

basic palette

This is a list of “single pigment” paints that can generally be applied to watercolour, oil and acrylic paint. These colours will not fade. There are warm and cool blues, reds and yellows (primaries), three secondaries, (green, brown and purple) and a white. You should get to know what they do individually and how they work together, before experimenting with others.

Better quality paint is priced in categories as some pigments are more expensive than others. Buy the best quality you can afford without feeling guilty about using with abandon.

cerulean blue - warm greenish blue, opaque, light
with yellow ochre makes fine dull greens

ultramarine blue - transparent, reddish, dark
mix with alizarin for a clear dark purple

dioxazine purple - rich dark purple synthetic, transparent and strong

alizarin crimson - cool bright bluish red, transparent, dark, mixes well
with ultramarine for purples and with viridian for strong darks

quinacradone violet - as a synthetic substitute for alizarin crimson,
transparent bright, dark purplish red

cadmium red light - warm, strong red, other densities (dark, medium) are less useful at first. More opaque than alizarin crimson.

cadmium yellow light - orangey yellow, warmer and brighter than
yellow ochre, strong and slightly opaque

yellow ochre (yellow oxide) - opaque, cool yellow, good basic “earth colour”

viridian - dark, transparent, bluish green. A base for mixing more complex greens. Needs warming up (the addition of yellow) to make believable, landscape, floral greens. If you want to buy a green, this is the one to start with. Mixes with alizarin for more great darks. Not always available being replaced by “viridian (hue)” an imitation made with phthalo. This is more garish, but a reasonable alternative.

burnt umber - a rich dark orangey brown “earth colour”, mixes well with other colours and greys down blues that are sometimes jarring.

titanium white - (not needed in watercolour)

The basic warm opaque white.

Buy a big tube, you’ll use more white than any other colour.

When you get to know it well, try some other whites, zinc, or flake.

They each have different personalities.

Notice: no blacks

They are more trouble than they are worth at the beginning and you can mix such interesting darks you don’t really need them anyway. (see the sheet on alternatives to black.)

Ready for more?

Try cobalt blue, especially if you’re painting sky and water.

Try raw and burnt sienna, raw umber and light red if you’re interested in painting portraits.

Chromium oxide green is a useful addition to a landscape palette.

Try the phthalos (a.k.a. Winsor colours) blue, green, red, but watch out! They’re powerful, and stain.

Or try the Mars colours. They’re more subdued, synthetic earth colours.

Consider mixtures later as well.

Hooker’s green and paynes gray are favourites of many painters.

New mixtures are being introduced as we go along. If you check the labels for the pigments used you can mix your own to save money and increase the range of colour you can produce yourself.

Once you understand the basic pigments and how they mix together your exploration of the array of colours available will be more fruitful and less frustrating.