

COMPOSITION IN ART

'And after drawing comes composition. A well-composed painting is half done' Pierre Bonnard

com·po·si·tion/ kämpə 'ziSHən/Noun

1. The nature of something's ingredients or constituents; the way in which a whole or mixture is made up. 2. The action of putting things together; formation or construction.

Composition can be thought of as the ABC's of art. Composition refers to aspects of the physical *form* of the art object. In other words, as we analyze art we ask the question: What *elements* or qualities are used to build the *form* of the art work?

Composition in visual art is divided into two categories: the *elements of art*, and *principles of design*.

composition = elements of art + principles of design.

The *elements of art* are the individual basic qualities of visual art, such as line, shape, and color. Elements of art are like the individual words that make up a sentence.

Principles of design are like sentences. The *elements of art* are arranged in various ways using *principles of design*.

Composition uses elements of art and principles of design to create meaning in an artwork.

An artist uses them as tools.

The elements of art

- **Line:** a moving path created by a point on a surface
- **Shape:** an enclosed line
- **Volume and Mass:** volume--a shape in three dimensions, space within that form; mass--density of an object, actual or perceived weight
- **Color:** hues and their tints and shades, and their relationship to each other
- **Light:** the effect of light on an artwork; incorporation of light into the artwork; the use of light as an artistic medium; or the illusion of light in a two-dimensional artwork
- **Movement and Time:** kinetic art; actual or implied movement; time-based arts, the time it takes to experience an artwork, or the illusion of time passing or a moment in time
- **Space:** where an object is situated and how it relates to its surroundings; also, the illusion of three dimensions in two-dimensional art
- **Texture:** the surface quality of an object, or the illusion of texture in two-dimensional art

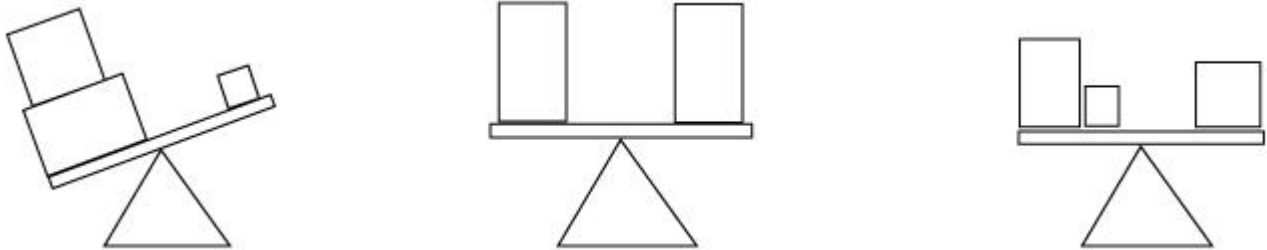
Principles of Design & Composition

Unity: Do all the parts of the composition feel as if they belong together, or does something feel stuck on, awkwardly out of place? The composition should combine into a cohesive whole, with theoretically every element related to and compatible with all others. This usually requires some consideration on the part of the artist, either by planning ahead, or arrived at through working on the painting.

Contrast: Strong differences between light and dark, or minimal, such as Whistler did in his Nocturne series. **Movement:** Used to draw the viewer's eye around the composition, as well as to create interest or an actual sense of visual movement in the work. There many ways to give a sense of movement in a painting, such as the arrangement of objects, the position of figures, the flow of a river. Used often with counter-movement, which neutralizes each movement, in order to create a stable composition or a dynamic quality.

Balance: Having a symmetrical arrangement adds a sense of calm, whereas an asymmetrical arrangement creates a sense of unease, imbalance. Distributing the "weight" of the forms in the composition, both horizontally and vertically, in terms of their size, shape and position. The aim is generally asymmetrical balance - meaning that the composition should be balanced, but not symmetrical (exactly the same on the left and right sides). For example, if you have two identical bottles, and place one on the left side of the composition and one on the right side in the equivalent position, you have symmetry. If you have one tall bottle on the left side, and two smaller bottles on the right, you have an example of asymmetrical balance.

