Color Theory in Action

In the previous module, we touched on color theory and mixing colors. In this module, we'll put color theory to work and look at four different color schemes.

As we learned before, color schemes are a method of limiting a color "palette". Color choices are determined by the colors' locations and relationships on the color wheel. Therefore when a specific color scheme is implemented, the colors used are not the local colors of the subject.

We can alter the local color to any color that we prefer as long as we include the value range of the observed subject. In other words, as long as the value is accurate, the subject will be communicated in the painting, even though the colors are different.

Using a defined color scheme in a painting can create "mood" and harmonize the work. This approach also creates multiple opportunities for creative use of color in your paintings.

Getting Started

For this exercise, we'll create four different studies but confine them to one canvas. In each study, we'll use a different color scheme. Essentially, we'll treat each study as its own work, but limit the dominant colors to greens and reds so that the finished canvas is still harmonized.

We'll start by drawing the subject in each square. If consistency in the drawing is desired, a graphite transfer can be used to produce the same line drawing in each section.
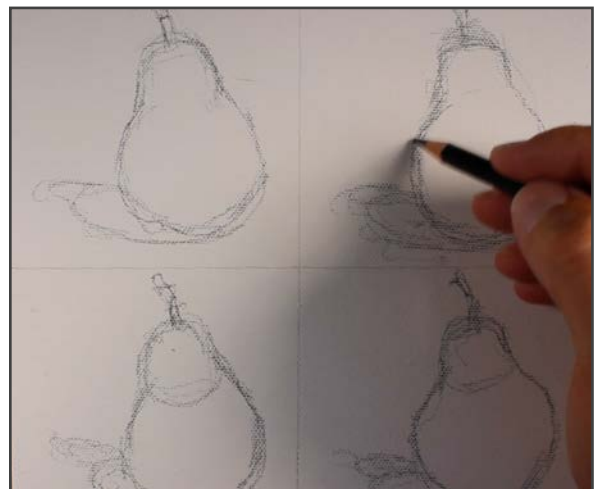
The Importance of Value

Since we are using specific color schemes in each section, we'll ignore the local color. Local color is the actual color of the object. We are free to alter the color to any that we choose as long as the value relationships are consistent with the subject. If the values are correct, then the subject will be communicated to the viewer.
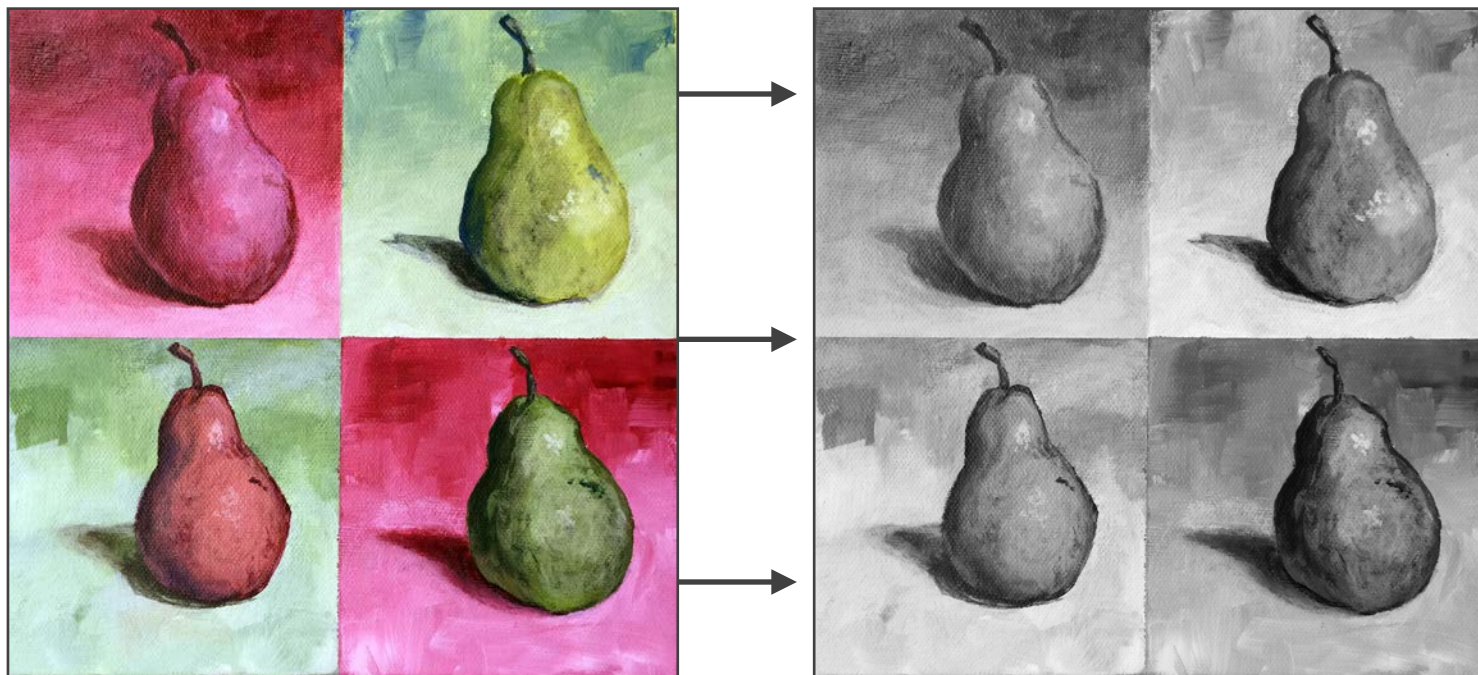
Monochromatic

