

Artists & ILLUSTRATORS

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PAINTING

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Brush CONTROL

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WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM FREUD, DEGAS AND MATISSE



LEFT Al Gury, *Lilac and Peonie*, oil on panel, 35x28cm

IN-DEPTH

1. THE HISTORY OF COLOUR

CHAIR OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, **AL GURY** BEGINS HIS TWO-PART EXPLORATION INTO THE HISTORY OF COLOUR PALETTES AND PRACTICES IN PAINTING

With more than 30,000 years of artefacts and related archaeological research, we have a good view of the evolution of theories and practices of colour in art. The earliest forms of paints found in prehistoric cave paintings form the basis of what we still use today, materially and aesthetically.

Coloured clays provided ochres and browns, carbon was used to make black and chalk, and ground seashells created whites. These basic ingredients provided the earliest pigments for depicting animals and humans in an elegant mixture of fact and symbol, storytelling and religion. Surprisingly, these earth colours have remained the basis for most artists' palettes throughout history.

By the time the peoples of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean had developed stable cultures, the use of colour had blossomed into a wide range of functional, decorative, social and religious uses. A typical palette in use in the ancient Near East and Egypt might include black, ochre, red oxide, vermilion, blue, yellow and green. The bright blues and greens were derived from lapis lazuli and the green stone malachite. Copper oxides were used in the making of blues and iron oxides provided earth reds. This very concise range of colours, often called a 'classic palette', has provided the core pigments for artists throughout most of western history.

Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, born in 384 BC, wrote at length on the physical sciences. *De Coloribus* (or "On Colours") features his attempts to explain colour in the physical sense, as well as discussing the palette. Aristotle recommended that, in addition to the colours of the 'classic palette' listed above, purple be added to the list. Ancient purples were made from combinations of red and blue pigments, such as hematite and manganese.

Largely, that same classic palette remained the basis for artists and artisans for years to come. Medieval book illuminations, icons and altarpieces, portraits and the decorative arts all relied on the stable colours of the ancient earth palette and the addition of a few expensive bright colours for richness and beauty.

Artists and their apprentices continued to make their palette colours through the time-honoured methods passed down from ancient times: hand grinding pigments in 'vehicles' of egg, water or oil.

The new medium of oil painting developed in the 15th-century paved the way for a new era of colour usage and theories. Colour in painting had generally been subject to use in visualising images that were highly conceptualised and attempted to perfect nature rather than document it.

During this period, Leonardo da Vinci's observations and notes on atmosphere and



Coloured clays offered a source of ochre

Ground up seashells were a source of white



Dry pigments form a basis for artists' colours



Charcoal could be used to paint with earth colour

colour helped to open up a new way of seeing nature and depicting it in painting. 'Atmospheric colour', also known as the way forms and the atmosphere affects colours and light they exist in and which surrounds them, became the visual watershed for painters of the next 500 years.

Da Vinci once famously observed a bonfire in a farmer's field and noted that, as it rose past the brown hills, the smoke looked very blue in comparison. In contrast, however, when that same plume of smoke rose past the clear blue sky, it appeared a dirty grey. Such observations of colour interaction are typical of Da Vinci and his move toward a more observational and scientific attitude to colour.

As the natural world, rather than just the spiritual world of the medieval period, became more influential upon western culture, artists' palettes followed suit.

By the 17th-century, painters as diverse as Frans Hals and Nicolas Poussin were influenced by these concepts and theories that descended from Aristotle and Da Vinci. Even so, artists' >



CLASSIC PALETTE

Historically, painters have laid out their colours in very simple, practical manners. Some arranged them from lightest to darkest around the rim of the palette. Others arranged them in hue groups, such as reds, yellows and blues. Some separated the earth colours from the bright colours, forming two distinct groups or arranged them in mixed gradations of each colour.

Whatever the chosen arrangement, the placement of the colours on the palette should suit the working methods and aesthetics of the painter.

Recommended Classic Palette: Titanium White, Cadmium Yellow Light, Cadmium Red Medium, Permanent Rose, Ultramarine Blue, Yellow Ochre, Raw Umber, Burnt Umber, Burnt Sienna, Venetian Red, Indian Red and Ivory Black.



LEFT Al Gury's oil study of Peter Paul Rubens' *Portrait of a Gentleman*.

presented the first modern palette of brilliant primary and secondary colours: red, yellow, blue, purple, orange and green, and the many complex gradations in between. The term prismatic colour came into use to describe the bright colours seen through a crystal prism that soon found their way onto the artist's palette and balanced those earth colours.

A more affluent, trade-based European culture had access to many more colours. The academies of art had now largely replaced the artists' workshop as the scene of aesthetic debate. Also, colour theorists now might easily be scientists or academics rather than painters. Artists themselves followed these debates, but continued to produce paintings based on the classic colours of time-honoured palettes and formal elements of light and shade, line and form development.

Colour continued to be dependent upon the subject as it always had been, as well as on the simple gradations of colour, from lighter and brighter to darker and duller. Rembrandt and his deep tonalities could represent open form colour and painting methods, while the German painter Hans Holbein might represent closed form painting and its elegant polished line edges. Nevertheless, the artists' palettes remained surprisingly simple and reliable, based on the ancient models.

Next month: Al investigates the colour theories of the 18th-century and their influence on modern paint palettes. www.algury.com

LEONARDO DA VINCI PAVED THE WAY FOR A NEW ERA OF COLOUR USAGE AND THEORIES

palettes were still very much rooted in the ancient classic palette balanced on the one hand by the earth colours and extended on the other by the brighter colours. Materials such as ground lapis and malachite, lead, and madder root continued to be in use and were still to be replaced in a later era by chemical dyes and other modern materials.

Sir Isaac Newton provided the first modern theories of the nature of colour. He also



COLOUR IDENTITY TINT TEST

- Once you decide on your colours and arrangement, place a swatch on the test surface in your chosen order. This swatch should be a thick 'chip' of oil paint.
- Drag out a bit of each swatch with a little linseed oil. This swatch is called a 'transparency.' Do this in turn for all the colours on your test surface. You should now have two rows: one row of thick samples of tube colour and one swatch of each that is transparent.
- Mix a light tint from each colour, making sure to clean your brush thoroughly between each mixture. These tints should be no darker than 2 or 3 on a value scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the lightest, or pure white, and 10 being the darkest. To do this, have a lot of Titanium White available on your mixing surface.
- The result should be three rows: from the tube, the transparency and the tint of each colour.
- Compare the qualities of each. You will see that the 'identity' of each tint is quite different from the next in temperature, intensity, and hue.