

Hue, Saturation & Value

BEGINNER

Every color has three properties, and learning their names makes it much easier to adjust color. Hue is the name of the color: red, yellow, blue, orange, purple. Saturation is how intense or pure the color is: fire-engine red is highly saturated, dusty rose is low saturation. Value is how light or dark the color is: a light pink and a deep crimson are both red hues, but very different values. When a color looks wrong in a painting, you can ask three specific questions: Is the hue right? Is the saturation right? Is the value right?

HOBBYIST

The most important of the three properties for realistic painting is value. If your values are correct, a painting reads as three-dimensional and believable even if the colors are slightly off. Saturation is the most commonly abused property in beginner work — everything ends up oversaturated, producing a harsh, garish quality. Real-world colors are mostly quite desaturated; highly saturated colors are the exception, not the rule, which is precisely why they carry visual weight when used sparingly.

PROFESSIONAL

The HSV model is the working vocabulary of digital color tools, but its deeper utility is as a diagnostic framework. When evaluating a painting digitally, sampling specific areas and examining their HSV values reveals structural color problems: shadow areas that are too saturated (shadows are typically less saturated than lit areas), mid-tones sharing the same value as both lights and darks (creating flat, undifferentiated range). In traditional painting, this diagnostic requires training the eye rather than using a picker.