THE ART OF COMPOSITION
A Simple Approach for Creating Masterful Designs

the-art-of-composition.com
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About This Website

The Art of Composition is a nonprofit, comprehensive skill-based art learning resource for the serious artist, photographer, and graphic designer that wants to learn the true art of design and improve their visual literacy skills. Unlike so many other art and photography websites that offer the same tips, tricks, and rules, the-art-of-composition.com is about separating fact from fiction, revealing the painter's secret geometry, and providing easy-to-apply design techniques for anyone that has a strong desire to create masterful work.

Because of the 20th century Modern Art movement in America, far too many artists, and photographers have relied solely on their "feelings" and "instinct" to create compositions instead of developing real design skills through academic studies and careful application. As can be expected, this "creative" approach to design in art has caused disastrous results. For without the much-needed knowledge on the harmonic armature of the rectangle, the contemporary artist and photographer will find it difficult, if not impossible, to reach their full artistic potential regardless of how much time they invest in their craft.

Photograph above by Paul Hassel analyzed using the harmonic armature
Disclaimer


The Art of Composition: A Simple Approach for Creating Masterful Designs is not intended for commercial distribution and should only serve as a free teaching aid for students that want to learn more about the harmonic armature of the rectangle in art and photography. Because this user’s guide is a collection of daily analytical notes and is always evolving, please check back weekly for updates. Finally, all critiques and analytical notes demonstrated in this user's guide should not be interpreted as criticism of one’s work but instead viewed as an attempt to teach the modern artist and photographer how to expand their visual literacy skills.

*Painting above by Edgar Degas analyzed using the harmonic armature*
To Learn More About Dynamic Symmetry

The Art of Composition: A Simple Approach for Creating Masterful Designs focuses explicitly on the harmonic armature of the rectangle and does not teach the artist and photographer how to use Dynamic Symmetry. However, if you are interested in learning more about the Dynamic Symmetry system of design, I highly recommend reading The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry by Michel Jacobs. This book is easy to understand and will lay the foundation for all future studies. You can download a free PDF copy here.

Painting above by Michel Jacobs demonstrating the simple application of Dynamic Symmetry
A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry Video Lecture Series was created to compliment this incredible book by Michel Jacobs and tie the information in with the Barnstone Studios lessons 7 & 10 on Dynamic Symmetry. Parts 1-9 are available now. Part 10 will be available in early October 2021. To start watching these videos today, click here.

Image above from the video lecture series “A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry”
Other Recommended Dynamic Symmetry Products

Lesson 7 & 10 videos on Dynamic Symmetry

Introduction to Drawing & Design Workbook
Click here for reviews of these products

Technical Books on Dynamic Symmetry
The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry
Dynamic Symmetry A Greek Vase
Dynamic Symmetry a Primer
Why I Wrote a User's Guide for Artists and Photographers

The Art of Composition: A Simple Approach for Creating Masterful Designs evolved from my personal and professional experience as a photographer, master level darkroom technician, and graphic designer. After years of applying the same "popular" rules of composition to my images and designs, I reached a point in my artistic career where I was no longer able to improve my portfolio regardless of how much time and money I invested in photography workshops, photography books, and high-end camera equipment.

Realizing I was getting nowhere with the Rule of Thirds, the Rule of Odds, the Rule of Space, and Leading Lines, I began an intensive search for any information I could find on real design principles. I read every art and design book I could get my hands on and spent endless days and nights analyzing over five thousand works of art. The Art of Composition: A Simple Approach for Creating Masterful Designs is a series of personal analytical notes that reflect this ten-year study.

By sharing this collection of analytical notes with other artists and photographers, I hope to save them years of frustration and wasted time as well as put them on the most productive path for improving their lifetime body of work. While other books written on composition tend to focus on incorporating complex design methods using overlapped Dynamic Symmetry root rectangles, this user's guide takes a one grid approach to teaching that will make it easier for the artist and photographer to learn the art of composition at the quickest rate possible.

Photograph above (Splashes of Hope) taken with a Leica M240
My Views on Marketing vs. Real World Information

Throughout this user's guide and on my website the-art-of-composition.com, I'm very transparent with my views on misleading marketing to promote Dynamic Symmetry and the harmonic armature. While I believe that marketing can be a useful tool for sharing valid information, I'm firmly against advertisements that present classical skill-based design in a false light to sell products.

For this reason, I no longer sell or recommend self-published books, videos, or any other products that haven't met the strictest standards of quality. More importantly, all the recommendations I make in this user's guide (and on my website the-art-of-composition.com) I own and have used over the past twelve years in my pursuit to learn the art of composition.
About Me

I've been a photographer for 36 years and a graphic artist since 1994. I started with film and a traditional wet darkroom setup. Studying Ansel Adams' darkroom techniques, I developed skills to produce a fine art black and white print and won several photo competitions in high school. After high school, I studied at The College of St. Rose and received my B.A. in Public Communications. I did an internship at Channel 10 in Albany, NY, producing several television spots.

I graduated from college in 1991 and started working at Albany Medical Center as a darkroom technician and graphic artist. Working at Albany Medical Center helped me grow as a graphic artist by working on projects that included the O.J. Simpson trial, creating graphics for published medical journals, and photographing case studies for slide presentations.

I left Albany Medical Center in 1996, and I've been working with General Electric as a contractor ever since. Through the years, I kept up with my photography and the transition from film to digital. I spent five years learning digital lightroom techniques, including image manipulation in Adobe Photoshop/Lightroom, scanning all film formats, and producing fine art prints on archival inkjet printers.

Along the way, I have met some great photographers. I have taken workshops in Woodstock, NY, with Mary Ellen Mark and Magnum photographer Constantine Manos. In 2008, I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to photograph a Leonard Nimoy exhibit in Massachusetts. Currently, most of my time is spent studying skill-based art training and helping to restore design skills that have been lost over the past 100 years due to the 20th century Modern Art movement.

Camera Recommendations

I've been shooting with Leica cameras since 1994. Over the years, I've used the Leica R4, R5, R7, R8, M6, M7, M8, M9, M240, and MP240. The camera bodies are beautifully crafted, and the lenses are phenomenal. For those interested in street or documentary photography, I recommend the Leica M9, Leica M240, or the Leica MP240. If you're shooting film, the M6 is a robust camera. For those interested in purchasing used Leica cameras, I highly recommend KEH.com. I've been buying cameras from KEH for over 24 years.

Views on Post-Processing

When I shoot film, I expose for the shadows and develop for the highlights. With digital, it's the opposite - expose for the highlights and bring up the shadows in Lightroom or Photoshop. While I have nothing against cropping images, it's not a practice that I perform on any of my photos. I find shooting full-frame allows me complete control over my designs.
I photograph with a Leica M10, Leica M240 digital, Leica MP240 digital, Leica M6, and a Leica M7. When I shoot film, I use Ilford XP-2 black and white C-41 and scan with a Nikon Coolscan 5000-ED. I print my images using an Epson 3800 archival ink-jet printer.

Photograph above taken at the New York State Museum with a Leica M240

Design Studies

Beginning my studies in the field of Dynamic Symmetry over twelve years ago, I've continued my search, even today, for the most reliable information available on the art of composition. My website the-art-of-composition.com is a reflection of my passion for design and a vessel for me to share classical skill-based art techniques with other artists and photographers.

Most Recent Project

As of 2017, I've been working on a series of photographs representing simple studies in design. By focusing on everyday, ordinary landscapes and subject matter, much in the spirit of William Eggleston, has allowed me to continue my practice of applying classical skill-based design principles to my images. This project will last another three years.
Free Dynamic Symmetry and Harmonic Armature Grid Pack

Download a free Dynamic Symmetry and harmonic armature grid pack for Lightroom and Photoshop, plus an additional set of camera grids for the beginner photography student. This basic grid pack is perfect for the artist and photographer to analyze, edit, or experiment with your favorite artwork and photographs.

Photograph above by J. Gordon using the harmonic armature
My Thoughts on Other Websites and Educators That Teach Dynamic Symmetry

Over the years, I've done a tremendous amount of research to learn more about composition in art, Dynamic Symmetry, and the harmonic armature of the rectangle. With this research, I've noticed that most instructors and websites that teach Dynamic Symmetry limit their information solely on the artist using root rectangles to create and analyze their compositions. In my opinion, this narrow approach to teaching design severely limits their ability to instruct the student in the most effective way possible.

Because artists compose their work using more than one system of design, which I've already indicated at the beginning of this user's guide, it's important to discuss not only Dynamic Symmetry but the harmonic armature of the rectangle. For this reason, I recommend the books by Juliette Aristides for artists and photographers that want to learn the art of composition. In the book "Classical Painting Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice," Juliette talks about both design systems and explains the differences between them thoroughly.

Drawing above by Juliette Aristides analyzed using the harmonic armature
For those beginner artists that want to master the art of composition, I suggest keeping things simple. If you want to learn more about Dynamic Symmetry, I recommend starting with the book *The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry* by Michel Jacobs. If you want to explore the harmonic armature of the rectangle, I suggest the book *Classical Painting Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice* by Juliette Aristides and the free PDFs by Thomas Kegler found at the bottom of this page.

While there are educators online that suggest the application of overlapping root rectangles to create designs, I do not recommend this method for the beginner. In my professional opinion, I find this approach far too complicated and completely unnecessary for creating a masterful composition. Artists that draw and paint can use straight root rectangles suggested in the book by Michel Jacobs or draw the harmonic armature of the rectangle on any size canvas. Applying design in this manner will give the artist an infinite amount of variety in their lifetime body of work.

Additionally, it's also important to point out that after analyzing many masterworks, I remain somewhat skeptical about the use of overlapping Dynamic Symmetry rectangles to create a composition because this practice is based on the false assumption that every artist uses root rectangles. In truth, many artists throughout history have created designs that employ the use of the harmonic armature of the rectangle, as demonstrated in the book "The Painter's Secret Geometry" by Charles Bouleau.

Click here for articles 1 & 2 by Thomas Kegler on the 14 line armature of the rectangle.
Art Highlights

To keep up to date with what's going on with the-art-of-composition.com, please visit my Art Highlights section on my website. You can find a large volume of information as well as additional art and design techniques to help improve your lifetime body of work. I'm also currently working on analyzing a large group of masterworks using the 14 line armature of the rectangle and Dynamic Symmetry. Click here to learn more.

Painting above by Sarah Saltila designed using the harmonic armature
Click here for related video
15 Myths About Composition in Art and Photography

With composition being one of the most popular and least understood topics in art and photography today, it's necessary to discuss many myths that prevent artists and photographers from reaching their goals in creating successful and masterful compositions. In my experience, 99% of the information written about design on art and photography websites is either misinterpreted or entirely incorrect. Below are fifteen myths about composition in art and photography that never seem to die.

1. **Composition in art is intuitive (or random)**

   Because of the 20th century Modern Art movement in America, many artists and photographers have been falsely led to believe that composition in art is intuitive when in fact, it's not. Master artists take great strides to develop intricate designs that go down multiple tiers, and it's simply not possible for anyone to create artwork with geometric precision based on intuition alone. And even though intuition does play an important role in one's style, it's not enough to create masterful compositions. All art, regardless of the medium used, requires the knowledge and application of respectable design principles, and randomly placing elements in a composition will not result in a consistent body of work.

2. **Composition can't be taught**

   Any artist or photographer that claims composition cannot be taught is either intentionally being misleading or simply uninformed. Composition can be taught and has been taught for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. In fact, in Eastern European schools, children starting at the early age of seven are trained in the principles of design (the armature of the rectangle).

   Unfortunately, because so many modern artists aren't trained in design or offered actual design information in their education, whether it be at the university they attended, workshops they have taken, or books they have read, it's naturally assumed it's something that can't be learned. However, despite the many romanticized claims by a lot of modern artists, nobody is born with the ability to grasp all the principles of design. Learning composition is a skill in art that needs to be studied, mastered, and applied.

3. **Some people are born with the "gift" of composition, while others are not**

   The idea that some people are born with the "gift" of understanding composition while others are not is pure nonsense. Design is a visual language, and nobody is born with the capacity to grasp all the concepts and techniques in creating masterful art. I have analyzed 1000's of masterpieces, and they all contain universal design principles that were learned and applied by the artist at some point in their career.
Furthermore, in my experience, those that claim they are born with this "gift" continually demonstrate a lack of understanding of composition when you analyze their art. In other words, their body of work isn't consistent or visually strong because they haven't studied or applied the fundamental principles of design.

4. Design systems, design grids, and rules in composition kill creativity

Creating art using design grids and applying "rules" in composition do not kill creativity. In fact, the opposite is true. Because of the Modern Art movement, the term "creativity" became inconsequential in the art world and was mistakenly interpreted as "do whatever feels good" or create art "spontaneously." However, creating a successful work of art requires more than just doing what feels good or being spontaneous, and without acquiring the knowledge of time-tested design principles, any creativity or spontaneity an artist feels can never be adequately expressed.

As Juliette Aristides states in her book Classical Drawing Atelier, “Without understanding the elements of design, artists have to rely solely on their intuition when composing a picture. While intuition and feeling are, of course, a major defining element for an artist, they alone are not enough to consistently achieve a mastery of composition that rivals that of nature. Intuition and feeling without the knowledge and judgment of design principles are a liability in art— for without the knowledge and the know-how of design principles, the composition can easily appear chaotic and disjointed.”

5. Design systems and design grids make art appear too rigid

Utilizing an authentic design system to create art does not make a work of art too rigid. The definition of rigid is "unable to bend or be forced out of shape, not flexible, and not able to be changed or adapted." Using Dynamic Symmetry and the 14 line armature of the rectangle offer an infinite amount of variety, is extremely flexible, and will allow an artist to make various changes before a final composition is completed. Unfortunately, many modern artists mistakenly use the word "rigid," when they really mean structure. However, a masterpiece must always have a logical structure that efficiently utilizes the geometry of the rectangle the artist chose for their composition. Otherwise, their art will appear chaotic and ultimately fail.

