

6 Steps to Realistic Paintings

Techniques and skill building exercises, to help you create better paintings, even if you're just beginning.



Most of us creators have that general goal to improve but how do we get better and how do we make our paintings look more realistic.

The majority of us respond to those questions with a generic answer — ***practice***. Practicing does indeed make perfect, but repetition without purpose can sometimes be like spinning your wheels without going anywhere.

That's why I developed a course that gives you step by step skill building exercises with purpose, to take your paintings to a whole new level, even if you're just beginning.

<https://www.rosetanner.com/colormixingmasterclass> This course moves you from feeling stuck and confused about color mixing and painting to building the confidence you need to begin creating realistic paintings.

I hope you will have a look, there are also full length bird painting demonstrations that take you through my process step by step.

With that in mind, we can make our paintings more realistic by following these Six Steps....

Step 1— Know Value, Your #1 Asset

What is value?

Value is essentially how light or dark a color is. In other words, it is the brightness of a color. The lighter the color, the higher the value — and vice versa. With value, artists can easily emphasize certain parts of their subjects and give a good amount of perspective of light or volume.



That's the more technical reason why value is more important than color. However, as artists, we need more relatable arguments as to why we should prioritize *value* so *read on*.

It's the dark color that tells the story in a painting. It took me some time to learn the importance of value, but once I did, it was a game changer. Value is what makes your subjects discernible and can describe a scene where colors can't.

Value can help emphasize certain parts of your painting and direct the viewer's eye right where you want it to go.

Did you know you have 20 times more the ability to read value vs color? Not to nerd out on you, but the human eye is made of receptors. These receptors are the sensitive elements that absorb light and start the process of sending visual signals to the brain. There are 6 million receptors that help us see color — 120 million receptors help us to see value.

How do we see Value?

As novices to the craft, it can be challenging to determine how value is applied to paintings. However, there are ways —or life hacks— to help us see the value in our subjects so that we can properly apply them to our paintings.

Here are some of those ways:

1. Squinting and compare

Looking at your subject in its entirety can be overwhelming to some, but when you observe your subject while squinting, most of the details will be blurred out and the true values, particularly the dark values will become prominent. Those are the values to put in your painting.

2. Using a value finder

Value finders are essentially tools that scale a color from dark to light. Just hold them beside your subject and you'll be able to spot the value in a matter of seconds.

3. Turning a photo black and white

It can be discouraging to find the *value* in a colored image or subject. Black and white photos of your subject make it easier to spot value because it removes the complexity of color. Not only that, they can give the observers an idea as to whether or not the value pattern is good.

4. Looking through a hole-punched surface

As I've mentioned before, looking at your subject in its entirety can be overwhelming. A hole-punched surface can help with that. Using this method allows viewers to identify specific areas without any neighboring distractions. When we look through hole punches, only a portion of the value can be seen and the colors should be isolated.

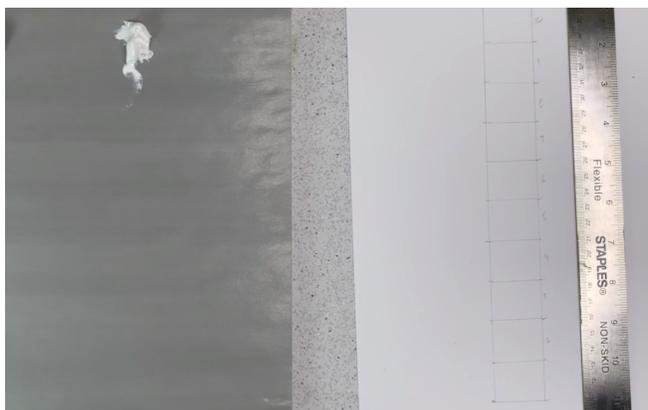
The Value Scale Exercise

Often artists jump right into a subject they're inspired by without practicing. Like a musician practices his scales, it's a good idea as an artist too. Improving your skills can be a challenge, but with this exercise, you can start to get to know the ten values available to you as an artist.



Here, we will be painting 10 values from white to black with increments of gray in between. Using only black and white is imperative since we want to get rid of any unnecessary distractions.

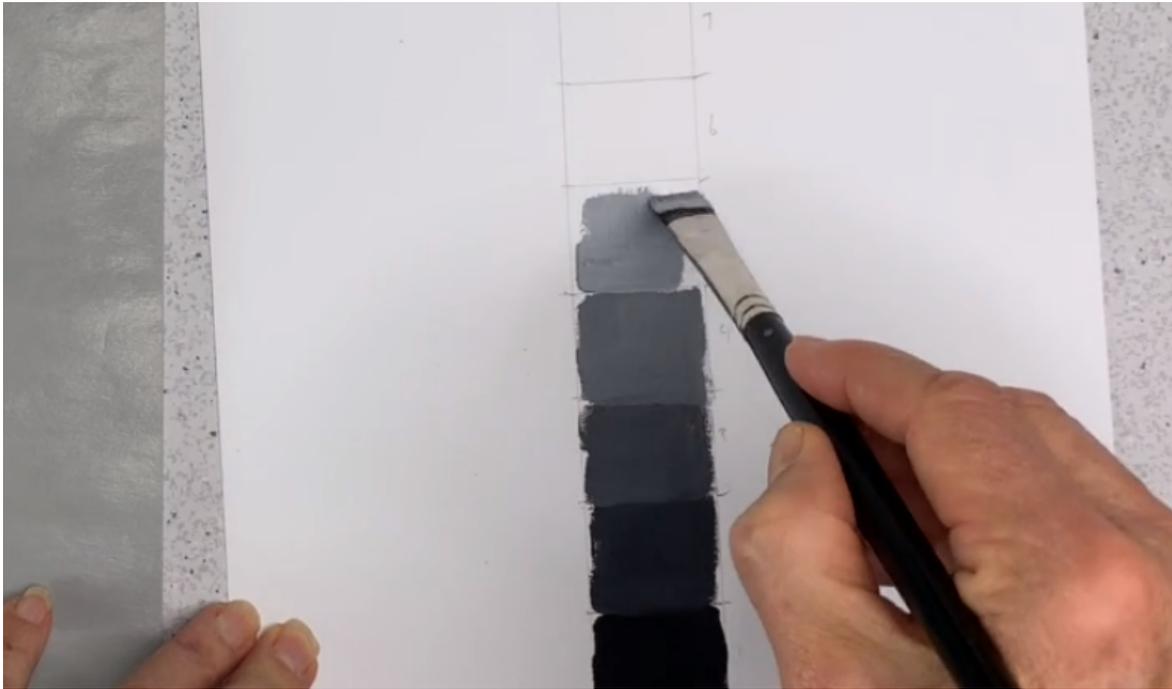
It may sound easy but it can be very difficult to figure out how light or how dark a value should be compared to the one next to it. With that being said, if you follow these steps on how to do it, you'll have nothing to worry about.



