

**THE PAINTER'S PALETTE; A
THEORY OF TONE
RELATIONS, AN
INSTRUMENT OF EXPRESSION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649223633

The painter's palette; a theory of tone relations, an instrument of expression by Denman Waldo Ross

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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DENMAN WALDO ROSS

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By **Drama W. Ross**

THE PAINTER'S PALETTE. Illustrated.
ON DRAWING AND PAINTING. Illustrated.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND New York

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**A THEORY OF TONE RELATIONS
AN INSTRUMENT OF EXPRESSION**

BY
DENMAN WALDO ROSS

**LECTURER ON DESIGN
IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
MDCCCXIX

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Fine Arts - Carnegie Fund
W.A.L.
4-23-30
21567

PREFACE

IN taking up the practice of painting, it is a question what pigments to use, how to arrange them on the palette, and then how to use the palette. Following the example of most painters, we take certain pigments; blacks, browns, reds, yellows, greens, blues, and whites; and, putting them in a row, we proceed to mix them, two or more together, quite freely, following our visual impressions or the suggestions of the imagination. In so doing we hope to produce results and effects which will be appropriate to what we have seen or to the ideas we have to express. There is no principle or law in this procedure and the effects produced depend, in every case, upon the taste and judgment of the performer; who is, necessarily, as much concerned with the problems of the palette as he is with the problem of his Motif or Subject, whether it is well chosen; of his Design, whether it is consistent; or of his Drawing, whether it is true or expressive. It is so difficult to decide what to do, in view of the great number and variety of pigments, and the infinite possibilities of mixing them together. Most painters get over the difficulty by acquiring a habit and doing the same thing repeatedly, following the precedents of their own particular practice, whatever it happens to be.

Considering the Art of Music and the use of musical instruments, it seems that the musician has a great advantage over the painter in having a fixed scale of tones and definite rules for using it, — rules based on good precedents and representing the practice of recognized masters. Thinking of musical instruments and the laws of Counterpoint and of Harmony, the question comes up whether it may not be possible for the painter to convert his palette into an instrument of precision and to make the production of effects of light and color a well ordered procedure, — a procedure which everyone can understand and follow. If this is possible, the mind of the painter

may be released from the problems of the palette and devoted, almost wholly, to the still more important problems of Subject, Design, and Representation. After more than twenty years given to the consideration of this question and to experiments in the use of set-palettes, I am fully persuaded that it is perfectly possible to make of the painter's palette an instrument of precision, — an instrument which will serve him both as a mode of thought and means of expression. He will then use his palette very much as the musician uses his voice or the violin or the piano.

Among the many palette-systems which I have devised and considered there are two which seem to me particularly interesting and promising. One of these systems may be described as the System of a Suitable Triad Repeated. The other may be described as the System of the Spectrum Band with Complementaries in Corresponding Values.

In the first system; a certain triad of colors, a triad in which there is a complementary balance, is repeated at equal intervals of the Scale of Values between the extremes of Black and White. There are four triads which I have used in this way: Red, Yellow, Blue; Orange, Green, Violet; Violet-Red, Orange-Yellow, Green-Blue; Red-Orange, Yellow-Green, Blue-Violet. There is another series of triads in which the colors are taken, not at equal intervals of the Scale of Values, but at unequal intervals. In the four regular triads above given, the colors are taken at the interval of the fifth. Taking the colors at intervals of the fourth, fifth, and sixth, we get another series of triads, with complementary balances, — a series which I have used and found extremely interesting. It was Mr. H. G. Maratta who first suggested them. The regular triads will be generally used; the others as they may be required. Taking the regular triad Red, Yellow, Blue, and repeating it five times between the extremes of Black and White, we get the palette indicated in the following diagram:

THE RED-YELLOW-BLUE PALETTE

White	White	White
Red	Yellow	Blue
Red	Yellow	Blue
Red	Yellow	Blue
Red	Yellow	Blue
Red	Yellow	Blue
Black	Black	Black

In using this palette I have generally followed the rule of taking the colors on up-to-the-right or up-to-the-left diagonals, — mixing Red with a higher Yellow and Yellow with a higher Blue; or Blue with a higher Yellow and Yellow with a higher Red. By mixing the three colors, as they follow one another in one or the other of the two sequences, I get neutralizations and a perfect neutrality. Occasionally I have followed both sequences in the same design or picture. This System of a Suitable Triad Repeated is very fully described in my book, — *On Drawing and Painting*, published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1912.

In this book, which is published as a supplement, I propose to describe and explain the System of the Spectrum Band with Complementaries in Corresponding Values. I have had this system in mind, in one form or another, for more than twenty years, and I have followed it, off and on, during all that time; following it for a while and then, preferring the System of a Suitable Triad Repeated, giving it up. During the past five years, however, I have used it almost exclusively; and, in its present form, it seems to me the better system of the two. It is much more logical in theory and much easier to follow in practice. The most serious difficulty will be found in the setting of the palette; in deciding what pigments to use, in preparing the tones and in getting the complementaries properly adjusted, to produce the required neutralizations and a perfect neutrality. It is only a master who can produce a satisfactory palette which will be the instru-