The first color scheme we'll create is monochromatic. The word, "monochromatic" literally means "one color. A monochromatic scheme consists of just one color. We'll use the tints and shades of that color to create the illusion of light, form, and texture within the scene.

For our monochromatic section, we'll use Alizarin Crimson. Tints are created by mixing the color with Titanium White. Shades are created by mixing the color with a mixed "black" of Ultramarine and Burnt Umber.
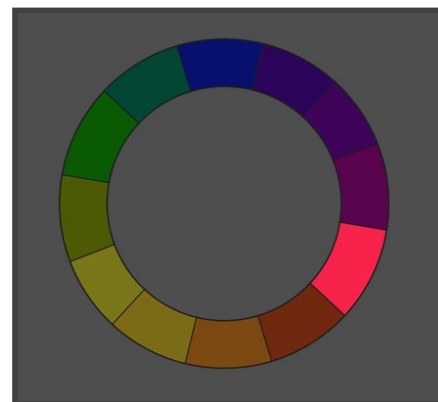
The background is painted with darker values at the top, transitioning to lighter tones at the bottom. This transition is created though multiple applications of darker reds and lighter reds.

The shape of the cast shadow behind the pear is developed with a darker value of Alizarin Crimson. This area will be refined after the pear has been added, but for now, just the overall shape will suffice.

The shape of the pear is defined, overlapping the background color and the shape created for the cast shadow. A lighter value is added initially.
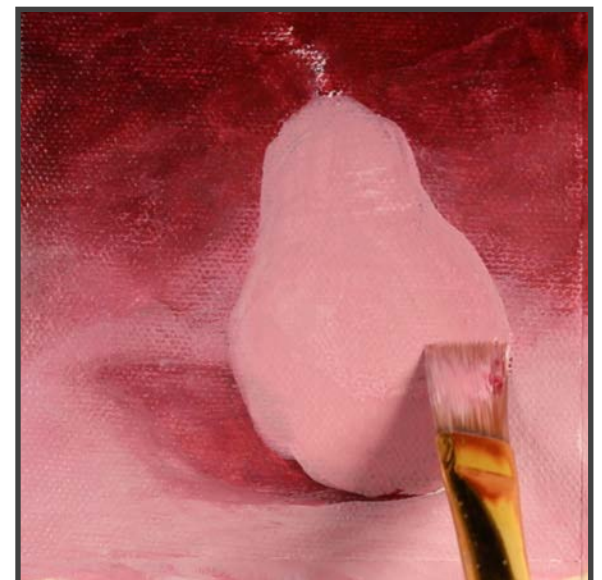
Darker values are developed in the area of core shadow on the pear. A few darker marks are added for spots and blemishes before adding a glaze over the top with a lighter value.

Stronger highlights are added with a light value of Alizarin Crimson. This value is very close to white, but still retains a "hue" of red.


Darker values are developed further, increasing the value range and contrast. A transition from darker to lighter values is also developed.