Here's how to do it:

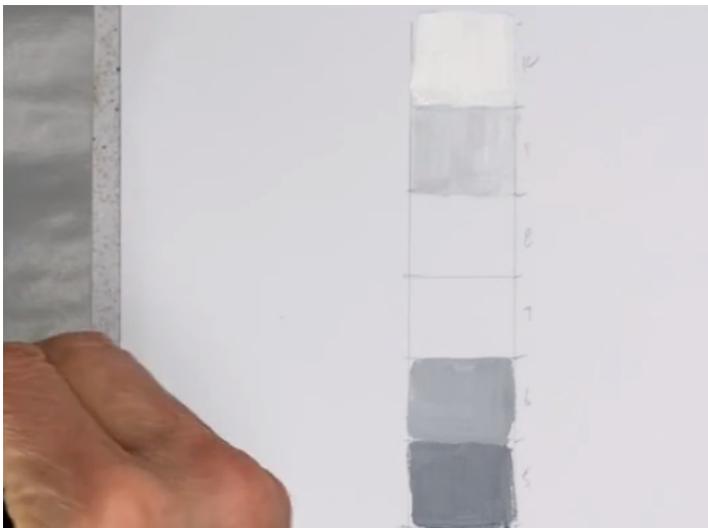
Step 1: Purchase a Grayscale Value Finder and use it as a reference to match the values in the exercise. Draw *ten* one-inch squares side by side.

Step 2: Paint the box at one end black and the at the other end white. Black will be numbered as one while white will be ten.



Step 3: On your palette, SLOWLY mix a little amount of the white into the black to make your values. Make sure to be careful and don't add more white than what you think is enough. Don't be in a rush. Our goal is to get the feel of the mix.

Step 4: Once you think you have the shade you are looking for, use the value finder as reference. Hold it beside the mixture and squint to compare — make sure to focus your vision at the intersection where the two values meet. That's the area you want to compare to with your mixture.



Step 5: Repeat the process for the next 5 boxes — from box 1 to box 5.

Step 6: Once you have the 5th value, do the same process but this time, try going down from the white (start from box 10.) Starting from white gives a different feel.

The goal in this exercise is to help you improve value mixing and your observation skills.

This exercise will also help you gain more control and become more familiar with the brush. There are a lot of nuances in *value* and it will take some time to get used to, but once you get the hang of it, you can make this technique our own—and you'll be one step closer to being masters of the craft.

Step 2 - Mix the Color Charts

The Fastest Way to Learn Color is to Blend Every Color with Every other Color

Painters, at some point of their painting journey, learn that color is a very complex topic. Unlocking its full potential is easier said than done. Color mixing may sound simple, but there are a lot of things to consider — value, color ratios, the feel and a whole lot more.

Now we know that value is more important than color, but if we inject color to what we already know about value, we'll be on a whole new level.

Remember, value creates context and emphasizes emotion. Color amplifies value.

This lesson includes two exercises wherein we explore the potential of color and the values each of them can have.

All of these lessons are show in detail on video in my online painting workshop To see a list of materials for my online painting course and the exercises below check here.

In the FIRST exercise, you'll make a chart that will have all of your colors *pure* — adding white to adjust the value.

In our last step, we talked about value and all its benefits and practiced how to get the values between white and black.

Let us begin.

STEP 1: Prepare your chart.

The chart you will be using should have *eleven rows and five columns made of squares*—the sides of the squares should be masked with tape so that no paint accidentally goes to unwanted areas.

You can get yourself one here: <https://www.colorfrontier.com/>



STEP 2: Choose eleven colors from your palette and label the top row with the names of the colors.

These colors will serve as your pure colors — the colors that we will mix white with. You can label your pure colors using any method you prefer. Printing, writing or using color based labels are some examples — it's up to you.

STEP 3: Spread your Pure Color to the first square.

Palette knives can be awkward at first, but in time having experienced this exercise will pay off and using the tool will be second nature.

Take out your palette knife and take the first pure color of your choice and spread it thinly in the first square on the top row. Make sure to spread the paint evenly; having an inconsistent spread could mean having inconsistent values.



STEP 4: For this next step, there are actually two methods you could use to arrive at the five different values.

In painting, we have to remember that there could be a lot of methods to arrive at the same result. Learning more than one method can mean having more tricks up our sleeves.

In this first method, we're going to find the values of our pure colors chronologically from darkest to light.

To do so, we're going to use a method called *tinting* — the process of taking your pure color and mixing it with white. This is just similar to the value exercise in the previous lesson. What we are looking for here is the consistency of the change — the jump from one value to another.

Mixing your colors on your palette first is highly recommended — it's better to work out the value jumps first on your palette to save you the trouble of unnecessarily taking out the paint in the squares.



Here's how you do it:

Mix your pure value color with white until you get a slightly lighter shade. Remember, you should always use white little by little until we get your desired color — so you can get the feel of how the value changes

Repeat each process until you get the five values (including your pure) from darkest to light — then spread each color, chronologically from darkest to light, on the squares below the pure.

