INTRODUCTION TO AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN VISUAL ORGANIZATION

So far, this chapter has emphasized the various visual communication and perception theories that deal with the process and components of visually communicating messages. Another aspect of creating visual messages is the aesthetic or visual qualities of figures and forms, and their arrangements.

The interpretation of aesthetic qualities relative to compositions may vary according to the background and preferences of the artist, architect, or designer as well as the background and preferences of the viewer. However, aesthetic qualities have been defined as a harmonious whole, or a feeling of completeness, that is referred to as "unity." Unity can be characterized by the following terms: equilibrium/balance, contrast, harmony, emphasis, proportion, simplicity, repetition, dominance, symmetry, scale, rhythm, and variation. Since many of the aesthetic principles and terms are discussed in depth in other references, only a select few are presented here.

The following list includes visual attributes that contribute to shape or form qualities, their organization, and resulting unity.

Properties of Good Figures/Forms

- simplicity
- easy recognition
- easy to remember
- regularity
- familiarity
- symmetry
- balance
- proportion

Refer to Chapter 10 for more information on good figure characteristics.

Visual Qualities of a Message

Contrast between elements or groups of elements in reference to their arrangement or physical qualities:

- size
- weight
- mass
- quantity
- shape
- simplicity
- regularity
- color
- value/tone
- texture
- direction
- orientation
- continuity or rhythm
- repetition

Dominance and Emphasis

The terms **dominance** and **emphasis** relate to the hierarchy of elements within the compositional structure; primary and secondary compositional elements establish visual importance. The hierarchies of order are:

- chronological
- general to specific
- specific to general
- reading order (based on cultural practices)

Placement of Groups of Compositional Elements Within a Format

This refers to information on perception and Gestalt grouping laws.

- proximity
- similarity
- closure
- common movement
- good continuation
- figure/ground qualities
- repetition
- contrast

Types of Groupings According to Compositional Balance

- symmetrical
- asymmetrical
- ambiguous
- neutral

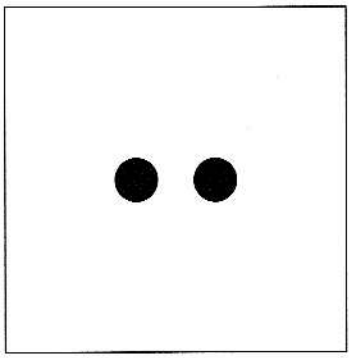
Visual or compositional **unity** can be achieved in a variety of ways through the use of the elements just listed and through the visual treatment and arrangement of these elements within the format (see Figure 11.55).

Unity is the wholeness or completion of the composition or visual statement in harmony with the elements used.

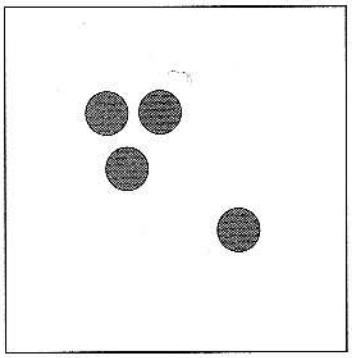
Harmony usually refers to a pleasing consistency among the different parts of a composition that brings visual order to sets of similar or unrelated elements.

Repetition is the use of the same compositional figure or form more than once in the same format (see Figure 11.56).

Rhythm is related to accent and movement and is created by repeating similar compositional elements (see Figure 11.57).



11.55a



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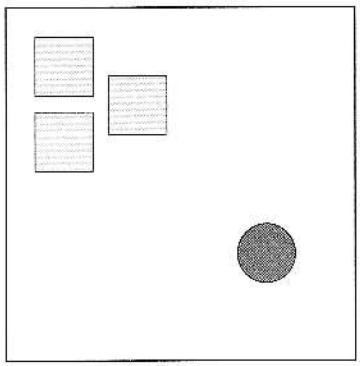

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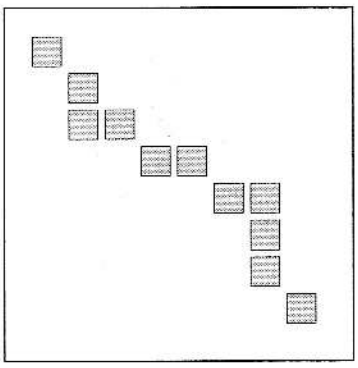