6. Photographers don't need to study design because they shoot on the fly

Many photographers assume that they don't have to learn design because they don't have the time to construct elaborate compositions like a master painter. While there is some truth that taking photographs is intuitive in nature, the photographer must always administer the same design principles to their images that a master artist would apply on the canvas. Otherwise, the photograph cannot be considered art.
Martine Franck once said that "Composition in photography is in a way intuitive because you don't have the time, but obviously, you have to recognize all the elements. It's a familiarity that comes with art training." It's not surprising that Martine Franck happens to be one of the greatest photographers that ever lived. Not only was she a master photographer, but she was also an exceptional designer.

7. The Rule of Thirds is the best system of design for photographers and artists

While the Rule of Thirds is a legitimate concept, it is not the best system of design. In fact, it's not a system of design at all. It's simply the most familiar and easily understood "rule" or "guideline" on composition in photography and art circles today. The reality is, most photography and art website articles only recommend the Rule of Thirds because many artists aren't familiar with any other systems of design. Unfortunately, because Dynamic Symmetry and the 14 line armature of the rectangle aren't well known, the Rule of Thirds has become the dominant approach to composition.

Despite its overwhelming popularity, primarily because the concept is so simple, the Rule of Thirds is far too limiting for creating sophisticated designs and master artists don't solely use it in their art. Also, because the Rule of Thirds grid doesn't incorporate diagonal lines or consider harmonic divisions in a given square or rectangle, it forces the artist to rely heavily on intuition, increasing the chances that the composition will appear disjointed and static.

8. The Rule of Thirds is used everywhere in advertising

The Rule of Thirds is not used everywhere in advertising. A trained master artist or designer in advertising will use Dynamic Symmetry or the 14 line armature of the rectangle because it will give their work variation, theme, and harmony.

9. The Rule of Thirds grid is derived from the Golden Section rectangle

The Rule of Thirds doesn't have anything to do with the golden section, and stretching a Phi rectangle (1.618) to fit the dimensions of a 1.5 rectangle (digital camera sensor/35mm film) isn't the proper way to design. That is to say, whenever you see a golden section spiral grid overlaid on top of a 1.5 rectangle, it's safe to assume that the artist or photographer isn't properly trained in design.

10. The Rule of Thirds allows the artist to be creative with their compositions

The Rule of Thirds, as a stand-alone concept, doesn't allow an artist any freedom with creativity. In fact, because the Rule of Thirds doesn't offer any flexibility (without the knowledge of the harmonic armature), every artist that limits their designs to this famous grid is burdened with the reality that every composition is identical regardless of the subject or scene. In other words, there is no harmonious variety from one piece of art to another.
11. The Rule of Thirds can be traced back to classical and Renaissance paintings

The Rule of Thirds, as it's interpreted and applied today by most artists and photographers, has little to do with the sophistication of a classically designed painting. The Rule of Thirds concept was first documented in the book "Remarks on Rural Scenery" by John Thomas Smith in 1797.

12. You should avoid placing your subject in the center of a composition

There is absolutely nothing wrong with placing a subject in the center of a composition as long as there are supporting elements that balance out the whole. The overwhelming popularity of the Rule of Thirds grid is inappropriately based on this myth and, unfortunately, has steered artists in the wrong direction for creating strong compositions in their art.

13. You need to be great at math to master the art of composition

Using calculators and understanding math is not a requirement for learning composition because design in art is a physical geometry. As long as an artist knows how to intersect a diagonal line with another diagonal line at 90 degrees, that's all the math they need to know. In fact, you can create all the root rectangles in the Dynamic Symmetry system of design with a square and a piece of string.

14. Famous photographer quotes are a great source for learning composition

With the recent rise in popularity of blogging and free online e-books, many writers will use famous photographer quotes as a guide to teaching the art of composition. However, most of these books are solely written with the intent of boosting social media stats and making money by selling books on Amazon. The fact is, learning composition in art requires time, years of research, and a clear understanding of classical design principles. In contrast, publishing free e-books that contain an endless list of contradictory photographer quotes requires no effort at all. More importantly, most photographers’ quotes are over-romanticized claims that have little to do with time-tested knowledge on composition.

15. Photographers can learn composition from photography websites

Most mainstream photography websites only have an interest in making money by selling cameras, camera accessories, and photography software or producing an endless stream of daily blog posts and YouTube videos to boost social media stats and manipulate Google SEO rankings. None of these objectives have anything to do with mastering the art of composition or becoming a highly respected artist.
The Importance of the Armature of the Rectangle

Throughout this user's guide, I repeatedly refer to the armature of the rectangle. For artists to improve their visual literacy skills, they should never underestimate the importance of familiarizing themselves with this concept. In effect, the armature is the foundation that supports an artist's content and ideas while arranging them in an organized manner so that the viewer can effectively read the presented work of art regardless of whether it's a drawing, painting, photograph, or piece of sculpture.

The drawing below by Juliette Aristides demonstrates the application of the basic 14 line armature that master artists use to create their compositions. Any artist who expects to achieve mastery in their craft should memorize this armature's construction and employ it with regularity and consistency in their body of work. It's also important to note that this armature directly relates to the musical scale of composition.
The sine waves, in the image above, demonstrate the geometry that occurs in music and how it relates to the armature of the rectangle below. Notice the $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{2}{3}$, and $\frac{3}{4}$ divisions.

The image above shows the harmonic divisions in the armature of the rectangle.
"It's not always apparent, but a drawing relies on an invisible and underlying geometry that begins with the proportions of your paper (or more specifically the dimensions of your drawing within the paper’s rectangle). This structure is referred to as the geometric armature, and artists use it to begin to define the relationships of the parts to the whole in a composition."

- Suzanne Brooker, "Essential Techniques of Landscape Drawing: Master the Concepts and Methods for Observing and Rendering Nature"
Prologue

Every artist has their own style. From da Vinci to Degas to Rembrandt to Renoir, you can easily identify their work. If you're a photographer interested in learning more about the art of photography, you might want to study the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alex Webb, Constantine Manos, Elliott Erwitt, or Vivian Maier. And while most everyone would agree these well-known street photographers are masters of the same genre, their photos look nothing alike.

One should never disregard or minimize the importance of design in their art as a characteristic of personal "style." Nor should style be confused with pictorial structure. Style is highly unique, whereas creating an effective pictorial structure requires the knowledge and application of universal composition principles. Indeed, all master artists and photographers of every period have their own stylistic differences, yet they all follow the same respectable systems of design - meaning the armature of the rectangle.

Because the Rule of Thirds is the most widely acknowledged and accepted composition concept in mainstream art and photography, I address the rule in great detail throughout this document. However, my objective for writing about the Rule of Thirds is not to solely encourage its use but rather to demonstrate unequivocally to the reader that master artists, highly skilled photographers, and advertisers employ more techniques than this simple tic-tac-toe grid can provide.

Design is a visual language that must be learned, mastered, and applied if an artist expects their work to mature fully. And even though Modern Art ideology doesn't encourage skill-based art training, by no means should the contemporary artist assume that classical art techniques, which are thousands of years old, are outdated or invalid. In truth, the Modern Art philosophies of "personal expression" and "creativity," which are so prevalent in today's culture, only have significance if one's "personal expression" is executed with a certain amount of artistic proficiency. Only then can an artist or photographer be truly "creative."

Furthermore, despite the many misguided and romanticized claims that some people are born with the "gift" of understanding composition, while others are not, I can state with absolute certainty that these claims are erroneous. Composition in art is not intuitive, and nobody is born with the ability to grasp all the principles of classical skill-based art. Master artists take great strides to develop sophisticated designs, and it's highly unlikely, if not impossible, that anyone can create artwork with geometric precision or visual mastery based on intuition alone.

With design being one of the least understood and lost skills in art today, learning the art of composition is more important than ever. The purpose of this user's guide is to reintroduce those lost skills and help artists achieve the highest level of quality in their work. Whether you draw, paint, sculpt, or take photographs, understanding and applying effective design techniques to art is not a luxury - it's a necessity.
What is Artistic Style?

Artistic style can loosely be defined as a combination of personal interest in a particular subject matter, the techniques the artist employs in their work, and the tools they use to execute their art. For example, I currently consider myself a landscape photographer. This is not my style, but rather the genre that I work within. However, my approach to photographing landscapes, the subject matter I choose, and the particular camera, lens, etc., depict my personal artistic style. It’s a combination of these elements that make my images unique and identifiable to me.

Over the years, I've had many photographers ask me how they should go about developing their own artistic style. While there is no clear answer to such a complicated and personal question, my advice to them has always been the same. First, master the art of composition and learn as much as you can about classical skill-based art. Then once you have invested the appropriate amount of time in learning the necessary skills in your chosen craft, you can explore the idea of artistic freedom and personal expression.

Painting above by Sarah Saltila designed using the harmonic armature
Why Compose?

When you're visiting an art gallery and a painting grabs your attention from across the room, have you ever asked yourself why? Is it the color arrangement, the subject matter, or the brush strokes? How about the medium used? Is it because the artist used watercolor or oils? While all of these artistic qualities can contribute to the success of a masterful work of art, more than likely, it was none of the above. It was probably the composition.

All art forms require composition. Think of a musician like Mozart. He is conforming to a particular arrangement of notes so that his music is pleasing to our ears. A skillful writer will learn how to structure their sentences so the reader can move fluidly through the chapters in their book. An artist who draws, paints, or photographs will require an effective arrangement of subject, shape, color, and value to make their art more powerful, more compelling, and expressive. A well-designed work of art will achieve this goal.

Henry Rankin Poore once said, "Composition is the mortar of the wall, as drawing and color are its rocks of defense. Without it, the stones are of little value and are but separate integrals having no unity." Undeniably, composition is the glue that binds all of the various elements together in a frame. A haphazard composition, solely created using one's intuition, won't be as effective as a carefully planned design. A successful work of art will draw the viewer in, let them wander for a period of time, and allow them to exit gracefully. Simply put, composition is the foundation of all art.

Related podcast: Art and What Makes Us Human
Related article: The Strength of Beauty
Elements of Composition
(from the book *Pictorial Composition*)

Composition is the orderly and harmonious grouping and arranging of lines and masses so that they will present a pleasing relation one to another. Unless the various parts of a design or picture are so arranged, they are simply isolated parts and have nothing of interest or value. For instance, if six matches or toothpicks are allowed to fall upon a sheet of paper, the effect, shown in Fig. 1 (a), will not be orderly and harmonious and therefore no pleasing arrangement will be formed. But if the sticks are purposely arranged as in (b), a hexagon will be formed. Placing one end of each stick against one end of all the others and spreading the bodies of the sticks out fanwise, as in (c), produces a sunburst. Placing them as in (d) forms a six-pointed star. Still, other orderly and harmonious arrangements could be made with the six matches, all illustrating composition.

Composition, however, also depends on the relative sizes and shapes of the outlined spaces; the relative tone values, sizes, and shapes of the masses of black, gray, and white; and the relative color values, as well as their light and dark values, and the sizes and shapes of the masses of colors.

The chief elements of composition are unity, balance, rhythm, harmony, and concentration of interest. Unity is the holding together of the parts. Balance is the placing of each part in its proper position so that no part will be unduly emphasized. Rhythm is the constant relation and orderly connection of parts. Harmony is the consistent arrangement of parts that have something in common, such as size, etc.

In the composition of pictures, however, the parts must also be so arranged as to keep the observer's interest concentrated on the proper object or figure. Unless this is done, the picture will not convey the message or tell the story in the most graphic manner.
Without Design, There May Be Representation,  
But There Can Be No Art - Kenyon Cox

Many artists and photographers read about classical skill-based design and brush it off as unimportant, are intimidated by it or think it's too complicated to use. And because most of us have been taught art based on Modern Art philosophies of the 20th century, the contemporary art student has difficulty believing that composition in art isn't random or intuitive but rather planned and precise. However, design cannot successfully be ignored or reduced solely to human intuition if an artist ever expects to reach their full potential, master their craft, and produce a consistent body of work in their lifetime.

As humans, we can view an entire picture at once, but we can't focus on every element simultaneously. That is to say, we visually scan different areas of an image independently, and then our brain pieces them together - much like a jigsaw puzzle. For this reason, solid design principles must be applied to art for it to be successful. Without a properly composed picture, the viewer's eyes will roam aimlessly, unable to make sense of what the artist is ultimately trying to convey. Therefore, if a drawing, painting, or photograph doesn't contain a well constructed and intelligent design, it can't legitimately be considered a work of art.

Kenyon Cox on Modern Art and Composition

Painting above, "Fall And Expulsion," by Kenyon Cox

Perhaps the greatest weakness of modern art is the relative neglect of what is ordinarily called composition, or what I prefer to call by the good old word design. The word composition means,
of course, the putting together of the picture, and seems to imply a more or less mechanical assemblage of separately existing parts. The word design conveys the finer and truer idea of an original guiding thought, a principle of unity, out of which the parts and details of a picture are developed by a natural and organic growth. You compose a pudding or a black draught—you design a work of art. Yet the word composition is a convenient one, and one so commonly understood that I shall use it interchangeably with the word design.

Whatever it is to be called, that the thing itself is rather out of fashion there can be no doubt. Our tendency has been to exalt the other parts of the art of painting at the expense of this fundamental one of design, and to decry and belittle composition as a thing of small or no importance. Indeed, if one may believe all one hears, its very existence has been denied; for a well-known and justly admired American painter has been quoted as telling his pupils that "There is no such thing as composition." If he ever said so, one is left in doubt as to just what he could have meant. It is possible that he intended to say that there is no science of composition, and no valid rules for it, that design is, and must be, a matter of instinct and of unconscious creative action on the part of the artist. In that case, what is true in his statement is equally true of drawing and color and handling.

In all these things the business of the artist is to create and to leave to others the task of finding out the reasons for the form of his creations. It is possible, in any art, to formulate principles to account for what has first been done, it is impossible, by the application of rules based on these principles, to create a new and vital work. This is not a reason for neglecting the study of the masterpieces of art, for ignorance was never yet creative. It is simply the statement, in another form, that the artist, however well trained, must be an artist born, and work as the artist has always worked.

It is possible, also, that what was meant to be expressed was merely a personal preference for informal and expressive design over formal and monumental design; for the composition of the isolated easel picture over the composition of the great mural painting. If so, it was the expression of a preference so common in our time as to be nearly universal; a preference which has caused us to place on the walls of great public buildings pictures that seem to defy rather than to enrich the design of the surrounding architecture; a preference which has led to the writing of textbooks on composition that include in the list of their don't's nearly all the things which a study of the great masters would inculcate as things to do.

