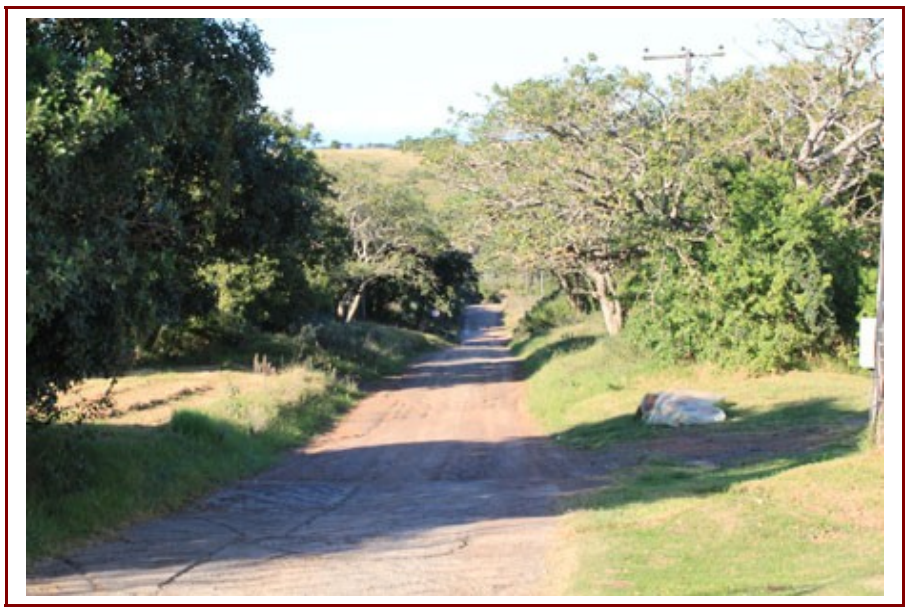
Without a Shadow of a Doubt!

Painting Shadows 101

Shadows – are mysterious, they provide balance, contrast, depth, shape and suggest more than they reveal. Shadows are essential to the representational painter's skills. However painting the shadow convincingly is often confusing to beginners and intermediate artists too. Many times the shadow is simply fudged with the hope that the bright bits will carry it all off. I want to have a closer look at the basics of the mysterious shadow. If you are like me then too much theory can get tiresome. I prefer doing, but please bear with me as a little theory now will make the doing part more rewarding.

To paint a convincing shadow we need to consider a few things:

1. what is the light source
2. what is the nature of the light
3. The direction of the light
4. the colour of the object causing the shadow and the surface in shadow.



In this reference we can see that:

The light source, the sun, is giving a warm light. The shadows are therefore cool.

The shadows are not blue, but a cool version of the local colour. Blue can however be used to mix this shade (eg. A cool burnt sienna)

The grass in the sunlight is yellow-green. The grass in shade is a cool dark green.

Observe the shapes of the shadows.

The light source:

This is usually the sun. It is usually warm light. This means the temperature of the light will be warm. Consequently the shadow will be cooler. We can cool down the warm colours by mixing in cool colours. eg. Some ultramarine into yellow-green to get the cool shadow.

Cool light such as on an overcast day will result in generally cooler colour influenced by blues and purples. Adding white also tends to cool colours. The shadows will however appear warmer.

Cool artificial light or warm artificial light will have similar properties to outdoor light, but be careful. Sometimes shadow temperature can be confusing under these conditions.

The Nature of the Light

This will fall under light source too. Warm sunlight or cool fluorescent light for example.
The light source and the nature of the light are the factors influencing **colour temperature**. An important matter when we come to painting our shadows.

The Direction of the Light

Provides self evident facts such as direction of the shadow and where the dominant light source is coming from. If the dominant light source is warm then colour temperature is likely to be warm.

The Colour of the Object

This is the local colour of the object you are observing. Its shadow colour will be determined by the light temperature. Cool or warm.

Conclusion:

From the above we can say that colour temperature depends on the nature of the light and this will in turn determine the colour temperature of the shadow. How so? We can drill down further and agree that if the light is warm eg sunny day, then the shadow will be cool. If the light is cool eg, fluorescent light then the shadow will be warmer. This will help us mix the correct colour temperature to indicate the shadow.

Some important points:

1. We must always observe the local colour closely. There will be exceptions now and then especially when artificial light is in play.

2. Shadows are darker colours of the local colour. Earth will still be earth but its colour will be cooler or warmer depending on the light. Use a dark, cool version of brown for example by mixing ultramarine into burnt sienna. This is preferable to using blue alone to depict the shadow. Blue will make the shadow jump out rather than a calm receding shadow. Experiment to get the correct colour and temperature.

3. Shadows will have less texture than the brightly lit area.

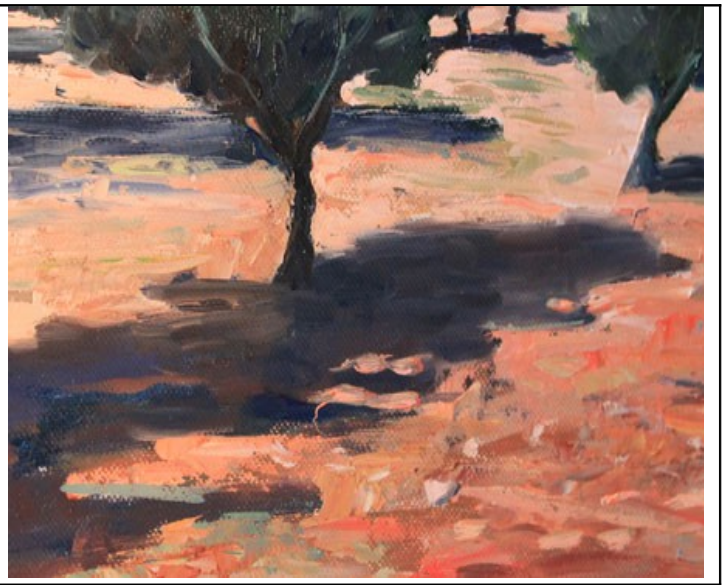
4. Remember the values. A shadow is not always very dark. Observe and adjust values to the scene.

5. Shadows will not be black. They may be dark but never black so use colours other than black to make your darks. Ultramarine, alizarin and viridian are good colours to mix into darks as they are transparent. This adds to the mystery of a shadow – depth is better than a blank black.

6. Shadows will be darker at the base of the object and will diffuse as they progress away from the object.

7. Shadow edges must be closely observed. They may be soft or hard or progress from hard to soft. Look closely to see.

Shadows are cool. Light is warm.



Shadows are flat compared to textures in the light. Edges of shadows are softer. Shadows are influenced by surrounding reflected light.

Colours are also influenced by their neighbouring colours. Cerulean blue will appear cool against red but warm against viridian. Alizarin will appear cool against orange but warm against ultramarine. Your shadow must therefore be painted with these relationships in mind to get a convincing shadow.

This is a short lesson in colour theory and needs fleshing out with practical work at the easel and preferably outdoors. There is no substitute for this so practice a lot. You will develop your favoured methods and approach to shadows, but if you use the above tips you will have a good start to painting shadows. Shadows are a wonderful part of your painting and deserve close attention.

If this article has been helpful to you please share it with a friend. Thank you

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