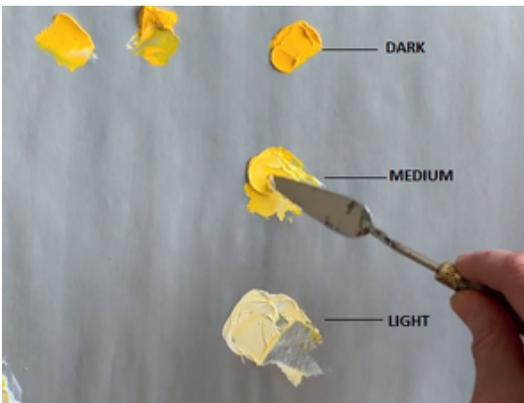


In the second method, we are going to find the values in between the values. This is easier for some since it's basically a process of finding the middle-ground, rinsing and repeating

To do so, we have to consider our pure as the “dark” value. Then we have to find the medium and light values of our pure color.

To find the lightest value, mix **white with your pure color** until you get a slightly off-white color. Make sure that you just barely stain the white — tint it ever so slightly. Once you think you have the right value, spread it thinly at a working area and make sure to leave some space for three more values.

Next, we need to find the value between your pure color and the off-white color — the medium value. You can do so by measuring out 50% of your light and dark values. However, there is never an exact ratio in color mixing, so add either light or dark as needed.



Once you get your light, medium and dark colors, you will now have three colors as reference. These colors will be your basis of finding other values.

Using the light, medium and dark values, we can easily find the *values* in between. To find them, you can either eye-ball it or use 50% of each of the surrounding *values*.

Again, there's no exact science to this process. Adjust the colors as needed by adding white to

lighten or the pure color to darken. The goal is to get a feel the *values* of the *pure*

Remember to always compare your new color with its surrounding ones. Go back and forth to see if the value is really in the middle. And take note that what we're looking for is a jump from one value to another — it doesn't need to be a big jump though.



Once you have the values, you can now put them on the squares — and you should have the same result with Step 4's first method.

STEP 5: Repeat steps 2-4 using your other pure colors and fill up your color chart.

Some things to remember:

- 1) take note that, in painting, there are so many options to arrive at the same conclusion and it should be the artists' job to judge whether or not if he/she arrived at a desired value.
- 2) Both methods of step 4 are equally effective. However, it is up to you to choose what's best. Choose one (or both) you're comfortable with. It's all about preference and how much you can learn from it. Both serve a purpose of training your eye to see values in between values.

STEP 6: Be a perfectionist and review your work.

I'm just kidding, it doesn't have to be perfect. However, we do need to make sure we have a good result to get good results. What I mean is, we have to make sure that we understand what this exercise does for us.

Here are some things to take note of:

First, we have to compare different values as you look at your color chart — use a value scale if any assistance is needed.

Secondly, compare the rows as a whole and consider how light and dark your value is compared to those that are next to them. In other words, compare one value of one pure to another value of another pure.



You can see in this photograph, when you squint your eyes, how a couple of these values are darker..

Your goal here is to attempt to make each row have the same intensity of value. If one value doesn't match the intensity of the other, you can correct it by removing the paint on the square and mixing it with white on your palette. Then place your new color back on the square — best done while the paint is wet.

STEP 7: Remove the tape and be proud of yourself!

Simple enough, right? Value and color are two integral aspects of painting. Only when we know the extent of value of each color can we really unlock the full potential of depth and perspective.

MOVING ON

In this SECOND exercise, we will use one color as the predominant, mix it with another and run it through other colors to create five values.

This exercise is similar to the last since it helps you get to know color and value in a more fun and satisfying way. However, it is kind of like a level higher than the last one because we will be using three colors — instead of two — in finding the *values*.

There are a lot of rules in painting, and we should always remember that Pigments are one the most important factors in determining the color and the range it is capable of.

Let's get right into it.

STEP 1: Choose one pure color and do steps 3-4 of the *previous exercise*.

This color will be considered as your dominant color and be your reference throughout the whole exercise or chart.

STEP 2: Choose another color to combine with your dominant color.

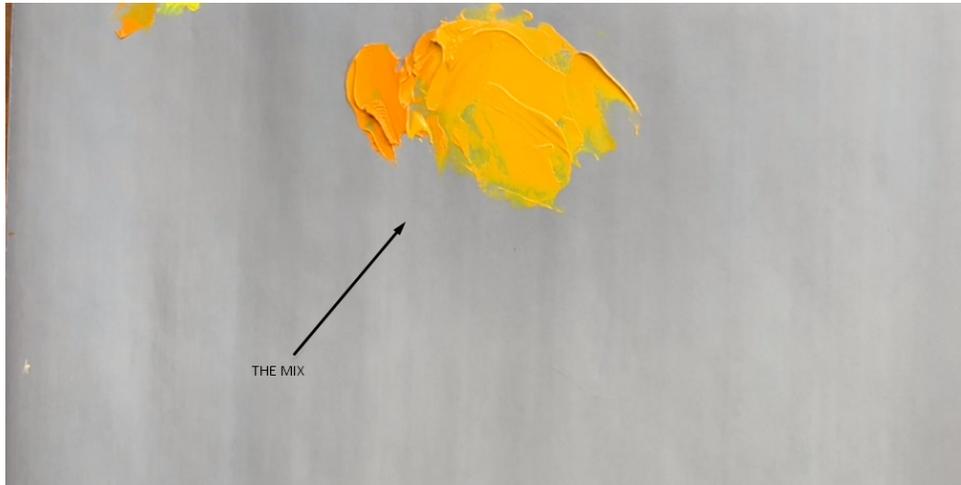
The mixture of the two will be, from here on out, known as the "mix".

Remember, your dominant color should be considered as the integral color of your mix. In other words, the mix should have more of it than the other.

STEP 3: As a rule of thumb, use a 75:25 mixing ratio to make a mix

In this step, 75% of the mix should be the dominant color.

