

What Color Palette Should I Choose for My Painting?

By Susan Schmidt

Choosing colors for a painting is both an art and a science. When you understand a few color-theory basics, test combinations, and think about the mood you want to create, you can build a palette that feels intentional and harmonious. Explore, take notes, and trust your instincts as you develop your own approach.

Understanding Color Theory

Color wheel basics

Get comfortable with the color wheel—primary colors (red, blue, yellow), secondary colors (green, orange, purple), and tertiary colors (mixes of a primary and a secondary). This foundation makes it easier to predict how colors will interact.

Color schemes

Use a simple scheme to create unity and contrast. Common options include:

- **Analogous:** Colors next to each other on the wheel for gentle contrast (e.g., blue, blue-green, green).
- **Complementary:** Colors opposite each other for high contrast and energy (e.g., red and green).
- **Triadic:** Three colors evenly spaced around the wheel for a balanced but lively palette.

Practical Tips for Color Selection

- **Set up your palette:** Arrange paints in a consistent order (many artists go light to dark—white, yellows, oranges, reds, purples, blues, greens). A repeatable layout helps you mix faster and avoid muddy color.
- **Mix more than you buy:** Use tube colors as starting points, then mix to match what you see. Start with a simple mix (e.g., yellow + blue for green), then nudge it warmer or cooler as needed.

The Psychological Impact of Warm and Cool Colors

Artists use warm and cool colors to shape mood and focus. Warm colors—reds, oranges, and yellows—often feel energetic or inviting. They can make areas advance visually and help draw attention to focal points. A small warm accent inside a mostly cool painting can be an easy way to create emphasis.

Cool colors—blues, greens, and purples—tend to feel calm or reflective. They can make areas recede, suggest space, and support quieter, more contemplative scenes.

Further reading: [The Science of Color: How Artists Use Color Theory to Evoke Emotion](#)

Challenge: Critique your color choices.

- 1) What scheme am I using (analogous, complementary, triadic, etc.)—and where did I deviate on purpose?
- 2) What mood am I aiming for, and do my color choices communicate it (quiet, bright, tense, warm, cool)?
- 3) Do the colors feel harmonious overall (controlled contrast, consistent values, no accidental clashes)?
- 4) What worked best, and what one change will I try next time (shift temperature, simplify the palette, increase/decrease contrast)?



Water Lilies by Claude Monet



Red Hills and Bones by Georgia O'Keeffe