

Choosing Colors for Veil Paintings

As a general rule, we can develop a wonderful painting starting with a palette with as few as three colors. From the perspective of Light, Color and Darkness, we can choose a color for the light, a color for the darkness behind the light and a color for the darkness in front of the light.

Of course, it is also possible to do a painting that is entirely “behind the light,” i.e. in the various cool colors (turquoise, blue, indigo or violet) or essentially “in front of the light” in some of the various warm colors (yellow-green, yellow, orange, vermilion, carmine and magenta or earth tones). Viridian green, if it is used as the light, could be part of either of these palettes. These color schemes use “analogous” colors—colors next to each other on the color wheel.

We can think of color space with the help of the following schematic:

Moving out of darkness towards light:

Magenta –

Carmine –

Vermilion –

Orange –

Yellow –

Yellow-green –

Viridian Green – *Lightest, purest light*

Moving out of light towards darkness:

Turquoise –

Cobalt Blue –

Ultramarine Blue –

Indigo –

Violet –

Darkness, where the light eventually dies out.

The “light” can actually be any color between Magenta and Indigo, though it is more typically between Orange and Cobalt Blue. Viridian Green represents the purest unveiled light, but this light quickly changes to either turquoise, yellow-green or yellow as the atmosphere thickens, so we often do not observe it. For whatever color is chosen as the light, we will not have lighter colors than that in our painting (e.g. if our light is yellow, we will not have yellow-green or viridian in our painting; if our light is cobalt blue, indicating a darker atmosphere, we will not have turquoise or viridian, or yellow-green or yellow). Keep in mind that the earth colors (burnt sienna, brown madder, etc.) are options for less bright colors in front of light. We can also use gray as a neutral for the light or darkness behind the light – a fun experiment.

A color in front of the light will be a warm color of increasing darkness relative to our light; a color behind the light will be a cool color of increasing darkness relative to our light. Some examples include:

Color in front of light	Light	Color behind light
Cadmium Orange or Raw Umber	Turquoise	Indigo or Payne's Gray
Scarlet	Cobalt Blue	Violet
Carmine	Yellow	Ultramarine Blue
Burnt Sienna	Viridian	Violet

Once we have established our color atmosphere, we can also use extender colors to expand our palette, especially when bringing in form. For instance, to darken cobalt blue, we could choose ultramarine blue or indigo or even violet. We darken a color by choosing a color toward increased darkness, not by adding black. To lighten a color, we choose a color toward increasing light. For instance, to enhance or lighten burnt sienna toward the light, we could use orange or vermilion. To lighten orange, we could use a bit of yellow—a change of color towards increasing light. The addition of white or dilution of tint can be used for changes of value within a color sphere. We can also weave and mix our original colors to achieve a wide range of tones – these would be more outside the path of the light, on the sides of our painting. The purer colors appear more in the path of the light.

Remember that warm colors tend to be denser in the center and lighter toward the sides and cool colors tend to be denser on the periphery (away from the light) and lighter toward the light.

Other ways of choosing a color palette

Creating our color palette out of a warm and cool version of each primary color will help keep our colors harmonious when we mix them—and requires fewer tubes of paint! For example: warm blue - Ultramarine Blue, cool blue - Phthalo Blue; warm red – Pyrrol Orange, Cadmium Red; cool red - Alizarin Crimson, Quinacridone Rose; warm yellow – New Gamboge, Indian Yellow; cool yellow – Hansa Yellow Medium, Yellow Ochre. We can use other warm and cool versions of these colors as well. We might choose all warm or all cool versions of these colors for our painting to create a certain mood or mix them.

Other ways of choosing colors could include using complementary colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel; using split-complementary colors, where instead of one of the complements, we use the colors to either side of it; colors indicated by points of an equilateral triangle, square or rectangle within the color circle, etc.

We can feature one color in greater intensity and set it off with tones or neutrals from our other colors. Where the light strikes, the color tends to be warmer; shadows tend to be cooler.

Use variations in value to create a feeling of depth. The value structure of a painting is the key to having it work, which is why doing a light/darkness or monochromatic study to begin with to identify the light, mid-light, mid-dark and dark values is a great help. Colors get cooler and lighter in the distance, since we look through so much lit up air across the horizon. Colors in the foreground tend to be warmer and darker, even silhouetted, often with lit up edges toward the light. If the darkness (substance) in front of the light is very thin, it can be brilliantly lit up from behind, like the silver lining of a dark cloud, and become even lighter than the background. Focus on light/dark or color areas, not objects, initially. Remember, the form emerges out of the color in veil painting, not the other way around.