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# CHAPTER 18

## *“All you need to know about painting” (2)*

### **Introductory**

*We have now come to the last chapter and the question as to how to make the best use of the information and ideas presented.*

*The first chapter introduces the five propositions of Marian Bohusz-Szyszko, the ones that according to him constitute, “all you need to know about painting”. The chapters that follow provide an account of their very respectable historical and scientific origins and explain why they are so powerful. At the same time they point out some limitations. However, although the combination of non-repetition of complex colour mixtures have the capacity to transform what artists can achieve, they certainly do not represent “all there is to know about painting”, not even with the modifications and extensions suggested in this book. Most notably, they give short shrift to two subjects that many artists consider to be of the upmost importance. Thus, they have no relevance to the kind of “colour dynamics” that can be generated between juxtaposed colours (the subject of the following chapters) and they do not address what is perhaps the most important topic of all, namely the role of the feelings.*

*Although a full discussion of the importance of the feelings as a driving force in drawing and painting is reserved for “Fresh Perspectives on Creativity”, it would not do at all to neglect them entirely in what follows.*

### **Finding a project**

In painting, as in other spheres, there are no rules without a project. For example, the rules of Marian Bohusz-Szyszko are irrelevant to the recent work of my friend Michael Kidner<sup>1</sup> in which he used colour coding to make it easier to follow the intricacies of the complex patterns he was exploring. Each colour denotes a member of a group of related shape clusters. If there are four such groups, only four colours are needed: More than four would be confusing. Nor

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<sup>1</sup> See the Chapter 7 in “Fresh Perspectives on Creativity”, which is devoted to him.

is there any reason why they should be mixtures, except when another of the requirements is equal lightness and, even then, since variations in lightness can be achieved with additions of black or white, there is no reason for the use of mixtures containing complementaries. Similarly, the projects of Mondrian and Jackson Pollock depended for one reason or another on a limited palette and all used primary colours which as far as I know were straight out of the tube or pot.

Likewise, Op Artists like Bridget Riley and colour-field painters like Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, Robert Motherwell and Morris Louis, Robyn Denny and Patrick Heron all had projects that hardly required the knowledge presented in this book, although it is tempting to suggest that, in most cases, it could have taken their projects, as well as those of a multitude of others following similar objectives, just that little bit further.<sup>2</sup>

Another kind of project that is not necessarily dependent on the aspects of colour explored in this book concerns the creation of meaningful or striking images. Magritte asserted that he did not value his works as paintings, but as presentations of ideas. It is true that he needed a basic knowledge of painting in order to present those to their best advantage, but he was not interested in painterly qualities in their own right. One consequence of his attitude is that his images look just as good (or better) in reproduction than in the original. Francis Bacon is lauded for the capacity of his paintings to disturb. Do they succeed better as a result of his repetitions of both colour and mark-making? Whether or not the large numbers of them are produced for that reason, they certainly manage to reinforce the disturbing nature of the images.

Even if we restrict our interest to representational paintings, we find that there is no need for using complex colours containing complementaries to create effects of space and light. As Vermeer and many other artists working within the Renaissance traditions made clear to us, it can be done using a small palette of pigment-colours and subtle variations of lightness (tone, value) and texture. However, using a much larger palette of colours and working with complementary-containing complex colour mixtures, both make matters a great deal easier and has the potential for achieving considerably richer results. To get some idea of what, compare Vermeer or Véronèse with Gauguin or Cézanne.

As mentioned earlier, during my early years as an artist, my own project was to test the validity of the propositions on Marian Bohusz-Szyszko. It was to be several exciting years of exploration before I came to feel that I had a compre-

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2 A suggestion that will be explored in depth in "*Painting with Colour*".

hensive understanding of their power and their limitations.

### **How to make the best use of the ideas in this book**

Every new way of doing anything at all seems difficult at first. We have to persevere through a time of struggle and uncertainty, until we find that the activity suddenly seems natural to us and relatively easy. It is the same with the objective of never repeating pigment-colours and only using ones that are mixtures containing some proportion of pigment-colour from the opposite sides of the colour-circle. Practice eventually makes achieving this goal seem natural and easy, provided only that we start with an adequate selection of pigment-colours and a sufficiency of mixing space on the palette. There are some additional problems with acrylics, due to their rapid drying time, and pastels, because all mixing has to take place on the picture surface, but these can be overcome with a little ingenuity.

When we are making our mixtures, we need to remind ourselves that *we cannot know what we are doing* except in the most general of ways. It is extremely difficult to predict with any degree of precision the outcome of mixing any two pigment-colours, even when they are unadulterated tube colours.<sup>3</sup> The problem is made more difficult with every additional parent colour added to the mixing process. Indeed, when complex mixtures containing complementaries are involved, prediction becomes impossible. However, using our knowledge of the general properties of the colour-circle,<sup>4</sup> we can have a rough and ready idea of outcomes. Also, the fact of having a goal allows us to know if we are progressing in the desired direction. This means that we can both sense the degree of deviance and adjust our colour mixture accordingly. The degree of control we can get using the complex mixtures method is surprising. I would back it against any other method for getting the nearest possible match with any of the colours found in nature.

