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Product Profiles

Secondary Colors: Mixed vs. Purchased



Secondary colors are hues expressed on the color wheel between primaries, and on the palette, each can be mixed from two of the three primary colors. Secondaries that are mixed from multiple pigments can look and perform differently from single-pigment secondaries, however. Artists often have specific preferences for selecting, creating and using these colors depending on style and technique.



Mixing Secondaries

One key to mixing secondary colors is to select the strongest possible primaries that are closely related to the desired hue. The farther the primaries are apart on the color wheel, the more they act as near-complements which will result in a more neutral, less colorful mixture. Violet, for example, can be difficult to mix from red and blue, if the red has an orange quality, or if the blue is a greenish variant. Better results are obtained by pairing a cooler, more violet blue with a red that is closer to magenta.



One of the advantages to using a single-pigment secondary is that the color performs more consistently in mixtures than a blended hue. When a secondary is made by combining primaries, inevitably one component is weaker than the other. As additional colors are introduced, the stronger component tends to assert itself, while the weaker one can be overwhelmed in the mixture. The result is a shift in hue away from the desired secondary, with a bias toward the stronger component. It's possible to

compensate by adjusting on the palette, but not every artist will be satisfied to do this.



Testing the tint strength of yellow

The **tinting strength** of the primaries will determine how bright the resulting mixture will be. Tint strength is the degree of color change a pigment can induce in a mixture. A pigment with powerful tint strength only requires a small amount to influence the color of mixtures. Phthalo blue, for example, can tint a large amount of yellow to produce green, and the resulting green can be very bright. Primary colors with weaker tinting power take a lot more pigment to achieve a secondary, and may not yield as bright a mixture.

It's easy to weigh **paint cost** as a factor in deciding whether to purchase secondaries or make them on the palette. Most artists would reason that, as a standard practice, it doesn't make sense to mix two expensive primaries to make a secondary which can be purchased for less money.

Batch consistency is another consideration when mixing secondaries in the studio. Hues mixed on the palette are difficult to duplicate with precision, so if the same secondary will be needed repeatedly, or a large area needs to be covered, a sensible solution is to either purchase a prepared color, or to mix a larger batch in bulk. When mixing in bulk, empty collapsible aluminum paint tubes can be filled in the studio with a palette knife. Make sure to retain a small sample and

record the proportions you used in case you want to make a duplicate batch



1824 portrait by Eduard Friedrich Leybold

One factor in choosing single-pigment secondaries unrelated to technical performance is that certain colors have been used for so long that they have achieved the status of "major notes". This is one reason why artists often still prefer older pigments over newer alternatives, even if, in some cases, the older colors might be less potent or lightfast. Genuine Viridian, for instance, is often favored over modern synthetic replacements despite being less brilliant and slightly grainy compared to synthetics. Arguably this is entirely subjective personal preference, but some artists feel strongly that there is an authentic look that can only be obtained by using the original pigment.

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