Whatever else was meant, it is almost inconceivable that a literal denial of the existence of composition, or design, can have been intended, for that would have been the denial to the arts of the one thing they have in common, of the one great fundamental and unifying principle that makes art. Design is arrangement, is order, is selection. Design is the thing that makes a work of art a unit, that makes it a whole rather than a haphazard collection of unrelated things or a slice of unassimilated nature.
It does not merely concern itself with great decorative compositions or arrangements of many figures; it is necessarily present in the simplest problems art can set itself. Suppose you are to paint a portrait head. There will be questions of drawing, of character and expression, of light and shade and color, of the handling of your material, to all of which you must find answers; but before you can consider any of these things, there will be the initial question: where are you to place the head on your canvas? How far from the top and the bottom, how far from the left or right-hand border. And what is the shape of your canvas to be, rectangular or circular or oval, and what shall be the proportion of height to width? This is the fundamental problem of design, the problem of the division of space. If you are going to do a little more of the figure, other problems will come into play. Shall you include the hands, and, if so, where shall you place them?

That is the problem of the balancing of dominant and subordinate masses. What is the general silhouette of your figure, and where shall it cut the borders of your canvas? That is the problem of line. If you do not settle it intentionally and well it will settle itself accidentally and, in all probability, badly. The problems of design are essentially the same in everything you do; they only become more complicated as the subject becomes more complex.

If you are to paint a still-life, it is evident that you must arrange the objects somehow; they will not come together of themselves. You might, conceivably, begin a portrait and wait for a happy accident a spontaneous pose of the sitter to give you the arrangement of the hands: you cannot wait for the copper kettle and the dead fish to place themselves agreeably. And still, less can nature or accident determine your composition of a number of figures unless you rely entirely upon snapshots. If you have any intention, any story to tell, any idea to express, if it is no more than the idea of a crowd you must arrange your figures, well or ill.

Even in landscape painting of the most naturalistic kind, where it is not uncommon today to accept what nature gives, abdicating the right to put in or leave out and retaining only that right of choosing an agreeable view which the photographer exercises equally with the painter even there, though you may reproduce a natural landscape as literally as you are able, you must determine where to cut it off. You must decide where to make the division between your chosen matter and the rest of nature which you reject, you must think whether your material will go best onto an upright canvas or an oblong one, and what are to be its proportions and dimensions. In that act, you are exercising the art of design. You cannot escape from design; you cannot avoid composing. You may compose badly but compose you must.

And if the demands of design are fundamental they are also universal. It is not only your lines and masses that must be composed but your light and shade, your color, your very brush marks must be arranged; and the task of composition is not done until the last touch has been placed upon the canvas, although, for the sake of convenience, the term composition, or design, is generally limited to the arrangement of lines and masses, the arrangement of the other elements of the picture being considered separately.
As design is the underlying and unifying principle of every work of art, so it is the classic principle, par excellence, the principle which makes for order and stability and clarity and all that the classic spirit holds most dear. It is conservative in its nature and tends to preserve the old molds even when new matter is put into them. It holds on to tradition and keeps up the connection with the past. It changes, but it changes more slowly than almost any other element of art.

Great and original power of design is more rare than any other of the powers of an artist, and a radically new form of design is very nearly inconceivable. Artists will make a thousand new observations of nature and almost entirely alter the contents of a work of art before they make any but slight changes in the pattern in which it is cast; and in all the history of painting the men are but a handful who have made any material addition to the resources of the designer.

If in our own day we seem to have cut loose from tradition and to have lost our connection with the great design of the past it is not because we have suddenly acquired a surprising degree of designing power and are inventing a new and modern art of composition, but because most of us have forgotten altogether how to compose and are trying to get on without any design at all; the result being bad design and mere chaos....

To download the book “The Classic Point of View” by Kenyon Cox, click here.
The Art of Seeing and Visual Literacy

Looking and seeing are not the same. Someone who is looking at an image (or work of art) is only picking up a few small details - much like skimming text in a book. Someone who "sees" has the ability to decode all the elements of an image (or work of art). In other words, looking is passive while seeing is comprehensive.

Art is a universal language and a form of communication. To become a visually literate artist, one must learn the language of art - meaning the alphabet, the grammar, and the vocabulary of seeing. In simpler terms, a visually literate artist can read, write, and interpret the visual language. In modern times, becoming visually literate is more important than ever. Because of the Internet and technology, we have become a media-driven culture that relies almost entirely on images. In fact, most people view images, on average, about 7.5 hours a day.

Currently, our education system teaches textual literacy and computer literacy but neglects visual literacy as a core curriculum. Also, far too many artists aren't taught the visual language as part of their art education program. This lack of knowledge prevents the student from ever reaching their full potential, and their overall body of work suffers dramatically. Therefore, if an artist can't read or write the visual language, they won't have the necessary skills to apply that knowledge to their own work, and effective communication through art becomes impossible.

Painting above by Katy Hamilton, 3 years of study, age 28 from the Da Vinci Initiative
Teaching Visual Literacy in America (K-12)

Due to the recent revival of classical skill-based art education in America, the lessons required to become a visually literate artist are currently taught starting at the early age of five (kindergarten) and continue through the student's high school years (K-12). By the ninth grade, the student is introduced to the golden section, the Fibonacci spiral, the armature of the rectangle, and other design tools to learn the basic skills necessary for analyzing (deconstructing and reconstructing) a master artist's work. Below are several images from the ninth-grade lesson plan "Composition Study with Chardin" from the Da Vinci Initiative website.

To download this lesson plan by the Da Vinci Initiative, click [here](#).

Related article: [On Master Copies in Art](#)
### LESSON PLANS FROM

#### GRADES 9-12/BASIC ART

**VISUAL LANGUAGE III (9-12)**

Adapted from the Ani Art Academy’s Language of Drawing and Language of Painting Programs

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**SUMMARY**

“Learning to design is learning to see, an adventure that gets more and more captivating the further you go.” - Oliver Reichenstein

Visual Language III is a strategic sequencing of educational visual arts exercises designed to develop visual literacy and communication skills in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Echoing the same rational sequence of skill building exercises from the celebrated Waidhulis curriculum (designed for the International Ani Art Academies) Visual Language III seeks to develop visual literacy and communication skills that will allow students to successfully interact and contribute to a global environment that is increasingly dependent on visual stimuli.

“Visual arts education is now understood as critical and necessary for success in a world that is making a paradigm shift to a global model requiring higher order thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and flexibility. Even Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains – a standard model for the classification of intellectual behaviors related to learning – has been revised and restructured to make “Creating” the top of the hierarchy. The taxonomy now reflects not only the arts. In particular, but also a relevance to 21st century work. Visual arts learning includes all three of Bloom’s domains of educational activities leading to higher order thinking.” - Darien Public Schools Art Department, Connecticut.

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www.davinchinitiative.org

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Supplement 7

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 to 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 most often used 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).
Mandy Theis is a figurative painter and art educator, and graduate of the Aristides Atelier. She is the president and co-founder of The Da Vinci Initiative—a foundation that supports skill-based learning in K-12 art classrooms. The Da Vinci Initiative provides atelier training and resources to art teachers through online classes, workshops, conferences, and keynote speaker services. Mandy is an advocate for visual literacy and figurative work in the contemporary art market.
Atelier Training & Visual Literacy

- “Atelier training is pretty much the way artists were trained up until about a hundred years ago. The idea being that there are inherited artistic information that has been handed down through generation after generation from one artist to another artist.”
- “A lot of people don’t realize it, but there are actually scientific discoveries in art just like there are in every other field.”
- “We can’t really move art forward if we don’t understand what’s already known about visual literacy.”
- “[I’m working on a book that should be released over the next year] about how visual literacy matters to every profession, so each chapter is an atelier concept and how it matters to a certain profession.”

A Missing Piece in Art Education

- “With the advent of Modernism, there was this idea that training would ruin your creativity, and it was the artists themselves that purposely chose not to train the next generation.”
- “Nobody loves learning more than art teachers, and yet there’s been a separation between access to this skillset and how we train art educators in today’s time.”

The DaVinci Initiative

- “What we’re really trying to do is take this gap and close it and provide access to these skills to art educators so that they can incorporate it into their classrooms.”
- “Because the training fell out of favor, it’s very, very difficult for most art educators to access it.”
- “We’re increasing the ability to teach very important skills about how the eye actually sees information, interprets information. This isn’t just important for artists.”
- “It’s about helping your eyes see in a more nuanced way.”
- “The response has been overwhelmingly positive because we’re offering something teachers love: learning.”

Skills-Based Art as Counterculture

- “It’s ironic that realism has become a counterculture movement in art, so to speak, or that skill-based art is the counterculture movement in art. But it excites me to think that skills matter again.”
- “Historically we probably know less about what it is that we’re seeing than humanity did a hundred years ago, with the access to the internet and more information in every other subject than we’ve ever had before.”
“My incentive is that I want children to be able to create whatever artwork is in their heads and their hearts without compromise. I just want to provide additional options of what they can do in the classroom.”

“Understanding color or shape or value or line in a really nuanced way, not just saying here’s a line…it changes how you see the world.”

**Figurative Art in A (Post) Post-Modern Climate**

“I see these two huge, big names who we like to think of as the poster children of non-realist art, are embedded very heavily in realism, turning to realism, and learning as much as they can about it.”

“If you look at gaming systems, often all the edges are really hard, which kills the illusion of depth […] even in these games where they're trying to get you to believe you’re in these other worlds, there are little pieces of the inherited artistic knowledge base that are still missing—even though they’re trying more than anybody to be realistic. Technology can only do what we give it.”

“I would argue that the reason that some of the abstract works are selling at such high price points has more to do with their branding. The branding of high-end galleries, high-end collectors, or high-end auctions. But it's not just abstract work that's received that kind of branding […] I think we have to understand as realist artists what that game is, and how we can play it or get around it.”

**The Middle-Class Collector**

“We’ve lost the knowledge of collecting and the confidence of collecting in that middle-class range. There are many people that have a million-dollar house with five-dollar prints on the walls.”

“As artists especially, it's our job to help educate the public on how to purchase artwork, how to collect artwork, the value of having a real painting in your home versus a print on your wall […] encouraging and educating that middle segment to renew that knowledge base. It’s not just the skills of artmaking that were set aside for the last five-hundred years, it’s a skill of collecting.”

Click [here](#) to listen to the podcast.

**Related Article:** [Does Training Ruin Artists’ Voices?](#)
Painting above by Chardin analyzed using the harmonic armature
Design and the 20th Century Modern Art Movement

As early as the 1940s, classical design began to disappear from most art educational programs, along with all skill-based training, because of the Modern Art movement in America. And because this shift towards creating artwork based on one's "feelings" (not technical skills) became so popular with the masses and most art galleries, very few artists in this country were adequately trained in the application of Dynamic Symmetry or the 14 line armature of the rectangle. By the 1980s, over 1500 years of accrued technical skills (including classical design) were on the verge of becoming extinct. Unfortunately, this lack of education and knowledge of respectable design principles is still prevalent today.

For this reason, it's not surprising to hear that the 20th century is considered the worst period in the history of art. As Fred Ross states in the article Good Art, Bad Art, "Three-quarters of the 20th century will go down in art history as a great wasteland of insanity -- a nightmarish blip in the long road of the development of human logic, and reason and art, from which we are only just starting to awake."

Despite the negative impact of the last century, the art world is slowly changing. With modern Conceptual art popularity deteriorating and classical skill-based ateliers emerging all over the country, the next generation of artists can finally acquire the much-needed training that will allow them to create masterful art. In fact, if the current trend in the art industry continues, within the next ten years, learning design will be one of the most sought out and demanded "lost" skills in art education.

"Atelier training is no longer a dying tradition. More studios are opening across the country than I can keep track of, and the number of students, once just a handful, is now in the thousands. Despite every reason why this movement might remain small, it continues to grow."

- Juliette Aristides, Lessons in Classical Painting

Paintings above by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jackson Pollock, and Ray Wanda Totanes (15-year-old Da Vinci Initiative student)

Related Article: Community Suppression of Art Knowledge
For those artists and photographers that have watched some of my video lectures on art and composition, you will notice that I’m very much against Modernism ideology when creating art. In fact, much of my dislike for Modern Art and Modern Art ideology stems from their complete lack of consideration and respect for learning real art skills and, in turn, use art-speak to justify poorly executed and distasteful works of art.

As Fred Ross states in his article *Why Realism* "Art-speak is a contrived form of language, which uses self-consciously complex and convoluted combinations of words to impress, mesmerize and silence opposition. "Art-speak" is generally used by people in positions of power and authority and in combination with "prestige suggestion" is ultimately employed to silence contrary instincts and ideas to prevent people from identifying honestly what has been paraded before them. This is accomplished by brainwashing society through authority and confounding, with "art-speak," the evidence of our senses about objects and ideas that otherwise any sane person would question."

In my own experience, I find the use of "art-speak" in photography circles as well. For example, I recently came across an ad for a photography workshop that uses the same nonsensical language to describe what the photography student will learn. In the advertisement, the photographer uses phrases such as "Finding Your Voice As An Emotional Messenger" and "Orchestrating A State Of Creative Flow." What does this mean for those that might want to sign up for this photography class, and what will the photography student actually learn? I honestly couldn't say. As with most photography workshops, you pay a lot of money to learn very little.

If you’re an artist or photographer that wants to learn more about Modernism and classical art training, I highly recommend visiting the Art Renewal Center website. You will find a large volume of articles as well as a massive database of master paintings that will educate as well as inspire you to advance your studies as a classically trained artist.
Art Can't Be Taught?
By Mandy Theis Hallenius
(President and Cofounder of the Da Vinci Initiative)

The contemporary Modern Art movement in America advocates a single approach for educating artists. Pillars of Modern Art theory, such as the belief that real artists can only be made through their ideas, and that the confines of training will inhibit the journey to true artistic enlightenment, are frequently advocated in art education as unbendable truths. The painter Jean Dubuffet articulates the Modern Art philosophy when he writes, “...I hold to be useless [conventional] kinds of acquired skill, and those gifts, whose sole effect seems to me to be that of extinguishing all spontaneity, switching off the power and condemning the work to inefficacy.” (Ashton, pg. 123).