Even if we think that we have succeeded in mixing the colour that we are looking for on our palette, we are faced with the question as to whether what looks right on it will still look right in the context of the painting. The chances are quite high that the change in context will significantly alter the appearance of the colour in question. If this turns out to be the case, we need not worry. Just as when we are faced with the need to modify mixtures on the palette, we will find that we have a clear sense of the direction in which the unsatisfactory colour needs to go. Whether it should be darker, lighter, more or less fully saturated,

3 Unless a rigorous measuring system is used, which is not practicable with brush and/or palette knife situations.

4 Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16.

bluer, greener, yellower, more orange, more red or more violet, etc. Such relative judgements give us all the information we need to for adjusting our colour mixture appropriately. From the practical point of view the process of doing this is easy. We can place full confidence in our highly sensitive *comparative-looking skills* and use them to feel our way within the framework of our knowledge of the general properties of the colour-circle.<sup>5</sup>

### **"Dirty" colours**

It often happens that early attempts of mixing complementaries into pure tube colours produce results that are perceived as being "dirty". But this denigratory choice of words is just a matter of the relation of the mixture to a preconceived goal. Of themselves colours cannot legitimately be described as being "dirty", unless we prepared to describe greys, blacks, earth-yellows and earth reds, squeezed directly from the tube as being so. The difference in our way of feeling about them is due to our conception of the colour we are aiming to produce. If our objective is to make pure, bright colours, we are up against the fact that the process of mixing in complementaries invariably involves a visible degree of desaturation and a degree of darkening. It is this invariable direction of change, particularly if our inexperience results in the colour-mixtures drifting far from their original target, that is responsible for the sense of "dirtiness".

One way of showing that it is only the fact of falling short of our goal that leads us to describe the offending colour as "dirty", is to place it in the context of the other colours on the picture surface. If we do, we will repeatedly find that what seems "dirty" on the palette can seem clean, beautiful /and or exciting in the context of the painting.<sup>6</sup> Our response can also be dictated by our objectives. For example, a red that is too "dirty" when situated in a painting of a bright red dress may be the most luminous colour in the context of the depiction of a brown garment.

In general, "dirty" colours are indispensable for setting off brighter ones. One of the virtually endless numbers of examples would be Rembrandt's use of dark and "dirty" colours to create the context that gives dramatic vivacity to an earth-red, or a shining brightness to a yellow. Edgar Degas was very likely thinking of the Dutch master when he defined a "colourist" as "*Someone who can make a Venetian Red look like a Vermilion without actually touching it.*"<sup>7</sup>

5 Chapters 13, 14 and 15.

6 See also Figure 1 in Chapter 4 of "Painting with Colour". The orange bars that look extremely luminous in the painting illustrated, appeared on the palette as a distinctly "dirty" pink.

7 Much more on this crucially important subject in "Painting with Colour", in the chapters

As reiterated many times, “*dirty*” colours that are composed of complex mixtures containing elements from both sides of the colour-circle, have a high probability of being unique. Even more likely to be so are colour-mixtures that have been made by combining complex mixtures already situated on the palette, for they necessarily represent further levels of complexity. In general, the more complex a colour, the more probable its uniqueness. Or, in more scientific terms, the greater the likelihood of it existing in an hitherto unexplored regions of colour space.

This dual capacity for enriching our palette and propelling us into unexplored colour excitements is only one of the great advantages of using complex colour mixtures. At least equally useful for artists is the fact that, no matter where in colour space the complex colour is to be found,<sup>8</sup> it will contain the surface, light and illusory pictorial space giving properties as described and explained in earlier chapters.

In these and other ways so called “*dirty*” colours are a godsend to all who wish to extend the range of their colour-based experiences. They are absolutely not something to recoil against, but something to be made use of.

### **Clean colours**

Another way of dealing with “*dirty*” colours is to mix them with fully saturated tube colours or mixtures of adjacent fully saturated colours on the colour-circle. It is both theoretically and practically possible to create a mixture that is “*only just noticeably different*” to the fully saturated colour or colour mixture with which the “*dirty*” colour is being mixed. In other words, any less of the “*dirty*” colour in the mixture would cause it to be indistinguishable from the unadulterate, “*clean*” looking colour with which it is being mixed. Such colours, which by definition do not look “*dirty*”, incorporate the sense of light, space and harmony that is provided by all complex mixtures that contain some proportion of pigment from the opposite side of the colour-circle, when placed in the context of a picture surface covered with other complex colours, mixed in the same way.