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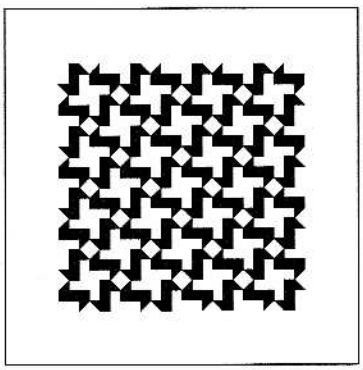

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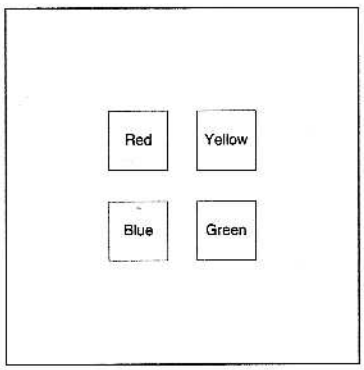

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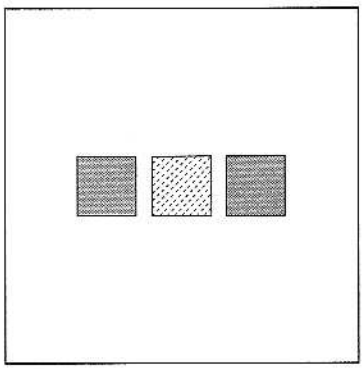

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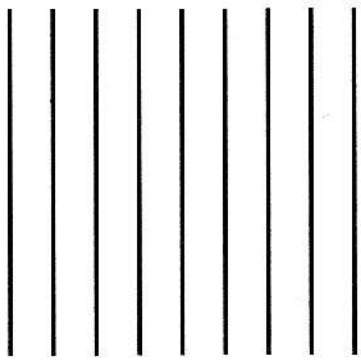
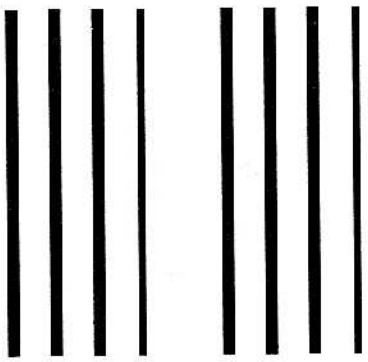


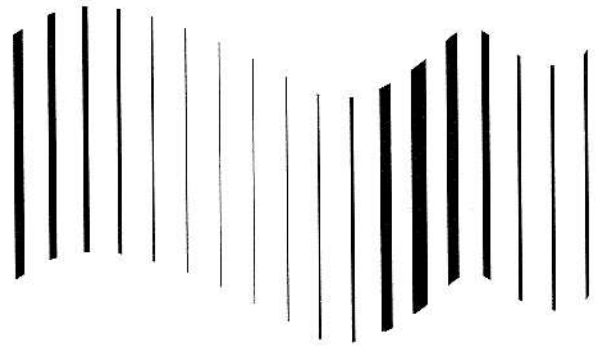
11.56a

Figure 11.55 Visual attributes within a composition that contribute to unity: (a) similarity of shape; (b) similarity of shape and proximity; (c) shape, proximity, and value; (d) shape and good continuation; (e) pattern and repetition; (f) color and shape; (g) space, texture, and value.

Figure 11.56 (a-b) Repetition established by lines or groups of lines.



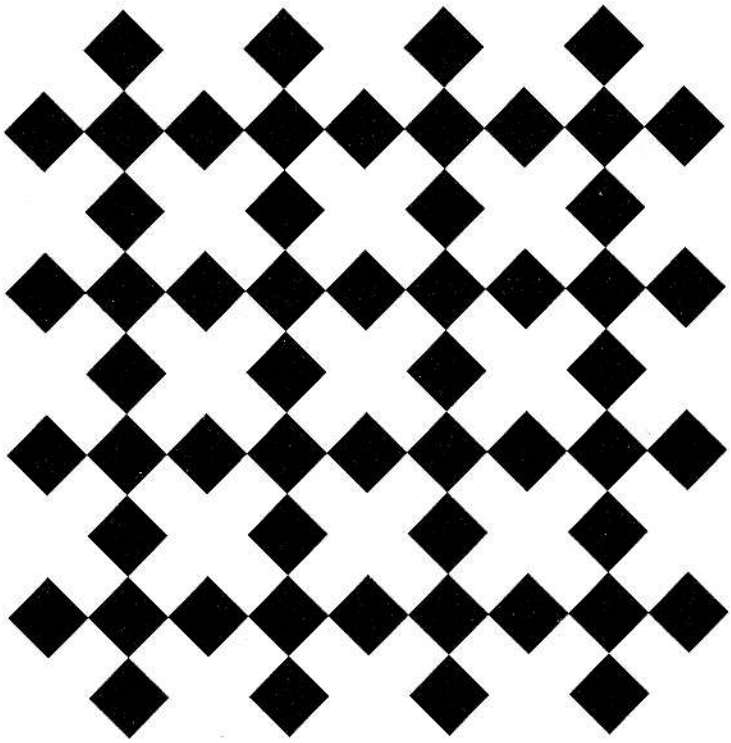
11.56b



11.57

Figure 11.57 Repetition and varying the alignment and line weight creates a feeling of movement and rhythm.

