

DISTRIBUTION

EQUAL MOVEMENT
OF UNEQUAL ELEMENTS
OVER THE SURFACE

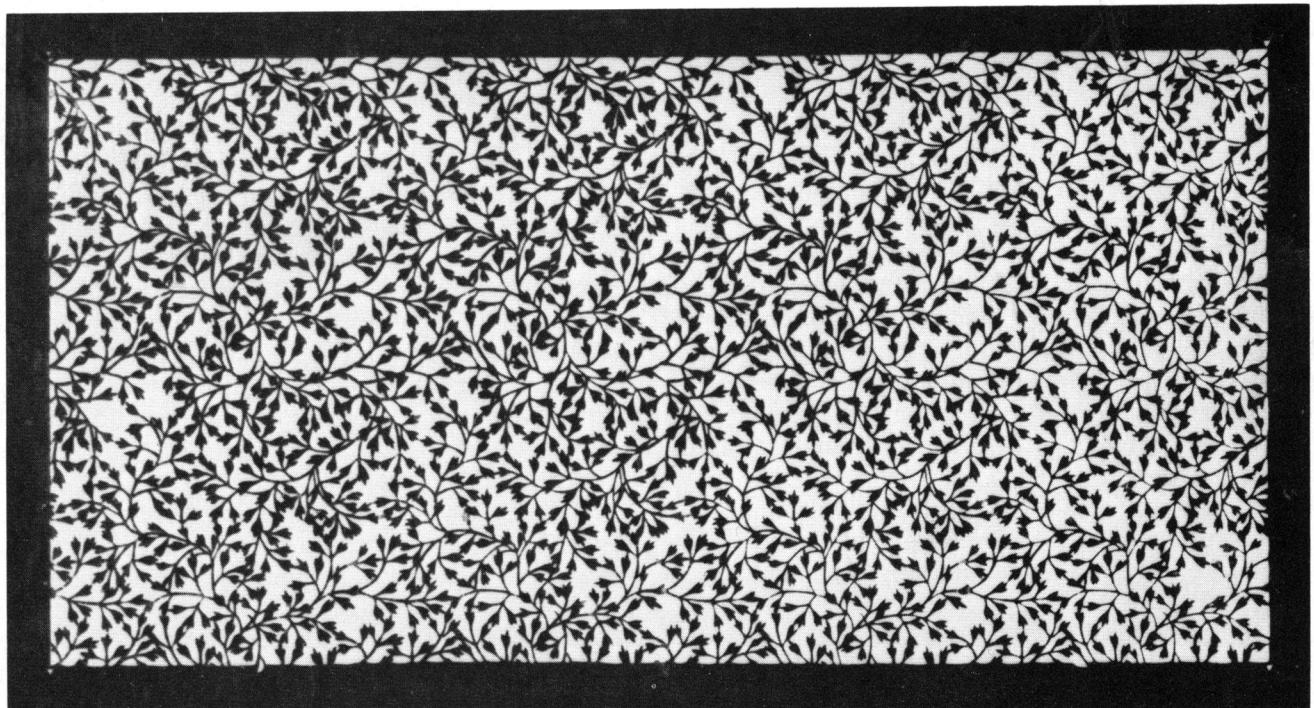


FIGURE 2-1
Kata-gami: Leafy Vine. 18 × 35.4 cm.
Courtesy of Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The Smithsonian Institution's
National Museum of Design.

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Distribution deals with the rhythmic reorganization of pattern structure. It involves movements of unequal elements which are equalized over the surface through the interplay of countermovements between them rather than by an even repetition of identical design units. Different movements combine and exchange between the distributed elements, balancing each other, so that the finished surfaces appear as uniform as those of pattern. The movements of Pattern and Distribution express rhythmic orders—the basis of all surface organization.

