



Build a creative habit while exploring art theory fundamentals

# COMPOSITION



# ART



# LAB

written and designed by **Amanda Hinton**

edited by Jennifer Arzt and Guta Galli



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Composition concepts interspersed with opportunities to critique a great work of art.

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Composition Art Lab provides interesting, inspiring, and informative resources to help you build a creative habit while exploring art theory fundamentals.**

Artistic expression is integral to what it means to be human. Whether you are composing a poem, painting, song, photograph, etc., at its loftiest, creating art is a means for allowing others to sneak an intimate glance into our soul, to make them feel what we need them to feel.

We create because the act of creation is incredibly rewarding. The thrill of pressing the shutter button at the precise moment that captures a perfect image, that satisfying squeeze of fresh paint on the palette, the scratch of a nice pen along the tooth of the paper.

## WHAT IS COMPOSITION?

Composition refers to the way different components are structured to form a whole. The arrangement of the constituents of an image should draw the viewer in, then guide their focus to specific visual elements, applying (or breaking) rules and conventions regarding composition, storytelling, and design. An image that is visually arresting and well-structured will more effectively convey a narrative, evoke a feeling, transfer information, or provoke delight.

## VISUAL LITERACY

Understanding compositional concepts provides the framework for thinking through what we are seeing, analyzing why we have the reaction we do (the like/dislike emotional response), formulating ideas about the artist's intent, and finding meaning.

Understanding the terminology used to analyze and discuss art breaks down the language barrier and moves people past the defeating idea that art is “not for me”. These intellectual tools will help practicing artists decide if their work is finished and strong, and if not, how they can move forward.

## THE STRUCTURE

The Composition Art Lab consists of thirty core concepts. Each one presented with an easy-to-follow explanation, visual examples, and two assignments that demonstrates how to actually use the principle in your work. The quick-take exercise can be completed in 5-30 minutes; the portfolio-builder is a more in-depth project that can be completed in your favorite art medium.

## WHO IT IS FOR

Conceptual fundamental understanding is a great foundation for beginning artists, but equally valuable for advanced artists who have rely on their technical skills more than conceptual knowledge.

This book is geared towards people who want to practice art—including painters, photographers, illustrators, makers, graphic designers, etc.—but is also great for people who want to learn more about experiencing art and reading images.

## START YOUR ART HABIT

The single greatest thing you can do to improve your art is to build and maintain an art practice, to develop the grit and habits that push you to create EVERY. SINGLE. DAY.

Try using this book as a bootcamp or crash course: read one concept a day and complete the quick-take. Then come back and work through the longer projects that speak to you. In two months, you will have built an art habit that is a rewarding part of your daily routine. Bonus points if you work alongside an accountability partner.

## GO THEN KEEP GOING

Continue studying, creating, and looking with fresh eyes at everything around you. Think about what you see in the advertisements you're inundated with, in museums, in your own sketchbook. What works and what doesn't? Use those insights to improve your work, push yourself further, and inspire new risks to take. Never lose your sense of curiosity. Never stop learning.

# STUDYING ART FUNDAMENTALS

## What are Art Fundamentals and Why Study Them?

Art Principle Postulate:

There are concepts that are foundational to our understanding and experience of making and viewing art.

I learned in high school—and still see the same list shared today—that there are primary elements of art: line, shape, form, value, space, texture, color. Plus, there are elements of design that describe how those art elements are composed: unity, balance, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, pattern, proportion. And there are important themes explaining how we create and perceive, like composition, color theory, historical and cultural context, and storytelling basics; each with many component concepts.

These concepts are tools to for analyzing the art and images you see around you, giving you the framework to think through why you do or don't like a piece of art and to form ideas about what the artist was trying to convey. And just as importantly, they provide the key for improving your own work. Without a system and tools for evaluating what we see, how can someone know if their

own artwork is complete or will have the effect they want it to? Without a study of essential concepts, it's difficult to examine and express why art makes one feel the way it does, which is key for being able to create impactful, powerful work.

