

Use of a Set Palette in Realist Painting

Art Club Demonstration by Christian Kolupski

MOST pre-20th century realist painters controlled their color by painting from a set, or closed, palette. They selected only the pigments they needed to meet the demands of their current picture. They did not complicate their process by putting out more hues or higher chroma than their picture required. This saved them money and, more importantly, labor.

Premixing Color. Artists often took the additional step of creating ranges of values for their tube colors before starting their painting. Portrait artists created ranges of basic flesh tones. These premixed colors had enough range to cover the majority of hue and chroma variations of flesh. As a rule, they did not paint directly from paint as it came from the tube.

Color Strings. A modern application of these principles is to use “color strings.” In portraiture, three strings are premixed: gray, red and yellow. These split the general local color of flesh into three neutralized “primary” positions: neutralized red, neutralized yellow and neutralized blue (gray). This gamut is wide enough to encompass most variation evident in the model, as nose differs from cheek differs from forehead, etc. All three strings hold the same value steps as they move from dark to light.

Maintain Hue and Chroma. Color strings are not just a starting color plus white, plus white, and plus white. Instead, switch to higher chroma tube colors in higher value tints. This compensates for the dulling effect of the higher proportion of white. Mix each value step to hold the same hue and chroma throughout the entire color string.

	Value 2	Value 4	Value 6	Value 8	Value 9
BLUE STRING	Black + touch white	Black + more white	Black + more white	Black + more white	White + touch black
RED STRING	Alizarin + touch black / white	Venetian red + black / white	Venetian red + white	Venetian red + cad red light + white	White + touch Cad red light
YELLOW STRING	Burnt umber + yellow ocher + black	Yellow ocher + Burnt umber	Yellow ocher + touch white	Yellow ocher + more white	White + touch Cad yellow medium

The three color strings above are sufficient to describe 95% of the hue and chroma shifts visible in any model in most lighting. Such a palette is arranged according to the rule, rather than the exception. When the color strings cannot reach a particular hue, supplement them with higher chroma tube colors.

Portrait Demonstration. A practical method for “alla-prima” portraiture is to block-in the darks, then the halftones, and end in the lights. Start with a general block-in of the shadow mass. This is a middle dark, matched to the model’s shadow color. Spread the paint thin and flat so that there is little variation; shadow is the absence of light and texture. Ignore smaller accents inside the shadow mass. Aim to see only the big shape of the entire shadow mass.

Paint Tiles. After the block-in, “tile-in” the halftones to duplicate the effect of the fall of light across form. Do this by painting small increments of ascending values that slightly overlap, one into the other, creating smooth value transitions. Think of these as stairs stepping gradually into the light.

Start by tiling-in the lowest halftone value by painting it slightly into the edge of the shadow, but pushing outward into the lights. Then tile-in the next value to slightly overlap the previous tile, pushing further into the light. Intermix between the three strings to describe color variations you see. Continue the process through the halftones and into the lights, ending at the highest values.

Realist Painting Course. The principles described above are developed and expanded upon within the Realist Painting Course, taught by Christian Kolupski at his Rochester, NY studio. Classes are currently held Wednesday evenings at 6:00 and Thursday mornings at 9:30. **Two additional classes of the Realist Painting Course will begin on February 2, 2010: Tuesday mornings: 9:30 am –12:30 pm and Tuesday evenings: 6:00 pm –9:00 pm.**