

Composition in Art And Photography





What IS Artistic Composition?

Composition is a roadmap to guide the viewer through the image and tell our story.



Composition is different from the subject matter of a painting or a photograph.

Done successfully, good composition draws the viewer in and then moves the viewer's eye across the whole painting or photograph so that everything is taken in, finally settling on the main subject.



What affects composition?

Light and shadow

Position (left, right, angle, and distance)

Perspective (high or low)

The focus of the painting or photograph –
what you want to convey to the viewer

Composition brings together everything...

it unifies beat, rhythm and rhyme in a poem;

timbre, melody, harmony, tempo and dynamics in a symphony;

and subject, mood, light and moment in a photograph –

and somehow makes them greater in whole than the sum of their parts.

Composition creates a synergy which elevates art above mere expression, it can transform even the vulgar into the sublime.

Ian Plant, Photographer



Sometimes you look at a photograph or a painting and you know something is “off” but you don’t know what it is.

There could be many things “wrong” with the image, but it’s probably the composition that is throwing you off!

COMPOSITION

The art of organizing elements of artwork into a harmonious and pleasing whole.
The consideration of how objects are placed in a design or work of art.

Tips for creating good composition:

1. Overlap

Place objects slightly over one another. This will get the eye to move from one element to another. Objects should not be touching each other by edges ("no kissing allowed!"). Avoid isolation. Build a relationship between objects.

Good overlapping



Avoid kissing



Avoid isolation



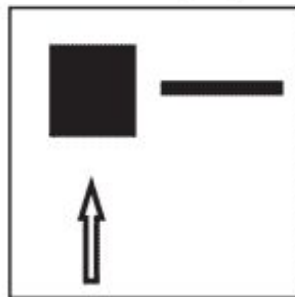
2. Crop

Consider having objects go off the edge of the page. This gets the viewer in and out of the picture. Avoid floating objects within the edges of the page.

Have object go off the page



Avoid floating objects



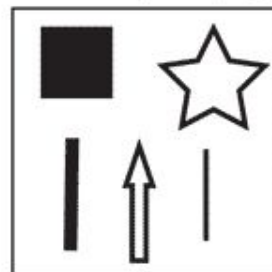
3. Rotate:

Consider placing objects at an angle. Things that are tilted create a more dynamic composition. Artwork with objects that are perfectly lined up with the edge can be boring.

Tilt objects



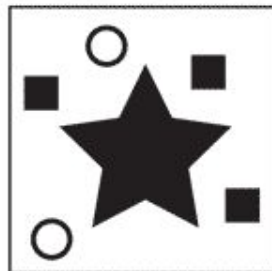
Avoid all objects upright



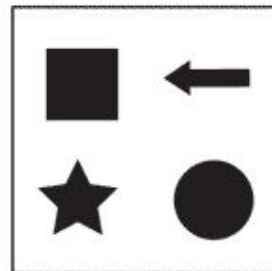
4. Focal Point

Create an area of importance. Give the viewer something to focus on. One way to achieve this is through size variation. Try not to have all elements the same size. Another way to create focus is through color dominance.

Use size & color variation



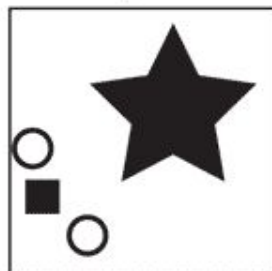
Avoid all objects the same size



5. Off-Centering

Avoid placing objects directly in the center of the page. Think about placing objects slightly to one side. This will create a more interesting composition. Try to keep elements balanced as you do this. For example, one large object could be balanced by 3 smaller ones. (Note: this does not mean that a symmetrical design cannot be successful.)

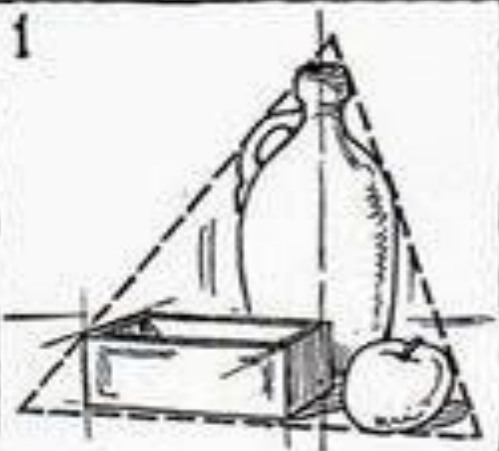
Off-center objects for interest



Centered can be boring

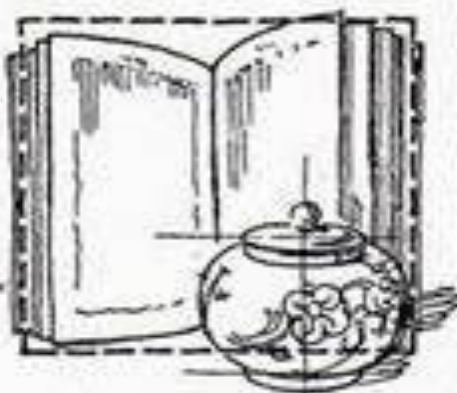


1



A TRIANGULAR
GROUPING

2



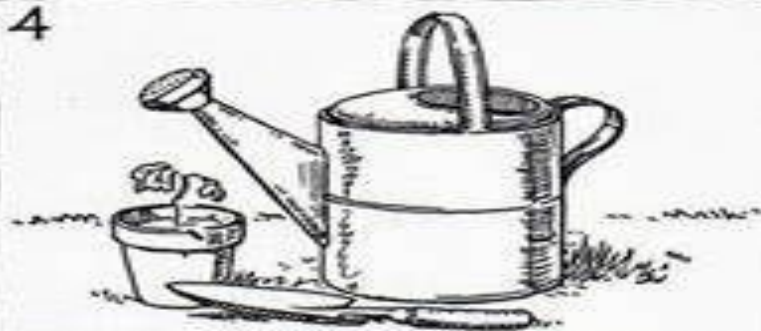
A SQUARE
COMPOSITION

3



A CIRCULAR
GROUPING

4



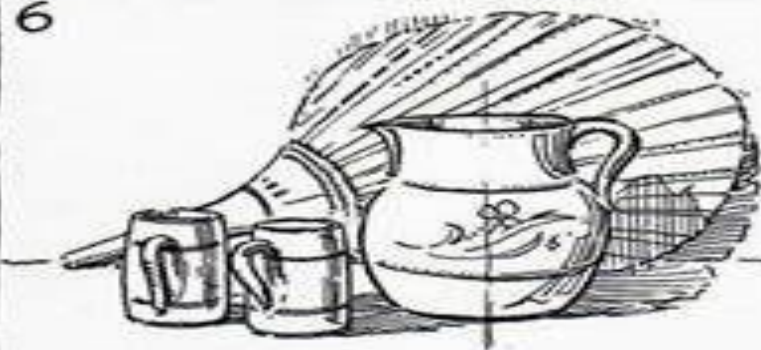
OBJECTS ASSOCIATED BY USE

5



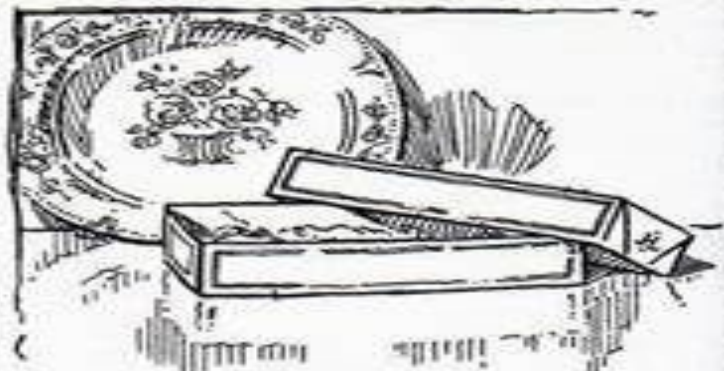
OBJECTS CONTRASTING IN FORM

6



OBJECTS CONTRASTING IN SIZE

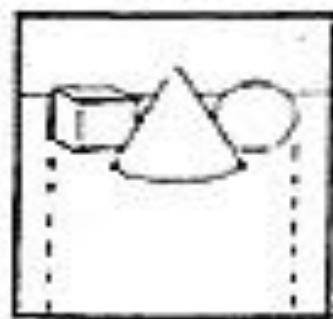
7



MARGIN LINES CUTTING OBJECTS

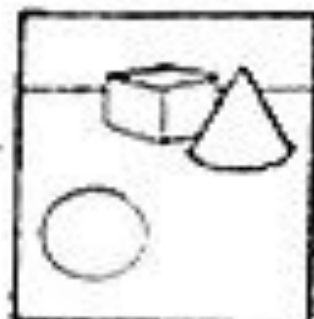
Fig. 104. Here we have applied some of our thoughts on composition to arranging objects. Sketches like these serve as crude guides for the final drawings.

NO



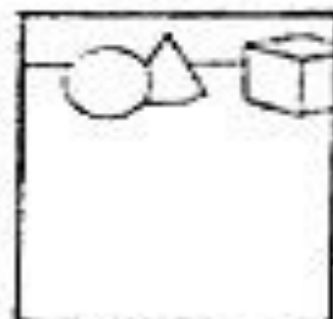
STATIC!
NO FLOW

YES



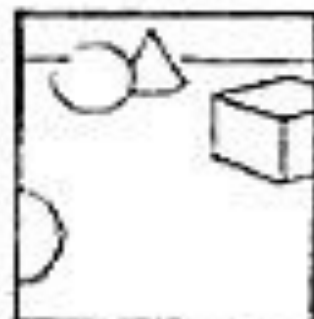
INTERESTING
MOVEMENT

NO

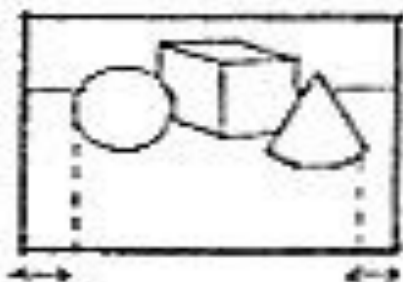


BOTTOM EMPTY
SPACE-DEAD

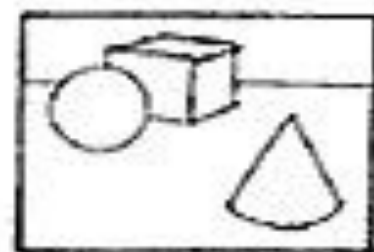
YES



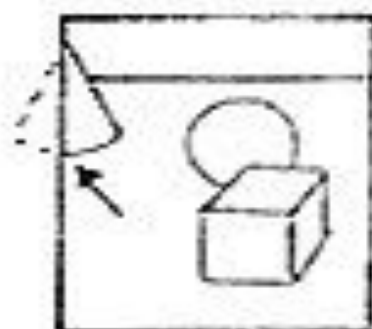
EMPTY SPACE
HAS MEANING



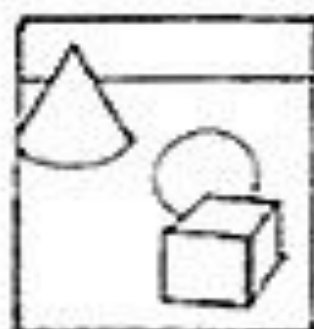
TOO CENTERED
BORING!



