

The Elements of **Composition**

A Complete Guide

By  studio binder



The Elements of Composition

The Complete Guide

Visual principles for Art, Photography, & Film

Brought to you by StudioBinder

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Foreword

The impetus behind StudioBinder was simple — to create a holistic [production management solution](#) that could handle everything from screenwriting and storyboards, to shooting schedules and call sheets.

But once this was done, it became clear that creating the software wasn't enough, we had to educate as well. Navigating the world of advertising, filmmaking, photography, music videos, etc. is a daunting task full of jargon, new technologies, and moving pieces.

The [StudioBinder Blog](#), which hosts over two thousand articles and millions of readers every month, and our [YouTube channel](#),

which is well beyond 1 million subscribers, were born out of this goal to educate.

StudioBinder's business and educational aspirations have aligned in ways that continually inspires me. And it has been a real honor and joy to watch the StudioBinder community grow.

Which brings us to this latest resource: *Elements of Composition in Art, Photography & Film – The Complete Guide*. Composition can be a rather subjective and elusive concept — more intuitive than prescriptive — and every image maker approaches it differently.

No matter if you're an artist, photographer or filmmaker, composition is an imperative aspect of the craft. Even if you've never studied composition, the "rules" and techniques are very accessible. In fact, you've probably utilized these concepts every time you snap a photo or sketch out a storyboard. In many ways, composition is instinctual.

Our goal in this book is lay out the basic foundational elements of composition. Not for the purpose of memorization but to give you

a head start as you develop your own approach. We hope you enjoy the book and that it inspires a new way to visualize your next image.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Kiraz".

Robert Kiraz, CEO
StudioBinder

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

How do you tell a story in a single image? For many artists, photographers and filmmakers, this is the ultimate question. Granted, telling a story is not a pre-requisite for an image — a simple landscape can be just as evocative and resonant as anything. But even then there is still a story to be found.

Composition is a catchall concept that guides the image maker on their journey to tell a story, convey a message, or evoke an idea. Art is communication between the maker and the observer. Sometimes the language used is clear and familiar, other times it

is obtuse and cryptographic. It all depends on the goals of the artist.

Image makers working today should understand than anyone consuming their work has a lifetime of experience “reading” images. Even if they can’t articulate it, they intuitively understand what “looks good” and what “looks bad” when it comes to composition.

And if the artist wants to take control of the reception of their work, they need to consider how composition works and how it can be used.

What follows is an introduction to composition, the basic elements and how they work in combination. These aren’t dogmatic rules that must be followed; merely guiding principles that have worked for centuries to create some universally accepted ideas about images, their meanings and interpretations.

CHAPTER 2

What is Composition?

Composition is the arrangement of elements within an image. It is a means for an artist to convey specific emotions, stories, or meanings within a singular arrangement. It is where you place your subject(s) in relation to each other. It is how you use color to create contrast. It is the size of your subject compared to the empty space around them.

And that's just the beginning.

While there are no absolute rules for composition, there are various principles that artists utilize to create compositions that

convey what they desire. In many ways, you already understand these principles on a gut level.

Whether you were aware or not, you've spent your life looking at and "reading" images. And since these same principles have been studied, utilized and passed down through the centuries, you're already well-versed. Now it's just time to give these concepts names.

Each chapter in this book is dedicated to one of the many elements of composition, along with some relevant techniques. Depending on your personal aesthetic, some of these elements may be irrelevant while others you might come to embrace.

And, of course, all art is subjective and there are no claims here that following these guidelines will guarantee the perfect image. Consider this more of an inspirational guide and less of a strict set of rules.

CHAPTER 3

Focal points

To start, let's talk about focal points. As the name suggests, this is a point of focus — where you want the eye to go. Often this point is the main subject or idea of the image, the thing that matters most in how the image is read. This sounds pretty simple but it can get complicated very quickly.

For example, if you have multiple points of focus, which is more important? What can you do with composition to make sure “Focal Point A” carries more weight than “Focal Point B”?

Luckily, there are a few composition techniques to help establish and prioritize these points of focus.

Simplicity

Simplicity is the philosophy and practice of creating only what is necessary within a work of art. Simplicity depends greatly on both the artist and what they are exploring or expressing through their medium.

The artist must decide what is absolutely necessary within their work of art and what is not. By discarding what is unnecessary, the artist strives for simplicity.

It makes a lot of sense — if you want the subject of your image to be clear and definitive, leave everything else off. Don't distract the viewer with extra “stuff,” just keep it plain and simple.



Dune (2021) • Simplicity

Of course, the downside might be that your image lacks complexity and **subtext** but sometimes that's the point.

Simplicity should not be mistaken for simplistic. Simplistic refers to the use of rudimentary techniques or subjects. Simplicity refers to an artist's intentionality with the content of their work. Simple paintings, photographs, or films can still carry complex meaning.

Rule of Thirds

The [Rule of Thirds](#) is the process of dividing an image into thirds, using two horizontal and two vertical lines. This imaginary grid yields nine segments with four intersection points.

When you position the most important elements of your image at these intersection points, you produce a much more natural image. It is also suggested that the horizon is placed on either the top or bottom horizontal lines.



2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) • Rule of Thirds

Off-center composition is pleasing to the eye because it's typically where the eyes go first. When there is a subject or object off-center, it also gives viewers the ability to interact with that space between them.

This allows for interpretation and conversation between the subject and the background, as opposed to a fully centered subject.

This compositional rule is perhaps the most well-known and commonly-employed technique. The rule provides a reliable guideline for [framing](#) your shots and an excellent starting point for beginners who hope to dip their toes into the many rules of composition.

Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle is another way to create balanced focal points in an image. This is done by drawing a diagonal line across

the image, with two additional lines from the remaining corners intersecting the first line at 90 degrees.

