

# The Zorn Limited Palette

Posted by [Michael Lynn Adams](#) on Apr 23, 2010 in [Art Instruction](#), [Painting Demonstration](#)



Anders Leonard Zorn



The Zorn palette is named after **Anders Leonard Zorn** (February 18, 1860 – August 22, 1920), who was an internationally successful artist from Sweden. Best known for his portraits, domestic scenes and nudes in outdoor settings, he like John Singer Sargent and Joaquín Sorolla, are greatly admired by many realist artists today for his lively and skillful brushwork.

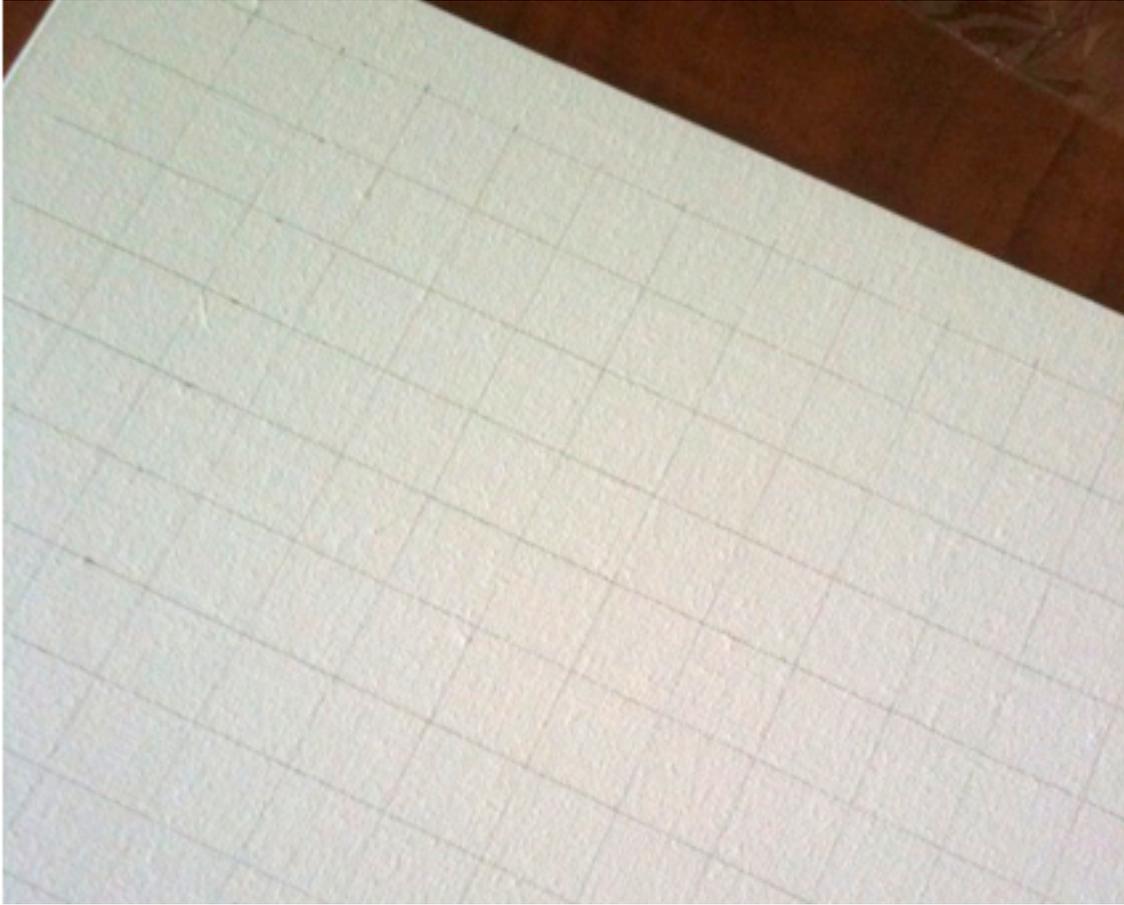
Zorn is also known for using a limited palette. It is believed that Zorn reduced his palette to as few as three rather earthy colors – Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Red Medium, Ivory Black plus White. There seems to be some disagreement over the exact number of colors on his palette. Some lists add Vermillion, Viridian, and/or Cerulean Blue. Wherever the truth lies the palette is far more limited in color range than most artists use. Me? I normally use 19 colors.

