

LAYERING COLORS

When layering colors, it makes sense to use the most transparent colors of your palette, as you want the colors underneath to show as much as possible through successive layers.

The concept here is similar to color mixing on paper except that we are separating colors and letting the paper dry between each layer so the colors don't get muddy. This method is very effective for painting skin tones in portraits, as it gives you more control over tonal value and edge quality. I also sometimes use it in landscapes and still lifes.

You can choose any number and choice of colors for layering, but using the three primary colors will allow you to obtain almost any color. When layering with primary yellow, blue and red, always start with the yellow layer since it is the least transparent color of the three.

I compare layering to color mixing in the sense that the same area will be painted with a mix of different colors but instead of mixing them at the same time on the paper, you paint one, let it dry, paint another one, let it dry, and so on. This method is actually close to the printing process. Colors are separately applied and mixed on the paper.



THE TREE PLACE

Watercolor on paper mounted on board

Triptych, three pieces each 24" × 24" (61cm × 61cm)

In this painting, the background foliage has been painted mostly in a wet-on-wet technique. The tree trunks have been painted with many successive layers to obtain rich colors.



GETTING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Watercolor on paper mounted on board

30" × 30" (76cm × 76cm)

The sky has been painted in successive layers of yellow, red and blue to obtain subtle variations in color.

What Else Should I Know About Layering?

Layering can be tricky. Here are a few things to watch for:

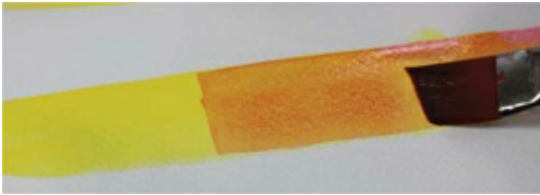
- To prevent your colors from getting muddy, be very careful not to lift the previous layer of color. Make sure the previous layer is totally dry before your next paint application, and use a soft brush with a light hand.
- Some colors are more intense than others. For example, when layering skin tones in my portraits, I start with a layer of yellow, then red and finally blue. That last layer of blue can easily overpower the colors beneath, so I use very light washes with the more intense colors.
- When layering colors, you are painting the same area repeatedly. That makes it difficult (if not impossible) to keep the edges sharp. Layering techniques usually produce edges that are not perfect. Some of the colors from previous layers will peek out. This is part of the charm of layering, and I think it adds interest to a painting.

Selecting Colors for Layering

When layering colors, you need to have an idea of how much of each of the layering colors you will need and where they will go. You can make an educated guess. For example, a bright orange will be mainly yellow and red and a more subdued orange will be mainly yellow and red with a tiny bit of blue. You can also use an image editing software like Corel PaintShop Pro® or Adobe Photoshop® to split the channels of your reference photo into CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow and black). This will tell you how much of each primary you should use in each of your color mixes.

Here are a few other factors to consider when approximating colors for layering:

- How much yellow, red or blue comprise the local color? For example, an orange will be mainly red and yellow, a green will be blue and yellow.
- Is the color very bright or a bit subdued? If the color is subdued, then it has a bit of its complement in it. For example, a subdued red will have a bit of green in it.
- How intense is the color? The more intense, the more paint and less water you should use. A very bright orange will have more yellow and red than a light orange.
- Is the local color in shade? If it is, then it has a bit of its complement and a bit of blue mixed in.



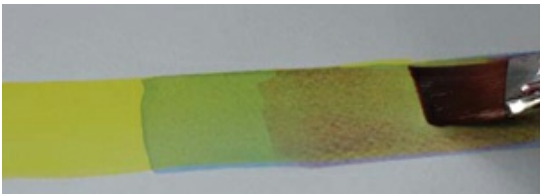
Layering an orange tone by painting a yellow layer and then a red layer.



Shade on the orange tone: A light layer of blue tones down a bright orange.



Layering a green tone by painting a yellow layer and then a blue layer.



Shade on the green tone: A light layer of purplish-red tones down a green.

What is Local Color?

Local color is the natural color of the object you are painting, unmodified by light or shade. Let's say you are painting a red apple. Its shade might actually be a mix of red (its local color), green and blue.

DOWNLOAD IT! Make a Layered Color Wheel. Visit [ArtistsNetwork.com/fearless-watercolor](https://www.artistsnetwork.com/fearless-watercolor) to download a PDF exercise.

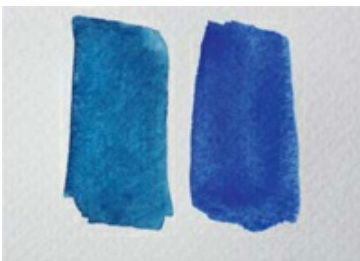
Recommended Colors for Layering Skin Tones

I generally try to have at least two go-to tones of yellow, red and blue: one cool and one warm. I decide which to use depending on the light temperature of the subject. A useful tip to remember is that shade on a warm color is usually cool and shade on a cool color is usually warm. Here are the colors I often use when painting portraits. They are also good general warm and cool color choices.



Warm and Cool Yellow Hues

The warmer hue is Yellow Ochre and the cooler hue is Cadmium Lemon Yellow.



Warm and Cool Blue Hues

The warmer hue is Ultramarine Blue and the cooler hue is Prussian Blue.



Warm and Cool Red Hues

The warmer hue is Permanent Red and the cooler hue is Alizarin Crimson.

In What Order Should the Colors Be Layered?

As a general rule, it makes more sense to layer the more opaque colors first and then to paint the transparent layers on top of the opaques. That way, all pigments will show through the layers and build up the new color.



This portrait has been painted with layers of Yellow Ochre, red (Alizarin Crimson and Permanent Red) and blue (Ultramarine Blue and Prussian Blue). Yellow Ochre is the most opaque color, and the blue and red pigments used are more transparent. Therefore, the first layer to be applied was Yellow Ochre.

When Might I Use Layering?



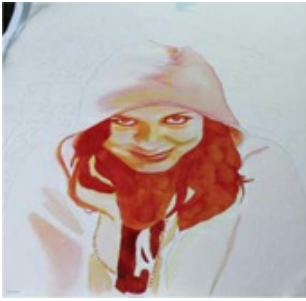
Layering Transparent Watercolor to Build Up Skin Tones

The skin and hair colors have been created by layering the three primary colors: yellow, red and blue.



Layering to Render Atmospheric Effects

Layering can be an effective way to build up luminous colors that will render atmospheric effects. The layer of yellow-orange beneath the green buildings helps show the effect of light in this cityscape.



Layering to Paint Skin Colors

Layering works well in portraits, as it gives you more control over rendering skin tones; you can focus on tone and edges while slowly building up hues.

Glazing Colors

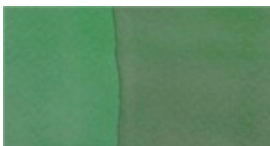
In essence, glazing is the same as layering, except it is usually done in a more transparent and subtle way with a goal of subtly modifying the underlying color. To glaze with watercolor, you will apply a light wash over all or part of a painting. You might glaze an entire painting if you want to add a bit of color harmony to the entire piece; it's a good way to connect disparate colors. You may also decide to glaze just a part of the painting. It's a great way to tone down a too-demanding color, for example. In such a case, you would add a glaze in a complementary color.



An orange color is toned down with a light complementary blue glaze.



A bright blue is toned down with a complementary brown glaze.



A bright green is toned down with a light complementary red glaze.