Composing Art

Vocabulary of Art
Principles of Design

- Unity
- Variety
- Repetition
- Rhythm
- Balance
- Emphasis/Focal Point
- Economy
- Proportion/Scale

The organization of Elements is called Composition or Design.
Lawrence Going Home. 1946

Unity and Variety: Color and Shape
Lines of Rhythm
Unity and Variety: Pattern and Design

de Hooch. Interior of a Dutch House 1658.
Structural Lines
Symmetrical Balance: Mirror image of Shapes/Forms on either side of an imaginary axial dividing line. Elements correspond to one another in size, shape, and placement.
**Emphasis:** The viewer’s attention will be centered more on certain parts of the composition than on others.

**Focal Point:** A specific spot to which one’s attention is directed.

**Subordination:** A less visually interesting area.
Emphasis: Directing our Eyes

Degas Jockeys before the Race 1878-9.
Proportion and Scale

**Scale:** Size in relation to a constant or “normal” size.

**Proportion:** Refers to size relationships between parts of a whole or between two or more items perceived as a unit.
Egyptian. Palette of Narmer. Canon of hierarchic proportion
Leonardo daVinci,

*The Study of Human Proportions*

According to Vitruvius, c. 1485-90.

Doryphorous. Polykleitos
ACTUAL SIZE VERSUS PERCEIVED SIZE

Rembrandt Self Portrait. 1630. 2” x 1 7/8”
Unexpected Proportion and Scale

Compositional Impact of Scale

Michelangelo Pieta 1501.

Master of the Beautiful Madonna. Pieta. 1415
• Unity refers to the imposition of order and harmony on a design

• Variety is a kind of visual diversity that brings many different ideas, media, and elements together in one composition

• Balance refers to the distribution of elements, whether unified or varied, within a work

Introduction
• Provides an artwork with its cohesiveness and helps communicate its visual idea

• Artists are concerned with three kinds of unity: compositional, conceptual, and gestalt (the complete order and indivisible unity of all aspects of an artwork’s design)
• An artist creates compositional unity by organizing all the visual aspects of a work

• Too much similarity of shape, color, line, or any single element or principle of art can be monotonous and make us lose interest

• Too much variety can lead to a lack of structure and the absence of a central idea

Compositional Unity
Compositional Unity

1.110 Three diagrams of compositional unity
Gateway to Art:
Hokusai, “The Great Wave off Shore at Kanagawa”
A Masterpiece of Unity and Harmony

• Created a unified composition by organizing repetitions of shapes, colors, textures, and patterns to create a visual harmony, even though the scene is chaotic
  • Mount Fuji (A), in the middle of the bottom third of the work, almost blends into the ocean
  • Whitecaps on the waves (B) mimic the snow atop Mount Fuji
  • Hokusai has also carefully selected the solids and voids in his composition to create opposing but balancing areas of interest. As the solid shape of the great wave curves around the deep trough below it (C), the two areas compete for attention, neither possible without the other
1.112 Interior design,
I. Michael Interior
Design, Bethesda,
Maryland
1.113 Linear evaluation of elements in interior design, I. Michael Interior Design, Bethesda, Maryland
The interior has a balance of curved and straight lines that complement each other:

- The linear patterns of curved lines repeat (red), as do the other directional lines.
- Shapes are distributed throughout the scene (green).
1.114 Marie Marevna (Marie Vorobieff-Stebelska), *Nature morte à la bouteille*, 1917. Oil on canvas with plaster, 19¾ x 24”
Marie Marevna (Marie Vorobieff-Stebelska), *Nature morte à la bouteille*

- The unifying features are the angular lines and flat areas of color or pattern.
- Marevna’s Cubist style breaks apart a scene and re-creates it from a variety of different angles.
- The entire work becomes unified because the artist paints a variety of different viewing angles using flat areas of color and pattern throughout.
- Even though we view the still life from many different angles, the artist was able to unify the composition by using similar elements.
1.115 Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation*, c. 1469. Oil and tempera on panel, 23 x 32". Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, Italy
Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation*

