

Color Schemes

Colors are like musical instruments. Each instrument has its own special sound. When you hear an instrument in an orchestra, the sound you hear is affected by the sounds of the other instruments. When the musicians tune up before a performance, you hear confusing, even unpleasant, noises. When they play together in an organized way, they can make beautiful sounds. In the same way, putting colors together without a plan can be confusing and unpleasant to your eyes. Color without organization can look like a visual argument. A plan for organizing colors is called a color scheme.

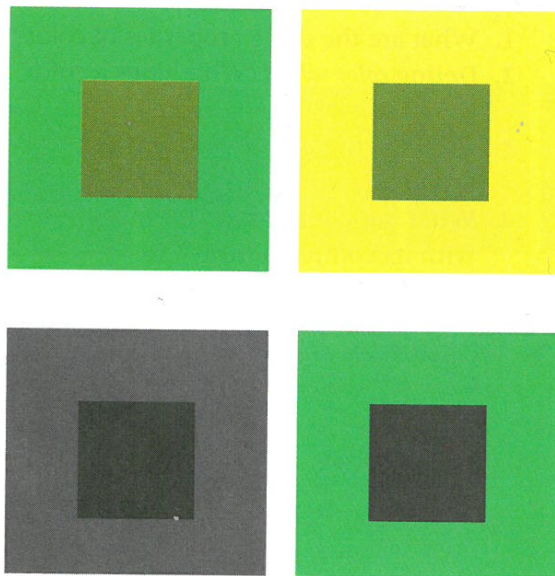
When two colors come into direct contact, their differences are more obvious. A yellow-green surrounded by a green looks even more yellow. A yellow-green surrounded by yellow, however, appears greener. Grayish-green will seem

brighter when it is placed against a gray background. This effect is called simultaneous contrast (**Figure 6.12**).

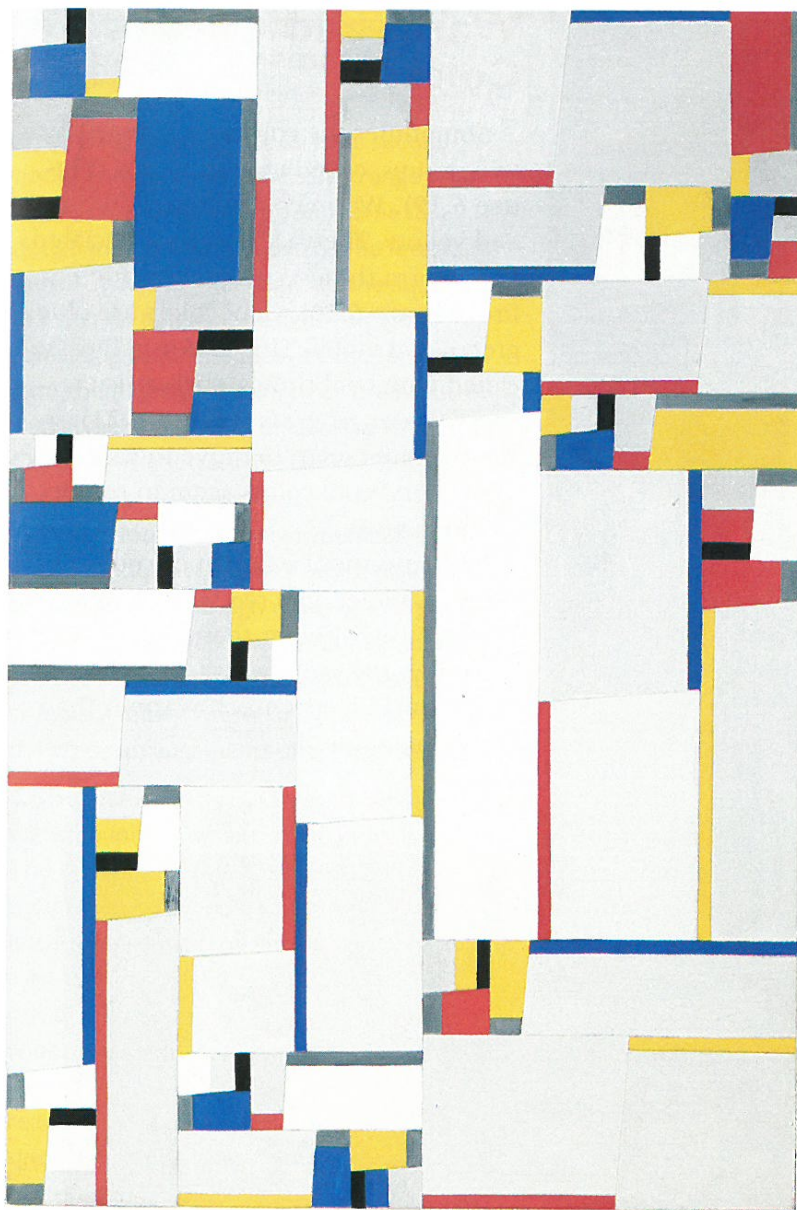
A color scheme is a plan for organizing colors according to their relationship on the color wheel. By following a color scheme, you can avoid putting together colors in a confusing or unpleasant way. The following are some of the most frequently used color schemes.

