

The Limited Colour Palettes Artists Can Use to Excel at Painting

Ingrid Christensen

<https://www.artsy.net>

Painters today have more pigments to choose from than any other artists in history. They can buy traditional, historical varieties that Rembrandt would recognize, such as siennas and ochres, or 20th-century innovations like phthalocyanines and quinacridones—pigments with an intensity that would have startled even the colour-loving Impressionists.

Despite this abundance, many artists and art educators endorse the use of a restricted “limited” palette as a way to develop coherent, harmonious, and personal paintings.

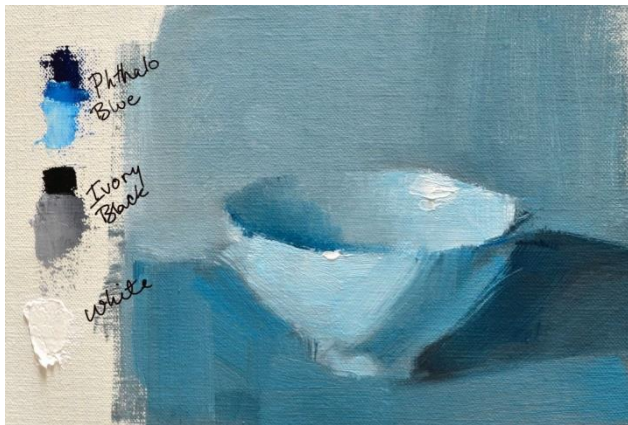
Monochromatic palettes

Limited palettes are great learning tools.

Students are often taught to paint in monochrome, using only a dark brown or black pigment, plus white. This allows them to focus on accurate shapes, degrees of light and dark—called “values” or “tones”—and paint application, without the additional complexity of colour. By mastering these austere palettes, students build a strong foundation for the later introduction of colour.



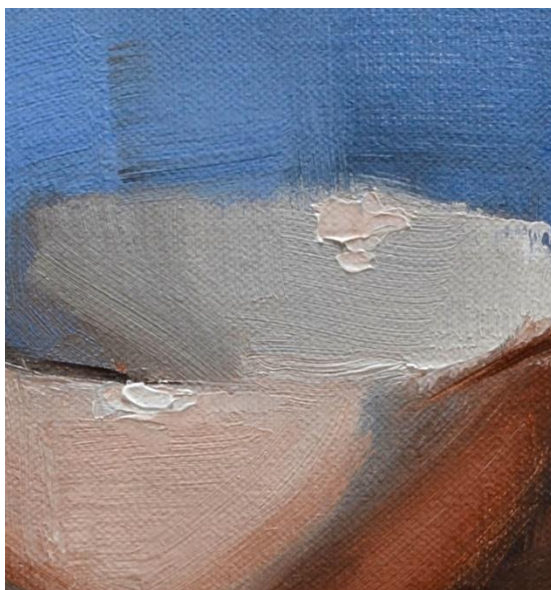
A more contemporary monochromatic approach involves using black and white, plus another colour. In this example, phthalocyanine blue is introduced to produce a work of tonal accuracy that transcends the academic flavour of a strict black-and-white exercise.



Palettes with one warm and one cool pigment
To add more versatility to their palettes, painters may choose to select one warm and one cool pigment, plus white. In this example, burnt sienna and ultramarine blue are mixed to create a full tonal range, as well as temperature variations from cool to warm. Colour temperature is a useful tool for creating the illusion of depth on the two-dimensional canvas.



Warm colours appear to come forward in a painting, while cool colours are recessive. This effect is visible at the inner and outer parts of the bowl. Both areas are greyed because they contain all three colours of the palette, and they are exactly the same value. Yet mixing a larger amount of burnt sienna into the front of the bowl results in a warm colour, while mixing more ultramarine into the inner bowl makes it cool.



Notice how the warmer mixture appears closer to the front of the picture plane, while the cooler colour recedes into the middle ground. This effect, added to the use of value changes, can create works that convey both form and space.



The Zorn palette

Limited palettes aren't just for beginner painters. Many professional artists limit the number of pigments that they work with. Perhaps the artist who is most well-known for doing this is

Anders Zorn, a Swedish painter active during the late 19th and early 20th centuries who developed a colour palette that bears his name. This self-portrait from 1896 was created with the four-color "Zorn palette," which you can also see him holding in the painting.



Anders Zorn, *Self-portrait with Model*, 1896. Courtesy of National museum.

Though scholars have debated the exact colours the artist used, the Zorn palette is often considered to be comprised of **yellow ochre, vermilion, ivory black, and white**. Some believe he used a cadmium red rather than vermilion; regardless, cadmium red light is a modern substitute for vermilion, which is toxic.

These four pigments are capable of making a full range of colour, despite the fact that the palette contains no blue. Ivory black's bluish undertone allows it to act as blue; it can be mixed with vermilion to create muted purples, and with yellow ochre to suggest green. The Zorn palette is also effective for creating rich dark colours and beautiful greys.



The Zorn palette results in subtle, tonal paintings, but it may not satisfy artists with a passion for colour. Even Zorn himself didn't use it exclusively.

Other limited palettes



Painters who want the potential for both bright colour and greyed colour can choose from many other limited palettes, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. For a broad range of colour, a simple palette made of saturated red, blue, and yellow pigments, plus white, is key. Whenever pigments are combined, they lose some chroma, so starting with high-chroma colours ensures that your mixtures will be intense.

This colour palette combines cadmium red light, ultramarine blue, and cadmium yellow light, plus white. As with the Zorn palette, it can make a version of every hue, but the saturation level is much higher.

Cadmium yellow light mixed with cadmium red light produces clean, high-chroma oranges; mixed with ultramarine, it results in saturated, slightly warm greens. The weakness of this palette is in the purples. It's excellent for depicting something like these weathered pavers, but incapable of painting the high-chroma purple flowers.



Substituting cool alizarin permanent for the warm cadmium red light results in high-chroma purples that could do justice to the blooms.

However, alizarin would alter the orange scale. Mixing this cool red with cadmium yellow light creates cool terra-cottas and siennas, rather than true orange.



Every three-color primary palette will have some weaknesses in colour rendering, and artists who want to be able to achieve pure purples, oranges, and greens will have to add colours to it. One way to address this weakness is by adding a single missing pigment, such as green or orange, or by choosing to use a six-colour split primary palette instead.



The six-colour palette contains warm and cool versions of each of the primaries—red, blue, and yellow. A sample palette may contain cadmium yellow and cadmium yellow light; ultramarine blue and phthalocyanine blue; and cadmium red light and alizarin permanent.

Charting the greens alone shows the broad range of hues—from warm olive to cool lime—that can be achieved with two yellows and two blues. No single green you purchase can achieve such variety.



A painter's palette is, ultimately, an expression of how they see the world and the colours that they love.

By exploring a variety of limited palettes from earthy to intense, painters can discover the combination of colours that best helps them convey their world view.