The Austrian stone sculptor, Fritz Wotruba, goes so far as to warn all artists, “In technique lurks death.” (pg. 110). Some Modern Art extremists label supporters of traditional techniques as socialists, as the Expressionist artist Pierre Alechninsky did when he wrote, “fighting ... Social Realism on the left kept me pretty busy...” (Ashton, 11).

The unquestioned acceptance of these ideas prevents educators from teaching specific concepts out of concern of ruining budding artists. Issues with teaching a Modern-Art-only curriculum, however, reach deeper than reluctance among pedagogues. This approach to education also inhibits the active, targeted teaching of art in favor of a passive approach, as it is perceived that teaching a specific objective will interfere with the creative potential of pupils. Also, it creates a system in which educational goals are vague and students often have little understanding of what it is they are supposed to learn.

These theories also deprive art educators in the K-12 system of much-needed educational tools, especially well-rounded textbooks and meaningful assessments. In addition to these problems, the Modern Art Movement accepts almost everything as art, which allows many non-art subjects to supplant the art curriculum in the K-12 public school system. The adoption of Modern Art ideologies has also deprived teachers themselves of well-rounded art educations to use in their own pedagogical practices. Finally, these ideologies have created a lack of understanding among art teachers of what technical skills students can learn, and at what developmental stage pupils can learn them.

Advocates of the Modern Art system of teaching-by-not-teaching include professors at prestigious art schools, such as Michael Asher at CalArts. Asher is famous for his teaching philosophy, which asserts that “…students do all the talking while instructors bear witness” (Thornton, p. 46). His theory is that the instructor’s role in the school is not to interfere with whatever it is the students are doing: and that the students, who by definition lack knowledge, should teach each other.
Although this methodology of teaching-by-not-teaching is used by most art professors today, it has an increasing number of influential critics. One is James Eakins, a respected art historian who works in the strongly Modern-Art-learning Art Institute of Chicago. Eakins believes that the trend of Modern-Art-influenced teachers has nearly ended the teaching of the majority of classical art techniques that were traditionally passed from generation to generation. In fact, he describes these nearly-lost techniques that until recently were a staple of art education, as endangered species. He states that “...there is no reason why ‘endangered’ media can’t be revived. It’s just that they are not usually taught, so they count as things that cannot be learned in studio art classes. With the giddy growth of new media, it might seem that [they] are obscure or trivial. On the contrary: they were the central techniques of centuries of art production. In that respect, it’s contemporary practice that’s impoverished, not older practice” (p. 74).

Though Modern Art pedagogy was invented as recently as the 20th century, it is nearly universally adopted by art teachers today, many of whom teach these principles exclusively. This narrow approach of teaching-by-not-teaching negatively affects the education of art students by depriving them of an active source of artistic training. The Modern Art idea of treating every child as an individual on a mission of self-discovery with minimal guidance also creates boredom, frustration, and confusion for both pupils and educators. If nothing a child does can be wrong in the art classroom, and no clear objectives are presented for what the child should learn from a day’s lesson, then it becomes impossible to measure how and what the pupil is actually learning. The faults of this approach go against many established principles of pedagogy commonly used in other subjects.

The absence of these established principles in the art classroom, such as standards-based learning and active assessment, can best be noticed when compared to other subjects. For example, a music teacher would never give a child a trumpet and for the next several years tell him that nothing he does with that trumpet is incorrect while simultaneously refusing to teach him how to play notes. The child would inevitably become bored by his lack of progress in music, and by his complete inability to create what initially drew him to music. The boredom, misunderstanding, and confusion in art education is in large part due to the exclusive application of Modern Art theories.

The Modern Art approach to education also dominates many contemporary mainstream textbooks, which are an important tool used by art educators. In these textbooks, trendy modern art subjects are covered in depth, while classical principles such as armatures of rectangles, have been ignored for so long they have become completely forgotten by many authors. Look carefully through the Art Connections series, or the Art and the Human Experience textbooks and a plethora of lesson plans emphasizing balance, symbolism, shape, rhythm, and pattern can be viewed. These topics are the most instrumental tools of the Modern Art movement according to many Modern Art practitioners. In fact, Gunther Uecker uses many of these concepts when describing his own work.” At first I use strictly arranged rhythms, mathematical sequences, but these dissolved into a free rhythm... I decided on a white zone, as it is the extreme of colorfulfulness, the climax of light, triumph over darkness.”
Although these textbooks include some art history lessons that cover art prior to the advent of Modern Art, they teach few skills needed by students in order to achieve a similar result. The lesson plans that do reference pre-Modern Art are heavily Modern-Art-derived. They focus on shapes and colors, and offer little in the way of technical skills. Modern Art plays a very influential role in the way techniques and ideas are selected for art education textbooks, which in turn dictates the way art is disseminated within K-12 classrooms. Due to the Modern Art belief that less technical training (and especially no classical training) makes purer artists, contemporary art textbooks are skewed heavily towards a Modern-Art-style lessons at the expense of more balanced educational approaches.

Another important tool, assessment, is also not applied by educators who believe in a Modern–Art style of pedagogy because this methodology specifically prohibits making value judgments about art. Art teachers have been taught through their K-12 education and then at college not to judge art. If someone protested that a black dot on a canvas for example, were not art, she would be condemned as ignorant by Modern Art advocates. This mentality has created a fear of making any judgments towards any art, and therefore many art teachers have forfeited the ability to be discerning when it comes to art created by their students. If all art is equally valid, how can teachers possibly make meaningful assessments of student work? Many choose instead to grade art students on superficial factors such as participation or classroom cleanup. Neither of these teaches art to students, and therefore many teachers who grade in this way have come to the conclusion that art can’t be taught. Teachers have effectively inhibited themselves from teaching art by refusing to evaluate art.

When art educators accept the Modern Art idea that art is anything and everything an individual wants it to be, they enable the definition of art to become so broad that it invites other subjects to besiege art curricula. Frequently these additions to art curricula include “everything else” that the government/ school board/ principal decides should be taught but doesn’t want to fit in elsewhere. In the K-8 school where I recently taught, for example, measuring, greenhouse, and Native American studies are all squeezed into the art class, and all must be taught in just one period per week per class. Because art teachers have allowed the definition of art to become so broad, we can no longer defend art as an independent and legitimate subject. The strongest defense art educators in this Modern Art system have left to them is that exposure to art improves student performance in other subjects.

Another major reason why many art teachers are so invested in promoting Modern Art pedagogy is that an overwhelming majority of them do not know how to teach technical skills. This is often true because their teachers didn’t know how to teach those skills. And nor did their teachers’ teachers. An overwhelming majority of art teachers today are a product of this Modern Art system that has eliminated technical training in favor of so-called “pure” ideas. Because art teachers have never been taught these under-appreciated skills, many do not believe the skills are teachable. This problem of technically-unsigned art teachers is a direct result of the nearly universal application of Modern Art theories throughout the last century.
Of all the reasons for the belief that “art can’t be taught,” perhaps the most obvious is that few teachers really seem to know what technical skills students are capable of learning in art, and at what age they are able to learn them. This lack of understanding becomes very apparent when art skill sets are taught outside the art curriculum. Skill sets that cover art topics in The Creative Curriculum for Preschool compare very oddly to those indicated in art education textbooks. In The Creative Curriculum for Preschool, there is an entire column devoted to assessing random scribbles, controlled scribbles, and circle scribbles. Preschoolers are expected to know shapes, including triangles, circles, squares, rectangles, ovals, and diamonds. They are expected to draw people with faces and arms and bodies that stand on a baseline and show two dimensions. Preschoolers can do all this, yet similar lessons are presented to many grade levels in the K-12 art textbooks.

Considering shapes, for example, the third grade Art Connections textbook introduces square, triangle, circle, rectangle, and freeform shapes, and suggests that students practice tracing shapes with their fingers. The fourth grade Art Connections textbook also covers most of these same shapes (the freeform shape is excluded for unknown reasons) even though the same textbook series already covered the material in third grade (p. 68). The fifth grade Art Connections textbook covers the same material yet again (p. 88). And yet, according to preschool experts, these shapes are fully recognizable to the average child at the age of three or four. This lack of understanding of developmental artistic skill sets is due largely to the fact that Modern Art theorists value neither technical ability nor assessment, and therefore choose not to study how children learn art.

The Art Connections curriculum is not alone in underestimating children’s technical abilities. Page 5 of A Handbook of Arts and Crafts states, “In such areas (as perspective and lettering), dexterity can be judged, but one can rarely expect great displays of comprehension and coordination in the lower grades.” This passage asserts that younger students are not capable of understanding calligraphy. Yet handwriting, a subject regularly taught in Kindergarten, is by definition a form of calligraphy. In fact, all areas of art can be effectively assessed when certain principles of Modern Art theory are rejected, which will then allow a true understanding of students’ technical abilities to emerge.

Modern Art ideas have a place in many art curricula, but should not be taught exclusively. Art teachers have a professional obligation to their students to provide them with a balanced education and a complete art curriculum from which to learn. With multiple tools and approaches, professionals can expand art education beyond its current boundaries and lift students to even higher levels of artistic understanding.

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Painting above by Mandy Theis analyzed using the harmonic armature
The Importance of Looking Back

One of the core beliefs of modernism is that a work of art can't be derivative for it to be original. Of course, anyone with a little common sense would know there is no validity in such an irrational philosophy. All of the necessary skills required to become an accomplished artist (drawing, modeling, composition, canvas preparation, color theory, paint control, etc.) are, in fact, derivative.

Sadly, many contemporary artists don't recognize or acknowledge any connection to the art of the past. As a matter of fact, modern-day art teachings encourage the idea of creating art based solely on instinct rather than learned skills. This "teach by not teaching" approach to education prohibits the student from flourishing, and the modern artist is forever stuck in a state of creative primitivism.

Therefore, if the modern artist ever expects to advance in their work, they must first learn and master the skills of those that have come before them and use that acquired knowledge, along with their own unique creativity and intuition, to create art that will add value to the long-standing tradition of classical art.

Painting above by William-Adolphe Bouguereau analyzed using the harmonic armature
**What Is Classical Skill-Based Design?**

On most photography and art websites today, anyone can easily find recommended tips, tricks, and rules for composition. For example, we have all heard of the Rule of Odds, the Rule of Space, the Rule of Thirds, Centered Composition, Leading Lines, and so on. And with anything new, these rules and tips, which are simple to apply, might seem fun and exciting at first. However, much like playing the game of tic-tac-toe when you were a child, the novelty wears off quickly, and the artist hits a plateau with their work that they can't get past.

Unfortunately, these often misinterpreted and unfounded "beginner level" concepts, which are usually applied independently to a composition, are far too restricting for the serious artist to exercise with any authority, flexibility, or expertise to a drawing, painting, or photograph. In turn, this lack of flexibility limits an individual's artistic style and makes it difficult for the viewer to distinguish one artist's work from another. For this reason, master artists and photographers won't limit themselves to only using the so-called modern "rules" in their compositions.

In classical skill-based design, there are professional terms like Baroque diagonal, Sinister diagonal, gamut, coincidences, radiating lines, figure-ground relationship, classical balance, steelyard principle, aspective view, arabesques, reciprocals, root rectangles, the armature, golden section series rectangles, etc. Unlike the present-day "rules" in composition, classical skill-based design is an integrated set of design principles that work together and will allow the artist to create stunning works of art that have theme, variation, and harmony.

*Painting above by Juliette Aristides designed using the [harmonic armature](#)*
Photograph above by J. Gordon using the harmonic armature
Drawing above by J. Gordon using the harmonic armature
Click here to watch a demo video.
Skill-Based Art: A Learning Resource for Art Students & Artist-Teachers
( Podcast With Mandy Theis)

Click here to listen to interview with Mandy Theis Part 1
Click here to listen to interview with Mandy Theis Part 2

Painting above by Mandy Theis analyzed using the harmonic armature

Click here to listen to interview with Mandy Theis Part 1
Click here to listen to interview with Mandy Theis Part 2
Why Rules Are Necessary For Learning Art and Design

Painting above by Suzanne Brooker analyzed using the harmonic armature

As an artist, not having the skills to grasp the basic principles of design would be like the average person not having the ability to read. The artist can't interpret the compositional structure in paintings by Edgar Degas, Peter Paul Rubens, Vincent van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci or any other master artist, past or present. In other words, they would look at their work, not have the capacity to analyze it, and, in turn, can't learn from it. This inability to decode design is the equivalent of a musician not having the ability to read music. It's crippling.

I read many articles about design on photography and art websites, and most of them sound the same. Even someone as famous as Ken Rockwell once wrote in one of his articles on composition that "rules in art suck." Believe it or not, this is the general attitude regarding rules in photography and art today because many modern artists feel that rules inhibit creativity. For example, Bruce Barnbaum, author of the book "The Art of Photography," once stated that "Rules are foolish, arbitrary, mindless things that raise you quickly to a level of acceptable mediocrity, that prevent you from progressing further."
Regrettably, not only does Barnbaum's statement advocate visual illiteracy, but it also has no validity when it comes to creating a successful work of art. After all, if rules are foolish, arbitrary, and mindless, how come so many master artists followed strict rules for designing their art? Should we call Leonardo da Vinci foolish, mindless, and refer to his work as mediocre because he used the golden section? I should hope not.

Unfortunately, because far too many artists don't have any training or knowledge on using the harmonic armature, they indiscriminately toss out all the rules in art. Again, from the book "The Art of Photography," Barnbaum also lists the rules to avoid. He states "Several of the most well-known rules, the rule of thirds, the rule of avoiding a horizon in the center of the image, the rule of having an image read from left to right, the rule of not placing the center of interest in the center of the image, and so many others are undesirable constraints with no validity."

While Barnbaum's explanation is technically accurate, it can easily be misconstrued by the untrained artist. For instance, in his book, he never mentions anything about classical design techniques, Dynamic Symmetry, or the rectangle's 14 line armature. Consequently, if a photographer or artist doesn't understand the authentic rules of design or know how to apply them effectively to their work, they will become stuck, and their passion will outweigh their ability to perform.

