

# Artists & ILLUSTRATORS

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## 2. THE EVOLUTION OF COLOUR

IN PART TWO OF HIS EXPLORATION INTO THE HISTORY OF COLOUR, **AL GURY** LOOKS AT THE INFLUENCE OF ARTISTIC MOVEMENTS ON MODERN PAINTERS' PALETTES



In the 18th century, the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution saw the development of a new world of artists' colours, materials and palettes of colours. Progress in the chemical and petroleum industries would, over the next century, not only produce cheaper substitutes for older expensive and fragile colours, but also a host of new hues.

Classic palettes of eight or 10 colours continued to be the basis of painting practice, but new colours such as Cadmiums, Alizarins and Phthalos were added and experimented with. By the middle of the 19th century Chromium Green, Cadmium Yellow, Viridian, Cerulean Blue, Cobalt Blue and many others became economically and readily available as artists' paints. Some painters added so many new colours to their palettes that as many as 40 tube colours crowded their mixing surfaces.

Eugène Delacroix is one such artist who attempted to match colours in nature directly with new tube colours. Exotic pigments like Mummy (made from ground Egyptian mummy wrappings) and asphaltum (made from petroleum and tar) came and went with fashion. An important factor in this development was the prevalence of art supply stores by the end of the 19th century, which began to replace the making of artists' materials. In many ways, the concept of the 'lost secrets of the Old Masters' derives as much from this switch from the studio to the store as anything else. The recipes and practices that were part of the workshop system were replaced by more standardised practices in the art academies, and so the myths and misunderstandings of the practices of earlier masters became part of the romance of art.

English company Winsor & Newton was at the forefront of developing new materials for artists that were consistent in their high quality and permanence.

Then, in 1839, the French scientist and man of letters Michel-Eugène Chevreul wrote the simultaneous contrast of colours based on his studies of colour contrast at the Royal Gobelins tapestry works. Chevreul observed that spots of colour could optically mix to provide illusions of other more subtle colours. For painters, especially landscape artists, this opened up a world of possibility when it came to capturing the effect of different colours. This new approach to both



**ABOVE**  
Impressionism caused an explosion in the modern world of colour; Adolphe Borie, *Girl*, 1890s, oil, 51x40cm

the painting of atmosphere and colour mixing created complex observational illusions in the works of the French painters Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, and others, that would not have been possible without the writings of Chevreul.

Curiously, it is from this time that we see new myths and misunderstandings enter the canon of colour mixing and practice. Aristotle suggested that absolute black and white were the true absence of colour, and so some Impressionist painters recommended to their students that all blacks should be mixed from complements. Removing black from the palettes of art students became common. The same was true of white. All light colours are tinted by the colour of the atmosphere and light sources, so in reality, there was no such thing as 'pure white'.

The Post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat utilised a pure, almost abstract, version of the new concepts of colour mixing by limiting his palette to red, yellow and blue. As many painters became more interested in the pure properties of colour and colour expression, the idea of colour itself as a subject took root. Post Impressionist, Fauvist and Modernist painters explored as many avenues of colour expression as there were individual painters. Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin embodied excitement among painters for the new colour possibilities. >

**LEFT**  
A palette very similar to that used by Rubens was used to create this example of a 17th-century Dutch landscape: Black, Lead White, Red Oxide, Terra Vert and Lapis Glaze

