



NWWS AZR November 2024

Using a Limited Palette

A limited palette generally consists of 3-6 colors (not including black and white). The selected colors in a limited palette would be the only colors used in a single painting. Typically, artists choose one or two primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and mix their secondary and tertiary colors (green, purple, orange; green-blue, green-yellow, purple-blue, purple-red, orange-red, orange-yellow, etc.) from those chosen primaries. An artist known for using a limited palette was Leonard Zorn (1860-1920). He created his famous Zorn palette using Cadmium Red, Yellow Ochre, black, and Titanium White. Black was considered his stand-in for blue. Admittedly, his paintings from this palette were quite muted, but a wide variety of colors were created from his palette.

Why do we choose to limit a palette? By selecting a red, yellow, blue, and mixing all the other colors, you create harmony. It hones your eye to see subtlety in color mixes; it creates glowing neutrals; in each part of the painting, there is usually some part of one or more of the primary colors.

Many artists use the same three primary colors for each painting, adding another here and there as needed. Other artists select (and vary) specific limited palettes for each painting, depending on that painting's mood or focus.

Consider the following when selecting your limited palette for your painting(s). If you choose a primary red, yellow, and blue, you should be able to reasonably mix all secondary colors. However, most colors straight from the tube will have a bias to either side of the color chart. For example, one yellow might have a warmer bias, leaning more towards orange (ex. New Gamboge), and another might have a cooler bias, leaning towards green (ex. Lemon Yellow). [Daniel Smith's Interactive Color Map](#) will help you see where each tube color lies in relation to the primary colors and each other. In selecting your limited palette, be sure you can mix your most important color to your desired liking by selecting the appropriate red, yellow, and blue. The red, yellow, and blue you select will be mingled to create each of your colors. Your red could, conceivably, be Burnt Sienna, or Red Scarlet, Cadmium Red, Pyrrol Red, Quin Rose, or Indian Red. Make a test chart with the major blends before deciding. Use the color chart to help decide what mixes will create your most important color.

Sometimes, I add another color or two. I love to add Quin Burnt Orange, as it seems to be a nice addition to most paintings. I always mix it with my other chosen colors. In addition, make sure you can get to a dark value. You may need to select an additional color such as Indigo to get to a dark value.

Submit a painting using a limited palette of red, yellow, and blue. Let me know what colors you chose in your palette. Mix all your neutrals and all your secondary/tertiary colors from your chosen red, yellow, and blue.

Most importantly, have FUN!

Sarah