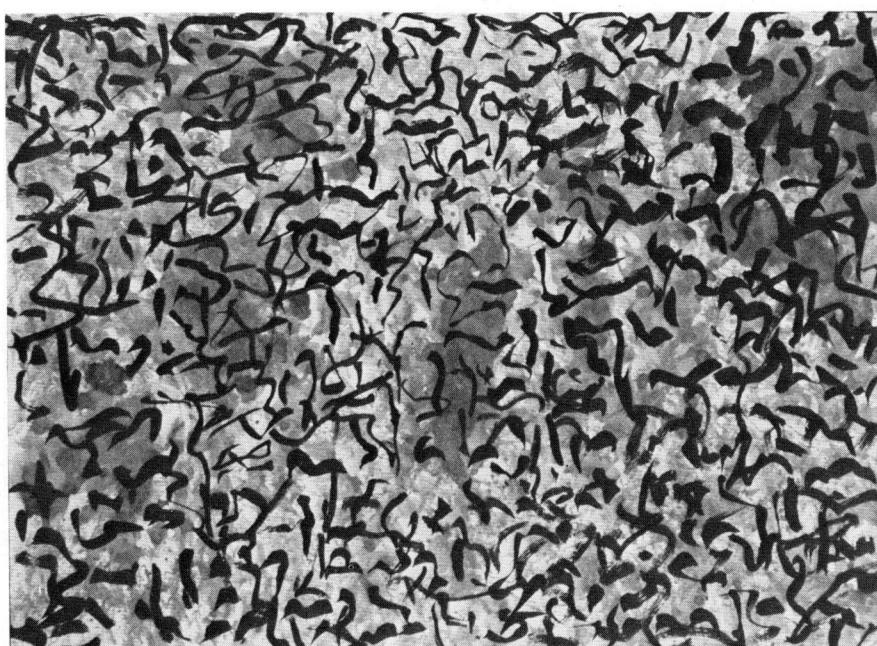
The *kata-gami* shown in Figure 2-1 is designed as an interlacement of lines and dots spaced around various sizes of irregular light shapes. It is difficult to focus long on any particular area on the surface since it appears as a visual wander without a stop. There is an occasional pause at one of the eccentric light shapes formed where curved lines and small dot-like leaf shapes join, but the interdependence and equal emphasis given to these three elements, and their distribution within the design, creates a continuous

movement without interruptions over the surface. The light shapes vary in size from large to small, in evenly arranged contrasts, without emphasis on one size or the other. The curvilinear elements move vigorously through the design, each countering the other, enclosing movements within the surface. Throughout, the dots and masses extend the action of the lines and define the light areas. However, upon careful looking, it can be seen that the design is made up of smaller areas, identically composed, within a grid structure; particular shapes repeat at regular, measured intervals. It is the skillful use of similar, but not identical, elements within each grid unit that disposes the small repeat, and the large area of the complete stencil repeat appears as a single self-contained plane.

CONTRAST TO PATTERN

This organization of evenly distributed but contrasting elements, differs sharply from that of a standard checkerboard arrangement, with its minimal visual vocabulary of a single dark-light exchange in even alternation over a surface. It differs, too, from any of the surfaces developed in Pattern—Figures 1-24, 1-34, or 1-67, for example—where a simple rhythm of repetition of even the most complex of composed repeats is the basis of organization. The *kata-gami* shows an arrangement of elements in an equilibrium maintained by movements balanced by countermovements. The freely developed surface shown in Figure 2-2 is made up of brush strokes all similar in character,

FIGURE 2-2
Distributed surface—
ink study.



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but with each slightly different from the others. It is not based on a grid foundation, as is the *kata-gami*, but the idea of a uniform surface composed of evenly distributed design elements without an obvious statement of measured repeat is common to both.

Although the grid is used as a foundation for surfaces developed in Distribution, its final effect on the surfaces is quickly minimized by the arrangement of elements. The American crazy quilt, Figure 2-3,

is made up of many small patches that certainly give the appearance of even distribution. Even the symmetrical motif at the upper center of the quilt becomes subordinate to the overall activity of the surface. Nevertheless, the design clearly states its grid base, 15 units in all, rather than absorbing it. In itself, this is not a bad thing—in fact, it was probably what the designer wanted—however, for the intention of Distribution, the second quilt, Figure 2-4, is better de-

FIGURE 2-3

Crazy Quilt.