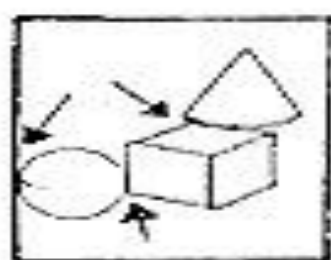
OFF CENTER
CREATES EYE FLOW



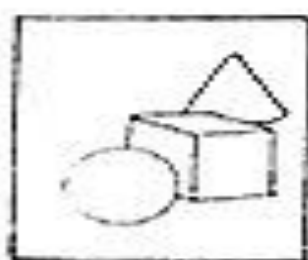
BAD CROPPING -
CUT IN HALF



GOOD
CROPPING



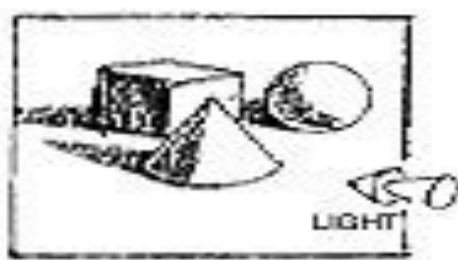
**BAD TANGENCIES
FLATTEN SPACE**



**OVERLAPPING
CREATES SPACE**



**FLAT LIGHTING -
DULL**



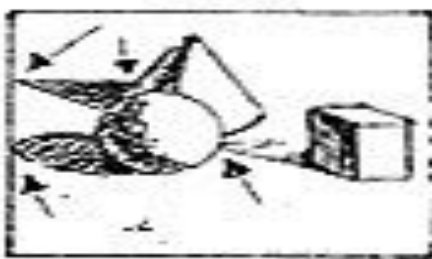
**INTERESTING LIGHTING
DESCRIBES FORM**



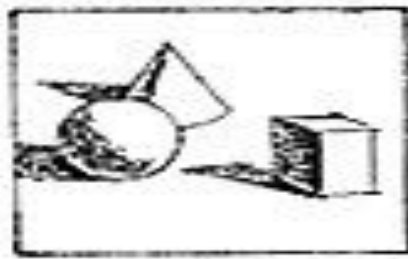
**OBJECTS IN
CORNERS
CREATE TENSION**



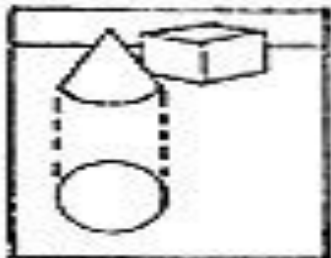
**NEAR CORNER
NO TENSION**



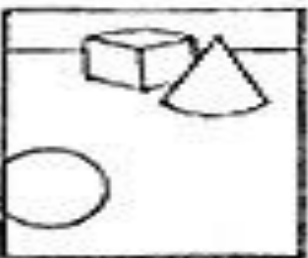
**BAD TANGENCIES
ON SHADOWS
FLATTENS SPACE**



**NO TANGENCIES
CREATES SPACE**



**DIRECTLY ABOVE
FLATTENS SPACE**



**OFF TO ONE SIDE
BALANCES SPACE**



Tangencies -

Tangents are where 2 lines just touch each other in a way that causes spatial ambiguity and a slight jarring on our eyes.

It's not super obvious but can really ruin a perfectly good painting and can unwittingly change the composition in your drawing.



Composition

Break down your vision to these two questions - and keep asking these questions throughout your creative process!

And this is NOT about your subject matter, but rather HOW you plan to PRESENT that subject!

What is it you want to say?

And how do you want to say it?



What is it you want to say?

What story are you telling?

Is it about a specific subject or is it broad like a landscape?

Is it about the color - or the texture - or the shapes -
or the contrasts?

Is it the emotion?



How are you going to say it?

Are you going to emphasize the highlights or the shadows?

Are you going to use texture to create depth in your image?

Are you going to use color to draw the eye in?

Are you going to simplify the background to bring detail to your subject?



Visual Design Elements - the Building Blocks

Line: A mark that spans between two points. This is the most fundamental visual element at your disposal.

Shape: A contained area defined by edges.

Color: The different hues - complementary, analogous, monochrome.

Texture: How rough, smooth, glossy, etc. the surface is. This could be the physical texture or the mere illusion of texture.



Visual Design Elements - the Building Blocks

Value: How light or dark a color is - tint, shade, tone.

Space: The space taken up by (positive) or between (negative) objects.

Depth: The illusion of distance on a flat surface. Depth is typically segmented into a foreground, middle ground, and background.



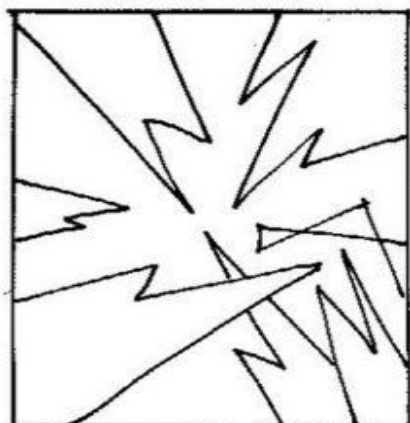
Lines



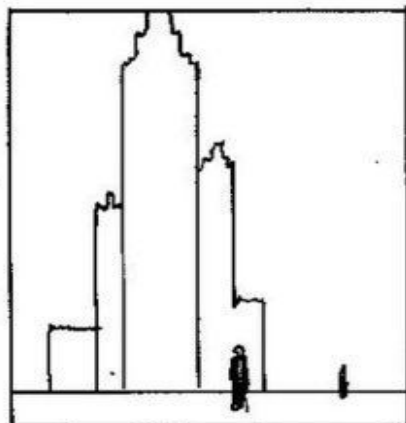
Lines are much more than the outline of objects in our paintings or photographs. They should contribute to incredible expression, rhythm, movement, and harmony.

They can also lead the viewer where we want them to travel, with both actual and implied lines.

