

11 Steps to Creating Better Compositions

Strong composition in a painting is a characteristic that is not measurable or quantifiable. It is based on different elements and the relationships between them. If the composition in a painting is done well you don't notice it initially, you just know that the painting has something about it that is particularly appealing. But when a painting's composition is done badly (such as when the subject is floating in the middle of the canvas, or squeezed into a corner), the effect is very noticeable and the painting feels awkward.

Great compositions don't just happen by accident. They take planning, patience, and a knowledge of all the visual elements at your disposal. The great thing is, no matter how much or how little talent you have, you'll always be able to improve your art by sketching out a good composition before you begin.

1. Pick a good subject

This one might be a no-brainer, but you can't have a great composition without something good to compose! Obviously your composition depends a lot on what you're actually painting or drawing, so pick something interesting (visually at least), and always make sure that there's a good light source from one direction to give the object a strong highlight and shadow. I like painting stuff with a lot of color, texture, sharp angles, etc, since those will increase a viewer's interest. What excites you about your chosen subject? Is it the light, or color, or shape, or texture, or pattern? Keep your focus in mind throughout the painting to help you make compositional decisions.

Artist Mary Whyte writes:

The 3 Keys to a Living a More Creative Life

1. Don't focus on what you want to do. Instead, focus on what you want to be.
 - Then it will come naturally
 - You have to be excited about your art
 - Paint from your heart, not your head.
 - This is a story that needs to be told!
2. Instead of focusing on what you do well, focus on what you do differently.
3. Know what is essential to you.

"Show me something really special, God!"

Suggested reading: "The Art Spirit" by Robert Henri

2. Decide on the format and size of your painting.

Format refers to the size and shape of your canvas or other painting surface. Will it be horizontal, the traditional landscape mode, or vertical, the traditional portrait mode? Will it be square or some other shape altogether? How big or small will it be? This has a huge impact on how the painting is viewed. Do you want the viewer to come in close, as if you are showing them a precious gem or telling them a special secret? Or do you want the viewer to have to step back to take in your painting, feeling

diminished or enveloped by the grandeur or monumentality of it? The easiest shape to create a balanced composition is a rectangle.

How big do you want to portray your subject? The scale of art can change its entire feel, so it's important to have a purpose for making an object larger or smaller than life. For instance, a large, 6ft diameter painting that enlarges an object like a penny will have much more importance and meaning than a normal-size painting of a penny. By enlarging objects, you increase importance; reducing size usually diminishes importance. If you're not sure what size to make it, just keep it as close to life-size as possible.

The rectangular format: this is an absolute classic and extremely flexible format. When a rectangle is displayed with its shorter side across the top it is known as 'portrait format' and with its longer side across the top 'landscape format'.

The square format: This can work extremely well or very badly. You very rarely see a square old master painting. This is because it is harder to balance a painting that has lots of elements within, for example, a collection of figures in a landscape within a square format. It can look awkward very easily. However, using a square format for a more contemporary subject, an abstract or a minimalist seascape, can be very effective.

3. Use a viewfinder & create your own crop

Often the most powerful lines in a work of art are the four that most artists don't even think to control. The edges of your canvas or paper are responsible for containing and shaping your final work of art. Why settle for drawing inside somebody else's lines? Make your own! If you're planning on drawing a skyscraper, cut your paper to the height and width necessary for your subject. Painting a landscape? Why not make your canvas wider, for a panoramic view? This can be used to enhance practically every work of art, so make sure to think about it before choosing to use a standard canvas or paper. Use a viewfinder to isolate your subject and the key elements in a scene, check their placement and determine the format.

4. Think about placement and focal point

The way you place shapes on a 2-dimensional surface lend levels of importance, meaning, and balance to a piece. Centering your subject vertically, horizontally, or both will always give a greater sense of stability to your work, but might end up feeling a little boring or typical as well.

Letting part of your subject get cropped off by the sides, top, or bottom will usually add more visual interest, as will making a single object fill the entire space. Do watch out for objects that barely touch edges. This type of placement is awkward and should be avoided. Avoid letting lines divide your art exactly in half. This pulls the viewer out of the space you've created and will distract from the image.

The focal point is the thing that is the main subject of the painting. The focal point should draw the viewer's eye to it. (Also, don't try to include too much in one painting.)