Courtesy of The Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Harriet L. French.



veloped as an all-over surface, although no grid at all is used as a foundation. The examples represent extremes that are interesting in themselves: the first creates an interesting visual tension between the apparently erratic patches organized within a regular grid, and the second shows a balanced visual scramble over the surface. They can be related to the preceding examples of *kata-gami* and free study. All of the examples are worth examination, but the structure of Distribution lies between the extremes shown, rather than at one end or the other.

PATTERN-LIKE

Distribution is based upon Pattern, and can be best understood by seeing how it relates and contrasts to Pattern. The basic structure of all patterned surfaces is that of an even repetitive rhythm. The concept of Distribution is that of continual but contained movement—not randomness, but a *pattern-like* functioning of the parts of the design. A clearer visual distinction can be made by comparing any of the dark-light surfaces from Manipulations with the *kata-gami* shown

FIGURE 2-4
Patchwork Quilt.
Index of American Design. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



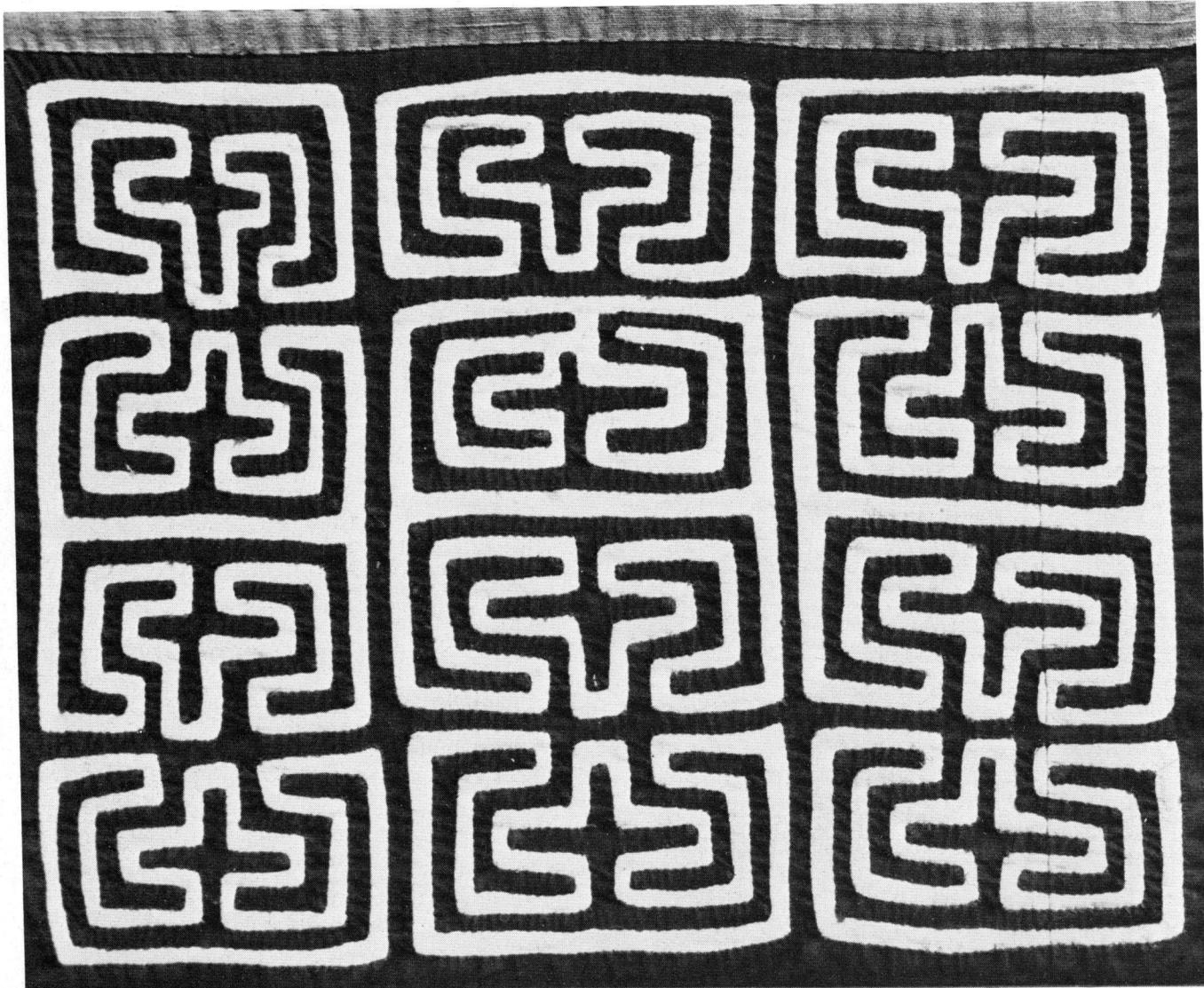
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in Figure 2-1. Distribution is closely related to Pattern since the design elements share an identity that gives them an appearance of sameness, but they do not repeat exactly. The solid, measured, one-to-one repeat, characteristic of simple pattern is missing. Its function is replaced by that of interacting movements between the design elements: the tempo is one of evenness over the surface created by movements that are countered by equal and opposite movements, without exact repetition.