Even artists that don't consciously scrutinize each choice in terms of executing on these fundamentals, are likely still using these principles intuitively. Similar to when one finds they have driven their car home, but can't remember every stop and turn along the way.

Familiarity with these first principles, structures, tropes, and significant concepts can take away the barriers that lead people to feel confused or isolated by art, the belief that they “just don't get it” and never will. This knowledge and these skills are critical for being able to interpret and deeply engage in art. Having a common language allows you to communicate about and critique works of art made by you and other artists. Critique is an incredibly powerful way to push your art forward if you know how to receive, digest, and participate in it.

Obviously, art can resonate with us, evoke an emotional response or a feeling in the gut, even if we haven't read about compositional framing, color interaction, and line quality. And, the answers to “what is art” and “is this art good” remain subjective, regardless of education. But there are a (large!) set of concepts that are inherently important for how we perceive, discuss, and make art.

# HOW TO CRITIQUE

## Steps for Critique: Translating the Visual into the Verbal

Critique uses language to describe, analyze, and interpret art. Begin by observing the piece with care and attention, respecting the work and the artist. Analyze what you are seeing, how the piece is composed, and each of the artist's choices. Determine context for the piece; then consider what the artist is saying. Hold your personal feelings and emotional response to the piece until the final evaluation.

Take a few minutes to review [Barrett's Principles of Interpretation](#), which provides good guidelines for the mindset needed for giving and receiving critique.

### 1. DESCRIBE

Look with a naive gaze and list what you see. State the obvious. This step is completed without judgement.

- What type of work is it: painting, photograph, sculpture, etc.?
- What medium is the work in: carved marble, watercolor on panel, black and white giclée?
- What elements are included: figures, objects, shapes, colors, etc.?
- How are elements arranged?
- Is the work abstract, representational, or something else?
- What other characteristics of the work do you observe, such as scale, tools, process, etc.?

### 2. ANALYZE

Outline the formal aspects of the piece, how the elements are composed, and what choices the artist has made. Look at the piece through the lens of each compositional concept.

- Which compositional concepts are at play in the piece, and how?
- How do the characteristics described in the first step impact the viewer's perception?

- What is the subject or focal point?
- Why was a certain technique used, and why not another one?
- What artistic choices stand out, and what is their effect?

### 3. CONNECT

Look for symbols and references. Finding connections does not imply that the piece is unoriginal, but places it in dialogue with other works and culture itself.

- What does the piece remind you of?
- What immediate connection does your mind make?
- Does the piece relate to other works of art?
- Are the elements, process, or artistic choices symbolic or allegorical?
- What broader context does this piece reside in: how does the piece relate to specific times, places, or cultures?

### 4. INTERPRET

Use your description, analysis, and connections to suggest possible meanings for the piece.

- What is the piece about?
- What feelings does the piece incite?
- What ideas are communicated by the piece?
- Is there a message, and if so, what is the message?
- What are the artist's intentions?

### 5. EVALUATE

After the above steps are complete, use what you have outlined to inform your opinion. Describe your aesthetic response. Evaluations are subjective.

- Is it art?
- Is it relevant, what are its merits, where is there value?
- What are the weaknesses and strengths of the piece, and why?
- What rubric or criteria are used to make the evaluation, and why?

# SUBJECT & SPACE

**The figure or positive space is the subject of the image; ground or negative space is the surrounding area.**

## THE CONCEPT

The subject is the topic of the image—it can be an object, a person, a place, an idea, a feeling, or a group of those. For the artist, the subject is what is being depicted and expressed, whether from their inner or external realities. For the viewer, the subject is what is perceived and experienced.

Positive space is the area containing the subject. It may be solely the subject, such as a headshot on a solid background, but may also include other elements that are touching the subject or are in the same focus, like two people and the bench they are sitting on, and may also include other supporting points of interest in the image.

Appropriate white space gives the subject room to shine, keeps the image from feeling cramped, provides a neutral, contrasting backdrop, and works to balance and complement the subject (like a solid shirt for a bold patterned necktie).