However, this exercise is partially by feel and the 75:25 rule is not absolute. It will ultimately depend on the value of the color you chose.



Change the color frequently to see how the colors interact with each other while keeping one of them dominant. Don't be afraid to add either colors as necessary.

STEP 4: Create 5 values of the mix and add them to your squares

To do so, do steps 3-4 of the *previous exercise* to get the values.

Take note that either methods in step four work fine. Use what you're comfortable with.

STEP 5: The next step is to move on to the next color

This step is similar to step two. However, the new mix should be composed of the dominant color and a new color.

This is where the exercise gets interesting! Now you will select 11 colors from the recommended palette, choose the ones that you want to get to know more. You may choose only one yellow and one red from the palette it's up to you.



STEP 6: With the new color mix, create five values using steps 2-4 of the previous exercise.

If you squint at this chart and look at the bottom row, assess and see if one of the colors pop out. That's what you're going for — the consistency in the values.

You will find, as you get into mixing these colors and values, the

process will be your own. The main thing is to create five different values with logical steps in between.

STEP 7: Repeat steps 5 and 6 until you fill up the whole sheet.

Take as long as you need. The most important thing is to be acquainted with the process of getting the values and the feel of mixing.

STEP 8: Once again, be a perfectionist and review your work.

Squint and compare — rinse and repeat. Keep in mind that colors beside each other, especially in the lower rows must have the same intensity. This exercise isn't only about color mixing — it's also about value.

Correct the values you aren't satisfied with by removing the paint on the square and mixing it with white on your palette. Place your new color back on the square ones you're content.



STEP 9: Remove the tape and be happy at what you've done!

There you have it! Two simple exercises that are fun and satisfying to do.

Keep in mind that the objective of these exercises is for you to be more acquainted with the intricacies and nuances of color mixing. Color can be extremely complicated but

with mixing, there's more than one way to get the result. Choose what's comfortable for you and have the courage to explore other options.

Step 3 - Keep your Darks Thin and Colorful



For a more complete explanation on how temperature and color work together, we recommend that you do the exercises on our website: <https://www.rosetanner.com/colormixingmasterclass>

Let's explore **Transparent-Oxide Brown and Cobalt Blue**. These two colors are different for several reasons but here, we consider how color temperature is affected when these two are at play.



When mixed together, they create this dark and brownish hue. Mix more of the Blue than the Brown, you'll get a cooler dark color. Mix it the other way around and you'll have a warm dark color. Using color temperature in your darks like this, will look more professional than using black. *We include several color mixing templates like this one above, in our course.*

In this lesson, we'll delve into the world of *still-life* — which is a whole other genre in and of itself but if we take a closer look at the process, we'll notice several techniques that use the temperature of darks rigorously.

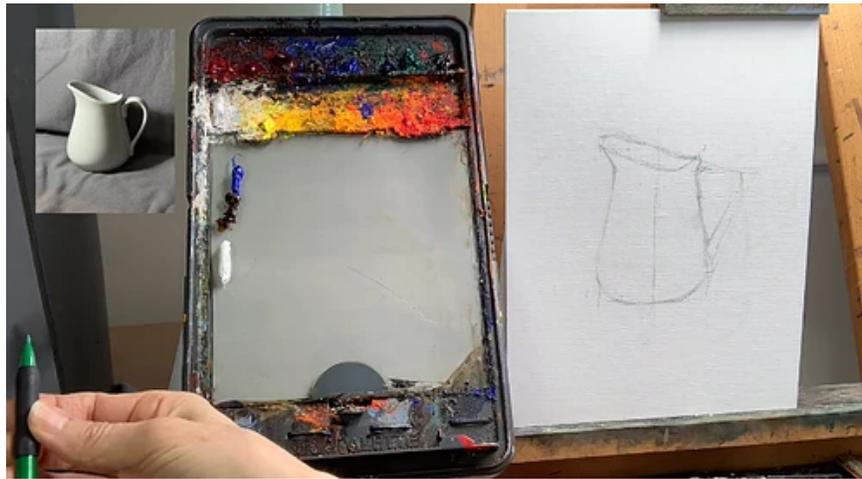


We know that still life can be complicated. So we decided to walk you through the painting process. At <https://www.rosetanner.com/colormixingmasterclass>, you'll find the intricate process on how to do it yourself — and how it relates to the necessary darks. Go check them out!

Here's the gist of what you're going to find on the site:

Step 1: Drawing

We start this exercise by drawing our subject on the canvas. The shape together with the light-source are the two most important factors to remember in order to create a more three dimensional painting. We start this exercise by drawing our subject on the canvas.



