# Neccessary Neutrals

by

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The Usefulness of Neutrals

A painting drenched in saturation, can send the eye darting from one place to another, distracting the viewer from the focus of the work. Neutral colours provide a support system and spotlight in the overall composition by being non-confrontational and capable of creating a mood and emotion such as a welcoming and peaceful atmosphere. They provide the backdrop to give intense saturation centre stage. The brighter tones could not be so bright without the neutral tones. The neutrals are what make the bright colors more vibrant and more interesting to the entire scene.
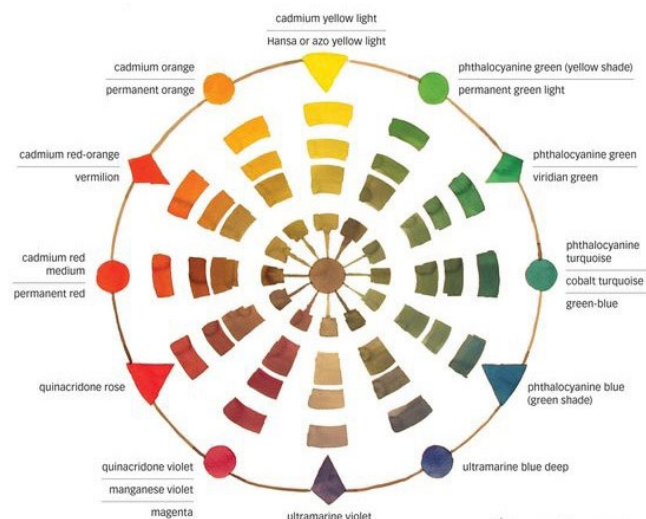
What are neutrals? - Defining Neutrals

The opposite of neutrality is saturation. Saturation includes pure tone such as the primary and secondary colours on the colour wheel - red - blue - yellow - green - purple, orange.
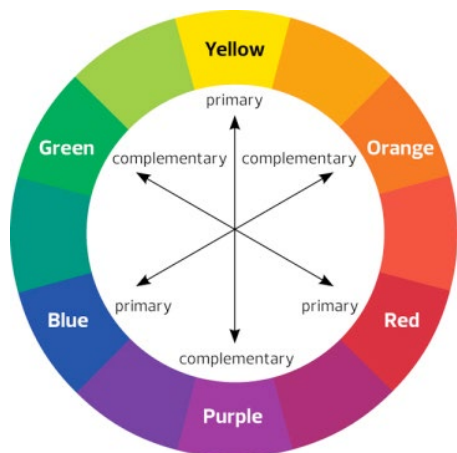
Complimentary colours:
red and green
blue and orange
yellow and purple

So, neutrals are any set of tones created when mixng two complimentary colours and any amount of white - getting a neutral grey or brown. This depends if you add more red and yellow to the combination to get a warmer neutral. Or, more blue or green to the combination to get a greyer (cooler) neutral.

Neutrals in Context

In the landscape, and all around us for that matter, neutrals are more 'there' than we think. They are hiding in the shadows, within the foliage, in the background, in the clouds, grasses, flowers, in the shape of a person's face, and object, and in so many more places before us.

As creative beings, we are all interested in bright colours. When using mostly bright tones, the viewer's eye doesn't know where to look and everything in the scene is shouting. Your painting can potentially come across unnatural, unpleasant and flat. This is why using neutrals can be so important to improve your work.
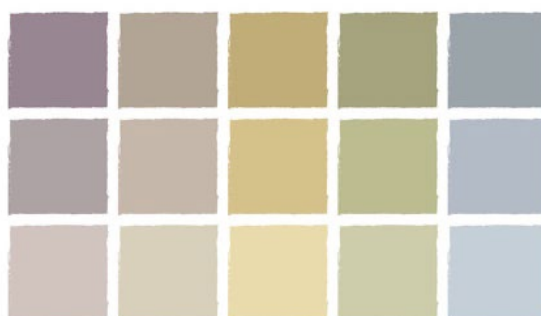
"Tea With Sugar Please"
44cm x 44cm

Neutrals provide the viewer a break from the intensity of highly saturated tones while also complementing and balancing them. Neutrals also create interest and provide subtle but important variations in a painting.

When pastel painting, it is a matter of choosing your neutral from your pastel sticks, or layering the complementary colours to get the final neutral you desire.

I also find it useful while pastel painting to do an underpainting using all neutral colours. I use this neutral ground as a map to build up the more saturated colours in my painting. I find this helps me to not overdue my brights.

The 'brightest brights' cannot be so bright without the support of the neutral tones.

Demonstration

Left: Subject photo

Top right: This is the initial pastel application for the underpainting using a variation of warm and cool neutrals to create the map.

Bottom right: The initial pastel application painted in with water and a synthetic flat-head brush. I have used brush strokes to follow the movement in the subjuct - diagnal strokes for the diagnal cloud movement, opposite diagnal strokes for the sand mounds, vertical strokes for the grasses, trees, and bushes.

Once the underpainting has dried, I start with the application of the darkest darks in each of my plains - the far distance, the middle plains, and the foreground plains.

I then build on the shadows, applying a variations of dark neutrals to give the areas some interest before I start applying more saturated tones. I am constantly keeping in mind the different plains and corresponding values. At this stage, I have also applied some colour to the plains of sand so I can build their relationship with the sky and distance. I need to make sure I don't lose all the neutrals in my underpainting, as the underpainting provides some texture to the sand.

Keeping a very loose approach, I continue to slowly

build up the saturation of colour- leaving my lightest lights towards the end of the painting process. During the process of building up the saturation of colour, I can stop and look to make sure my neutrals are not lost. I can always re-apply and add more neutrals to achieve the overall look, mood, and composition I desire.