

The Principles of Art

The principles of art generally deal with the way the elements of art are composed within the work of art. So, the principles of art typically deal with composition. The principles tend to be more fluid than the elements meaning that opinions vary on what the principles really are. If the elements of art are your tools, the principles of art are *how you put them to work*. It is where the style of art manipulates its substance. The **principles of art** represent *how the artist uses the elements of art* to create an effect and to help convey the artist's intent. The use of these principles can help determine whether a painting is successful, and whether or not the painting is finished.

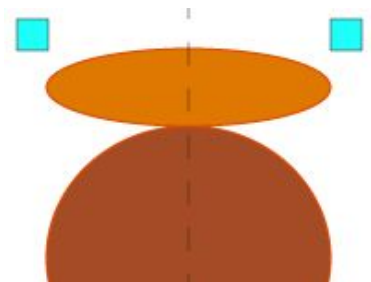
The artist decides what principles of art he or she wants to use in a painting. While an artist might not use all the principles of design in one piece, the principles are intertwined and the use of one will often depend on another. For example, when creating emphasis, the artist might also be using contrast or vice versa. It is generally agreed that a successful painting is **unified**, while also having some **variety** created by areas of **contrast** and **emphasis**; is visually balanced; and **moves** the viewer's eye around the composition. Thus it is that one principle of art can influence the effect and impact of another.

The eight principles of art are balance, proportion, unity, harmony, variety, emphasis, rhythm, contrast and movement. All of these principles clearly deal with the placement of elements within artwork.

The 7 principles of art

Balance refers to the visual weight of the elements of the composition. It is a sense that the painting feels stable and "feels right." Imbalance causes a feeling of discomfort in the viewer. A feeling of equality in weight, attention, or attraction of the various visual elements within the pictorial field as a means of accomplishing organic unity. Balance can be achieved in 3 different ways:

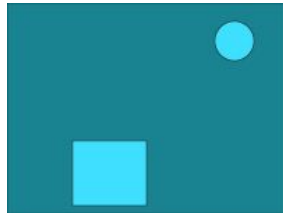
- *Symmetry* is a form of balance achieved by the use of identical



balance compositional units on either side of a vertical axis within the picture plane. Here, both sides of a composition have the same elements in the same position, as in a mirror-image, or the two sides of a face.

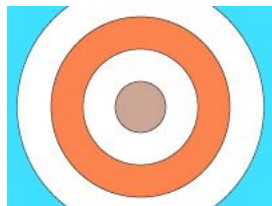
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- *Asymmetry* is a form of balance attained when the visual units on either side of a vertical axis are not identical but are placed in positions within the picture plane so as to create a “felt” equilibrium of the total form concept.



Here, the composition is balanced due to the contrast of any of the elements of art. For example, a large circle on one side of a composition might be balanced by a small square on the other side

- *Radial symmetry* is a form of balance that is even, radiating out from a central point to all four quadrants of the shape's constraining plane. Here, elements are equally spaced around a central point, as in the spokes coming out of the hub of a bicycle tire.



Contrast is the difference between elements of art in a composition, such that each element is made stronger in relation to the other. When placed next to each other, contrasting elements command the viewer's attention. Areas of contrast are among the first places that a viewer's eye is drawn. Contrast can be achieved by juxtapositions of any of the elements of art.

Negative/Positive space is an example of contrast. Complementary colors placed side by side is an example of contrast.

Harmony

Harmony in art and design is the visually satisfying effect of combining similar, related elements. For instance:



adjacent colors on the color wheel, similar shapes etc. It is the wholeness or completeness of a picture. Harmony in art is used by artists to tie a composition together and help the composition make sense as a whole piece of art. To create unity or harmony in art, artists arrange the similar components and elements of art to create consistency.

