Color Temperature

Artists often call colors "warm" or "cool." This refers to whether a color lies on the red/orange/yellow half of the color wheel or the blue/green/purple half. The color wheel can be divided down the middle into these two groups, as shown at right. The warm side symbolizes the colors of sun and fire, whereas the cool side is associated with ice, water, and sky. Paintings that are predominantly warm and predominantly cool exude a very different feeling based on these associations.

**Warm**

Cool

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Warm colors appear to come forward in a painting, and cool colors appear to recede. An easy way to remember this is by recalling how mountains take on an increasingly blue or purple cast as they recede into the distance (part of a phenomenon called "atmospheric perspective"). Many artists use this idea to create a sense of depth in their paintings by pushing and pulling elements, using cool tones to push back and warm tones to pull forward.

In *New Mexico Field*, I used the principles of atmospheric perspective to create a sense of depth, pushing the mountains into the distance with cool purples and bringing the near foliage forward with warm oranges and yellows. Notice how even the bushes in the foreground suggest depth with the use of warmer and cooler mixtures of green.

Color Relativity

While colors are generally classified as warm or cool, they can also be *relatively* warm or cool within their hue. Although red is considered the warmest color, there are cool reds and warm reds. A cool red contains more blue (such as magenta), and a warm red contains more yellow (such as coral). By virtue of the relative warmness or coolness of a color, artists can manipulate space and influence how the viewer perceives a color. This leads us to the importance of color relationships. The way we perceive a color's characteristics is relative to its surroundings. By using contrasts in temperature, value, and chroma, we can make colors appear warmer or cooler, lighter or darker, and brighter or duller simply by the colors we place next to them.

A   B
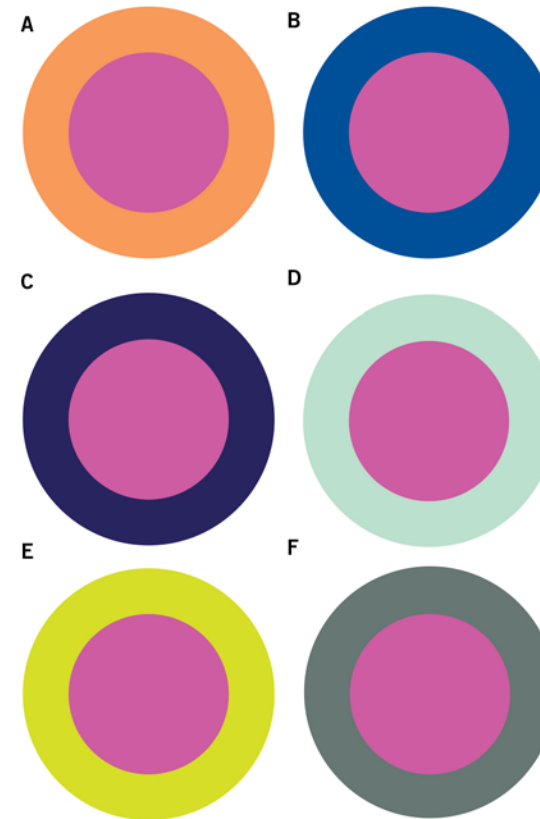
Relative Temperature A color's temperature is influenced by surrounding colors. Note how the same pink circle appears cooler set against orange (A) than blue (B).

C   D

Relative Value Our perception of a color's value depends on its surrounding color. Note how the same pink circle appears lighter in example C than in example D.

E   F

Relative Chroma A color's chroma can appear different depending on nearby colors. Note how the same pink circle appears dull against yellow (E) and bright against gray (F).

To summarize:
- How do you make a color appear warmer? *Place a cooler color adjacent to it.*
- How do you make a color lighter? *Place a darker color adjacent to it.*
- How do you make a color appear brighter? *Place a duller color adjacent to it.*