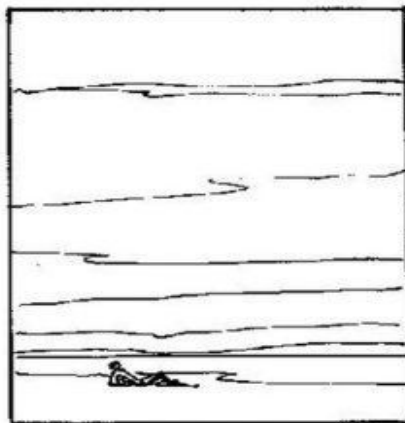
THE RELATIONSHIP OF LINE TO EMOTIONAL RESPONSE



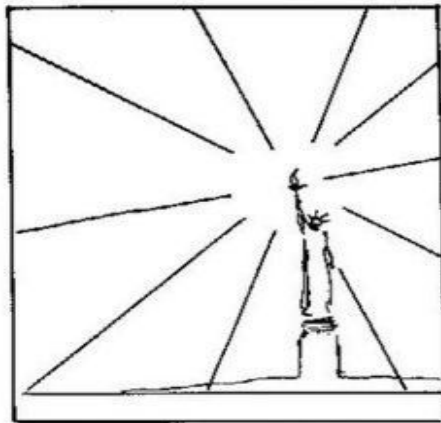
ANGLES FOR AGITATION, CONFUSION,
CLASH, INSECURITY, ACTION, STRIFE



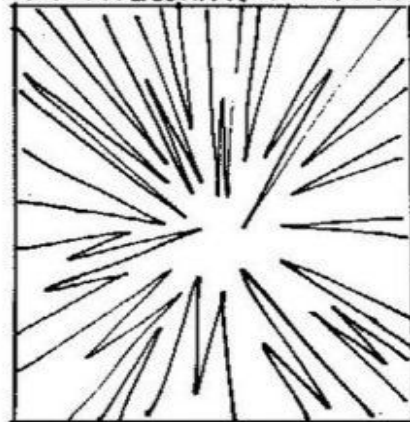
VERTICALS FOR DIGNITY, STRENGTH,
PERMANENCE, STABILITY, AWE



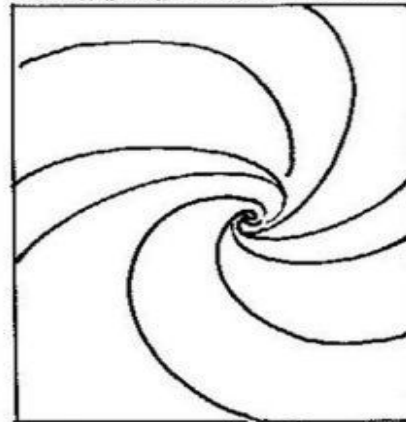
HORIZONTALS FOR REPOSE, CALM,
QUIETUDE, PEACE, TRANQUILITY



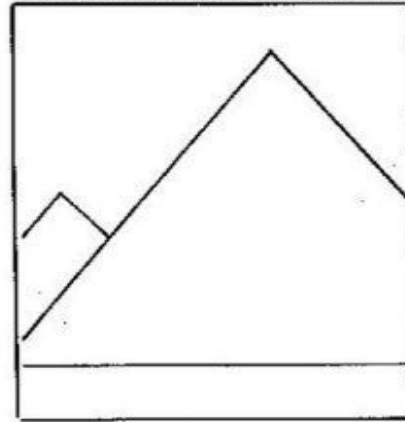
RADI: FOR GLORY, DEVOTION, DUTY,
PATRIOTISM, UNITY, AMBITION, FREEDOM



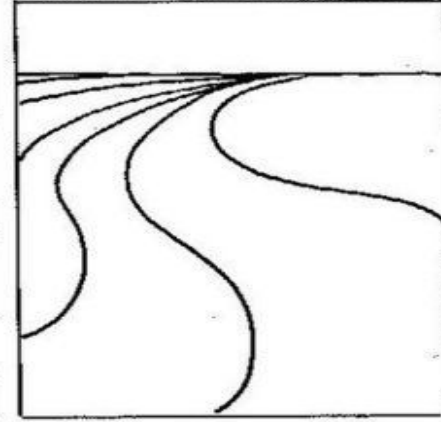
RADIATION FOR SHOCK, ATTENTION



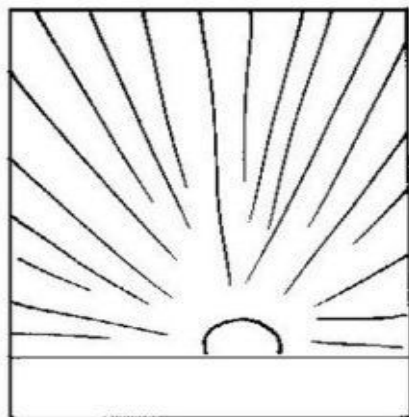
SPIRALS FOR MOTION, POWER, EXCITEMENT



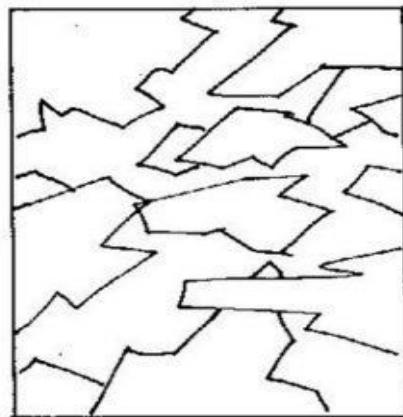
TRIANGLES FOR PERMANENCE, SECURITY



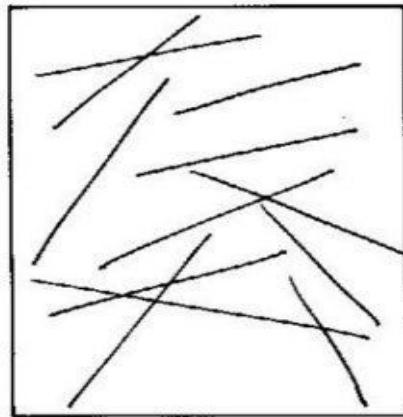
RHYTHM FOR GRACE, CHARM, MOVEMENT



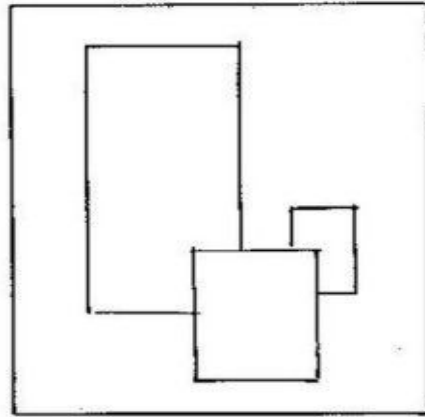
LIGHT FOR HOPE, LOVE, AMBITION.



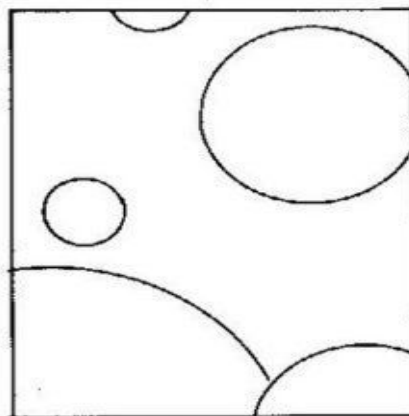
BROKEN SHAPES - INSTABILITY - UNCERTAINTY



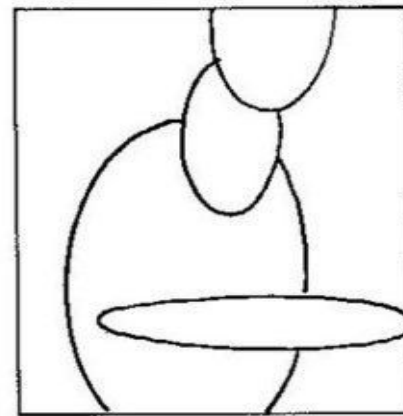
OBLIQUES - COMBAT - CONFUSION - CLASH



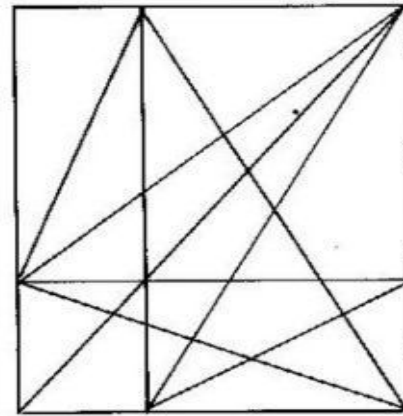
RECTANGLES - STABILITY - STRENGTH - UNITY



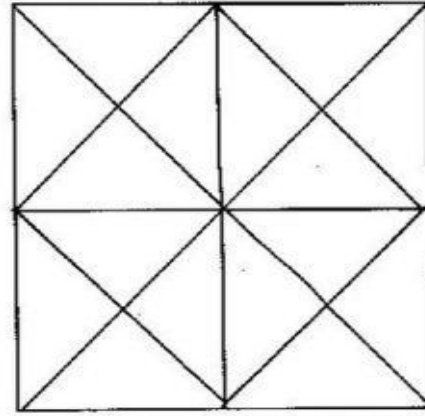
CIRCLES - IMMENSITY, VASTNESS, ETERNITY.
MOTION - EQUALITY - DELIVERANCE.



OVALS - FEMININITY - CREATIVENESS
SENSUOSITY - GRACE - PERPETUATION



INFORMAL SUBDIVISION - ACTIVITY
EXCITEMENT - ELASTICITY - PROGRESS



FORMAL DIVISION - DIGNITY - UNITY
BALANCE - FORMALITY - STRENGTH.



Shapes

Each area of our paintings can be broken into larger and smaller shapes. The more effectively we group colors, values and lines into abstract shapes the better our compositions and paintings will flow.

Grouping everything into shapes allows us to separate our thoughts from unnecessary detail in the early stages of painting. It helps us create pattern, unity and movement without the initial distraction of the millions of small nuances and variations that exist in our scene.





Shapes

Some common shapes we encounter in nature are spirals, zigzags, circles, triangles, curves, and diagonals.

Use them strategically to enhance your designs.

Each has their own character and effect on the viewer.

Most people can sense their energy intuitively.



