Once you start painting and closely looking at colors, you soon realize that choosing only black whenever you need to put in a shadow on a face, still life or a landscape doesn’t work. The result isn’t subtle enough to capture a realistic shadow.

**The True Colors of Shadows**

Back in the time of the Impressionist, working from the then-relatively new theory of complementary colors, the logical color to use was violet, being the complementary of yellow, the color of sunlight. Monet said: “Color owes its brightness to force of contrast rather than to its inherent qualities … primary colors look brightest when they are brought into contrast with their complementaries.” Observe the violet in Monet’s shadow and the violets under the “people” in the Kingslan Studio version of the “Harvest Girl”.

In a still life, you can start with chromatic black to create shadow work (more on this later) but add a bit of the complement of the receiver into the mix.

**In Cantaloupe with Glass Still Life**, there is a touch of Ultramarine Blue in the shadow mix as the table (receiver) is orange.

In the Rolling Pin Still Life, there is a touch of yellow in the shadow mix as the table (receiver) is a light neutral violet. The yellow is actually Raw Sienna - a neutralized yellow/orange.

In the Ginger Jar Still Life, there is a touch of orange in the shadow mix as the table (receiver) is a light neutral blue. The orange is actually Burnt Umber - a neutralized yellow/orange. The shadow from the pewter onto the cabinet has a touch of Ultramarine Blue in it - orange and blue complements.
How to Mix Chromatic Black

I enjoy using black in my paintings but it can cause a “dead” effect. If you make your own black, you can create nuances. The most common way of creating a chromatic black is by mixing ultramarine blue with burnt umber (complements to each other). In the chart below are other ways to create black. The color in parenthesis is the traditional oil color.

When this chromatic black is added to white you get some of the most beautiful grays imaginable. If these grays are too blue for you, simply add a little more of the earth color to the original mixture, which will make the grays look more gray.

Mixing Black

- Phthalo Blue 01 (Prussian) + Quin Crimson (Alizarin) + Burnt Sienna = Chromatic Black (+ white = gray)
- Phthalo Blue 01 (Prussian) + Quin Crimson (Alizarin) + Burnt Umber = Chromatic Black (+ white = gray)
- Phthalo Blue 01 (Prussian) + Quin Crimson (Alizarin) + Raw Umber = Chromatic Black (+ white = gray)

Varying the amount of white added to these mixes creates several values of gray.

You get a different set of grays depending on which ‘brown’ you mix in with the Prussian and Alizarin.

Use Chromatic Black to Darken Other Colors

Mixing small amounts of your chromatic black into your colors will darken them without ‘killing’ the color like regular black would do. I tell my students that Phthalo Blue and Crimson are ‘miracle colors’. Experiment with these different tones of black and see what can happen!

Monet painted his interiors of Saint-Lazare station, where the steam trains and glass roof created dramatic highlights and shadows, without earth pigments. He created his astoundingly rich array of browns and greys by combining new synthetic oil-paint colors (colors we today take for granted) such as cobalt blue, cerulean blue, synthetic ultramarine, emerald green, viridian, chrome yellow, vermilion, and crimson lake. He also used touches of lead white and a little ivory black. No shadow was considered as being without color, and the deepest shadows are tinged with green and purple.

Ogden Rood, the author of a book on color theory that greatly influenced the Impressionists, is reputed to have loathed their paintings, saying “If that is all I have done for art, I wish I had never written that book!”