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Working with Color

Paul Baldassini explains how to use piles and puddles
for color mixing and color matching — 8-page demonstration

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Paul Baldassini

Working with Color

Paul Baldassini explains how to use piles and puddles for color mixing and color matching

One of the most important skills for artists who paint realistically is being able to match a color we see with paint. Sounds easy but it's not, and it has taken me a lifetime of painting to sort it all out. Over the years I have developed a structured approach to oil painting beginning with a composition developed using the "high-tech" methods of digital photography and image editing followed by the "low-tech" working methods of the Old Master painters. Since I don't want to make compositional changes once the work is underway, I spend a significant amount of time developing my composition using digital tools and editing software

before I start painting. I find this method of combining multiple digital reference images highly satisfying and do not make color studies, not sketches or small layouts of any kind, finding them completely unnecessary to my working style. Once I've arrived at my composition there is no need to go back and make adjustments as my sole focus will be on color mixing. A complete monochromatic underpainting is then executed before the overpainting begins.

For color mixing I use mostly "dry" pigments straight from the tube, occasionally adding Old Masters Flemish Maroger jelly medium as necessary and

odorless mineral spirits for cleaning brushes. My palette is laid out chromatically left to right, from light to dark and warm to cool. This immediately insures my response to value, temperature and chroma as I begin building the piles and puddles that I use for mixing and applying color.

Saturated Color Piles and Puddles

Before I start the overpainting I mix up some color piles of the dominant colors and grays that I'll be using for the day's session. For example, if I'm working on pink blossoms I'll mix up some quinacridone magenta and ultramarine blue deep to make a purple. Then, I'll make some smaller piles of that mixture lightening it with white (NOTE: "white" means Brilliant Yellow Extra Pale). I do the same with ultramarine blue deep and white and another with quinacridone magenta and white. Both working piles and puddles can be seen in Figure 1.

That's about where the predictability stops. I know from experience how my mixtures, generally, will turn out — warm or cool, lighter or darker, higher chroma or more neutralized. So, from here on through to the final brushstroke the color mixing action is completely reactive-based. I dip into the pure tubed



Little Climbing Beauties, oil on mounted portrait linen panel, 24.375 x 32.5" (62 x 83 cm)

color blobs at the top of my palette and start mixing into the pre-mixed piles creating smaller puddles. I note the hue, chroma and value, and apply a mixed color to the underpainting. This is important since every hue is influenced by the other colors surrounding it. Chroma is the easiest to figure out because not all colors can achieve the same level of brightness and, chroma relates to value because it decreases as a hue moves towards neutral gray. A color must inherently possess either lightness or darkness — value — so I know it's correct by matching it to the value of the underpainting. All of this I determine by constantly analyzing the reference image. By far the most difficult aspect of color mixing is determining the correct temperature, and it's unavoidable that additional mixing will have to take place on the canvas. This is adjusted by dipping into a puddle and mixing on the canvas, adjusting an already painted passage as necessary.

Most of what I just explained involves body (opaque) color mixtures that are



Figure 1. Color piles of quinacridone magenta mixed with ultramarine blue deep and some with more white added to the mixtures. There are also piles of quinacridone magenta and ultramarine blue deep with white added to the mixtures. As I work and mix color, those pile evolve into puddles which continue to grow and merge creating more variety of pre-mixed warm and cool tones in different values to dip my brush into. Some warm and cool green puddles have started developing to the right.

broadly painted blocked-in passages. Most, but not all, are then drybrush blended, pulling everything together before moving onto the next passage. Darks are applied very thinly, varying the amount of jelly medium, if any, as

necessary to achieve the desired effect. For these shadow areas and shapes I use dry pigment or add a bit of jelly medium and scrub the transparent darker color mixtures right over the underpainting varying the hue but matching value to create visual interest. It all happens very fast as I move on to the next color area and shape and repeat. Finally, opaque white highlights and tinted lights are applied thickly with very little medium. This method of working is quite difficult to explain but all I know is that it works, at least for me.

There are two indispensable “mother” colors in my palette: Warm Grey and Cool Grey. One of these two colors is mixed into just about every color puddle at some point to neutralize the mixtures. During the session the puddles grow and mingle and merge offering a useful array of chromatic and grayed-down hues to dip in to. I use these color mixtures to modulate the warm and cool hues as necessary to develop the forms. The mother colors insure color harmony as some of almost every mixture contains one or the other. The use of this technique produces subtle grays which act as counterpoint to higher chroma colors. Since most of the colors



Figure 2 Color piles and puddles mixed with “mother colors” of warm and cool grays used to paint the warm and cool color and value transitions in the blossom on the right. The dominant yellows were cooled and grayed down with one gray mixture and the purple shadows were warmed and grayed down with another gray mixture. The opposing warm-cool/complimentary color contrast used to model the forms sets up a vibration creating visual interest throughout the composition.

are grayed down, the careful application of high or full chroma colors create a jewel-like effect and luminosity is achieved. A working palette example of mother color mixing can be seen in Figure 2.