Monochromatic Colors

Monochrome means one color. A **monochromatic** color scheme is a color scheme that uses only one hue and the tints and shades of that hue. Because this is such a limited scheme, it has a strong, unifying effect on a design (**Figure 6.13**). It is very easy to organize furniture or clothing using monochromatic colors. The drawback to a monochromatic color scheme is that it can be boring.



◀ **FIGURE 6.12** Your perception of any color is affected by the colors that surround it. This effect is called simultaneous contrast.

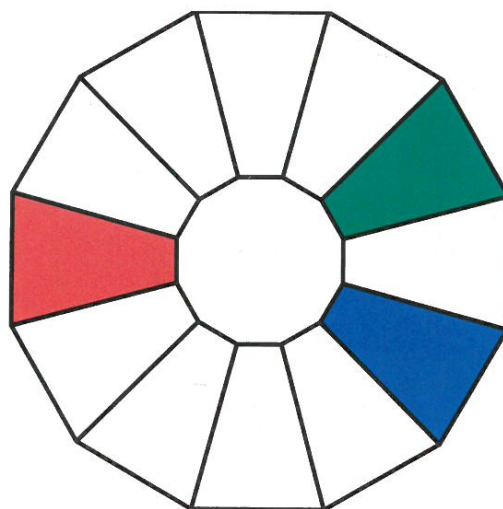


◀ **FIGURE 6.17** Even though this painting is based on the primary triad, it is very comfortable to view. What has the artist done with the colors to make this painting easy to look at?

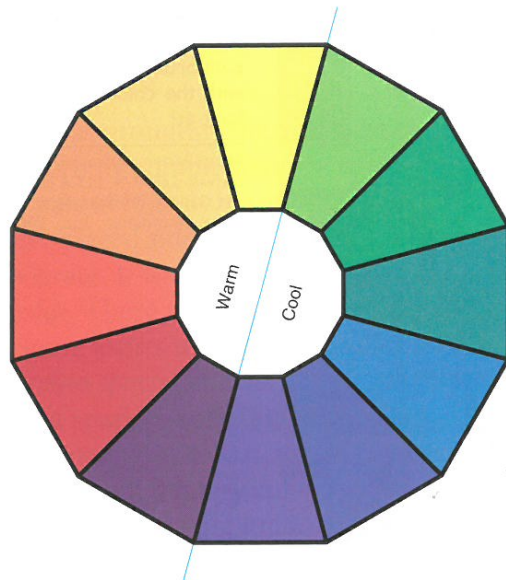
Fritz Glarner. *Relational Painting #93*. 1962. Oil on canvas. 169.9 × 111.8 cm (66⁷/₈ × 44"). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of the Seymour H. Knox Foundation, Inc., 1966.