- The artist concentrates on two major areas: foreground and background
  - The organic human shapes in the foreground are balanced against the geometric lines of the background

- Rather than communicating a feeling of tension and violence, the composition is quiet and logical, emphasizing the mood of detachment and contemplation
Romare Bearden, *The Dove*, 1964. Cut-and-pasted printed papers, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on board, 13\(\frac{3}{8}\) x 18\(\frac{3}{4}\)”. MOMA, New York
Romare Bearden, *The Dove*

- Some artists create compositional unity while gathering together bits and pieces of visual information.
- In this work we see snippets of faces and hands, city textures of brick walls and fire escapes, and other associated images assembled into a scene that, at first glance, seems frenetic and chaotic.
- Bearden reflects the order of the city with an underlying grid made up of verticals and horizontals in the street below, and the vertical street posts and buildings in the upper section of the work.
• Conceptual unity refers to the cohesive expression of ideas within a work of art

• The expression of ideas may not look organized, but an artist can still communicate them effectively by selecting images that conjure up a single notion

• Artists bring their own intentions, experiences, and reactions to their work. These ideas—conscious and unconscious—can also contribute to the conceptual unity of a work

Conceptual Unity
Chapter 1.6 Unity, Variety, and Balance

Interactive Exercises:

Conceptual Unity

Click the image above to start the interactive exercises

NOTE: Internet access is required to view this material
Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (The Hotel Eden)*

- The disparate shapes, colors, and other characteristics of everyday things come together to form distinctive images.

- Cornell has collected objects from life and sealed them in a box.

- Placed together, all the different objects in the box make and express an idea greater than any one of them could suggest on its own.
• Gestalt is a German word for form or shape
  • Refers to something in which the whole seems greater than the sum of its parts

• We get a sense of gestalt when we comprehend how compositional unity and conceptual unity work together

Gestalt Unity
PART 1 FUNDAMENTALS

Chapter 1.6 Unity, Variety, and Balance

Interactive Exercises:

Gestalt Unity

Click the image above to start the interactive exercises

NOTE: Internet access is required to view this material
1.118 *Vishnu Dreaming the Universe*, c. 450–500 CE.
Relief panel. Temple of Vishnu, Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, India
Chapter 1.6 Unity, Variety, and Balance

Vishnu Dreaming the Universe

- The repetition of the human shapes that attend Vishnu creates compositional unity
- The dualities of male/female, life/death, good/evil are illustrated in the complex stories of the gods
- A religious idea provides profound conceptual unity
- The image, the religious idea that the image illustrates, and the fervent belief of the artist who created the work all interconnect
Variety is a collection of ideas, elements, or materials that are fused together into one design.
Variety is about uniqueness and diversity.
Artists use a multiplicity of values, textures, colors, and so on to intensify the impact of a work.
Variety can invigorate a design.
Variety is the artist’s way of giving a work of art a jolt.

Variety of shapes and values set into a grid.
Interactive Exercises:

Variety

Click the image above to start the interactive exercises

NOTE: Internet access is required to view this material
Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*

- Used variety to energize his artwork and challenge his viewers
- The work features a stuffed goat with a tire around its middle standing on a painting
- By combining these objects, Rauschenberg creates an outlandish symbol of himself as a rebel and outcast
- By using a variety of non-traditional art materials and techniques, the work becomes a transgression against traditional art and morals
• Even while using a variety of different shapes, colors, values, or other elements, an artist can create visual harmony
1.121 Album quilt, probably by Mary Evans, Baltimore, Maryland, 1848. Appliquéd cottons with inkwork, 9 x 9’. Private collection.
Album quilt

- These carefully sewn quilts are named after the scrapbooks kept by Baltimore girls.

- Like a scrapbook, these quilts use a variety of images and fuse them together into a finished work.