Shapes

Zigzags create energy and drama

Curves lead us gracefully around and through the composition

Diagonals add tension and dynamic energy

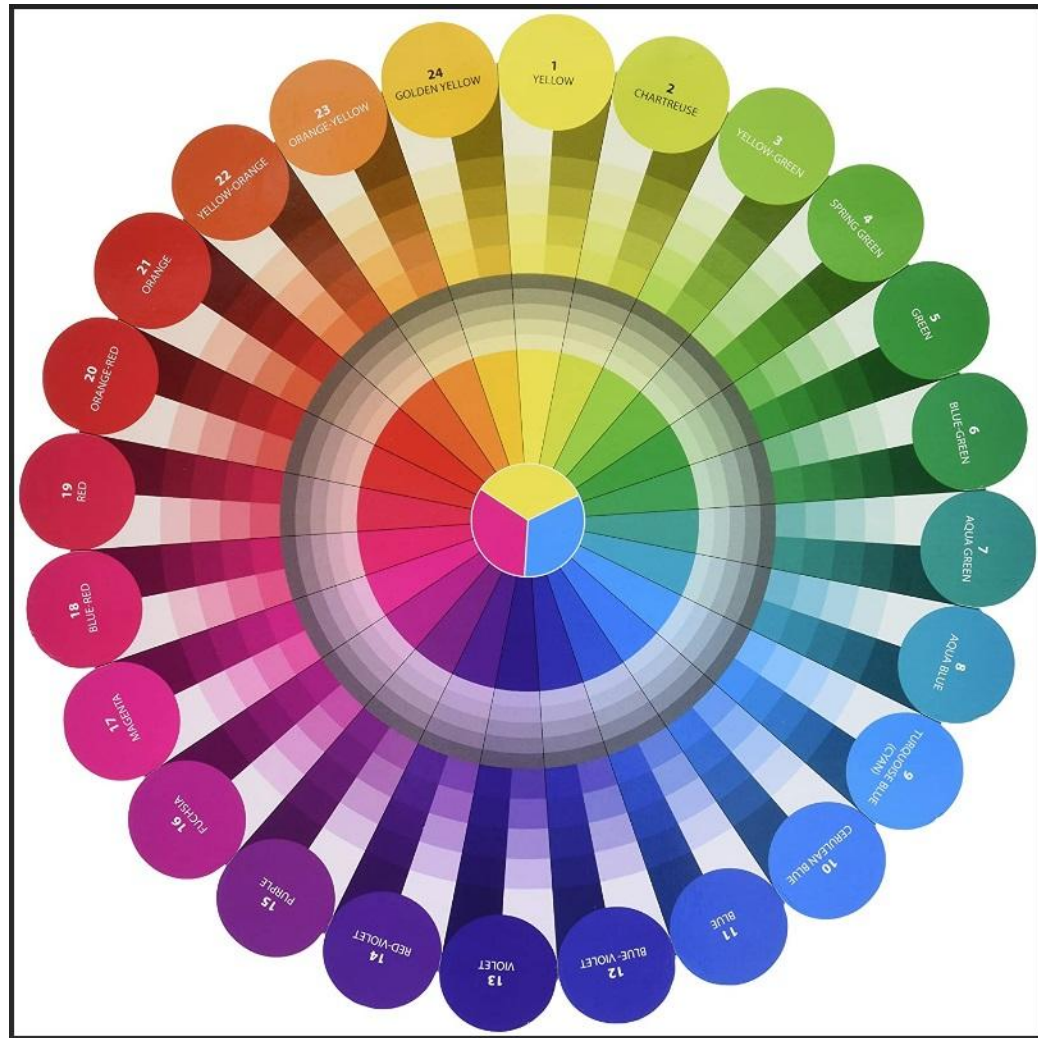


Color

Complementary

Analogous

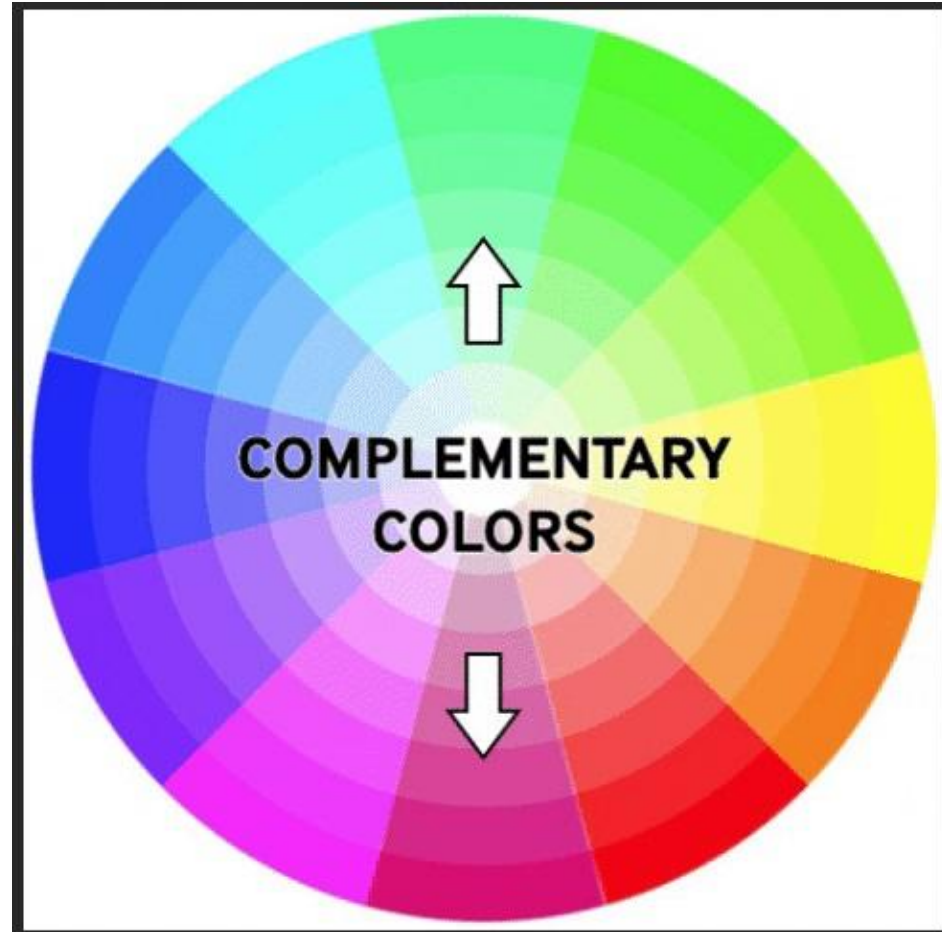
Monochrome





Complementary Colors

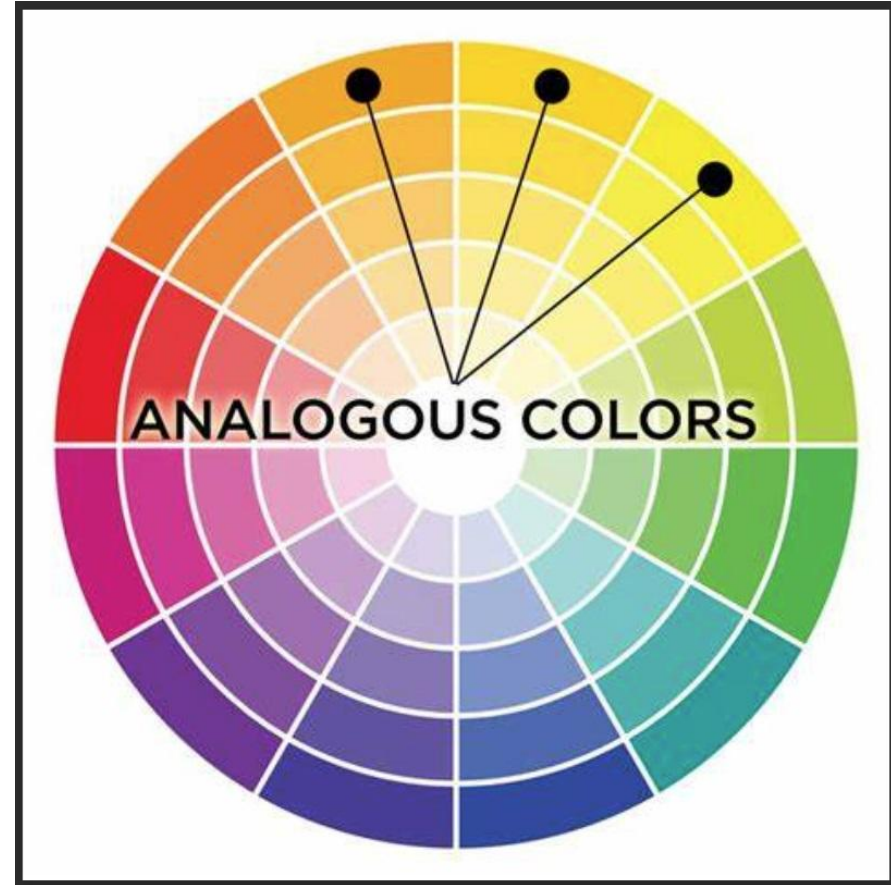
Complementary colors are on opposite sides of the color wheel.





Analogous Colors

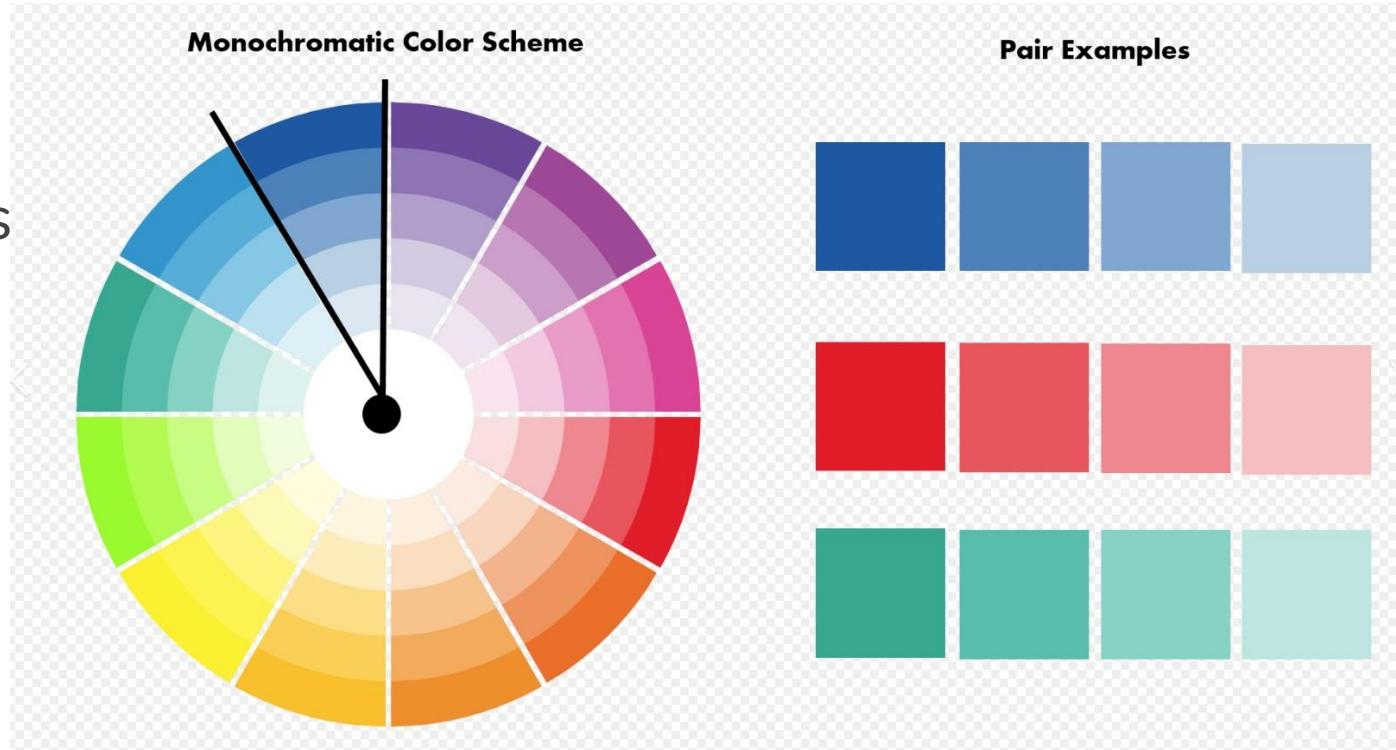
Analogous colors are those who are side by side on the color wheel.





Monochromatic Colors

Monochromatic colors are shades and tints of the same wedge of color on the color wheel.

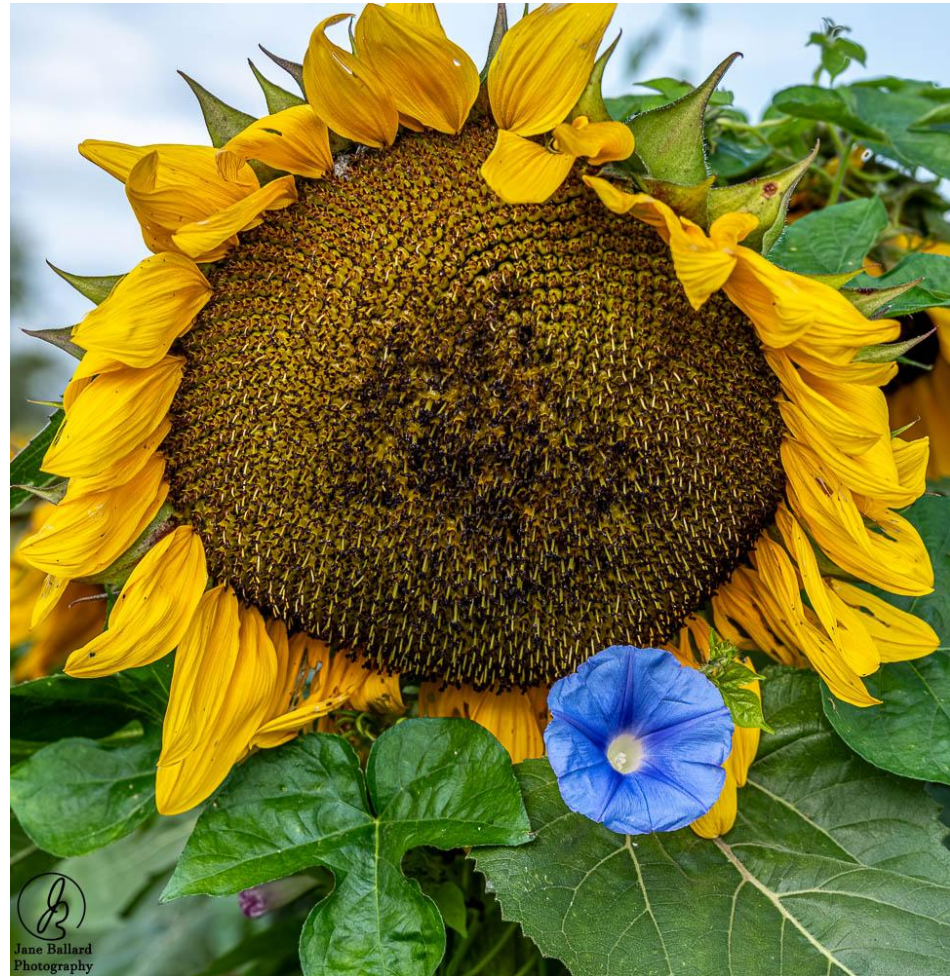




Texture

Texture can be created or can be inherent in an image.

Putting something rough next to something smooth will create dimension in an image.





Value

Use shades and tints of the same color to create interest in an image.

A 3-dimensional form is dependent on values that become light and shadow.





Space

You can fill your image with your subject OR you can give your subject room around it to isolate it.





Depth



Images can have depth by having a foreground, a middle ground, and a background.