Place the focal point on one of the 'intersection spots' from the Rule of Thirds, then check the other elements in the painting. Imagine a tic-tac-toe grid laid over your composition, such that the image is divided into equal thirds both horizontally and vertically. These are the Rule of Thirds lines. A strong composition is one in which one of the main elements of the image falls along one of these lines, or a focal point of the image falls in the area where the lines intersect. This simple rule works with any format (shape) of a painting - rectangular or square - and any size. It also works vertically and horizontally.

The Rule of Odds is based on the idea that it is more interesting and pleasing to see an odd rather than even number of items grouped together. Three objects, in particular, is naturally pleasing as it forms a triangle, which is a stable geometric shape. Images with an odd number of objects tends to feel more dynamic, and hence more interesting, than images with an even number of objects.

5. Consider viewpoint

Is your subject being portrayed as seen from eye-level, or from below or above? The viewpoint impacts the significance of your subject. An eye-level viewpoint creates a sense of connection between the viewer and the image; a view from below tends to monumentalize your subject, giving it importance; a very high viewpoint, also called a birds-eye view, is often used for landscape and gives a sense of vast space; a tilted view is very dynamic and can be used to convey movement and drama.

6. Control your lines

Any subject you choose will have at least an outline as well as other lines to give it depth, texture and detail. Our eyes naturally follow lines, so use that to your advantage in capturing the viewer's gaze. Let your lines flow to the center of your work, or to the spots that you want the viewer to look at. Angled or curved lines generally add more visual interest and movement, but too much can be chaotic. Horizontals and verticals lend strength, solidity, and impressiveness but can be boring.

Avoid letting lines divide your art exactly in half; like with a horizon line running through the middle, or vertically with a tree. This pulls the viewer out of the space you've created and will distract from the image.

7. How Are the Elements Spaced?

It's rare to find neat and orderly arrangements of elements in nature. Just think of the difference between a natural forest, where the trees grow any which way, and a plantation, where the trees are planted in evenly spaced rows. Varying the space between the elements in your composition, the angles at which they lie, and their sizes makes a painting more interesting.

8. Balance positive and negative space

Positive space is any object or shape that stands out from the background and registers to the eye as "something." Negative space is the background, or space

around objects. Usually it's suggested that you keep approximately equal amounts of positive and negative space to make a work feel more balanced. If you don't have enough negative space, your art may feel busy and crowded, but too much negative space can cause the work to feel empty and subdued.

On the other hand, a busy, crowded painting may be your intent, and using a lot of negative space often works well at focusing attention on the positive space that is there. You get to choose how you want your art to feel, so pick a balance that's right for your subject matter and style.

9. Are the Values Varied? Is There Contrast?

Visual art should have a full range of values from dark to light. Without bright highlights and dark shadows, an image will often feel gray or washed out, and will be less interesting. Darker areas in a predominantly light section will stand out and draw the eye, and the same is true for the reverse. Use this to focus attention but watch out for unintentionally doing so. Make sure you're not adding emphasis to a corner or edge of a painting if your focus is meant to be in the center.

10. Simplify distracting elements

Too many shapes, lines, or colors can distract or confuse viewers. If you want the viewer to notice or return consistently to one part of the painting, simplify the rest of it. Decide what the focus should be and if YOUR eye gets distracted, change it! Another way to simplifying your art is to get closer to a single object. Leaving out the peripherals and zooming in until the whole frame is filled with only one thing always brings attention where you want it. Of course, doing so will change your positive/negative balance drastically.

11. Choose your colors deliberately

Bold color will catch attention so use them purposefully where you want people to look. Any color that's all alone surrounded by another color will also stand out. Just like with contrast, this can happen unintentionally, so check for it in your composition.

Also be aware that warm colors (yellow, orange, and red) will make objects appear closer to the viewer, so use them to create depth and space. Cold colors (blue, purple, and some green) will cause objects to recede into the distance. When an object in the "back" of your painting is too warm, it'll distract from your overall composition and pull attention where you don't want it.

Wabi-Sabi: The Art Of Imperfection

Pared down to its barest essence, wabi-sabi is the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death. It's simple, slow, and uncluttered-and it reveres authenticity above all. Wabi-sabi is flea markets, not warehouse stores; aged wood, not Pergo; rice paper, not glass. It celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind.

Finally, I really stress for the artist to sketch at the beginning of each creative process so I'd always recommend drawing out different compositions until you feel as though you've exhausted every option. You also *could* take a bunch of photos and then alter them digitally to find the best composition for your subject. I am a true believer of "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

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