

COMPOSITION/DESIGN

Composition is how the elements of art and design, (**visual elements**)—line, shape, color, value, texture, form, marks and space—are organized or composed according to the **principles of art and design**—balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, unity/variety, proportion—and other elements of composition, to give the painting structure and convey the intent of the artist.

Composition is different from the subject matter of a painting. Every painting, whether abstract or representational, regardless of subject matter, has a composition. Good composition is essential to the success of a painting. Done successfully, good composition draws the viewer in and then moves the viewer's eye across the whole painting so that everything is taken in, finally settling on the main subject of the painting.

The Visual Elements

The visual elements are the building blocks in painting and comprise of:

Line: The visual path that enables the eye to move within the piece.

Shape: Areas defined by edges within the piece, whether geometric or organic.

Color: The different hues.

Texture: Surface qualities which translate into tactile illusions.

Tone: Tone is essentially a color which is not a pure hue, white or black.

Space: The space taken up by (positive) or in between (negative) objects.

Depth: Perceived distance from the observer, segmented into the foreground, background and optionally middle ground.

Principles of Art and Design

The principles of art (or the principles of design) are essentially a set of criteria which are used to explain how the **visual elements** are arranged in a work of art.

CONTRAST

Contrast is everything in art. Without it, you may as well leave the canvas blank.

It is one of the principles of art which refers to the striking difference between two elements. For example, there is a strong contrast when you place a vivid red next to a dull green, or a rough texture next to a smooth texture, or a hard edge next to a soft edge, and so on.

Detail contrast: a contrast between areas of detail and more bland areas.

Shape contrast: A contrast between different shapes (rectangles and circles).

MOVEMENT

Your paints cannot physically move, but you can arrange the paints in a way which gives the illusion or suggestion of movement.

One of the most effective techniques for creating movement in your painting is to use bold and directional brushwork. By doing this, you can suggestively push your viewer around the painting as you please. You could also suggest movement through repetition or pattern.

VALUE

Value Contrast: Refers to the contrast between light and dark colors. Every color has an underlying level of lightness. A saturated yellow is *lighter* than a saturated blue. So when you place a yellow next to blue, there is a contrast in hue and value.

Our eyes are very responsive to value contrast, much more so than hue or saturation contrast. That is why value is widely considered by artists to be the most important aspect of color.

COLORS

Hue Contrast: Hue contrast refers to the contrast between different colors on the color wheel. It is independent of value and saturation (though they often play a part). Colors which are on opposing sides of the color wheel have a strong contrast. These are referred to as complementary colors.

SATURATION

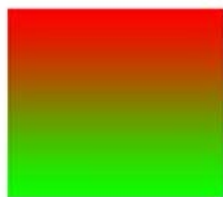
Saturation Contrast: Refers to a contrast between saturated and dull colors. For example, a saturated yellow against a dull yellow.

The image below demonstrates value contrast, hue contrast and saturation contrast in that order.

Value Contrast



Hue Contrast



Saturation Contrast



Many artists do not think about color contrast in terms of value, hue and saturation. Most of the time they take a very general approach to color. When you think of color contrast in terms of the three individual elements, you start to see so many more opportunities in painting. Instead of just contrasting a red color against a green color (hue contrast), you could bring value and saturation into the mix by contrasting a *dull and dark red* against a *saturated and light green*. Or you could create a very subtle contrast between different greens in your painting by keeping the hue the same and just altering the saturation.

Tip: When you change one aspect of a color (the value, hue or saturation), there are usually implications on the other aspects. For example, if you make a color lighter with white, you also reduce the saturation but the hue will stay roughly the same. When you make a color lighter with yellow, the saturation will not change as much but the hue will change. I like to think about color like a triangle of influence. When you change one side, always consider the implications it has on the other two sides of the triangle.