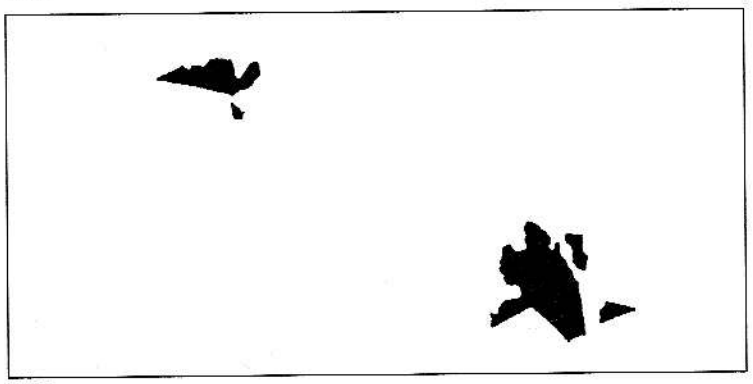
Pattern refers to the repetition of a figure or the combination of figures and forms that appear more than once in the composition (see Figure 11.58).



11.58

Figure 11.58 Pattern is the repetition of shape or combinations of shapes.

According to perception theory, **unfamiliar figures** or forms arranged in a random way have little or no recognition factor (see Figure 11.59).



11.59

Figure 11.59 Compositions consisting of unfamiliar figures and forms arranged in a disorderly or random way that have no meaning for and are not recognized by the viewer.

Figure 11.60 (a) Symmetrical balance; (b) asymmetrical balance; (c) ambiguous balance; (d) neutral balance.

Compositional Balance

Equilibrium or **balance** refers to the distribution of elements within the format. Included in aesthetics is the need to perceive balance or equilibrium between figures and forms. Studies by psychologists indicate that this appeal for balance is related to the sense of equilibrium within the human body.

The arrangement of the compositional elements can result in visual stability that is either static or active. Compositional balance can be achieved by either symmetrical or asymmetrical configurations. Balance can be achieved through the visual treatment of the compositional figures or forms by varying their physical attributes such as shape, texture, color, value, and pattern.

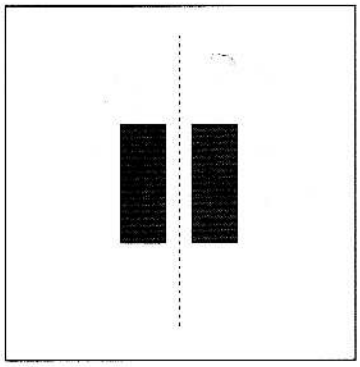
Types of Balance

Symmetrical balance is characterized by a central axis; the arrangement of a group of compositional figures and forms may be symmetrical relative to their position within a format (see Figure 11.60a). Symmetrically balanced compositions are characterized by regularity, congruency, proportion, passivity, restfulness, static, inactivity, and stability.

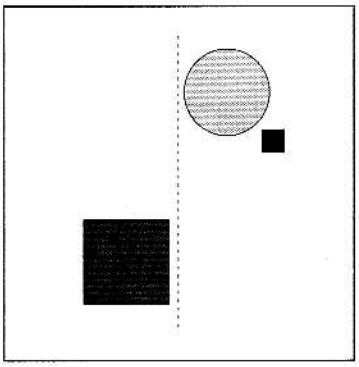
Asymmetrical balance is characterized by irregular or unequal arrangements between compositional elements relative to a central axis; it is often referred to as dynamic, active, stressful, tense, or diverse (see Figure 11.60b).

Ambiguous balance is characterized by a lack of, or unclear, relationships between compositional elements; it is referred to as vague, indefinite (see Figure 11.60c).

