

# COLOUR MADE SIMPLE

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR NEW ARTISTS



# COLOUR THEORY

As a beginner, it can feel overwhelming – all those names, wheels, and rules – but at its core, colour theory is simply a set of tools to help you paint with more confidence and clarity. Learn a few simple principles, and suddenly colour won't feel so mysterious – it'll start making sense,



## What is Colour Theory, and Why Does It Matter?

Colour theory is the foundation for how we use and understand colour in art. It helps you choose colours that work well together, create mood, and bring harmony or contrast to your paintings.

## Does Colour Theory Apply to All Painting Mediums?

Yes – the core principles of colour theory apply whether you're working with watercolours, acrylics, or oils. Concepts like the colour wheel, primary and secondary colours, complementary pairs, hue, saturation, and value are universal across all visual art.

However, the way colours behave and are applied differs between mediums due to their unique properties.

# HUE, VALUE, TINT, TONE & SHADE – WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

**Hue** is the pure form of a colour (eg. Red, Blue Yellow). We can change a colours 'hue' by adding another colour. Adding a liitle red to yellow will create an orange hue.

**Value** is the lightness or darkness of a colour. We can change its value (lightness or darkness) by adding white or black.

**Tint** is a colour + white

**Tone** is a colour + grey

**Shade** is a colour + black

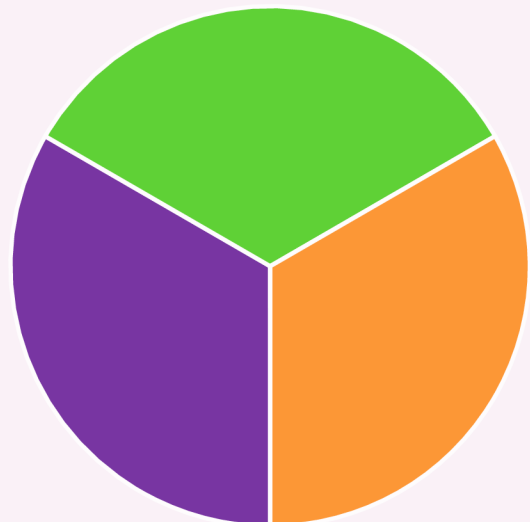
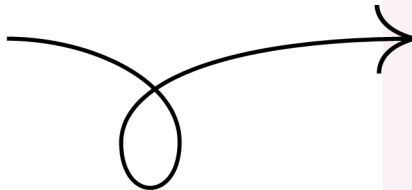


# PRIMARY, SECONDARY & TERTIARY COLOURS

In theory all colours derive from the three **primary** colours, red, yellow and blue.

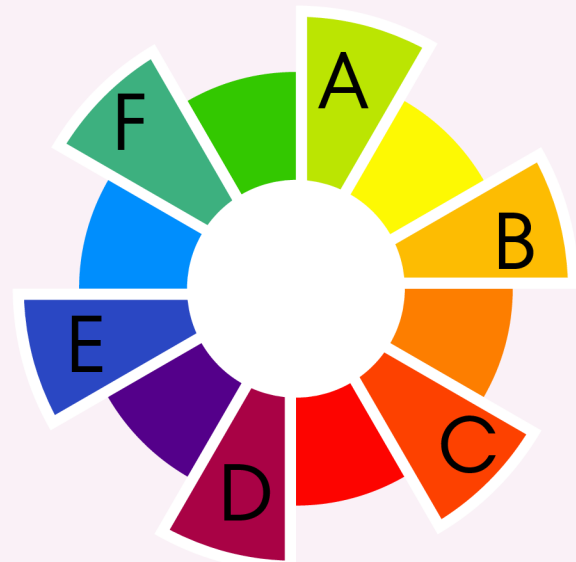


The three **secondary** colours, orange, green and violet are the results of mixing the primary colours, so that red & yellow make orange, yellow & blue make green, and red & blue make violet.



A **tertiary** colour is made by mixing equal amounts of a primary colour and a secondary colour together. There are six tertiary colours. On the colour wheel, they sit between the primary and secondary colour.

- A - Yellow-Green
- B - Yellow-Orange
- C - Red-Orange
- D - Red-Purple
- E - Blue-Purple
- F - Blue-Green



# WARM & COOL COLOURS

The twelve part colour wheel can be split in half into a section of six warm colours and a section of six cool colours.