Neutral Gray Piles and Puddles

There is not really much high chroma saturated color in our everyday world. Just about everything is a grayed down version of our comfortable hues with glimpses of high chroma color appearing here and there depending mostly on sunlight and time of day. But, neutral grays are everywhere! Outside in the fields, forests, bushes and grasses, in the street and neighborhoods of our cities and suburbs, inside the home and quiet places, in our offices, and in the clothes we wear. Except for a handful of exotic plants and animals everything is some shade of grayed down hue. When high chroma colors are placed among neighboring neutralized counterparts, the primaries, even if slightly neutralized themselves, appear much more vibrant. High chroma colors really stand out when juxtaposed against much duller colors or dull optical mixtures. If the neutral grays are complimentary biased to the higher chroma colors, then the effect is even more pronounced, deliberately creating a strong visual contrast. I strongly suggest learning how to mix and include subtle mixtures of neutral and near-neutral colors in your work. The Impressionists understood this, despite their seemingly bright and intense colors.

My first attempts at this was not very successful since I was making all of my grays from complimentary mixtures like Viridian and Naphthol Red, or Ultramarine Deep and Burnt Sienna, or Cerulean Blue and Cadmium Orange. These mixtures make acceptable grays but it was too much work mixing them up before each painting session. I had read about other artists that were using pre-mixed convenience grays which I

had avoided up until then for whatever reason of purity of colors, but decided to give it try. After much trial & error (and cost) most ended up in the reject box. I finally settled on Sennelier's Warm and Cool Grey. Warm Grey, a light value mixer, was great for dulling down all of the yellows, and the much darker valued Cool Grey effectively dulled down the cooler and darker side of my palette and produced lovely warm green grays when mixed with Chinese Orange. Although adding the grays to saturated colors produced a slight loss of chroma and a minor shift in hue, I found that by adding the mixtures from these puddles into just about every color pile effectively harmonized the overall color appearance of the painting.

My basic sequence then, when starting a painting session, is to either squeeze out a complete palette of color or, using a small mixer knife, whip up the color piles left over from the previous days session, usually a combination of both. Then I mix up a separate pile of Warm and/or Cool Grey. Depending on what I'm painting that session I make secondary and neutral mixtures of key colors. For example if I'm painting yellow and white blossoms I'll mix some of the following piles:

- Cadmium Medium Yellow and white
- Cadmium Yellow Deep and white
- Cadmium Yellow Deep, Warm Grey and a touch of white
- Cadmium Medium Yellow, Warm Grey and a touch of white
- Ultramarine Deep, Cool Grey and a touch of white
- Ultramarine Deep and white (warm blue)
- White and a speck of Indigo (cool blue)
- Ultramarine Deep and Quin Magenta on dark side of purple
- Ultramarine Deep and Quin Magenta and white on light side of purple
- Chinese Orange and Cool Grey to darken
- Chinese Orange and Warm Grey

to lighten

- Chinese Orange and Cool Grey and a touch of Warm Grey

Over the course of a painting session all of these piles will evolve into puddles containing light and dark and warm and cool mixtures of each other. Other support color puddles might be dark, light or mid-tone mixtures of palette colors that are not part of the original pile mixtures. It sounds complicated but the puddles just evolve and grow by themselves as I dip and mix into them, sometimes using the jelly medium. There are no color charts or systems that I use to make color decisions — it really is just a reaction based process involving the arrangement of colored shapes on a surface. As I'm applying these broadly painted color shapes I'm aware of their "complementarity" or relationship to each other.

Green Mixtures

What greens to mix and when and how to use them can quickly become a daunting exercise in frustration. You will, of course, have to discover for yourself which green mixtures work best for a particular passage within the constraints or your palette of colors, but the principles are the same. The extent of my greens these days is directed mostly to the accurate representation of those greens associated with specific flowers, such as the warm dull greens of peony leaves or the shiny cooler red-green leaves of rose foliage. I think the best green mixtures contain varying amounts of oranges and dark reds. Even within these broad generalizations there is always the need to modulate and contrast warm greens against cooler greens in response to observed light situations at specific times of the day.