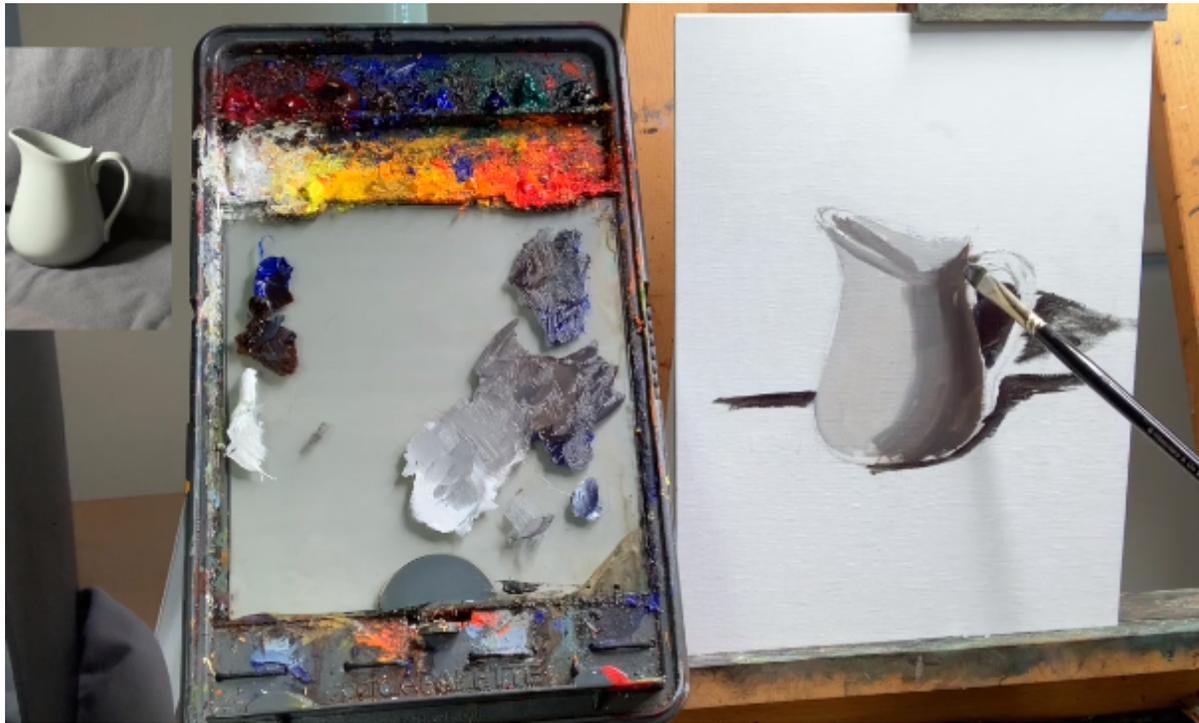
Placing lines or markers at the center of your subject helps with the symmetry of the drawing. Better symmetry means a more organized painting experience.

Step 2: Look for the Darkest Darks

These kinds of darks are what make the “base” of the subject. They create the platform on which the subject can stand.



In this step, take a small clean brush and look for the darks. Once you've established the right value and temperature, paint in the darks and use them to build the foundation of the subject.

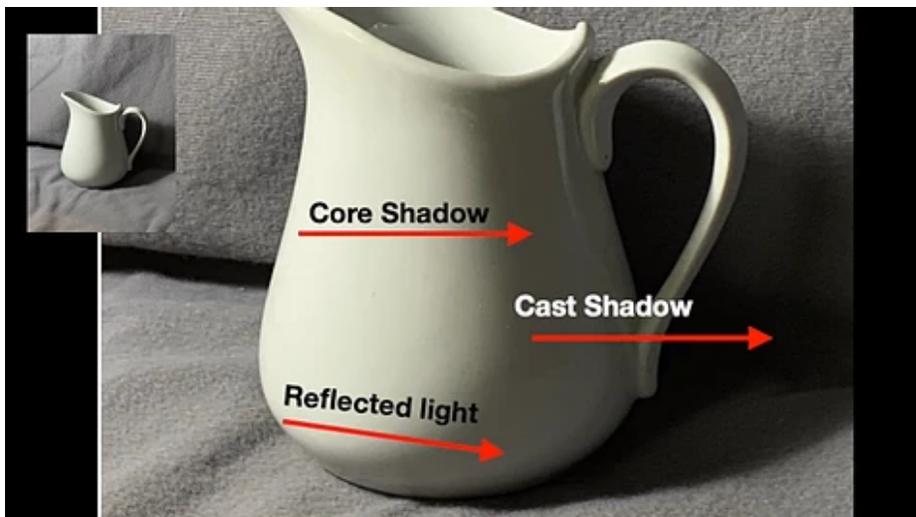


Step 3: Keep Your Whites at Bay

When you're painting the whites, we suggest not to use the whitest value right away. This is because once the lightest is already painted, there won't be any other brighter colors to use for your highlights.

We recommend that you start off with thin, transparent type layers. The thinner the layers you make, the easier it is to get through your painting — always leave some room for correction

Continually squint at your subject to find the true value it will always be darker than you think. Keep your paint thin in the beginning. This gives the illusion of softness to your whites.



Step 4: Look for the Core Shadow, Reflected Light, and Cast Shadow

Determining these parts of the painting can help with the process of making it more realistic since the transitions of value are what make the subject pop.

The Core shadow is the darkest part of the

shadow. It is the dark band visible *where light and shadow meet*. It is the point at which light can no longer reach the form to illuminate it.

The reflected light can be found on the shadows of an object. The easiest place to find reflected light is near core shadows.

Step 5: Look for Areas of Value to Change.

Constant reevaluation of value and temperature can help you find values shapes that need to be changed. Even if they're subtle, they'll make a difference and make your painting more dynamic and three dimensional.



Step 6: Refine What You See

This step is kind of like an exaggerated version of step 5. How far you go at the detail is up to you. It's always good to take second looks and use a smaller brush to get to those details.

Building your layers slowly and don't be

afraid to wipe away if it's not looking correct, that is the beauty of oil. The more you spend slowly building the form, the more realistic your paintings will become.

Step 7: Figure Out Your Background

Establishing the background can either be done at the before or after the subject is painted.



Painting the background after the subject can give you the headroom to correct your edges. Considering each edge in the painting. Edges in painting are the window to style and a whole topic in itself.

Artists use edges to direct the eye to the focal point or the center of interest. You can do so by using sharper edges in the focal point and softer one in the rest of the painting.

Step 4 — Know How to Desaturate your Color Mixtures



As painters, we'd want to be more relatable to our audience without compromising on our creativity.

How do we do that? The answer is a concept in color we call *Saturation*.

Saturation in color describes its purity. In other words, it is the extent of its intensity. When artists want to desaturate or mute a color, they'd want a color to be less than saturated – they'd dull it down a bit

Desaturated or Muted colors are essentially grayed or dulled colors or colors that have low chroma or saturation — in other words, they are the opposite of vivid colors.

Saturation is different from value. While value focuses on how dark or how light a color is, saturation addresses the vividness of a color, how pure or dull the pigment appears.

Why should we desaturate?

