

COMPOSITION

By Stuart Grais

Composition is one of the most challenging yet powerful and exciting aspects of 2-D design. It is the technical foundation of your image. Without it, images visually fall apart.

INTRODUCTION

Photo composition is the foundation upon which we build our images by the correct selection, arranging, organizing and combining the visual elements within the picture area to produce a harmonious and pleasing work.

Work out your composition early, moving yourself or elements around until the arrangement is pleasing to you. Making major changes and adjustments later in the design process is much more difficult.

Bull's Eye Composition

When you place the Main Subject right 'smack' in the center of the picture area, it is called a Bull's Eye. This should be avoided at all times, unless you have a definite reason for doing it.

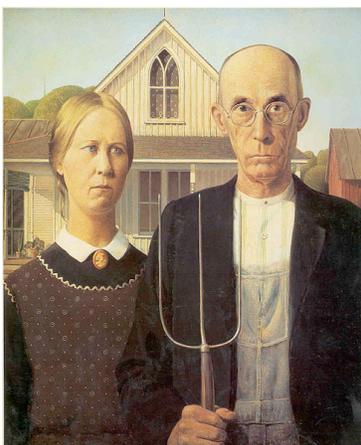
With the main subject in the center of the picture frame the eye will go in to the picture and stay in the center of the frame looking at the Bull's Eye/Main Subject and will not move around in the picture to see and enjoy any other items. The eye will get tired very fast and lose interest in the photograph.

Your purpose in making images is to have people look at them, enjoy them, talk about them and buy them. If they cannot get interested in a image they will not bother to look at it and will definitely not buy it. It is best to always have the Main Subject OFF-CENTER. Even if it is just a little off-center it will improve the picture's composition.

PROPORTION

Proportion refers the size relationship of visual elements to each other and to the whole picture. One of the reasons proportion is often considered important in composition is that viewers respond to it emotionally.

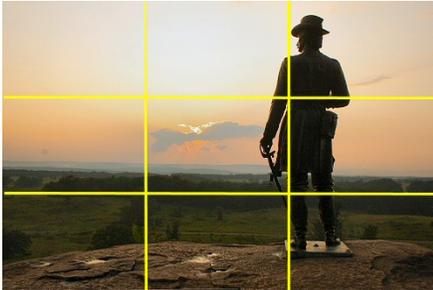
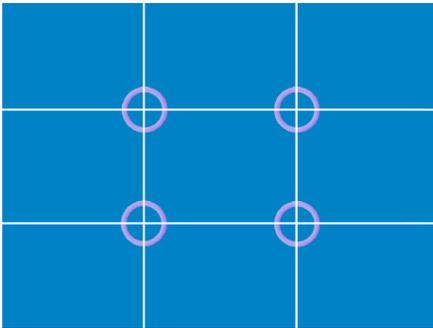
Proportion in art has been examined for hundreds of years, long before photography was invented. One proportion that is often cited as occurring frequently in design is the Golden Mean or Golden Ratio.



RULE OF THIRDS

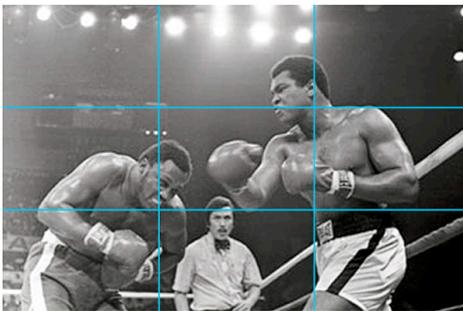
Imagine you're shooting a landscape and there's an isolated farmhouse in the distance or a single tree in the middle of a field, acting as the main focal point. Most photographers would stick this subject in the centre of the frame – which can work in some situations. However, you will generally get a more pleasing sense of balance if you position it using the rule-of-thirds.

To do this, divide-up your camera's viewfinder into an imaginary grid using two horizontal and two vertical lines. The focal point is then placed on or near any of the four intersection points created by those lines.



The rule of thirds can also be used to help you position the horizon. It's tempting to stick it across the center of the frame, but unless you're shooting a symmetrical scene, such as reflections in a lake, the result tends to look very static and lifeless.

A much better approach is to place the horizon one third from the top or the bottom of the frame, so you're emphasizing either the sky or ground. To help you achieve this, divide the viewfinder into thirds using two imaginary horizontal lines, then compose the scene before you so the horizon falls on one of them.



