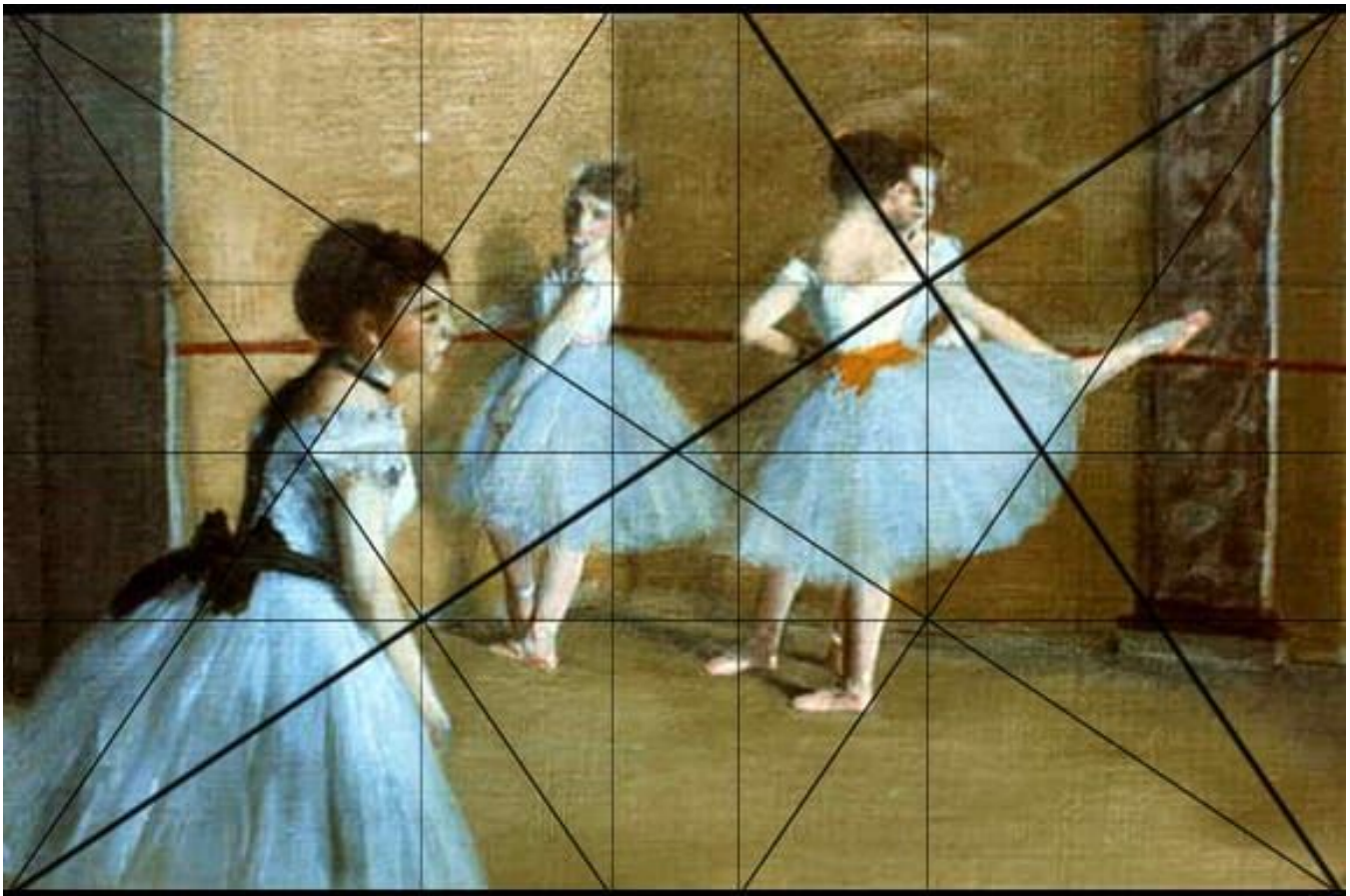


Elements of Art: The importance of Composition

Composition is the term used to describe the arrangement of the visual elements in a painting or other artwork. It is how the elements of art and design—line, shape, color, value, texture, form, and space—are organized or composed according to the principles of art and design—balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, unity/variety—and other elements of composition, to give the painting structure and convey the intent of the artist.

Composition is different from the subject matter of a painting. Every painting, whether abstract or representational, regardless of subject matter, has a composition. Good composition is essential to the success of a painting. Done successfully, good composition draws the viewer in and then moves the viewer's eye across the whole painting so that everything is taken in, finally settling on the main subject of the painting.

Art is not just about being able to accurately render a scene. It is the visual form of music and you are the composer. A well composed painting will intrigue and invite the viewer and help communicate the artist's statement.



Edgar Degas, Dance Class at the Opera 1872 (detail)

Elements of Composition

The elements of composition are used to arrange and organize the visual components in a way that is pleasing to the artist and, one hopes, the viewer. They help give structure to the overall layout and the way the subject matter is presented. These elements can also encourage or lead the viewer's gaze to wander around the whole painting, taking in everything on the two dimensional plane and ultimately coming back to rest on the focal point.

In Western art the elements of composition are generally considered to be:

Unity: Do all the parts of the composition feel as if they belong together, or does something feel stuck on, awkwardly out of place?

Balance: Balance is the sense that the painting "feels right" and not heavier on one side. Having a symmetrical arrangement adds a sense of calm, whereas an asymmetrical arrangement creates a more dynamic feeling. A painting that is not balanced creates a sense of unease.

Movement: There are many ways to give a sense of movement in a painting, such as the arrangement of objects, the position of figures, the flow of a river. You can use leading lines (a photography term applicable to painting) to direct the viewer's eye into and around the painting. Leading lines can be actual lines, such as the lines of a fence or railroad, or they can be implied lines, such as a row of trees or curves of stones or circles.