- Because a strong structure is imposed on the many different shapes through the use of a grid, the work holds together as a unified whole.
• Just as real objects have physical weight, parts of a work of art can have visual weight, or impact

• If the amount of visual weight does not have a reasonable counterweight on the opposite side, the work may appear to be unsuccessful or unfinished

• If there are reasonable visual counterweights the work seems complete, and balance has been achieved

Balance
Interactive Exercises: Balance

Click the image above to start the interactive exercises

NOTE: Internet access is required to view this material
• If a work can be cut in half and each side looks exactly (or nearly exactly) the same, then it is symmetrically balanced
  • Near-perfect symmetry exists in the human body
  • Because it is a part of our physical body, symmetry can seem very natural and we can make natural connections to it
Fig. 121 Luster Painted Bowl

Design, Color and Pattern: Contrast
SYMMETRICAL BALANCE

Giacometti Chariot 1950.
1.122 Ritual container from Gui, China, Shang Dynasty, 1600–1100 BCE. Bronze, 6⅜ x 10⅜”. University of Hong Kong Museum
Ritual container from Gui, China

- Artists of ancient China designed a creature born of symmetry called the *t’ao t’ieh*

- The image of the creature in an artwork is not immediately apparent, because its form is “hidden” amongst many separate symmetrical shapes and forms

- It is as if a symmetrical collection of elements coalesces to reveal a monster mask

- The meaning of this motif is mysterious, but it may symbolize communication with the gods

- On each side of the central ridge are patterns that mirror each other
• When artists organize a composition they often use different visual “weights” on each side of it.

• This applies when the elements on the left and right sides are not the same, but the combination of elements counters each other.

Asymmetrical Balance
1.123 Muqi, *Six Persimmons*, Southern Song Dynasty, c. 1250. Ryoko-in, Dailoxu-ji, Kyoto, Japan
Chinese artists have used asymmetrical balance to reflect on life and spirituality.

Dark, light, and the subtle differences in shape are not distributed evenly between the left and right sides of the work.

The artist creates subtle variations in the placement of the persimmons on each side of the central axis.

Brilliantly counteracts the visual “heaviness” of the right side by placing one shape lower on the left.

The use of brush and ink was a form of meditation, through simple, thoughtful actions, in search of higher knowledge.
Asymmetrical Balance: Two sides that do not correspond to one another in size, shape, and placement.


Haranobu. The Evening Glow of the Ando. Edo Period (Japan).
Radial balance (or symmetry) is achieved when all elements in a work are equidistant from a central point and repeat in a symmetrical way from side to side and top to bottom.

- Can imply circular and repeating elements
- Sometimes used in religious symbols and architecture where repetition plays an important role in the design
Andrea Palladio, part elevation/section and plan of the Villa Rotonda, Vicenza, Italy, begun 1565/6. From the *Quattro Libri*, Book II
Andrea Palladio, part elevation/section and plan of the Villa Rotonda

- Although the term “radial” symmetry suggests a round shape, in fact any geometric shape can be used to create radial symmetry.
- Palladio wanted people who lived in this building to be able to experience four views of the surrounding countryside from a single vantage point.
- Loggias, or porch-like entrances, on all four facades; they are all equidistant from the center of the building.
- The same elements are used on four sides.
Amitayas mandala created by the monks of Drepung Loseling Monastery, Tibet
Amitayas mandala

- Is a diagram of the universe
- Shapes pointing in four different directions from the center are symmetrical
- The creation of one of these sand paintings is an act of meditation that takes many days, after which the work is destroyed
• Unity, variety, and balance are central principles that artists use to create visual impact.

• Unity gives a work a certain oneness or cohesion.

• Variety is expressed in contrast and difference.
  • Created by the use of different kinds of lines, shapes, patterns, colors, or textures.

• Balance is imposed on a work when the artist achieves an appropriate combination of unity and variety.

Conclusion
Matisse Large Reclining Nude 1935.

EVOLUTION OF A DESIGN
This concludes the PowerPoint slide set for Chapter 1.6

*Gateways to Art: Understanding the Visual Arts*
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