Three *molas* from the San Blas Indians of Panama are shown in Figures 2-5, 2-6, and 2-7. They

should be compared with each other to see how the idea of Distribution is evolved from a Pattern foundation. A similar basic motif is used in each *mola*, with variations in each of the three examples, to develop its surface. The first, Figure 2-5, is very close to a plain pattern statement: a complex design unit evenly spaced on the surface, in an equal exchange of dark and light. The second, Figure 2-6, combines areas that are not equal, but share the same line width, and repeat the same turning movement in line. The top section of the design seems to grow out of the more regulated arrangement of the bottom section, but

FIGURE 2-5
Mola.



takes on a different kind of relationship to the total piece through the placement and interaction of the linear motif; a very approximate symmetrical arrangement unifies the two parts of the surface. It becomes a composition of areas distributed over the surface. One's attention is on the all-over actions of the field as they balance each other, which is a contrast to the visual control of repetition seen in the first example.

The repetition of consistent shapes creates a strong "patterned" impression in the third *mola* shown, Figure 2-7, but an even and controlled repeat—a consistent metrical rhythm—is absent. The result suggests

pattern, but it is not pattern. Rather, it is a balanced arrangement of closely related but continually varied elements, which is characteristic of Distribution. It is in this sense that it is "pattern-like." The maze design of the *mola* is made up of like elements varied in size, put into an interesting and rugged irregular order, based upon the interaction of strong vertical and horizontal intersections, from which the stepped rhythm is developed as a control. The idea of a regular repeat is secondary. A comparison with Figure 2-6 should clarify the contrast between areas made up of similar elements that are distributed evenly

FIGURE 2-6
Mola.



