

Studio Craft Organizing the Palette: Options

Ask the Experts: “The standard way I was taught to lay out a palette was to start with the bright colors first, according to the rainbow, then mix neutrals. We had some earth colors included but they were on the end, after violet. White was off to the side, and we were not allowed to use black. I’m sure not everyone does it this way. What are some other options?”



Palette with colors in ROYGBIV order with tints and shades beneath

A: There are lots of other ways to lay out a palette, depending on the mixing system the artist uses, the color scheme of the artwork, and the pictorial goals. Whatever organizational scheme is used should satisfy several needs:

- Efficient movement between colors for mixtures
- Sufficient supply of each color, with plenty of clean reserve
- Room for intermediate mixtures, as well as main mixing area

Chromatic to Neutral

Many artists learn an academic standard method starting with bright colors, organized according to the spectrum (ROYGBIV) with neutrals available as a supplement. In this system, the artist starts with bright colors and reduces brightness (chromatic intensity) by mixing between complements (colors opposite one another on the standard color wheel). This modern palette scheme

developed out of Impressionism and was refined in Bauhaus-inspired teaching systems, at a time when newer pigments, especially synthetic-organic colors, provided the most complete range of bright hues ever available to artists.

Neutral to Chromatic

Before the development of synthetic pigments, the majority of artists' colors were more neutral, many of them earth pigments, ochres, umbers, and oxides mined from the earth. Bright colors were available, but there were fewer, and they were often less permanent. Plant-derived colors like madder and sap green were prone to fading, especially when applied as thin transparencies. Very few permanent, bright yellows existed before the mid-19th c.

A palette based on a majority of neutrals and earth colors will usually have an emphasis on light and dark values, and colors may be further organized for handling specific types of subject matter, like portraits or landscapes. There may be two arcs of color on the palette, an outer (major) palette for general use and an inner assortment of brighter colors for highlights and bright focal points.

Warm/cool pairing

A variation on the standard, modern palette of bright colors is organized in pairs or groups of primaries, with a “warm” and “cool” version of each, or each in the pair selected for mixing one of the two adjacent secondaries. The position of red, for instance, might be occupied by a color that has more orange character (“warm”), paired with a magenta or crimson for mixing violet (“cool”). Artists using this palette might hand-mix all secondaries, but it’s more common to include some secondary colors at logical positions between primary pairs, or in a sub-assortment.

Hue/Value/Chroma

Some artists group bright and neutral (earth) colors together by hue on the palette. This might involve clustering bright cadmium red, for instance, with burnt sienna and English red. Others might organize by value, from light to dark, or create tints and shades in bulk.

Minimal/primary

Especially for a travel palette, sometimes it makes sense to organize a limited assortment of a few highly versatile colors that can mix all secondaries and tertiaries. Usually this consists of a set of primaries with maybe an important secondary, plus white, but some artists start

with just a complementary pair and mix everything from that.

The Kitchen Sink

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some lay out a palette with just about everything in the paint box. This can work for a very organized artist, but it can lead to a lot of wasted leftover paint. It also restricts mixing area.

Whatever Works

Whatever system (or variation) the artist uses should be something that works for the pictorial goals. Don't hesitate to put colors where you want them, and where you expect them to be. Remember: the palette works for the artist, not the other way around.

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