

How Ian Fennelly chooses

COLOUR





WELCOME

Hi there!

One of the most common moments of uncertainty in urban sketching is not the drawing. It is standing in front of a scene with your sketchbook open, outline complete, brush in hand, and not quite knowing which colours to pick up first. You have plenty of colours available. You might even have a rough idea of how you want the painting to feel. But where do you actually begin?

This guide explains why that works, and gives you Ian's favourite complimentary pair to explore for yourself.

“The colours are already
in your palette.

This exercise just helps
you understand how to
let them **work** together.”

IAN FENNELLY

Introduction

When choosing colours, Ian Fennelly almost always starts in the same place. He picks a pair of complementary colours (colours that sit directly opposite each other on the colour wheel) and builds his entire palette around them. When two complementary colours share a painting, they don't just sit alongside each other. They intensify each other, and when mixed together they produce the neutral tones that connect everything.

That neutral is the heart of this exercise. Most painters call it “mud” and try to avoid it. Ian uses it on purpose. Add a little white and you have a grey/brown that harmonises perfectly with everything else in your painting, because it is literally made from the same pigments already on your palette. Your shadow colour, your mid-tone, your dark sections, all without ever reaching for black.

The exercise takes about twenty minutes. You mix six versions of that neutral, from deep and rich all the way through to a pale delicate neutral shade, and lay them out side by side. Keep the finished grid somewhere visible when you paint, and you will never be stuck for a shadow mix again.



Materials

Let's start by taking a look at what materials we need for this exercise:



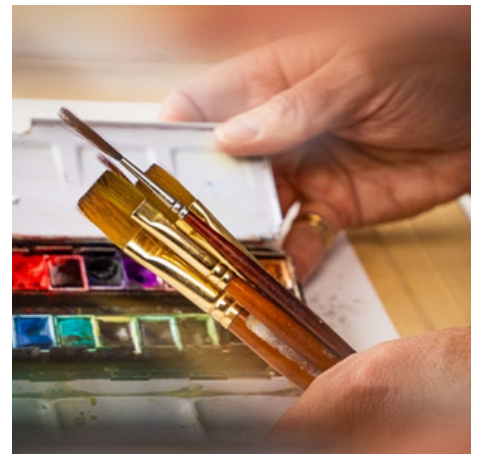
WATERCOLOUR PAPER

Something with a bit of tooth works best, but whatever you have is fine.

WATERCOLOURS

Ian uses Winsor and Newton Professional, but the exercise works with any watercolours.

The colours we'll be using are: **Ultramarine Blue and Burnt Sienna with Titanium White.**



A BRUSH AND WATER

Nothing specific needed here.
Any brush that can carry a decent wash, perhaps a flat or rigger.

PERMANENT PEN

Use this for drawing the grid lines only.