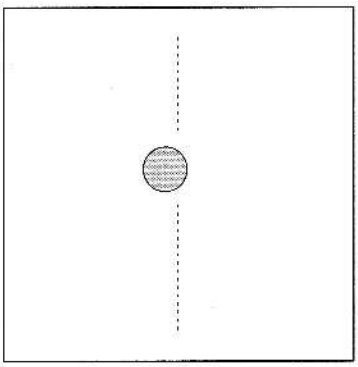
Neutral balance is characterized by randomness and ambiguous equilibrium; it is referred to as nonactive, lacking emphasis or contrast (see Figure 11.60d).



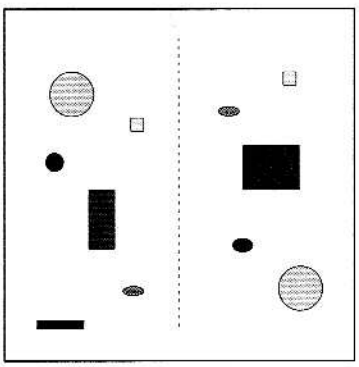
11.60a



11.60b



11.60c



11.60d

GROUPING ELEMENTS WITHIN A FORMAT

The way elements are grouped within a format affects the way a composition is interpreted. Compositions that are organized in a linear, horizontal, vertical, or diagonal grouping will be perceived as having directionality. Other types of groupings can communicate randomness, isolation, or static balance (see Figure 11.68).

The figure and ground relationship also will affect the composition. Groupings may create new ground relationships. White figures on a black ground appear smaller than black figures on a white ground for example (see Figures 11.69 and 11.70).

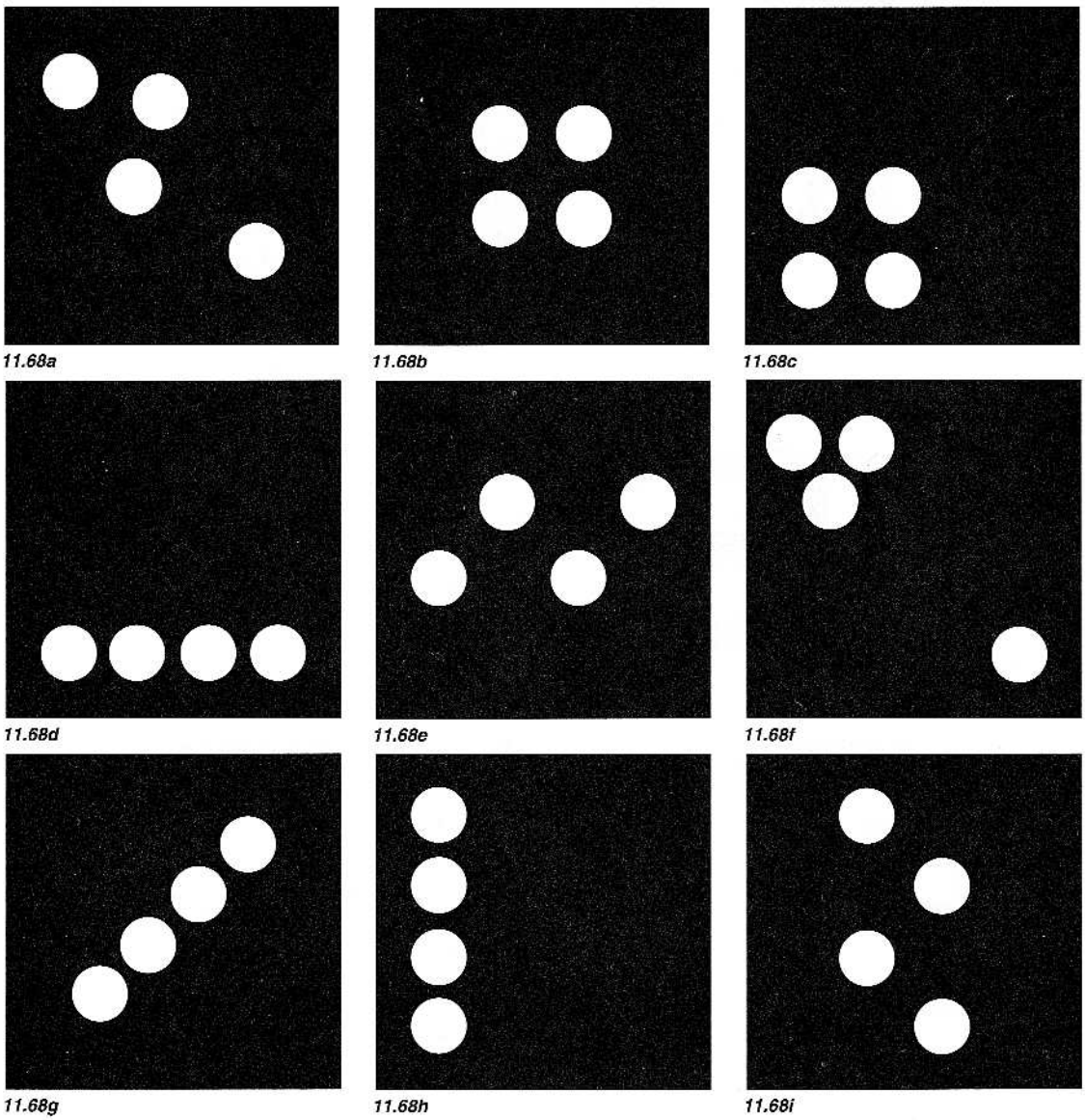
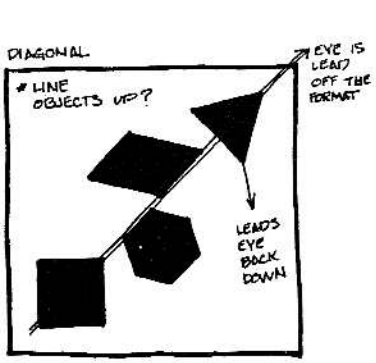
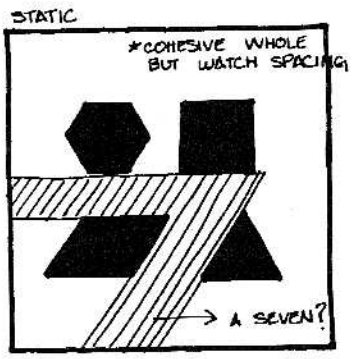


