



Mood-Alter

From tense oranges to dreamy purples to soothing greens, use color choices to set the mood of your paintings.

By Sheri Ramsey

Color is the first and the last part of my pastel paintings. It's their most important element—sometimes I feel as though I've got the colors of a painting coursing through my veins. But my goal is to take this feeling and get it onto the paper, and I want my viewers to have an emotional response to my paintings that matches my own. To make this kind of connection you have to create the right

mood, and the key to getting the right mood is to take control of your colors.

The Play of Colors

One of the best ways to set the tone of a painting is through the use of light and shadow. Light spaces can inspire happiness, vitality and warmth, while areas of shadow often represent struggle, quietness or coolness. Leading the viewer in and out of the colorful light and shadows of a landscape is one of your best painting tools, but even paintings with small degrees of contrast can allow for a wide variety of colors. Plus, these lights and darks change along with the color relationships, which can appear and disappear with a single stroke.



On the Large Scale

The Grassy Road, Triptych (pastel, 22x54) began as a small diptych. But I quickly realized that the peaceful mood created by these contrasting colors, including violet gray, green, madder violet, permanent rose and violet rose, would work much better in three large pieces, though each section still has a composition that can stand on its own.

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Observe for yourself, for example, how a simple blue-violet can go from quiet when placed beside maroon to exciting beside a rust color.

Constant, close observation of the variety and nuance of the colors in nature is the first step in finding exciting color relationships. There are certain combinations I've come to prefer, such as browns and grays that have a purple or blue cast (as in the trees of *Windberg Autumn*, at right). These colors are great for portraying the placid effect that the silvery light of a cloudy day has on a landscape. In the golden light of a late afternoon, on the other hand, a reddish purple shadow can make the gold look even richer and more inspiring (as in the shadows of *Together*, on the next page).



From the Ground Up

For *Windberg Autumn* (pastel, 9x12) I used a dark, gray-green paper, which was a bit of an experiment for me. That foundation helps to create the effect of an overcast day, and the bright orange and yellow really jump off the dark paper.

The Color of a Mood

1

Looking for Relationships

2

Creating an Underpainting

3

Heightening the Contrast

4

Varying the Technique

5

Getting the Feeling



1 I began this landscape by sketching the scene in large, open strokes with pastel pencils to see how the colors relate to each other. I mostly stayed true to the colors of the scene, and I wanted to avoid direct complements that might be too jarring, so instead of straight violet with the bright yellow I used red violet (maroon) and blue-gray violet.



2 Once I had the major color relationships I wanted, I brushed Turpenoid over the entire painting with an oil-paint brush to soften the colors a bit. I used just enough of the wash to get some interesting new shades without darkening them too much.



3 After the wash dried, I darkened the shadows with a variety of blues and purples (blue violet, red violet and Prussian blue, all from Rembrandt), which had the effect of brightening the lighter areas of yellow in the leaves and the open sky in the background.





4 I continued to add detail and variety to the foliage in this stage, and I found that the dark purple in the foreground was too dark for the light effect I wanted as the viewer “enters” the painting. So I brushed off the pastel and used a plastic eraser to lighten up the head of the path and some of the growth alongside.



5 In the final stage I varied the maroon tree shapes so they wouldn't look like “fingers.” I put in some light sparks of color and I toned down the distant trees in order to push them back. The resulting *Fairchild's Path* (pastel, 25x15) gets a mysterious feeling from the many dark values, but the light at the opening of the path keeps it non-threatening, and the contrasting colors give it excitement.

Another of my favorite relationships, deep gray-purple (specifically violet gray No. 270-1, from Great American Artworks) with a middle-value yellow-green (green No. 15, from Unison), as seen throughout *The Grassy Road, Triptych*, has a wonderful soothing effect.

Essentially, I arrange my palette by values. The darker values tend to be cool shades of blue, purple, magenta, maroon and green.

