

Focus on Creativity: Exploring Color

by Photographer Raymond Klass

Color can be one of the most influential elements of design. It has the power to direct the way our eyes travel throughout the image, influence our perception of mood, and can control the emotional impact of the picture. Often color is perceived as a one-dimensional element, either it exists or it doesn't. Nothing could be further from the truth.

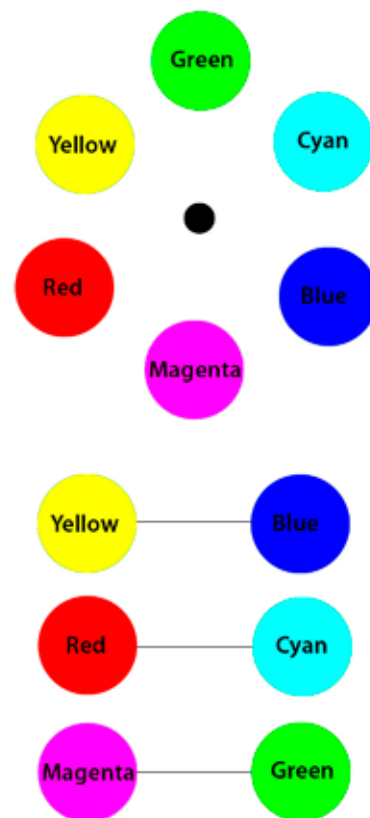
Color is an important aesthetic choice that you, the photographer, have control over. It's not simply about how far we push the "saturation" slider in Photoshop, but rather starts with the very objects we choose to include, and those that we do not. Our visual arrangement of elements, their corresponding colors, and their interactions is often the first statement an image makes to the viewer. It's important to understand that you the artist have complete control. Realizing that these decisions can and should be conscious choices is the first step.

You may remember the colors commonly used in school as **Primary Colors**, Red, Blue, and Yellow. These **Primary Colors** are meant to be the ones that could be mixed together (as in paint), to form all the other colors. The important concept here is that these primary colors are the most basic elements, the ones we use as building blocks to form the rest of the color wheel.

Looking ahead to a more modern view of the **Primary Colors**, we now realize that Red, Blue, and Yellow are not fully able to create the other colors, and so our printers use Cyan instead of Blue, and Magenta instead of Red. These are the basic building blocks of your printer's ink.

Looking at the top color wheel, color opposites often called **Complementary Colors** are those colors that sit directly across from each other on the color wheel. For instance, Yellow and Blue are direct opposites of each other.

In addition to both **Primary** and **Complementary** colors, photographers would benefit from a good understanding of **Warm** and **Cool** colors. **Warm** colors are the reds, oranges, and yellows - these colors tend to come forward in a composition, and evoke a energetic, or active mood. **Cool** colors consist of blues, greens, and aquas. They tend to recede into the image, and evoke calm or passive moods.



The last concept that isn't strictly limited to color is the idea of contrast. Color contrast can help different elements of your image come forward. The closer colors are to each other on the color wheel, the less color contrast can be found between them. For instance, a red and an orange have relatively little color contrast compared to a red and a green or a red and a cyan.



If you're looking to highlight a subject of a specific color, you might look for opportunities to place colors nearby with a high degree of contrast. This is often why some photographers choose to have a red or yellow canoe in a blue lake, because it simply stands out better due to its color than a blue canoe.

Using a high level of color contrast isn't a requirement for a successful image, some images work well with little or no color contrast, and it is this lack of color contrast that contributes to the mood of the images - think of a foggy scene.



The slight blue line along the edge of the leaf creates a great deal of color contrast between the warm and cool colors, and serves to highlight the edge of the subject. Without this the image would not be nearly as dynamic.



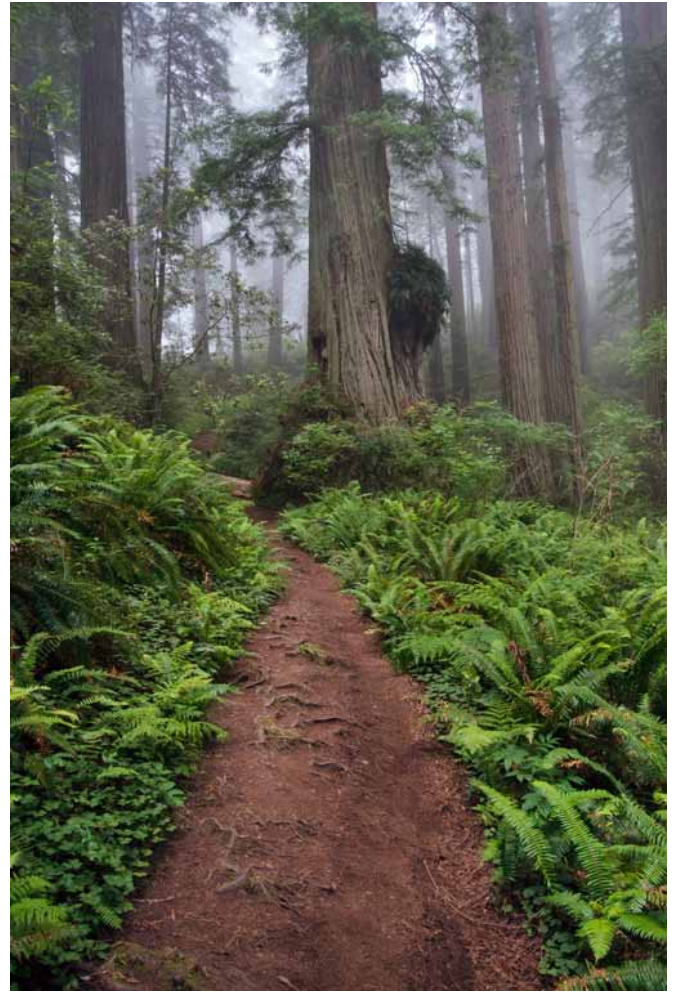
This image uses the contrast between cool and warm colors to add depth to the ray of light appearing. Try covering the area of light with your hand, and see how the mood changes.



This image uses both warm and cool colors, along with complementary colors to direct your eye first to the bright yellow grasses, and then down the lake to the mountain and sky. The warm yellow grass comes forward from the cool colored background to grab the viewers eye initially.

Had there not been this contrast between color, the grass would not hold the same aesthetic weight. It is a good example of using color contrast to direct how a viewer flows through the image.

Color is a powerful element that affects all areas of the image. It can be used to highlight foreground subjects, create dramatic mood, or convey the feeling behind the image. Learning to use color to your advantage is just one of the many steps behind creating a successful and compelling photograph.



This foggy scene along the coast of California has a muted color palette that creates a definite mood. It was a raining, foggy day, and the cool colors of the fog overhead recreate the cold and damp setting that was there.

The contrast here is built between the cool fog and the warm colors of the reddish brown path, which grab the viewer and take them through the frame. Adding small amounts of contrasting color can be a very powerful tool for directing your viewer to the important elements within the frame.