Balance is way individual elements in your drawing or painting are distributed. Imagine your drawing as a scale: the items in your drawing should be balanced so that the scale doesn't tip one way or the other.



Unbalanced, Symmetrical Balance, Asymmetrical Balance

Unbalanced: In the first image above, there are too many heavy items on the left, making the composition unbalanced. Don't think about the actual weight of the items, but their visual weight. Large objects carry more visual weight than small objects.

Symmetrical Balance: The second image shows symmetrical balance. While the scale isn't toppling over in either direction, symmetry often makes for a less exciting visual composition.

Asymmetrical Balance: The third image shows asymmetrical balance, which is the most visually pleasing of the three. There's an odd number of items grouped together, which is more interesting than an even number of items. Two of the items are smaller and grouped together to balance out the weight of the third larger object.

Pattern: The placement of lines, marks or shapes into a rhythmical or regular arrangement; this often results in a two-dimensional quality to the form or to the painting as a whole, for instance in Matisse's paintings the surface ornamentation often becomes the design of the painting itself.

Variety: Having enough differences in size, color, shape, etc. to create visual interest.

Rhythm: In much the same way music does, a piece of art can have a rhythm or underlying beat that leads and paces the eye as you look at it. Look for the large underlying shapes (squares, triangles, etc.) and repeated color. This is placement of elements in the composition at intervals which, through regularity of spacing, or of the spaces between elements, creates a "rhythm" in the painting. Interesting rhythms in a painting can be quite effective.

Focus (or Emphasis): The viewer's eye ultimately wants to rest of the "most important" thing or focal point in the painting, otherwise the eye feels lost, wandering around in space. "Center of Interest." It is about dominance and influence. Most artists put it a bit off center and balance it with some minor themes to maintain our interest. Some artists avoid emphasis on purpose. They want all parts of the work to be equally interesting.

Repetition: As in music or poetry, the principle of repetition enhances the work. This can mean the repetition of a form into a "motif," as in Andy Warhol's soup cans, or it can mean the repetition with variation of a theme - of shape, color, image, etc. For example, repeating an element with a slight variation can be like an echo - or the repetitions can form a pattern within the work. Repetition, pattern and rhythm are often interrelated.

Quadrant-In this simple composition a dynamic balance is created by the changes in value from dark to light within the painting which is divided into fourths. There is not equal amounts of dark or light on each side.

Sequential-This simple composition is completely reliant on rhythms. Rhythm is important to all compositions in any discipline and visual art is no exception. The changing sizes and values lead a viewer across the page like changing notes lead a listener through a piece of music. Notice that there are not any two areas that are the same size. This helps to create an asymmetrical balance.

Asymmetrical-Also referred to as Dynamic Balance. This sort of composition relies on creating balance between the two sides of the picture. Think of it as you would a scale. On one side of the scale there is eight one-ounce cubes and on the other is two four-ounce cubes. They both weigh eight ounces, but look different. In a composition this could be shown as two large dark squares and eight light squares. Try to move the elements around the composition to lead the viewer around the composition. The use of one shape, color, line etc. is called repetition of an element and helps to create connections between objects in a composition. This compositional style also shows up in sculpture.

Emphasis - say "Center of Interest." It is about dominance and influence. Most artists put it a bit off center and balance it with some minor themes to maintain our interest. Some artists avoid emphasis on purpose. They want all parts of the work to be equally interesting.

Harmony - As in music, complementary layers and/or effects can be joined to produce a more attractive whole. The composition is complex, but everything appears to fit with everything else. The whole is better than the sum of its parts.

Unity - When nothing distracts from the whole, you have unity. Unity without variation can be uninteresting - like driving on a clear day through Western Kansas on the interstate. Unity with diversity generally has more to offer in both art and in life. Of course some very minimal art can be very calming and at times even very evocative. Even a simple landscape can have a powerful effect.

