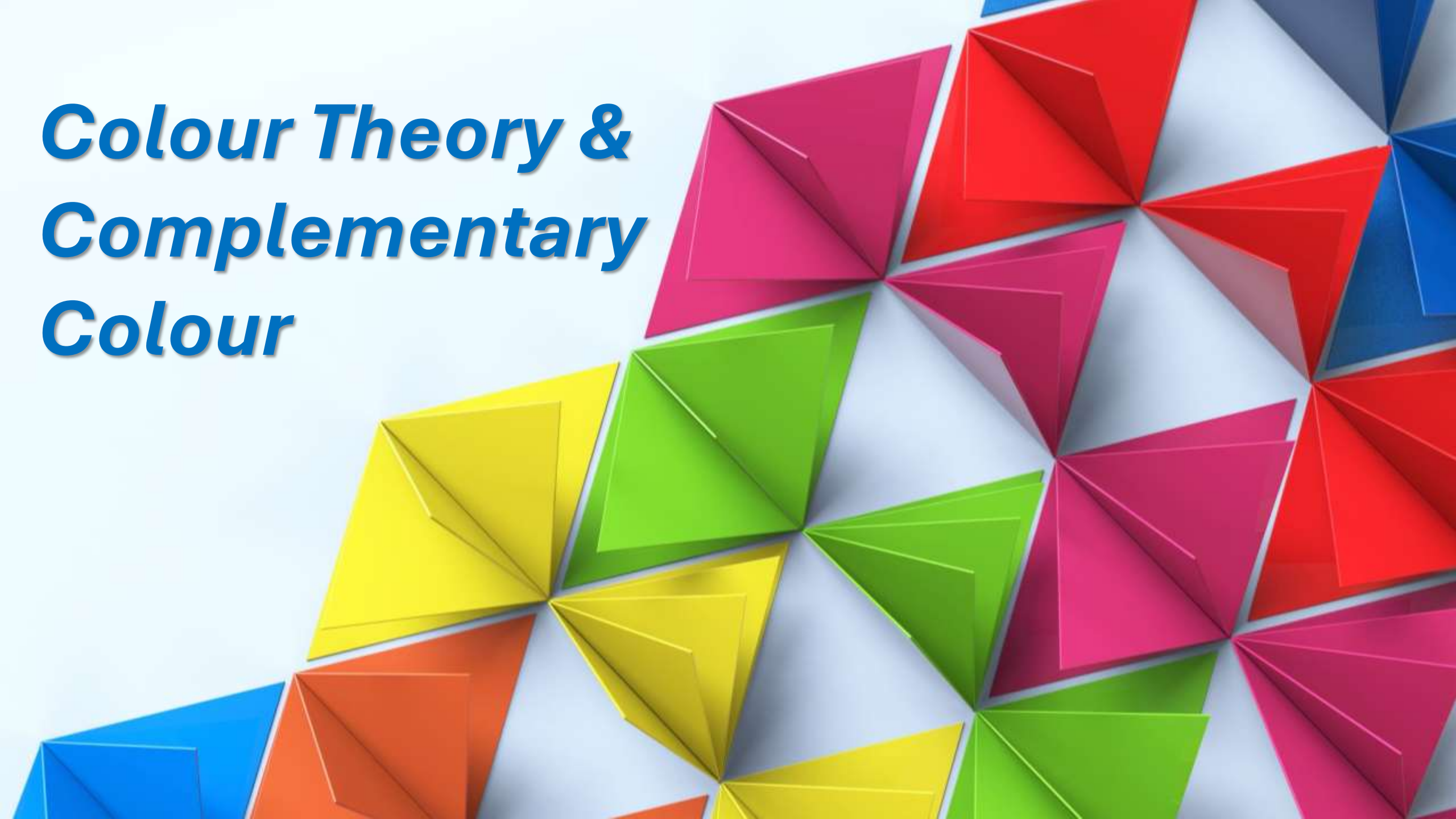


Colour Theory & Complementary Colour





“A journey from perception to practice”

Today we’re going to explore something that quietly shapes almost every photograph we take, which is colour.

Not just the colours themselves, but the relationships between them, the emotions they evoke, and the way they guide the viewer’s eye.

By the end of this session, you’ll see colour not as decoration, but as structure — the scaffolding beneath the image

Colour Theory and Complementary Colour



Why Colour Matters

Some images catch our eye faster than others. But do you know why?

Colour is the first thing the human eye interprets.

Before we understand shapes or context, we *feel* colour.

It sets mood, creates atmosphere, and tells the viewer how to respond long before they've had time to think.