Why Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Red Medium, Ivory Black. They are an earthy version of the basic primary colors Yellow, Red and Blue. Yellow Ochre is earthy but still mixes with red and black to create some very pleasant warm and cool colors. Cadmium Red is rich and warm. Ivory Black is cool and act like very deep blue.

Curious about just what happens when you work with such a palette, I tried a little exercise borrowed from [Alla Prima: Everything I Know About Painting](#) by [Richard Schmid](#). I created a color chart of the most basic Zorn palette: Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Red Medium, Ivory Black and Titanium White. I had done this exercise with my full palette before and learned more about color mixing than any other exercise I know of. It beats blind experimentation hands down. *(NOTE: This exercise is a variation on Schmid's color chart exercise. You should by his book, Alla Prima: Everything I Know About Painting and follow his instructions if you are going to make a chart for your full palette.)*

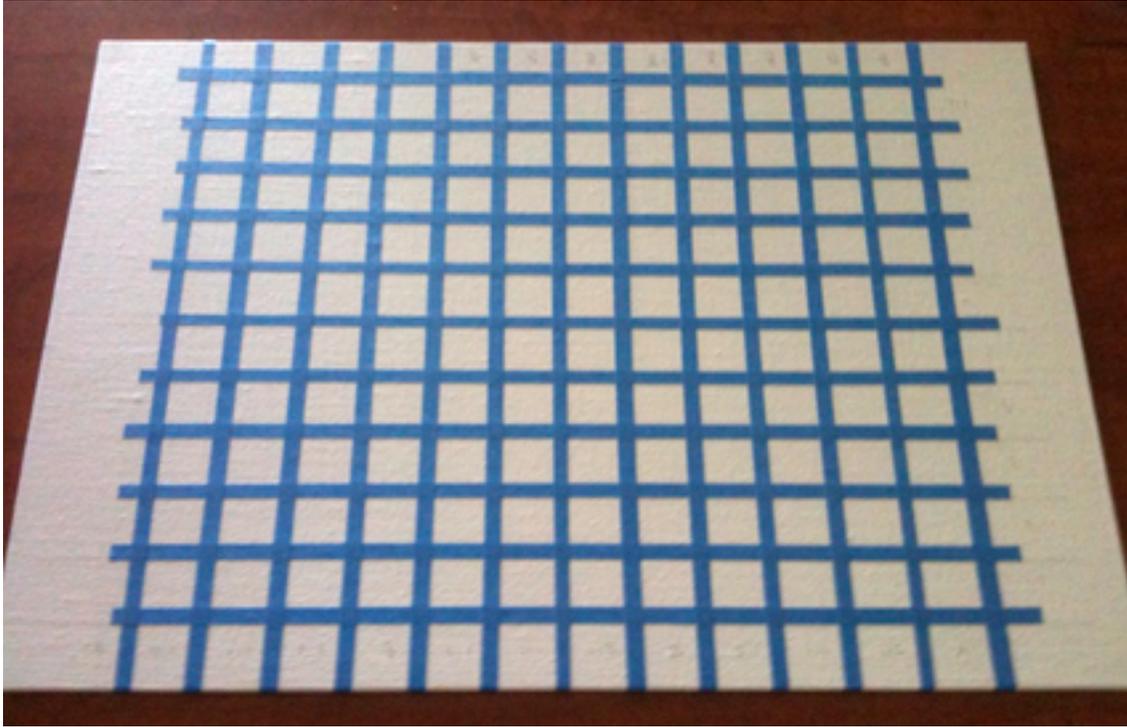
This exercise involves creating a color chart where the basic Zorn Palette of Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Red, and Ivory Black are systematically mixed from full saturated color to a barely tinted white. The resulting chart shows the remarkable range of colors you can get from this basic palette.

