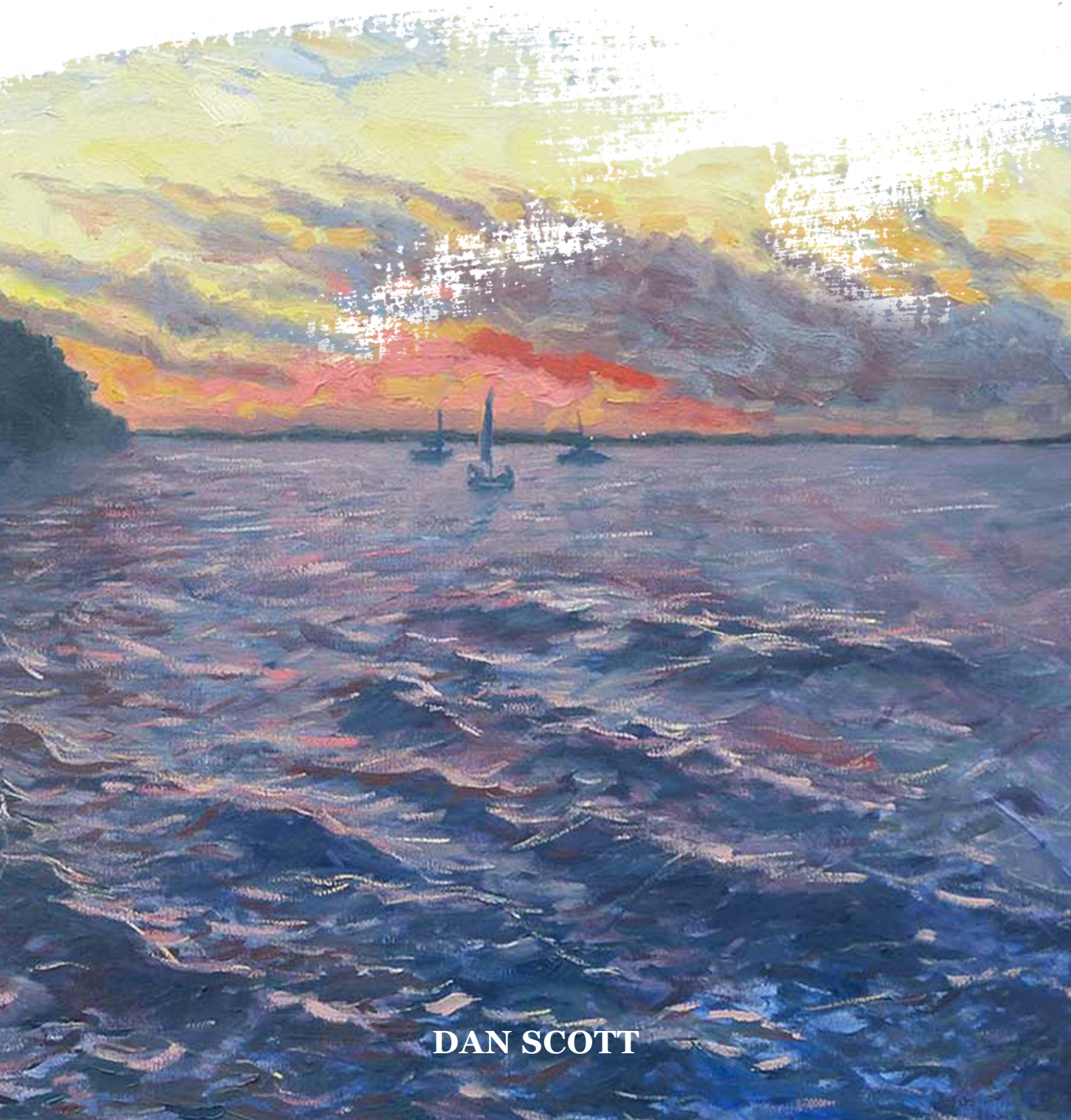
DRAW PAINT ACADEMY

COLOR THEORY CHEAT SHEET

for Beginners



DAN SCOTT

Introduction

Thanks for downloading this cheat sheet. The purpose of this sheet is to give you a brief overview of color theory as it relates to us as artists.

