Article 16 – Triadic Color Scheme
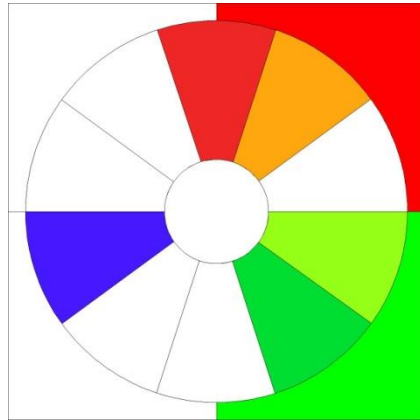
The last color scheme that we are going to discuss is the Triadic scheme. This scheme pulls 3 hues that are equidistance apart on the color wheel. The resulting palette will have a warm or cool dominance based on the colors selected.
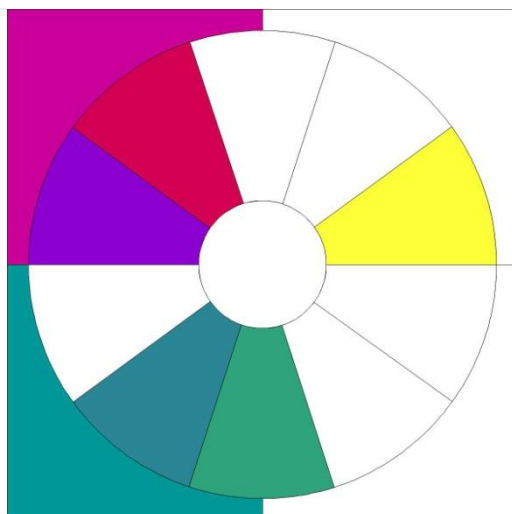
Because the Munsell wheel has 10 steps (primaries and secondaries), I will need to find tertiary colors to complete the triad.
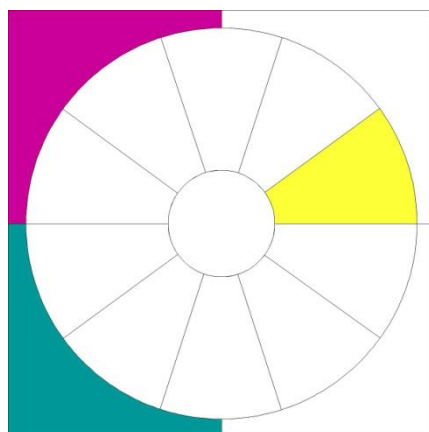

Let's start with Blue-violet. To find the other 2 hues for the triad I need to pull a red-orange (between red and orange) and a green between green-yellow and green.
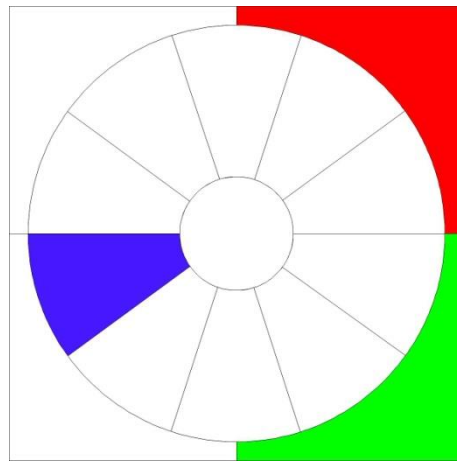


Here are the 3 colors of the triad.

In this example I am starting with yellow. I need to find a hue between purple and red-purple and between blue and blue-green.

If this palette doesn't remind you of the 1980's then you are too simply too young to have any memory of that decade. I had lots of clothes in these colors.

I find the Triadic color scheme the most difficult to find and use and that must be true for most artists because most of my color theory books barely mention the triadic scheme.

When looking for fabric using a triadic color scheme I first think of bright children's prints like this Dr. Seuss print.
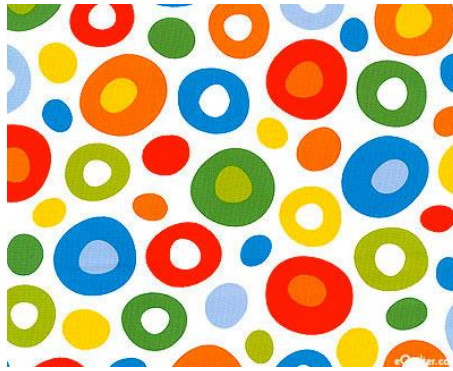
But would true color theorists call this a triadic scheme? There's that green added in that doesn't seem to belong. At what point does a color scheme move from being triadic to simply being "multi-colored"?

This fabric is the best example if what I believe to be a true triadic color scheme. It's very bright and vibrant using the primary colors from the [pigment color wheel](#). I think that these next two fabrics are also good examples of triadic color schemes.
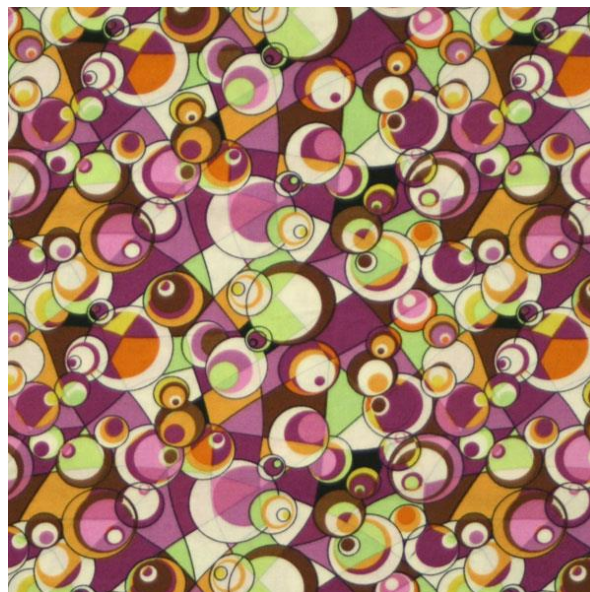
Here are 2 more samples that I also think utilize a triadic color scheme. Do you agree?

How about this next one? The orange, green and purple are a triadic scheme for sure but is it still triadic when placed on a yellow ground or with the addition of brown (which is really an orange)?

Does it matter?

Not if you like what you are seeing.

I believe that color theory and color systems are simply tools, not rules. It's good to know the basics because it can help you to make decisions about your own color palettes. If something doesn't look "right" you can then look at value, intensity, color relationships and other traits to see what you can do

to improve your palette and, ultimately, your project. But don't let it stifle you into inaction. There's never one right answer and in the end you only need to make yourself happy.