Lighting the Path

Together (pastel, 24x36) is the second section of a four-part painting created for the Illinois School for the Deaf. (Each section has a hidden hand sign, such as the two fists pressed together with thumbs extended upward—in the background and to the right.) I wanted to symbolically represent the paths chosen—some easy, some hard—in our lives, and the exciting colors suggest a bit of adventure.

(Among these are Prussian blue No. 463, violet gray No. 478 and black green No. 179, all from Sennelier.) My middle values are various hues of rose, orange, gold, ochre, rust, red oxide, violet, blue and green, and my light values consist of orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. You'll notice I have shades of purple and blue in each value choice because I find them so versatile, but I don't keep black or white on my palette. These I use only for emergencies.

The Technique

When I find a scene I want to paint, I take plenty of photos, usually 10-20. That way, I can use only those that have the aspects of color and dimension that I'm interested in. I work on Wallis Archival sanded pastel paper and I begin by sketching the design lightly with pastel pencil, which gives me a quick look at the painting's composition and value relationships.

For the first (and possibly the second and third) layer of colors, I use pastel pencils, pressing lightly with open strokes and working from dark to middle values. From the beginning I'm

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Your Mood of Choice

The colors you choose for a scene have a huge impact on the feeling that scene conveys to the viewer, as you can see by these examples. High degrees of contrast can be dramatic like the yellows and dark blues of **A**, or jarring and energetic like the bright blues and pinks of **B**. Less value contrast, on the other hand, can have a quiet effect like the purplish **C**, a dreamy effect like the greenish, orange-tinted **D**, or an ambiguous and haunting effect like the light values of **E**.



careful to pay attention to how the colors interrelate to avoid mud. Once I'm off to a good start, I'll brush Turpenoid over the pastel strokes to tone the white paper and make a transparent underpainting. I do this with either oil-paint brushes or natural varnish brushes, depending on how much space is to be covered and how much Turpenoid I want to use—less for darker colors than for middle value colors.

To get more variation of color at this stage, I like to play with the wet surface. You can blot the colors with a tissue to make them lighter or to add texture, and you can use drips of Turpenoid to add interest. This process can make your colors flow together in beautiful

ways (although they'll appear lighter when they dry), and my Wallis Archival paper is strong enough to allow me to do all this, plus scrub and jab with brushes and still have tooth for the next layers of pastel.

Next I start painting the darkest values at my center of interest with soft pastel, still pressing lightly, and work my way around the paper, dark values first. Pressing lightly keeps the tooth of the paper from filling too quickly. To make changes, I use a dry oil-painting brush to pull off excess pastel and to erase if necessary. I gradually intensify and vary the colors as I work my way toward completion, with the thicker layers usually at the center of interest and the secondary focal points. I'll press harder with the soft pastels as I move on until at the end I might be pounding on the paper!

At the end I'll do whatever is necessary to get the look I want. For example, in *Fairchild's Path* (on the previous page) I thought the foreground was too dark, so I brushed off some of the pastel and erased the dark purple with a plastic eraser. I could have just used a lighter pastel, but I wanted that area to have a fresher look and I didn't think the addition of light purple would quite capture the right feeling.

The Right Connection

In a painting, the mood you create is essentially the result of your colors—from their hues, values and intensities to their contrasts, relationships, and the positive and negative shapes they create. Get inspired by the colors you observe and try to get a sense of what feelings they suggest in you. Then take them to your paintings and use them to bring about those feelings, and even make them up as you go along if necessary. If the color you see doesn't spark the mood you want, change it, or create a new environment for it, and you'll be able to send your viewers whatever message you choose. ♦

About the Artist



SHERI RAMSEY is a native of Omaha, Nebraska, studied art at Indiana University, and has operated the Ramsey Art Studio in Springfield, Illinois, since 1974. She's also taught high school art, as well as oil and pastel painting at the Springfield Art Association since 1975. Her art hangs in public collections throughout the United States and in private collections all over the world. She's also had several solo and group exhibitions, and is a member of the Pastel Society of America.