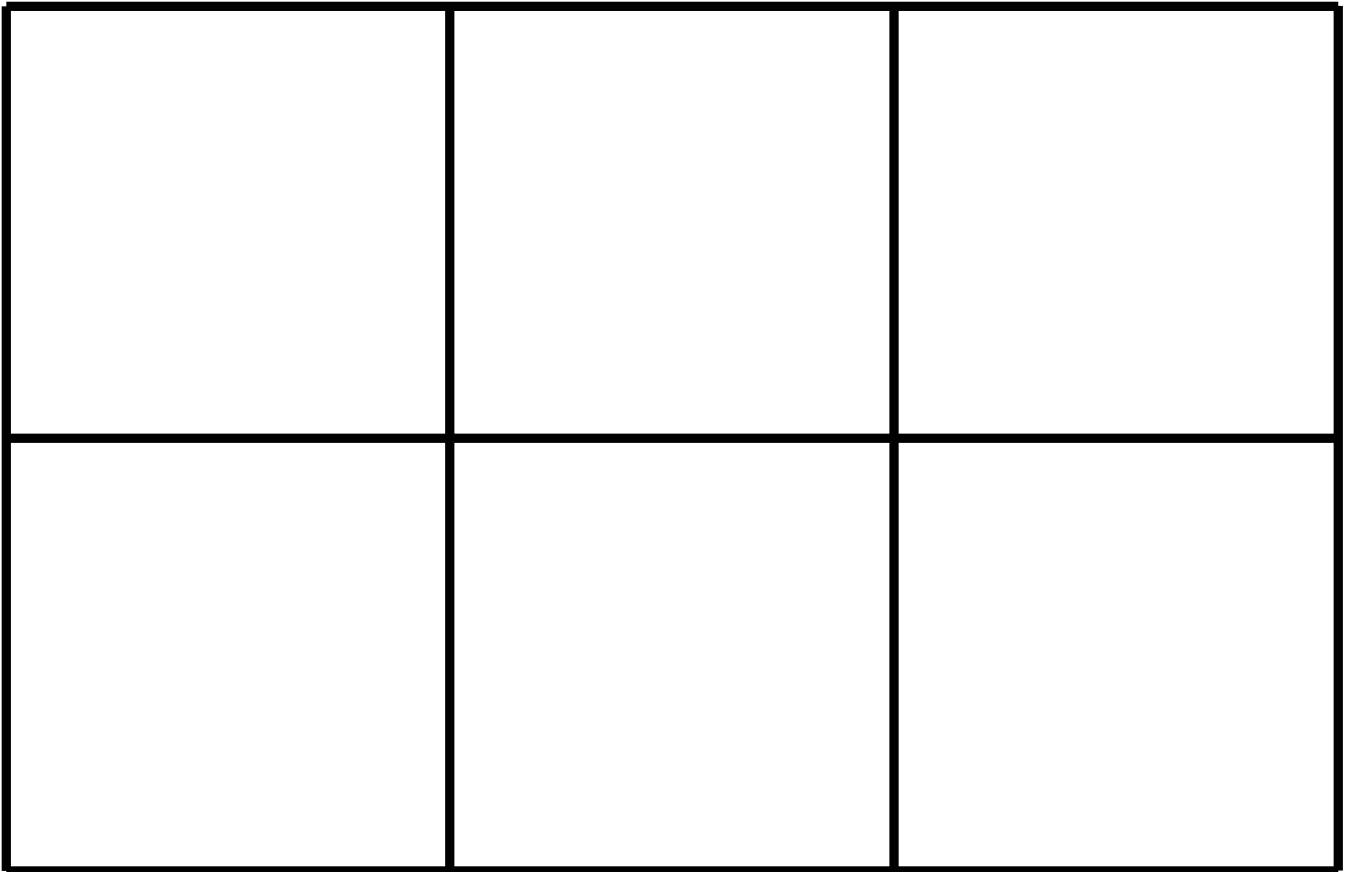
A water-soluble pen will bleed into your mixes and muddy everything up before you even start.



Let's Begin...

Draw a three-by-two grid on your sheet of paper using a permanent marker. Six boxes in total, arranged in two rows of three.

Make them large enough to paint a proper swatch in each one, roughly the size of a post-it note or a little bigger.



You will use one box for each step of the mix, working from the darkest and most concentrated version all the way through to the lightest.

Pairing Colours

Burnt Sienna and Ultramarine Blue is Ian's personal go-to combination and the one he reaches for most often in his own work. If you are doing this exercise for the first time, start with this pair.

These two neutralise beautifully into a rich, warm grey that feels completely natural on the page. If you only ever learn on complementary pair, Ian would tell you to start here.

Part of what makes this pair so reliable is the temperature of the two colours. Ultramarine Blue sits on the warm side of blue, with a slight purple lean that means it sits naturally next to the warmth of Burnt Sienna rather than fighting against it. When you mix them in roughly equal amounts, you get a rich, natural dark with real depth and character.



TOP TIP: Tilt the balance towards more blue and the mix cools down. Add more Sienna and it warms back up again. Add white and you can take it to whatever tonal value you need.

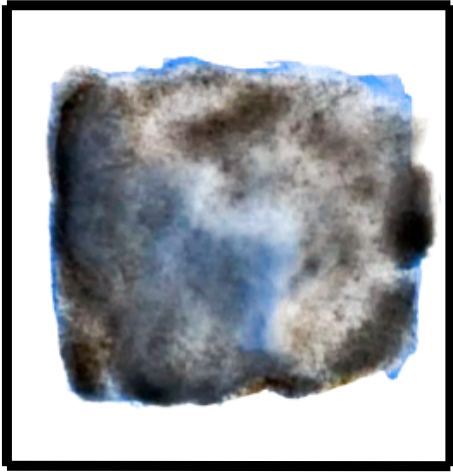
It is an enormously flexible combination.

