

RED

IS NOT A PRIMARY COLOUR

a colour-mixing mini-course



I used to think I could get away with knowing only the basics of colour to create great paintings, but you know where that got me?

Avoiding colour altogether.

I painted so rarely that when I finally broke out the colours, I only used them straight from the tube. There is, of course, nothing wrong with tube colours, but without really knowing what I was doing, I felt powerless when it came time to mix.

At first, colour-mixing can feel like a pretty daunting task, especially when you have a vision for the perfect colour palette and no idea where to begin. With the right information and some practice, you could be on your way to mixing colours like never before!

Now to address the elephant in the room: **Red** isn't a primary colour?

I know that as a child we are taught about the colour wheel and primary colours. We are taught that RED, YELLOW, and BLUE are our primaries because they just simply can't be mixed or made from other colours. While that seems reasonable, I assure you this is a simplistic explanation of a very complicated and scientific situation. We will talk more about that later in this guide.

For now, here is what you'll get from this rad guide:

- An explanation of the language of colour
- An understanding of the primary colours and the myths about red, yellow, and blue
- An introduction to choosing your own palette based on your personal colour style
- An explanation of how to mix complimentary colours
- A simple guide to buying paint!

Read on for my personal tips to mix well, save money, and waste less!

The language of color is a fascinating aspect of art that encompasses various elements, including paint names, origins, pigments, binders, and lightfastness. Understanding these aspects of paint will help you understand what to shop for and how to use your paint. You'll also get a better understanding of what to expect from your paints too!

- 1. Paint Names and Origins:** Paint names are often derived from the pigments used to create them or from historical origins. For example, colors like "Cadmium Red" or "Ultramarine Blue" get their names from the pigments cadmium sulfide and sodium aluminum sulfosilicate, respectively. Some paint names, such as "Burnt Sienna" or "Raw Umber," originate from natural earth pigments found in specific regions.
 - 2. Pigments:** Pigments are finely ground particles that give paint its color. They can be derived from various sources, including minerals, plants, animals, or synthetic chemicals. Pigments possess unique properties that affect their appearance, such as transparency, opacity, and color intensity. For instance, the pigment titanium dioxide produces a highly opaque white, while phthalo blue is known for its intense, transparent blue hue.
 - 3. Binders:** Binders are the substances that hold pigments together and allow them to adhere to surfaces. Common binders include oil, acrylic, watercolor gum arabic, and egg tempera. Each binder offers distinct characteristics and properties, influencing the handling, drying time, and texture of the paint. For instance, oil paints provide a rich, buttery texture and longer drying time, while acrylics dry quickly and offer versatility.
 - 4. Lightfastness:** Lightfastness refers to the resistance of a color to fading or changing when exposed to light. Certain pigments are more susceptible to fading over time, especially when exposed to direct sunlight or harsh environmental conditions. Lightfastness ratings are indicated on paint tubes or labels, ranging from excellent (indicated as "I" or "++++") to poor (indicated as "V" or "----"). Understanding the lightfastness of pigments helps artists select colors that will maintain their vibrancy and integrity over time.
-

Why do these things matter to an artist? Understanding the language of color and its components is crucial for artists for several reasons:

- **Expressing Intention:** By knowing the characteristics of different pigments, artists can select colors that best represent their artistic vision. They can choose specific hues, opacities, or textures to convey emotions, atmospheres, or conceptual ideas effectively.
- **Color Mixing:** Knowledge of pigments enables artists to create desired colors through color mixing. Understanding the properties of primary and secondary colors allows for greater control and precision when achieving specific color harmonies. It's also important to understand specific language that can affect your mixing. For example, the word **hue** is used in paint to tell you that this particular paint is a blend of other pigments to imitate the label colour, but each pigment used in that paint can affect your mixing if you're not familiar with them.
- **Material Selection:** Familiarity with binders helps artists select the appropriate medium that suits their style, desired effects, and working preferences. Each binder offers unique qualities that affect application techniques, drying times, and the overall look and feel of the artwork. For example, an alkyd binder in oil paints is a resin, which requires the use of solvents in cleaning and is therefore not appropriate for someone with a solvent-free oil painting practice.
- **Preservation and Conservation:** Awareness of lightfastness ratings is essential for artists who want their artwork to last for generations. By using pigments with higher lightfastness, artists can ensure that their creations maintain their original vibrancy and colors over time, preserving the integrity of their work.

Why should you care about any of this?

It's completely fine to make art without worrying about any of these things, but the more you learn about the tools you are using, the more informed a decision you'll make when things go wrong and it's time to find a solution!