Some of the strategies we can use for depicting depth are -

Proportion;

Shading (values);

Overlapping;

Foreshortening;

Position and clarity (atmospheric perspective)



Visual Design Elements - the Building Blocks

Lines

Shapes

Colors

Texture




Value

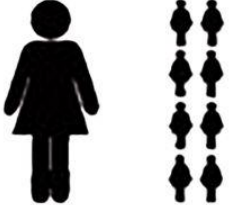



Space

Depth

The Principles of Design

(how to use the tools to make art)

Pattern		A regular arrangement of alternated or repeated elements (shapes, lines, colours) or motifs.
Contrast		The juxtaposition of different elements of design (for example: rough and smooth textures, dark and light values) in order to highlight their differences and/or create visual interest, or a focal point.
Emphasis		Special attention/importance given to one part of a work of art (for example, a dark shape in a light composition). Emphasis can be achieved through placement, contrast, colour, size, repetition... Relates to focal point.

<p>Balance</p>		<p>A feeling of balance results when the elements of design are arranged symmetrically or asymmetrically to create the impression of equality in weight or importance.</p>
<p>Proportion/ Scale</p>		<p>The relationship between objects with respect to size, number, and so on, including the relation between parts of a whole.</p>
<p>Harmony</p>		<p>The arrangement of elements to give the viewer the feeling that all the parts of the piece form a coherent whole.</p>
<p>Rhythm/ Movement</p>		<p>The use of recurring elements to direct the movement of the eye through the artwork. There are five kinds of rhythm: random, regular, alternating, progressive, and flowing. The way the elements are organized to lead the eye to the focal area. Movement can be directed for example, along edges and by means of shape and colour.</p>



Pattern

A regular
arrangement of
elements





Contrast

Rough or smooth
texture

Large shapes to
small shapes

Dark to light tones

Man-made or
natural





Emphasis

A focal point

It brings clarity and focus which can help engage the viewer because they feel they understand what's expected of them.





Balance

Visual balance, weight of the elements, symmetry, balance of color

Balance is largely based on a feeling rather than a formula.

Something asymmetrical can bring a feeling of tension to an image.





Proportion

The relative size of one element in comparison to another

The trees in the foreground shouldn't be the same height as your mountains in the background.





Harmony Unity

How the elements work together -

Think of the song “one of these things is not like the other.”

It’s much easier to point out when something is not in harmony than to describe what a harmonious image is supposed to look like.





Movement and Rhythm

Repetition, line, shape, texture





Composition Principles

Gestalt

Gestalt means “unified whole”. We want the world we see to have unity and organization. Our brains tend to organize visual chaos by grouping similar elements into categories such as Proximity, Similarity, Closure, and Continuity.



Composition Principles

Proximity

The closer objects are placed near each other, the more likely they are to be seen as a single group or pattern, or even as a single entity rather than as individual separate shapes.

That doesn't mean they have to feel like one object.

Proximity can create tension and powerful expression.



Proximity



Jane Ballard
Photography



Composition Principles

Similarity

Similarity occurs when the objects or elements we see look like one another.

When characteristics such as color, texture, shape, size, value, or direction are repeated in a painting or a photograph, they create unity because of similarity.



Similarity



Jane Ballard
Photography



Composition Principles

Closure

When we see a familiar shape or object like a square or the wall of a building and that shape is broken by a flower bush or beam of light, our brains will fill in the broken line or 'close' the shape.



Closure





Composition Principles

Continuity or Continuation

The easiest way to think of this is when it feels like someone is looking in a specific direction.

This can also be accomplished using a figure staring in a certain direction in the painting or photograph.

The viewer's eye will tend to follow the line of sight.



Continuity or Continuation

An 'implied line' is created which the viewer follows.

We are compelled to move from, or through, one object to another.

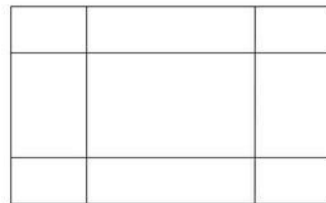
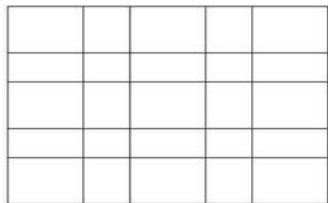
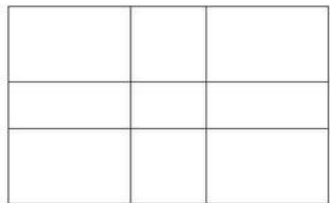
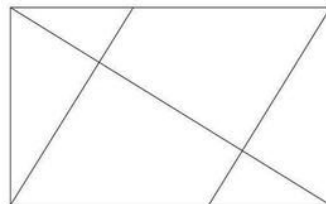
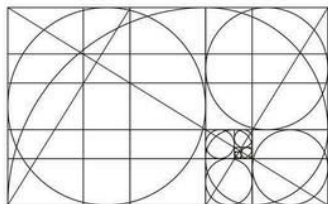
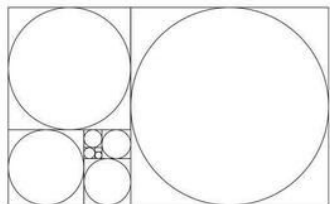
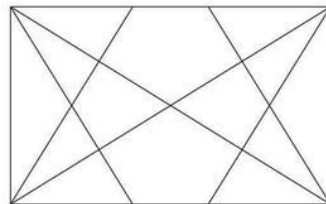
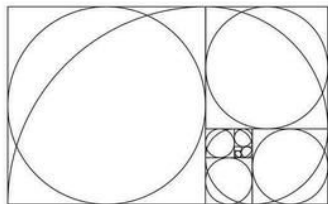
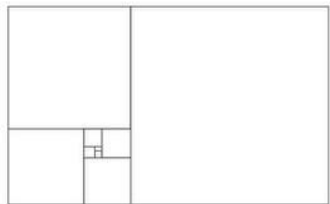
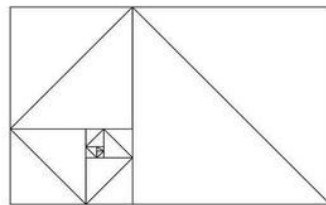
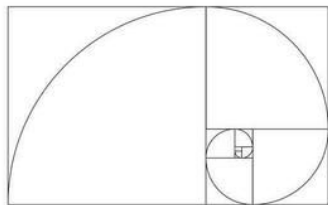
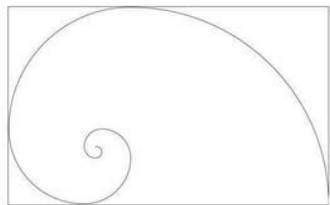




Composition Principles

Dynamic symmetry

These are mathematical ratios for finding pleasingly proportioned compositions.





Golden Ratio, Golden Mean, Fibonacci Spiral

What is the golden ratio?

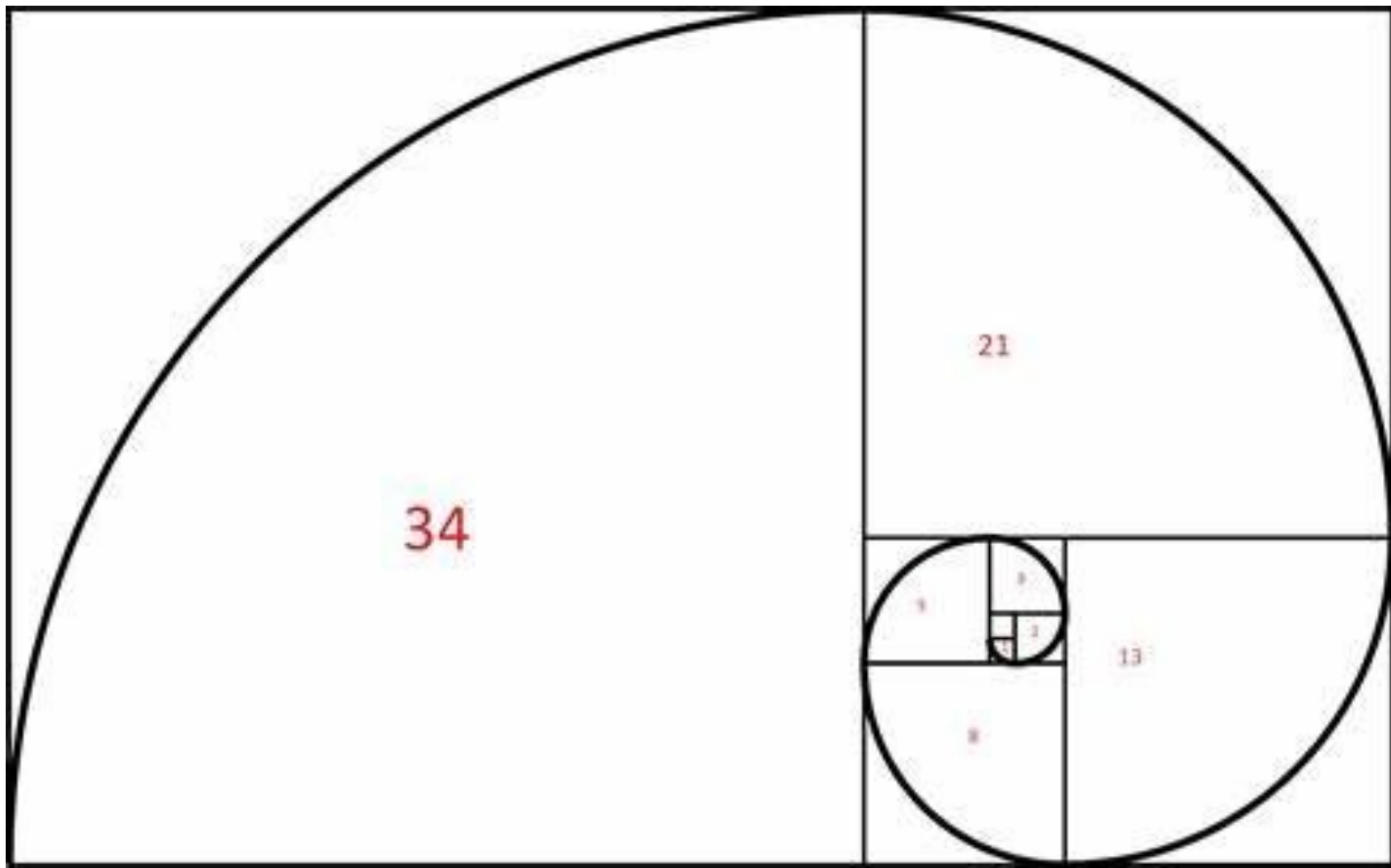
Well, it's actually very simple: two quantities are in the golden ratio if their ratio is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantities.

Wait, what?

Maybe this mathematical formula will help:

NO???

$$\frac{a + b}{a} = \frac{a}{b} \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \varphi,$$





Golden Ratio, Golden Mean, Fibonacci Spiral

The easiest way to show what the golden mean looks like for artists is to use a Fibonacci Numbers inspired rectangle.

