

Color Harmony Quick Reference Guide

Reference the [Composition, Color & Light Course](#) for more detail.

Key Color

Key color is the main or most dominant color in the image.

- Without the key color, the image does not work.
- Don't worry too much about there being a "right" key color. Just pick a dominant color and go with it.

In the painting below, blue was used as the key color. The entire top of the painting includes different tints and shades of blue.

All Paintings by Albert Bierstadt



Complementary Color Harmony



A complementary color harmony includes the key color and another color that lies directly opposite on the color wheel.

Complimentary colors produce a high contrast between colors known as color contrast.

Color contrast is produced when warm & cool colors are displayed side by side, of varying lightness values, high and low.

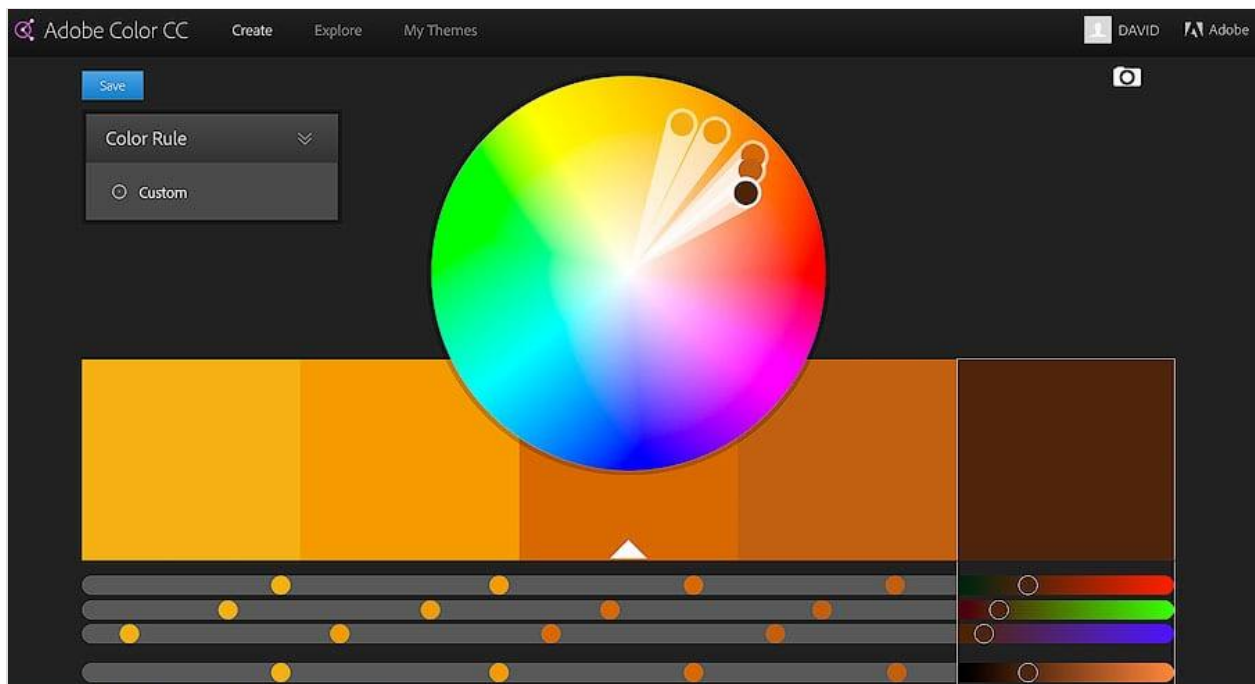
In the following image, the key color is blue and the complementary color is yellow. Different colors of blue and yellow are shown throughout the image, providing depth.

A dark shade (black added to a color) of green is present in the foreground but doesn't draw much attention.

Photographers can remove attention from unwanted objects by burning or darkening them in post-processing.

This causes the viewer to look at the brighter & more vivid colors first.

Analogous Color Harmony





Analogous colors lie directly next to each other on the color wheel.

Different tints (white added), shades (black added), and tones (gray added) of orange are used in the painting above.

The key color is clearly orange.

Analogous color harmonies are often found in nature and work very well for scenes with high tonal contrast.

Without large areas of dark to offset the warm colors the painting would be overwhelming.

Our eyes easily move around the painting due to the large numbers of different shades showing transitions from light to dark.

Triadic Color Harmony



The Triad or Triadic Color harmony uses 3 or more colors, spaced evenly, producing the points of a triangle.

Triadic color harmonies are often vibrant due to the spacing of the colors.

Usually, the Key Color is dominant while the other colors are more subdued.

In the painting above, high contrast is used in the foreground with shades (black added) of orange and green, while low contrast is used in the background with tints (white added) of blue, green, and orange.

Shading objects often makes them appear closer, and tinting objects often make them appear further away.

