

---

# Color in Shadows

by  
Don  
Andrews

**Most watercolorists seem wonderfully color-oriented when painting the lights in their landscapes. They fill these areas with vibrant and lively color. But when they address the shadow areas, they seem to lose their concern for color and resort to cold, inky darks. In truth, the shadow pattern in a painting is where the richest, most exciting color possibilities can be found.**



## Problem darks

A common problem I continually see in the workshops I teach is a lack of color excitement in the shadow patterns of my students' paintings. Their shadow areas appear murky or unnecessarily dark. It seems these artists automatically reach for dark, blue pigment whenever they describe a shadow.

In truth the shadow pattern in a painting is where the richest, most exciting color possibilities can be found. When observing the passages of light and shadow on a model or in the landscape, notice that a strong light source can make the subject's color seem diffuse or washed out. The shadow areas will report a deeper, richer value of the local color. While the lights in your subject are usually quite limited in value range, the shadow patterns offer a wide range of values from light-middle, middle, middle-dark to dark. This fact goes to the heart of this color concept.

I believe the most vivid color range on our palette revolves around middle-values and that's exactly where most shadows exist. We're limited when we paint light values: we either leave white paper or dilute our colors to indicate illuminated areas. However, when we paint the shadows, we're able to use pigment much stronger and, if we're willing, just as creatively.

## Solving the problem of murky darks

There are a couple of factors that contribute to the problem of murky or overly dark shadows. Many shadow problems develop from a poor color/value selection. For instance, if you first paint in the lights with warm, dominant washes and then overlay the shadow pattern with cooler washes in a similar value and intensity, these opposing color temperatures can create a murky, neutral shadow. To overcome this problem, try to mostly stay in the same color temperature for shadow patterns as in the lights. Richer mixtures of similar colors or color temperature will keep the shadows clean and vivid.

## Don't rush into darks

Darks are necessary for emphasis, but don't rush into them. And remember: less is more. Save the darks in your shadows for special accents placed after you have developed the majority of shadow shapes in the middle-value range.

### Remember:

Clean, vibrant shadow patterns and shapes will enhance any subject you paint. And middle-value is the key to a successful shadow pattern statement.

**Don Andrews**, A.W.S., is a prize-winning painter, popular teacher and the author of *"Interpreting the Figure in Watercolors,"* Watson-Guittill. A native of Alabama, Don recently moved his studio and home to Exeter, New Hampshire.

Not all shadows have to be painted in analogous colors. It's O.K. to have color temperature changes in the shadow pattern, if these color temperature changes are strong enough to overpower the underlying wash. Put simply, if you're going to switch from warm to cool, or vice versa, put the pigment down powerfully.

## Shadows aren't necessarily cool or dark

Shadows aren't necessarily cool or dark, though there's nothing wrong with occasionally describing them that way. Shadows can be as color-varied and experimental as the lights. Try painting the shadows with rich middle-value reds, greens, and violets. The trick is to use richer, undiluted mixtures of local color rather than automatically reaching for the blues or dark neutrals—or both.

Remember to paint through the value scale with your subject. Don't skip the middle-value range—live there! Build as many steps around middle-value as possible. Middle-value is where your best color opportunities lie, and that's where the majority of the shadows are found.



## A different approach

One of the best ways to create clean, powerful shadows is to paint them first. Leave the light on the figure or landscape and begin the painting by addressing the shadow pattern. This is especially effective when the majority of your subject is found in shadows. It is important to begin with a little stronger value statement when painting the shadows first. I'm often fooled into thinking I'm being bolder in values than I'm actually being, because I'm visually comparing this first wash to the white of the paper. So, start with a rich, light-middle value and work through the value scale from there.