The area of cast shadow behind the pear is revisited and the shape and value is refined. Values are made a bit darker by mixing "black" with Alizarin Crimson.


The stem is added by applying a dark application, blocking out the shape. Highlights are added with a light value of Alizarin Crimson, followed by an application of mid tone.
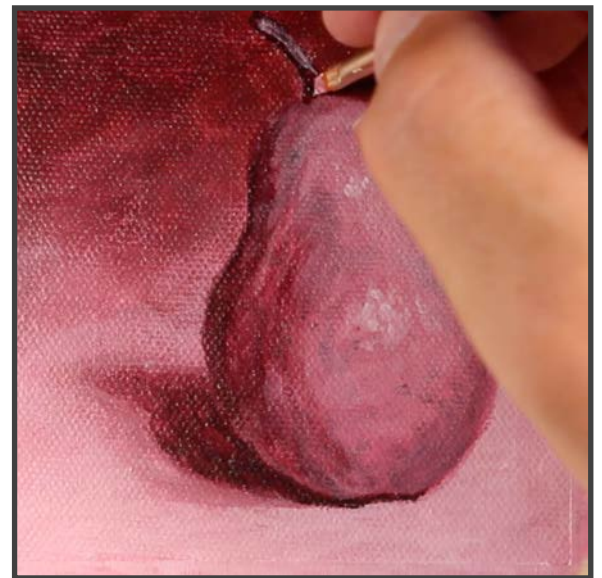
Analogous

Analogous colors are three to five colors that are next to each other on the color wheel. Analogous color schemes provide little color contrast, but are harmonious.

For this example, we'll use four specific colors: blue, blue-green, green, and yellow-green. The primary blue is Ultramarine and the yellow is Cadmium Yellow Light. To darken values, a mix of Ultramarine and Burnt Umber is used.
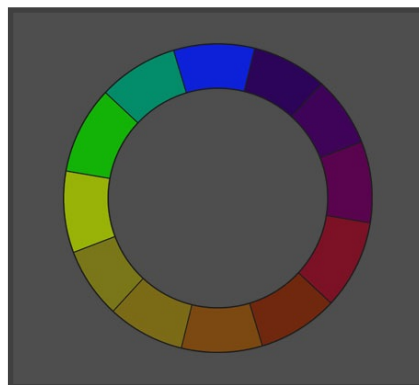
We'll begin on this section by establishing the background. Again, we'll create a transition from dark values to light values. Since we are using an analogous scheme, we can allow some of the colors to play a more active role. While the background is mostly green, we'll allow some bits of blue and yellow-green to remain visible.

Shadows on and around the pear are developed next. A darker mixture of blue-green is used initially to define the shapes.


Areas of lighter value are developed with a bright yellow-green. This application is allowed to overlap parts of the blue-green. Some of the darker undertones will show through this application.
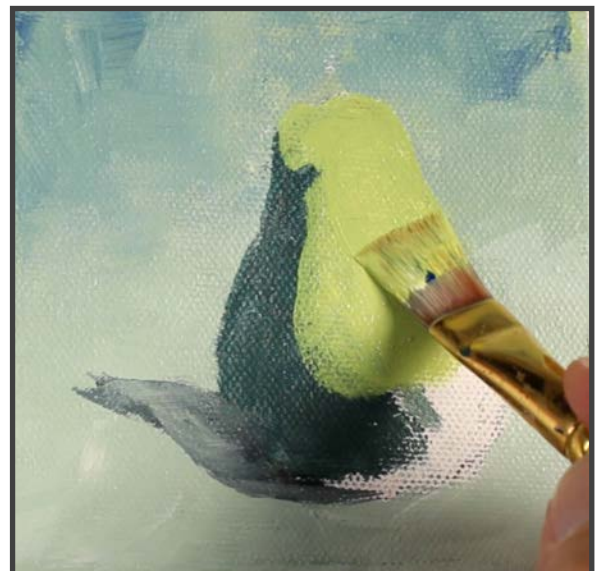
After the initial tone is added to the pear, the decision is made to lighten the foreground to increase the contrast. A lighter value of green is applied. This application is also used to define the edges of the cast shadow.