Color is amazing. It is all around us. It influences our decisions, evokes feelings and adds vibrancy to our beautiful world. But, because color is so involved with our day-to-day lives, we tend to overlook its importance.

I hope this cheat sheet gives you a better understanding and appreciation of color. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at dan@drawpaintacademy.com.

Happy painting!

Dan Scott

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Color is much easier to understand when you break it down into separate elements, which are:

Value: How light or dark something is, with white being the *highest value* and black being the *darkest value*.

Monet, The Red House

Saturation: A measure of how intense, rich or vivid a color is. Most colors are in their most saturated forms straight from a tube, then they lose saturation as you mix them with other colors.

Hue: Refers to the position of a color on the color wheel. Red, blue, orange, green, yellow - these are all different hues.

TINT: A color plus white.

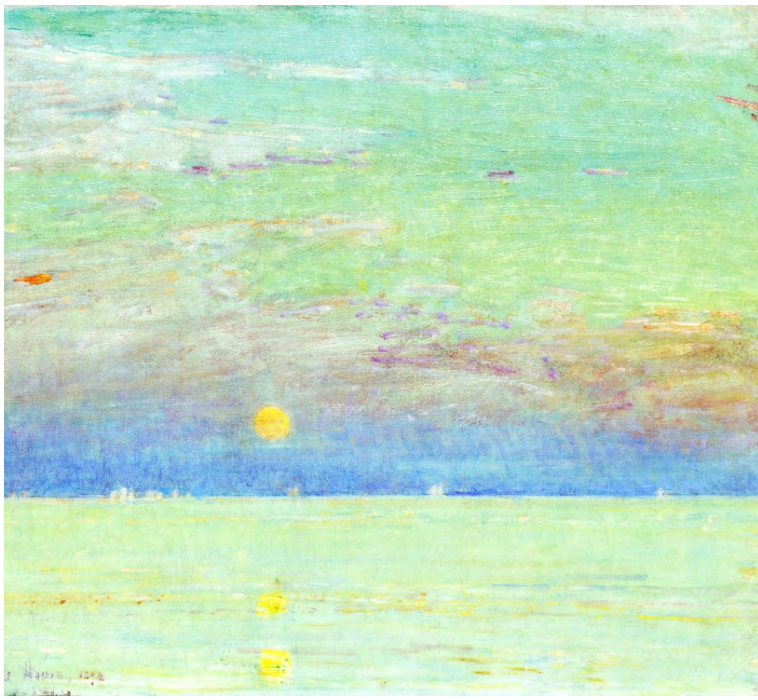
SHADE: A color plus black.

TONE: Used to broadly describe different mixtures of a color. You will also hear artists use the phrase “toned down” to describe reducing the saturation of a color (making it closer to gray).

VIVIDNESS, CHROMA, RICHNESS, PURITY: Refers to the saturation of a color.

HIGH-KEY: Refers to a range of light colors (colors in a high-value range).

LOW-KEY: Refers to a range of dark colors (colors in a low-value range).



Childe Hassam, Moonrise at Sunset, 1892

Childe Hassam, Nocturne, Railway Crossing, Chicago, 1892

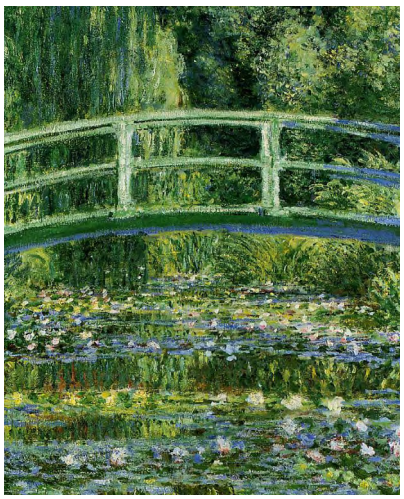
TEMPERATURE: Refers to how warm or cool a color is in terms of color temperature (think orange versus blue). This is not a *physical* temperature, but rather an *implied* temperature.

COLOR SCHEME: An arrangement of colors which is generally considered to be aesthetically pleasing. The popular color schemes used by artists are **complementary, analogous, triadic, split-complementary, Monochromatic** and **rectangular**.

