

How many colors should a painting have? As many as possible. And as few as possible. This answer involves two principles of art. And while they seem to conflict, they don't.

I believe art viewers want to see as much as an artist is able to show them. Variety is wonderful.

One of our main objectives as artists is to keep viewers looking. We should want our viewers to want to see it all. But we also want them to keep looking. So they need to keep finding more. One way to do this is by using a variety of colors.

By color I'm not just talking about hue, but also chroma (how neutral it is) and value (how light or dark it is).

There are only so many paints available to an artist. Since there's not enough variety, we must mix our own colors using the paints we have. It's the mixing of paints which can give us an unlimited range of color. This may be done by mixing in small batches so the result is always different, mixing unevenly, or layering of transparent paints.

As many colors as possible satisfies the need to give viewers a lot to look at. But as few as possible would unite the picture by assuring us they appear all over. It would give it balance.

The solution to this conflict is found by asking how many colors we need to mix in order to create all the colors which should be in a particular painting.

Any two colors can be mixed to create any of the colors located between them on a color wheel. And if they're not complements then those colors are all different hues, too. This can give us a very interesting range, but does limit the artist to the particular neutral hues which are found on the line between those colors on a color wheel.

Three colors which span the color wheel so that they form a triangular area that encompasses absolute neutral, allows for every hue on the wheel to be made by mixing. And all of the neutrals within the triangular area can be made, too.

The most pure colors to appear on this type of painting are the actual paint colors used. All else is somewhat neutral. These pure colors will attract attention and may form focal points. While we're attempting to show a viewer as much variety as we can, too many focal points can turn into a lack of focus. This is a reason why too many pure colors are undesirable.

The advantage to using only three, or even just two, pure colors is that most every location on the picture is likely to be some blend of those paints. While we can achieve the colors we want with various mixes of paint, our eyes receive light from the actual paint we used.

Viewers may think they're looking at a picture which is made of many different paints, but their eyes know better. Their eyes see the paints in common which unite the picture.

CONCLUSION - Viewers will see a full color picture with only three paints. Or, they can see a wide range of color with only two paints. But they'll also sense that every part of the picture belongs to the whole picture.