Emphasis is when the artist creates an area of the composition that is visually dominant and commands the viewer's attention. This is often achieved by



contrast. The principle of visual organization that suggests that certain elements should assume more importance than others in the same composition. In the below examples, notice how the smaller elements seem to recede into the background while the larger elements come to the front. Pay attention

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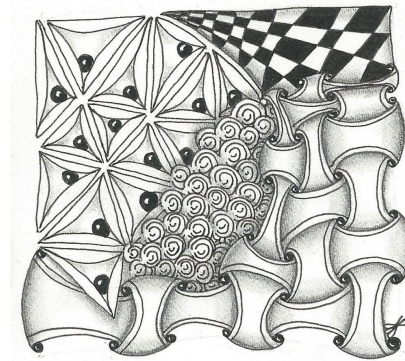
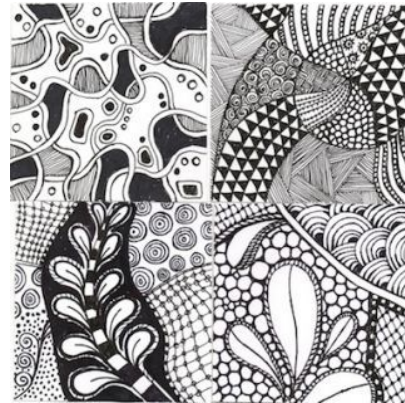
to both scale and value of the objects that recede and advance.

Movement is the result of using the elements of art such that they move the viewer's eye around and within the image.



A sense of movement can be created by diagonal or curvy lines, either real or implied, by edges, by the illusion of space, by repetition, by energetic mark-making. Without movement, artwork becomes stagnant. A few good strategies to evoke a sense of movement (among many others) are using diagonal lines, placing shapes so that they extend beyond the boundaries of the picture plane, and using changing values.

Pattern is the uniform repetition of any of the elements of art or any combination thereof. Anything can be turned into a pattern through repetition. Some classic patterns are spirals, grids, weaves. A popular drawing practice is Zentangles, in which an abstract or representational outline is divided into different areas, each of which contains a unique pattern.



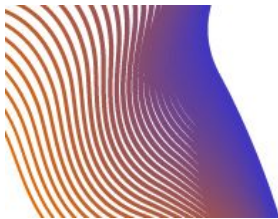
Rhythm is A continuance, a flow, or a feeling of movement achieved by the repetition of regulated visual information. It is created by movement implied through the repetition of elements of art in a non-uniform but organized way. It is related to rhythm in music. Unlike pattern, which demands consistency, rhythm relies on variety.



Regular Rhythm



Progressive Rhythm



Flowing Rhythm

Unity/Variety You want your painting to feel unified such that all the elements fit together comfortably. Too much unity creates monotony, too much variety creates chaos. You need both. Ideally, any artist want areas of interest in his composition along with places for your eye to rest. Variety is the complement to unity and harmony, and is needed to create visual interest. Without unity and harmony, an image is chaotic and “unreadable;” without variety it is dull and uninteresting. Good design is achieved through the balance of unity and variety; the elements need to be alike enough so we perceive them as belonging together and different enough to be interesting.

Proportion

Proportion is the principle of art that refers to relative size. Proportion is largely about the relationship of the size of one element when compared to another. When drawing or painting realistically, proportion is important. If the proportions are incorrect, then the resulting image will look less realistic or abstracted.

Alternatively, artists can use proportion for effect. By manipulating proportion, the artist can make his/her subject seem strong, weak, funny, mysterious, etc. We can exaggerate proportions to emphasize a meaning or an element within the scene. For example, a caricature artist distorts proportion in order to create a stylized image of the subject. Before going forward, let’s define proportion as it deals with visual art. Proportion does not refer to overall size, but rather the relationship of the sizes of two or more subjects or elements. In art, the size of an element is referred to as scale. For example, a basketball and a baseball are different in scale but share the same in proportion.



Composition in Art

Composition is harder to teach from scratch because it's more about the finished artwork. When all the pieces come together and form a whole you get a composition.

The overall layout of a piece is very important. Artists often consider things like [the rule of thirds](#) or the infamous [golden ratio](#). Neither truly defines a composition, but they can both go into your decision making.

Your choice of composition is defined by size, angle, perspective, and attention on foreground/background objects. As you can tell this fundamental skill really gets developed later in your artistic progression.