Rhythm: In much the same way music does, a piece of art can have a rhythm or underlying beat that leads your eye to view the artwork at a certain pace. Look for the large underlying shapes (squares, triangles, etc.) and repeated color.

Focus (or Emphasis): The viewer's eye ultimately wants to rest on the "most important" thing or focal point in the painting, otherwise the eye feels lost, wandering around in space.

Contrast: Paintings with high contrast—strong differences between light and dark, for example—have a different feel than paintings with minimal contrast in light and dark, such as in Whistler *Nocturne* series. In addition to light and dark, contrast can be differences in shape, color, size, texture, type of line, etc.

Pattern: A regular repetition of lines, shapes, colors, or values in a composition.

Proportion: How things fit together and relate to each other in terms of size and scale; whether big or small, nearby or distant.

General Composition Tips

- There should be a center of interest or focus in the work, to prevent it from becoming a pattern in itself.
- You should try to direct the viewer's eye all around the painting. Try to avoid leading the viewer's eye out of the picture immediately, with subjects facing out of the image.
- Exact bisections of the picture space should be avoided.
- Small, high contrast, elements have as much impact as larger, duller elements.
- The prominent subject should be off-center unless a symmetrical or formal composition is desired.
- The horizon line should not divide the artwork into two equal parts but be positioned to emphasize either the sky or ground; showing more sky if the painting is of clouds, sunrise/set and more ground if a landscape.
- Spaces between the objects should be the same. They should vary in shape and size. That creates a much more interesting image.

THE COMPOSITION HIERARCHY

Here is what makes up a great composition. Remember though, these are just tips and not strict rules which you must follow.

by Dan Scott, www.drawpaintacademy.com

1 FOCAL POINT

What is the point of interest in your composition? Don't leave your viewer wanting and give them something to focus on.

2 SIMPLIFICATION

Too much going on? Simplify it. Compositions with clutter can make it difficult to identify the focal point.

3 RULE OF ODDS

An odd number of elements can be perceived as being more natural than an even number of elements.

4 RULE OF THIRDS

Segment your composition into thirds both ways. A common technique is to place your focal point at one of the intersections. Also, as a general guideline, each of the segments should be different.

5 CREATE MOVEMENT

A stagnant composition may be boring. Create movement in your composition and use it to guide your viewer's eye around the composition.

6 DON'T CUT IN TWO

Avoid bisecting your composition, for example with the horizon.

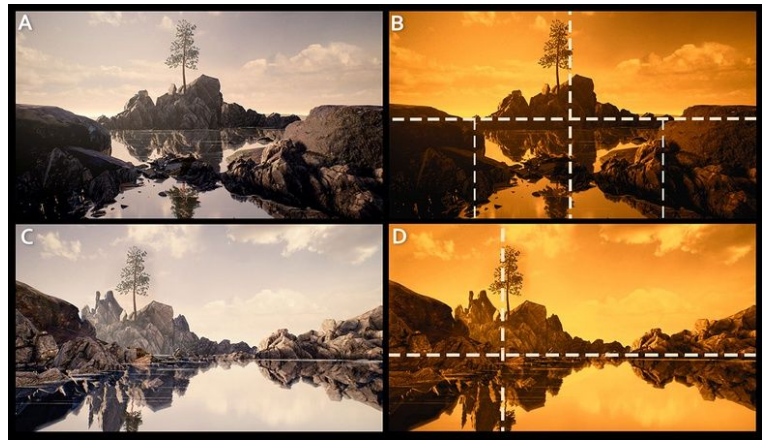
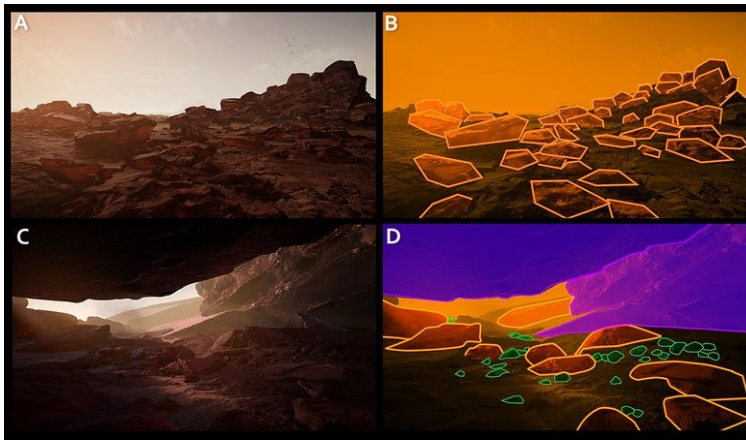
7 PEOPLE LIKE TRIANGLES

Triangular compositions are thought to be more aesthetically pleasing. This is similar to the Rule of Odds.

www.drawpaintacademy.com

For this class you will need:

Several sheets of blank paper and a pencil. Feel free to just listen in and take notes, or work on your own projects while we chat!



Images by Chris McCabe



Painting by Dan Scott



Paul Cezanne, Still Life with an Open Drawer 1867 - 1869

Here are some links for further study about composition:

<https://willkempartschool.com/7-simple-compositional-tweaks-that-make-your-still-life-painting-100-more-professional/>

<https://3dtotal.com/news/general/5-composition-mistakes-to-avoid-by-chris-tulloch-mccabe-artwork-guide-2d>

<https://www.artistsnetwork.com/art-techniques/composition/painting-composition-tips/>

<https://www.samuelearp.com/new-blog/2019/7/16/5-composition-ideas-to-improve-your-landscape-painting>

<https://willkempartschool.com/compositional-mistakes-in-drawing/>