

COMPOSITION & DESIGN

Composition

These are guidelines not necessarily rules. Learn to play with your compositions until you get a look that feels pleasing. It is a skill just like painting and takes practice.

Rule of Thirds

Significant compositional elements (your subject) should generally be placed along imaginary lines that break the image into thirds, both horizontally and vertically. Focal points should be placed at the intersection of these lines for the most compositional impact. The first known reference to the rule of thirds was by John Thomas Smith in 1797, in his "Remarks on Rural Scenery", and it still endures today.

Focal Point

Your subject should be where your eye begins when you look at a painting (or photo) and where your eye always comes back to rest. There should be no competing secondary elements in your painting, and if there are secondary elements you should ensure that one of them is dominant so your eye is not bouncing between two or more elements. To obtain balance between your focal point and secondary elements, you can make your secondary elements smaller, cooler, duller, and/or darker which will make them recede and pop your focal point.

Odd Numbers

If you have multiple objects in your composition, it is best to have three or five (or other odd number). This provides a better sense of balance than even numbers of objects, because even numbers tend to create symmetry and asymmetry (as in the rule of thirds) is more interesting and pleasing to overall composition.

Background

Ensure your background does not distract from your subject by being too warm, too bright, too light (note the TIV), or too busy. Your background is never your focal point.

Less is More

A good painting is not cluttered. In terms of masses or elements, three to seven is a good number. Look at all of your elements individually and decide if they are necessary and add to the composition or are unnecessary and subtract from the composition. Eliminate them if they are the latter, and reassess.

Design Elements and Principles

Elements – The seven things that make up a painting, drawing, design, etc.

Principles – Thing you do with the elements.

NOTE: These elements and principles vary by the reference being used, but definitions are generally the same.

Elements

1. **Line** – Describes the mark between two points or boundaries of shapes.
2. **Shape** – Describes a self-contained area with dimension (often referred to as positive space).
3. **Space** – Describes the area around objects (often referred to as negative space).
4. **Color** – Describes hue of an object.
5. **Value** – Describes the lightness or darkness of an object.
6. **Texture/Pattern** – Describes the surface of an object, and can be tactile or visual.
7. **Size** – Describes the dimensions of an object.

Principles

1. **Balance** – Elements distributed so that the weight of a composition feels/appears evenly distributed (balance can be symmetrical or asymmetrical).
2. **Dominance** – An element that is the most important and therefore becomes a focal point.
3. **Contrast** – Elements that vary, usually a great deal (i.e. large/small, dark/light, smooth/rough)
4. **Rhythm** – Elements that create a sense of cadence through the piece (i.e. vertical lines).
5. **Repetition** – Elements that occur more than once.
6. **Variety** – An element that is the same but may have one or more different attributes (i.e. large purple square/small red square)
7. **Harmony** – Elements that together express similarity and therefore cohesiveness (i.e. pastel colors, round shapes)
8. **Unity** – All the elements working together in your piece (whether harmonious or dissonant).

Look to these elements and principles if you find your painting appears to lack something or if something does not look quite right.