## Warm colours

- Red
- Red-orange
- Orange
- Yellow-orange
- Yellow
- Yellow-Green

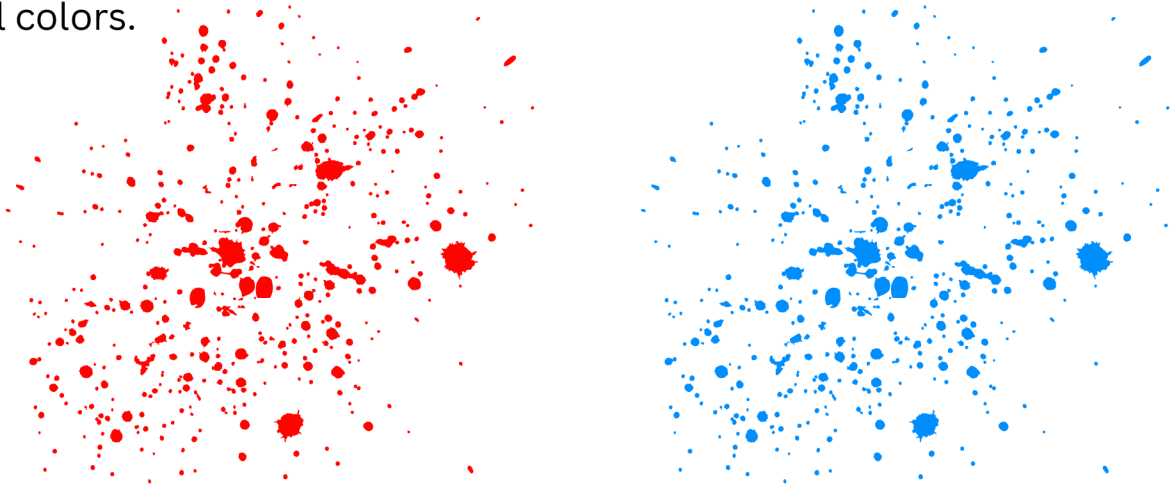
## Cool colours

- Green
- Blue-Green
- Blue
- Blue-Purple
- Purple
- Red-Purple

# WARM & COOL COLOURS EXPLAINED

**Warm Colors:** Generally, reds, oranges, and yellows are considered warm.

**Cool Colors:** Blues, greens, and purples are typically categorized as cool colors.



## Why Warm & Cool Colours Matter in Painting

The use of warm and cool colours plays a key role in shaping a painting's mood, depth, and emotional impact.

**Mood & Atmosphere:** Warm colours bring energy and vibrancy; cool colours create calm and serenity.

**Depth & Dimension:** Warm colours appear to come forward, while cool colours recede – helping create a sense of space.

**Focal Points:** Warm hues naturally draw the eye, making them ideal for highlighting key areas.

**Harmony & Balance:** Understanding warm vs. cool relationships helps you build cohesive, visually interesting palettes.

**Emotional Impact:** Colour choices influence how your painting feels – from joyful and lively to reflective and quiet.

# COMPLEMENTARY COLOURS

## Understanding Complementary Colours

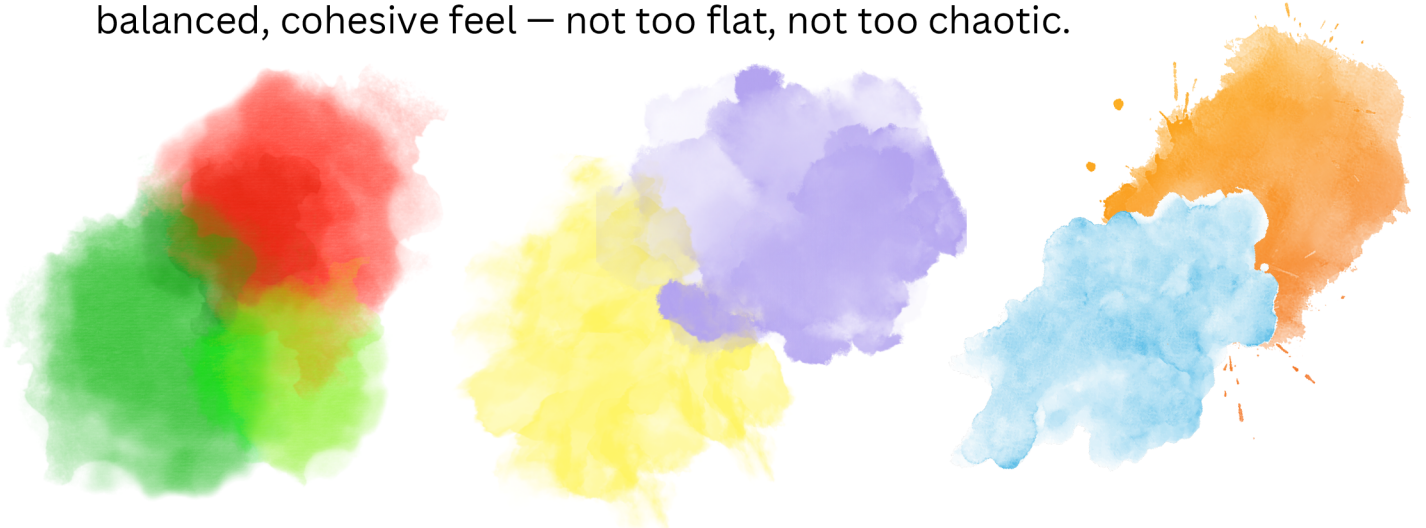
Complementary colours are pairs of colours that sit directly opposite each other on the colour wheel – like red and green, blue and orange, or yellow and purple. When placed side by side, they create strong visual contrast and make each other appear more vibrant. When mixed together, they neutralise each other, producing earthy browns or greys.



