**An Art Renaissance: Reviving the Lost Principle of Balance**

**By Paul Fremes — June 29, 2025**

In the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary art, a remarkable renaissance is underway — one that seeks to restore an ancient, nearly lost principle: **the art of visual balance**. This concept, rooted in centuries of artistic tradition, promises to reshape how we create and experience art.

**What Is Visual Balance?**

Visual balance doesn't only mean symmetry (a mirroring of an image's two sides). In fact, some of the most dynamic works in art history rely on **asymmetrical balance**, where unequal elements on either side of an image create a sense of dynamic harmony.

This phenomenon is supported by the **brightness/weight illusion** — the psychological principle that **dark objects can appear heavier than bright ones**. As a result, a small, dark shape on one side of an image can visually counterbalance a larger, brighter area on the other.

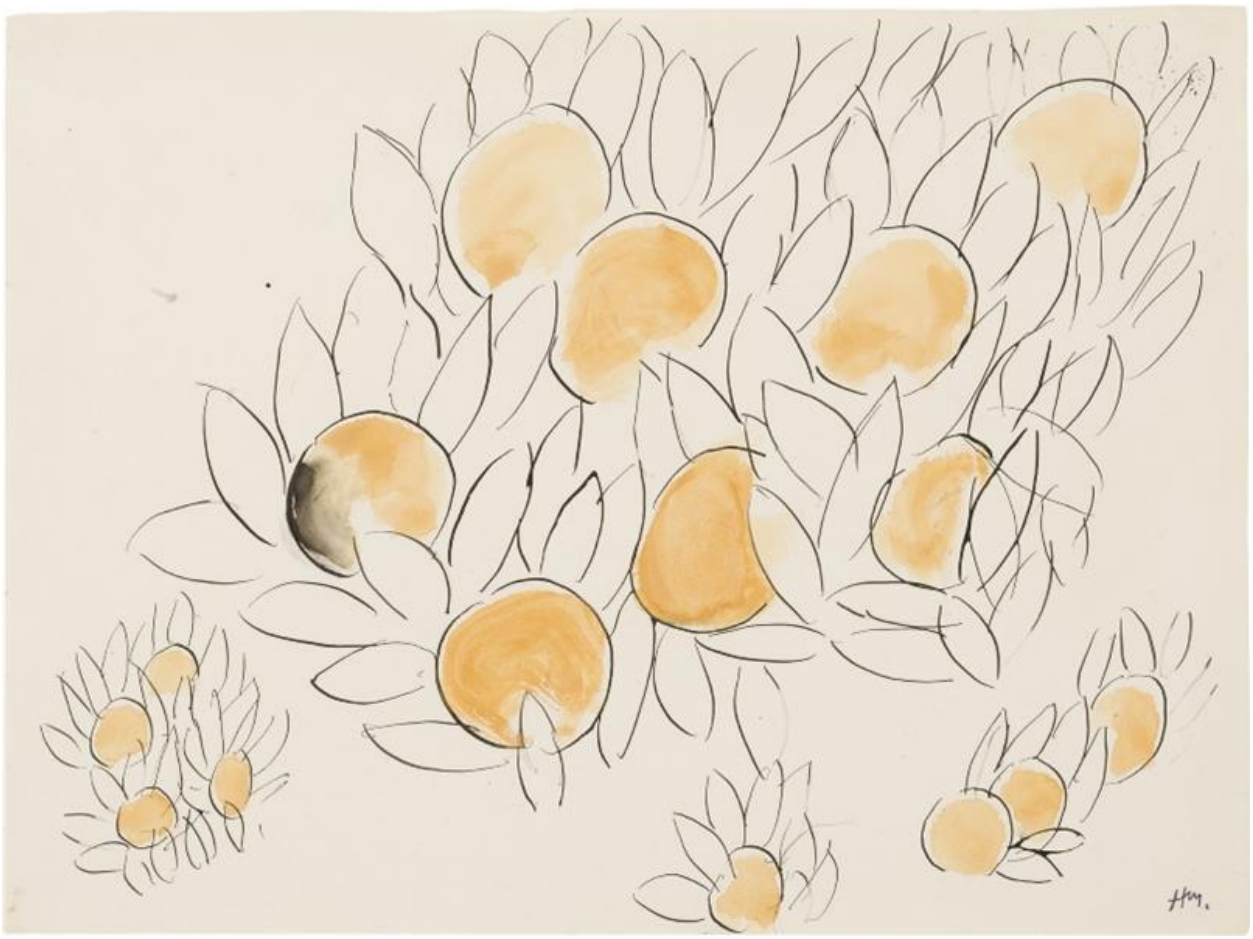
This idea can be distilled into a simple but powerful formula:

**Small, dark = large, bright**

This phrase, which I coined, encapsulates a timeless visual truth that many artists from the 1500s to the mid-20th century understood and employed intuitively.

**A Hidden Thread Through Art History**

Take, for example, **Henri Matisse's *Orangier* (1945)** (below). A small, dark brushstroke on the left helps the 3½ large flowers on the left to equal or balance the 4½ large flowers on the right. It's a visual equivalent of punctuation — quiet but essential.