In this example from [Pulp Fiction](#), you can see how this is done. Jules and Honey Bunny land perfectly on these intersections with that main diagonal marking a natural [eyeline](#), especially for Vincent aiming in the middle.



Pulp Fiction (1994) • The Golden Triangle

The key with the Golden Triangle is that it creates a balanced composition. Instead of simply a balance between “left and right,” we also get “top and bottom” of the frame, all at the same time.

Points are a basic element of composition and a natural starting point. In the next chapter, we'll look another element that helps to draw the eye to those points: lines.

CHAPTER 4

Lines

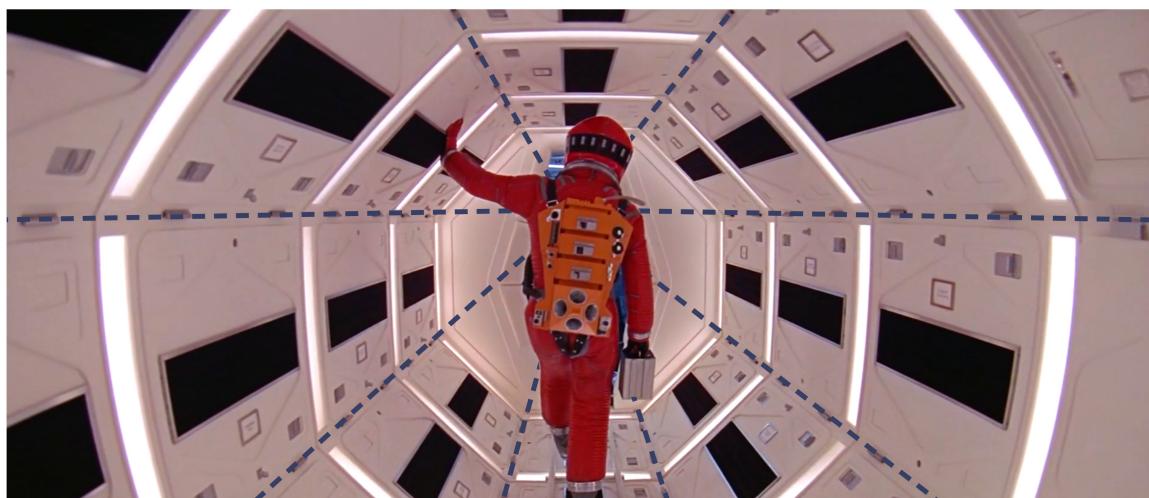
If the goal is to get the viewer's eye to the focal point, using lines is a great way to facilitate that. When we say lines, this isn't only literal lines. They can also be more suggestive lines that nudge the eye in the desired direction without being so obvious.

And, of course, more abstract works can forego lines altogether. In those cases, the goal is to let the eye wander which is best achieved without any lines to guide us.

Leading lines

[Leading lines](#) are actual lines (or sometimes imaginary ones) in a shot, that lead the eye to key elements in the scene. Artists use this technique to direct the viewer's eye but they also use it to connect the character to essential objects, situations, or secondary subjects.

Whatever your eye is drawn to in a scene, leading lines probably have something to do with it. In this shot from Stanley Kubrick's [2001: A Space Odyssey](#) (dotted lines added for emphasis), notice the lines created by the [production design](#) focus our attention on the lead character as well as help "push" them forward.



2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) • Leading Lines

The contrasting colors also emphasize our subject but we'll cover color and contrast in later chapters.

Leading lines found in nature are much less distinct, but equally effective. Naturally occurring leading lines can be found in rivers, horizon lines, or mountain ridges.

In this photo, the slope as well as the waterline curve our eyes directly towards the natural focal point (the sun).