## EVOLUTION OF COLOUR

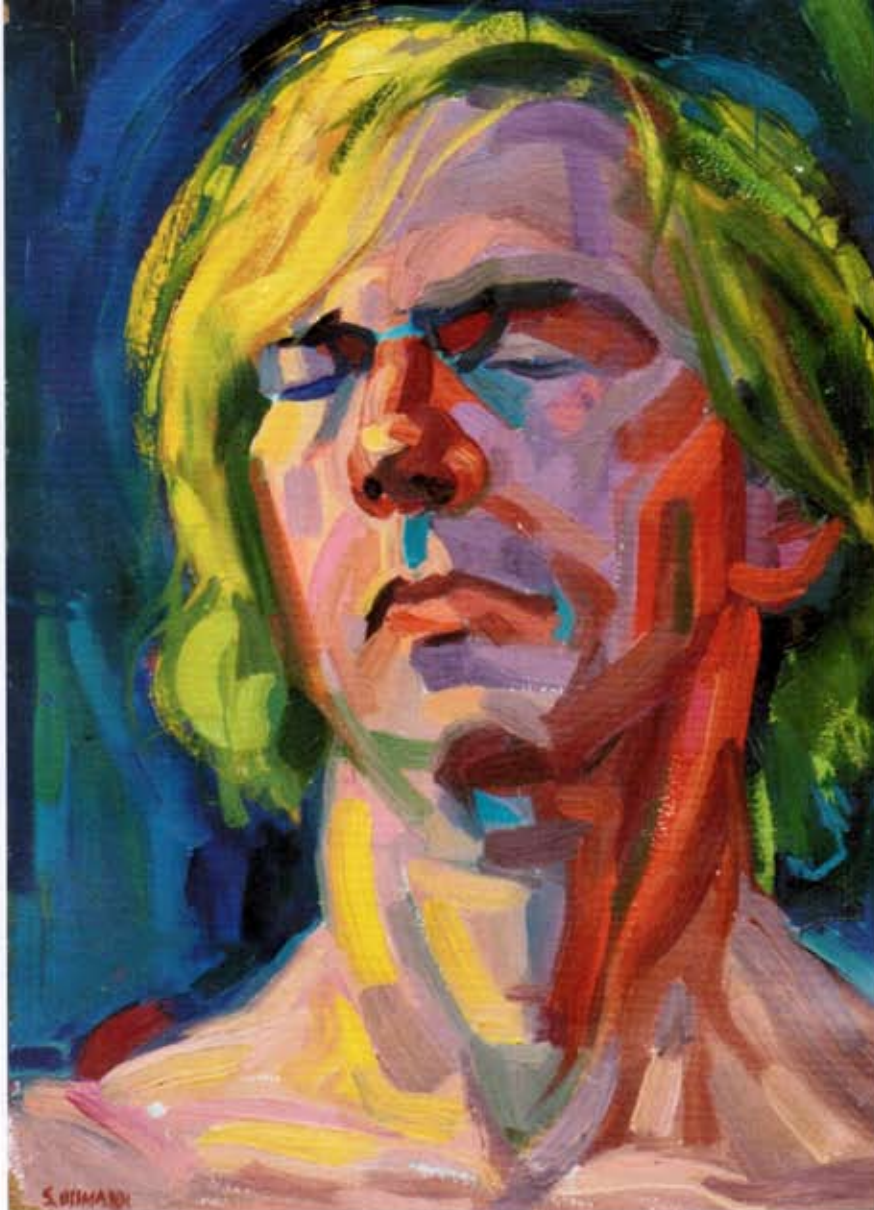
Just as Impressionism had spread rapidly through Europe and America, modern examples of colour expression appeared in salons, galleries and art schools throughout the western world. Coexisting side by side at the advent of World War I, the works of painters such as John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins could be seen in the same cities as André Derain and Matisse. The modern world of colour and artists' palettes had exploded. On the one hand the classic palette continued to be a standard for many artists, while other artists tailored their palettes to their personal tastes and aesthetics.

The period from the beginning of the 19th century to the start of World War I contained some of the most wide ranging and experimental developments in aesthetics, artists' materials and colour theories of any in western history.

In the first decade of the 20th-century, Albert Munsell, a painter and teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art in the United States, outlined his concepts of 'hue, value and chroma', which became known as the Munsell System. His rational view of organising the experience of colour has become one of the primary modern systems of colour notation both in the fine arts and the colour industry. He suggested that any given colour was a hue (member of a colour family: red, yellow or blue), a value (lighter or darker on a scale from pure white to black with middle values in between) and a chromatic intensity (how bright or dull the colour was).

This comprehensive academic approach to understanding colours added to an array of concepts that painters utilised in organising the experience of colour via their eye and materials. Most manufacturers of artists' oil colours, as well as those of acrylics – developed in the 1950s – use the Munsell System and even note the hue, value and chroma of a colour on the paint tubes.

In the 1920s in Germany, a young artist and teacher at the Bauhaus school was to become one of the most important influences on modern art of the 20th



### ABOVE

This Fauvist-style portrait uses Cadmium Lemon, Cadmium Red, Cobalt Violet, Cadmium Green and Cerulean Blue