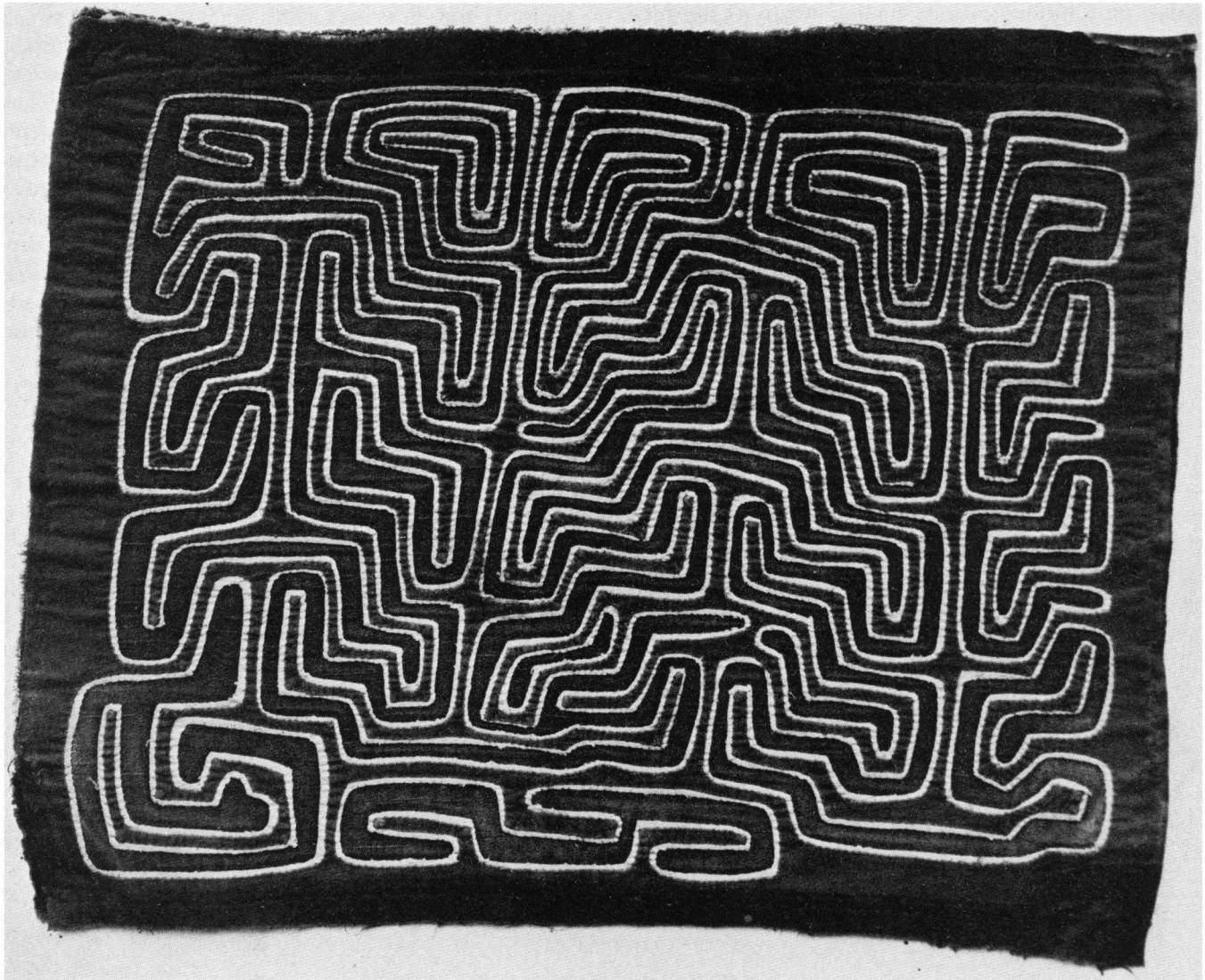


FIGURE 2-7
Mola.

within it, and areas in which the elements, though identical in character—if not in exact size and shape—are combined in a more structured arrangement, which becomes compositional. The elements in Figure 2-6 are unequal in visual weight and placement, and mass to form superior dominant shapes, establishing centers of visual emphasis rather than creating a uniform, uninterrupted surface, such as that shown in Figure 2-7, which is the quality of Distribution. Further clarification of the differences can be seen by comparing Figure 1-24 with the *kata-gami*, Figure 2-1, and the *mola*, Figure 2-6. In each there is an identity of shape content, and each fully develops its surface, but uses a different method to do so.

The surface shown in Figure 2-8 is another good example of free distribution of elements—here a dot—besides the brush and ink study and the crazy quilt examples (Figures 2-2 and 2-3). As a whole, the surface has variety and interest in the movements made up by the alignment of the dots, and the stress and release caused by their varying densities. There are no obvious stops, no strong single directional movements, no superior shapes emerging from the massed elements, and it certainly does not appear as a regular pattern organization. It should be pointed out that although the dots on this surface are dissimilar in size and are in balanced distribution over the surface, an edge has been developed around the field which gives