Painting above by Walter Murch using the armature of the rectangle
Painting above by Walter Murch using the armature of the rectangle to create a series of horizontal and vertical divisions
Breaking the Rules in Composition

At one time or another, we have all read an article on composition that offered an extensive list of "tips" and "tricks" on how to compose our art, only to be told at the very end to "break the rules." Unfortunately, this type of flawed "creative" advice happens more often than it should because far too many artists and photographers haven't taken the time to learn classical skill-based design techniques. So, when in doubt, they throw the rules out.

Additionally, many modern artists and photographers will also assume a master artist is "breaking the rules" of design when a piece of artwork falls outside of their knowledge on composition. For example, I recently came across an article written by an author who claimed Leonardo da Vinci was "pushing the Rule of Thirds to the limit" because one of his drawings didn't line up precisely with a Rule of Thirds grid.

Curious as to how they came to that conclusion, I analyzed the piece further only to discover that da Vinci was, in fact, using the harmonic armature and, therefore, not breaking any rules. Regrettably, this lack of knowledge of fundamental design principles limits the analytical abilities of the modern artist, and in turn, they come to incorrect conclusions about the artistic methods of master artists, past or present, and the best practices for creating a respectable body of work.

Painting above by Suzanne Brooker analyzed using the harmonic armature
The Painter’s Secret Geometry

In the past, designs by master artists were kept hidden from the public and were only passed down from a master to their apprentice. This tradition of secrecy is still very much alive today. In fact, many modern master artists will not speak openly about how they design their art and, often when asked, will flat out deny it.

Much like the magician that won't reveal how they perform their illusions, the artist has always carefully guarded the most crucial element when it comes to creating masterful art - that being composition. This philosophy is known as the "painter's secret geometry." And because very few people have the ability to decode design, it's not difficult for the artist to fool the unsuspecting public while maintaining the "illusion" that great art is intuitive and spontaneous, even though it's not.

However, times are changing. Because of Thomas Kegler, Juliette Aristides, Jim Serrett, J. Gordan, Arleta Pech, and several other modern artists that teach classical skill-based art, this historically undisclosed information is finally becoming more widespread. Hopefully, in time and with some persistence, this knowledge on design techniques will reach an even larger audience because of the Internet, this website, and artists that are more forthright about creating their compositions.

Painting above by Juliette Aristides
Painting above by Thomas Kegler from his free PDF on the harmonic armature
Painting above by Conor Walton designed using the harmonic armature
Learning how to analyze a master artist's work requires time, patience, and persistence. In the past, I have had many artists and photographers contact me to say that they couldn't detect any formal composition used in a work of art - therefore, it must have been created intuitively. Usually, this assumption results in error. Since many masterful designs trickle down multiple tiers, the artist's methodology isn't always apparent on the first level of a design scheme. Additionally, decoding complex compositions can become even harder for the beginner student because many artists don't know how to interpret the 14 line armature of the rectangle.

For example, one mistake I often see made by artists is that they will lay a Rule of Thirds grid on top of a masterpiece and conclude that the artist must have used that design scheme because some of the elements line up. However, even though parts of the artwork might line up with the Rule of Thirds grid, this is not always a clear or accurate indicator that the artist used that design method. Further analysis is usually required.

Becoming proficient at analyzing composition is much like learning a new language; it takes time, effort, and the right skills. For instance, if someone handed me a book written in German, I wouldn't be able to read it in a few days. I would have to be taught the language first. Learning how to "read" a work of art isn't any different. The artist needs to be taught the language of design to understand art.
I have been analyzing drawings, paintings, and photographs for many years, and I'm still discovering new information every day. Not to be misunderstood, I'm not saying that an artist has to spend that much time researching design, but I do suggest taking the time to at least understand the basics of good pictorial structure. Once the fundamental principles of composition are learned, an artist can decide if they want to pursue their studies further.

The above image is an example of an artist oversimplifying design by laying a Rule of Thirds grid on top of a Chardin painting. In the picture below, notice how you can obtain a more accurate view of the sophisticated design by Chardin by analyzing art using the 14 line armature of the rectangle.
Why I Don’t Use Overlapped Root Rectangles to Analyze Art

When I first began learning design over ten years ago, I studied several methods for analyzing art. One popular approach recommends finding the dominant diagonal line in a composition and then matching the appropriate root rectangle. However, after much trial and error, I have found this method less than desirable and overly complicated for the beginner.

Unfortunately, when approaching analyzing art using this method, you have to break down the root rectangles to the point where the analysis becomes illegible. In other words, you end up with lines all over the place. In contrast, analyzing art using the harmonic armature gives the artist more flexibility, simplicity, and accuracy in the long run.

Drawing above by Mandy Theis analyzed using the harmonic armature
The painting above by *Edgar Degas* can be found in a self-published book on Dynamic Symmetry. While the author states that the artist used overlapped Dynamic Symmetry root rectangles to compose his masterwork, when you analyze the same painting with the harmonic armature, you realize that this claim can easily be disputed.
A Closer Look at the Rule of Thirds

Contemporary photographers and artists are often more familiar with the Rule of Thirds than the harmonic armature. And even though the Rule of Thirds is a legitimate concept for creating compositions, I don't recommend the artist limit their creativity by not building on this popular design grid.

However, for those artists and photographers that are new to the concept of the Rule of Thirds, it's stated that when a rectangle or square is divided into thirds horizontally and vertically, the four intersecting points within the composition are the most effective areas of interest. The artist or photographer can then place the essential elements of their subject in or near one or more of the intersections called "eyes." These positioned elements in a design don't need to land precisely on the "eyes" to be effective. Below is an example of the Rule of Thirds grid.

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Limitations of the Rule of Thirds

The Rule of Thirds Doesn't Incorporate Diagonal Lines Into the Design Grid

While there isn't anything wrong with creating divisions on thirds in a design, the use of additional diagonal lines are critical to the success of any work of art whether it's a drawing, painting, or photograph. Because the Rule of Thirds doesn't incorporate diagonal lines into the design grid, an artist can't determine the best position to place their subject within the intersecting points called "eyes." Regrettably, this limitation forces the photographer or artist to "guess" most of the time.
You Can't Use the Rule of Thirds Grid to Analyze Master Artist’s Work

Because master artists’ designs are far more complex than the Rule of Thirds grid, you can’t analyze or learn anything from their art. In other words, you don’t have any resources available to study. To become more proficient at visual literacy, you have to possess the necessary skills to decode composition, color theory, etc. Once you master these skills, you can discover how other master artists design their work and apply that knowledge to your own art.

In the painting above by Johannes Vermeer, notice how the diagonal lines of the harmonic armature are used to create additional divisions that don’t relate to a rule of thirds grid.
Painting above by Anna Rose Bain, analyzed using the harmonic armature
The painting above by Juliette Aristides demonstrates how the artist can create a very complex design with the harmonic armature. The harmonic armature allows the beginner and advanced student incredible flexibility for their compositions.
The Rule of Thirds Can Create Imbalances in a Composition

If an artist isn't careful, it's easy to create imbalances in a composition using a Rule of Thirds grid. Because the Rule of Thirds design concept pulls your subject out of the center of the frame (regardless of the artist's intention) and off to one side, it's not uncommon to disregard what remains in the other half or two-thirds of the image. Many photographers and artists assume that as long as they have their subject in a particular cross-hair, it's an effective design. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Balance in design is critical to any work of art, and leaving areas of dead space on one side of the frame gives the viewer a sense of imbalance.

The Rule of Thirds and John Thomas Smith

The Rule of Thirds concept is famous for being mentioned by John Thomas Smith in 1797. In his book "Remarks on Rural Scenery," Smith quotes a 1783 work by Sir Joshua Reynolds, in which Reynolds discusses, in unquantified terms, the balance of dark and light values in a painting. Smith then continues with an expansion on the idea, naming it the "Rule of Thirds."

Joshua Reynolds stated that "Two distinct, equal lights, should never appear in the same picture. One should be principal, and the rest subordinate, both in dimension and degree. Unequal parts and gradations lead the attention easily from part to part, while parts of equal appearance hold it awkwardly suspended, as if unable to determine which of those parts is to be considered as the subordinate. And to give the utmost force and solidity to your work, some part of the picture should be as light, and some as dark as possible. These two extremes are then to be harmonized and reconciled to each other."

So, from Joshua Reynolds statement, John Thomas Smith concluded that the principles of design can be reduced to the simple explanation of value distribution. Smith states, "Analogous to this "Rule of Thirds," if I may be allowed so to call it, I have presumed to think that, in connecting or in breaking the various lines of a picture, it would likewise be a good rule to do it, in general, by a similar scheme of proportion."
For example, in a design of landscape, to determine the sky at about two-thirds; or else at about one-third, so that the material objects might occupy the other two: Again, two-thirds of one element, (as of water) to one third of another element (as of land); and then both together to make but one third of the picture, of which the two other thirds should go for the sky and aerial perspectives.

This rule would likewise apply in breaking a length of wall, or any other too great continuation of line that it may be found necessary to break by crossing or hiding it with some other object. In short, in applying this invention, generally speaking, or to any other case, whether of light, shade, form, or color, I have found the ratio of about two-thirds to one-third, or of one to two, a much better and more harmonizing proportion, than the precise formal half, the too-far-extending four-fifths—and, in short, than any other proportion whatever. I should think myself honored by the opinion of any gentleman on this point; but until I shall by better informed, shall conclude this general proportion of two and one to be the most picturesque medium in all cases of breaking or otherwise qualifying straight lines and masses and groups as Hogarth's line is agreed to be the most beautiful, (or, in other words, the most picturesque) medium of curves." Hence, the Rule of Thirds was born.

However, the confusion and lack of credibility with a "one size fits all" approach to composition are unavoidable because Joshua Reynolds refers to the distribution of values between light and dark and the greatest area of contrast, not the divisional breaks of the square or rectangle. These are two separate and distinct principles. Moreover, the Rule of Thirds analogy isn't considering the dimensions of the rectangle used in a work of art. In other words, there isn't anything wrong with creating divisions at the half or four-fifths point as long as all the elements in a composition are balanced and harmonized.

In conclusion, after reading "Remarks on Rural Scenery" and analyzing some of John Thomas Smith's engravings, it's evident that the Rule of Thirds is, at best, a "beginner" level design concept. What's more, because the Rule of Thirds doesn't incorporate diagonal lines into the design scheme, applying the grid to a work of art tends to produce compositions that lack energy, theme, variation, and harmony. Creating great art will always require respectable design principles, and anything less is denying oneself the ultimate satisfaction of creating work worthy of respect, admiration, integrity, and longevity.

The 14 Line Armature and the Rule of Thirds Grid

As previously mentioned, even though John Thomas Smith references the Rule of Thirds in his book Remarks on Rural Scenery, it should be noted that the Rule of Thirds grid is actually derived from the 14 line armature by driving two vertical and two horizontal lines at the ⅓ and ⅔ divisions. In the images below, notice how the Rule of Thirds grid won't change regardless of the dimensions of the rectangle.
Drawing above analyzed by J. Gordon using the harmonic armature
Why the Rule of Thirds Is Popular With Artists and Photographers

Even though the Rule of Thirds doesn't offer an artist much in terms of creative value, you might be asking yourself, "why is this rule so popular?" There are several reasons:

The first reason is due to the lack of written material available on design. Finding valuable content on the harmonic armature is incredibly difficult, as well as the required effort of piecing the information together so that it makes sense to the artist. In my experience, it's taken me more than ten years to find the best available resources for learning composition and a lot more time analyzing masterworks. In contrast, finding articles on the Rule of Thirds is easy.

The second reason the Rule of Thirds is so popular is that it's easy to use and doesn't require any effort, skill, or knowledge. For example, all the photographer or artist has to do is place their main subject in one of the four crosshairs and bang, an instant masterpiece. However, realistically speaking, that is rarely the case. Creating successful compositions in art requires more than a simple one-level tic-tac-toe grid can provide.

Painting above by Anna Rose Bain analyzed using the harmonic armature
Recommendations for Analyzing Composition in Masterworks

For the beginner student who desires to analyze art, I highly recommend studying work by Juliette Aristides, Thomas Kegler, Suzanne Brooker, Jim Serrett, Conor Walton, Paul Hassell, Mandy Theis, J. Gordan, Arleta Pech, Joe Winkler, and Ken Goshen. This group of modern artists employs the use of the harmonic armature in much of their work, and I have found them to be a reliable source for learning the art of composition.

When studying drawings, paintings, and photographs by these masters, overlay the harmonic armature on their compositions and try to break them down as far as you can. Experiment with your analysis by adding vertical and horizontal lines wherever two or more diagonal lines meet. Additionally, look for repeating themes and the use of dominant diagonal, horizontal, and vertical lines. If you spend enough time analyzing these highly skilled artists’ work, your visual literacy skills will improve dramatically.

*Drawing above by Juliette Aristides analyzed using the harmonic armature*
Painting above by Thomas Kegler analyzed using the harmonic armature
How Artists Can Use the Harmonic Armature in Design

After studying masterworks for many years, I have discovered several ways the artist can use the harmonic armature. The first way is to lock their subject into place on the canvas by driving horizontal and vertical divisions wherever two or more diagonal lines intersect within the harmonic armature. A few examples of this can be seen below.

In the painting above by Thomas Kegler, notice how he is locking his subject into place (blue lines) using specific divisions derived from the harmonic armature.
Painting above by Thomas Kegler designed using the harmonic armature.
Click here to watch the process video.
In the painting above, notice how Juliette Aristides is locking the subject in place using specific divisions derived from the harmonic armature.
Another way the artist can use the **harmonic armature is to outline the angles in their subject to match the diagonal lines within the compositional grid** they have chosen for their design. For example, in the painting below by **Suzanne Brooker**, notice how she uses several of the diagonal lines derived from the armature to outline and frame the figures in the composition.
Images above by J. Gordon demonstrating how the artist can use the diagonal lines of the armature. Click here to watch the video.
The image above by J. Gordon demonstrates how the artist can frame in their subject using the diagonal, horizontal, and vertical lines of the harmonic armature.
Image above by Paul Hassell demonstrating how photographers can use the harmonic armature to frame their subject.
Intuition in Composition

Despite what most contemporary artists learn in art school, master painters don't approach a canvas and produce a masterpiece (intuitively) on the spot. They take many steps prior to preparation. These steps include drawing, designing, and creating various sketches known as posters that include gestures, expressions, tones, and color composition.