Landscape and floral & garden painters are confronted with an abundance of greens that dominate just about every scene or subject. How to translate greens to keep a painting from appearing monotonous requires varying

both the green hues and temperatures and matching their values within a passage. To begin with I make up two large piles of base greens, one warm and one cool, one opaque and one transparent. The former is mixed from Viridian, Indigo, a bit of Cadmium Lemon Yellow and some palette white. The latter is mixed from Viridian, Indigo and Chinese Orange. These last two are deeply staining and transparent pigments and make an excellent base color to develop many other green mixtures. I will almost always mix some of this green with jelly medium and brush it over an underpainting passage denoting leaves or background greens. As this sets up I mix up some other greens; warm and cool, light, dark or mid-tone as necessary to develop and model the forms. These mixtures are listed below. Since most contain the addition of a cadmium color or gray, they will become semi-transparent or opaque.

- Indigo plus Chinese Orange (this is my dark value neutral base green)
- Base green plus Cadmium Yellow Deep (warmest low chroma tone)
- Base green plus Cadmium Yellow Medium (warm low chroma tone)
- Indigo plus Cadmium Yellow Deep (warm mid chroma tone)
- Indigo plus Cadmium Yellow Medium (less warm high chroma tone)
- Indigo plus Cadmium Yellow Lemon (cool high chroma tone)
- Indigo plus Raw Sienna (less cool high chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Cadmium Yellow Lemon (very cool high chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Cadmium Yellow Medium (less cool high chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Cadmium Yellow Deep (warmer mid chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Chinese Orange (warm mid chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Naphthol Red (very warm mid chroma tone)
- Viridian plus Warm Grey (cool neutralized tone)




Heirloom Alba Roses, oil on mounted portrait linen panel, 23.75 x 35.5" (60 x 90 cm)

- Indigo plus Warm Grey (very cool neutralized tone)
- Warm or Cool Grey can be added to any of these mixtures to neutralized chroma

It's much easier to match and apply dark value and shadow colors, which, like the greens found in floral foliage for example, using mostly transparent mixtures applied thinly over the underpainting; lights and midtones require more thought and patience. In order to match the value of most of the colors present in my floral reference image with oil paint, large amounts of white must be mixed into the paint in order to lighten it, that is, to raise its value. What is not "lightness" in the painting are just darker passages that usually only require some combination of dark transparent pigments mixed with medium and/or a touch of an opaque mixer, usually one my grays. Very often I just "up-mix" the value range of my palette to darken it. That means adding Raw Sienna into any of the yellows, Perylene Crimson into red, and Ultramarine Deep into Viridian, for example.

An example of my working proce-

dure is to brush on a thin transparent layer of base green, further darkening an already a dark underpainting value. Where the underpainting was lighter the base green will only tint it, but the darker tones deepen in value considerably. With other piles and puddles of mixed greens at the ready, I brush on opaque green mixtures of the appropriate values and temperature, the paint melding into the wet base coat, darkening ever so slightly. I apply warm and cool tones side by side as necessary and dry brush blend them, applying lighter tones as necessary to model the forms. When done, details are added like veins and edge curls with opaque paint, a small brush and little or no medium.

When the paintings are completed they must dry before varnishing. The use of Maroger medium reduces overall drying time — three to four weeks at most depending on how thick the final light or white highlights were applied. If baked in the sun the painting will dry even faster. When fully dry, I apply one coat of Old Masters Mastic Varnish. Drying time for the varnish is at least two weeks, several days in the sun. After that the painting is off to the framer and I'm onto the next work. 

My Art in the Making Heirloom Double Peony



STAGE 1 THE DRAWING & START OF UNDERPAINTING

The image is transferred to the panel by sandwiching a large sheet of Saral graphite transfer paper between the full-size grayscale print (cartoon) and the panel. This is the single most important part of the process, taking up to several hours. So it will stand out against the grayscale print, I use a fine-tip red ink pen to trace the necessary information to the panel. The completed tracing resembles a large complicated contour drawing whose shapes will become filled with colors mixed from piles and puddles. Shadow notes and form rounding are indicated using dots and dashes. I'm right-handed so my working sequence is top left to the bottom right. I paint one section at a time, move to the right and complete another, then down and repeat. Dipping my brush into a puddle of quinacridone magenta I begin painting thinly or thickly depending on the value.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Artist's Oil Colors from left to right

- » Cadmium Yellow Lemon
- » Cadmium Yellow Medium
- » Cadmium Yellow Deep
- » Raw Sienna
- » Chinese Orange
- » Fanchon (Naphthol) Red
- » Quinacridone Magenta
- » Dianthus Pink
- » Persian Rose
- » Perylene Crimson
- » Viridian
- » Ultramarine Blue Deep
- » Indigo
- » Warm Grey
- » Cool Grey
- » Brilliant Yellow Extra Pale
- » Raw Umber is used only for the underpainting

Medium and Varnish

- » Old Masters Maroger Painting Medium, Flemish Formulation
- » Mastic Varnish

Support

- » Portrait linen mounted onto Trupan Ultralight MDF, 1/2-inch thick panels using Lineco Neutral pH adhesive primed with two coats of Williamsburg Oil Painting Ground

Brushes

- » Filberts and some flats, sizes 0 through 12. Most paintings are completed with only a No. 0, 2 and 4 Filbert. Extra-long filbert brushes sizes 2 and 4 are used for blending.

