Lesson 6 — Color Fundamentals

Local Color vs Light Color

BEGINNER

An object's local color is its actual, real color — a red apple is red, a blue car is blue. But when light hits it, the color you see on the lit side is the local color shifted toward the color of the light source. In warm sunlight, the lit side of a red apple becomes a warm, orangey red. The shadow side shows the local color shifted toward the complement of the light. Once you start seeing this — lit side modified by light color, shadow side by its complement — everything you paint will look more vibrant and alive.

HOBBYIST

The local color versus light color distinction is where most painters plateau. Beginners paint the apple is red and the shadow is dark red — applying uniform local color and just varying value. The upgrade is understanding that the light source has its own color, which modifies the local color additively. A white object in sunset light becomes orange-yellow in the lit area and violet-blue in the shadow. The object's local color is white, but you are not painting white — you are painting the light and atmosphere that falls on it. This is the philosophical basis of Impressionism.

PROFESSIONAL

The professional management of local versus light color is a question of degree and context. In naturalistic painting, the shift from local to light color is observed from nature and applied with sensitivity to specific conditions. In stylized illustration and concept art, the relationship can be pushed far beyond naturalism for expressive effect: hyper-saturated colored light that transforms local colors dramatically is a staple of fantasy and sci-fi concept art. Understanding the underlying physics — light adds its color to surfaces, complement-biased shadows modify in the opposite direction — lets you make non-naturalistic choices with internal consistency.