**STEP 1: Draw the Grid**



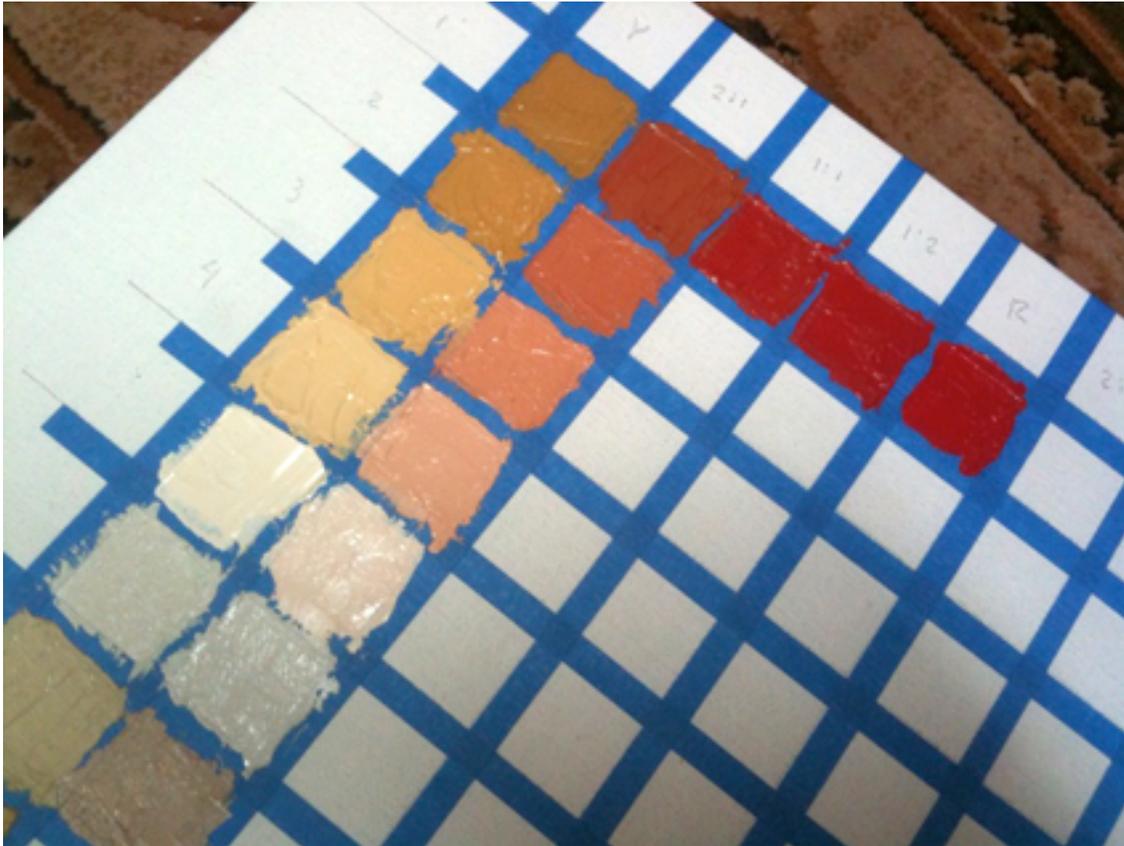
On a 16 x 12 canvas panel I drew a grid of 1-inch squares, 12 across and 10 down.

## STEP 2: Mask the Grid



Using house painter's masking cut in 1/4 inch wide strips to mask the edges of 10 rows and 12 columns of squares where mixed colors will go.

**STEP 3: Mixing and Painting the Grid** – Here is where the fun happens



Using a small palette knife (you can use a brush) I painted in the grid.

**Top Row:** Colors straight out of the tube, either pure or mixed with another pigment – but no white.

**Next Four Rows:** Mix white with the color in the top each column to create a progressively lighter value of that color. The percentage is an approximate value. The point is to show a gradual but clear difference from the pure color to a light tint of that same color.

**Bottom Five Rows:** I added a trace of the color that was not mixed in upper half of the chart. So where Yellow Ochre and Red are mixed I added to trace of Ivory Black – enough to see a shift in saturation without overwhelming the original mixture. The idea here was to see what kind of color shift from warm to cool happens when a trace of the third color is added.

# ZORN PALETTE

Y= YELLOW OCHRE    R=CADMIUM RED MEDIUM    B=IVORY BLACK

	Y	Y:R	Y:R	Y:R	R	R:B	R:B	R:B	B	B:Y	B:Y	B:Y
	PURE	2:1	1:1	1:2	PURE	2:1	1:1	1:2	PURE	2:1	1:1	1:2
100%												
80%												
60%												
20%												
5%												
5%												
20%												
60%												
80%												
100%												
	TRACE OF BLACK				TRACE OF YELLOW				TRACE OF RED			

**TIP 1:** Mix One Column At A Time.

Mix a large puddle of pure colors first and divide it into five smaller puddles. Then add white to each puddle to create the gradually lighter mixes. After those colors are painted on the grid, add the third, trace color, to each mixture to use in the lower half of the column.

**TIP 2:** Keep Your Palette Clean

Clean your palette after you finish each column to keep your colors clean.