

Symmetry

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Artists often use symmetry and asymmetry in works of art. In this lesson, you will learn about symmetry and how it's used, or not used, by artists in a composition. This lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

An artist uses the properties of symmetry and asymmetry to create visual balance and dynamism in a composition.

1. Symmetry and Bilateral Symmetry

At its most basic, **symmetry** means equal across an axis, or the imaginary line of division. In contrast, **asymmetry** means unequal across an axis, and **bilateral symmetry** means identical across an **axis**.

IN CONTEXT

This work by Barbara Kruger is symmetrical, but not perfectly bilaterally symmetrical. One half of the image is a negative of the other half. If you drew an imaginary line through the center of this image, the two halves would not be identical, but it would be close.



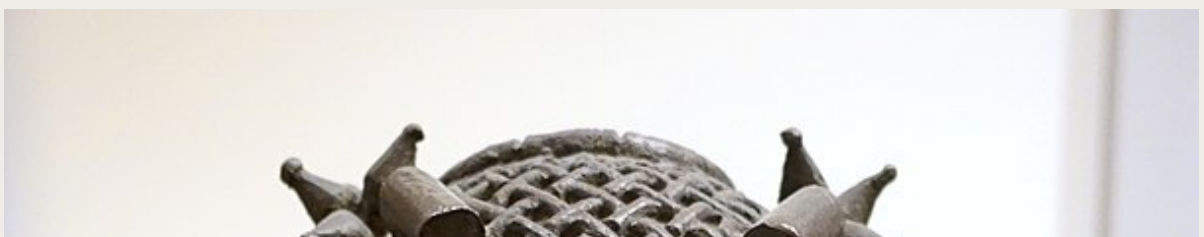
Barbara Kruger

Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)

1989

Photographic silkscreen on vinyl

The sculpture below is a portrait of a king from Benin, or present-day Nigeria. There are some slight imperfections in this object, with the eyes being slightly different sizes, but aside from that, it is an example of bilateral symmetry. *Bilateral* symmetry means that the two halves of something are identical or mirror images of each other. If you drew a line through this image, the two halves would be the same. Notice how the idea of formal perfection adds to the idea of kingly power and authority that this object projects.





Head of an Oba, or king

Kingdom of Benin

18th century

Bronze



TERMS TO KNOW

Symmetry

The quality of having exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis.

Axis

An imaginary line that divides an object.

Asymmetry

Lack of equivalence or similarity between parts.

Bilateral Symmetry

When two halves of something are exactly the same or mirror images of each other.

2. Asymmetry, Balance, and Dynamism

The woodcut print below, by Hokusai, is an excellent example of asymmetry. Nearly a quarter of this image consists of negative, or empty, space, with the sparrows and flowers occupying the right and bottom halves. There is, however, still a sense of balance between the elements of the composition, the birds and flowers, and the empty space.



