

Color Mixing like the Masters with Acrylics

A look at Renoir and Monet and their use of color.

Supplies:

Acrylic Paint:

Blue, Yellow, Warm Red like Cadmium Red Light and a cool red like Alizarin Crimson Hue

Pencil

Bristol paper, sketchbook or substrate of your choice

Water

Palette Paper

Small and Medium flat paintbrushes

Much of the world around us is actually a pretty muted color palette. When you see bright and dark colors most of the time its the difference between lights and darks and warm (reds/oranges) and cool colors, (blues/greens) rather than the use of a bright bold color.

If you want to paint from life and capture what you are really seeing, choose and mix muted earth colors. If you want to create very bright, vivid abstracts or impressionist pieces, you might need some more man-made pigments that have a higher color saturation.

Lets talk about the Impressionist color palettes of Renoir and Monet

Renoir and Monet were contemporaries and worked together in their early years, each artist developed their own impressionist style but used similar color palettes.

Renoir's palette consisted of seven warm and cool versions of primaries, plus white:

Flake White, (modern equivalent = titanium white) Cobalt Blue, Viridian, Dutch Yellow, (modern equivalent = Naples Yellow Hue) Cadmium Yellow Light, Naples Orange, (modern equivalent = Pyrrole Orange) genuine Cadmium Vermilion Red Light, and Alizarin Crimson.

Monet used these eight colors, plus white:

Lead white, (modern equivalent = titanium white) Chrome yellow, (modern equivalent = cadmium yellow light) Cadmium yellow, Cadmium Vermilion Red Light, Viridian green, Emerald green, French ultramarine, Cobalt blue, Madder red, (modern equivalent = Alizarin Crimson) (to get Emerald green I mixed Viridian and Prussian Blue)

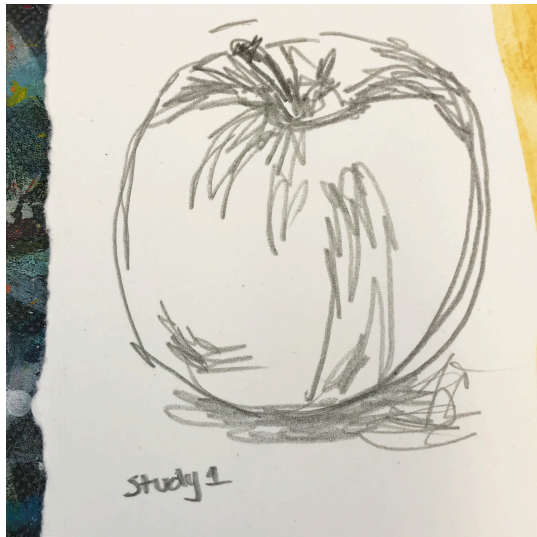
Both of these palettes are an example of a limited palette, used by many painters that consist of a warm and cool of each primary color, along with white. Some painters, like Monet, also often added a secondary color, green, to facilitate mixing landscape greens, and to use to mix with Alizarin crimson to make a chromatic black.

Wait, what about the traditional primaries of Red, Yellow and Blue?

The idea that these 3 colors can mix everything is both true and a bit deceiving subtle greens, violets, oranges etc can be achieved through what we traditionally think of as primaries however since nature is a many layered and colorful place understanding the warm leaning yellow vs the cool leaning yellow can help you to paint a beautiful sunset or daffodil that can truly come to life on your page or canvas in a whole different way.

Creative Exercise:

Lets do a sketchbook study and experiment with some painting techniques Monet used. Often times we see finished works in museums or prints and it can be easy to forget the time and study each of these master artists put in.



For this example I will be using an apple but feel free to choose any object you wish. There is no right or wrong way to do a study feel free to use loose paper or your sketchbook. Your goal is to sit with your subject and capture its shape, color, lights, darks and personality. You can do this through a quick loose sketch like my example, or through tight illustrative lines. Don't think too hard about this just put your pen or pencil to paper and just start.

Once you have your sketch select your substrate to work on I am working on 140lb bristol paper but a canvas, board or anything you are comfortable with is just fine.

Exploring Monet's style:

We are trying to achieve an 'impression' of the subject, rather than a detailed copy, so squinting your eyes at the subject, to blur the details is one of the first tricks to adopt.

7 tips for achieving a successful Impressionist painting:

Use a light yellow or bright under painting or ground.

Squint

Use a stiff brush (like hogs hair)

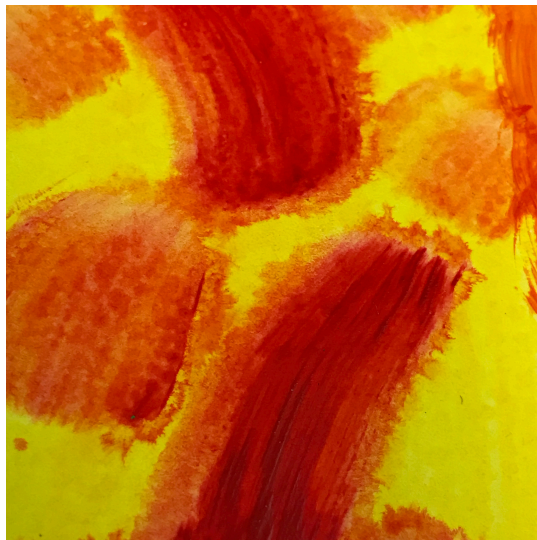
Apply thick paint in overlapping layers

Use complementary colors

Mix color on the canvas using a wet on wet painting technique

Adopt an impressionist palette

Monet used many techniques in his work that artists still use today, we will be exploring 2 of them. These techniques are described below and you can see a sample of each to the right. I used Cadmium yellow, Cadmium Vermilion Red Light for each of these techniques.



Wet into Wet

Start by painting a solid field of yellow, while the color field is still wet, paint strokes of red on top. Use the same size brush spaced out to create a gradient effect as the wet colors blend together as you make your stroke. The stroke directions should appear random and not regimented or lined up in a formal pattern for this technique. A flat bristle brush was used for this example.



Scumbling

For this technique dip your brush into red and yellow the paint then push it straight onto your substrate so that the bristles splay out, rotate the brush slightly to create a mottled effect. This is simply repeated over the entire surface of your page. You will need to experiment to see how the paint blends as you create the transition from red to yellow. Keep in mind that this is a mottled effect and not a smooth transition. A Flat bristle brush was used for this example, however you should experiment with various types of brushes.

A close-up study of Monet's paintings show that colors were often used straight from the tube or mixed on the canvas. But that he also "scumbled" colors -- using thin, broken layers of paint that allows the lower layers of color to shine through.



Using your sketch as your jumping off point choose a light color (like Yellow Ochre, pictured here in my example) for your background and paint your substrate with your selected color, let this dry completely before you begin.

Once dry, lightly block out your subject with a pen or pencil, make sure to look at your object but feel free use your sketch to refine any details or make any adjustments. Each time you slow down and look at your subject and sketch it you have an opportunity to refine your impression of it. Use the brush techniques as your starting place for applying color.



Refer to the 7 tips for Impressionist painting and allow yourself to be loose and play with overlapping color using 2 colors on your brush at a time. You are mixing right on your piece as you go!

Keep building layers of color until you feel you have captured the impression of your subject. Capturing the impression could mean the feel, the light, the color etc.

Remember: Monet developed his skill and technique over decades so keep at it and learn from his process and color palette truly understanding color and developing a eye for seeing your subject is the first step to becoming a master.