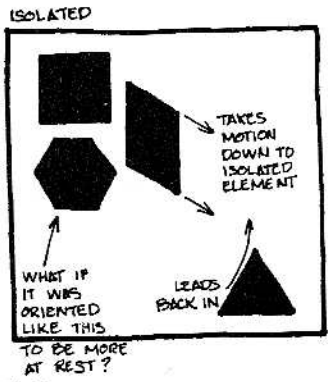
Figure 11.68 Grouping organization of elements: (a) random; (b) static; (c) asymmetrical; (d) linear; (e) staggered; (f) grouped and isolated; (g) diagonal; (h) vertical; and (i) staggered.



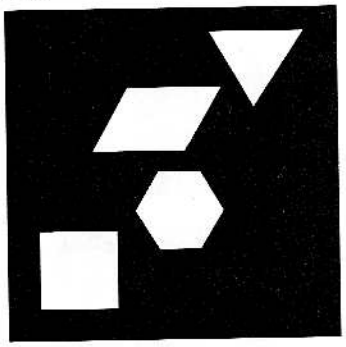
11.69a



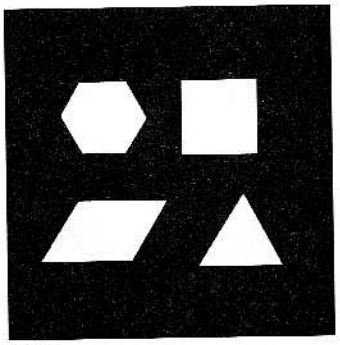
11.69b



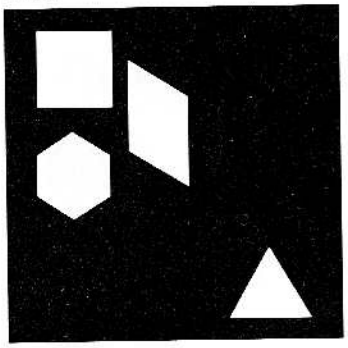
11.69c



11.69d

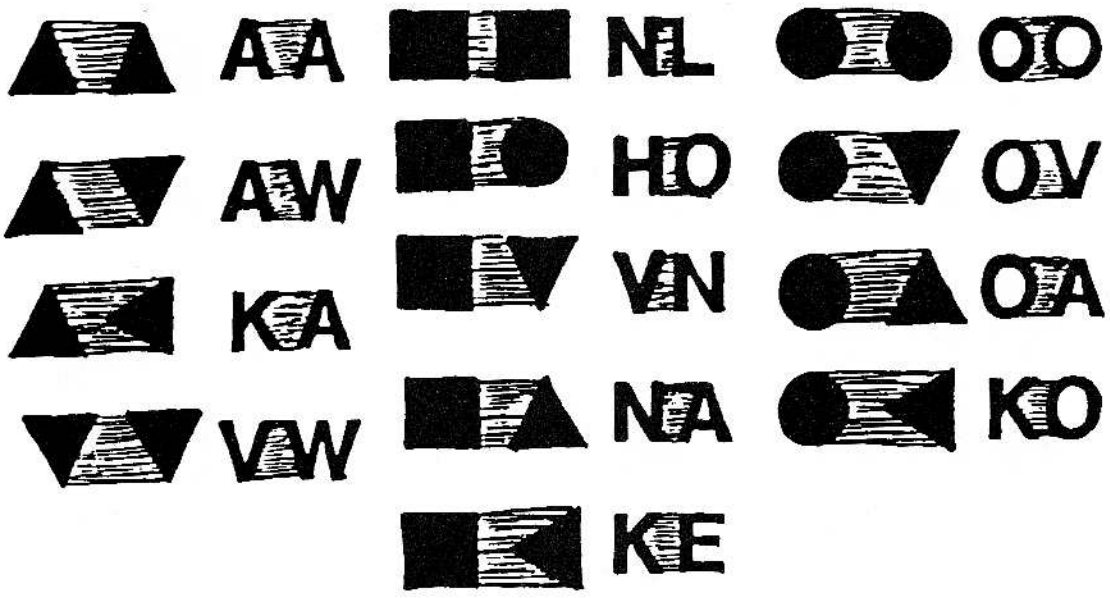


11.69e



11.69f

Figure 11.69 (a-f) Study sketches of figure/ground relationships between compositional elements and the format area in positive and negative (illustrated by Alan Jazak).



11.70

Figure 11.70 Study sketches analyzing the figure/ground relationship between letterforms by comparing their basic contour shapes (illustrated by Alan Jazak).

INTRODUCTION TO GESTALT GROUPING LAWS

Gestalt psychologists have set forth a number of visual grouping laws that describe visual perception of groups of figures. By understanding the way people see and interpret visual information, artists, architects, and designers can be more successful in bringing meaning to compositions and forms.

Research studies on the perceptual principles, which have been established through viewer response testing, report that the human tendency is to see and remember visual stimuli in the simplest form. As the eye and brain experience an object or environment, they remember the image by grouping visual information.