Colour is the emotional engine of photography

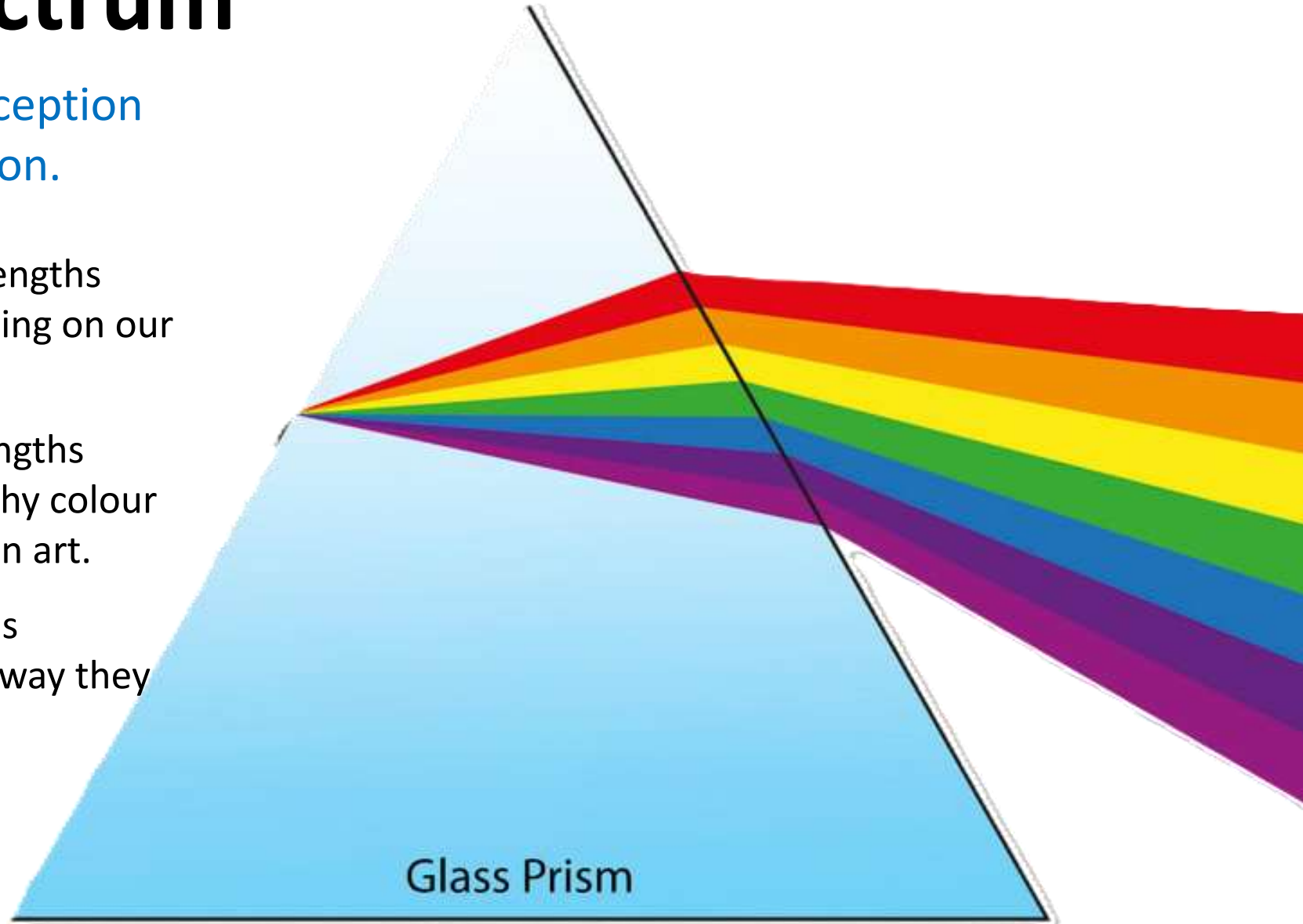
The Visible Spectrum

Light → wavelength → perception
→ camera interpretation.

All colour begins with light — wavelengths bouncing around the world and landing on our retinas.

Our cameras interpret these wavelengths differently from our eyes, which is why colour management is both a science and an art.

Understanding the spectrum helps us understand why colours behave the way they do.”



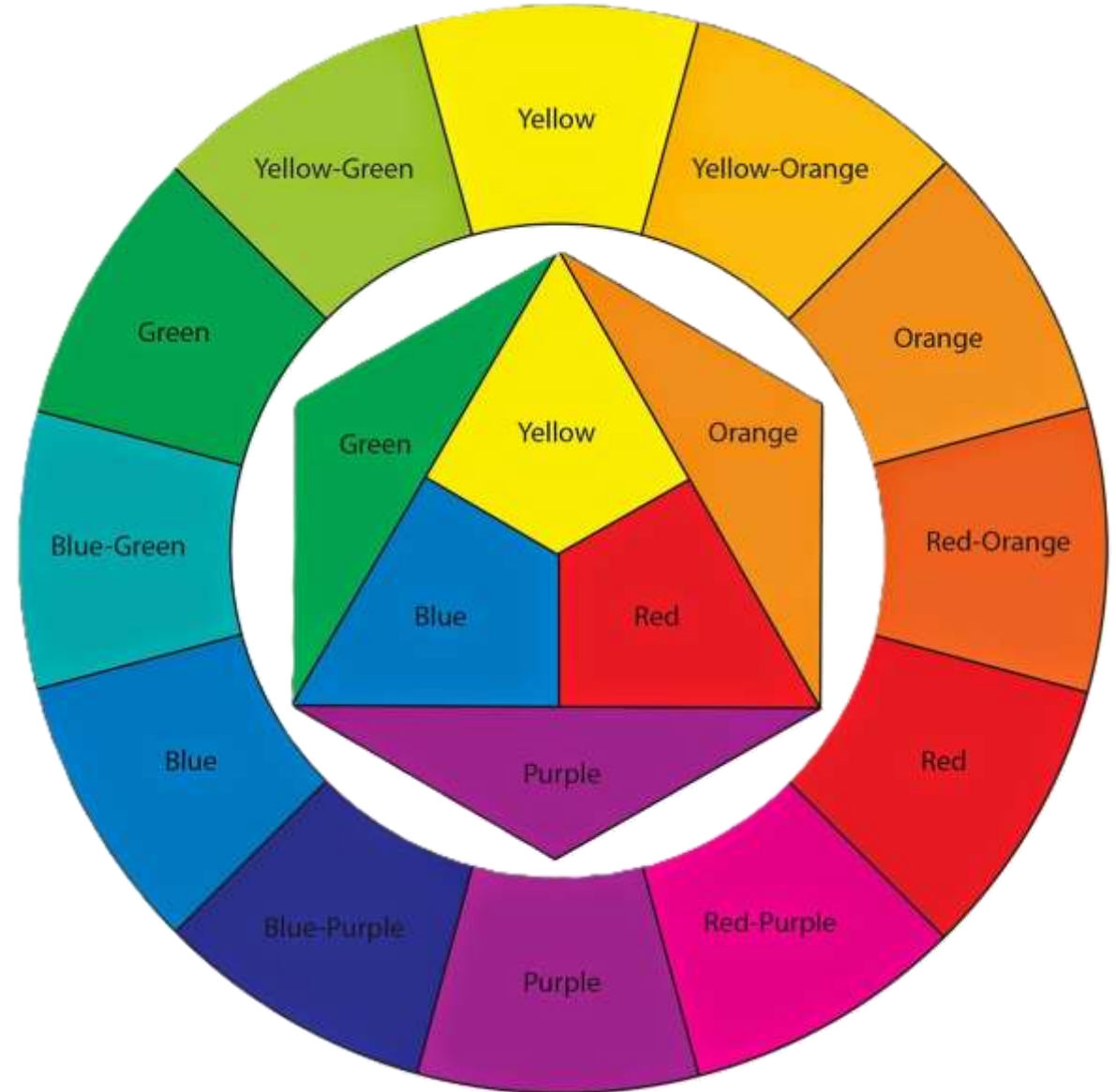
The Colour Wheel

To make sense of the spectrum and colour relationships, we come to the colour wheel, a tool that's been with us for centuries.