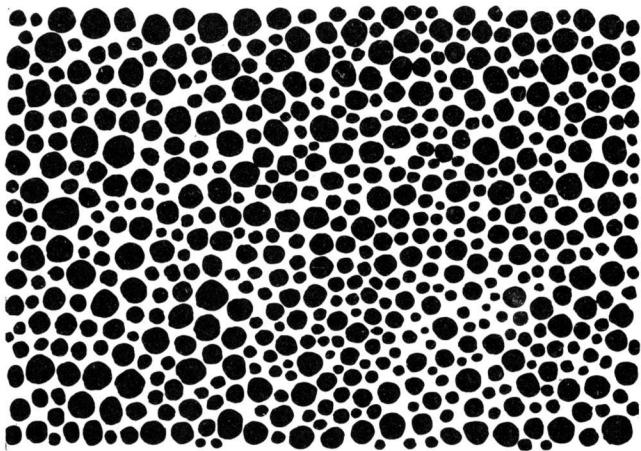


FIGURE 2-8
Dot—ink study.

the appearance of a frame. If the area is meant to be self-contained—complete as it is—there can be no objection to this margination. However, if the area is meant to be used as a single repeat on a larger, all-over surface, the idea of a continuous and even distribution would be lost, and the rectangular framework of the combined units would control and dominate the resulting surface—an effect similar to that of the crazy quilt made up of fifteen square units.

FIGURE AND FIELD

Although the grid is the foundation of both, the placement of design units within the grid is one of continual variation in Distribution rather than that of consistent placement, as in Pattern. This difference gives a directionless character to distributed surfaces, such as those seen in Figure 2-1 and 2-18, which contrasts to the strong directional movements frequently produced in Pattern games when design unit joins design unit, as shown in Figure 1-31, particularly. This makes the initial moves in Distribution games more complex than those of Pattern since the entire field is always in the process of becoming completed. No single area is defined until its adjacent areas are defined, and the games are played as continuities, with no part complete without the definition of another part. Just as in poetry one line is often dependent upon the following lines for completion of sense, rhythm, and form, in design a patterned surface is not complete until all the design units are in position and become mutually defining, and the surface can be understood

as a whole. But the complexities of simple symmetrical rhythms are not those of asymmetrical rhythms, where the awareness of the total page and the interactions of all its compositional elements must be in balance at once. There is no part of a composed surface that is less or more important than any other part: one thing has the same value as another. In a traditional figure-field relationship, that part or portion that is to support and express the figure—the field—will be effective only if it supports and completes the composition. Less or more will entirely alter the result. As such, the field cannot be a passive support for the dynamic of the figure, but must have an active function in the entire design of the surface. Here, the traditional description of figure and field has been replaced by the simple observation that everything counts: everything is connected to everything else, and the connecting relationships are the design.

Unless this general idea, this unifying viewpoint exists, there is little to be gained by criticizing particular parts of a design. If all the parts are of equal importance as they interact with one another, then the entire area must be seen at once as it has been put down as a self-contained organization. Are the parts working together to create a single unified impression? Any attempt to rectify particular areas is valuable only insofar as it relates to the whole and calls attention to the entire concept and how it has been felt and stated. Then the area that seems out of relationship can be taken into the general context of the design and corrected from that standpoint. When criticism focusses on details, with attention to parts rather than to the whole, the result is likely to be no more than a piecing together or a patching up.

The relationship of connecting design elements as they move together to form a complete surface is the particular emphasis in Distribution. The thinking is the same as that required when drawing from the human body: one shape anticipates and defines another shape in a rhythmic continuum, and this relationship between the shapes must be understood before one is able to draw. In the conventional study of the torso shown in Figure 2-9, the twisted axis of the pose gives a dynamic quality to the figure; however, it remains an active figure on a passive field. The areas surrounding the drawing serve to define the figure, but full attention has been given to the figure rather than to a completed surface. This is not true of the seated figure shown in Figure 2-10. A comparison of this drawing with Figure 2-9 shows immediately that here the entire page is being composed. Although figure and field exchange is not equal, all the areas of the surface are considered as being interdependent in the composition.