Mentally grouping visual information according to certain characteristics is known as the Gestalt grouping laws. The most common of these grouping laws are similarity, proximity, closure, and good continuation.

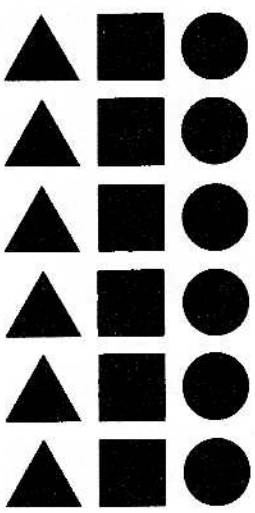
Similarity

According to the law of **similarity**, viewers tend to see

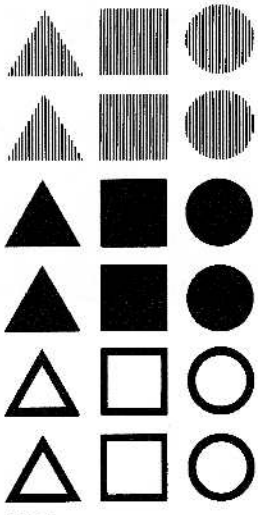
Figure 11.71 When figures maintain the same color or value, they are distinguished and visually grouped according to their shape. Studies indicate that viewers tend to see (a) columns of figures or (b) rows of figures in a group.

Figure 11.72 Figures maintaining their shape, but varying in color value, texture, or contour outline are visually grouped (a) according to value, color, texture, or contour outline or (b) in columns or rows based on value, color, or contour outline.

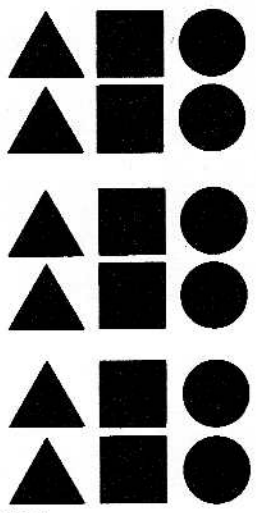
Figure 11.73 Elements grouped according to proximity and similarity are perceived as a related group. (a) These groups can have space or interval between them and still be perceived as part of a larger pattern group. (b) When figures change shape, value, color, or contour, they may be perceived as pattern groups of columns or rows.



