deal with direct and indirect light, surface and cast shadows.

Without the added consideration of color relationships, a monochromatic palette lets the artist explore properties of paint, and experiment with techniques of application. In a monochromatic composition, it's possible to isolate effects of paint thickness, brushstrokes, and textures.

Finished paintings in a single color can be used as the basis for later works in full palette. By developing a composition first in a single color, decisions about light and shade, texture and value seem clearer and more resolved when additional colors are added, while paint handling and brush work will be easier and more effortless.