

Color

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Artists have a wide variety of tools available to use when creating artwork. Color is an excellent element of composition artists can use to affect the overall feel of a work of art. In this lesson, you will learn about:



BIG IDEA

Color is an important element of composition and a tool used by artists to enhance their artwork.

1. Primary vs. Secondary Colors

This lesson explores pigment-based colors as opposed to the color spectrum of white light. This is important to note, as the primary colors for pigments are different than the primary colors of light, which can sometimes introduce a bit of confusion.

For pigments, the **primary colors** are blue, red, and yellow. These basic colors, along with white and black, can be combined to create an infinite number of colors by adjusting the type of color as well as the amount of color.

Secondary colors are those colors that are created by combining equal amounts of the basic primary colors. Blue plus red creates purple. Blue plus yellow creates green. Red plus yellow creates orange. Purple, green, and orange are secondary colors because they can only be created by combining primary colors.



TERMS TO KNOW

Primary Colors

Red, yellow, blue.

Secondary Colors

Orange, green, purple—the colors made by specific combinations of primary colors.

2. Complementary Colors

The **color wheel** is a useful reference tool that helps artists identify complementary colors, those colors that are of an opposite **hue**. If you look at the color wheel, every color's complementary color is directly across from it.

Take a look at the color wheel below. Take note of the colors directly across from each color. These are complementary colors:



➞ EXAMPLE Yellow's complementary color is purple, red's complementary color is green, and blue's complementary color is orange.



Tiles on the exterior of the Agha Borzogh Mosque

Iran

Consider the use of complementary colors in these tiles decorating the exterior of the Agha Borzogh Mosque in Iran. Inside the pointed arch, green leaves and red flowers use complementary colors to create a

harmonious composition, while elsewhere the composition emphasizes blue and yellow. Some of these colors are not directly across each other on the color wheel, but artists often improvise and do not use colors that are exact opposites.



TERMS TO KNOW

Color Wheel

The arrangement of prismatic colors on a circle so that complementary colors are across from each other.

Hue

The types of color—blue, green, red—are all different hues.

3. Color Value vs. Color Saturation

The amount of black added to a color is called color **value**. If you started with the secondary colors of orange, green, and purple and added a dollop of black to each, you would see them darkening a bit. The amount of white added to a color is called color **saturation**, or intensity. When color saturation is used, colors are not only lightened a bit but seem to “pop” more.

IN CONTEXT

Below are examples of color value and color saturation.

First, color value. When a small amount of black is added to the colors here in the image, the colors darken. Here you can see the black has been added to the bottom row of colors.

Color Value





José Clemente Orozco

La Gran Legislación Revolucionaria Mexicana y la Abolición de la Esclavitud (The Great Legislation of the Mexican Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery)

Mural located at the Palacio de Gobierno, Guadalajara

1949

This mural by the Mexican muralist Orozco uses low-value colors. How does the use of color in this work influence the overall mood of the work? Next, color saturation. When a small amount of white is added to the colors in the image, the colors lighten. Here you can see the white has been added to the top row of colors. Notice how colors are not only lightened a bit but seem to pop a bit more off the screen as their intensity has increased.

Color Saturation/Intensity



Claude Monet

Waterloo Bridge

1901

Oil on canvas

This painting by Monet uses colors that have low intensity, which are more effective for showing the effect of the angle of the sun, fog, and even haze and pollution on the view of Waterloo Bridge. You might also notice the use of complementary colors in this composition.



TERMS TO KNOW

Value

The amount of black added to a color.

Saturation/Intensity

The intensity of a color is dependent on the amount of white added. Lavender is a low-intensity shade of purple.

4. Hot Colors vs. Cool Colors

Hot colors refer to colors in which yellow and red are the most dominant. On the other hand, **cool colors** are colors in which blue is the dominant color.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look below at this painting of a flower by Georgia O'Keeffe. Red is clearly the dominant color. Ask yourself the following questions as you observe the painting:

- How does this choice of color affect the feel of the painting?
- How would the feeling change if the dominant color were blue or green?



Georgia O'Keeffe

Red Canna

1923

Oil on canvas

Now, compare the above painting to the painting below, which is an example of Pablo Picasso's Blue Period paintings. These are excellent examples of how an artist uses color to evoke a particular mood. Ask yourself the following questions as you observe the painting:

- How does this choice of color affect the feel of the painting?
- How would the feeling change if it was in a different color, such as pink or hot pink?



Cool Colors

Pablo Picasso

The Old Guitarist



DID YOU KNOW

Picasso's Blue Period was a consequence of some upheaval in the artist's personal life, including the death of a friend, a bout of depression, and changes in his political ideology. Now the choice of color enhances the subject matter, which usually consisted of solitary figures and/or depictions of the poor.



TERMS TO KNOW

Hot Colors

Colors in which yellow and red are dominant.

Cool Colors

Colors in which blue is dominant.



SUMMARY

Artists attempt to enhance their artwork in many ways. One element of composition that is an excellent tool for artists to use is color. In this lesson, you learned about **primary vs. secondary colors**. The primary colors are blue, red, and yellow. The secondary colors are those colors that are created by combining equal amounts of the basic primary colors. Mixing equal amounts of blue and red, for example, creates purple.

Complementary colors are those colors that are of opposite hue. These can be found directly across from each other on the color wheel. You learned about **color value vs. color saturation**. Remember that color value is defined by the amount of black added to a color, and color saturation is defined by the amount of white added. Choosing one over the other will darken (color value) or lighten (color saturation) the color.

Finally, you learned about **hot colors vs. cool colors**. In hot colors, yellow and red are dominant. In cool colors, blue is dominant.

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [The Haystacks](#) | Author: Vincent Van Gogh | License: Public Domain
- [The Old Guitarist](#) | Author: Pablo Picasso | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

Color Wheel

The arrangement of prismatic colors on a circle so that complementary colors are across from each other.

Cool Colors

Colors in which blue is dominant.

Hot Colors

Colors in which yellow and red are dominant.

Hue

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