You should never force a picture to comply with the rule-of-thirds, but when used with care it can work well and after a while you will find yourself naturally dividing the scene into thirds to aid the position of important elements.





MAKE THE MOST OF LINES

Lines just can't be beaten when it comes to adding depth and dynamism to a picture. As well as creating a strong sense of direction, they also carry the eye through the scene so it takes in everything along the way.

Horizontal lines divide the scene in layers and produce a restful effect by echoing the horizon. The eye normally travels from left to right, and steadily upwards through the scene.

Vertical lines are far more active so they give a picture tension and a strong sense of vertical direction— think of the towering trunks of coniferous trees reaching for the sky.

GEOMETRY IN COMPOSITION

Geometrical elements are rarely very good as subjects, primary or secondary. Instead, they serve an auxiliary role, helping pull the picture together. They have at least three common and very important uses.

1. The Leading Line

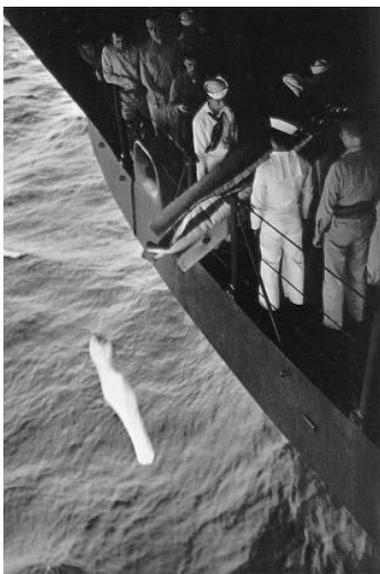
A leading line does what it says: it leads the eye from one part of the picture to another: from the foreground to the background, the secondary subject to the main subject (but very rarely the other way round).

The leading line adds motion to an otherwise static picture and ties different elements in it together.

Diagonals and arcs or other unclosed curves make good leading lines.

2. The Spatial Divider

A spatial divider divides the picture into discrete areas, which work together to make the composition. Not all pictures are based on areas, but sometimes areas can make for a strong composition even in the absence of clear points of interest.



3. The Framing Element



A framing element serves to focus attention on the main subject. It usually covers at least two edges of the picture and can intrude a good way into it, sometimes taking up most of the space in it. For this to work, the framing element has to have some interesting characteristics of its own: color, texture, or shape.

Bold, geometric shapes can work very well as framing elements: triangles or arcs work especially well. Usually, framing elements should be lower-key and more muted than the main subject: they are not meant to distract, but to focus, even when the actual point of the picture is the framing element, such as with some of the Phony Subject examples.

GEOMETRICAL ELEMENTS

Geometrical elements are simple, recognizable forms, such as squares, circles, triangles, lines, and curves. Compositionally some geometrical forms have more possibilities than others: squares and circles, for example, are more static and therefore less interesting than triangles or open curves. Some geometrical shapes have especially great compositional potential:

- Diagonals
- Triangles
- Arcs
- S-curves

The Diagonal

Perhaps the most striking compositional device, the diagonal principle, was first employed by the Japanese print masters, Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige. European artists were dumbfounded by the unconventional kind of depth created by the natural direction of eyes into the distance.



In *Sudden Rain in Shono* (1893) by Ando Hiroshige, in addition to the diagonal line from bottom right to top left, he elaborates the picture by depicting the rain counter-diagonally, turning the treetops to the left, thereby adding a dramatic effect.



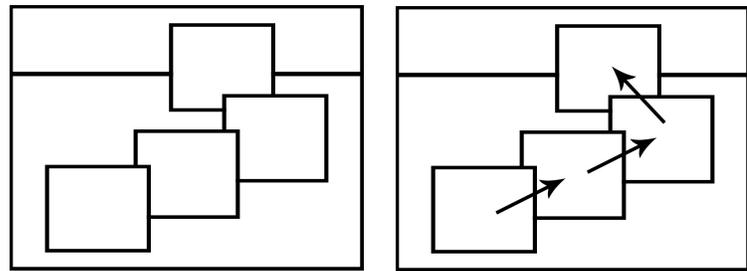
The most similar Western counterpart would be *Funeral under Umbrellas* (1895) by Henri Riviere, in which he enhances the sense of depth by synthesizing the diagonal principle and the Western perspective expressed in a taller frame.

Not only did he incorporate the diagonal composition, he also borrowed the theme, which had not been considered authentic until that time.