Other Supplies

- » Odorless Turpenoid for general painting
- » Pure Distilled Turpentine for thinning Mastic varnish
- » Small palette knives for mixing initial paint puddles
- » Cotton rags
- » Paper towels



STAGE 2 THE COMPLETED UNDERPAINTING

Three brushes are used to complete the underpainting: two No. 0 filberts, a new one for “drawing” and a gently used one to apply toned washes. Removing paint is just as important as applying it. The oil painting ground is a wonderful surface to paint on, not absorbent like gesso, and the thinned paint behaves exactly like watercolor, blending and lifting as necessary to model the forms. Using my reference photo as a guide, I paint one petal at a time, one section at a time in 4 – 5 hour sessions. The white ground is used for the light tones and whites just as in a watercolor. Each section is dry by the next day. I continue in this way section by section until the underpainting is completed.



Good Morning Hibiscus,
oil on mounted portrait
linen panel, 23.75 x 37.5" (60 x 95 cm)

STAGE 5 THE OVERPAINTING

For the blossom I mixed up four working piles: quinacridone magenta/some white; ultramarine blue/some white; ultramarine blue/quinacridone magenta; cool grey/ lesser amount of warm grey/touch of white. I scoop up some of the third pile, add some white to it and make a puddle. Studying my photo reference, I determine what color would be appropriate to mix into the puddle I just made, and create a new colored puddle which will be used to color a shape on the blossom. Then I either go back to the original pile or another pre-mixed pile, and repeat using a different color and making another new puddle. Or, I take some paint from the previous puddle and modify it as necessary. Dianthus Pink and Persian Rose mixtures are also introduced now in the darker value areas. This whole sequence gets repeated over and over again until the whole section is blocked in with colored shapes, one petal at a time, one section at a time. Many useful puddles develop quite quickly as I dip and paint reacting to each previously painted shape.

When done, using an extra-long filbert brush I blend over some, but not all of the blocked-in shapes. Each session takes about 4 – 5 hours. The background is a mixture of Turkey Umber and Transparent Dutch Brown. I apply it thinly with no medium right up to the edges of the painted blossom. Then, using a slightly worn No. 0 brush and a bit of magenta and jelly medium, the wet blossom edges are carefully blended into the dark background.





STAGE 4 FINISHED PAINTING

Heirloom Double Peony, oil on mounted portrait linen panel, 24.25 x 34.75" (62 1/2 x 88 cm). I clean the pink/grey mixtures from my palette and mix up both a cool and warm base green pile, start making puddles, painting and blending again. The leaf edges are carefully blended into the freshly painted dark background with a bit of magenta and jelly medium. Some edge treatments are softer than others to create the illusion of depth.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A professional fine artist, designer, photographer and image editor, Paul Baldassini has been working with graphic images for over 40 years. Having had some traditional training, Paul considers himself a self-taught painter due to his total immersion into a highly self-motivated learning process outside the realm of formal instruction — for the most part, self-taught. Through his dedicated study of 16th and 17th century master painters, combined with his vast knowledge of modern painting techniques and digital tools, Paul attends to details that give his paintings a mannered, but nonetheless, arresting quality. His technique is very similar to that of the old masters — a structured approach that utilizes a monochrome underpainting with direct overpainting and minimal glazing and scumbling. Most of what Baldassini paints these days are flowers — often peonies and roses. “Their fleeting beauty, color and variety command my attention while the blossoming

of a flower triggers the sense that something miraculous is coming.”

The paintings Baldassini creates are based on a composite of many images. Like much great art, they are a combination of fact and fiction. Paul uses digital technology to examine and edit, larger than life, the flowers he photographs. He spends hours exploring the design possibilities before putting brush to canvas. Whereas a still life painter seeks to capture an impression of a fleeting moment of light and time, Paul methodically seeks to reveal the intricacy and elegance of their design.

Baldassini has a BFA in Illustration/Graphic Art from Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA and is a Signature Member of the New England Watercolor Society, (NEWS). Paul, his wife and daughter reside in Connecticut.




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