The Fibonacci numbers and spirals are found in plenty of God's creations like pineapple fruit, pine cones, and flowers.

Fibonacci numbers are amazingly fun, especially when placed in a graphed rectangle.



21

13

3

2

1

1

5

8



“Rules” of Composition - from PetaPixel

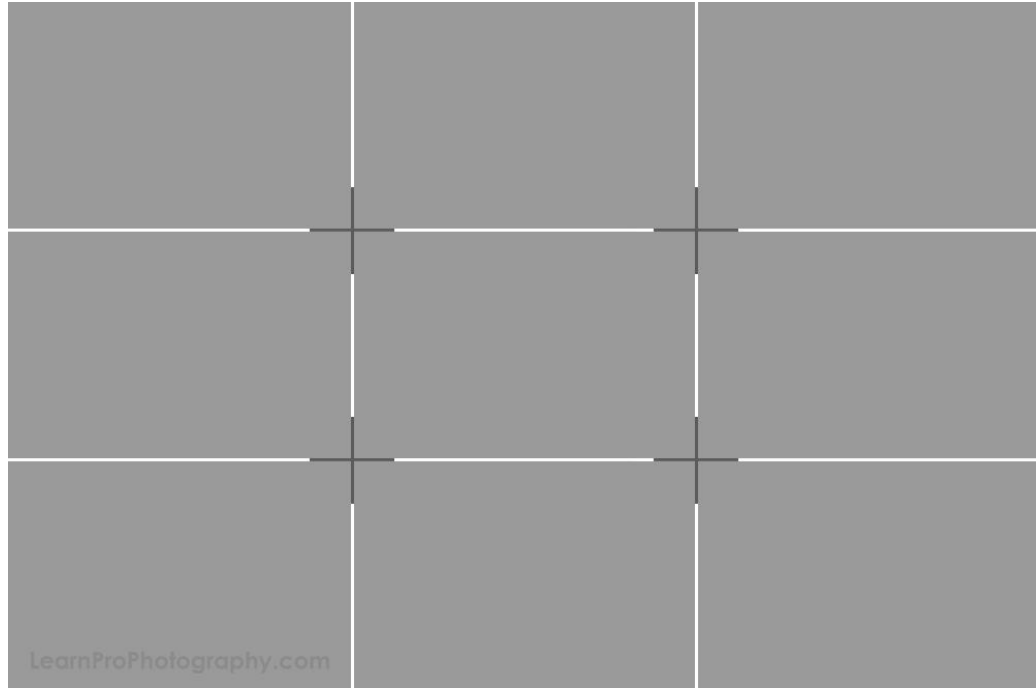
- #1. Rule of Thirds
- #2. Centered Composition and Symmetry
- #3. Foreground Interest and Depth
- #4. Frame Within the Frame
- #5. Leading Lines
- #6. Diagonals and Triangles
- #7. Patterns and Textures
- #8. Break the Pattern
- #9. Rule of Odds
- #10. Fill the Frame
- #11. Leave Negative Space
- #12. Simplicity and Minimalism
- #13. Use Black and White
- #14. Isolate the Subject
- #15. Shoot from Below
- #16. Shoot from Above
- #17. Look for Particular Color Combinations
- #18. Rule of Space
- #19. Left to Right Rule
- #20. Balance Elements in the Scene
- #21. Juxtaposition
- #22. Golden Triangles
- #23. Golden Ratio
- #24. Let the Background Give Context to the Subject
- #25. Let the Eye Wander Around the Frame
- #26. Use Layers in the Frame
- #27. Add Human Interest
- #28. Wait for the “Decisive Moment”



Rule of Thirds

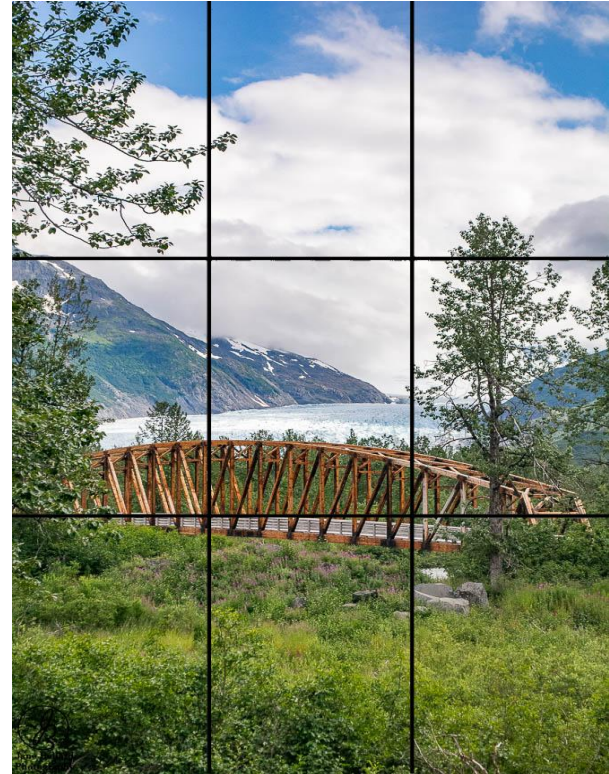
The rule of thirds suggests that you place your subject on any one of these intersecting points.

Use with caution as this will tend to create boring subjects where all your images look just like everyone else's images.





Rule of Thirds



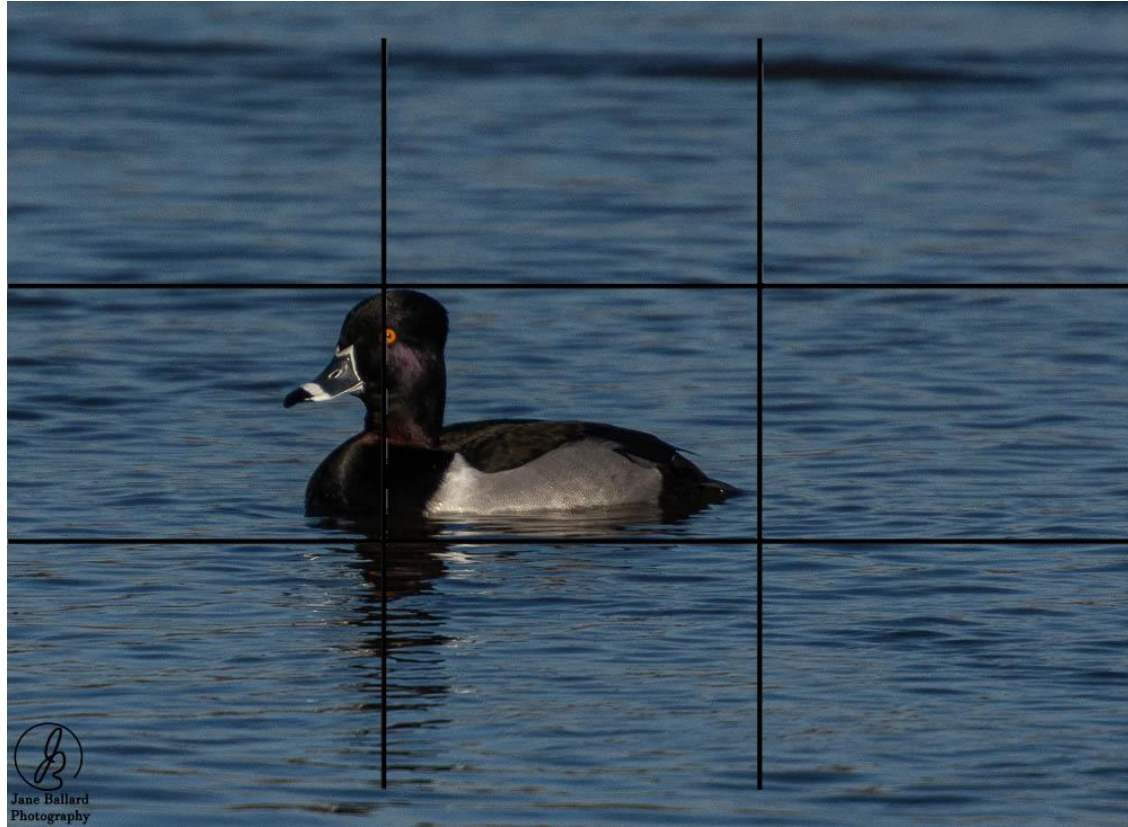


Rule of Thirds

If you're photographing or painting people or animals, you might want to place your subject's eye closest to you near one of the intersection points.

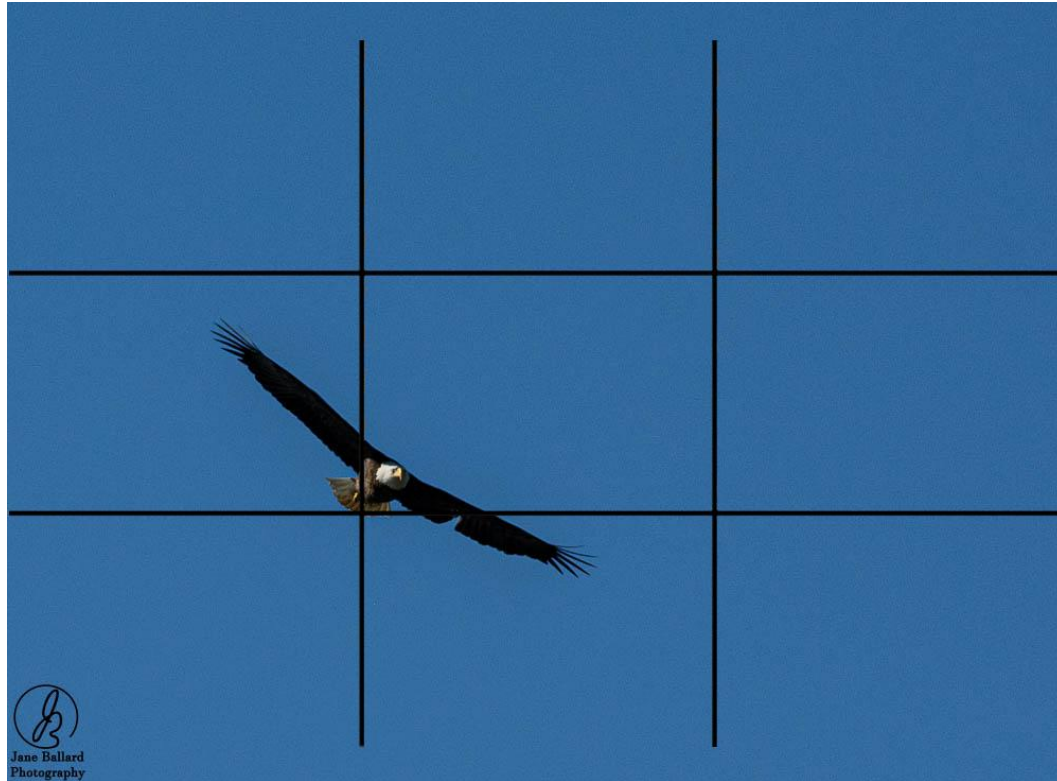


Rule of Thirds





Rule of Thirds





Rule of Thirds

If the sky is to be the main subject in your scene and is more striking than the foreground, you'll want to place the horizon at the lower line to view more of your sky and, vice versa, if the foreground is more pleasing, place the horizon line near the upper grid line.