Golden Mean—Golden Ratio—Rule of Thirds -Divine Proportion- Fibonacci's Ratio

There is a special ratio that can be used to describe the proportions of everything from nature's smallest building blocks, such as atoms, to the most advanced patterns in the universe, such as unimaginably large celestial bodies. Nature relies on this innate proportion to maintain balance.

The Mathematics

Mathematicians, scientists and naturalists have known this ratio for years. It's derived from something known as the Fibonacci sequence, named after its Italian founder, Leonardo Fibonacci). Each term in this sequence is simply the sum of the two preceding terms (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc.).

But this sequence is not all that important; rather, it is the quotient of the adjacent terms that possesses an amazing proportion, roughly 1.618, or its inverse 0.618. This proportion is known by many names: the golden ratio, the golden mean, PHI and the divine proportion, among others. So, why is this number so important? Well, almost everything has dimensional properties that adhere to the ratio of 1.618, so it seems to have a fundamental function for the building blocks of nature.

Golden Ratio In Nature

Don't believe it? Take honeybees, for example. If you divide the female bees by the male bees in any given hive, you will get 1.618. Sunflowers, which have opposing spirals of seeds, have a 1.618 ratio between the diameters of each rotation. This same ratio can be seen in relationships between different components throughout nature.

Still don't believe it? Need something that's easily measured? Try measuring from your shoulder to your fingertips, and then divide this number by the length from your elbow to your fingertips. Or try measuring from your head to your feet, and divide that by the length from your belly button to your feet. Are the results the same? Somewhere in the area of 1.618? The golden ratio is seemingly unavoidable.

You must have noticed many times that the length of the legs (waist to foot) to the whole human body is at golden ratio. Even the length of your fingers and palm is in golden ratio. The length of face to the width of face, length of front left handed teeth (incisor) is to the left handed canine teeth, from waist to knee and knee to foot, are all in golden ratio. Moreover snail shell (golden spiral), division of pitch of DNA spiral diameter are all proportionate in the golden ratio. Golden spirals, triangles and other such geometrical shapes are all the derivations of golden ratio.

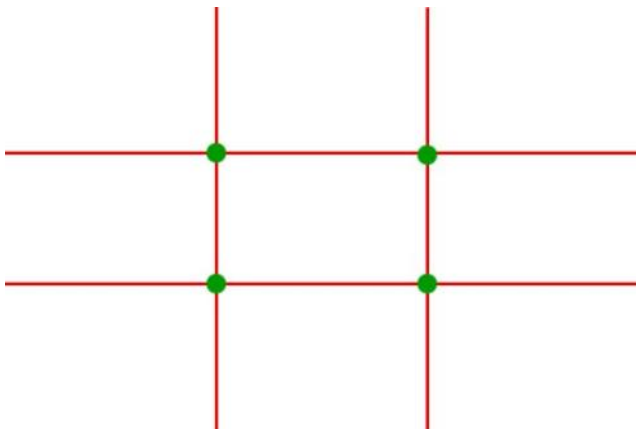
Why is the golden ratio aesthetically pleasing to human eye? Because the golden ratio is so abundantly visible in nature. The rhythmic pumping of ventricles in the human heart is at the golden ratio to one complete pumping cycle of all four chambers of the heart.