Split Complements

A *split complement* is the combination of one hue plus the hues on each side of its complement (**Figure 6.18**). This is easier to work with than a straight complementary scheme because it offers more variety. For example, start with red-orange. Check the color wheel to find its complement, blue-green. The two hues next to blue-green are blue and green. Red-orange, blue, and green form a split-complementary color scheme.



▲ **FIGURE 6.18** Split complement.



▲ FIGURE 6.19 Warm and cool colors.

Warm and Cool Colors

Sometimes the colors are divided into two groups, called *warm* and *cool* (Figure 6.19). Warm colors are red, orange, and yellow. They are usually associated with warm things, such as sunshine or fire (Figure 6.20). Cool colors are blue, green, and violet. They are usually associated with cool things, such as ice, snow, water, or grass (Figure 6.21). Warm colors seem to move toward the viewer and cool colors seem to recede, or move away.

The amount of warmth or coolness is relative. Violet on a red background appears much cooler than violet alone. However, the same violet on a blue background seems much warmer than the violet alone.



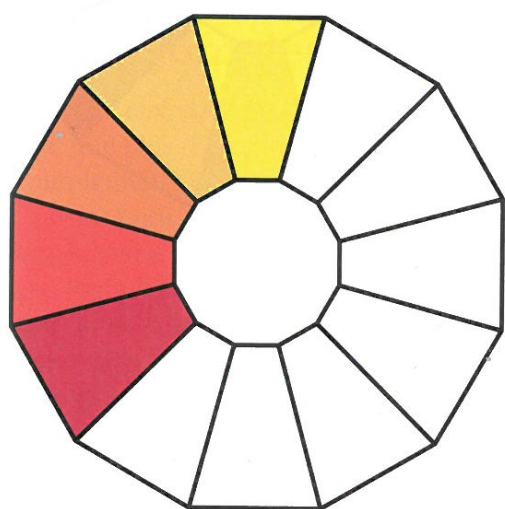
▲ FIGURE 6.20 The warm colors in this painting tell us the mood the artist is trying to create.

Rufino Tamayo. *Toast to the Sun*. 1956. Oil on canvas. 80 × 99 cm (31½ × 39"). Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas. The Roland P. Murdock Collection.



◀ **FIGURE 6.13** The artist has captured the sad mood of these people by using a monochromatic blue color scheme. He has kept it interesting by using the full range of tints and shades from white to black. Where are the whitest areas? Where are the blackest areas? Look at the title. Does the painting evoke this feeling?

Pablo Picasso. *The Tragedy*. 1903. Oil on wood. 105 × 69 cm (41½ × 27¼"). National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. © 1998 Board of Trustees. Chester Dale Collection.



▲ **FIGURE 6.14** Analogous colors are related.