Outside of the classically trained artist, in today's culture, this method of producing art is frowned upon because it's not considered spontaneous or original. In contrast, artists of the past approached a painting in the same fashion and with the same strategy as they would in designing a piece of architecture - they would have design plans already drawn out long before any work began. This carefully planned process increased the chances of success in creating a beautiful and structurally sound piece of art.

There are several ways a modern master artist will create a composition. The first method involves drawing out the armature (grid) on a piece of paper or canvas first, then draw the subject, elements, and spaces within the preconceived framework. For example, in Juliette Aristides' new video "Secrets of Classical Painting," before she begins to paint the live model, she has already mapped out the design armature on her canvas.

An alternative approach entails drawing out all your elements first and then placing all the components in your design. To give an illustration, once the artist has decided on an idea for a work of art, they can set up their composition and then move their subjects (already drawn) around the armature of the rectangle until they decide on a final design that will give their work theme, variation, and harmony.

Painting above by J. Gordon composed using the harmonic armature
Painting above by Ken Goshen analyzed using the harmonic armature
Click here for related video
Photograph above by J. Gordon analyzed using the harmonic armature
The 14 Line Armature vs. The Root Rectangle Armature

For those who have taken the time to investigate both design systems, the 14 line armature and root rectangles, the artist may wonder what the difference is between them since they both provide the same harmonic divisions.

In my opinion, I find using the 14 line armature of the rectangle easier to learn when it comes time to analyzing art as well as applying it to a composition. For example, you can purchase any size canvas you want at your local art store and draw a 14 line armature to create a successful composition. The other significant difference between both design systems is that Dynamic Symmetry allows the artist to break down the mother rectangle into smaller versions of the original rectangle. To make this point clear, you can see below that the root three has been divided into smaller root three rectangles going vertically and horizontally.
Painting above by Caravaggio designed in a root 3 Dynamic Symmetry rectangle analyzed using the harmonic armature
Creating Additional Lines Within the Armature

Even though the armature of the rectangle only contains 14 diagonal lines, this in no way restricts the artist from creating more to suit their artistic vision. To illustrate this point further, because the artist or designer can create vertical and horizontal lines from any two intersecting diagonal points, they can then use these new divisions as anchors in their composition to draw added supporting diagonal lines.

Painting above by Jim Sarrett analyzed using the harmonic armature
Photograph above by J. Gordon analyzed using the harmonic armature
Painting above by Ken Goshen analyzed using the harmonic armature
Painting above by Ken Goshen analyzed using the harmonic armature
Click here for related video
How to Build the Harmonic Armature

Below are the steps necessary to create a harmonic armature for any size square or rectangle. This universal grid can be used to create an endless amount of masterful designs. The artist should memorize this grid's construction and learn how to apply it to all of their work. And while, on the surface, the grid looks more complicated than a typical Dynamic Symmetry grid, because the process is repetitive, it's much easier to learn in the long run.
1/2 mark in the harmonic armature

2/3 mark in the harmonic armature
3/4 mark in the harmonic armature

1/3 mark in the harmonic armature
1/4 mark in the harmonic armature

Painting above by Arleta Pech demonstrating the use of the 14 line armature
The image above demonstrates how the artist can create additional horizontal and vertical divisions using the harmonic armature.
Painting above by Arleta Pech demonstrates the use of the 14 line armature and creating additional divisions.
Photograph above by J. Gordon analyzed using the harmonic armature
How to Start Using the Harmonic Armature

To begin the process of using the harmonic armature in composition, I always recommend starting simple. In other words, experiment by creating designs with only a few lines; a dominant horizontal, vertical, and diagonal. To demonstrate this process, notice in the painting below how Thomas Kegler incorporates dominant lines derived from the harmonic armature. To learn more about how to use the rectangle's harmonic armature, please visit my website. I have created a large volume of videos demonstrating this process.
Painting above by Joe Winkler demonstrating the use of the harmonic armature
Painting above by Joe Winkler demonstrating the use of the harmonic armature
Painting above by Sarah Saltila designed using the harmonic armature
The Harmonic Armature and Photography

While there is a lot of talk about photography and Dynamic Symmetry online, the harmonic armature is a far more useful tool for analyzing photographs. Because the 1.5 rectangle is the dominant photography format in the industry, it’s important to understand that you cannot accurately apply Dynamic Symmetry in photography unless you’re photographing in a square, overlap root four rectangles in a 1.5 frame, or crop your photographs to specific root rectangles.

Photograph above taken at a Splashes of Hope event in Long Island, NY
Related Video: One of the Most Important Videos I've Ever Created Part 1
Related Video: One of the Most Important Videos I've Ever Created Part 2
Camera Grids for the Beginner

Photographers that are new to Dynamic Symmetry or the harmonic armature might find the application of camera grids beneficial. Much like training wheels help a child from falling over when they're learning how to ride a bike, camera grids can aid the beginner in learning more about classical skill-based design. In many ways, experimenting with camera grids will help improve your visual literacy skills as an artist and photographer. However, once you have grasped the basics of good design, using this crutch should be used sparingly or avoided altogether.

Photograph above taken in Altamont, NY with a Leica M240

How to Make an Armature Grid for Any Digital Camera
(For beginner students only)

One of the benefits of shooting digital in modern times is having the ability to preview your subject or scene before you take the image. Most digital cameras available today have a setting known as "live view" mode. This feature will allow a photographer to look at the LCD screen on the backside of the camera while they're in the act of photographing.

Even though most digital cameras have a Rule of Thirds grid view option as part of the camera's available features, none offer the Dynamic Symmetry/harmonic armature grid. To get around this shortcoming, I've outlined a quick three step process that will allow any photographer to create an armature grid to apply safely to their LCD screen.
Step 1  
In the design program of your choice, create a page filled with the armature grids. The number of grids displayed will vary depending on the size of your LCD screen on the back of your camera. For myself, because I'm shooting with a Leica M240, I created a page that has four across and three down (see below image).

![Armature Grids](image)

Step 2  
Print the page of armature grids on a sheet of Staples repositionable window decal paper. You can find this product at your local Staples store or Amazon.com.

Step 3  
Once printed, let the sheet dry for 20 mins to allow the ink to stabilize. After the sheet is completely dry, cut and peel the perfectly sized grid and lay it over your LCD screen on the back of your camera. The decal can be pulled off easily at any time.

Photograph above taken at a Splashes of Hope event in Long Island, NY
Photograph above taken at a tattoo shop in Delmar, NY
My Thoughts on Creativity and Camera Grids for the Professional Photographer

Because the harmonic armature allows the artist to create an infinite number of compositions, photographers should never restrict creativity by locking their images into one design scheme. Photographers that continually use design grids attached to their cameras are always faced with this problem.

While some online marketers claim camera grids are necessary for applying a successful composition to a photograph, these design educators lack real-world experience, misinterpret the application of classical skill-based design techniques in photography, are trying to increase camera grid sales, and overlook the critical fact that tools should benefit the artist, not restrict their artistic freedom. Camera grids are not only unnecessary, but if overused, a photographer's visual literacy skills become stunted and their images predictable and overly mechanical.

In my combined 38 years experience as a photographer, educator of design, and graphic artist, I have yet to come across any highly skilled, historically relevant photographer that used camera grids to compose their images, and for any professional to engage in such a practice would mean a loss of credibility. Photographers that are taking their first step towards learning more about the art of composition should fully understand that camera grids are an aid for the beginner student - not a tool for the skilled professional.
Henri Cartier-Bresson
A Master's Ideology on Camera Grids and Composition

“Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move.

In applying the Golden Rule, the only pair of compasses at the photographer's disposal is his own pair of eyes. Any geometrical analysis, any reduction of the picture to a schema, can be done only (because of its very nature) after the photograph has been taken, developed, and printed – and then it can be used only for a post-mortem examination of the picture.

I hope we will never see the day when photo shops sell little schema grills to clamp onto our viewfinders, and the Golden Rule will never be found etched on our ground glass.

If you start cutting or cropping a good photograph, it means death to the geometrically correct interplay of proportions. Besides, it very rarely happens that a photograph which was feebly composed can be saved by reconstruction of its composition under the darkroom's enlarger; the integrity of vision is no longer there.

There is a lot of talk about camera angles; but the only valid angles in existence are the angles of the geometry of composition and not the ones fabricated by the photographer who falls flat on his stomach or performs other antics to procure his effects.” - Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Photograph above by Henri Cartier-Bresson analyzed using the harmonic armature
I occasionally visit photography websites to get a general idea of how other photographers react to using grids to create or analyze compositions in their photographs. Some of the responses have been positive and others negative. I expect this. However, one comment that is repeated more often than any other is, "What's the point of laying a grid over a photograph once it's taken?"

Placing design grids on top of photos, or any work of art, is an important part of the learning process, and it's a way for the student to increase their visual literacy. Additionally, it's also a valuable tool that will allow the artist to detect why some of their images are successful while others fail. This form of analysis, better known as deconstructing art, is essential for artistic training, and any artist who isn't willing to put the time or effort into this method of study will find it difficult to progress in their work.

Photograph above taken in Cooperstown, NY
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov composed using the harmonic armature
Did **Henri Cartier-Bresson** Really Use Dynamic Symmetry?

While you can find many videos and articles on photography websites about how **Henri Cartier-Bresson** used Dynamic Symmetry in his photographs, once you begin to study composition, you will quickly realize that these claims are weak at best. For example, Henri Cartier-Bresson was shooting in a 1.5 rectangle and rarely cropped his photographs. With this fact in mind, the only way to bring the 1.5 rectangle into the Dynamic Symmetry system of design is to overlap two root four rectangles. Because of the complexity of the application, it's improbable that **Henri Cartier-Bresson** used this method. Furthermore, if you analyze Bresson's work using the harmonic armature, you will discover how design is better utilized.

Video: [Henri Cartier-Bresson and Dynamic Symmetry: The Biggest Myth in Photography?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id)
Henri Cartier-Bresson was famous for seeking out a landscape (or background) to compose his subject before taking photographs. In a sense, he was setting a trap for his "prey." This pre-visualization technique allowed him to determine the best composition before snapping the shutter and increased the odds of taking a more favorable image when it came time to edit his contact sheets. However, for this technique to work effectively, the photographer must have a thorough understanding of classical design principles and a tremendous amount of patience. In the photographs below, notice how Bresson composes a picture before his subject appears in the frame.
Photograph above taken in Lake George, NY with a Leica M240
(Setting the scene)
**Intuitive Knowledge in Composition (Master Photographers)**

Everyone's a photographer. From your average soccer mom taking pictures of her kid playing on the field to grandma taking snapshots of her grandkids on Sunday visits, we all take photos at some point in our life. However, while everyone takes photographs, producing images that can be considered art is far more challenging. Because many pictures are snapped on the fly, it's naturally assumed that composition must be intuitive. While intuition does play a significant role in creating great photos, intuitive knowledge is far more valuable for taking images that can be considered works of art.

Intuition can be defined as the natural ability to draw a conclusion based on instinct or feeling rather than conscious reasoning. By contrast, **intuitive knowledge** in composition comes from studying design principles until you're able to recognize it quickly while you're taking pictures. In other words, you're training yourself to become visually literate. Henri Cartier-Bresson described this familiarity as the "decisive moment." And while many photographers recognize Henri Cartier-Bresson as one of the greatest photographers who ever lived, very few amateurs understand his knowledge and background training in design.

*Photograph above analyzed with the harmonic armature*
Photograph above taken in Cooperstown, NY with a Leica M10
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov composed using the harmonic armature
Photograph above by J. Gordon analyzed using the harmonic armature
The Decisive Moment - by Henri Cartier-Bresson

If a photograph is to communicate its subject in all its intensity, the relationship of forms must be rigorously established. Photography implies the recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things. What the eye does is to find and focus on the particular subject within the mass of reality; what the camera does is simply to register upon film the decision made by the eye.

We look and perceive a photograph as we do a painting, in its entirety and all in one glance. In a photograph, composition is the result of a simultaneous coalition, the organic coordination of elements seen by the eye. One does not add composition as though it were an afterthought superimposed on the basic subject material, since it is impossible to separate content from form. Composition must have its own inevitability about it.

In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, the product of instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject. We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment on the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.

The photographer’s eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail – and it can be subordinated, or it can be tyrannized by it. But he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action.

Sometimes it happens that you stall, delay, wait for something to happen. Sometimes you have the feeling that here are all the makings of a picture – except for just one thing that seems to be missing. But what one thing? Perhaps someone suddenly walks into your range of view. You follow his progress through the viewfinder. You wait and wait, and then finally you press the button – and you depart with the feeling (though you don’t know why) that you’ve really got something. Later, to substantiate this, you can take a print of this picture, trace it on the geometric figures which come up under analysis, and you’ll observe that, if the shutter was released at the decisive moment, you have instinctively fixed a geometric pattern without which the photograph would have been both formless and lifeless.

Misunderstanding the Decisive Moment

Depending on what photography website you go to, you will find different interpretations of the "decisive moment." However, one mistake I see repeatedly is that many photographers assume a photograph is a "decisive moment" as long as it tells a compelling story or displays a clear message that translates to the viewer.
Unfortunately, this interpretation isn't always correct. In other words, just because a street photographer captured a moment in time that tells a particular narrative, that doesn't mean it encompasses the full definition of a decisive moment. A precise and deliberate design must always be present. For example, as noted in the paragraphs above, Henri Cartier-Bresson discusses perspective, coincidences, organic elements that balance, relationships of forms, and the act of analyzing his photographs after they've been taken. These considerations are those of the visually literate artist and are thoroughly discussed throughout this user's guide.

Photograph above taken in Haiti with a Leica M240
The photograph above, taken in Haiti, was selected from a series of images demonstrating the occasional use of armature grids to evaluate my pictures. Notice how the armature is used to frame the subject and create specific horizontal and vertical divisions.
Practicing Composition Techniques at Museums

Photographers that want to practice applying classical skill-based design principles to their photographs will find shooting landscapes, still-lifes, or exhibits in museums an excellent exercise for sharpening their visual literacy skills. Because photographing still-life subjects doesn't involve moving visual elements, it's easier for the photographer to concentrate on all the design techniques mentioned throughout this user's guide.