Newton gave us the first scientific wheel.

Goethe explored its emotional qualities.

Today, it remains our map: a way of seeing how hues relate, oppose, and harmonise.





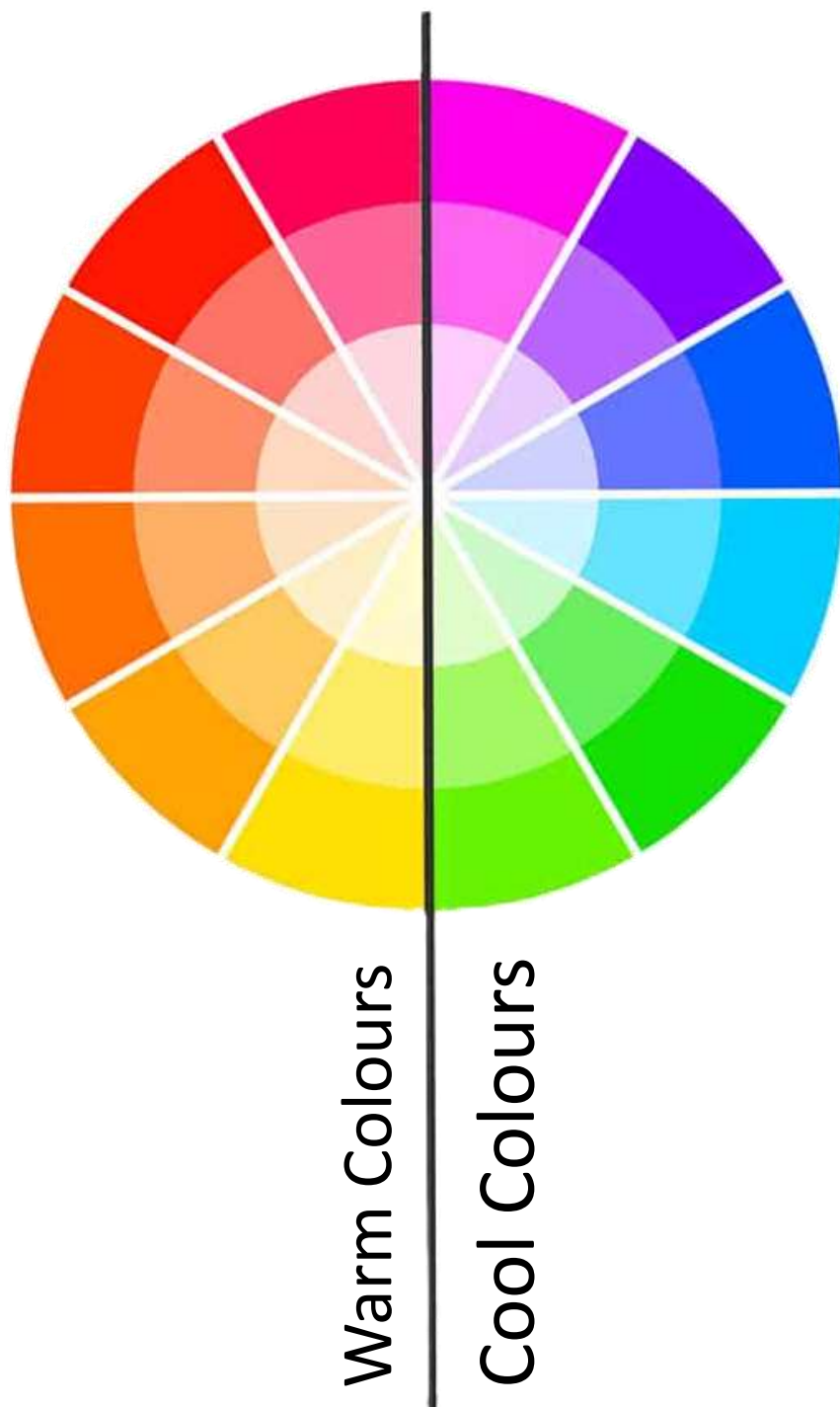
Hue, Saturation, Luminance (HSL)

- *Hue is the colour itself.*
- *Saturation is its intensity.*
- *Luminance is its brightness.*

“These three pillars form the backbone of colour control.

Change one, and the entire emotional tone of the image shifts.”

Warm vs Cool Colours



Warm Colours

Cool Colours

“Warm colours

— reds, oranges, yellows — feel close, energetic, emotional.

Cool colours

— blues, greens, purples — feel calm, distant, reflective.

Temperature shapes mood more powerfully than we realise.

It’s the difference between a cosy fireside and a quiet winter morning.”