*Henri Matisse, Orangier, 1945*

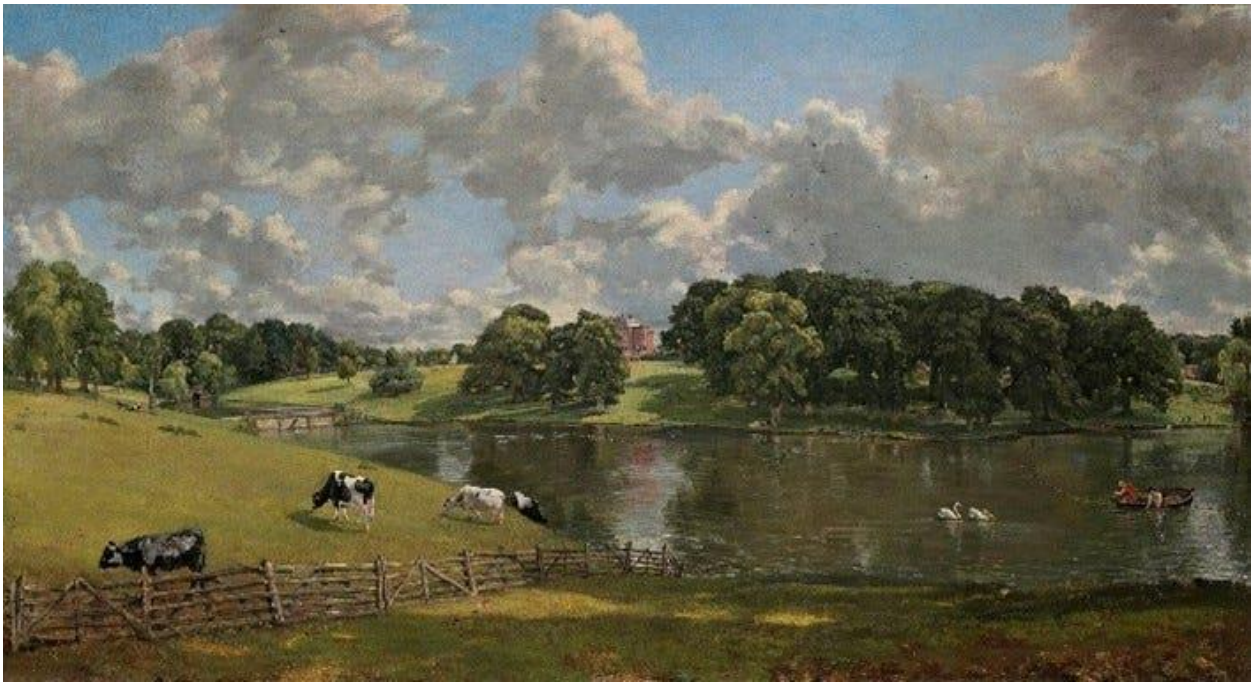
But this strategy dates back even further. In **Matthijs Bril's *Mountainous River Landscape* (1583)** (below), a dark cliff on the left balances a luminous mountain to the right. The cliff on the left is smaller and darker — yet visually equal in weight (due to the brightness/weight illusion) to the larger, brighter mountain on the right.

*Matthijs Bril, Mountainous River Landscape with a Hermit and Chapel, 1583*

Bril's mastery influenced Claude Lorrain, whose *Seaport at Sunset* (1639) (below) appears to follow this tradition. A small, dark ship on the right balances the larger, bright architecture on the opposite side.

*Claude Lorrain, Seaport at Sunset, 1639*

The lineage continues through **John Constable** (who influenced **Claude Monet**). In *Wivenhoe Park* by John Constable (1816) (below), a stand of dark trees on the right balances a luminous sky and field on the left.



*John Constable, Wivenhoe Park, 1816*

And, **Claude Monet's *La Plage de Trouville* (1870)** (below) shows a small, dark figure on the right balancing a bright figure, umbrella, building, and brighter sky on the left.

*Claude Monet, La Plage de Trouville, 1870*

**Why Did We Lose This?**

The mid-20th century saw a dramatic shift. Following the upheaval of World War II, many artists — profoundly affected by the violence and trauma of war — rejected traditional artistic values, which artists *mistakenly* perceived as aligned with the establishment responsible for the war.

Some post-war art movements prioritized innovation over tradition, leading to a gradual erasure of foundational ideas like balance from the collective artistic consciousness.

**Reawakening Balance**

In the photograph, *Tecumseh Park* (2024) (below), I demonstrate this methodology. The structure of the image invites viewers to engage more intellectually. A small, dark object on the right mathematically balances the broad expanse of brightness on the left — transforming what would otherwise be a mechanical recording of a tree into an enduring narrative design.

*Paul Fremes, Tecumseh Park, 2024*

Viewers can feel that something is working — because it is. When an artist uses their entire being, emotional and intellectual, they can create on a higher level.

**Why It Matters**

This isn't just about historical technique — it's about **perception**. When we understand balance as a functional relationship between **size** and **brightness**, we can read images with more pleasure and understanding and, create with greater efficacy.

Although this is only an introduction — and image balance is not the sole criterion for judging art — this awareness enhances our appreciation for existing work and empowers us as creators.

**The Takeaway**

We stand at the threshold of a new way to see and create. Recognizing that *small, dark = large, bright* gives us a tool to unlock the hidden structure of visual design — from classical painting and architecture to sculpture, cinema, and contemporary photography.

This is an opportunity to bring balance back — an idea abandoned for understandable but ultimately mistaken reasons.

**📽 Watch a Visual Demonstration**

*Watch a visual demonstration of these principles in the accompanying video:*
📎 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcYlmx9ybJ8

**About the Author**

**Paul Fremes** is a photographer and educator who coined the phrase *"Small, dark = large, bright"* to articulate a principle he created known as a combination of asymmetrical visual balance and the brightness/weight illusion. This synthesis forms part of an original pedagogical framework designed to clarify structural visual composition across fine art, photography, architecture, sculpture, and cinema.