COMPLEMENTARY

John Singer Sargent, Fisherwoman, 1913

ANALOGOUS



Claude Monet, Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge, 1897-1899

TRIADIC

Johannes Vermeer, The Milkmaid, 1658–1660

SPLIT-COMPLEMENTARY

Claude Monet, Regatta At Argenteuil, 1872

RECTANGULAR

Vincent van Gogh, Sunflowers, 1888

MONOCHROMATIC

Claude Monet, Morning On The Seine, 1897

COLOR HARMONY: Refers to the relationship between colors.

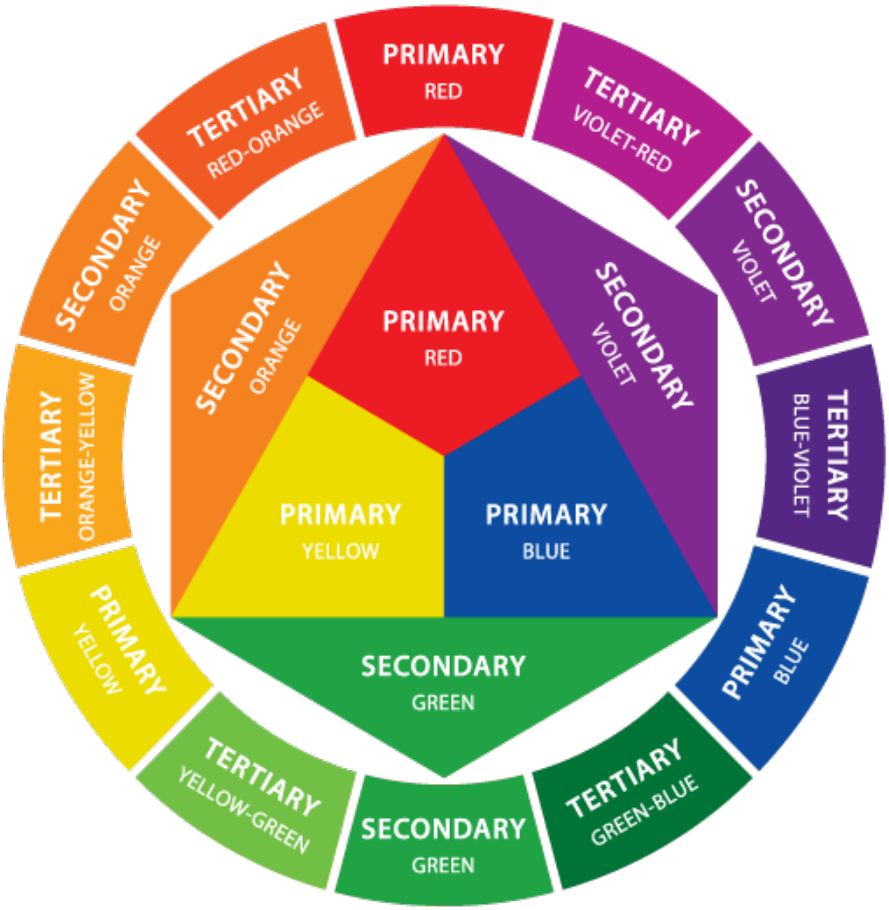
Since the origination of the color wheel by Isaac Newton, it has become one of the most powerful tools available to artists for explaining the relationships between colors.

The color wheel is comprised of 3 primary colors, 3 secondary colors, and 6 tertiary colors.

The three **primary colors** are red, blue and yellow.

The three **secondary colors** are green, orange and purple. These are made by mixing two of the primary colors.

The six other colors on the color wheel are the **tertiary colors**.



You can mix *almost* any color using just the primary colors (red, blue and yellow) and white. This is why painting with a limited palette is often recommended for beginners, as it forces you to learn how to mix your own colors rather than relying on pre-mixed colors.

Here are some tips for color mixing:

- Mixing any two primary colors will create the color between them on the color wheel. For example, by mixing red and blue, you will get purple.
- You can reduce the saturation of a color by mixing it with the color on the opposite side of the color wheel. These are **complementary colors**. For example, you can reduce the saturation of orange by mixing it with some blue.
- To darken a color, you can add blue, black or an earthy color such as raw umber or burnt sienna.
- To lighten a color, you can add yellow or white.
- To mix a natural black, you can combine a dark blue with raw umber or burnt sienna (you do not *need* to use black straight from the tube).