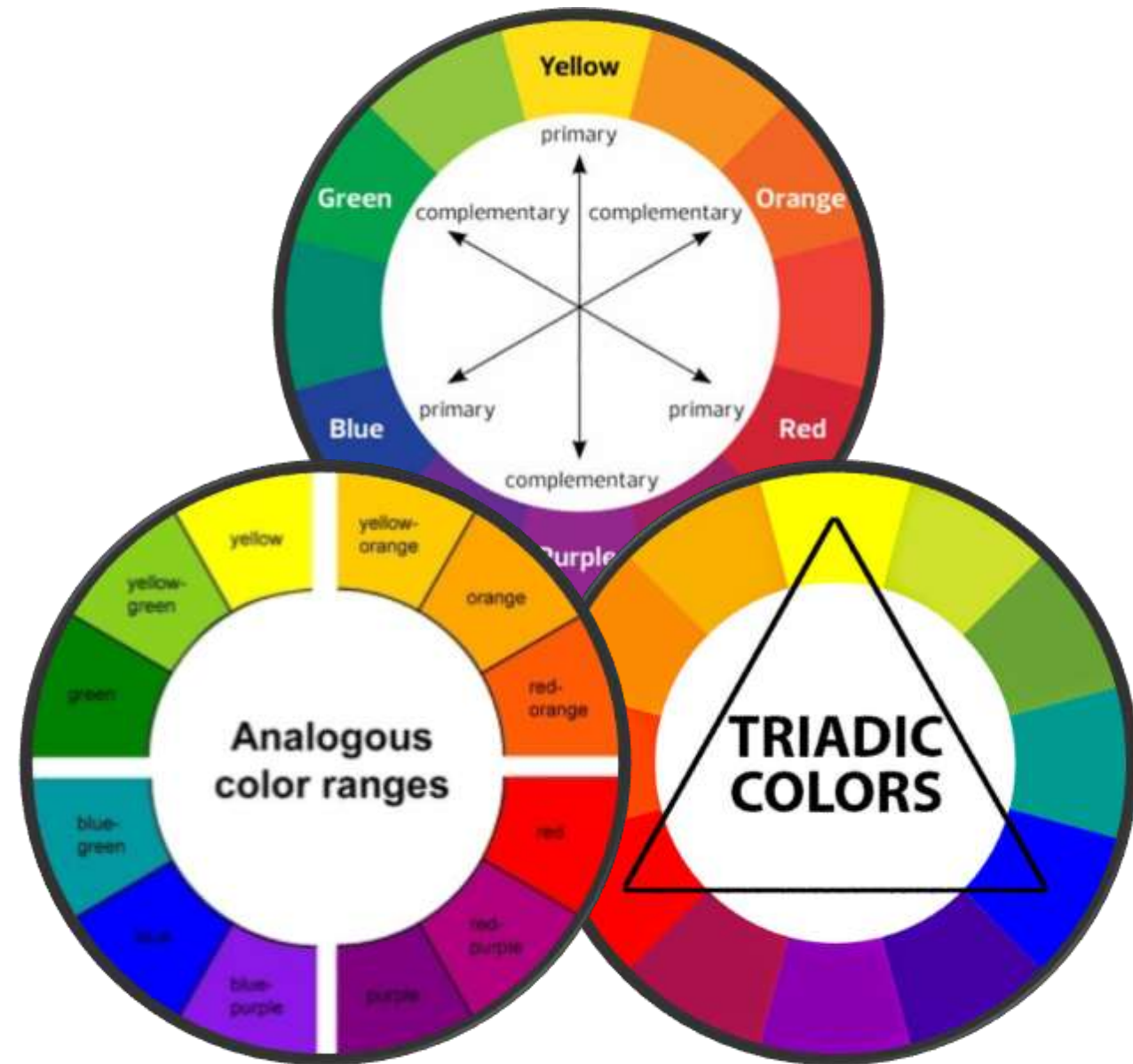
Colour Theory and the Wheel

Let's go back to the colour wheel, to decide what complementary colours are, and how to use them.

Working with colour theory, photography creates imagery with harmonious and balanced colours.

Colour organisation systems have been around for hundreds of years, but Newton's and Goethe's colour wheels are two of the most well-known examples.

To get an idea of how the wheel works, we'll look at three of the basic colour combinations, one of which is **COMPLEMENTARY**.



Analogous Colours

“Analogous colour scheme displays three colours that are side by side on the wheel, which is an ideal arrangement for landscape and nature photography to reveal subtle differences in tone and hue.

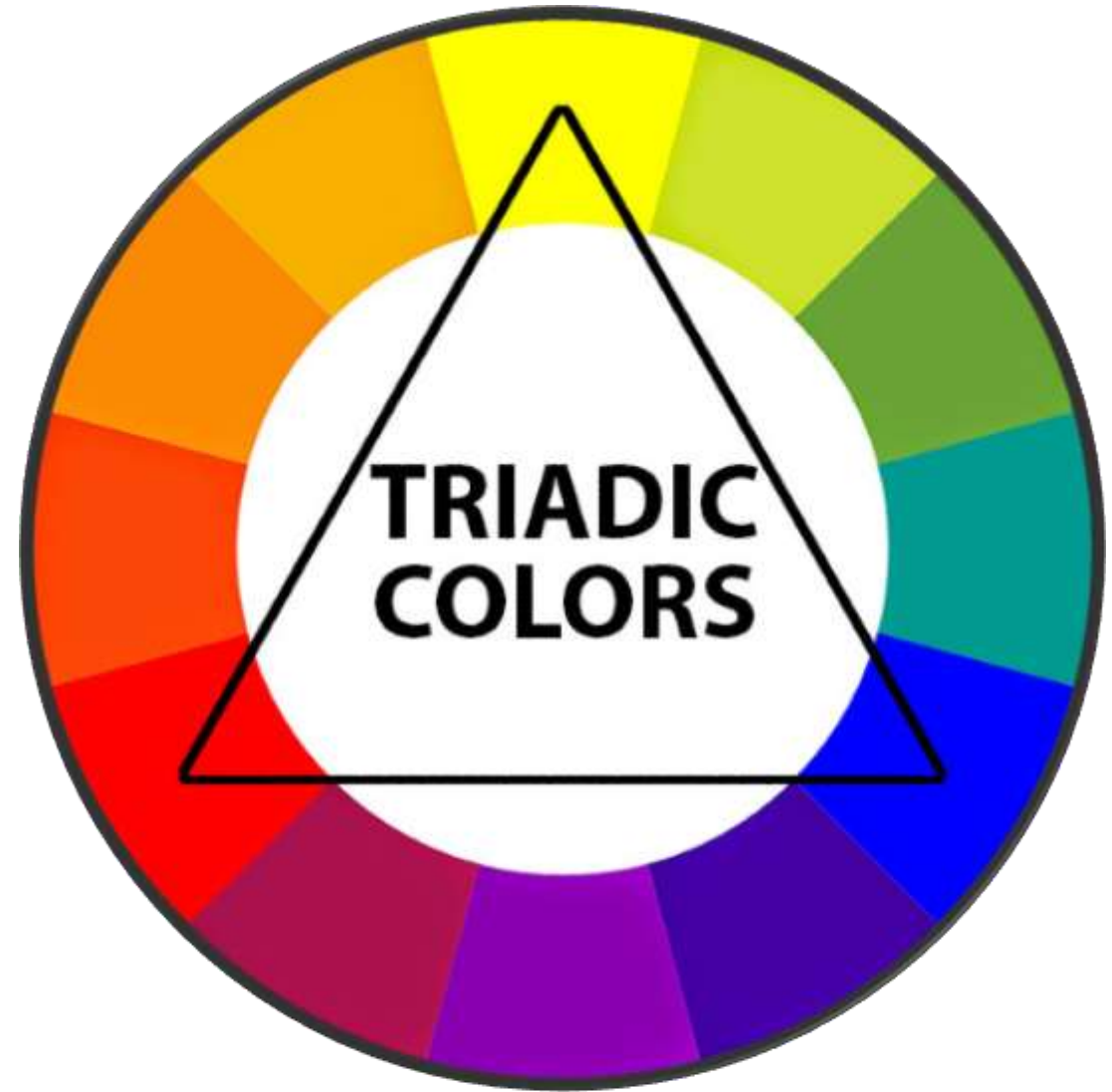
These palettes feel calm, cohesive, and painterly — perfect for scenes where you want the viewer to breathe.”