In school our first introduction to colour is learning to identify the three primary colours: Red, Blue, and yellow! And then we learn that these colours are primaries because we use them to make every other colour! WOW!

It is important for us to understand that this is a very limiting and traditional way of thinking about colour. This model is based on ancient understanding of colour, changed later by the scientific understanding of light and colour, which produced the concept of the RGB additive colour model. The additive model uses green instead of yellow (think RGB computers, LED lights, etc.). The additive model works by adding light together to create different colours, which is primarily used in computers and technology.

Contemporary understandings of colour understand that, depending on the context of mixing, different models are necessary. While the CMYK model is common in printers and digital work that is translated to print items, it is still a relatively new concept in paint mixing because there are so many bottles of paint that you can buy, so many artists never even learn to mix colours!



Subtractive Colour Model

As artists, it makes vastly more sense to use a subtractive colour model. Let's think of printers, where ink cartridges are tri-colour (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow). When you mix these colours together, they create black. This is because the primary colors in this model work by subtracting wavelengths of light and absorbing certain colors to create different colors, which is how paints and dyes work.

When translating this model to paint-mixing, we use cyan, magenta, and yellow paints to create all of the colours we need, but we also add white, and depending on your paints, quality, and other factors, there are a number of other additions you can make to get the colours you want. CMYK is really a starting point for your mixing.

Read on for my advice for colour mixing!

Choosing the paint colors for your painting palette as an artist is a personal and creative process. While there are no hard and fast rules, here are some steps and considerations that can help you make informed decisions:

1. **Start with a Limited Palette:** My recommendations for a starting palette in CMYK are: cobalt turquoise, quinacridone magenta, and hansa yellow medium, as well as lamp black and titanium white. These colours offer the least amount of toxicity while being more pure-pigmented paints and will be the easiest to control with colour-mixing. I recommend adding an ultramarine blue to this palette, as well as a vermilion red if you are painting a lot of earth tones. Please keep in mind learning to mix with a CMYK palette is a learning curve for most, but it can give you a lot of control over your colours and allow you to limit how many different tubes of paint you need to buy.
2. **Consider Your Subject and Style:** Think about the subject matter you plan to paint and the mood or atmosphere you want to convey. Different subjects may require different color schemes. For example, a portrait or landscape artist might want to focus on lots of earth tones, while a surrealist painting like myself may want to use high-chroma bright colours.
3. **Experiment and Explore:** Don't be afraid to experiment with different colors and combinations. Play with complementary or analogous color schemes to create harmonious or vibrant effects. Test out new colors or mixtures on a palette or small swatches to see how they interact and whether they align with your artistic vision.
4. **Expand Your Palette Over Time:** As you gain experience and confidence, you can expand your palette by adding additional colors that suit your artistic style and preferences. This allows for more flexibility and the ability to achieve specific effects or color harmonies.
5. **Quality and Lightfastness:** Don't be afraid to invest in higher quality materials at the beginning. Lots of artists will say its not necessary but if colour-mixing is something you'd like to be an expert in, you **need good supplies!**

Remember, color selection is a personal journey, and there are no strict rules. Over time, you will develop your own unique palette based on your artistic vision and preferences. Experiment, explore, and trust your instincts as you navigate the world of color.

Here are my tips for buying paint to keep you from feeling lost at the art store:

- Plan to buy a limited palette. Find an artist whose colour schemes you love and find out what their basic palette is. If they use a ton of different paints, try to figure out if they're using a split-primary palette (warm and cool of Red, Yellow, and Blue) or a CMYK, or something completely different. Use your new-found skills to convert their palette into something simple and start there.
- Learn the names of paint! Learn the language used like words that describe where pigments come from (cadmium, cobalt, cerulean, Naples yellow, etc.), words like hue that tell you about the purity of the colour, lightfastness and toxicity, and pigment sources (natural, synthetic, animal or plant-based).
- Be open to trying things that you may not end up liking. If smaller bottles are available, start there and move up to large tubes once you've committed.
- Don't cheap out on quality. Cheap out on the number of paints you buy instead. Cheaper quality paint will frustrate you, while less paint tubes will only sharpen your colour-mixing skills.
- Don't commit to a brand unless it's the best option for you! You can mix brands, just don't mix quality (and of course don't mix types of paint!).
- Buy a good palette knife for mixing oils and acrylics. It will save your brushes!



Thanks for learning with me!

If you want to know more about mixing colour,
check out my other courses here:

www.julilyart.com