The darker values in the core shadow are developed with a dark blue-green and the left edge of the pear is refined.
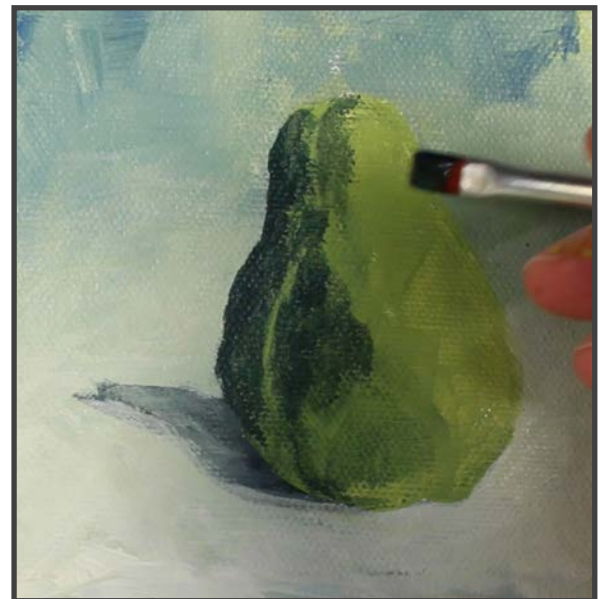
Transition areas that exist between the dark and light values are addressed with a mid tone green. This application is allowed to slightly overlap the blue-green and yellow-green applications.

A few blemishes and spots are added with the darker blue-green.

A lighter glaze of yellow-green is applied over the pear, predominantly on the side closest to the light source. This glaze uses enough water to be semi-transparent, but is thick enough to "stick" to the canvas. Colors underneath this application show through, creating a bit of depth in the color.

Intense highlights are added with an application of light yellow-green. Although extremely light in value, this application is not white.
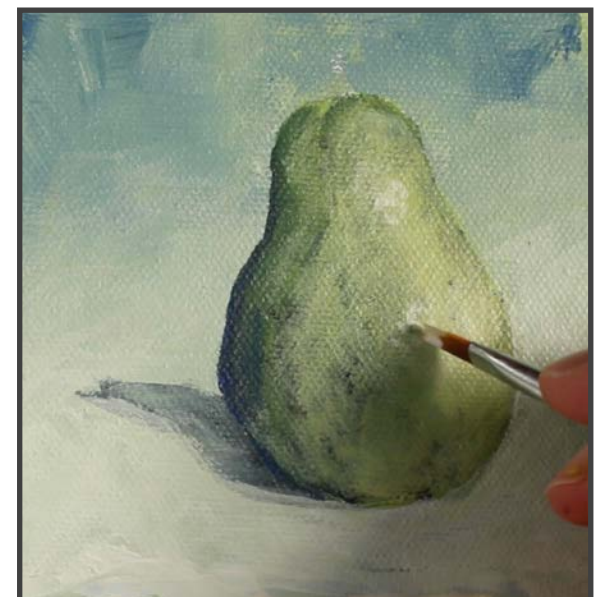
A "streak" of pure Ultramarine is added on the extreme left side of the pear in the area of core shadow. Ultramarine is also used for a few additional blemishes.


The cast shadow behind the pear is addressed with a darker value of blue-green. The stem of the pear is developed by first blocking out the shape with the same mixture. Highlights are added with a lighter value of blue-green.

Split Complementary

A split complementary color scheme is made up of three colors. These three colors consist of one color and that color's complement's closest analogous colors.

For this section, we'll use green, red-orange and red-purple. The same primaries are used: Ultramarine, Alizarin Crimson, and Cadmium Yellow Light. Titanium White is used to lighten values and our mixed "black" (Ultramarine and Burnt Umber) is used to darken values.
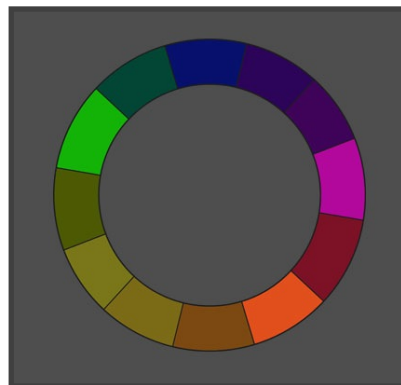
We'll start with the background. Again, we'll create a subtle transition from dark to light. We'll allow the brushstrokes to be visible to create texture and interest.

