

The Artists Magazine

Special Section

Oil Skills Handbook

This article is the unedited version as submitted to the Artist's Magazine before its publication in the August 2002 issue.

Mixing Color (Keeping your color clean)

By Paul W. McCormack

Relativity

Delacroix said something to the effect that, "I could paint the flesh of Venus with mud as long as I can choose my own Background." This means the definition of mud is a very relative term. A particular note of color may be dull, gray or muddy in appearance simply because of the intensity or chroma of the surrounding colors. When you approach your painting and apply that all-important first initial stroke of color on to the canvas your next stroke must be relative to the first in terms of value and color. The following consecutive strokes must then relate to the previous.



Rabbi Elliott T. Spar
Oil On linen, 23" x 18"

The use of too many colors

Another very common reason why someone ends up with muddy color is that they simply are trying to work with too many colors to achieve one single note of color. As soon as two colors are mixed together the chroma or intensity of that color begins to diminish, by adding a third color even more so. Excluding black and white, if you need more than 3 tube colors to achieve one particular note of color you may want to rethink your palette and plan of attack.

Too much blending

When applying paint to your canvas, lay stroke next to stroke and let it be, blend only the edge in between if necessary. Too much blending and pushing your paint around on the canvas will certainly dull those initial strokes of color. Try to give more thought to each and every brush stroke and note of color that you apply to your canvas.

Not using enough brushes

When modeling form on an object use a different brush for each major color and value change that you apply to your canvas. For example, when working the transition from light to dark on the forehead of my subject in a portrait, I would be using one brush for my light, one for my halftone and one for the dark. On the average I use about 10 to 15 brushes when working in any given session. By using only one brush your mixtures will undoubtedly begin to dull as they slowly work their way into each other on the palette. Although this is not the primary reason for working in this fashion, it will help in keeping your colors clean on your canvas as well as your palette.

Transitions

The color of an object is at its highest intensity right before it turns into shadow. Working the color transition from your light into shadow can easily and quickly dull your halftones. A common mistake is placing that stroke of color in the light right next to that stroke of shadow color and blending the two together. It is necessary to have that third note of color in between the two.



Keeping it clean altogether

Here are some very simple but important things that should be worked into your everyday painting routine. Keep the mixing area of your palette clean, I will clean off areas of my palette several times through out the day. Besides giving your brushes a proper cleaning at the end of the day try to keep your brushes relatively clean as you're working. As you reuse your brushes through out the days painting session change the turpentine in your palette cup when it becomes too murky.

A traditional Palette (keeping it simple)

My palette consists of only 15 colors plus white. With this I can mix just about any color under the sun. Although it can be fun to experience with different colors and brands of paint it is wise to use a simple palette especially as a student. By doing this you will be more likely to have a better understanding of what your colors can actually do. By using the same palette over and over I can instinctively mix any color that I see.

It is also very important to have all of your colors laid out on your palette at all times. The order of the colors is not important as long as they are in the same spot every time. If your palette is not fully laid out with fresh paint you may end up substituting one color for another and therefore creating notes of false color.

The Palette

Winsor & Newton Artists Oil Colors

Flake White no.2
French Naples Yellow (Holbien)
Cadmium Yellow Pale
Yellow Ochre
Raw Sienna
Cadmium Orange
Cadmium Red Light
Alizarin Crimson

Ivory Black
Burnt Sienna
Raw Umber
French Ultramarine Blue
Cobalt Blue
Cerulean Blue
Viridian Green
Sap Green

