

Watercolor Painting Advice

Color Up for Spring

Spring is upon us and it's time to break out of the winter doldrums by using color in a new direction. Here's a technique that has worked well for me: complementary layering of colors.

You can paint any subject this way by following these general instructions. First, underpaint your subject with a pattern of "surprising" colors. They're surprising in that they are high chroma or bright. With many paintings, a bit of unnaturally intense color is like adding the right amount of spice to a recipe. What might have been bland, now becomes rich and exciting. In most cases, you should avoid using the actual or native color of the subject and substitute brights for it.

Next, work the painting by overlaying color washes using complements of the underpainting. Start light and progressively work darker. Stay with variations of the complements, i.e., go no farther than the split complement of the underlying color. By split complement, I mean the colors on either side of the complement. So, for example, if the base color is red, then the split complements would be turquoise and yellow-green.



Finally, finish the painting by using dark accents of the complement. You can add black to some colors for shade in these accents, however, avoid using black just by itself. It's always better to mix your blacks using complements to create either warm or cool blacks that will enhance the lights of the original color.

Whew! That's saying a lot and it's worth re-reading to understand a watercolor

concept that goes back to the works of John Singer Sargent. If you look at "[Escutcheon of Charles V](#)", in the collection of the Met, you'll see how effectively Sargent brings a stone subject to life by alternating layers of blue-violet and ochre.

In my painting on the left, "Wheels of Industry", I began with an abstract underpainting of many colors including orange, yellow, green and red. Over these colors, I painted the shadows using their complements. When the base color switched, I continued with a flowing wash that blended with the complement of the new underlying color. So a wash could gradates from blue over orange to green over red.

Complementary layering – a great concept for giving your paintings more life and interest.

TIPS & TRICKS

- Any subject is suitable as long as you start with a good value plan.
- Use your color wheel to determine complements and split complements.
- Keep the washes wet so that you can blend colors effectively.
- Think tonally – you should be working from light to dark.

Tom says:

"The rich neutrals that develop in the glazed-over areas make your lights sing."

Painting Classes & Workshops

To learn more about underpaintings and to see me demonstrating this technique and others, I offer workshops and

regularly teach classes in the Colorado Springs area (check my 2009 schedule). My DVD videos are available by contacting the studio.

If you or your group is interested in hosting a workshop, please contact my studio via [Email](#)