I want to address a number of common color myths that seem to be floating around the art world.

Color Myth #1

That a color can be ugly, bland, or boring.

A color is just a color. How we perceive a color is entirely subjective.

You will often hear people referring to grays and browns as being "ugly" colors. We tend to associate these colors with less glamorous aspects of life.

But let me assure you that they are not ugly colors. They are just colors. How you perceive and interpret those colors is up to you.

Eugène Delacroix once said, "*I can paint you the skin of Venus with mud, provided you let me surround it as I will.*"

If you look at many of the great paintings you are inspired by, you may notice that grays and browns are dominant colors. Without gray and brown, how could you show off your vibrant reds, greens, yellows, and so on?

So there are no ugly colors, just colors of different saturations, values, and hues.

Now you may be wondering that if there are no ugly colors, there can also be no"beautiful" colors. And that is correct.

You may hear me say from time to time that a color is beautiful. But I am usually referring to the way the color is used in the painting, rather than the color itself. A color by itself has no meaning. It is what surrounds that color that gives it meaning.

If you deem certain colors as being ugly or beautiful, you are really placing a limit on which colors you are willing to use in your paintings. Why would you want to limit yourself in any way?

So don't think of a color by itself as being either ugly or beautiful. Instead, aim to make your colors *appear* beautiful as a whole in your painting, with each color playing an important role in the overall harmony.

Color Myth #2

That you can apply predetermined color recipes or schemes to achieve color harmony in all your paintings.

Unfortunately, nature is not so predictable that you can apply some color scheme or recipe and achieve great results every time in a painting.

I think of color more as a beautiful dance between all the different hues, tints, shades, and tones, rather than something that can be simplified into a standard formula.

Color is not simple, and it is not a perfect science in painting. But that is OK, and that is part of the fun of painting.

Instead of searching for simple formulas or schemes to help you apply color, learn how to see color and how to manipulate it. For example, say you want to mix a translucent blue-green color for a crashing wave in the surf. Instead of searching on Google for "how to mix turquoise" or "how to paint the color of water," ask yourself these questions:

- What color tree does the color belong to (red, blue, yellow, orange, green, or purple)?
- Is the color leaning toward another hue (is the blue of the water leaning toward green or purple)?
- What is the value of the color (how light or dark is it)?
- What is the saturation of the color (how dull or vivid is it)?

If you can answer these questions, then you can mix the color! No source on the internet will be able to tell you without seeing what you see first.

Color Myth #3

That some people have the "gift of color."

The ability to see and use color is not some gift you are born with. It is not something that you either have or you don't.

It may relieve you to know that color is something you can, in fact, learn and improve. But to do so, you need to think of color as a skill, rather than a character trait that you either have or do not have.

For some of you, this will be good news, as you will be able to go forward and improve your understanding of color. However, those of you who believe you have the gift of color may not like hearing all this, as it means you cannot just sit back and rely on your natural gift, and you, too, must go out and improve your knowledge of color.

Learning color is the same as anything in art.

First, you need to understand the theory behind color. If you learn based on flawed theories (and trust me, there are a lot of them floating around in the art world), then you are really crippling your painting skills. Learning color and painting should be a slow but steady improvement based on proven fundamentals.

Second, you need to practice and make mistakes. Without mistakes, you will never improve.

Thirdly, you need to analyze and learn from your mistakes. Mistakes are only good if you actually learn from them.

I can help along the way, but it is up to you to practice.

Psychological Triggers

Color has a powerful influence over human behaviour, to the extent it can manipulate your perception of what is actually there.

Here are some colors and their psychological triggers:

Passion, love, anger and danger		Health, nature and wealth	
Vitality, creativity and activity		Trust, security and spirituality	
Energy, light and hope		Creativity, royalty and wealth	

However, please note that these psychological triggers are all subjective and vary from person to person.

How do these two paintings make you feel? Do you feel any different psychological triggers from them?

