

Notes on Composition

Introduction

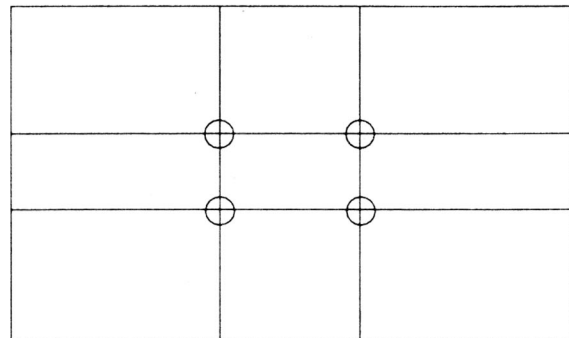
Composition is an important cog in the making of an image, and a subtle tool of communication. It can transform and strengthen an image when used with consideration and forethought. On an aesthetic level, even a basic awareness of composition can be an advantage.

Simple compositional rules

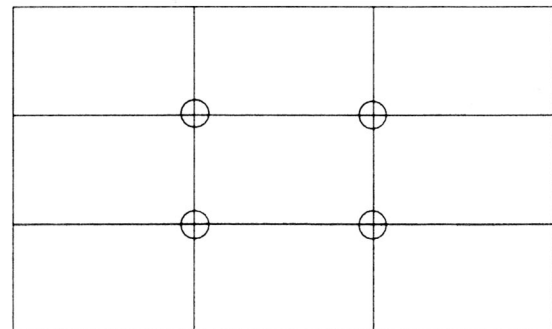
Placing a focal point in the centre of a picture can create a symmetrical appearance. The centre point is the point of greatest attention, and when the eye is drawn here it tends to remain static.

Moving your focal point off centre creates an asymmetrical composition. Of course, a focal point can exist anywhere within a composition. The nearer a focal point is to the edge or corner of an image, the more tension is created. Expressions such as 'living on the edge', and 'feeling cornered', illustrate this.

The **Golden Section** or **Golden Rule** is a Greek rule of thumb created by a pythagorean mathematician. Four focal points are created by dividing the canvas up as seen to the right. There is a mathematical formula to create the precise proportions, but creating them by eye is much easier. This formula was favoured by renaissance painters.

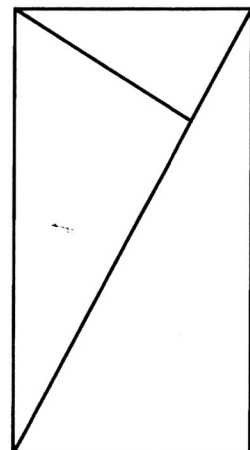


The **Rule of Thirds** is similar to the Golden Section and can be calculated much more easily. Dividing your canvas up roughly into thirds both vertically and horizontally will create four focal points. Placing an object that carries visual importance upon or near one of these points can help create a balanced composition.



Another rule is the **Golden Triangle**. It's a really useful rule for artwork with diagonal lines. Firstly split the artwork area diagonally with a line. Then from the corner opposite the drawn line, create another line that meets the diagonal at 90 degrees.

Approximately placing focal lines, objects or shapes near these lines will observe the golden triangle rule.



Understanding how composition communicates

Simple shapes and lines can influence how we interpret an illustration. Subconsciously we analyse images which in turn presents us with an overall impression.

Horizontal formats, shapes and lines can suggest calm, stillness and stability. A composition that is predominantly made up of horizontal lines will give off relaxing and stationary undertones.

Vertical shapes and lines are much more vigorous. They oppose the flat of a horizon and reach upwards. Vertical shapes and lines can enforce a feel of strength and energy.

Diagonal shapes and lines can imply movement and even suspense. A sense of tension is created by the fact that objects placed diagonally are subject to gravity, and therefore susceptible to movement. Diagonals within a picture can also lead our eyes to a focal point.

There is a tendency to 'read' diagonals from left to right and upwards, unless re-directed by an object facing backwards or downward in a composition. A sense of reminiscence can occur when objects in a picture direct us to look backwards or left in a composition!

Reading pictures

Simple shapes can also influence our subconscious impression of an image. Curves and bends give off sensations of comfort and protection. Since the womb is symbolised by an oval, illustrations with curves and ovals are far more comforting than ones with sharp edges and points.

Conversely, jagged edges, sharp points and so on naturally give off feelings of uneasiness and danger.

Close up focal points in compositions can create an intimacy within an image, depending upon the sensitivity of the artwork. Equally, a sense of intimidation, immediacy and involvement can also be achieved, depending upon the subject. The larger the object is the stronger and important it feels.

Distant compositions or compositions where the subject is further away evokes a sense of distance and even detachment. When a subject is far away it is no longer part of our world.

The smaller an object, the less important or weaker it will look.

Placing a focal point in white or surrounding an object with space can demand its attention, and also create a sense of isolation.

Overlapping objects

Overlapping elements in a composition can create more of a sense of depth and perspective. There can be a tendency not to overlap or partly cover objects in a composition, but keeping objects separate can fragment a composition, rather than bring it together. Of course, this observation can be used to an advantage.

Framing a Composition Inside an Composition

Framing a focal point within a composition is a useful device to create more visual weight. For example, by using lines, shapes, colour or tone to highlight an area within a composition such as a lit doorway can be a dynamic tool to lead the eye.