Rarely do you use the paint color straight out of the tube, muting your colors gives it a more realistic effect. Normally, you would want to amend or desaturate a color to match your subject — be more consistent and homogeneous.

Usually, painters would want to keep our subjects more saturated than the background. If we apply desaturation or muting to our paintings, we'll have more control on what the viewer sees. In other words, we can be better at emphasizing what we want.

Part 2: Cadmium Orange



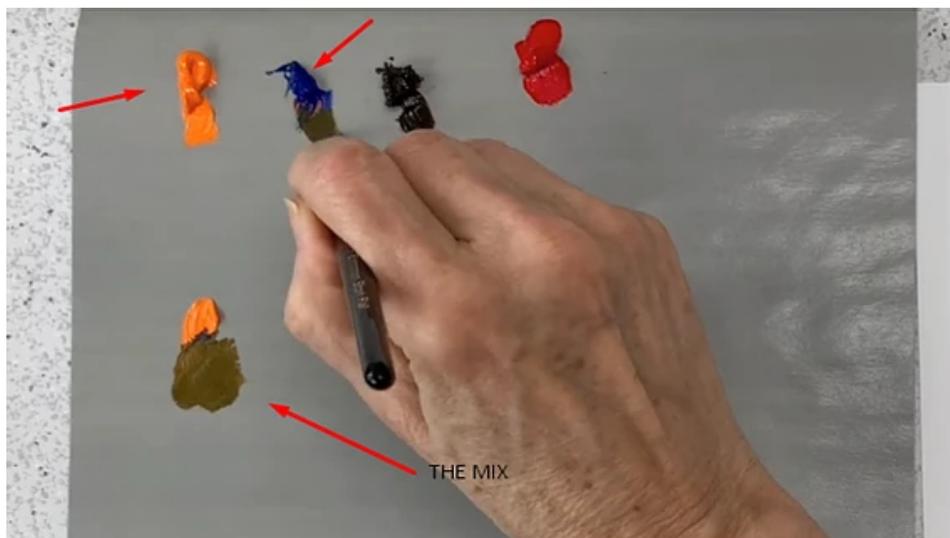
In the second part, we'll use Cadmium Orange as our main color and what we'll use to desaturate here is its complementary color, Cobalt Blue.

Complementary colors are two colors that are on the opposite sides of the color wheel.

As artists, knowing which colors complement the other is important and for the sake of this lesson, ***we use complementary colors to desaturate.***

Doing so will help with the process of matching colors since complementaries are naturally pleasing to the eye.

In this part of the lesson, we'll notice that Cadmium Orange is bright and warm. It has a medium value and is opaque. Cobalt Blue, being the complementary color of orange helps contain its brightness and warmth.



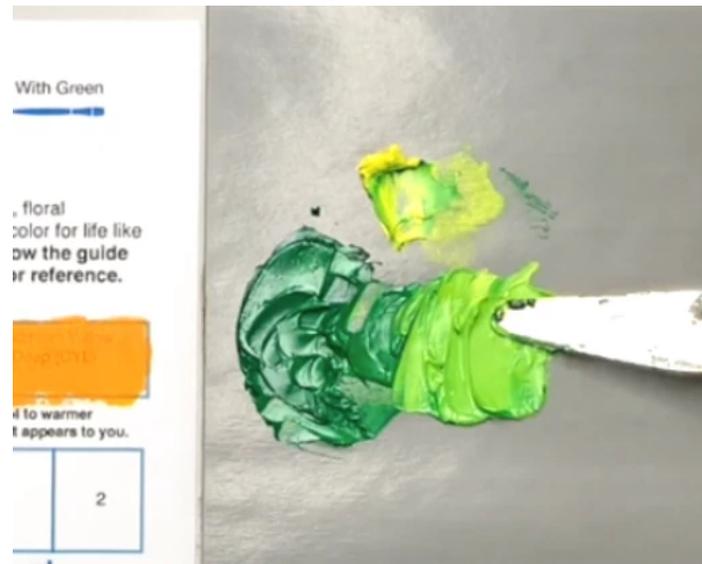
Part 3: Viridian

Viridian is very versatile and the only green I have on my palette .

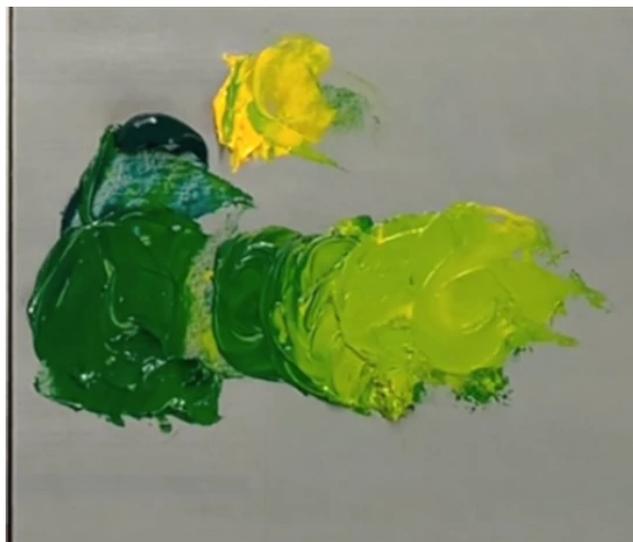
Yellow and green are great together because they are next to each other in the color wheel. Colors that are next to each other in the color wheel should have an analogous relationship. What that means is that those colors, when used together, create this soothing effect.

First step is to take a look at how different Yellows react to Viridian

1. *Cadmium Lemon Yellow* is a strong opaque yellow that, when mixed with cool greens like Viridian, make a Lime Green — a brighter, but not harsher, new color.



2. *Cadmium Yellow Light*. It's a very bright mix for Viridian. When combined together, it can make your greens warm and sunny.