Claude Monet, Houses Of Parliament, Sunset, 1904

Claude Monet, Water Lilies, 1897-1899

Thanks For Reading

Thanks for reading this cheat sheet and hope you found it useful. I go into much more detail on color theory for artists in my Painting Academy for those interested.

If you have any questions or thoughts, feel free to email me at dan@drawpaintacademy.com.

Happy painting!

Dan Scott

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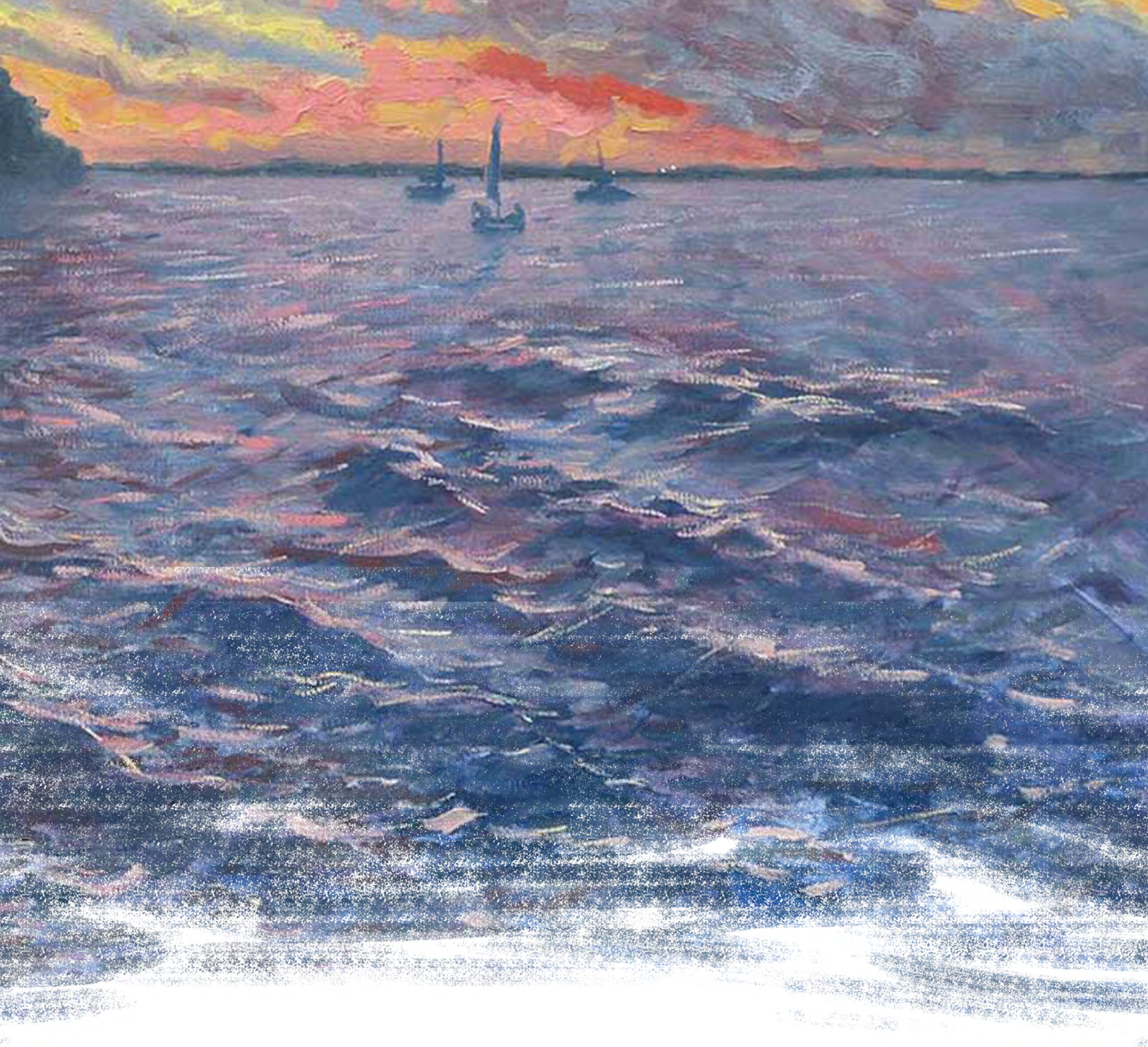

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