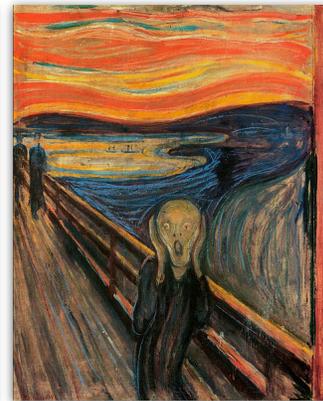
Since the diagonal device furnishes a dramatic touch to the picture, it is most effective when employed in such themes as unusual natural phenomena as in the examples shown.



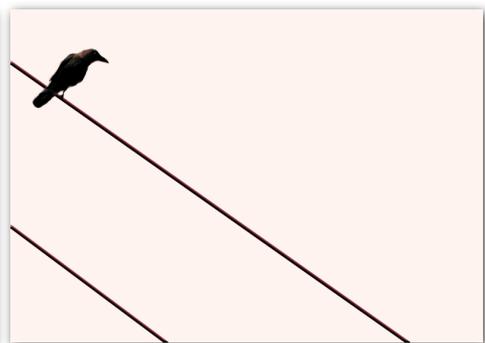
A picture with a diagonal element is almost always more dynamic and stronger than the same picture without it. While verticals and horizontals usually divide the space into areas, diagonals connect. Indeed, one of the most common and effective uses for the diagonal is the leading line— something that connects a main subject to a secondary subject, causing the eye to move inside the frame. In this role, diagonals can be strong components of perspective and depth, giving a picture three-dimensionality.



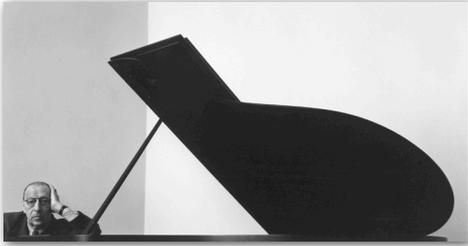
Here are pictures composed around diagonals used as leading lines and to create three-dimensionality:



Here are pictures composed around a diagonal used as a leading line and a space-divider, but not primarily an indicator of perspective:



The Triangle



A triangle is a closed curve that incorporates at least one diagonal. Being closed, it won't lead the eye out of the frame.

However, an equilateral triangle is a lot more static than a diagonal. By itself, and especially in the middle of the frame, it can lead to a static and boring composition.

Actual triangles are somewhat rare to come by, however. Instead of looking for them, a triangle can be used more abstractly: to position your main and secondary subjects in the frame, or by using three subsidiary points of interest form a "frame" for your main subject.

Triangular areas can make for unusual pictures, like these ones, for example:



I had a lot of trouble figuring out what to leave in this picture and what to drop out of it, until I settled on this composition:





The Arc

The arc can be a wonderful compositional element. Unclosed, it can serve as a leading line, pulling the eye towards the main subject, a spatial divider, or a framing element, focusing the attention on the main subject. Especially if it's asymmetric, it can force a dynamic and interesting composition.

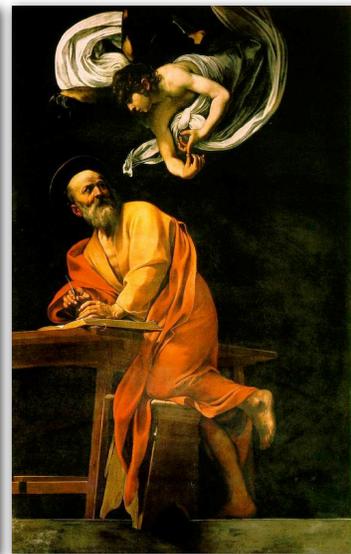
If you see an arc, study the scene carefully and find elements to balance out the (usually) asymmetric composition created by the arc, and try to find a way to make best use of the arc— don't just include it, concentrate on it and its purpose in the composition: is it a leading line, a connector, a spatial divider, or a framing element?



The S-curve

The S-curve is, well, a curve shaped like an “S”. It is compositional gold. If you see one, you *know* that there's a good picture to be had.

The S-curve is just about the only geometrical shape that can stand alone as a main subject, but it can also be used as a leading line, framing element, or just about anything else.



THE KEY

The idea is to become familiar with the principles above as a guide in training your eyes to naturally create interesting and powerful compositions. In so doing, work to simplify, reducing all elements in the painting to only the information you need to express your subject or idea.



In time, the very deliberate process of developing a composition will give way to a more natural, intuitive, interesting, and automatic activity, resulting in more original arrangements. You will also be better able to control your visual statement by expressing what you wish.