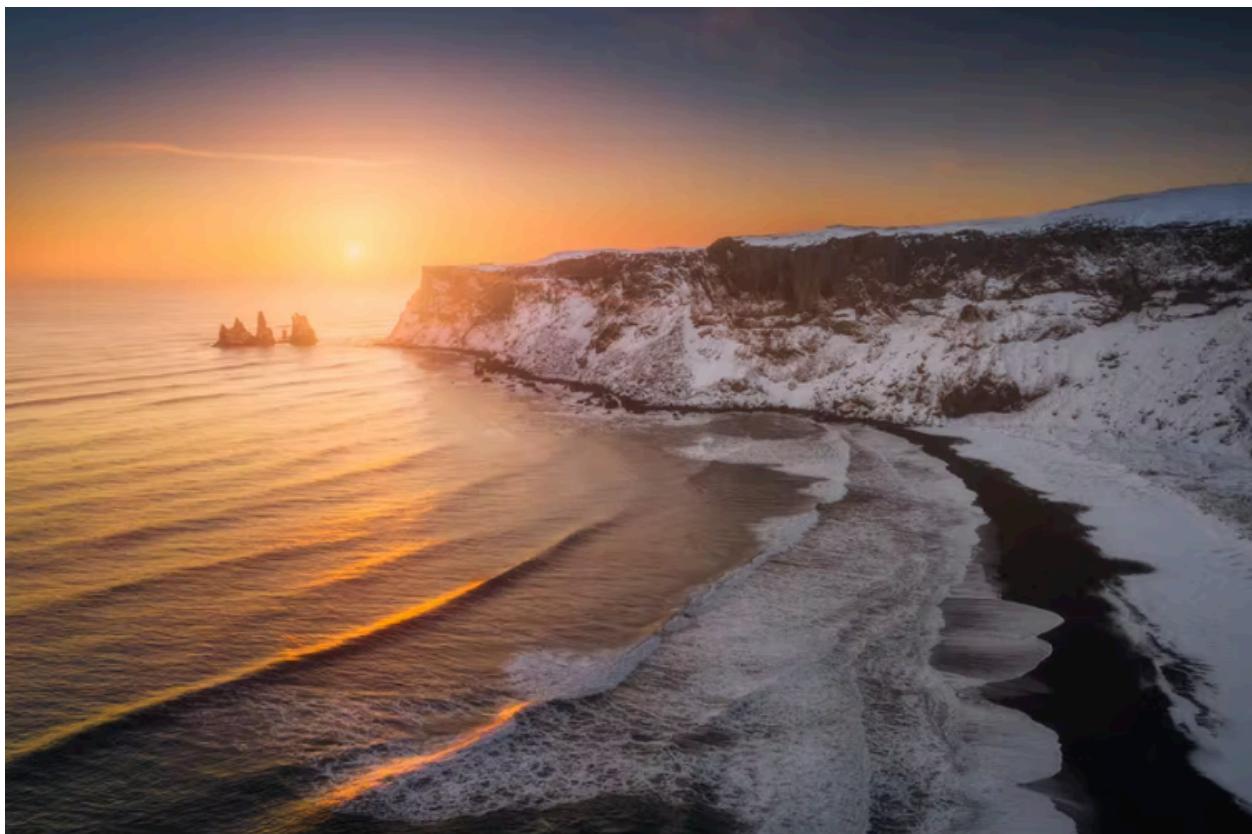


Photo by Iurie Belegurschi

Director [Terrence Malick](#) and cinematographer John Toll found naturally occurring leading lines for unique compositions in South Pacific rainforests.

In this shot, you can see the patterns in the palm leaves as well as the brush line all converge on the subject.



The Thin Red Line (1998) • Leading Lines

Artificial or man made structures produce the most distinct leading lines. Things like streets, fences, buildings, and bridges all have very distinguished features and lines that can be used in your compositions.

Horizontal leading lines move across the frame from left to right. They are precisely horizontal and parallel with the top and bottom of the frame.

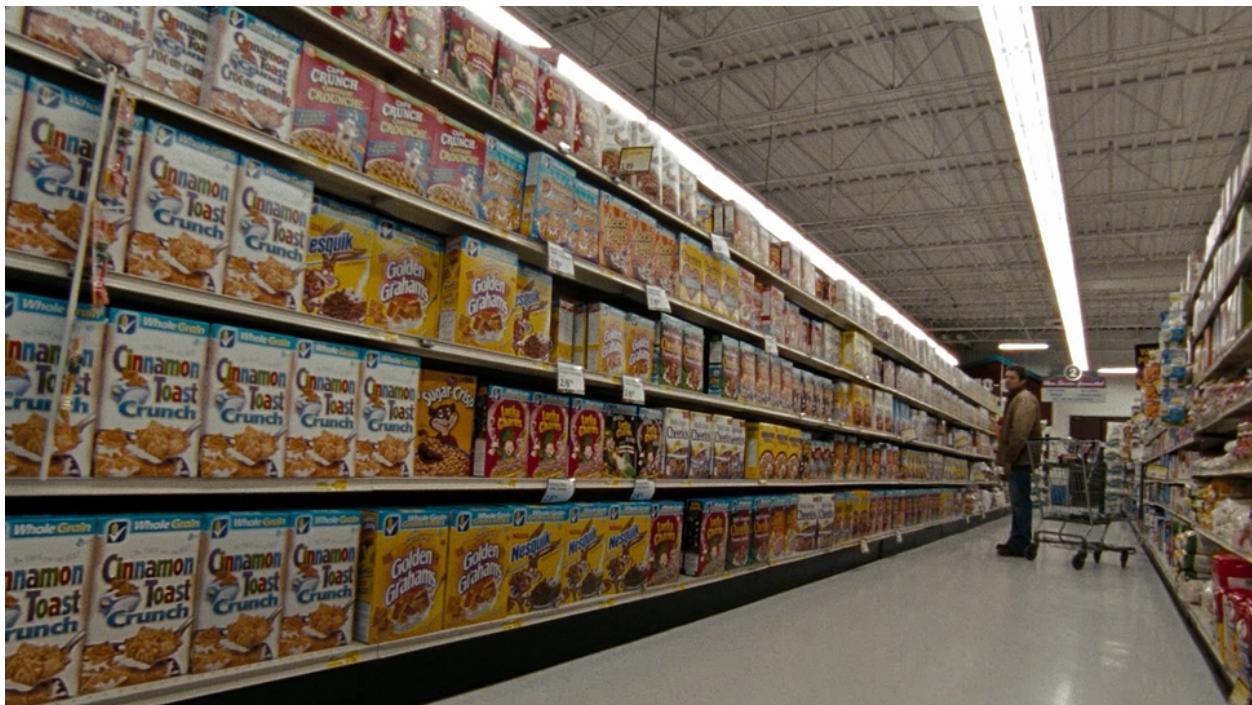
Vertical leading lines guide the viewer's eye upward or downward in the frame. This shot from the film *Trainspotting* uses the vertical lines from the architecture of the building to guide our eye downward toward the subject at the bottom of the frame.



Trainspotting (1996) • Vertical Leading Lines

Diagonal leading lines are great at creating depth. They often move across the frame in a diagonal direction, but also deeper into the shot.

This frame from *The Hurt Locker* uses diagonal leading lines of the grocery store aisle, shelves and lights to direct us deeper into the frame as well as toward the subject.



The Hurt Locker (2009) • Diagonal Leading Lines

Curved lines are a bit less common, but often found in natural leading line compositions or roads. They can insinuate more of a journey for a subject rather than leading us toward them entirely.

Lastly, converging leading lines from various directions converge toward one space or subject. This technique is called one-point perspective and it was one of [Stanley Kubrick](#)'s most common types of composition.