Rule of Thirds



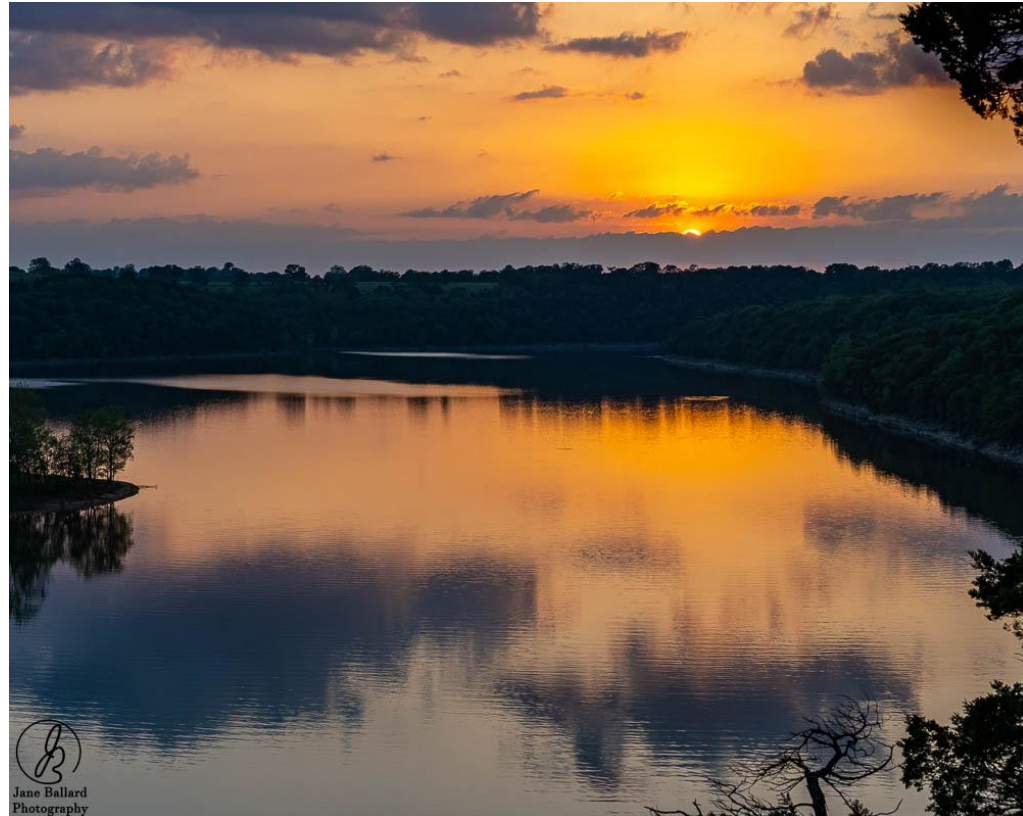


Rule of Thirds



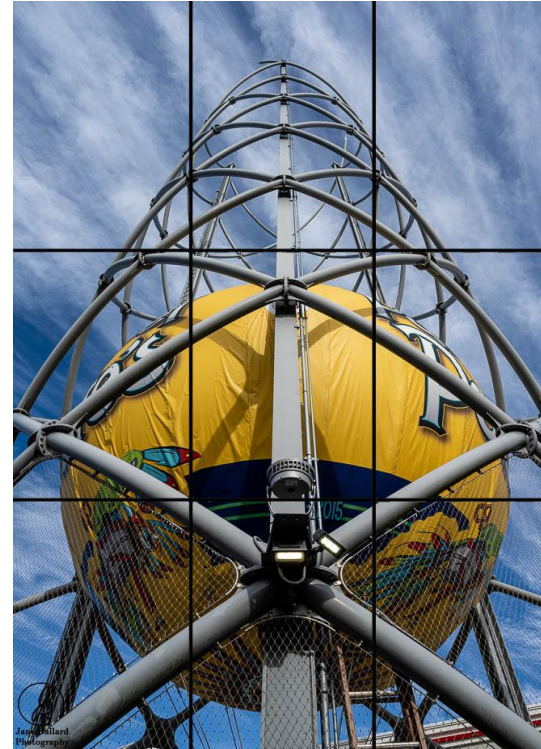
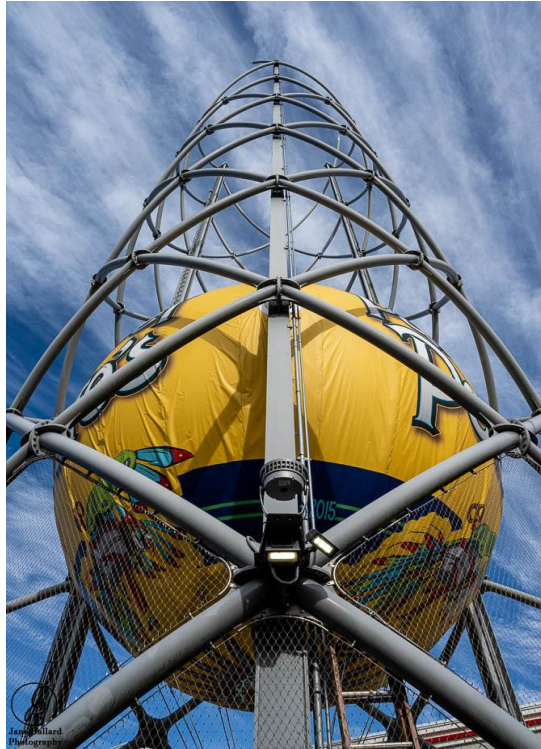


Rule of Thirds





Centered Composition - Symmetry



Foreground Interest & Depth





Framing

Using one element in your image to “frame” around another element





Framing



Leading Lines

Fences, roads, trees, limbs, stripes in fabrics, benches - all of these elements can be used as leading lines to lead the viewer into an image.





*not my images

Diagonals and Triangles

Diagonals and triangles can be used to create tension

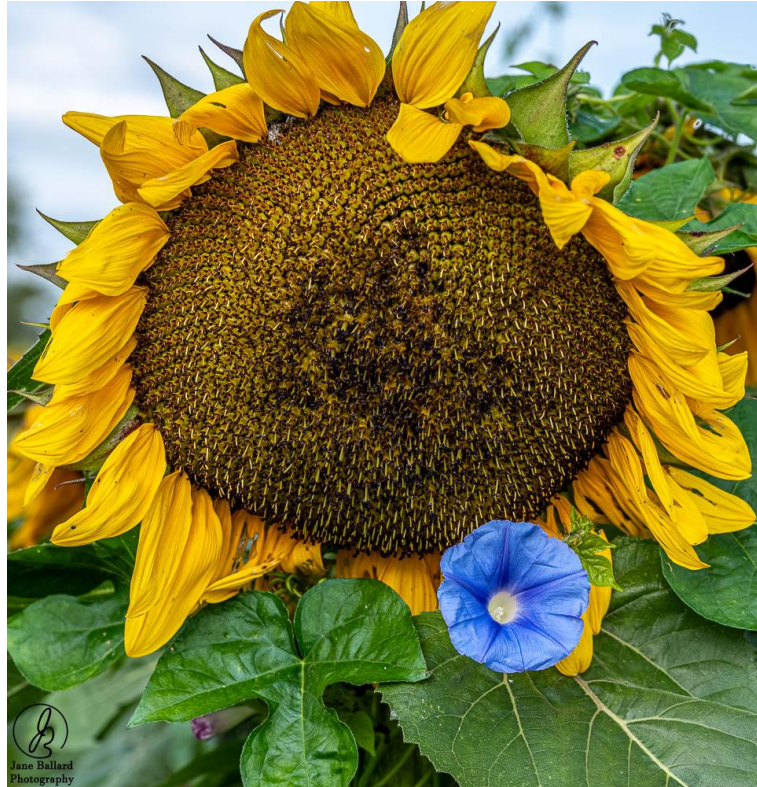




Patterns and Textures



Break the Pattern





Rule of Odds

Having an odd number of items in your image is more pleasing





Fill the Frame





Negative Space





Simplicity and Minimalism





Black and White





Isolate the Subject





Shoot from Below



Shoot from Above





Color Combinations - Color Theory





Rule of Space





Left to Right Rule

There is a theory that says we 'read' an image from left to right in the same way we would read text.

It is suggested that any motion portrayed in a photograph should flow from left to right.





Balance Elements in the Scene

You can compose your shot to include a secondary subject of lesser importance or size on the other side of the frame.

This balances out the composition without taking too much focus off the main subject.





Juxtaposition

Merriam Webster Definition - the fact of two things being seen or placed close together with contrasting effect.

With juxtaposition, we can contrast old and new, rough and smooth, warm and cool, natural and manmade, basically anything “opposite”.





Golden Triangles

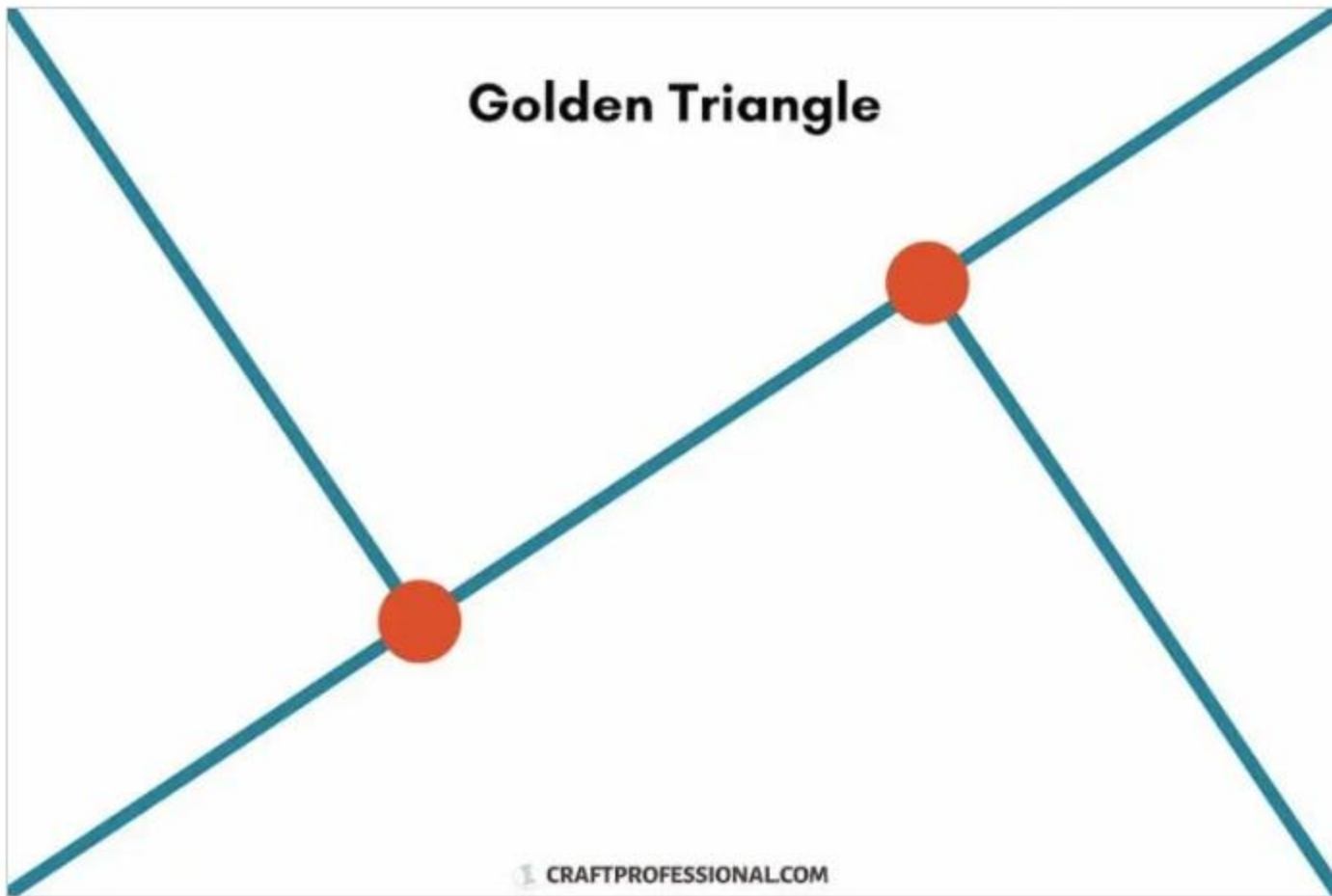
The golden triangles composition works in a very similar way to the rule of thirds, but instead of a grid of rectangles, we divide the frame with a diagonal line going from one corner to another.

We then add two more lines from the other corners to the diagonal line.

The two smaller lines meet the big line at a right angle as is illustrated on the next slide.

This divides the frame into a series of triangles.

Golden Triangle





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Golden Ratio, Golden Mean, Fibonacci Spiral



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Let the Background Give Context



Let the Eye Wander around the Frame



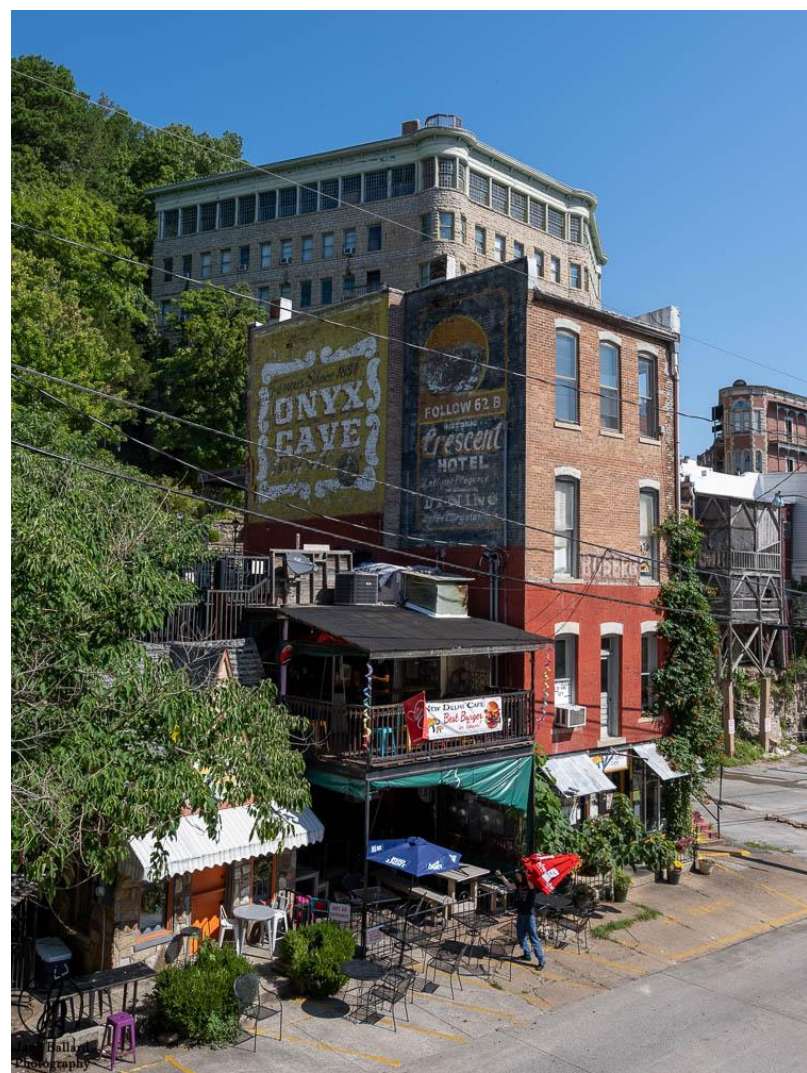


Use Layers - Foreground, Middle Ground, Background





Add Human Interest



Wait for the Decisive Moment





Composition “Rules”

If you KNOW the rules, you know when and how you can BREAK the rules!



Here are some more composition tips that generally apply to photography...

Watch your background!

Don't cut off limbs!

Get to your subject's level

Put subjects on different levels

Have human subjects turn slightly - posing



**Watch Your
Background!!!**



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Don't cut off limbs!!!



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Get to your subject's level



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Put your subjects on different levels



*not my images



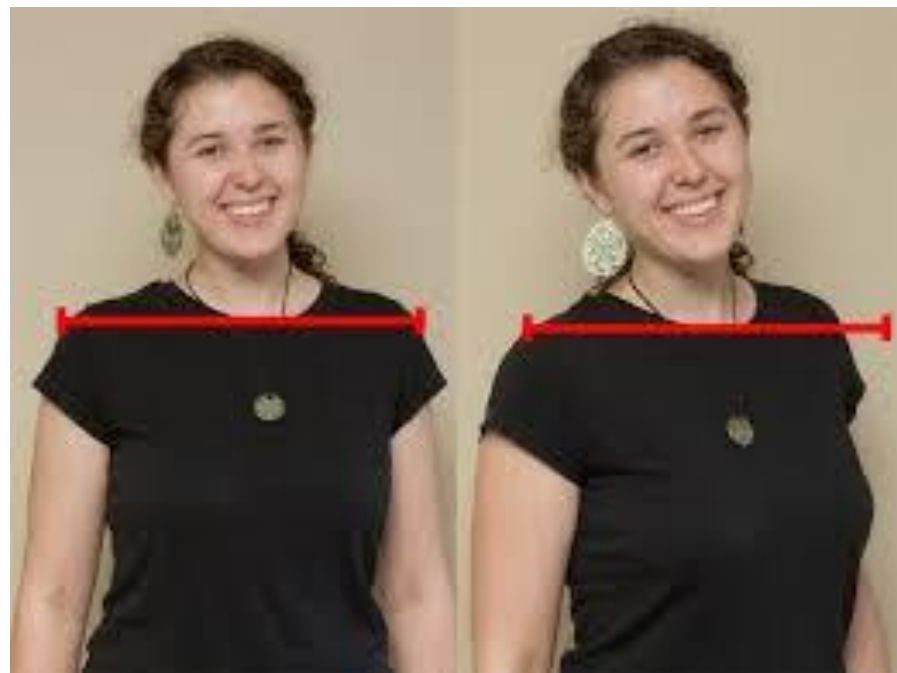
*not my images



Have subjects turn slightly

Don't have your people face the camera squarely, have them turn slightly, one shoulder or the other more towards the camera.

And don't have them stand "straight" - have them drop a shoulder or bump out a hip.



*not my images



Common Composition Issues

Focal Point on the Edge

Your focal point is the key feature or idea of your painting or photograph.

It should be in a prominent spot, not on the edges.





Common Composition Issues

Aligning Objects

It can look unnatural if the tallest tree in your landscape aligns with the peak of a distant mountain.





Common Composition Issues

Too Much Noise

Don't try to paint every color, value, texture, highlight, or shadow.

Simplify. You'll end up with a more cohesive painting.



Signe Bellard
Photography



Common Composition Issues

Uninspired

It's hard to make a composition work if it doesn't start with some kind of spark or idea.

Don't keep trying to create the same ol' same ol'.





Common Composition Issues

Horizon Line Right in the Middle

You should usually give dominance to the sky or land.





Common Composition Issues

Too Many Straight Lines (Particularly in Landscapes)

Straight lines are rigid and tight. Embrace curves.





Common Composition Issues

Pushing in the Wrong Direction

If you're going to exaggerate any elements in your painting, it's better to push in the direction of your big idea.

It's better to make your vivid sunset a bit warmer.

It's better to make your rigid cityscape a bit straighter.

It's better to make your stormy seascape a bit darker and the waves a bit larger.



Jane Ballard
Photography



Common Composition Issues

Unnecessary Objects

If something doesn't add to the composition, does it need to be there?





Common Composition Issues

Leading Lines Out of the Painting or Photograph

Lines are powerful. Our eyes like to follow them.

Be careful not to lead people out of your painting or photograph.




Jane Ballard
Photography



Common Composition Issues

Collection of Parts

Your goal is to create a beautiful painting, not a collection of beautifully painted parts.

Focus on the big picture and never lose sight of it.





Common Composition Issues

Lost Opportunities

Look for opportunities to convey your ideas.

Grass can be used to convey direction and movement.

Hair can be used to frame the face.

Highlights can be used to reiterate key structures.

Always think about each part's role in the bigger picture.





Common Composition Issues

Getting Caught Up in Your Own Ways

Avoid painting the same composition over and over again. Change it up.

Instead of painting a standard landscape, look up and paint it from an unusual angle.





Composition is, in essence, the palette of an artist's emotions, translating abstract sentiments into tangible visual cues, and enabling viewers to connect with the underlying themes on a visceral level.

Nicolene Burger



Composition is the very bedrock upon which the structure of artistry stands.

Composition is the difference between Memorable and Forgettable.

Balance and harmony are the yin and yang of composition.

Through careful arrangement, artists can convey a multitude of feelings, moods, and ideas.



References used

A Comprehensive Guide To Composition For Artists by Dan Scott

Composition in Art – Techniques for Creating Balanced Scenes by Nicolene Burger

The 31 Top Composition Concepts for Great Painting by Bill Inman

PetaPixel