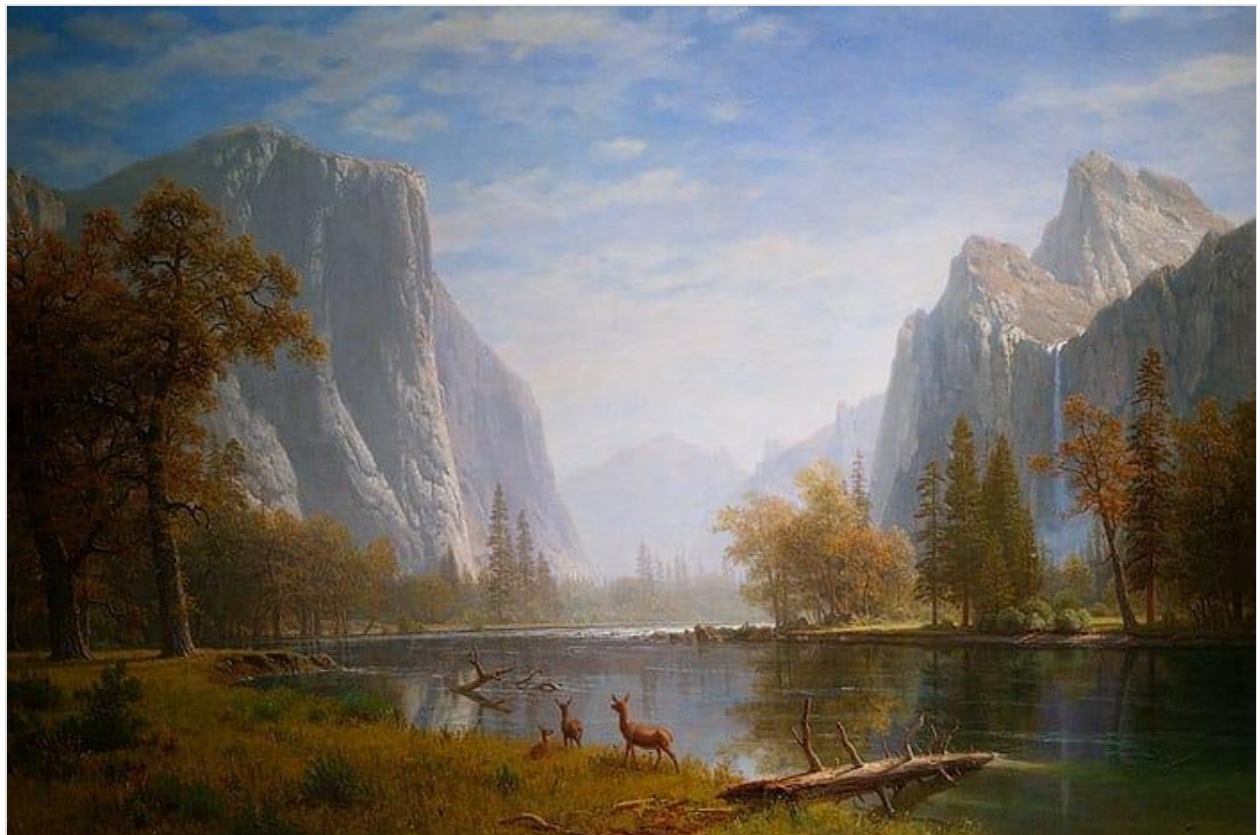
Tinting the background colors provides the feeling of diffuse, dense, and humid air catching the sunlight.

A transition from dark to light adds a sense of depth to the entire scene.

The cool colors of blue (sky) offset the warmer tints of orange (rocks), providing leading lines, moving your eyes from left to right through the painting.

On the right side of the large warm colored rocks, a green shade is used to provide depth & detail to the shadows.

Split-Complementary Color Harmony



The split-complementary color harmony is easy to use and often found in nature. Most sunsets and sunrises display this color harmony.

- After selecting the Key Color, find the complementary color that lies directly across from it.
- The split complementary colors are found on each side of the complementary color. They do not include the complementary color.

In the painting above blue is most likely the key color. It is found in the sky, waterfall, river, and shadows. Yellow and orange shades & tints are used as the split complementary colors.

Dark reds are used in the foreground producing an autumn scene, while saturated yellow is used for the center trees signifying a source of light.

Objects hit by direct sunlight often appear much more saturated than the same objects untouched by light.

Square Color Harmonies



By selecting a dominant key color and 3 subdued colors, spaced evenly around the color wheel, the square color harmony is formed.

This can change to a Rectangular Color Harmony by slightly moving each color. Test it out and see what works!

- The square color harmony is perfect for displaying the single most important object in a scene.
- All other subdued colors in the square are used to complement the key color and make the subject of the work stand.

Below, light yellow or blue is most likely the key color. Either will work in this case.

Without blue, the mountain is not dominant. Without yellow, the mountain also loses its power.

Both colors provide a stark color contrast of low and high lightness values.

All other colors, such as dark green, dark blue, and dark red complement and add more depth to the painting. The subject is clearly the peak, Mount Adams, which lies in the wilderness of my home state, Washington.