## Why They Matter in Painting

**High Contrast:** Complementary colours make each other stand out – great for adding impact or creating a focal point.

**Balance & Harmony:** Using complements in the right ratio creates a balanced, cohesive feel – not too flat, not too chaotic.



# TRANSPARENCY LEVEL

## Watercolours:

Known for their transparency and luminosity, watercolours are typically layered from light to dark. The white of the paper is key to creating brightness, and mixing is often subtle and fluid.

## Acrylics & Oils:

Both allow for transparent and opaque effects.

Many acrylic & oil paint brands, includes a visual indicator on the tube or packaging to show the transparency level. Look for a black and white striped pattern with a paint swatch applied over it.

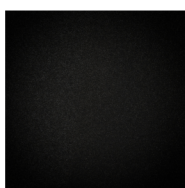


**Transparent:** If you can see the black and white stripes through the paint swatch, the paint is transparent.

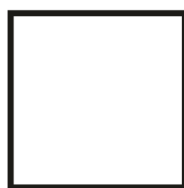
**Opaque:** If the paint swatch completely covers the stripes, the paint is opaque.

**Semi-Opaque/Semi-Transparent:** Some paints may be labeled as semi-opaque or semi-transparent, indicating that they offer a balance between transparency and opacity.

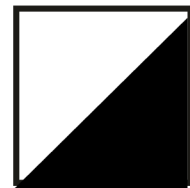
Some brands use different symbols to indicate transparency, such as a filled or empty square, or a half-filled square for semi-opaque



**OPAQUE**



**TRANSPARENT**



**SEMI-OPAQUE**

# OPAQUE & TRANSPARENT COLOURS

**Opacity refers to how much a paint hides or reveals what's beneath it.**

Opaque paints block light and cover over previous layers – they appear solid and are great for bold, flat areas of colour. (This doesn't mean they're shiny – just that they don't let light pass through.)

Transparent or translucent paints, on the other hand, let more light through. They're more “see-through” and are often used for glazing, layering, or creating luminous effects.

Understanding how opaque or transparent your paints are gives you more control over techniques like glazing, layering, and optical colour mixing.

TEAL  
(OPAQUE)



PTHALO BLUE (GREEN SHADE)  
TRANSPARENT

While there isn't a foolproof way to determine opacity or transparency without testing or referencing the tube, you can often get a good idea based on the color name and general pigment characteristics. Opaque colors typically include pigments like Cadmiums, Titaniums, and some earth tones like Umbers and Ochres. Transparent colors often include Phthalo and Quinacridone pigments, as well as some earth tones like Van Dyke Brown.

# QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE



WARM COLOURS	OPACITY	COOL COLOURS	OPACITY
Pyrrole Red	Semi-Opaque	Alizarin Crimson	Transparent
Cadmium Red Light	Opaque	Primary Magenta	Transparent
Cadmium Yellow Dark	Opaque	Cadmium Yellow Light	Opaque
Indian Yellow	Transparent	Hansa Yellow Light	Transparent
Ultramarine Blue	Transparent	Pthalo Blue	Transparent
Indanthrone Blue	Transparent	Prussian Blue	Opaque
Sap Green	Semi-Opaque	Cobalt Green	Semi-Opaque
Green Gold	Transparent	Viridian Green	Transparent
Pyrrole Orange	Semi-Opaque	Quinacridone magenta	Transparent
Cadmium Orange	Opaque	Ultramarine Violet	Transparent
Burnt Umber	Transparent	Raw Umber	Semi-Opaque
Burnt Sienna	Semi-Opaque		

# BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

## MINI EXERCISES



### Value Scale with One Colour

Choose one colour (like phthalo blue or cadmium red ) and create a simple value scale from light to dark by adding white.

🖌️ This helps train your eye to see value – not just colour.

### Warm & Cool Colour Challenge

Paint a simple object (like a piece of fruit or a simple flower) twice – once using warm colours (reds, oranges, yellows), and once using cool colours (blues, greens, purples).

🖌️ Notice how each version feels emotionally different.

### Opacity Test Strip

On a scrap of paper, draw a bold black line with a marker. Then swatch different paints over the top to test how transparent or opaque they are.

🖌️ Label each one, and note which would be useful for glazing vs. covering.

### Complementary Colour Challenge

Choose one pair of complementary colours, eg., red and green.

Paint a solid square of green on your paper or canvas. Once dry, paint a small red circle or shape in the centre of the green square.

🖌️ Observe how the red appears more vibrant and seems to "pop" off the green background.

# KEEP CREATING, KEEP GROWING



Colour isn't just theory – it's your voice, your story, and your freedom to create. You've got everything you need to begin. Remember that your unique way of seeing the world is your greatest asset.

🎨 Stay inspired,

Brenda