*Photograph above taken at the New York State Museum*
Using Design Grids to Crop Photographs

Among photographers, the idea of cropping photographs seems to be a continuous debate. While some professional photographers state that cropping images goes against their purist ideology, others feel that it can otherwise save a poorly composed photograph. In my experience as a photographer and teacher of design, I find it somewhat harder to fix a poorly constructed photo in post-processing. However, that doesn't mean it's impossible either.

Throughout the history of photography, many well-known photographers like Ansel Adams often cropped their images in the darkroom. In fact, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was firmly against altering his compositions, occasionally cropped his photographs to create a more pleasing design.

With that said, regardless of your ideological views, photographers that want to crop their photos in post-processing will find design grids to be an extremely useful tool. Also, because the photographer isn't faced with time constraints when composing their images "after-the-fact," I recommend experimenting with the rectangle's basic harmonic armature.

The photograph above (from a photographer that follows my website) was slightly cropped and adjusted to level the horizon and make better use of the 1.5 armature. To download a free Dynamic Symmetry/Harmonic Armature grid pack, click here.
Photograph above from the website unsplash demonstrating how the artist can use the harmonic armature to crop their images to create a stunning design.

(Click [here](#) for related video)
Photograph above from the website unsplash demonstrating how the artist can use the harmonic armature to crop their images to create a stunning design (Click here for related video)
Photograph above from the website unsplash demonstrating how the artist can use the harmonic armature to crop their images to create a stunning design

(Click here for related video)
Image above by a photographer that follows my website. The image was cropped using the harmonic armature grid. Click here for related video

Related video: 4 Composition Concepts Every Photographer MUST Know!
Composite Photography vs. Straight Photography

For those photographers interested in composite photography (cutting and pasting multiple images together to create a composition), applying the harmonic armature is used in the same manner as the artist that draws and paints. In other words, the composite photographer is not limited by the amount of time for creating their final design.

Also, it's important to point out that composite photography and the application of the armature should not be restricted to one design scheme - meaning the use of camera grids becomes even less relevant. Much like the artist who works on the canvas, the composite photographer will often use the angles of their subject to dictate how they arrange the various elements within the rectangle's armature.

Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov
The Difference Between a Fine Art Print and a Work of Art

Most photographers have the ability and technical know-how to create a fine art print. Meaning the image has the correct exposure, it's sharp, has good highlight and shadow detail, etc. However, mastering these technical qualities of a photograph is not enough to call it a work of art. Regardless of the medium used or mastery of technique, a work of art has to have a respectable composition - one that can stand up to close analysis.

For example, even though Ansel Adams could produce a photographic print that was technically superior to a Henri Cartier-Bresson image, Adams couldn't compete with Bresson's ability to create a visual masterpiece. Bresson was a highly trained draftsman, a brilliant designer, and understood how to apply classical skill-based art techniques to all of his photos. As a result of his knowledge and training in composition, Bresson produced a massive and consistent body of photographs in his lifetime - all of which were considered "works of art."

Photograph above taken in Cooperstown, NY
The photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates a true work of art.

Recommended Photography Videos:
- 2 Mistakes Photographers Make that Ruin Their Images Part 1
- 2 Mistakes Photographers Make that Ruin Their Images Part 2
- 2 Mistakes Photographers Make that Ruin Their Images Part 3
The photograph above by Paul Hassell was analyzed using the harmonic armature.
Among photographers, there is a continuous debate on how many photographs of a scene they should take. Some claim one image is enough, while others advocate for shooting more. However, one vital point to keep in mind is that a classically trained artist will rarely draw only one sketch before transferring their design to the canvas. They might do 3, 5, 10, 15 drawings, etc. Photographers should approach composition in the same manner by shooting a series of images (instead of just one). My suggestion is to read the book "Magnum Contact Sheets" and study how other photographers approach their subjects. This book will give you a realistic representation of how master photographers work.

Photographs above taken at an American Red Cross event
The Phi Rectangle (1.618) vs. The 1.5 Rectangle

Many articles written on photography websites claim that the Rule of Thirds grid is derived from the golden section rectangle (Phi 1.618). This isn't the case. Also, because many photographers only use the Rule of Thirds and aren't aware of any other design systems, they will stretch the Phi rectangle to fit the shape of a 1.5 rectangle to give them a better composition. Unfortunately, extending the Phi rectangle past its original physical dimensions changes the armature and the 90-degree intersecting diagonal lines. Simply put, once expanded, it's no longer a Phi rectangle.

Below is an example showing the difference between the Phi rectangle and the 1.5 rectangle. Even though the two rectangles' dimensions are close in size, notice the armature that each creates is drastically different.

In the example below, you can see how a photographer teacher incorrectly applied the Phi rectangle 1.618 (in red) to a Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph. This common error, which I repeatedly see on many of the popular social media-driven photography websites, is due to a lack of understanding and training in the basics of classical design techniques.
Camera Gear - Why I Shoot With a Leica

Even though I rarely talk about camera gear, it's important to briefly discuss the topic for those just starting their career in photography. As I have previously mentioned on my website and in this user's guide, the best camera in the world won't make you an artist, nor will it determine whether the photographs you take will be considered art.

Over the past 30 years, I've spent thousands of dollars on some of the best cameras and lenses ever made. And, of course, like most other photographers, I can appreciate the interest in purchasing a beautiful piece of camera gear. However, mastering the art of composition is the most crucial aspect of becoming a respectable artist. In truth, any photographer who is willing to invest time in practicing the design techniques mentioned in this user's guide will far exceed those that put too much emphasis on camera gear and image processing software.

With that said, if you're a photographer looking to purchase a new or used camera, I highly recommend Leica. Not only for the excellent craftsmanship but because the Leica lenses are superior to any other make or model of camera lens on the market. While I'm sure this statement might upset some Canon and Nikon users, by no means is it meant to be derogatory. In the past, I've used Minolta, Canon, and Nikon cameras on many occasions. And while I think all of these cameras are excellent, there is no denying the Leica brand's quality.

Currently, for all of my photography (personal and professional), I use the Leica M6 and M7 for film and the Leica MP240 and M240 for digital. For photographers that have an interest in purchasing a Leica camera, I recommend KEH.com. I have been buying used camera gear from them for over 24 years and have never been disappointed. For any questions about Leica cameras or lenses, please feel free to drop me an email at harmonicarmature@yahoo.com. I would be more than happy to discuss my experience using the Leica brand.
The Vertical Line in Composition

In a composition, the vertical line is more important than any other. The vertical line separates man (upright) from animal (on all fours), can stand alone without any additional support (unlike the horizontal and diagonal line) and demonstrates the direction of gravity.

To create a well-balanced vertical composition, the dominant vertical must be bisected by a horizontal or diagonal line to prevent the eye from quickly leaving the picture. For example, in the painting below by Kenyon Cox, notice how the dominant horizontal and diagonal line bisect the dominant vertical line in the composition.
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov demonstrates a strong vertical in the composition
The Horizontal Line in Composition

While the vertical is generally considered the figure painter's line, the horizontal is known among artists as the landscape painter's line. To create a successful design in a work of art using a dominant horizontal, a vertical or diagonal line must be introduced to balance out the whole. Without a strong vertical or diagonal line, the artist runs into the danger of slicing the image in half with no visual element to keep the viewer from leaving the frame too abruptly.

Painting above by Anna Rose Bain emphasizing the horizontal and diagonal lines derived from the harmonic armature.
The photograph above by Vladimir Spirov demonstrates how repetitive horizontal lines can create contrast with the strong diagonal lines of the composition.
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov analyzed using the harmonic armature
The diagonal line in Composition

The diagonal line in a composition is considered the most dynamic line and suggests movement along that path. Whether you’re working with a Dynamic Symmetry root rectangle or the harmonic armature, the diagonal line will start the construction of a design regardless of its complexity. Additionally, when you run two diagonal lines from corner to corner in a square or rectangle, these lines intersection will locate the center of the composition. The center of the picture is important because the eye will naturally seek it out.

In the painting above, by Elizabeth Gardner, observe how the two main diagonal lines and the central vertical lay the foundation for the overall design.

When you continue to break down the painting above into a simple grid, you can see how additional diagonal lines further support the composition.
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates a strong diagonal line.
In the painting above by John Singer Sargent, notice how he is using vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines for his composition derived from the harmonic armature.
Rabatment in Composition

In Kimberly Elam's book *Geometry of Design*, she refers to rabatment as the "lazy man's golden section." Rabatment is a design method that consists of overlapping squares in a horizontal or vertical rectangle, regardless of the dimensions, and the resulting horizontal and vertical lines give the artist a compositional structure to work within.

All horizontal rectangles have a left and right rabatment, and all vertical rectangles have a top and bottom rabatment. However, an important point to remember is that rabatment is only one design principle in a much larger system. Other design techniques must be employed to make this compositional method successful. In the image below, the root two Dynamic Symmetry rectangle demonstrates a rabatment on the left (green) and right (orange) hand sides.

George Bellows, “Both Members of This Club,” painting demonstrating rabatment used in composition
George Bellows demonstrating rabatment and the harmonic armature used in composition
Painting above by Jacques-Louis David demonstrating rabatment in composition.
Secondary Rabatment

When you overlap two squares in a rectangle, it creates another rectangle (vertical) in the center. For example, in the horizontal root two Dynamic symmetry rectangle below, notice how the overlapped squares create another rectangle (vertical in yellow and green) in the center.

Painting above, “Parnassus” by Nicolas Poussin, demonstrating secondary rabatment.
The term notional space means the rectangle that surrounds an element or object in a composition. In turn, this "notional space" rectangle allows the artist to simultaneously use the harmonic armature to place their subject in a visually pleasing location in their design. The painting below by Mandy Theis demonstrates how the artist can use notional space and the harmonic armature to create a masterful design.

Cast Drawing Course - Notional Space and Envelope (Video)
Painting above by Mandy Theis demonstrating the use of notional space and the harmonic armature
“For many years artists have been using strategies and techniques to make their drawings representational. Part of developing visual literacy for artists and budding artists is learning to recognize the overall shape of the object to be represented in the artwork. Knowing how to begin with a notional space helps with accurate proportion as well as placement of the composition onto the paper.

The notional space is the first step in establishing a frame of reference for where the object sits in space by touching the uppermost, lowest, furthest right, and furthest left points of the object. All these points determine where the notional space is placed.”

- The DaVinci Initiative Lesson Plan (3-5)
Gamut in Composition

Gamut in composition means the artist uses a limited number of directions in their drawing, painting, or photograph. By limiting the number of directions an artist uses, it won't overwhelm and confuse the viewer. Generally speaking, most master artists will only use 5-7 different directions in a work of art.

Painting above by Max Klinger demonstrating a gamut in composition
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates the use of a limited gamut.
Figure-Ground Relationship in Composition

Figure-ground relationship in composition is a technique master artists use to separate their subject (figure) clearly from the background (ground). By having a distinct separation between the subject and individual elements in a design, it makes it easier for the viewer to read the artist's intent. The best way to achieve an effective figure-ground relationship is to have a dark subject on a light background or a light subject on a dark background.

The painting above by Juliette Aristides demonstrates an effective figure-ground relationship.
Recommended Podcast
Notes on Art Education With Juliette Aristides

Click [here](#) to listen to the podcast
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov demonstrates an effective figure-ground relationship.
Photograph above by Vladimir Spirov analyzed using the harmonic armature
Placing One Eye Center in a Composition

One technique commonly used by master artists and photographers when composing a portrait is that they will place one eye of their subject dead center in the frame. It has been said that by placing one eye center, "the portrait tends to follow you around the room." In the photograph below by Steve McCurry, notice how the young girl's right eye is perfectly centered within the compositional frame. In this particular example, placing one eye center adds a dramatic visual effect because of the viewer's intense stare.
Many artists and photographers are often unsure whether they should choose a horizontal or vertical frame for their compositions. If you shoot medium format negatives or you're an artist that primarily designs in a square, the question is irrelevant. However, if you work with any dimensions wider than a square, meaning a rectangle, this dilemma needs to be addressed. Even though there is no simple answer, it's best always to consider your subject, the mood you want to portray, and the elements you want to lock into your chosen rectangle.

In the images below by Martine Franck and Erich Lessing, notice how they use their subject and the supporting elements within the frame to determine whether they shoot horizontally or vertically. For example, the top image of the girl lying on the ground is horizontal, along with the lines created by the row of cars. This repeated pattern of horizontal lines creates a visual rhythm.

The same can be said for the photograph in the second row. The figure is lying horizontally, echoing the top and bottom horizontals of the rectangle. In other words, the subjects and mood of the scene successfully fit the chosen format.
In the images below, notice how Erich Lessing uses vertical elements to tie in with the vertical frame he chose for his composition. In the top picture, the shower post becomes the dominant vertical. In the photograph below, the man is the dominant vertical, and the doorway and wall become a subordinate echo that creates a visual rhythm.
**Edge Distractions**

Being observant of the edges of your compositional frame is vital to the overall success of a design. Photographers, more than painters, have difficulty with edge distractions because, subconsciously, it's easy to block out the visual elements around the subject. For this reason, sometimes, when previewing images in post-production, you might notice details in your photos that you didn't see when you first snapped the shot. An effective way to avoid this problem is to visually scan the frame's edge before you decide on a final composition.

*Photograph above taken at a tattoo shop in Delmar, NY with a Leica M10*
Juxtaposition in Composition

Juxtaposition in composition is a technique used by many master photographers that combine several elements in a frame to create a surrealist effect or visual story. Henri Cartier-Bresson was famous for using this concept early on in his career. In the photographs below, notice how Cartier-Bresson and Nick Turpin use juxtaposition to create dreamlike and humorous narratives.
Simultaneous Contrast in Composition

Simultaneous contrast refers to how two different colors or values affect each other when placed side-by-side. In other words, the actual colors or values themselves don't change, but how we perceive them is altered.