### **Summary of practical lessons**

The main practical lessons from this book about painting with light can be

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dedicated to “*chiaroscuro*”, “*cast shadows*” and “*shading*”.

<sup>8</sup> The colours made can be of any hue, have any degree of darkness or lightness and any degree of saturation.

summed up succinctly:

- Relax and enjoy the extraordinarily rich range of colours that can be created by following the simple rules of Professor Bohusz-Szyszko as modified and expanded upon in these pages.
- See how when colours made in this way are applied to paintings, the finished product is imbued with a sense of space, light and harmony.
- Notice how the colours in them have a certain indefinable quality that is not quite like pure body-colour but is along those lines.
- If, despite your efforts at progressive mixing, certain patches of colour seem to jump out of their context, suspect that the reason is that they are repeats and, unless you enjoy the jumping out, change them relative to one another. Extremely small, even almost imperceptible changes should be sufficient.
- If the painting seems insipid, lacking in a sense of space and light or is to some degree disturbing to the eyes,<sup>9</sup> suspect that there are repetitions, look for them and make changes accordingly.

As I myself found, there is no need to go further than these easy-to-follow rules if your objective is to free yourself to explore any chosen region of colour space, at the same time, imbuing your paintings with qualities of space, light and harmony. Nor is there any need to get hung up on the theory behind them. The rules and a rough and ready understanding of the colour-circle<sup>10</sup> is all that is necessary. What could be simpler?

### The feelings

As stated both at the start of this chapter and at the start of this book, there is one key aspect of painting that the rules of Professor Bohusz-Szyszko omit, namely, the role of the "feelings", of which there are two intimately interconnected dimensions. These are "sensing" and "being moved by".

- Both in these pages and in "Drawing with Feeling" the emphasis is on an aspect of feeling that does not significantly differ between individuals, namely the one that underpins judgements of relativities. When we make comparisons we *sense*, not only that there is a difference but also

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9 Possibly to the degree of being perceived as garish.

10 Chapters 11-16

its extent and direction (longer, shorter, more vertical, more horizontal, flatter, rounder, lighter, darker, redder bluer greener, etc.). This feel-based capacity is at the core of *analytic-looking*. It is part of the heritage of all human beings. The fact that we are all good at it is why all of us have the capacity for achieving high levels of accuracy in drawing and painting.<sup>11</sup> If accuracy was what determines whether a person is an artist, everyone is born an artist.

Some people find it hard to believe that they are the equal of everyone else in this context, but this is because they are not very far advanced in the learning process. They can be reassured that there is no inbuilt reason why they should not rectify this situation. Indeed with a combination of a high level of motivation and good teaching the transformation need not take very long at all.<sup>12</sup>

- As everyone will be aware, there is also a more complex and personal dimension of the feelings and the role they play in creativity.<sup>13</sup> The “*feelings*” in question are the ones that make us feel “*good*” or “*bad*” about things, whether we do so mildly or with passion. Their importance to our processes of creativity is that they have a determining influence on our responses to every situation we confront in the course of our daily lives, including ones that we come across when making paintings.

The fact that each individual’s feelings are forged by an ever ongoing sequence of experiences, dating back to earliest childhood (many think back to the womb and beyond into genetic inheritance) and that the content of these experiences is different for every individual, means that each of us responds to everything we encounter in unique ways (whether the uniqueness be marginal or dramatic).

This assertion is true in every domain of human experience although it plays out differently in each. With respect to our visual world, it means not only that each of us notices and overlooks different parts of its contents, but also that there is always at least an element of uniqueness in the way we are excited by, react against or are unmoved by whatever it

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11 The only exceptions are those with very serious conditions, such as total blindness. According to my experiences teaching dyslexics, dyslexia is not one of these.

12 In my experience, the performance level of even the most seemingly incompetent beginners can almost always be significantly upgraded in a matter of days.

13 A core subject in my book “*Fresh Perspectives on Creativity*”.

is that does catch our attention.

From these assertions concerning the feelings, we can draw two conclusions. The first of these is that the fact that each of us feels in unique ways, means that each and every one of us *sees* in unique ways . The second, which follows from the first, is that we all possess unique possibilities both for personal creativity and for opening the eyes of others to new experiences.

***What you still do not know about painting***

*Even though the ideas presented so far in this volume provide ways of thinking about painting that can support a lifetime of creativity, many might feel that there are various matters of great importance that have been left aside. The second book in this volume, "Painting with Colour", is full of these. It not only deals with a variety of new ways of looking at the otherwise familiar subject of local colour interactions, but also with everything to do with cast shadows, shading and chiaroscuro, as used in both drawing and in painting.*

*The final chapter, makes a synthesis of both the theoretical and the practical ideas contained in the four volumes of in the series.<sup>14</sup>*

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14 "Drawing on Both Sides of the brain", "Painting with Light and Colour", *Fresh Perspectives on Creativity* and "What Scientists can Learn from Artists".