Rule of Thirds Definition

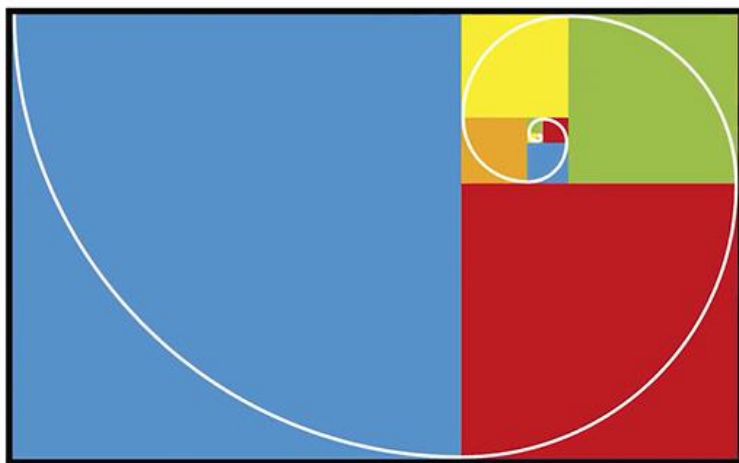
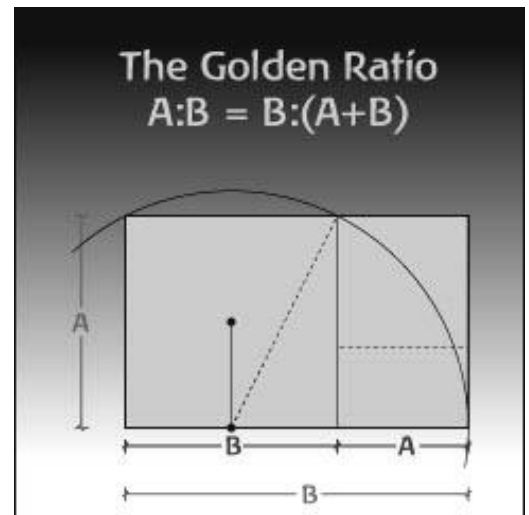
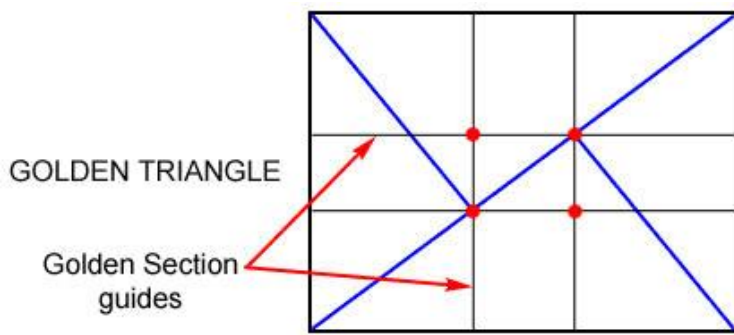
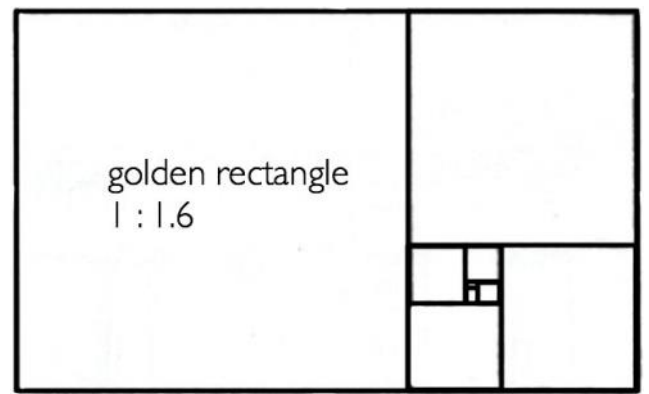
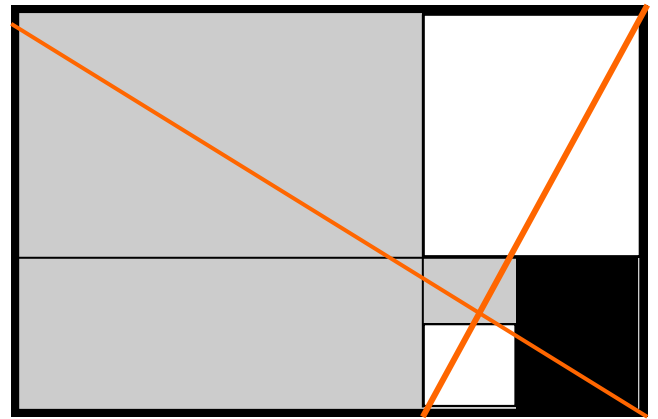
The rule of thirds is one of the main "rules" in composition and stems from the theory that the human eye naturally gravitates to intersection points that occur when an image is split into thirds.

In the rule of thirds, photos are divided into thirds with two imaginary lines vertically and two lines horizontally making three columns, three rows, and nine sections in the images. Important compositional elements and leading lines are placed on or near the imaginary lines and where the lines intersect.

Golden Mean—Golden Ratio—Rule of Thirds -Divine Proportion- Fibonacci's Ratio

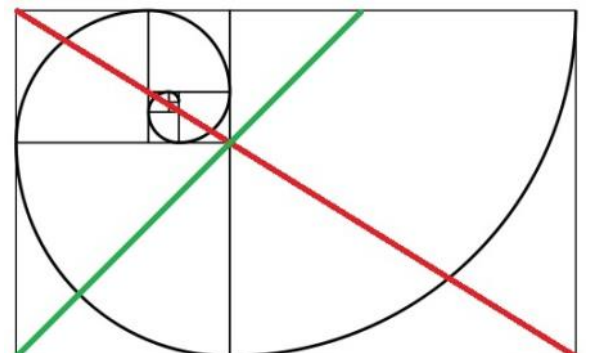


Rule of Thirds Grid: Locate your Subject near on intersection point.

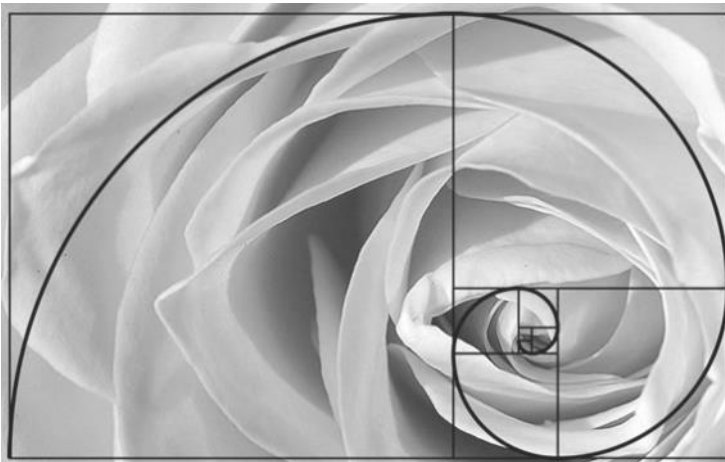
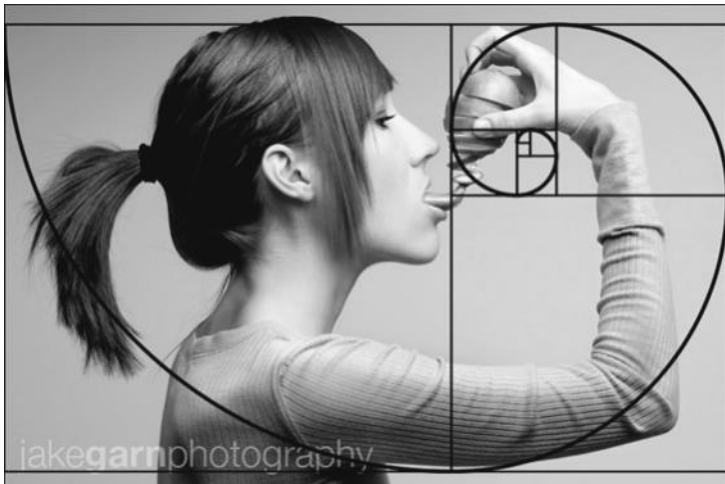
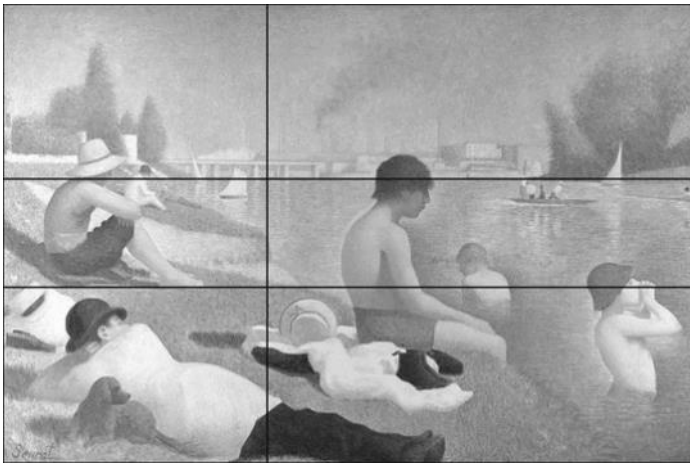
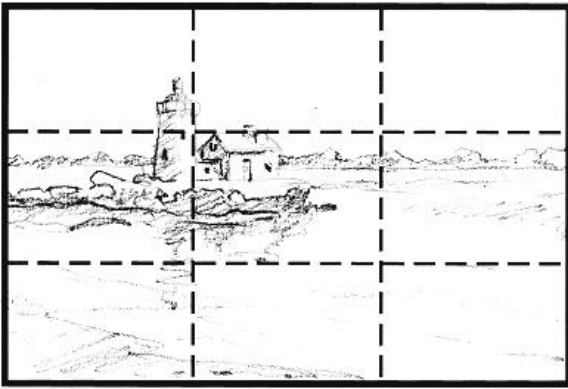


a b

$$(a + b)/b = b/a = 1,61803...$$



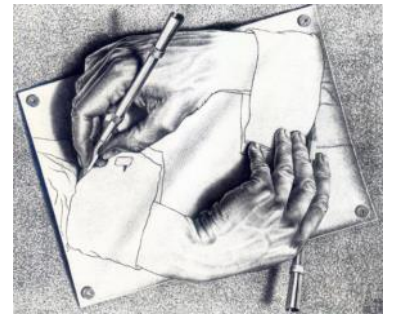
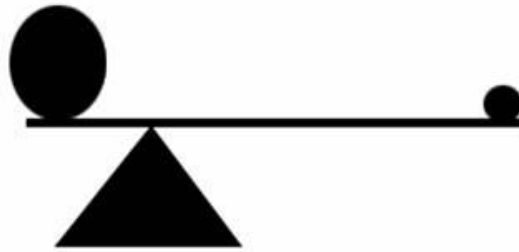
Golden Mean—Golden Ratio—Rule of Thirds -Divine Proportion- Fibonacci's Ratio



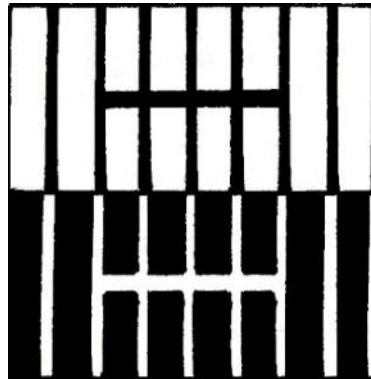
Unity



Balance



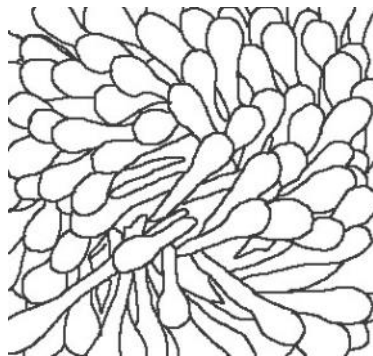
Contrast



Proportion



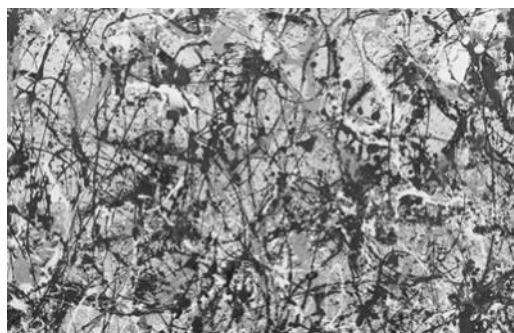
Pattern



Variety



Rhythm



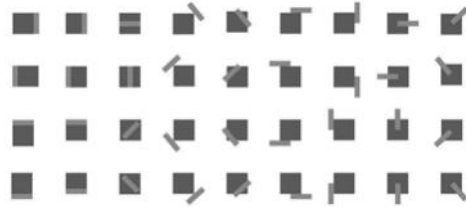
Focus



Repetition



Sequential



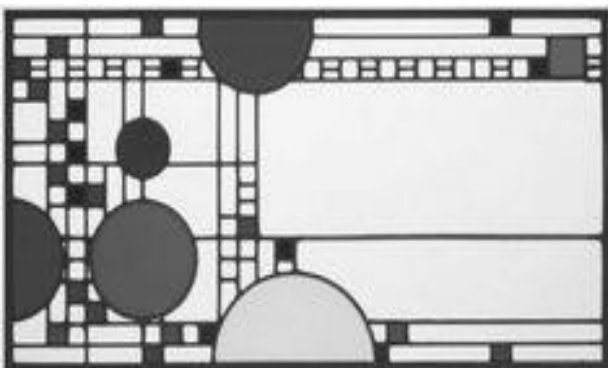
Quadrant



Movement



Assymmetry



visual blunders every artist should be aware of

1. Closed corner

When a shape completely covers any corner of the artwork, it visually isolates that corner from the rest of the painting.



2. Halved shape

When a symmetrical shape is cut in half by the edge of the painting it creates an uncomfortable, chopped-off feeling for the viewer.



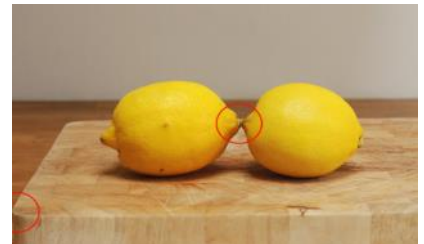
3. Tangent or Kissing (with edge)

When the edge of an object touches the edge of your painting it can create an awkward, crowded sensation for the viewer.



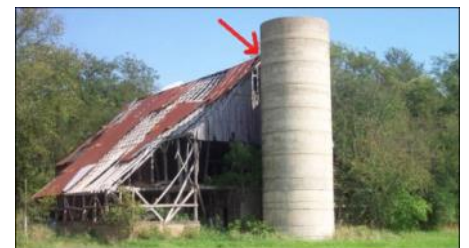
4. Tangent or Kissing (object with object)

When the edges of two shapes touch, the same "crowded" sensation is felt.



5. Hidden edge

When the edge of one object is hidden behind another object oriented in the same direction, the two may appear strangely joined together.



6. Split apex

When a vertical shape intersects or is directly aligned with the apex of another shape it causes a strange, unwanted symmetry.



7. Stolen edge

When the edge of one shape aligns perfectly with the edge of a second shape, it creates an ambiguous edge for both.



8. Antlers

When distinct vertical shapes appear directly behind an object, they often appear to be growing out of that object like antlers.



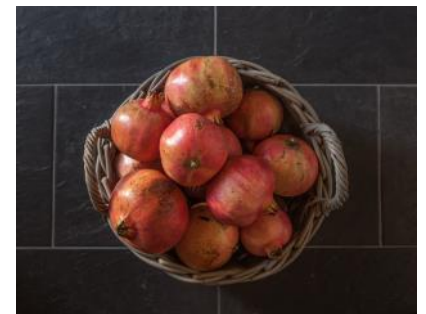
9. Skimmed edge

When the top of a vertical object ends at the bottom edge of a horizontal object, the two shapes may seem to merge.



10. Lumping Objects

When objects are lumped together they feel crowded and no visual interest



11. Scattering Objects

When there is too much space between objects so they do not seem related.



12. Cutting the Page in half.

When objects or shapes visually bisect the page in any direction.



Can you spot composition mistakes?

