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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Should My Palette Include Black?



Portrait of a Boy, John Singer Sargent, 1890

Ask the Experts: "My friend (who is also a painter) went art supply shopping with me and he criticized me for buying black paint. He said I should be mixing blacks from other colors on the palette. Is he right? And, if I mix them, what colors should I use?"

A: Some instructors treat this as a fundamental principle, but we think it really comes down to personal preference. It probably is true that many beginners depend too much on black paint to achieve dark shades, when they could be learning more versatile mixing solutions, so restricting black in the beginner's palette sometimes makes sense. Some artists retain this habit after school, and eschew tube black in favor of mixed dark colors. Eventually, however, a trained painter should be able to use black paint to its best advantage, just like any other color.

The key to effective use of black is identifying undertone and temperature, so the pigment can be handled like any other neutral. A version of black which has bluish undertones will yield different mixtures than would a

warmer, more naturally orange version of black. One good way to identify temperature and undertone of a color is by dragging a thin smear over a canvas board or gessoed paper.

The most commonly used blacks are carbon pigments (ivory black, lamp black, peach black, vine black) or iron oxide (mars black). Deep, transparent colors and some earth colors can also be combined to make mixed dark neutrals that function as black. At least one manufacturer uses this approach to make a black tube paint that contains only synthetic organic pigments.

Mixing complements or near-complements is key to achieving good dark neutrals. Raw or Burnt Umber can be mixed with Ultramarine Blue for a fast drying, deep neutral. Alizarin Crimson Permanent mixed with Phthalo Green creates a transparent, slow-drying black with subtle violet undertones, good for shadows in glazing.

One important consideration in making custom-mixed black is cost. Natural black pigments are among the most affordable, with good tint strength and coverage. Most of the colors artists mix to achieve black are more expensive than ivory or mars black, so when covering broad areas with solid black, it's usually more economical to use prepared black paint than to mix large volumes.

Probably the most important issue involved in excluding black pigments from the palette is that each has a unique hue with a particular set of properties, including temperature, undertone and drying rate, and artists who exclude these from their kit could be missing out. Different versions of black provide useful (some might say essential) color options that are worth experiencing.