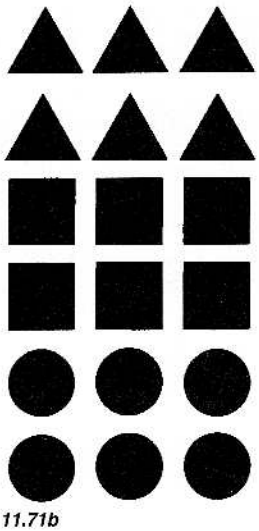
11.71a



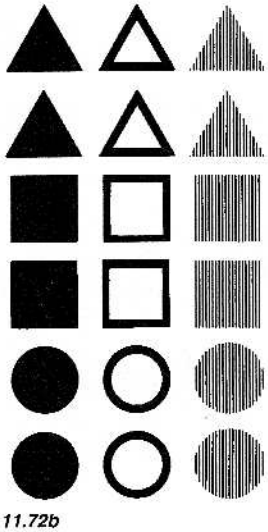
11.72a



11.73a



11.71b



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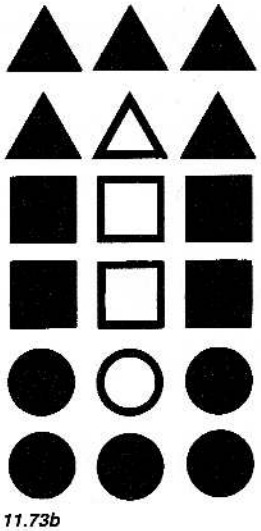


11.73b

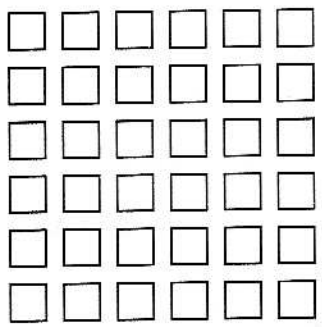
similar shapes as belonging together and similar figures as a group (see Figure 11.71).

When surface variations are added to compositions, figures with color, texture, value, and pattern are more dominant and are perceived as a group (see Figures 11.72 and 11.73).

Proximity

The grouping law of **proximity** states that when similar figures are located in close proximity to each other, viewers tend to see them as belonging to the same group of figures. Because of the visual attraction of mass, viewers relate or connect figures that are located closer together than those that are located farther apart (see Figure 11.74).

When proximity is used in combination with other grouping laws, such as shape similarity, color, value, pattern, or texture, certain visual information can be emphasized within a group of compositional elements (see Figures 11.75 and 11.76).



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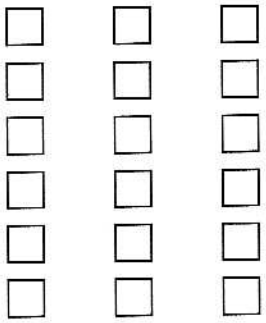

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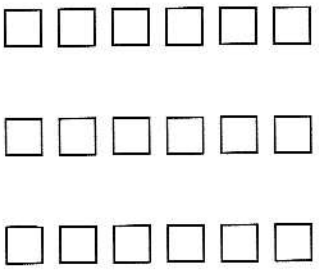

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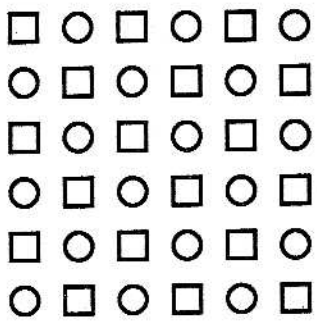

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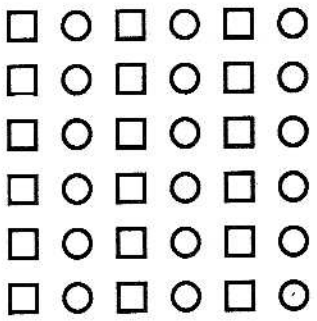

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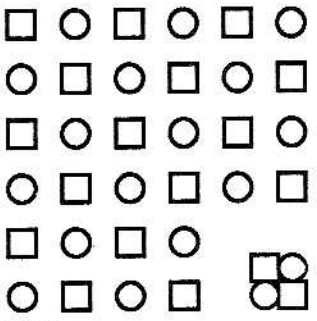

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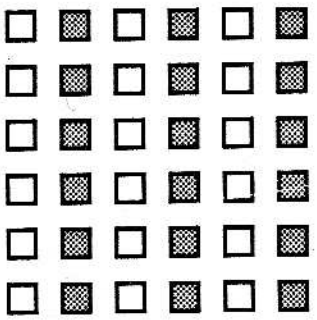