Triadic Colours

“Triadic schemes use three colours evenly spaced around the wheel. These images are often vivid because of the use of three contrasting colours.’

Triads are lively, energetic, and full of character — ideal when colour is part of the story.”

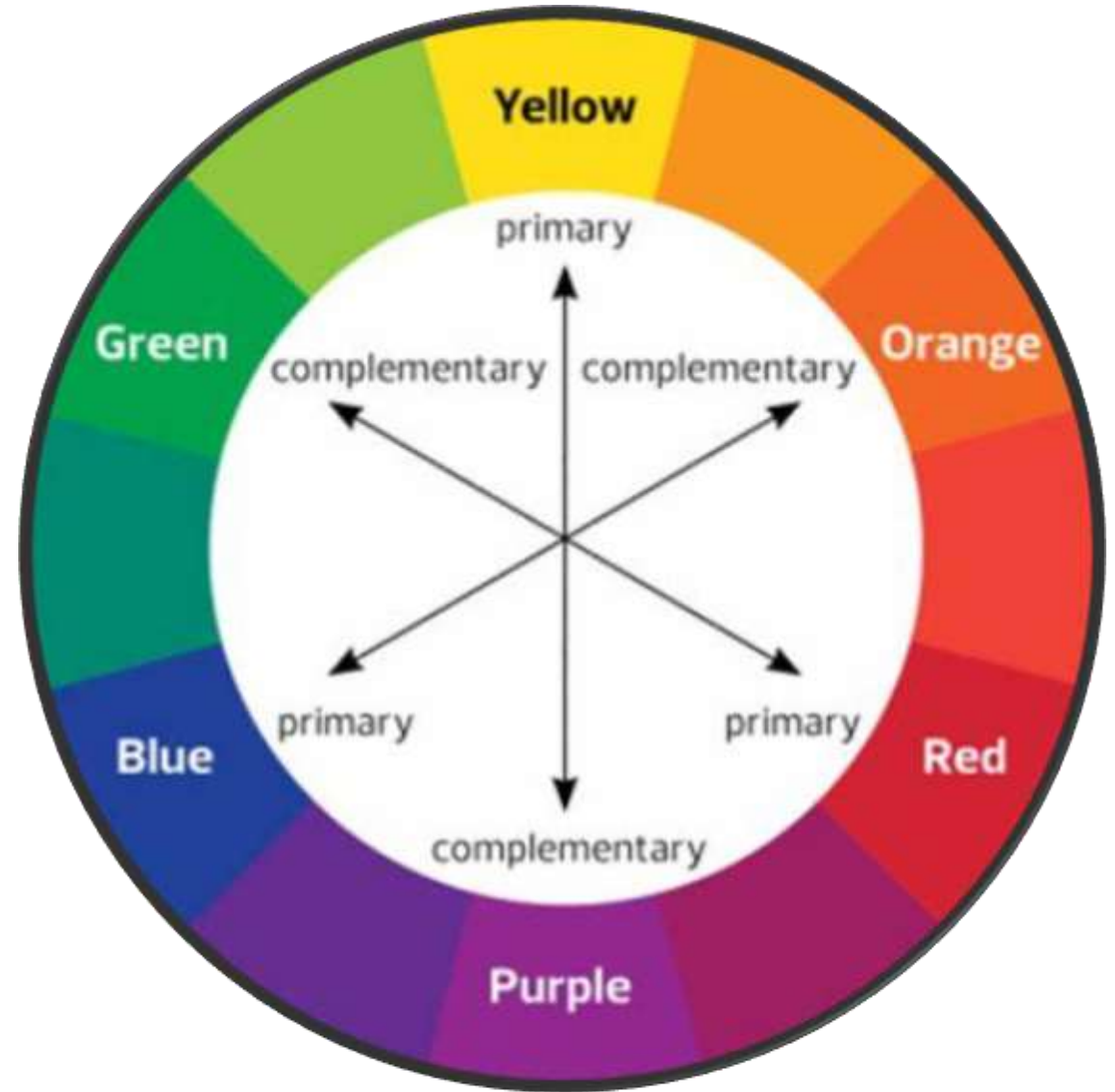


Complementary Colours

Find complementary colours by choosing two Primary colours from opposite sides of the colour wheel.

Red, Green and Blue have been considered primary colours for centuries, giving us the **RGB** model.

For example, the Red complementary colours are Green and Blue (*depending on the exact red hue*), and the Yellow complementary colour is Purple.

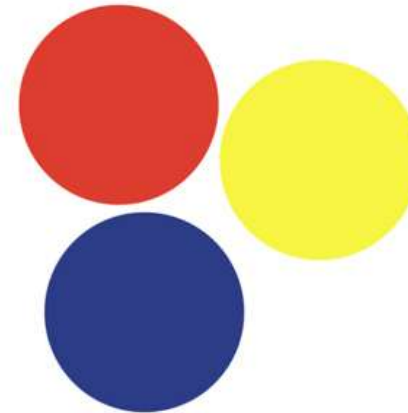


Complementary Colours

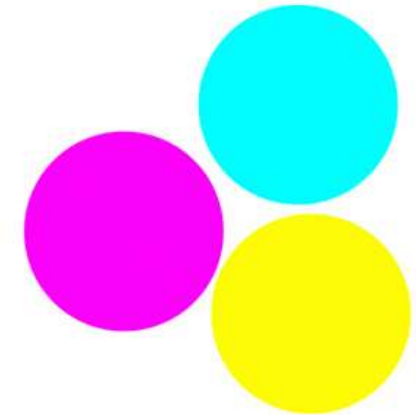
However, printers and designers who use modern subtractive colour methods use Cyan, Magenta and Yellow, which is the **CMY** colour model.

Using complementary colours is a great scheme to use for bold impact and to show off vivid colours.

Opposites create maximum contrast, maximum clarity, and maximum emotional punch.



RYB colour model



CMY colour model



Colour Harmony

“The brain seeks harmony.

