



## Defining a Personal Color Space #09

This issue of the Gamblin Studio Notes is about how to define personal color space by assembling a unique palette of colors. Over many years of painting and making paints, I have had the opportunity to experience the more subjective qualities of color. The "Cadmium Red Medium" oil paint that I see pouring over a triple roll mill in the Gamblin factory is a raw material that artists combine, mix, transform into different colors. Visiting studios, I see how hundreds of painters define their personal color space.

Artists' color wheels are represented by a two dimensional circle. But color space is actually three dimensional when black and white are added to create value (tone, tint & shade). Most color systems, like the Munsell system, use the highest chroma colors and white and black to create a color space that illustrates all possible colors. When you choose the colors for your palette, you are creating your own color system that has its own possibilities and limitations. I think there are essentially three approaches: limited, general, and special palettes.

I define **a limited palette** as one that reaches as much of color space as possible with as few colors as possible. This palette usually includes only five or six colors. Some very successful painters use limited palettes in all their work. One painter I know uses only [Titanium White](#), [Cadmium Yellow Light](#), [Cadmium Red Medium](#), [Alizarin Crimson](#), [Ultramarine Blue](#), and [Viridian](#). By using a narrow range of colors, painters need only learn how a few colors work together and influence each other. The downside is that the same color solutions keep coming up over and over with no little surprises to spark the experience.

This approach to selecting colors works effectively when painting opaquely is the top priority. With this system, though, painters give up a unique quality of oil colors—transparency. Also, using a limited palette, painters limit color intensity. For example, Cadmium Yellow Light and Cadmium Red Medium do mix into an orange, but not one that has the intensity of the pure pigment, [Cadmium Orange](#). I use **a general palette** of about 20 colors total, including 10 colors chosen from regular steps around the color wheel. In front of those colors on my palette, I place the [Radiant color](#) that relates to that color's location (warm yellow, cool yellow, etc.). My whites are Titanium or [Flake White Replacement](#) depending on the quality of the light.

Lately I have been using [Van Dyke Brown](#) as my black, and one or two of the [Portland Greys](#). My only earth color is [Yellow Ochre](#) because of its value in the landscape. I use [Transparent Earth Orange](#) to make a glowing warm underpainting. I use color mixing shortcuts, especially if it means getting quickly the right tint or grey. Isn't that the bulk of the work? Tinting and greying colors? The last way of creating color space is by using **a special palette**. There are no generalities. Painters like Mark Tansey use a one color palette. Wolf Kahn uses oil colors like a box of pastels: dozens of colors out at all times,

greys, tints, and pure colors. By creating a special palette you are meeting very specific requirements of your work.

This leads me to a discussion of personalizing your palette. We are all unique. Place 100 painters in front of a still life and you get 100 different paintings. Assembling your palette is not only a way of gaining access to color space but also a way of tweaking color to make it your own, emphasizing the differences between you and other painters. One painter might lay down an imprimatura of transparent earth color then build paintings using direct painting technique. Always, his first layer shows in certain areas. The color gives these paintings a warmth and comfort reminiscent of early 19th century Romanticism. Another painter might build paintings with pure colors and tints to make a jarring, noisy surface. Then by using a signature glaze color mixed to evoke an emotional sensation, the painter can unify and soften the surface. Some ideas if you want to experiment:

- Substitute [Phthalo Green](#) for Viridian then chroma intensifies, transparency increases. Every green element becomes more vibrant.
- If you have a "normal" 12 color palette consisting of Cad Yellow Lt. and [Medium, Cad Red Lt.](#) & Alizarin, Ultra Blue, Viridian, White and Black, Yellow Ochre, [Burnt Sienna](#) & [Burnt Umber](#), change all the warm colors to only earth colors. The color mixtures will have a new softness.
- If you are interested in maximum intensity then use only modern organic colors like Quinacridone or Phthalo colors instead of mineral colors. See the Gamblin Color Chart for selections of modern and mineral colors.

Over many years of paintmaking I have come to think that the subjective qualities of color, the emotion that each color represents, is as important to me as the technicalities of color mixing. And I feel that when I am missing one of my colors I am missing a potential emotion. I encourage you to personalize your palette. The last 150 years of pigment history have given us a range of colors never before available to artists. So painters do not have to accept color that is not exactly what you want.

For [Radiant Color Chart](#), a [Gamblin Artists' Colors](#) chart or to discuss technical questions, email to [RobertGamblin@gamblincolors.com](mailto:RobertGamblin@gamblincolors.com) or mail to: PO Box 625, Portland 97207.

If you have any further questions about defining a personal color space, please feel free to [contact](#) us.

Sincerely,

Robert Gamblin



**Thank you very much for your interest in our Gamblin Studio Notes.**

If you are interested in sharing your impressions about Gamblin Artist's Colors, please visit our [Gamblin Artist's Survey](#)