Lesson Title: Impressionism and Color Theory  
Grades: K–5  
Time Required: 1–2 class periods  
Subjects Area: Visual Arts  

Lesson Overview: Students will learn about the Impressionist painters’ use of color and how it connected to early 19th-century scientific theories about color. They will explore combinations of primary and secondary colors, experiment creating secondary colors, and create a landscape using complementary colors.

Common Core English Language Arts  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1.C  

National Core Arts Standards  
VA:Cn10.1.3a  
Develop a work of art based on observations of surroundings.  

VA:Cn10.1.5a  
Apply formal and conceptual vocabularies of art and design to view surroundings in new ways through artmaking.  

VA:Re8.1.2a  
Interpret art by identifying the mood suggested by a work of art and describing relevant subject matter and characteristics of form.  

VA:Re7.1.2a  
Perceive and describe aesthetic characteristics of one’s natural world and constructed environments.  

VA:Re7.1.3a  
Speculate about processes an artist uses to create a work of art.

Learning Objectives:  
Students will be able to:  
- Recognize the differences between primary and secondary colors  
- Gain familiarity with the vocabulary of color  
- Identify pairs of complementary colors  
- Experiment with combinations of primary and secondary colors to predict outcomes based on observed patterns  

Artwork in Focus:  
Click on the link below to access the image through the Wadsworth’s Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work. NOTE: The work of art used in this lesson may not currently be on view at the museum.  

Claude Monet, The Church at Vernon, 1883  

Materials:  
- Image of The Church at Vernon  
- Projector and screen/SMART board or equivalent  
- Acetate in red, yellow, and bright blue  
- Color wheel  
- Colored art tissue paper torn into long strips  
- Liquid starch or white glue thinned with water to the consistency of gravy  
- Small paper cups to hold glue or starch  
- Paintbrushes  
- Wax paper  

TEACHER RESOURCE  
thewadsworth.org/teachers  
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, School and Teacher Programs  
teachers@wadsworthatheneum.org
Lesson Procedures:

Part One: Guided Viewing

1. Have students look at the painting for 30 seconds. Then ask them to close their eyes—what was the first thing you noticed about the painting? (Answers will include the sunlight, the trees, and the water. Inform students that all of their answers are correct—Claude Monet was interested in creating works of art with all of those things in them.)

2. Lead a class discussion based on the following questions:
   - What time of day do you think it is in the painting? What do you see that makes you think so?
   - What is the weather like here? What time of year might it be? What makes you say that?
   - Explain foreground, middle ground, and background to students. What is in each section of the painting?
   - Where is the horizon line?
   - Close your eyes again. Now imagine jumping into the painting! Open your eyes: where are you standing? What do you smell, taste, feel, and hear in this space?
   - Look closely at the brushstrokes in this painting. Describe them.
   - Mimic the kind of movements the artist might make when painting this scene. How did it feel?

3. Give students the background information about the painting and the artist. Inform students that Monet painted en plein air, or outdoors, and that this painting was one that the artist painted directly from nature. He thought it was important to capture what he saw while working outdoors—his impression of the scene he painted on his canvas. This painting shows the kind of attention Monet paid to the world around him.

Part Two: Exploring Color

1. Introduce the idea of primary colors (red, yellow, blue). These are the colors that make up all the other colors. When you mix the primary colors together, you get the secondary colors (purple, green, and orange).

2. Assign each student a piece of acetate in blue, yellow, or red and have them try to find the right “color buddy” to create secondary colors.

3. Next, return to the painting, asking students to think specifically about the colors they see
   - What primary colors do you see in the painting?
   - What secondary colors do you see in the painting?
   - Look closely at the reflection in the water, what colors can you see in the reflections?
   - Squint your eyes, where is the darkest part of the painting? What colors did Monet use there?
     - What colors do you think he might have mixed together to make this color?

4. Present students with a color wheel. Explain that colors across from each other on the color wheel are called complements.

5. Using the acetate, have a student demonstrate how mixing two complementary colors creates a more muted color, but placing two complimentary colors next to one another actually makes the two colors look brighter!

6. Now have students identify where they see complementary colors next to each other in Monet’s painting (you might have to prompt them to include colors that are not pure primary or secondary colors, i.e. pink next to green). Can they imagine what the painting would look like if Monet had mixed his complementary colors instead?
Part Three: Tissue Paper Landscape Activity

1. Explain to students that they will create their own landscapes using secondary and complementary colors.

2. Distribute tissue paper squares in primary and secondary colors to students. Make sure a color wheel is visible to help students check their work.

3. Using Monet’s *Church at Vernon* as inspiration, students will create their own landscapes by layering tissue paper into complementary color compositions. (Prior to creating artworks, it may be helpful to discuss or look at different types of landscapes, including local landscapes surrounding their school.)

4. Show students how to arrange layers of tissue paper over the wax paper background. The edges of the tissue paper should hang over the edges of the wax paper. Encourage students to use combinations of primary and complementary colors arranged next to each other.

5. Students should experiment to arrange their landscapes with a foreground, middle ground, and background—they may want to include rows of mountains, waves in the ocean, or clouds in the sky.

6. After students have designed their landscapes, distribute the paintbrushes and cups of glue. Have students paint the glue over the surface of the wax paper and drop the tissue paper on top. Students will collage the layers of tissue paper into place. Add glue over the tissue paper composition before adding successive layers of tissue paper. The glue will make the tissue more transparent, demonstrating the variety of secondary and complementary colors created in this activity.

7. Hang or arrange finished landscapes and encourage students to describe the various colors they see within their projects. Ask students to identify areas of complementary colors

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Claude Monet, *The Church at Vernon* (1883)

Claude Monet (1840–1926) was a French painter who was partially responsible for the creation of the Impressionist movement in the late 19th century. He was concerned with capturing the fleeting effects of light in his paintings, which he completed with quick short brushstrokes and bright colors. Just after moving to nearby Giverny, Monet painted this sun-filled scene of the church in the town of Vernon in Normandy, France. His vantage point, downstream from Giverny, was the meadows of Vernonnet. He would go on to create several paintings of this church, each from a different spot along the River Seine.