When colours sit comfortably together, the image feels restful.

When they clash, the image feels tense.

Harmony isn't about being safe — it's about being intentional.

It's knowing when to soothe and when to provoke.”

Colour Contrast



“Contrast creates energy.

It tells the viewer where to look.

Colour contrast is often more powerful than tonal contrast - it’s the difference between a whisper and a clear, confident voice.”

Complementary Colours

Why They Work

“Complementary colours create a natural tension - a visual magnetism. *Warmth and cold, fire and ice.*’ These pairings feel instinctively right because our visual system is built around opposites.

You might need more inspiration and photography ideas for using complementary colours in your images. Think about red and green, which appear so often in our surroundings.

A strawberry or a ladybug are excellent examples.

But it’s not by chance that Christmas decorations are combinations of red and green.

Or think about orange and blue. Both colours are associated with strong and opposing concepts”.

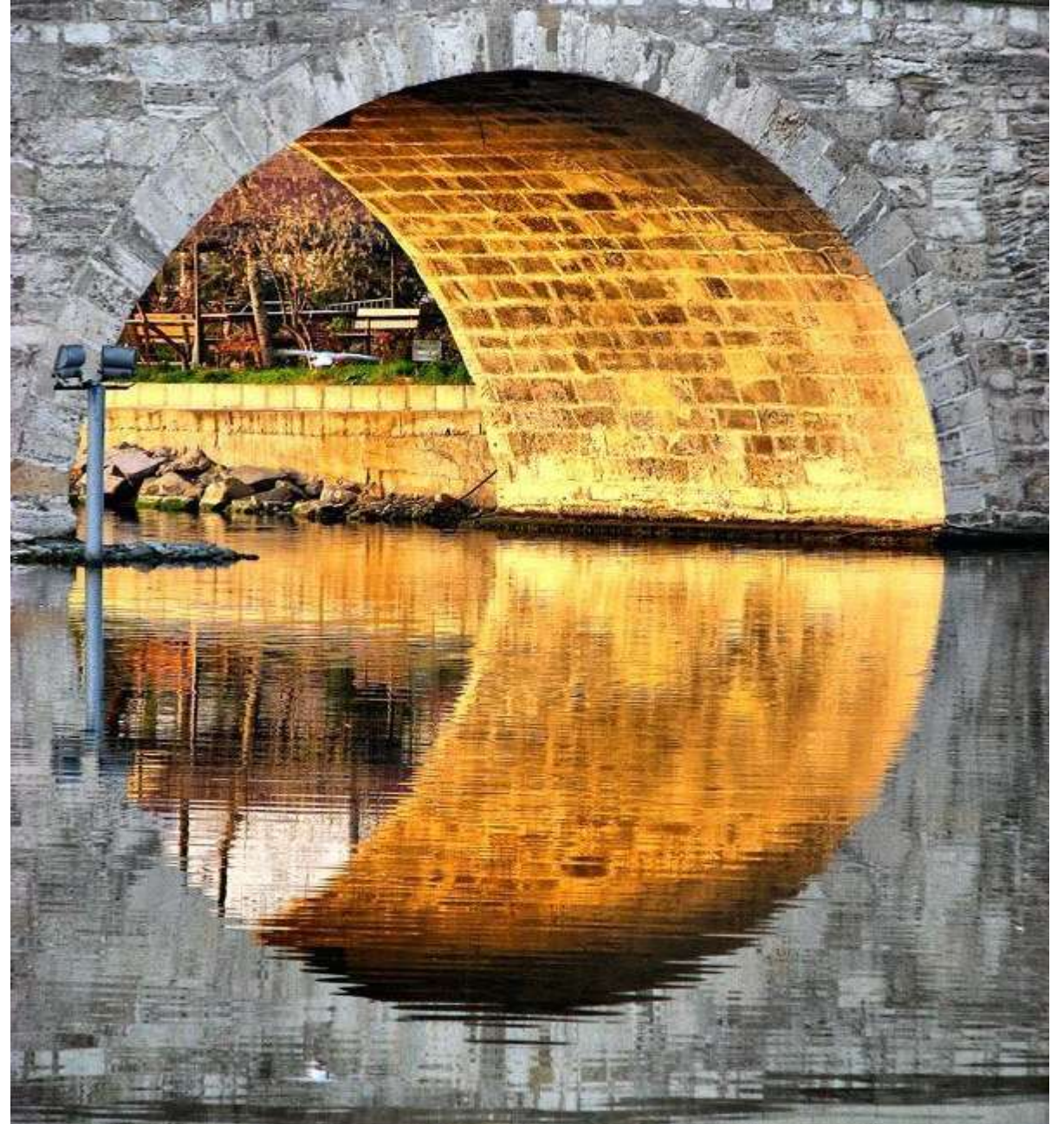


Colour Dominance & Balance

“Every image has a dominant colour — the one that sets the tone.

Balance is about distributing colour, so the image feels stable.

Too much of one hue can overwhelm; too little can weaken the composition.”





The Big Three Complementary Pairs

“Orange–blue, red–green, yellow–purple.

These are the great triad of opposites.

Each pair has its own emotional flavour
cinematic, natural, dramatic.

Once you start seeing them, you’ll find
them everywhere.”

Red and Green

Red and green is a common pair in nature.

Look at red flowers on green grass, apples in a foliage, tropical birds or even a ladybug on a leaf.

You should be careful when red dominates the image.

This is a strong colour, so make sure you turn up the intensity of your photo.

When you let green take the lion's share of the image, red becomes a perfect anchor to your point of interest.

Our eyes are naturally drawn to bright warm colours.

Don't be afraid to use a spot of red to mark the focus of the viewer's attention.



Yellow and Purple

Yellow is the most visible colour from a distance. It is often used to highlight an accent, to present an emergency and cautionary signal.

If you need to grab attention fast, use a splash of yellow.

It works well with its complementary colour, purple.

This combination often feels modern and playful. Perfect for experiments with colour blocking and fashion photography!

Yellow is the colour of the sun, so it's often used in landscape photography with purple clouds.

Sometimes photographers tend to overdo it a bit.

Keep this combination in subdued, darker, less saturated tones.

Unusual and slightly unnatural purple shade adds to the feeling of a fairy tale town.

Texture and clever lighting give the colours the ability to change their contrast



Orange and Blue

Amber and teal. A fantastic combination, and the most notable one between complementary pairs.