Simultaneous contrast was first described by the 19th-century French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul in his book on color theory, “The Principle of Harmony and Contrast of Colors,” published in 1839. In his book, Chevreul studied color and color perception, showing how our brains perceive color and value relationships.

To give an example of simultaneous contrast used in composition, notice how Vincent van Gogh uses bright blues and yellow-oranges in the painting "Cafe Terrace on the Place du Forum, Arles" (below) to create an intense, visual push and pull effect.
Separating Elements in Composition

Separating elements (or shapes) in a composition allow the viewer to identify the subjects and their relationships to each other clearly. For example, in the image below by Constantine Manos notice how all the figures in the design are easily detectable due to the negative space in between each figure and element. There aren't any confusing overlaps, and you can determine the gender of the figures despite the fact that most of them are only shadows.

The figure elements are clearly separated
Echoing in Composition

Echoing is a technique used by artists to create recurring themes in their images by repeating patterns, symbols, or ideas in the foreground and background. Many street photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Elliott Erwitt, and Craig Semetko use this approach to create a surreal and sometimes humorous effect. In the image below by Craig Semetko, notice how he is echoing the couples intimately engaged with each other.

![Image of couples with echoing effect highlighted](image1)

A good example of using echoing in composition to express humor can be found in the photograph below by Elliott Erwitt. Notice how Erwitt echoes the shape of the bird with the shape of the water faucet. This photography technique is challenging to achieve and requires an artist with a great eye, a sense of humor, and a quick finger.

![Image of bird and water faucet with echoing effect highlighted](image2)
Dutch Angle in Composition

The term Dutch angle is a concept used in composition that refers to tilting the camera to place all of your pictorial elements on a diagonal line. Essentially, this design method produces an image that would be akin to tilting your head to one side. The Dutch angle concept became popular in the '80s and '90s and slowly died out over the last 15-20 years.

The biggest drawback to using the Dutch angle technique design is that you eliminate any chance of visual balance because there aren’t any horizontal or vertical lines to keep your eye contained in the picture. For example, in the photograph below by Garry Winogrand, notice how the image only contains diagonal lines. This lack of vertical and horizontal stability in the design forces the viewer to exit the photo immediately.

“A picture should be able to hang from its exact middle. A perfect composition will not cause the viewer to turn his head to a false angle in the picture. Pictures that stand the test of time demand this.” - Henry Rankin Poore
Framing Within a Frame

Using the composition technique of framing within a frame allows the artist or photographer to easily signify to the viewer the most essential element in the composition. Framing the subject (within a frame) can easily be achieved by using architectural structures like archways, doorways, tree branches, etc. Additionally, the artist or photographer can use light and shadow to frame their subject.

Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates framing within a frame
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrating a frame within a frame
The photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates how you can use the harmonic armature to apply classical skill-based techniques to a work of art.
An arabesque, also known as the "line of continuity," collects, organizes, and relates different elements in a composition. An arabesque can be used to tie in the background with the foreground or connect specific components together in a design to create a sense of unity. A well-designed arabesque will allow the viewer's eyes to move fluidly (without hesitation) through a composition in a drawing, painting, or photograph.
Image above, “The Rape of Europa” by Paolo Veronese, demonstrating the use of the arabesque
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrating the arabesque
Coincidences in Composition

A coincidence in composition is a technique that artists use to tie specific elements (coincide) together at point-to-point relationships to give the eye a visual path to follow. The more coincidences you have going in a particular direction, the quicker the eye will move along that path. Also, a coincidence allows the artist to direct the viewer to read their work in a certain way while at the same time emphasizing what they feel are the most critical directions in a design. For example, in the painting below “Girl on Stairs” by Laura Theresa Alma-Tadema, you can see how she uses coincidences effectively to relate and tie together specific elements in the design to give the viewer a feeling of unity and visual rhythm.

Radiating Lines in Composition

Master artists use radiating lines in composition to tie specific elements together from a single point, much like the spokes on a bicycle's wheel. Using radiating lines creates a sense of unity and allows the eye to smoothly travel within the work of art. In the drawing below by Edgar Degas, you can see how he uses radiating lines (which fall within an arc) to tie angles and elements together to give the illusion of movement. Also, notice how the angles in the radiating lines match the angles in the figure's limbs.
Painting above by Jim Serrett demonstrates the use of radiating lines.
**Aspective View in Composition**

Aspective view means you show the most identifiable parts of the subject, which provide the viewer the maximum amount of information from different angles. For example, in the painting below by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, notice how he simultaneously shows three sides of the female nude. Employing an aspective view in a composition also enhances the illusion of the third dimension on a two-dimensional surface.

![William-Adolphe Bouguereau, “Biblis,” demonstrating aspective view in composition](image)

**Gazing Direction in Composition**

Gazing direction in a composition is the direction a subject is looking at in a scene. When creating a design, the artist should make sure that the gazing direction makes sense to the frame's overall balance. For example, in the painting below, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" by Tiffany Vargas, notice how the gazing direction and the main subject's position (looking away from the other figures in the composition) enhance the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Also, observe how the dark subordinate figures on the right walk in the opposite direction of the main subject. These opposing directions create an even sense of balance and mood in the overall design.
In the painting below, by Henri Fantin-Latour, notice how the gazing direction and the angles of the subjects create a circular motion in the composition. This calculated visual path, designed by the artist in the preliminary drawing phase, creates dynamic energy in the piece and allows the viewer to move around the picture without hesitation.
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrates how the artist can use gazing direction to create a repeated direction
Photograph above by Paul Hassel analyzed using the harmonic armature
Pointing Devices in Composition

Artists use pointing devices (cues) to give the viewer a visual path to follow in their compositions. If designed correctly, visual pointers will allow the viewer to enter the frame at a predetermined location and move around the piece in a prearranged pattern and enable them to exit without hesitation or too abruptly.

The Difference Between Pointing Devices and Leading Lines

Many artists and photographers will often confuse pointing devices with leading lines. While on the surface they might seem similar, when you take the time to study the techniques more carefully, you will discover a clear distinction between the two concepts. The most noticeable difference is that leading lines tend to draw the viewer to one focal point, were as pointing devices move the eye around the entire image.

For example, in the painting below called “Martha and Mary Magdalene,” notice how Caravaggio uses gazing direction and pointing devices to lead the viewer along a predetermined path within the design. Unlike leading lines, these subliminal visual pointers keep our attention inside the frame for a more extended period of time.
Painting above by Caravaggio (analysis with the 14 line armature)
Painting above by William Quiller Orchardson demonstrating gazing direction and pointing devices used in a composition
Painting above by John William Waterhouse demonstrating the greatest area of contrast, figure-ground relationship, gazing direction, and pointing devices. Notice how all these design techniques move the viewer around the composition.
The Problem With the Rule of Odds

On The Art of Photography website, Ted Forbes says that "The Rule of Odds states that framing your subject with 2 surrounding objects (thus creating an odd number of 3) suggests balance and harmony visually. We tend to prefer balance and feel comfortable with these groupings of 3. Groups of 2 or 4 can sometimes create a sense of competition whereas the odd groupings tend to balance that a bit. This is a very subjective rule, but it does create balance." However, anyone with a little bit of knowledge of real design knows this to be false. Balance in composition requires a lot more thought and education to create a successful work of art. To learn more about balance in composition, click here.

In the drawing above, notice how the two figures on the right are spaced closely together and the figure on the far left is clearly isolated. This isolation is reinforced with gazing direction and strong angles of the tilted head.
Circular Composition

Circular composition is a technique used by master artists to tie together, in a circular fashion, specific elements in a drawing or painting. This design approach is one of the more easily recognized techniques utilized in a work of art. In the picture below, by Anthony van Dyck called "Christ Crowned with Thorns," notice how the figures are enclosed in multiple circles to carry the viewer's eyes around the canvas several times before exiting.

One important thing to note is that circular composition doesn't always have to be literal - it can be implied. In the painting below, "Whistler's Mother" by James McNeill Whistler, notice how the artist uses rectangular shapes to create a circular movement. The picture frames on the wall as well as the curtains on the left keep the viewer's eyes into the painting and solidify the intended circular composition.
Painting above by William Bouguereau demonstrating circular composition
The painting above designed by Conor Walton demonstrates the use of the harmonic armature and circular composition.
Aerial Perspective in Composition

Aerial perspective is a technique that artists use in their drawings and paintings to give the illusion of the third dimension on a two-dimensional piece of paper or canvas. This method will create depth and atmosphere in your art. The way to achieve this effect is to keep your values, contrast, and details closest to the viewer stronger, while diminishing the values, contrast, and details the further you go back into the picture.

The concept of aerial perspective happens naturally in the world around us due to particles of dust and moisture in the air. These dust and water particles reduce visual contrast starting from the foreground and continuing to the background. The further back our line of sight goes, the more muted our visual perception becomes. A good example of this natural phenomenon can be found on a foggy day after a rainstorm. Below are a few examples of how master artists use the technique of aerial perspective in their artwork.

In the painting below, "Cardsharps" by Caravaggio, notice how the two figures closest to the viewer have the highest amount of contrast, detail, and values. The man furthest in the background has muted values, lower contrast, and less detail to create the illusion of depth.
Figures in the background are muted

Painting above by Nick Alm demonstrating aerial perspective
The image above by Rebecca Carpenter demonstrates how a photographer can create the illusion of depth.
Ellipses in Composition

Ellipses used in a composition are regular oval shapes that connect and tie together specific elements to create a sense of unity and a fluid visual movement for the viewer. In the painting below by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, notice how he uses ellipses to create a circular rhythm in his design.
Enclosures in Composition

An enclosure in a composition unifies and ties together specific elements by locking them into simple geometric shapes. For example, in the below painting "The Morning Toilet" by Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, notice how the two figures, the woman and child, are combined by enclosing them in simple geometric shapes - the triangle.
Negative Shapes in Composition

Negative shapes in composition refer to the space that surrounds a particular figure or object. While many artists and photographers tend to use the phrase negative space, I find the word "shape" is better suited for fine-tuning your visual literacy skills. However, regardless of your terminology, it's essential to keep in mind that sometimes negative shapes can overpower the design's positive elements if the artist isn't careful. A delicate balance is required.

Painting above, “The Governess,” by Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin demonstrates the use of negative shapes in a composition

Painting above by Leon Kroll using negative space in a composition
Greatest Area of Contrast in Composition

The greatest area of contrast (GAC) in a composition is the location in the picture where the viewer's eyes are usually drawn first. Generally speaking, this is most often where the lightest light meets the darkest dark because profoundly contrasting areas tend to demand immediate attention.

In the book The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry, Michel Jacobs states, "If we were to take a layout and paint the principle point of interest a gray, and another part, which we intended to keep as a minor point of interest, a black surrounded by a white mass, the principle point of interest would not hold our attention.

It must always be born in mind that the greatest contrast in black and white value will attract the eye. Sometimes we put a very light highlight into a dark mass and sometimes the reverse - putting a dark mass into a light area: either one of these methods will hold the eye."

With this idea in mind, a common practice with master artists is to place the most relevant subject (or element) on or near the GAC to give the viewer a sense of priority. For example, in the painting below, "Judith Beheading Holofernes" by Caravaggio, notice how Judith is the primary subject and happens to be ideally located in the most luminous area of the painting. The white shirt contrasts sharply with the dark background and the shadows cast by her face.
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrating the greatest area of contrast
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrating the greatest area of contrast (analyzed using the harmonic armature)
Balance in Art and Composition

Achieving balance in a work of art is essential. While most people have an innate sense of balance when it comes to pictorial composition, trying to create or fix balance in a design requires knowledge and skills. I recently read a blog post from B&H photo where the author claimed that "there is nothing wrong with an unbalanced shot unless your goal is a balanced one!" I strongly disagree. A master artist will continually strive to find balance in their work, and intentionally creating an unbalanced drawing, painting, or photograph doesn't make any sense. After all, why would any artist strive to create bad art and an unsuccessful composition?

A simple way to analyze balance in a work of art is to take any picture, drive a vertical and horizontal line through the center finding the middle or pivot point, and weigh the various elements surrounding it. A well-balanced work of art will show a pleasant distribution of all the components around the central axis. In the painting below, by Johannes Vermeer called the "Procuress," notice how all the elements are balanced around the central division: The woman's right-hand acts as the pivot around all the other items in the painting.
Painting above by Johannes Vermeer (analysis with the 14 line armature)
Classical Balance in Composition

Classical balance requires equal measure on each side of a central figure or object as well as the top and bottom. For example, in the painting "Madonna di San Sisto" by Raphael Sanzio (below) you can see that the central figure (Madonna and Christ) are balanced by the two other figures on the left (Saint Sixtus) and right (Saint Barbara) as well as the two cherub below (on the bottom edge of the picture). Classical balance gives the painting equal balance across the entire image.

If you were to visualize the painting as a scale, it would look like the image below. If you notice, both items on each side of the scale are equal in weight. So you can say that it's perfectly balanced. For each item in the painting above, there must be a corresponding element that keeps the balance from tipping. Remember that every item in a picture has a degree of pulling power, much like a magnet. While each piece draws attention to itself, it takes away from every other item proportionately.
Photograph above by Paul Hassell demonstrating an effective balance of elements
**Steelyard Principle in Composition**

When the subject of a picture is on one side of the middle, it must be close to a pivot point. If it departs from the center, it must be balanced by a small weight element on the other side to create a visual balance. If you were to look at an actual scale, this is what the steelyard principle would look like visually (see below).

*Painting above, “Mr. and Mrs. Andrews” by Thomas Gainsborough, demonstrating the steelyard principle from the book The Critical Judgment of Pictures by Henry Rankin Poore.*
Final Thoughts

I'm sure after reading this user's guide, you might feel overwhelmed by the amount of information I've provided. However, one thing to keep in mind is that creating great art, whether it be a drawing, painting, sculpture, or photograph, isn't easy. If it were, it wouldn't have attracted great minds like da Vinci, Picasso, Degas, etc.

Furthermore, I hope that you continue with your studies, take the time to learn how to analyze master artworks, and bring those studies and knowledge into your own art. After all, there is no greater reward than producing a work of art that you can feel proud of for many years to come. Above all, never stop believing in yourself and always push forward. Mastering the art of composition will require perseverance and the desire to be the best. I know you have it in you.

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Painting above by Diego Velázquez