Designing Pictorial Composition

Step 1 - Choose a composition “Type” to explore for your subject matter. These Types can be applied to any of the numerous art genres - from figure to landscape and everything in-between. Note... these samples are the most common types, but there are many others to consider as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration of Eye Movement</th>
<th>As Applied to Landscape</th>
<th>As Applied to Still Life</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“S” (or “Z”)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“O” (or circle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“U” (or “U”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“L”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Illustration of Eye Movement  As Applied to Landscape  As Applied to Still Life

“T”

“X”

Triangle

Steeleyard

Radiating
Step 2 - Integrate your choice of a compositional “type” from step 1 onto a harmonic armature (or one of the other numerous armatures such as the golden mean, root 2, root 3, etc.)

**SAMPLE - Use of a General Harmonic Compositional Armature**

The Generic Harmonic Armature uses naturally occurring ratios that are formed by intersections. These intersections correlate to musical root harmonies... octave (1/2) perfect 5th (2/3), perfect 4th (3/4), etc.

These ratios that are pleasing to the ears, are translated into ratios that are pleasing to our eyes.

This first series of images shows an initial thumbnail concept sketch that explores an “S” curve landscape. It is simply a gesture drawing of an idea. Although a good start, the composition could use some refinement. The layout feels too symmetrical and centered. The eye is led straight up from the bottom. Masses and shapes are randomly placed without consideration of harmonic placement.

Here, we can see how the initial idea has been slightly modified to lead the eye in a bit more of an interesting path - ending up on the upper right rule of thirds intersection. The land masses have been slightly moved to lock onto a few select leading lines and intersections of the armature. Thus, a more pleasing and unified composition results as optical harmonics are utilized.

* A note on the “Rule of Thirds”:
The “rule of thirds” is a common go-to approach for directing the eye of the viewer to one of the four intersections. This approach is derived from the harmonic armature as the four quadrants correspond to the four heaviest intersections of the harmonic armature. Although not the only (or perfect) locations for subjects, these intersections are naturally located in areas that are pleasing to the human eye.
Composition

Composition is arguably one of the most important components of a moving work of art. It is, however, an aspect that has been neglected in most academic settings – settling for what visually (subjectively) “feels” right. There are, however, objective approaches to composing an image. There are many good books written on the subject and I advise artists to educate themselves. This is a very abbreviated explanation as a starting point to help artists.

Rule of Thirds
Perhaps the most basic compositional arrangement is the rule of thirds. Massing of colors and values can simplify complicated themes/motifs. This approach simply encourages placement of focal points on the points of intersection. The reason that the rule of thirds works is that it is a derivative of the proceeding harmonic armature on the next page.
Harmonic Armatures
For artists wishing to create more elaborate visual arrangements, armatures are very helpful.
Proportions that are pleasing our ear (audible harmonics) are also pleasing to our eye (visual harmonics). Intervals of one third, one quarter, one half, two thirds and three quarters (both in audible and visual harmonics) result in positive sensory responses. There are several visual armatures that artists can use to create pleasing compositions. Root rectangle armatures as well as the Golden Mean are effective configurations.

The one I use most often is a simple generic armature that can be applied to any rectangle configuration/proportion from a square to a long thin rectangle. The major intersections correlate to the musical harmonic scale (one third, one quarter, one half, two thirds and three quarters).

**Generic harmonic armature:**
Locations of Harmonics

The samples below indate the harmonic proportion locations. Anchoring focal points and leading lines using these locations will help ensure a pleasing composition.

1/4 mark called out

1/3 mark called out

1/2 mark called out

2/3 mark called out

3/4 mark called out

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Samples of Armature in Use
You should always plan out your final layout before moving to the final work to be sure you have as solid composition.
To use an armature in planning out your composition, it is helpful to simply sketch your masses and elements directly on an armature pre-drawn or printed on sketch paper. Consider the location of elements based on the lines and intersections. Artists can use the angles as leading lines and the intersections as points of interest. The samples below help to illustrate how an underling armature can direct thoughtful placement. Elements are not simply subjectively arranged because they feel “right” – they are objectively arranged to be visually pleasing.
Examples of Thomas Kegler Using the Harmonic Armature
Painting by Conor Walton Analyzed using the Harmonic Armature
Painting by Conor Walton Analyzed using the Harmonic Armature
Painting by Conor Walton analyzed using the Harmonic Armature