TEXTURE

You could create a strong contrast between smooth and rough textures. Here are some of the applications of texture contrast:

- To create a sense of depth in your painting by using rough texture in the foreground and smooth texture in the background.
- To create a stronger contrast between your lights and darks by using thick paint for your lights and thin paint for your darks.
- To paint the illusion of numbers and activity. More texture can indicate there is more going on.

SHAPES

Shape contrast could refer to rigid and organic shapes, or long and short shapes, or circles and rectangles.

BALANCE

Balance is concerned with the visual distribution or weight of the elements in a work of art. A painting could be balanced if one half is of the same visual weight as the other half. Or, you could have a small area of heightened significance which is balanced against a much larger area of less significance, like in the painting below.

EDGE

In painting, you have hard, soft or lost edges. You can help people navigate through your painting through the clever variation of the edges you use.

Our eyes like to follow hard edges, but if you only use hard edges (have no edge contrast) then your painting may appear jarring and cartoonish. If you only use soft edges, then your painting may appear hazy and out of focus (which is not necessarily a bad thing, if you are going for that look).

You can make a powerful statement by contrasting hard edges amongst mostly soft or lost edges.

DETAIL

One of the most common problems in painting is trying to capture every single detail, no matter how insignificant. By doing this, it becomes confusing as to what the key features are in your painting as everything is rendered with the same level of detail.

As a general rule, use more detail for key features and less detail for areas which are less significant. This sounds obvious, but it can be difficult to follow, especially if you are not completely sure what your key features are.

If you are not sure what to use detail on and what to simplify, then ask yourself.... "What am I trying to say through this painting? What are the most important features which I want to paint." Then simplify the rest.

PATTERN

Pattern is a very important design concept which refers to the visual arrangement of elements with a repetitive form or intelligible sequence.

Pattern is not always obvious. It could be a simple underlying notan design which dances between light and dark in some kind of sequence. Or it could be the use of similar color patterns throughout your painting.

EMPHASIS

Emphasis is a way of using elements to stress a certain area in an artwork. Emphasis is really just another way to describe a focal point in your artwork.

RHYTHM

Interval contrast: A contrast between long and short intervals. In the painting below, notice the variation in the lengths of the intervals between the trees. The interval contrast can be used to create a sense of rhythm in your artwork.

VARIETY

Variety refers to the use of differing qualities or instances of the visual elements. Variety can be used to break up monotonous or repetitive areas.

UNITY

Unity refers to some kind of connection between all the visual elements in a work of art. Like harmony, this is a bit of a vague term which is difficult to objectively use to analyze art.

HARMONY

Harmony is a bit vague compared to some of the other principles. Generally speaking, it refers to how well all the visual elements work together in a work of art. Elements which are in harmony should have some kind of logical progression or relationship. If there is an element which is not in harmony with the rest of an artwork, it should stick-out and be jarring to look at. Kind of like an off-note in a song.

You will usually be able to tell just from judgment if all the elements are in harmony. It will just look right. However, if the painting looks off, then it can be difficult to tell if that is because there is no harmony between the elements or if there is some other issue.

MARKS

Mark making is a term used to describe the different lines, patterns, and textures we create in a piece of art. It applies to any art material on any surface, not only paint on canvas or pencil on paper. A dot made with a pencil, a line created with a pen, a swirl painted with a brush, these are all types of mark making.

Mark making can be loose and gestural, or structured and controlled such as hatching. Most artists work with a variety of marks in every painting, but there are some styles, such as Pointillism, where just one type of mark is used.

It is easy to think of a mark as a building block for whatever you choose to create:

- A single mark creates a *dot*.
- An extended mark becomes a *line*.
- A cluster of marks become a *shape*.
- A series of repetitive marks become a *pattern*.

TAKING RISKS/BEING BOLD

The canvas is the best place where you can take risks and be bold. It is just a canvas!!!! The world will still exist whatever you do on that canvas!!

Being bold refers to not only color but to daring to try.

Non attachment

Be curious.

What's the worst that can happen?