Image Examples



Box 1:

The Pure Mix

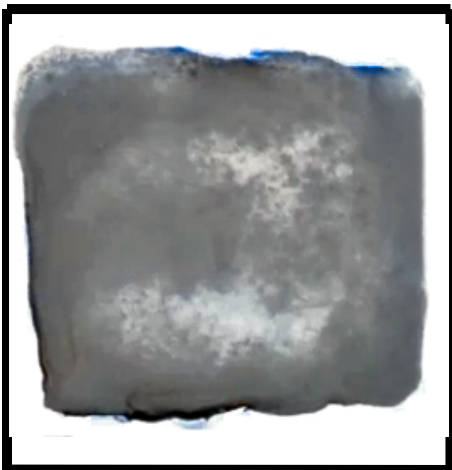


In the first square, mix your two complementary colours (Burnt Sienna and Ultramarine Blue) together in roughly equal amounts. Don't add any white yet. You're looking for the point where the two colours have genuinely cancelled each other out and you have arrived at a neutral, earthy dark.

This is the mud that most painters avoid.

Box 2:

First Addition of White



Take some of that same mix and add it to the second box, then add just a small amount of white. The tone will lift noticeably and start to feel warmer and more approachable.

You are beginning to see the range this mix can produce.

Box 3:

More White



Add more white to the mix.

By now you should have something that resembles a mid-range warm grey. This is the tone you would reach for when painting a shadow that sits in the middle distance, neither too heavy nor too light.

Box 4:

Even More White



Continue adding white.

The mix is getting lighter and cooler. It is starting to feel like the kind of colour you might use for a pale wall in shade, or the sky just above the horizon on an overcast day.

Box 5:

Considerably More White



Keep going.

You should now have something quite pale and luminous. It does not feel grey so much as just gently tinted, and it harmonises beautifully with everything that came before it in the grid.

Box 6:

The palest Version



Add as much white as you need to arrive at the lightest possible version of this mix.

It should be almost white but with just enough colour in it to feel connected to the rest of the grid. This is your lightest shadow tone, the one you might use for the faintest suggestion of depth in an area that is almost in full light.

Take a Moment

Once your six boxes are filled and side by side, take a moment to look at them as a sequence. The range from deep, warm dark all the way to pale, luminous grey is quite remarkable for just two colours and some white. That entire tonal range is what this pair can give you every time you paint.

Now place a stripe of pure Burnt Sienna and a stripe of pure Ultramarine Blue alongside the grid. Notice how naturally all eight colours sit together. That is colour harmony. The mixed greys belong to the painting because they were born from the colours already in it.



MINI TASK: When you have completed this first grid, try a second one with a different complementary pair and see how different the neutral feels.

Cooler, warmer, greener, more earthy. Every pair produces something distinct, and each one will suit different subjects and different moods.

Applying It

The practical use of this exercise is simple.

Before you begin any new painting, decide which complementary pair will anchor your palette. Mix them together, add white, and see what neutral you get. That neutral is your shadow mix, your dark areas, your mid-tone for the session. You've now solved the hardest colour problem in the painting before your brush has even touched the paper.

As you work, you will find yourself instinctively reaching for that neutral whenever you need depth or shadow, and because it is made from the colours already in the painting, it will always look like it belongs there. It will never feel stuck on or disconnected. **It will just look right.**

Ian uses this approach on every painting he makes, whether it is a harbour in Italy, a country lane in England, or a medieval street in France. The locations change, the palettes change, but the principle stays exactly the same.

Choose your pair, mix your neutral, and let the colours work together.





NEXT STEPS

In the Italy course, Ian builds each of his five palettes from scratch on camera before a single brushstroke goes down. You watch the complementary mix happening in real time, you see the neutral appearing on the palette, and you watch how he uses it to hold the whole painting together across every stage from initial sketch to final detail.

Five workshops, five complementary pairs, five completely different moods and atmospheres, all filmed on location in Riomaggiore on the Italian Riviera.

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