

## The Atelier Method

# COLOUR

Our five-part guide to atelier-style art continues with Lavender Hill Studios' Nick Bashall explaining the importance of values and Ann Witheridge talking us through a demonstration in colour

**M**y four-year-old daughter has the most beautiful large blue eyes, set against pearly white skin. It is perhaps her most striking feature – and to depict this accurately in a painting, one has to use colour.

Colour is such an amazingly beautiful and complex subject. The colours we see are a reflection of light hitting objects. Our naked eye can take in and process more colours than the most sophisticated camera – and yet when approaching colour in painting, it is essential to reduce it to the simplest elements.

Our fourth article is dedicated to this subject. The idea behind this series of five articles was to thoroughly prepare you for painting. And when one paints, it is the first time that we join our four stages together: proportion, line and volume, chiaroscuro and colour.

When moving into colour, the principles covered in the first three articles remain exactly the same, but one has the added complication of brushes, paints and mediums. However, it is very important to remember the principles and not let colour become an added complication. Plenty of people say to me that they can't work out or understand colour. Usually this means that it is actually the 'value' (the lightness or darkness of the colour) that they are having difficulties with.

Colour is very simple, if one deals with it in the right order. Drafting is the most important and difficult skill, which is why we spent the first two articles focussing on this. Value is incredibly important, and overrides temperature and colour. Think of some iconic images like Andy

Warhol's portraits of Marilyn Monroe. The colours are completely falsified, but the values and shapes are correct, and so we know immediately who the subject is. Not only is she recognisable but also the image is even more dramatic, playful and memorable in this falsification.

Similarly, Johannes Vermeer is often admired for his exquisite paintings with their jewel like quality and intense colours. But he started his paintings as monochrome studies, slowly building up the colours.

These colours only seem so intense because they are so clean and the

### TOP RIGHT

Ann Witheridge, *Spring Flowers*, oil on canvas

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Scott Pohlschmidt, *Pigments*, oil on canvas



control of relative values so great. If one looks closely at a portrait painted by the Dutch master, it is the combination of limited colour coupled with delicate highlights that makes them appear so vibrant. Conversely, an Impressionist painting that dealt

## WORKING WITH COLOUR

This exercise features a still life painting demonstration by Lavender Hill Studios student assistant Joni Duarte. We always begin this stage with a still life – there aren't the pressures of time or recreating accurate flesh tones that comes with a life model. Also it doesn't really matter if the onion is too big or too small; we are simply learning to use and enjoy the medium of paint.

In these steps, we can see how Joni has constructed the image through values (light and dark) rather than colour - the effect is much greater.



**1** When setting up a still life composition from which to work, Joni has chosen a strong light source with a dark background, so that the subject appears as a series of light and dark areas, and not individual, stark objects.



**2** The painting began by putting down a mid-toned ground over the white of the canvas. This means that you can now both lay down your darks and paint in the lights.

with the relationships of colour notes can be overwhelming and over-saturated, so much so that the colour becomes blander.

If you have followed the progression of the three previous articles, the introduction of colour can often overwhelm what you have learned so far.

When starting with colour at Lavender Hill Studios, we often begin with a *grisaille* (a monochrome painting) so that our students can better understand that the construction of a painting is determined by the values and tone.

### WORKSHOP 4

When painting a figure or portrait, there are many advantages to starting with a limited palette. For starters, it can help you to understand just how much can be achieved with a limited amount (and this applies to mediums and brushes, too). Then when one adds extra colours, it is a joy rather than a muddled mess.

If one has a limited palette, it is much easier to return to >



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**3** Next comes the 'scaffolding', similar to the ones in workshops 2 and 3. You can see here that Joni has delineated the shadow masses, not the objects themselves. Form is created through the shadows, not by depicting the external edges.



**4** Here Joni has massed in the dark value. He is using black and red from his limited palette. The red strengthens the black paint and adds a little warmth to the shadow mass. The painting should 'work' at every stage – it should always remain in harmony with itself. Even as a simple *grisaille*, the composition has a drama that comes not from the colour but the values.



**5** Now onto colour. Joni has blocked in some simple colour notes, using the limited palette. He has still not delineated the edges of the individual objects and yet one can easily 'read' it as a jug with some onions.



**6** Joni has refined the objects a little more here, adding a little variation to the lighter areas with some darker halftones and sharp highlights. How far one 'pushes' the painting is a matter of taste and personal style – whether one unifies or intensifies the colours, the edges and the accents is up to the individual.

## the atelier method

those base colours to remember how one got that temperature or tone. Also one's colours remain much fresher when there are fewer combinations in the mix; the more one mixes, the muddier the colour can become.

Lastly, it is believed that many of the great masters, such as Velázquez, Titian and Sargent, used a limited palette – and think how much they managed to achieve!

A good limited palette is comprised of just the following paints:



### *LEAD OR TITANIUM WHITE*

I prefer Lead White for portraits and flesh tones as it is a little warmer and denser, but Titanium White when landscape painting as it is cooler and has better covering power.



### *YELLOW OCHRE*

Try and find a brand that is neither too green nor too orange.



### *CADMIUM RED*

I find this a good balance – neither too purple, nor too orange. It can be substituted with Vermillion or Earth Red (the latter was a favourite of 18th-century British painters like George Romney and Joshua Reynolds).



### *IVORY BLACK*

I often substitute this for Paynes Grey instead as I find it can be a little softer. One can also add an Ultramarine Blue, too.

If I were to extend my palette, I might add Cobalt Blue or some different reds, like a Venetian or Earth Red, and perhaps Raw Umber. For a still life, one might need a Cadmium Yellow too, depending on the subject. Having kept my palette extremely limited, these extra colours become a luxury and one can really understand what they add to the painting.

The most important piece of advice is don't be a paint scrooge. Remember that this is oil painting, not

**RIGHT** Alex Tzavaras, *Male Nude*, oil on canvas



turpentine painting, so squeeze out lots of paint so you can mix with large, fluid amounts.

It is better to use large quantities of cheap paint at the start, so that one learns to paint with a loaded brush, rather than feeling precious about the amount of paint used and the inherent costs involved.

You can't make a single, luscious stroke unless there is a lot of paint on your brush. And you can't have a lot of paint on your palette to begin with.

**Next month: the final portrait demo. For more information on Lavender Hill Studios and the courses they offer, please visit [www.lavenderhillstudios.com](http://www.lavenderhillstudios.com)**