The Shining (1980) • One Point Perspective

Another thing lines bring to composition is the creation of shapes. In the next chapter, we take a step further towards more complex compositional techniques.

CHAPTER 5

Shapes

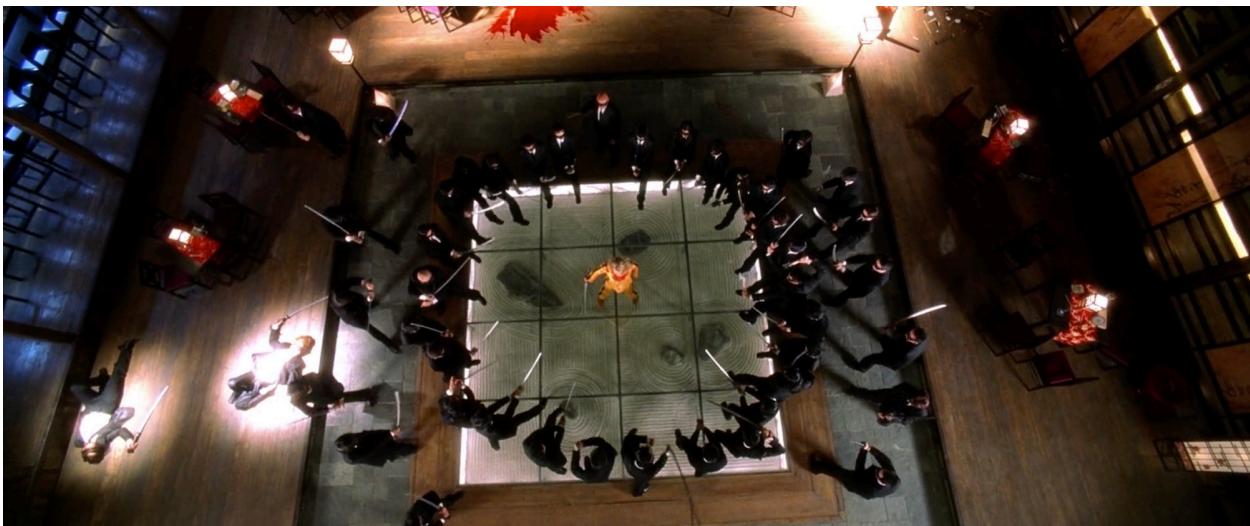
We find shapes everywhere in the world — from the rigid architectures of the city to the flowing forms in nature. And just like these other elements of composition, shapes bring with them a certain context and meaning.

Triangles are often used to illustrate strength and power dynamics, suggesting a hierarchy. Consider the triangle formed by the blocking in this shot and how even though the subject in the middle is center-framed, he is clearly powerless in this situation.



In Cold Blood (1967) • Triangle Blocking

Circles can bring an entirely different dynamic to a composition. In some cases, a sense of calm orderliness or, in this shot from Kill Bill Vol. 1, being surrounded on all sides by the enemy.



Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003) • Circle Blocking

Beyond pure geometry of literal circles and squares, we can also think in terms of how shapes are created by the relationship between subjects or between the subject and the background. One of these techniques involves creating a secondary frame within the frame.

Frame within a frame

There are certain compositional techniques that make a shot visually beautiful. There are other compositional techniques that are effective at visually telling a story. The [frame within a frame](#) does both.

Creating a frame within a frame is as simple as finding any shape or visual element in your scene that can frame your subject within the shot. This can be set pieces like doorways, windows, or furniture.

For example, this iconic frame within a frame from *The Graduate* uses a leg to frame the main character, Ben. It's pretty obvious what this composition is aiming for.

Mrs. Robinson is setting a trap, walling him into an uncomfortable situation he can't escape. But she's also seducing him and the bare leg is the perfect [symbol](#) for it.



The Graduate (1967) • Frame Within a Frame

Though it can be effective, you don't always need to use foreground elements to create a frame within a frame. In the following shot, the translucent drapes create a vertical,

rectangular frame around the subject, isolating him from his surroundings and guiding our eyes directly to him.



The Master (2012) • Frame Within a Frame

The frame within a frame is an incredibly effective and versatile compositional technique that can be created in a variety of ways.

It has created some of the most iconic shots in cinema because of both its aesthetic qualities and narrative function.

CHAPTER 6

Textures

Texture is an interesting aspect of composition because it's less about "arrangement" and more about the tactile aspects of an image. This element gives the composition a tangible aspect by appealing to our sense of touch.

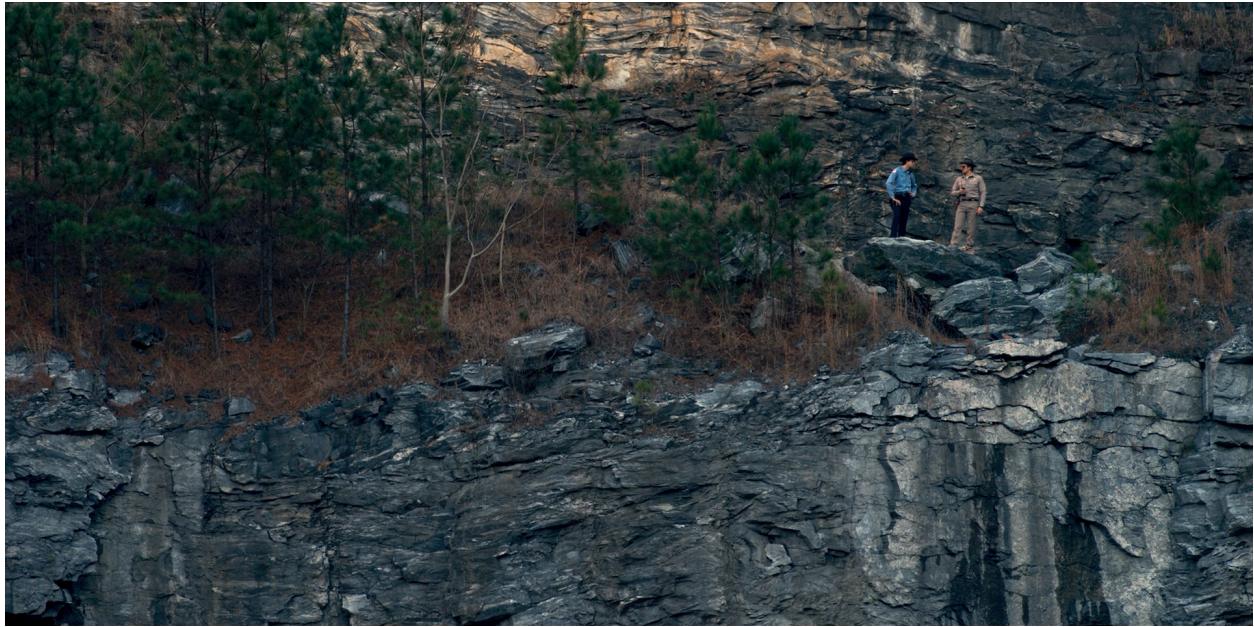
Especially in terms of painting, where paint can be applied to give the surface of the canvas a third dimension. For example, when the globules of paint bulge off of the canvas and actual brushstrokes can be seen.



Paintings by Lisa Elley

But this effect can still be achieved in 2D media like film and photography — it all comes down to what you're shooting.

In this shot from *Stranger Things*, notice how the texture of the rocks and trees interact with the subjects. This does a couple of things for us — it gives us a clear sense of location and the natural world surrounding the subjects.



Stranger Things (2016) • Texture

In this way, texture is a fantastic way to activate our senses beyond sight. Consider this photo of crashing waves on a beach. It activates our imagination — we can run our hands through white foam, we can smell the saltwater, and we might even hear seagulls.

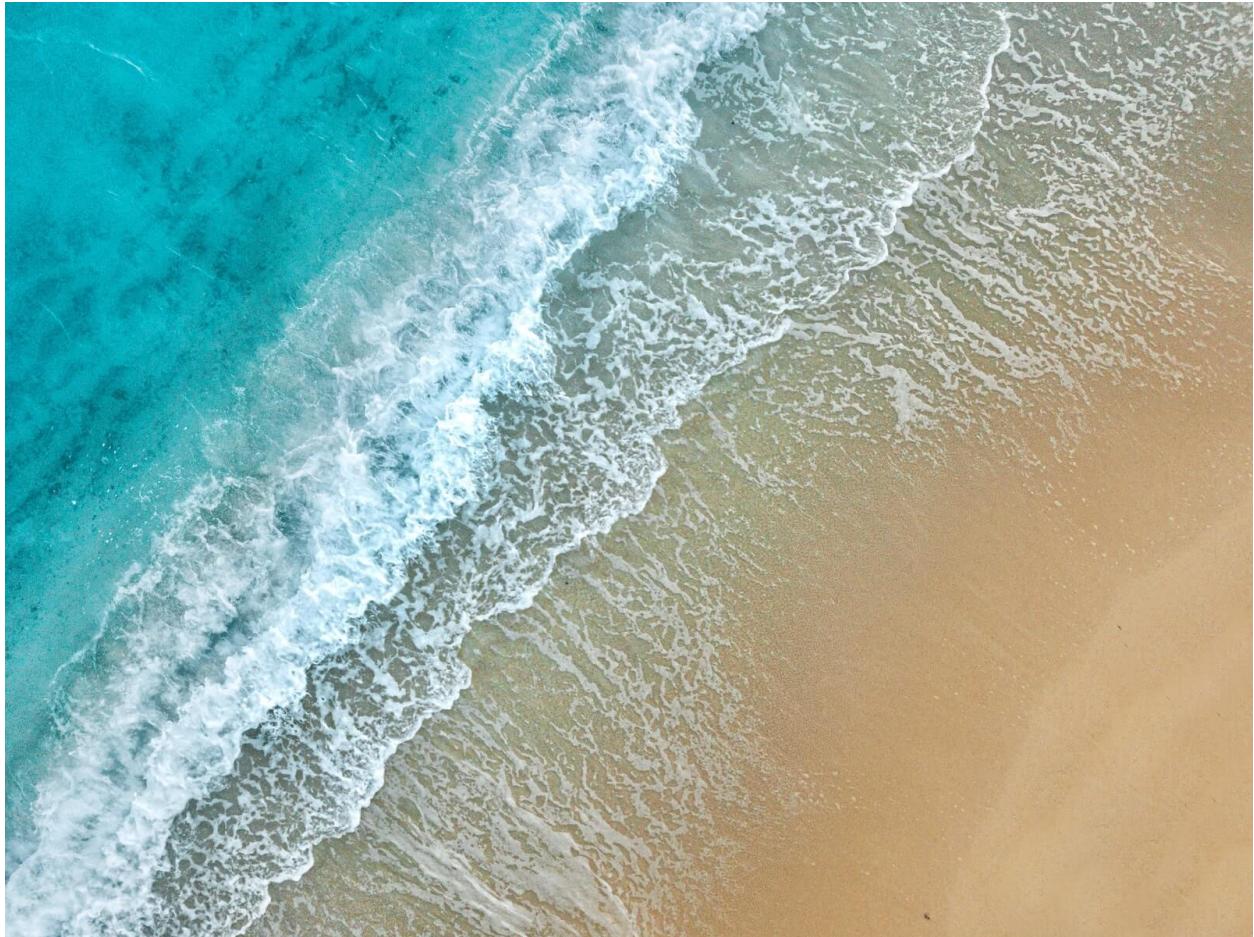


Photo by Rabih Shasha • Texture

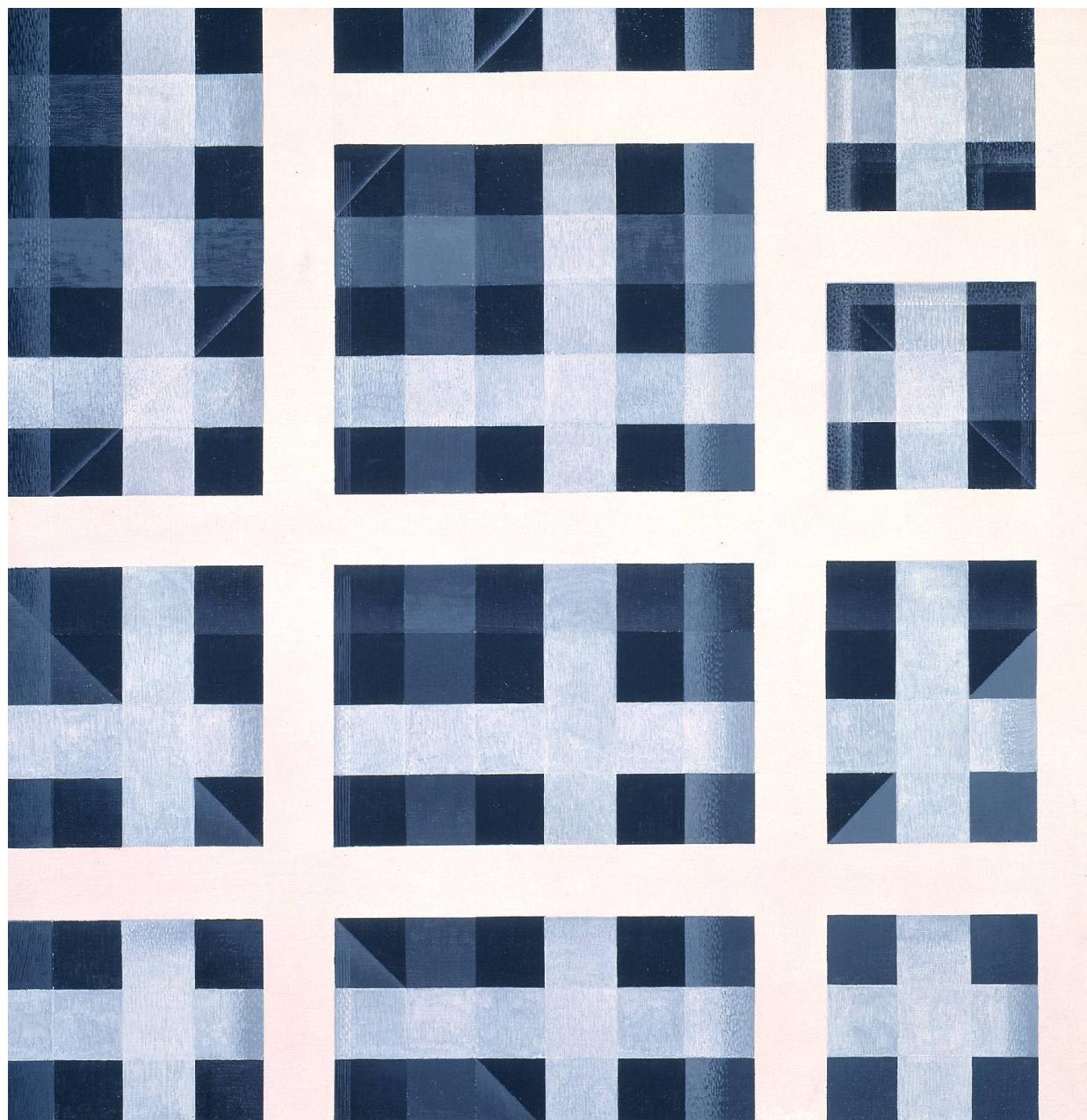
Even though most art is two-dimensional, bringing these aspects of texture can change that. It can be a literal third dimension in painting and it can help create a sensual experience where sight, sound, smell and touch can all become part of the composition.

CHAPTER 7

Patterns

Humans are pattern-seeking animals. And so, composing an image with patterns has an immediate effect to draw us in.

But other than focus, why else would an image maker use patterns? For one, they can create a sense of rhythm in an image. Even without music, you can *see* in the image below how the intermittent stripes, boxes, and rectangles generate a rhythm.



Sir Thomas Monnington • Square Design

Going back to the chapter on *Focal Points*, another really effective way to create a focal point is to establish a pattern and then interrupt it.



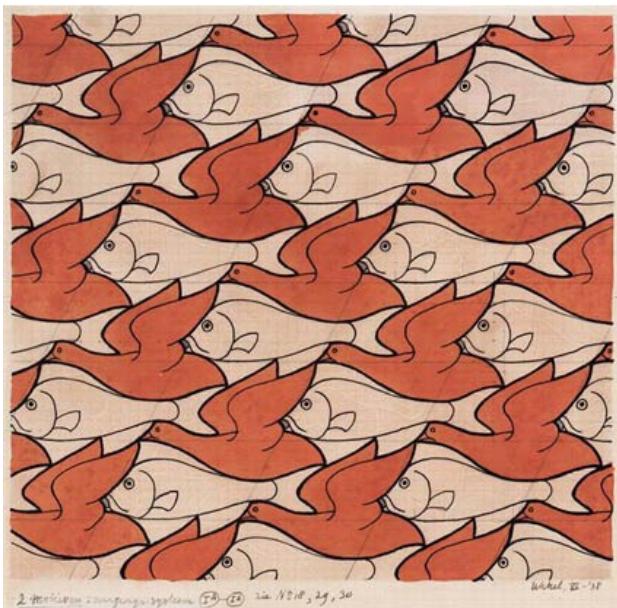
Thomas Leth-Olsen • Solo

Suddenly, instead of a uniform repetition of elements, we start thinking in terms of non-conformity. In an image like this, the focus turns away from the group and onto the individual.

Repetition

Repetition is a specific type of pattern that relies on multiple iterations of the same subject(s). What gets repeated can be anything — colors, shapes, people, etc. The presentation can be either uniform and orderly, or random and chaotic.

But what repetition ensures is a focus on the subject. Rather than use any of the other techniques we've already covered to draw attention to the subject, repetition forces us to acknowledge the focal point and/or message of the image. From the visual puzzles of M.C. Escher...



M.C. Escher • Repetition

...to the modern pop art of Andy Warhol.



Andy Warhol • *Campbell's Soup Cans*

These are rather extreme examples of repetition but the technique still applies with far fewer iterations. In these examples, the repeated imagery covers the entire image. In the next chapter, we'll dive deeper into the various ways to distribute the space of the image.

CHAPTER 8

Space

Every work of art, whether it is a painting, photograph, film or sculpture works with space. For the 2D arts, space is typically a consideration of the height and width of the image plane. We'll cover depth as a third dimension in the next chapter.

This element is a consideration of how you use the “real estate” available — do you crowd the image with your subject(s) or do you leave empty room around them? An artist is tasked with portioning this space out with either positive space or negative space.

For example, in this image, the positive space is our subject...



Positive Space • Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

...and the negative space is the desert surrounding her.



Negative Space • Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

Positive space and negative space are two sides of the same coin. One does not have as much impact without the other one existing. Let's take a look at these concepts to better understand how they work together.

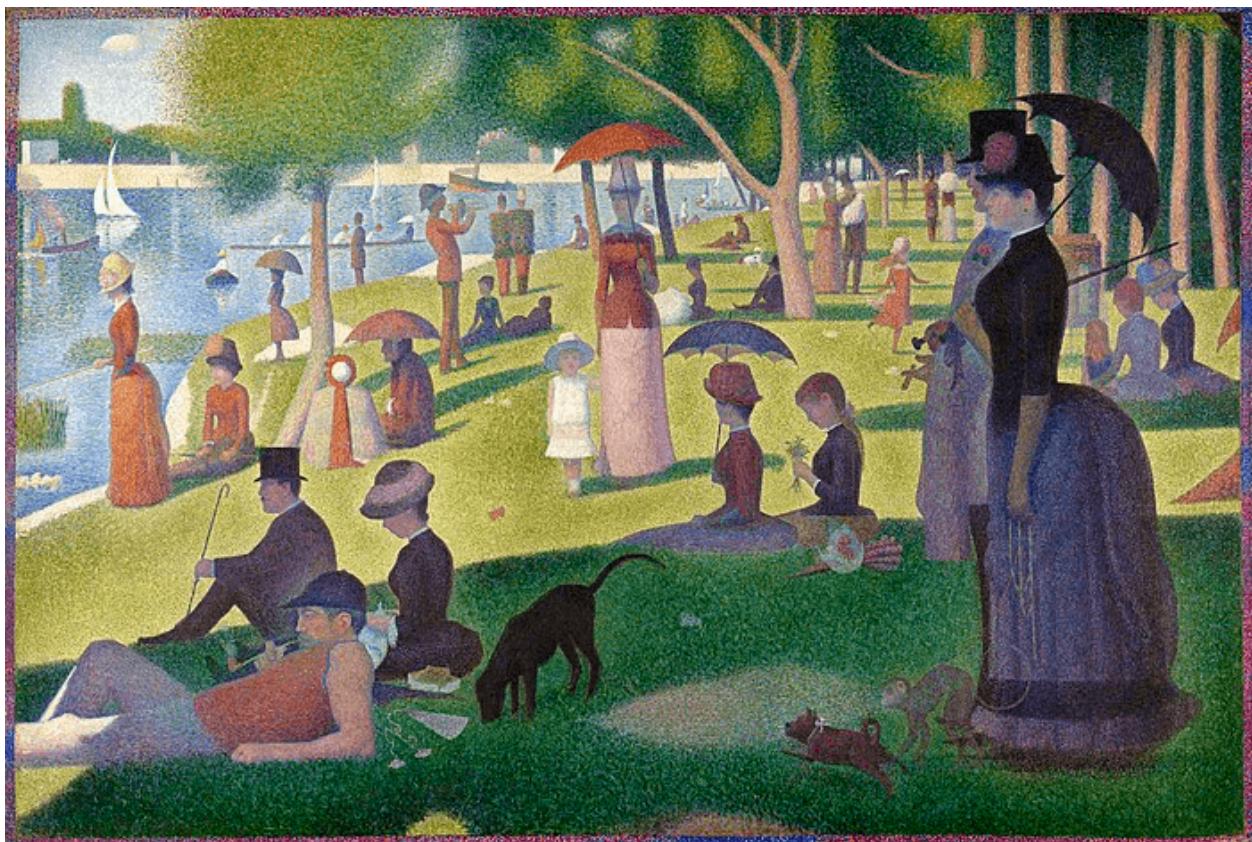
Positive space

Positive space is a term used to refer to the areas of interest and focus in a piece of artwork. This is often the subject of a work of art such as a person, landscape, or object. Even in abstract art where there may not be a definitive subject, shapes and patterns can become positive space.

Creating positive space might sound simple. After all, most of the positive space in a piece of artwork is simply the subject. Consider this iconic painting by French post-Impressionist artist Georges Seurat.

The painting, appropriately titled *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* creates positive space in a unique way.

The painting does not have a singular point of positive space, but various subjects and areas of positive space that paint the scene of a busy park.



"A Sunday Afternoon..." by Georges Seurat

Your eye might initially be the couple to the right of the frame in shadow. But you soon find that your eyes wander from person to person as if you are people watching at a park during a leisurely

Sunday. This is the function of creating positive space in an image. It creates points of engagement for the viewer.

As you can see, positive space is a powerful tool that can be created in various ways. The distinction of positive space as simply the subject of a work or art can be misleading. Rather, use positive space as points of interest that engage the viewer whether it is a subject or something else.

Negative Space

Negative space is a term used in art to describe the space surrounding a subject. Also called white space, it is typically empty and lacks details as to simplify an image.

Negative space can be used for psychological effect making it a great storytelling device. When using negative space, many photographers and cinematographers frame the subject from further away. This makes them smaller in the frame and creates space around them.

Notice how in *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth, the empty space around the subject becomes just as meaningful in the composition as the subject herself.



Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth

Small areas of positive space, commonly a person or subject, can be encompassed by negative space to reflect the internal state of the subject. This emotional state is often loneliness or isolation that is portrayed through the emptiness around them.

Look at this shot from PT Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* and look how the negative space surrounds and dominates our subject. The fact that all of this negative space is placed *behind* him only helps diminish him further.



Punch-Drunk Love (2002)

Allocating a majority of your frame for negative space can also be an effective way to capture scale.

The positioning of positive and negative space affects the weight of a work of art. How weight is distributed not only affects how a work of art *looks*, but also how it *feels* for a viewer.

Fill the frame

[Filling the frame](#) is the technique of composing an image so that positive space takes up most or all of the frame. This technique is often used to draw immediate and direct attention toward a subject.

In this technique, a single subject is framed close up so that it literally fills the frame. Filling the frame can be accomplished by getting closer to a subject, using [zoom lenses](#), [macro lenses](#), or cropping an image during editing.

In cinema, filling the frame with positive space is most commonly achieved with the [extreme close up shot](#). Learn more about this shot and more in our [breakdown of every type of camera shot](#).

When filling the frame, the positive space takes up most or all of the frame. This leaves no negative space for the viewer's eyes to wander.



Photo by Michael Davis

This use of positive space will immediately demand the viewer's focus. When a subject is a person, filling the frame with their face can create a deeper emotional connection between audience and subject.

Simplicity

Simplicity is the philosophy and practice of creating only what is necessary within a work of art. By discarding what is unnecessary, the artist strives for simplicity.

Simplicity should not be mistaken for simplistic, which refers to the use of rudimentary techniques or subjects. Simple paintings, photographs, or films can still carry complex meaning.

In regards to space, this concept of simplicity actually works towards both positive and negative space. Filling the frame eliminates all other subjects, which is the definition of simplicity.

Similarly, when a single subject is surrounded by negative space, we can also discuss the composition in terms of simplicity. By showing the empty space around the subject, we still think in terms of simplicity, but a context and meaning is added.

Simplicity in cinematography allows sophisticated themes, narratives, or characters to be more digestible to an audience leaving them more immersed and engaged in the film.



American Beauty (1999) • Simplicity

This concept of space is usually discussed in terms of two dimensions — height and width — but in the next chapter, we'll explain how to bring a third dimension into your compositions.

CHAPTER 9

Depth

Despite being a 2D medium, most art, photography, and film depicts 3D space. The way this is achieved is through depth — the illusion of space created along the z-axis.

Aiding in this process is the use of the foreground, middle ground, and background. This layering of subjects and elements in an image can do wonders at creating this illusion.

Another technique is to use a vanishing point. The simplest explanation is to make things smaller the “further” away you get.

And going back to our earlier chapter on *Lines*, leading lines are indispensable in selling the illusion.



Vanishing Point by Paul (Dex)

Now, let's go into a couple more techniques that help create the illusion of depth in a little more detail.

Foreground elements

Foreground elements are visual elements that are positioned between the camera and the subject. They are used in painting, photography, and cinematography to add depth, provide context, or create unique compositions.

The middle ground is often (but not always) where the subject is positioned. The background is what falls behind the subject. And the foreground is between the camera and the subject.

Creating depth in two-dimensional mediums can be challenging. Adding a simple foreground element is perhaps the easiest and most immediate way to add depth to an image.

Foreground elements give the viewer a better perception of space within the image. This painting titled *Paris Street; Rainy Day* by Gustave Caillebotte shows how a simple foreground element can add depth to an image.



Paris Street; Rainy Day by Gustave Caillebotte

Our eyes are drawn to the couple under the umbrella. Their placement within the Rule of Thirds makes them a natural subject. Caillebotte utilizes the left portion of the frame to fill out the background creating depth and providing the context of a rainy day in Paris.

Deep space composition

In many images, the foreground and background are there simply for [context](#) around the subject in the middle ground. But not all images need to be so exclusive. With deep space composition, all three planes are represented, in focus, and included in the “story.”

[Citizen Kane](#)'s famous [deep focus shots](#) are still some of the best. In this scene, director Orson Welles positions the characters at different depths, while all four stay in focus.



Citizen Kane (1941) • Deep Space Composition

The different depths are indicative of what is going on with each character. The little boy appears far away, but in frame, to remind us that he is going to be out of the picture soon, once they send him away.

So far, we've covered many elements and considerations when compositing an image. But finding the perfect balance between

them all is a challenge unto itself. Let's learn more about balance in the next chapter.