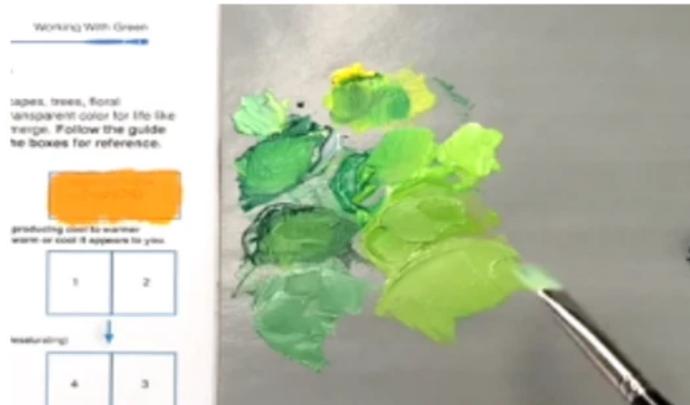
3. Cadmium Yellow Deep, an Orange-based yellow. This, when mixed with greens like Viridian, will give you that common leaf or tree-based color.

The next step is to now mix our new, natural-looking greens with Transparent Oxide Red.

Transparent Oxide Red is strong and functions similarly with Transparent-Oxide Brown. Both can go a long way and can make our greens have a warmer and more earthy tone.



Something to remember when using Transparent-Oxide Brown or Cadmium Red is that the amounts you use to desaturate colors depend on the saturation of the color itself.



We encourage you to experiment as much as you can with these colors and make color notes from time to time. Don't be afraid to play around on your palette and remember, no color mixture is absolute.

Step 5 - Use Color Temperature and People will Think you Know What you're Doing.

Studying and applying the rules and concepts of Color Temperature can be tricky. Get it wrong and you get a mediocre result. Get it right, and your work will be like one of the pros'.

What is Color Temperature?



It is the perception of warmth and coolness of a color. In other words, it's how our brains describe color.

When we think of color temperature, we think of how red looks warm or how blue looks cool. But only some of us think why that is.

It's not a product of the psychological reactions of human beings. Rather, leans more on the rules of Physics — to be more precise, the rules of light.

With that in mind, we should always consider the context of other colors when we determine temperature — we should always have a basis.

Color Temperature leans more on the Rules of Light. In other words, the primal basis for determining Color Temperature is the light-source.

Any object's physical presence has nothing to do with our vision. What determines what we see is the light reflecting on the objects — bouncing towards our retinas and ultimately processed by our brains.

Determining Color Temperature by Knowing the Light

Light can never be replicated. As painters, we can only go as far as to create illusions of light.

To determine Color temperature, we must know everything about our light-source. It's direction, general temperature, intensity etc.

Once we established how the light works — and how it affects our subjects, we can now determine the color temperature of the same. Once we've learned from the facts of our lights, we can use those facts as our "rules" of the setting.

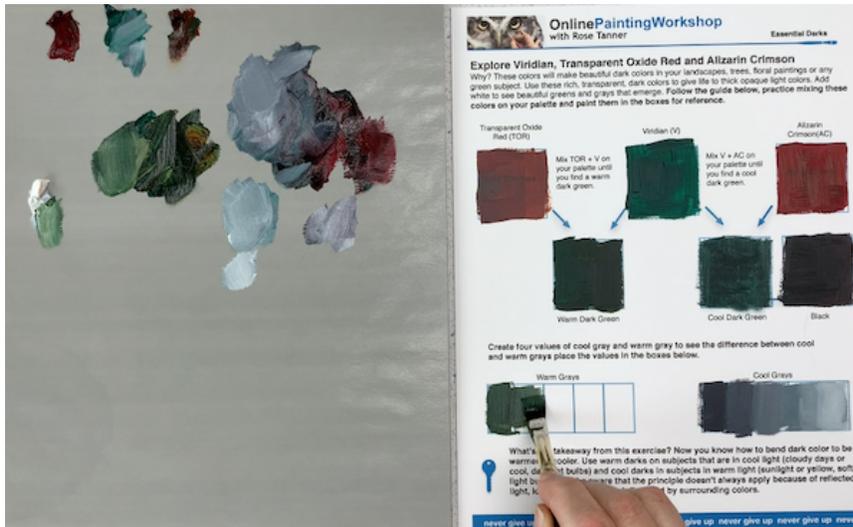
Here's a scenario:

If the light is radiating a warm kind of color, the shadows will, generally, be cooler. Why is that so? I can't tell you. It has something to do with the relationship between light and shadow.



Generally, surfaces that are in direct contact with the light tend to be warmer. And places where the shadow starts to gradually appear are cooler. Generally, warm lights produce cool shadows and cool lights produce warm shadows (there are exceptions to the rule.)

Lesson 5 in our comprehensive painting workshop provides us with templates that introduce color temperature to our already existing skill of observation and *value*.

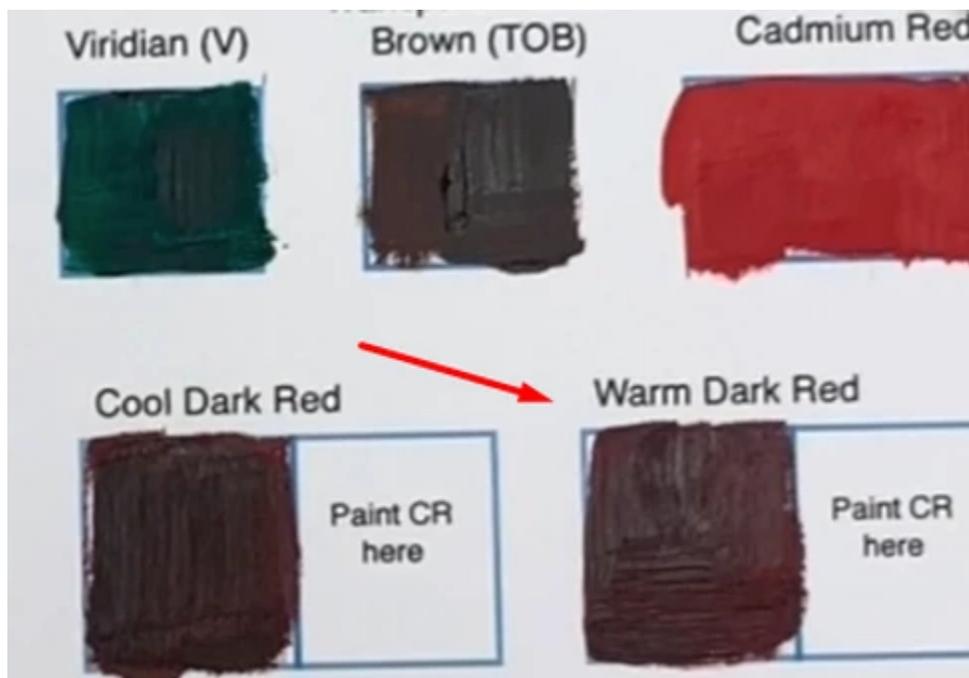


Here are some examples of what you'll find:

Alizarin Crimson.

It's a deep, transparent, cool, bluish red. If we mix Alizarin Crimson with Viridian, we make the red darker and cooler.

And if we take that same color, then add a little **Transparent-Oxide Brown**, we'll make it warmer, without making the Red that much darker.



Viridian

A cool bluish green that is very versatile but can look a little too unrealistic when not mixed with other colors.



When mixed with a little Transparent-Oxide Red, we can make the green darker and warmer. Or if we use the right amount of Alizarin Crimson, we can make the green darker and cooler.



And if we mix a lot of the Transparent-Oxide Red with the Viridian, we'll make a very beautiful and rich **black**



The next part of lesson 5 is the apple demonstration exercise.

This exercise is the process of painting a still-life like in the previous lessons, and we always encourage our students to delve in the process of painting still-lives because there is so much to learn just by paying attention to the smallest details.

The apple demonstration for Color Temperature

By making still-life, you'll know more about light and how it bounces around everywhere creating various complex changes in temperature and value.



Here's some of the key points of the apple exercise:

1. Draw before you paint.

Before we start painting, we should establish the general shape of our subjects. If we do so properly, we'll have an easier time shaping the flow of our process.

2. Know your light-source

This is probably the most important part. The light-source is what gives the colors their distinctive characteristics and at the same time, it creates shadows.



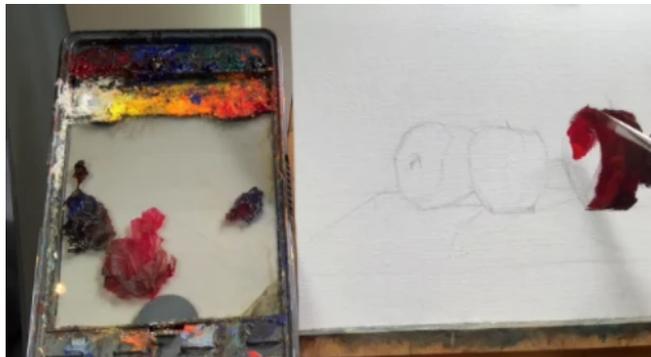
3. Start with the darkest darks first

Finding the darkest darks helps with value comparison, and ultimately, it can make your color-mixing easier. Build several areas of darker colors before adding the highlights.



4. Save your lights for last

Darks are substantially easier to correct than lights. By painting the darks first and restricting the use of your lightest lights, you are working more efficiently.



5. Take a Step Back and See if Your Colors are Accurate

Stepping back not only gives you a new perspective and the opportunity of having a break from the painting but more importantly, it gives you the opportunity to see something you can't from up close

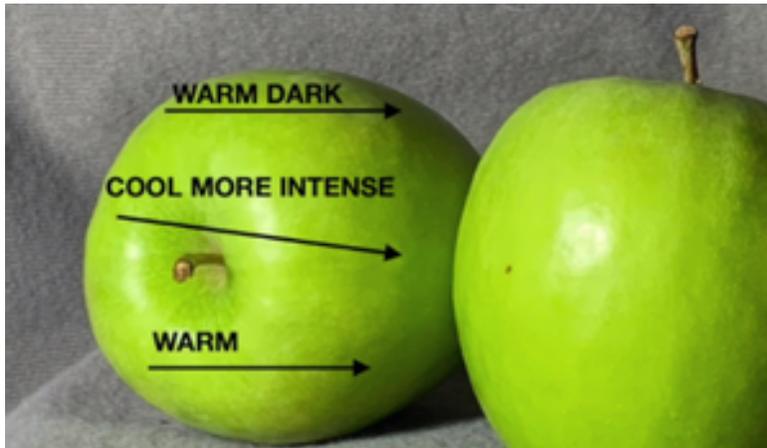


6. Blend the Colors

Using a clean fan brush, pull the dark colors into the lights. You'd want to keep the dark colors pure.

This step creates the illusion of seamless shadows. Remember, most of the time, realism means having seamless transitions.

7. Notice the Reflections and Subtle Details



Some details are harder to spot than others. However, most of the important details involve reflection and color change. So keep in mind when you're in the hunt for them.



Observe the influence of the subjects with each other; how light bounces from one surface to another creating nuanced changes in value and temperature.



8. Work the form and Refine the details

Time is scarce, I know. But the more time we put in refining our subject, the more realistic it will be. It's as simple as that. Reflections, value changes, color transitions and more. You'll find that the little details count. The parts make the whole.

The parts make the whole.



9. Lose Edges Into the Background

Never unintentionally leave an edge just sitting on the canvas. If an edge sticks out, the painting won't look realistic.

Painting still life will acquaint you with the inner workings of temperature. The more you pay attention to light and how it works in the real world, you'll have a better sense of vision when it comes to subtle changes of warmth. Especially when it comes to those colors within the colors.

Thank you for reading. I look forward to seeing you inside our Painting Masterclass if you would like an in-depth, step by step plan to build your skills and start creating realistic paintings.

<https://www.rosentanner.com/colormixingmasterclass>