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ASK THE EXPERTS



“Study in Gray” Emil Carlsen, 1906 shows dramatic, closely controlled contrasts, such as the rim of the bowl and teakettle spout

**Ask the Experts: “In my paintings, I feel like I can’t get my blacks dark enough or whites bright enough. I’ve tried several brands of white and black paint, and I keep getting the same result. How do painters get those deep tones and bright tints?”**

**A:** So much in painting depends on knowing the possibilities of the medium, and using these to the best effect. Controlling light and dark values is one of the most important skills an artist can acquire. Each medium has a limited range of values, and the work of art needs to be calibrated to the range of the medium. A conservative approach to value will help ensure that mixing solutions are available on the palette for every passage on the picture.

It’s important to identify the value requirements of a work of art in the initial stages so that the descriptive power of the medium is fully available for focal areas and significant visual elements. When a picture isn’t keyed to the range of the medium, the artist may feel as though elements of the picture are “off the

scale”, with whites insufficiently brilliant, and darks never deep enough.



“Study of a Nude Man” Thomas Eakins ca. 1869 demonstrates how passages of moderate light and dark can contrast to draw focus to the center of a picture. Darker tones that are similar in value recede into the portion of the face which is largely in shadow.

In order to calibrate the subject or composition to the medium, it’s necessary to identify three things: **lightest light, darkest dark, and most extreme contrast** of light and dark. Don’t assume, however, that the strongest contrast will always include the lightest and darkest colors. The darkest dark passage in a painting may be surrounded by other dark tones, so it may not necessarily catch the eye. Likewise, the lightest tone in a picture may not stand out if surrounded by other high-key tints. Whatever passage consists of two tones that are farthest apart on the value scale will tend to draw the eye and be perceived as significant in the picture.

Creating strong contrasts between colors can give the impression that colors are lighter or darker than they objectively are, and that the palette contains more hues than are actually in use. Placing a color next to a dissimilar one emphasizes the difference between them, so any fairly dark color will seem darker yet if placed next to a fairly light one.

When contrasts like this are handled effectively, it's possible to give the impression that a mid-range color is the darkest in a picture, even though there may in reality be darker passages on the same painting.



Seurat's portrait of his mother ca. 1882 shows masterful control of a narrow range. Lighter values carry the most intricate details, while darker tones and overlaps of greatest contrast are broader and simpler. The artist has carefully reserved the color of the paper for the lightest passages, where strong illumination is present.

Subtle contrasts are just as important as extreme ones in making the best use of the whole value range of the medium. Grouping similar lights and darks together allows the artist to compress complex sequences into a manageable range that fits within the limits of the palette.



Gwen John executed many works in a narrow value range, like this early 20<sup>th</sup> century painting, "Seated Girl Holding a Piece of Sewing". This approach created a misty, atmospheric effect that emphasized chromatic intensity

Whatever the source of white in a work of art, it's essential to conserve this for passages that require the "high notes". Watercolorists are trained to carefully plan where the paper itself will be used for highlights and other light passages. Painters in other mediums must reserve white paint as the top of the value scale.



In "The Samovar" by Emil Carlsen, ca. 1920, the artist has strategically organized lighter values to create highlights and reflections on brass objects using medium to medium-light values, reserving whites for a brilliant porcelain vase in the foreground

Once values are better controlled and tuned to the requirements of the artwork, the apparent range in the picture can exceed what is actually on the palette, and lights and darks will no longer fall "off the scale".

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