Orange and blue have significant emotional weight.

This is because both are associated with opposing concepts.

Warmth and cold, earth and sky, land and sea, fire and ice.

They are very close to ambient light.

And tend to harmonise well with human skin.

This is a powerful combination.

But try to use it with care and thought.

Sometimes photographers use these two colours without a clear purpose.

Because of that, an image can look overprocessed and too artificial.



Cool blue background makes tea look even warmer.



A simple yet effective orange on a delightful blue.

Green and Magenta

Green is everywhere in nature.

Usually, photographers use it in analogous colour harmonies.

They'll mix green tones with yellows, teals, and blues.

But you can combine it with its complementary magenta for an interesting result.

Rich, saturated magenta looks gorgeous with darker shades of green.

Also with more watery greens, such as sage or mint green.

These more neutral greens take the background role while magenta steps forward.

It also works with colours analogous to magenta.

Try different shades of violet and pink for stunning results.



You can push magenta shades to a dusty pink and it still would hold its own against green.



Saturated shades of magenta create an interesting contrast with natural green of leaves.

Red and Cyan

Cyan is a lighter shade of blue. It's close to teal, turquoise, electric blue, aquamarine, and other shades of blue-green.

In combination with red, it creates a very intense neon palette.

It could be a powerful combination if you need a fresh, modern and energetic look.

Remember that red tends to appear as the most saturated colour on camera sensors.

It's very easy to blow out. You have to be careful with saturation.

By changing red for the less intense pink in combination with cyan, photos still look captivating and engaging. But they are a bit more subtle at the same time.

You can find complementary colours naturally occurring.

Analogous red and pink with a vibrant complementary background.



Blue and Yellow

This is a lighter variation of orange and teal. I love the combination of a blue background and a bright yellow object.

It always reminds me of sunshine and The Simpsons.

Images like this always have a happy and cheerful atmosphere.

And this combination is great when you want one object to “pop” against a smooth background.

Keep the colours clear and simple.

No need for more subdued and darker shades.

Don't be afraid to keep it bright and colourful!

My first association with blue and yellow is always The Simpsons.

Cold blue background makes yellow juice splash “pop” even more.





When Complementary Colour Goes Wrong

“Complementary colour is powerful — but too much saturation can feel artificial.

Think of complementary colour as seasoning: enough to enhance, never enough to overwhelm.”

Complementary Colour in Black and White

“Even when colour disappears, its relationships remain.

Opposites become tonal contrasts.

The structure survives, even if the hue does not.”

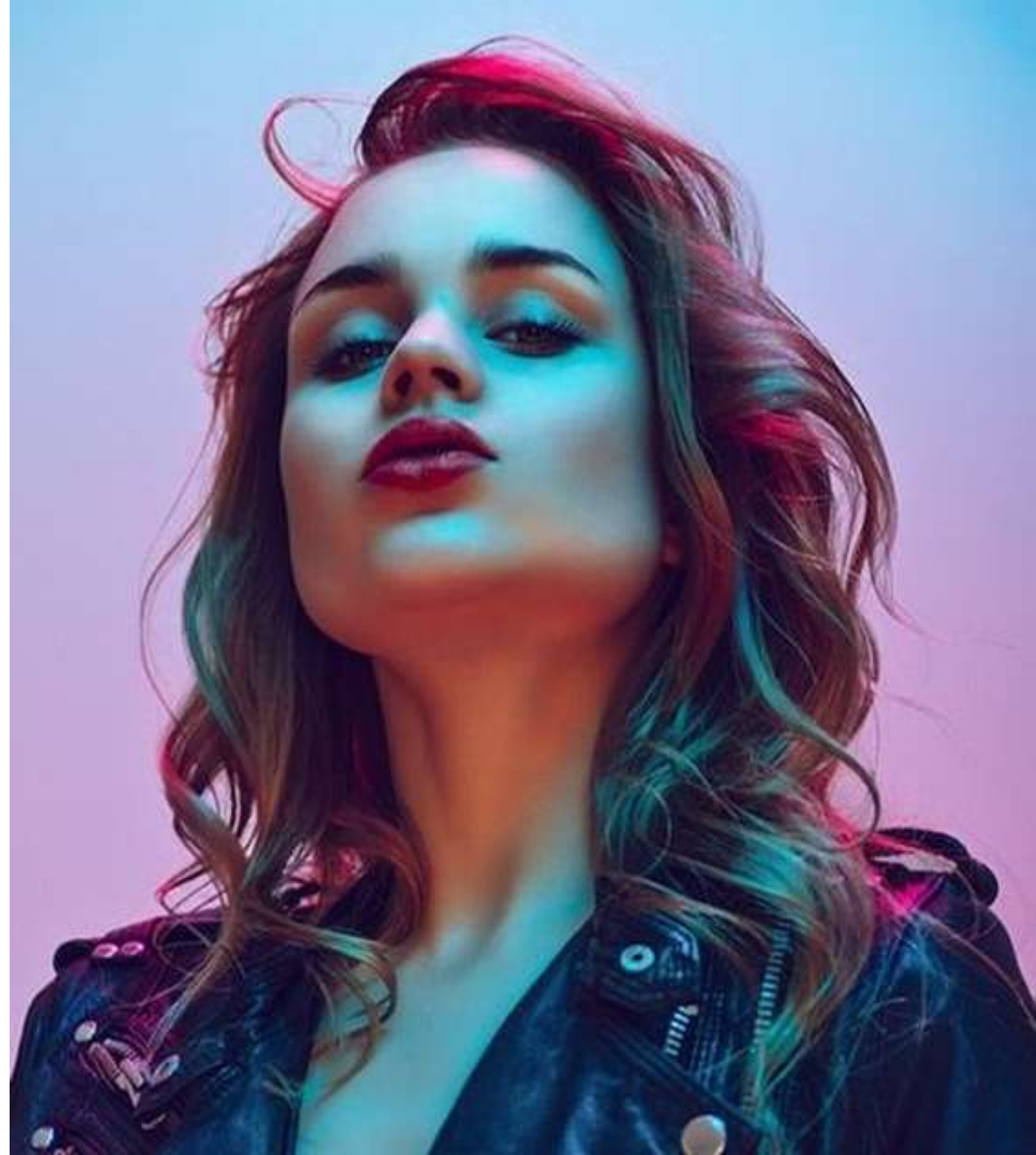


Complementary Colour in Portraiture

“Warm skin tones naturally sit opposite cool backgrounds.