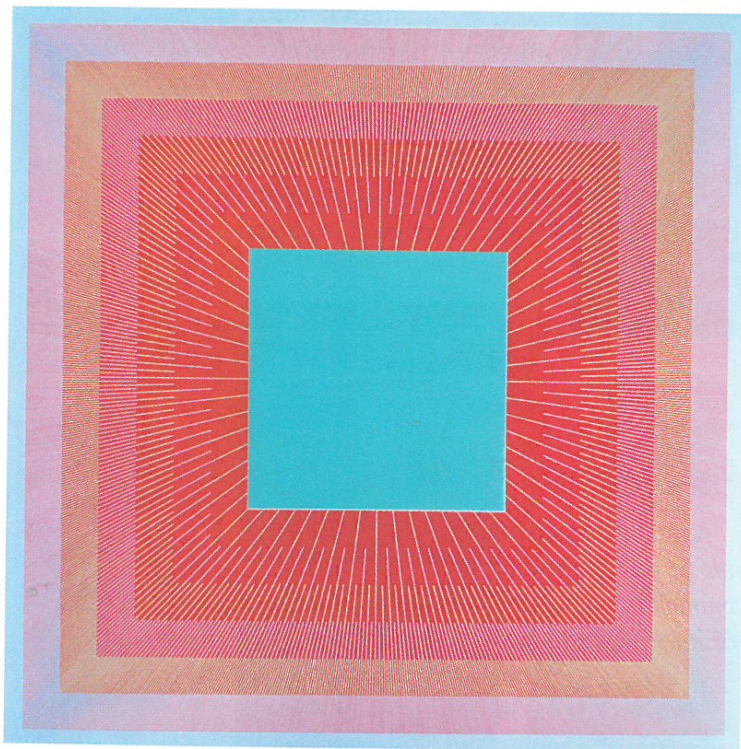
Analogous Colors

Analogous colors are colors that sit side by side on the color wheel and have a common hue (**Figure 6.14**). Violet, red-violet, red, red-orange, and orange all have red in common. A narrow color scheme would be limited to only three hues, such as violet, red-violet, and red. An analogous color scheme creates a design that ties one shape to the next through a common color (see Figure 13.34, on page 380).

Complementary Colors

The strongest contrast of a hue is produced by complementary colors. When a pair of high-intensity complements are placed side by side, they seem to vibrate. It is difficult to focus on the edge where the complements touch. Some artists use this visual vibration to create special effects. They make designs that sparkle, snap, and sizzle as if charged with electricity (**Figure 6.15**).

Complementary color schemes are exciting. They are loud, and they demand to be noticed. They are frequently used to catch the viewer's attention. How many ways do people use the red-and-green color scheme? Where else have you seen complementary color schemes used to grab attention?



▲ **FIGURE 6.15** This painting is an experiment with the effects of high-intensity, complementary colors. The well-defined squares have been created by precise lines, evenly placed. Notice how the red ground changes color according to the density of the alternating blue and green lines. Stare at this painting. Do the afterimages affect your perception?

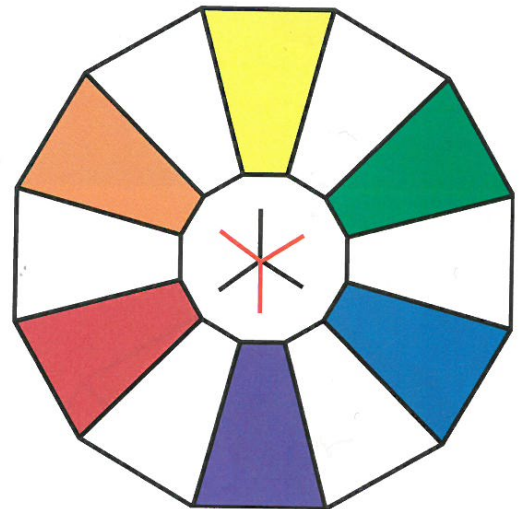
Richard Anuszkiewicz. *Iridescence*. 1965. Acrylic on canvas. 152.4 × 152.4 cm (60 × 60"). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1966. © Richard Anuszkiewicz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Not all color schemes based on complements are loud and demanding. If the hues are of low intensity, the contrast is not so harsh. Changing the values of the hues will also soften the effect of the design.

Color Triads

A color triad is composed of three colors spaced an equal distance apart on the color wheel. The contrast between triad colors is not as strong as that between complements. The primary triad is composed of red, yellow, and blue. The secondary triad contains orange, green, and violet (**Figure 6.16**).

A high-intensity primary triad is very difficult to work with. The contrast between the three hues is so strong that they might make people uncomfortable. A triad can be made more comfortable to the viewer by changing the intensity or values (**Figure 6.17**). A triad of secondary colors is less disturbing.



▲ **FIGURE 6.16** Color triads.