We'll develop the shape of the cast shadow with a darker green before creating the shape of the pear with a darker red-purple.

For areas closer to the light source, a lighter red-orange is applied. Because the red-purple has blue in its mixture, it is used for the shadowed areas on the pear. The warmer red-orange is used for the highlights and lighter areas on the pear.

A slight reflected highlight is added with red-orange on the bottom left portion of the pear. A few blemishes and spots are added with the darker red-purple.

A light value of red-orange is used for the strong highlights.

The shape of the stem is addressed with the darker red-purple. And while this area dries, the cast shadow is darkened a bit. Strokes for the highlights on the stem are added with the lighter red-orange.

Complementary

A complementary color scheme is made up of two colors that are opposites on the color wheel. Complementary schemes provide the highest color contrast.

We'll use the same primaries that were used in each of our studies: Ultramarine, Alizarin Crimson, and Cadmium Yellow Light. Values are lightened with Titanium White and Darkened with our mixture of "black" (Ultramarine and Burnt Umber).
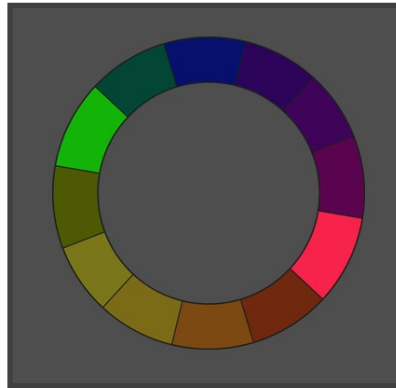
We'll begin this section in the same manner by addressing the background and the area of cast shadow. Again, a subtle transition of darker to lighter values is developed using various tones of Alizarin Crimson. The cast shadow is developed with a darker mixture of the red.

The body of the pear is defined with a darker mixture of green.

The right side of the pear is addressed with a lighter value of green. Here again, we'll create transitions of value by overlapping this application over the darker undertones.

As we have with the previous studies, we'll add a few spots and blemishes. These are added with a darker value of green.

The shape and value of the cast shadow is refined with a darker application of Alizarin Crimson.

In order to create a full range of value and to increase the contrast, the shadows are made a bit darker on the pear.

The shape of the stem is blocked in with a darker green, before adding highlights with a lighter value.

The strongest highlights are addressed with very light value of green. Again, this application is not white, although very close to it.

Although each of our studies is complete, they are confined to the same canvas and will be viewed as single work. Therefore, we need to be sure that each section has been addressed in a similar manner. The decision is made to revisit the first section and develop the values further, increasing the contrast between the dark and light values. Areas of shadow are revisited with a much darker value and extended a bit further to right side of the pear.

Lighter values are applied over the darker applications, allowing some of the color underneath to show through. Blemishes are added with the darker mixture of Alizarin Crimson and the intense highlights that were covered are returned.
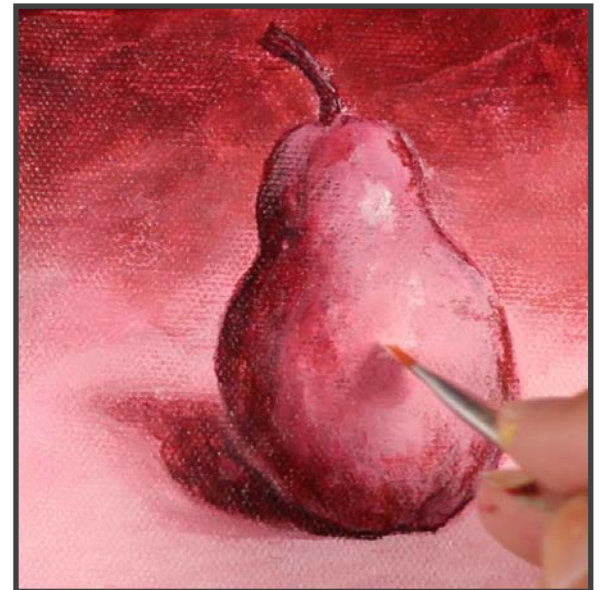
In painting, we are never limited to the colors that are observed. We can incorporate any colors that we wish as long as the values are correct. The schemes that we explored in this module ensure harmony in the work but are just a few of the possibilities that exist.