Katsushika Hokusai

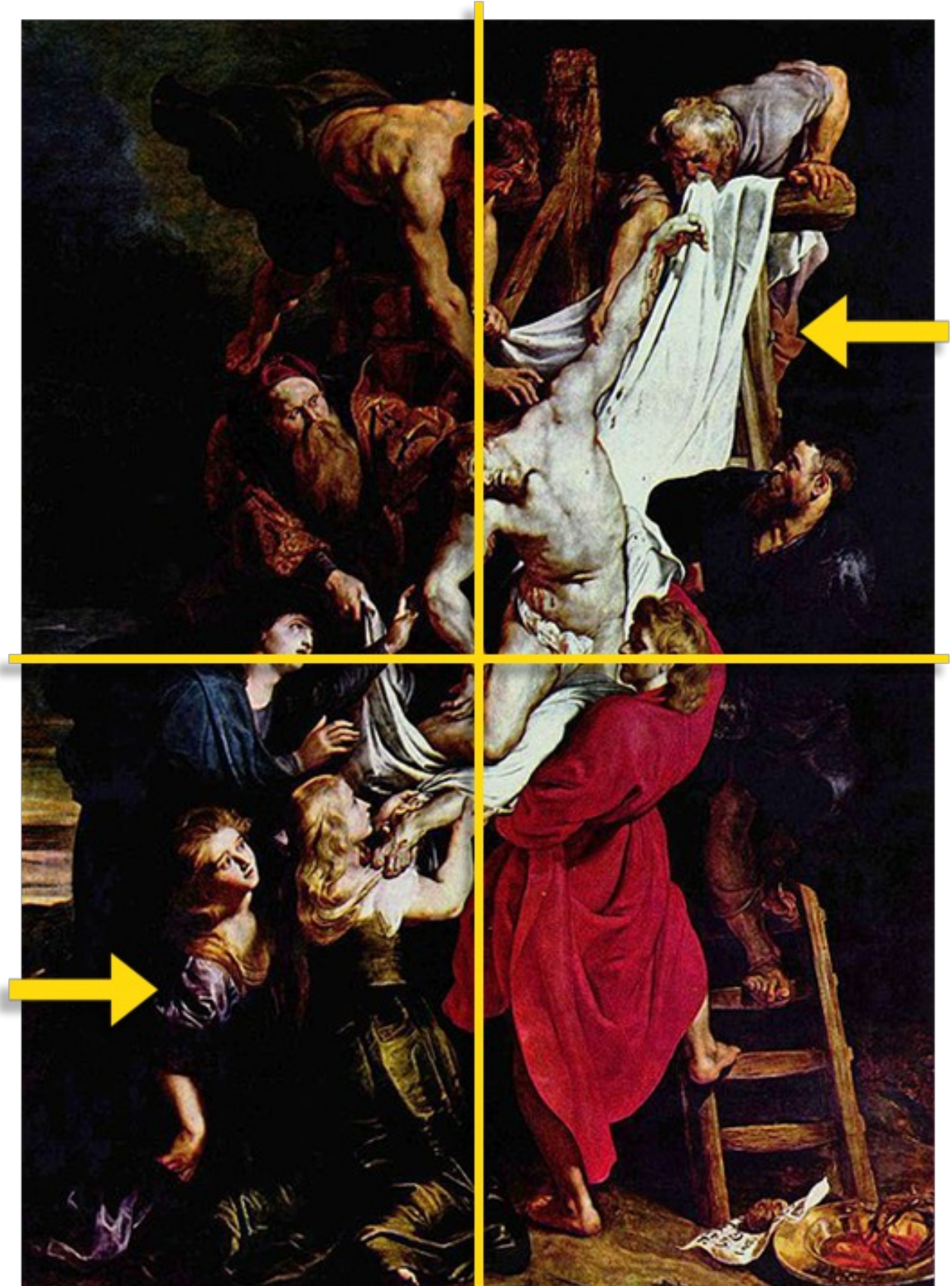
Sparrows and Chrysanthemums

c. 1825

Woodcut print

Asymmetry doesn't necessarily mean unbalanced. **Balance** is when elements of a composition carry equal weight or create harmony. A composition can be asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.

Balance and **dynamism** are achieved by a careful distribution of elements through the composition. We can get a better sense of this by breaking the image into quadrants, as in this next image.



Peter Paul Rubens

The Descent from the Cross

c. 1612–1614

Notice how the two quadrants identified by the arrows hold the majority of the visual weight in this image. These same two quadrants hold a roughly equal amount of weight in each quadrant and are diagonally opposed to each other. The other diagonally opposed composing quadrants have an equal distribution of empty space—empty of people, at least—which forces the eye, again, toward the diagonal axis and up to the right, creating the sense of dynamism. It can still be balanced even though it's asymmetrical.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dynamism

The illusion of movement in a composition.

Balance

When elements of a composition carry equal weight or create harmony; a composition can be asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.



SUMMARY

Symmetry and asymmetry are used by artists in works of art for varying reasons, sometimes to create visual balance and dynamism in a composition. In this lesson, you explored **symmetry and bilateral symmetry**. Remember that symmetry is when you see exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis, or line of division. Bilateral symmetry is when you see two halves of something that are exactly the same or mirror images on each part.

Finally, you learned about **asymmetry, balance, and dynamism**. Asymmetry doesn't necessarily mean unbalanced but instead is when there is a lack of equivalence or similarity between parts. Balance and dynamism, which is the illusion of movement, are achieved by a careful distribution of elements through the composition.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Asymmetry

Lack of equivalence or similarity between parts.

Axis

An imaginary line that divides an object.

Balance

When elements of a composition carry equal weight or create harmony; a composition can be asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.

Bilateral Symmetry

When two halves of something are exactly the same or mirror images of each other.

Dynamism

The illusion of movement in a composition.

Symmetry

The quality of having exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis.