

# " Composition 101 "

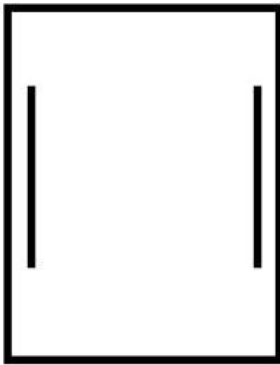
There are many ways to compose a picture, but we have to start somewhere and there are some underlying basics. A great artist can break the rules and invent new ones (we'll get into that later in this lesson).

## TENSION:

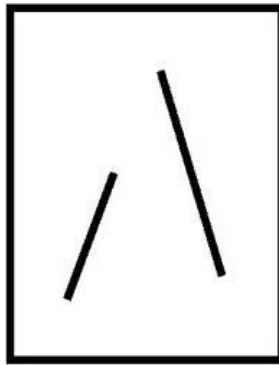
First, place a couple of lines on a page (a piece of paper, a canvas, whatever)

### BASIC ELEMENTS - 2 LINES AND A RECTANGLE:

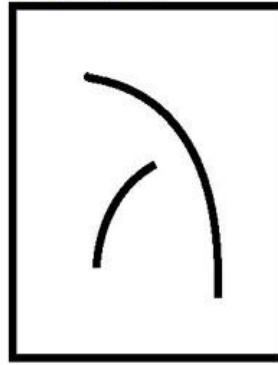
1. Two even lines, equal distance from picture sides and top



2. Varied line length, varied distance from picture sides and top, varied angles



3. Varied line length, varied distance from picture sides and top, varied angles AND lines are curved



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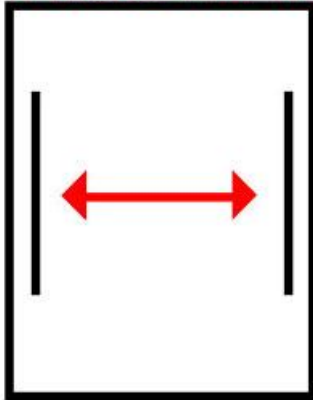
A basic concept in composition:

## "Beauty is organized variety."

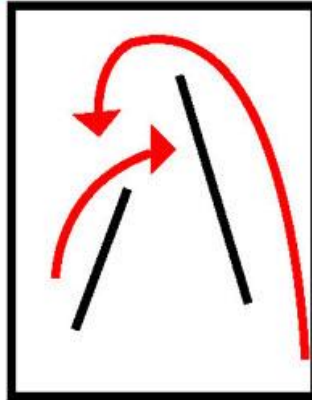
The two straight lines are boring . they are the same size and placed similarly near their respective right and left edges of the picture. In the second diagram above, the two lines are different heights, placed in different angles and relationships to the left and right edges of the picture . . . they are varied and therefore more interesting to the viewer's eye - we are beginning to create an interesting, organized variety. Notice also the shapes of the spaces between and around the lines (these are called "negative shapes" . . . see how they are too varied in size and shape.

-----Now, let's analyze how these lines lead the viewer's eye from one line to the other (the "TENSION" between these picture elements. . . later, these can be people, trees, fruit, flowers, whatever)

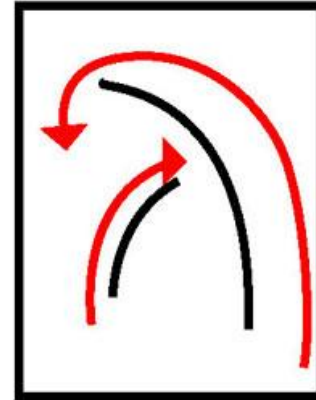
### TENSION ANALYSIS:



3. Tension - simple and boring - viewer's eye can bounce from line to line, and gets bored and leaves



2. Curved tension- large line dominates smaller one and WINS! . . . (a fight?)



3. Large curve encloses smaller curve . . . (mother and child?)

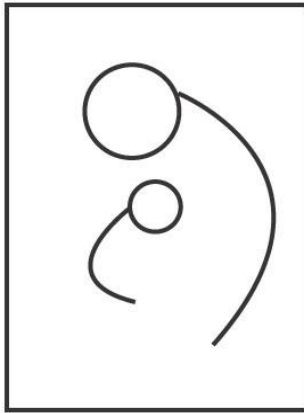
## Another BASIC CONCEPT OF COMPOSITION:

A teacher once responded to my question about "what was beauty" by answering"

Beauty is truth, truth beauty" - he neglected to tell me it wasn't his thought and left off part of the quote which is:

**“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.**

The quote is from ["Ode to a Grecian Urn" by Thomas Keats](#) (by the way, it wasn't Keats saying it, it was the words on the Urn itself.



Let's look at an obvious and simple organization and underlying structure you've seen used many times - a mother and child.

Too simple? Not at all the structure of this picture is strong and expresses the theme - the mother shape over the child huddling and protecting it, the child small and nestled under the mother's protective pose.



Look how it is applied in variations by great painters:



**Mother and Child 1895**  
[Denis, Maurice](#)

**Mother and Child**  
[Picasso, Pablo](#)

**Mother and Child**  
[Bouguereau, A-W](#)



Now, let's examine the composition more closely of one of the mother and child compositions above.  
(Repeated and made larger here)

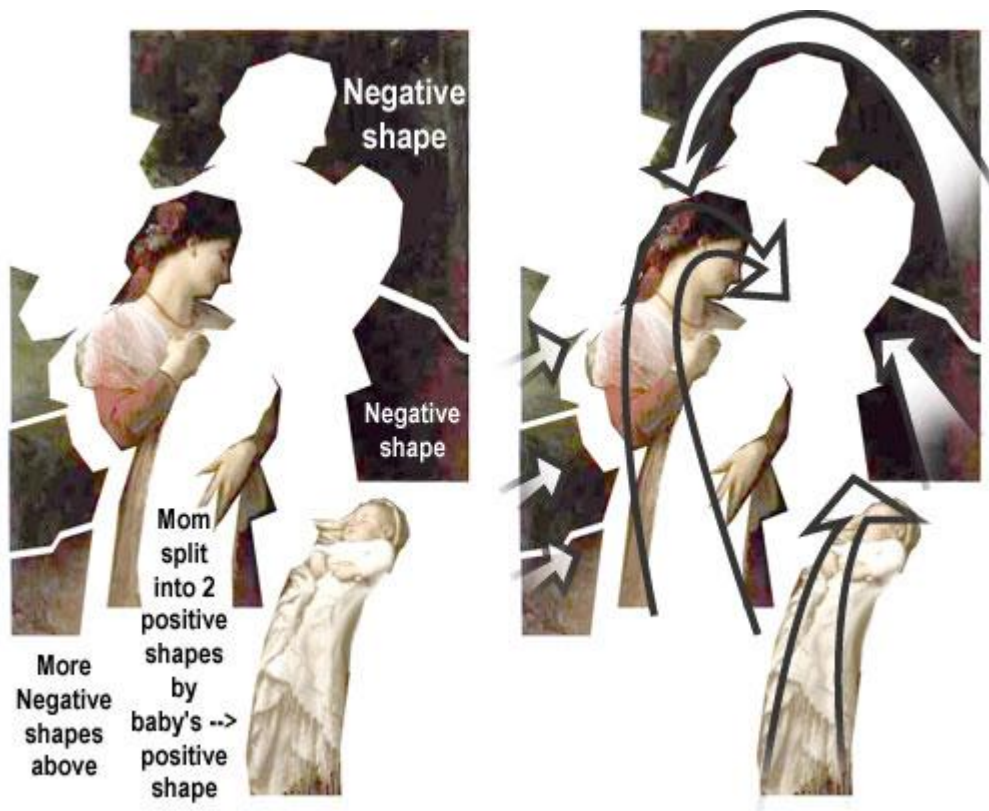
Below, we will tear the elements and shapes of this artwork to see how the composition is structured and how the artist used composition to bring the viewer's eye into and around the image in an interesting way.

Let's look at the shapes - the negative and positive shapes of the composition.

**Definitions:**

**Positive shape:** the shape of people, objects, things that are in a picture.

**Negative shape:** the shape of SPACES between people, objects, things that are in a picture.



In the "exploded" views, we have split up the Bouguereau into its basic negative and positive shapes and labeled them as negative and positive.

Now two other great basic principles of composition:

**Principle 1.** The shapes that make up a picture (negative and positive) should be varied and interesting. Why? One definition of beauty above is that "beauty is organized variety". If all shapes in a picture, or many of them were the same, the eye is bored and the viewer leaves the picture never to return. We want to keep the viewer looking at our

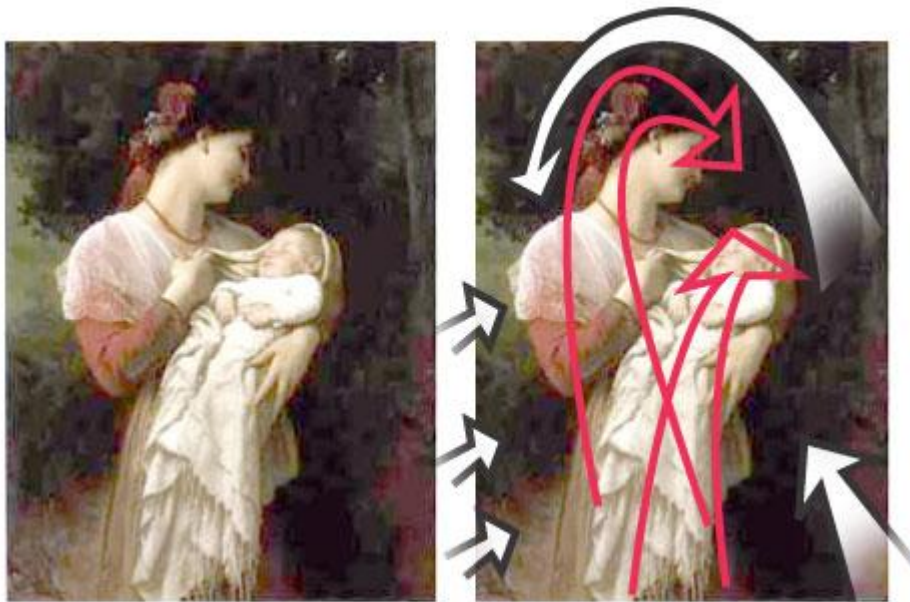
picture and make them look around the picture in a pleasant way. By varying the shapes, we achieve variety.

Now how do we "organize" the picture and keep the viewer moving about it to where we want them to look?

**Principle 2:** The shapes of the picture should be used to lead the viewer around the picture in an organized way and keep their eye moving **IN** the picture - not to the next one in the room or out the window.

On the right above, we analyze how Bougureau used the **THRUST** of the shapes his negative and positive areas to create **PATHS** for the viewer's eye to travel **INTO** and around the picture and to the dynamic tension between the mother and child. Also notice how their shapes, based on the basic mother and child composition contributes to the dynamics of the composition.

Below the original picture is alongside the analysis of the shapes and their dynamics.



[Images of paintings above courtesy of:](#)

**ART** CYCLOPEDIA