This creates separation, clarity, and a cinematic feel.

It’s one of the simplest ways to flatter a subject.”



Complementary Colour in Landscape

“Landscapes are full of subtle complementary relationships - blue shadows on orange cliffs, purple heather against yellow gorse.

Nature is a master colourist; we simply need to notice.”



White Balance As Expression

“White Balance isn’t just technical
— it’s expressive.

A warm shift feels nostalgic; a cool
shift feels calm or distant.

WB is one of the simplest ways to
change mood without altering the
scene.”

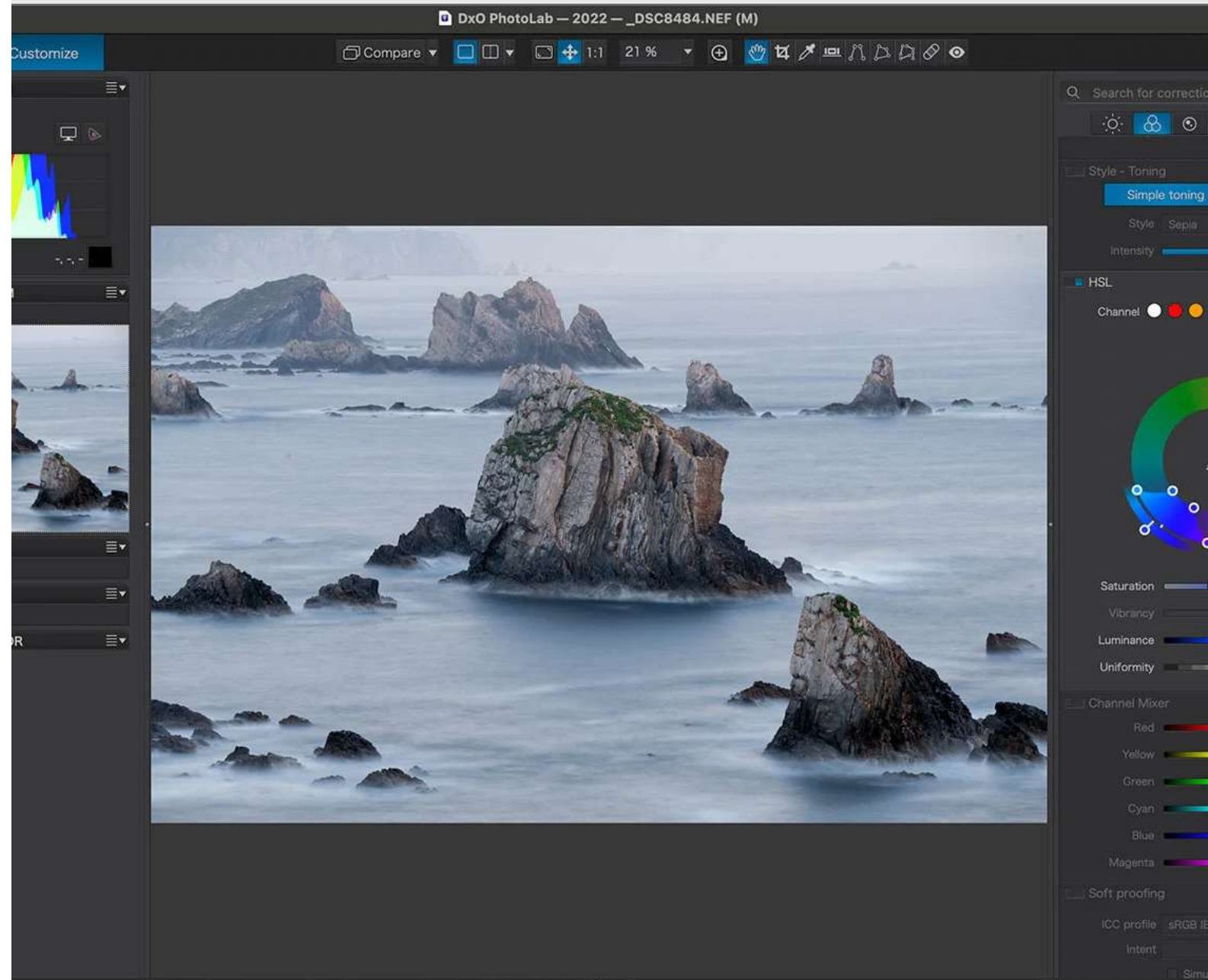


Using HSL Tools

“HSL sliders let you adjust specific colours without affecting the whole image.

You can deepen the blue without touching the orange or soften the red without dulling the green.

It’s precise, painterly control.”



Editing For Harmony

“Editing for harmony means softening contrasts, reducing saturation, and letting the image breathe.

It’s about creating calm, cohesion, and visual rest.”



Editing for Contrast

“Editing for contrast means strengthening opposites, deepening saturation, and letting the colours sing.

It’s bold, confident, and expressive.”



MID CONTRAST

MAX CONTRAST

In Conclusion

“Combining complementary colours in the right way can enhance your photos a lot more than you would expect.

Colour is one of the most powerful storytelling tools we have.

When we slow down and pay attention to it, our photography becomes more intentional, expressive, and deeply connected to how we see the world.”



Use Colour To Evoke Emotion

Colour has a huge effect on our mood.

Colours make us feel emotional.

Use colour tones and temperature as part of the framework for your photo's story.

A scary, haunted abandoned hospital would look less convincing if it was bathed in warm, soft sunlight in the golden hour.



Use Colour To Evoke Emotion

Below are seven colours and some of their associated meanings and emotions, although like so many theories in photography, it's OK to break the rules sometimes!



- **Red** – energy, excitement, passion, anger.
- **Orange** – warmth, happiness, enthusiasm.
- **Yellow** – cheerfulness, friendliness, creativity.
- **Green** – calm, natural, balance, growth.
- **Blue** – serenity, cold, sadness, trust.
- **Purple** – spirituality, mystery, luxury.
- **Magenta** – innovation, transformation, non-conformity.



*“A final moment of colour harmony
a reminder that the world is full of
opposites waiting to be noticed.”*

“So now it’s your turn.

Go out, slow down, and let colour
guide your storytelling.

Look for harmony, look for contrast,
look for emotion.

And above all enjoy the process.”