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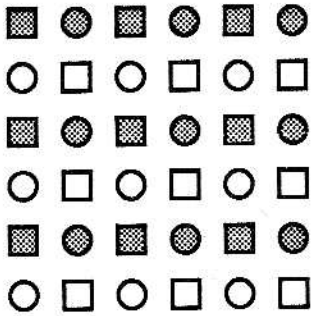
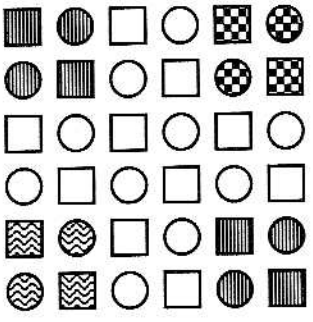


11.76b



11.76c

Figure 11.74 (a) When figures are repeated at equal intervals to create a pattern, they are seen as a coherent group or plane. When figures are deleted, the sets are perceived (b) as columns or (c) as rows because of their relative location to one another.

Figure 11.75 (a) When more than one shape is repeated in an interspersed manner maintaining an equal interval, an alternating pattern results. (b) When the shapes are aligned according to shape similarity, they are perceived as vertical columns. (c) When shapes are located close together deviating from the pattern, they are perceived as an independent group.

Figure 11.76 When surface texture, color, or value are added to a group of figures, creating a visual dominance within a pattern or grouping, they are perceived as: (a) vertical columns or (b) horizontal rows. (c) Selected shape grouping within a larger pattern.

Figure 11.77 (a) A group of figures may be perceived as a single, larger whole, or (b) an incomplete figure may be perceived as a complete figure, according to the law of closure.

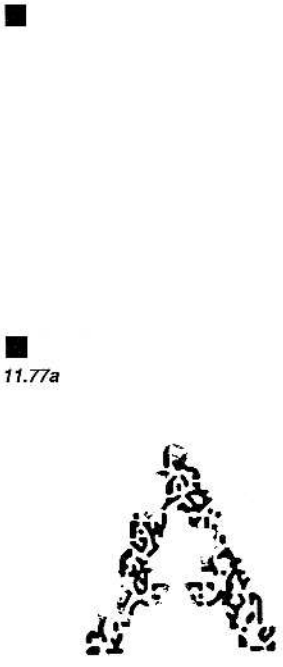
Figure 11.78 (a) Circular elements are perceived as a curvilinear line because of good continuation.

Figure 11.79 Dog figure illustrating familiarity in visual association (adaption by John Reinfrank, Assistant Professor of Industrial Design, The Ohio State University).

Closure

Closure is a property of both perceived shapes and the proximity of similar shapes. Viewers have a tendency to "close" or complete incomplete figures and grouped configurations.

The perception psychologist J.M. Bobitt flashed illustrations of incomplete figures through an instrument called a tachistoscope. Through this experiment, he found that viewers would perceive the incomplete figure as complete. Bobitt determined that in the perception process, the brain fills in the necessary information, creating closure (see Figure 11.77).

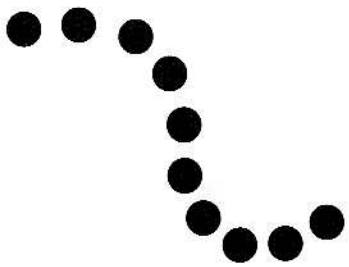


11.77a

11.77b

Good Continuation

In **good continuation**, a figure or group of figures is arranged in such a way as to have direction and seem to continue. This can be a property of figures, or a property of groups of figures (see Figure 11.78).



11.78

Visual Associations

Free association is the learned or acquired ability to assign and change verbal interpretations of a composition by moving from one to many associations.

Familiarity is the ability of a viewer to associate unfamiliar figures with more familiar figures. The most efficient or effective perceptual organization universalizes the familiar (see Figure 11.79).

11.79

Practice Exercise 11.6: Using Gestalt Perceptual Organizational Principles in Compositions

Begin by identifying and collecting a set of shapes, or objects in a related category—for example, shoes, hats, or leaves. After selecting the shapes or objects, draw them in several different positions and orientations.

The compositional arrangements that result in this study should express an understanding of the types of balance, the use of organizational principles, and good figure/ground relationships.

Next, work with the drawings, creating a "family" of compositional shapes. Use eight to ten different shapes or objects. Explore compositional balance, and apply the grouping laws while considering figure/ground relationships. Select the most interesting compositional organization and prepare a final solution using pen, ink, cut paper, or film on hot press illustration board (see Figures 11.80–11.81).