### PAINTER'S CHOICE

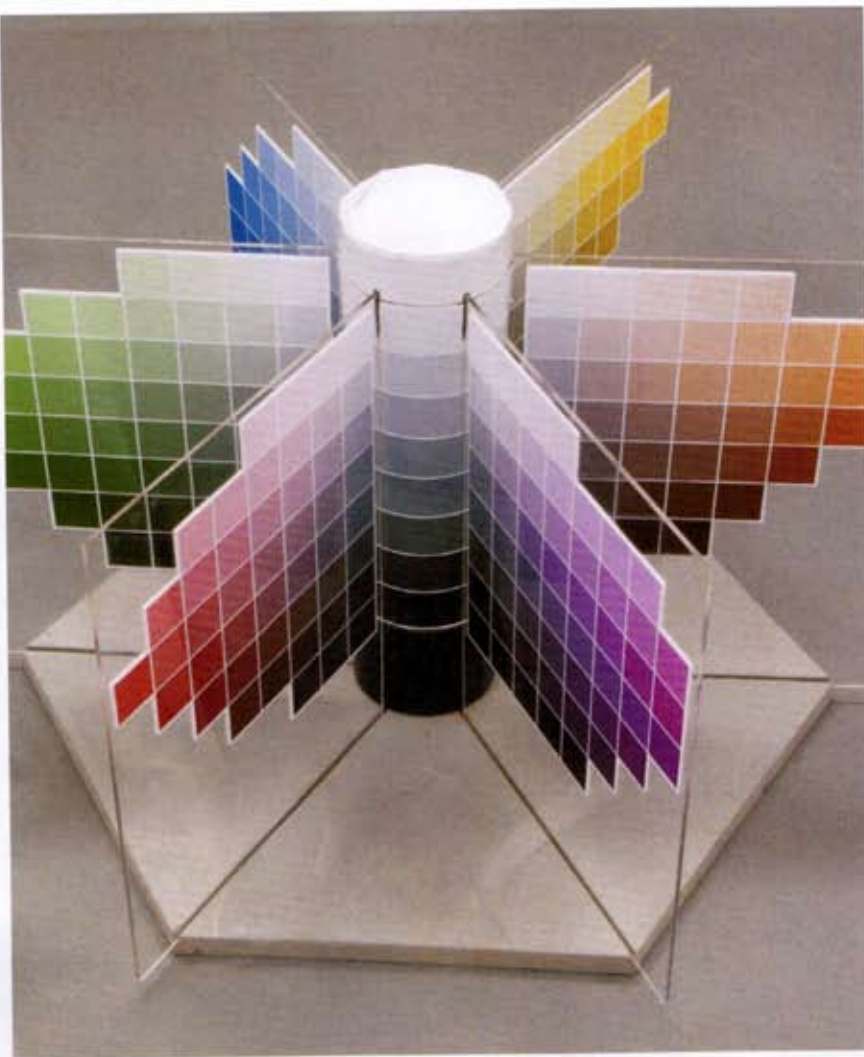
AL TAKES A LOOK AT THE COLOUR PALETTES OF THE MASTERS

**Titian:** Lead White, Ultramarine Blue, Red Madder, Burnt Sienna, Malachite Green, Red Ochre, Yellow Ochre, Orpiment (a yellow) and Ivory Black

**Camille Pissarro:** Lead White, Chrome Yellow, Vermillion, Rose Madder, Ultramarine Blue, Cobalt Blue and Cobalt Violet.

**John Constable:** Lead White, Yellow Ochre, Umber, Red Earth, Emerald Green, Ultramarine Blue, Prussian Blue and Black.

**Peter Paul Rubens:** Lead White, Orpiment, Yellow Ochre, Yellow Lake, Vermillion, Red Ochre, Ultramarine Blue, Cobalt Blue, Green Earth, Vert Azur (a blue-green), Malachite Green and of course, Burnt Sienna.



century. Over the next 50 years, Josef Albers developed concepts of colour organisation that would be outlined in his work *Interaction of Color*. His extensive series of paintings and prints, called *Homage to the Square* presented innumerable subtle interactions between colours of varying hues. Painters from post World War II Abstractionists, to pop artists to Minimalists employed the pure concepts of colour interaction inspired by the work of Josef Albers. In art education, along with the Munsell System, the Albers system of colour interaction became standard in classrooms across Europe and America.

The result of the developments of the many new pigments in the 19th and 20th century, along with experiments in aesthetics and content, has presented the contemporary artist with a number of palette options. The classic palette continues to be a solid, reliable and flexible choice, while limited earth palettes serve many artists by providing attractive neutrals and subtle colour gradations. Palettes of only red, yellow and blue and prismatic palettes all remain very common still today.

The key to understanding the palette choices and their function remains the same: it's about understanding the hue, value and chroma of each colour, and how it mixes with others.

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An example of the Munsell Colour System, one of the primary modern systems of colour notation