However, taken to the next level, negative space moves beyond being simply the empty area around the subject to work as a strong element in its own right. The

white arrow in the FedEx logo, intriguing shadows, the shapes of blue sky peeking between clouds, or images where positive and negative spaces are interchangeable.

### Imagine:

- A single object, such as the Statue of Liberty, isolated against a solid background, like the sky
- A really cramped newspaper, book, or magazine with barely any room between columns of text or as margins along the edge - there is very little white space
- When you see an image and think the subject “has room to breathe”
- A bustling Indian bazaar full of colors, people, and market stalls: so high-energy that you don’t know where to look next
- Watching a kite surfer at the beach

Gestalt theory explores how our brains interpret what we see, the whole and the parts. In gestalt terms, the figure is the positive space, the thing the viewer is pulled to; ground is the negative space.

Figure-ground perception describes how we organize visual information based on contrast—strongly differing colors like a red poppy in a field or opposing textures such as a rusty anchor on a sleek boat—and visual cues including size, shape, clarity, and proximity.

In general, positive space attracts and holds attention. Negative space doesn’t necessarily mean an area that is plain, blurred out, or literally empty - negative space and backgrounds can be busy. Although negative space is usually used for rest, as a stage, as visual silence, to define the borders of the subject, and to fill the in-betweens, negative space can also do the same things positive space does. It is line and form, shapes and texture, just like positive space. And as such, it can do anything, from enhancing a subject, to disrupting the focus on the subject, to creating rhythm, tension, noise, etc. Either figure or ground can be dominant, and the perception of which is which may switch as the image is viewed longer.

Often portrait artists will blur the background, make it roughly a solid color, or

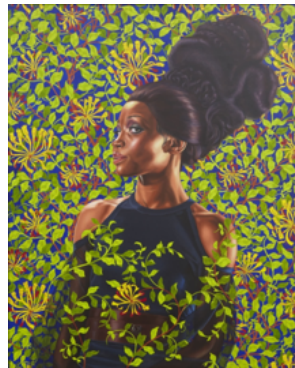
otherwise tamp it down to not compete with the figure. A strongly contrasting background, such as a silhouette against a bright clear sky or a lightly colored subject on a dark background, makes an obvious boundary between subject and space. The amount of negative space on a portrait creates different effects: as empty space goes from expansive to minimal, the subject seems lonely, then distant, then comfortable, then intimate, then unpleasantly close.

## EXAMPLES



The bird is the subject. The bird and branch are the positive space; the out-of-focus green area is the negative space. The empty space serves as a stage for the subject—it is just backdrop, but it does flow in and out of branches in an interesting way.

*Ananth Ramasamy, 2018*  
*Brown-Throated Sunbird Hangs from a Branch in Singapore*  
*National Geographic*



Wiley recasts the figures of power seen in western art and classical portraiture onto opulent, colorful, botanical patterns, which frequently come into the foreground, atop the subject. The ornate background does not overshadow the subject; whose realistic portrayal contrasts with the wallpaper-like background.

*Kehinde Wiley, 2012*  
*Shantavia Beale II*  
*private collection*



The blossoming, soft negative space defines the outlines of the crisp, stark white subjects. The viewer's eye flits from plane to plane as well as lingering on the textures and colors of the watercolor washes.

*Yuliya Martynova, 2012*  
*Connected I Farewell Tria in copper*  
*private collection*

## QUICK-TAKE EXERCISE

Choose five images from magazines, online, your past work, etc. Print them out or mark them up with a digital tool. Fill in all of the negative space with black (a big permanent marker or opaque paint if using paper). You can also fill in the positive space with white, if you like. Notice how the ground surrounds and where it moves into the figure. Which photo handles negative space most effectively and why? If you observe the blacked-out images rotated 90 degrees then upside down do your decisions change? Turning the image can help you see the negative space as abstract shapes rather than the outline of the subject.

## PORTFOLIO-BUILDER PROJECT

Select a subject - it could be your friend, a piece of fruit, the feeling of your first crush, anything. Create an image with your subject on a solid or blurred background. Capture this state of the image, either by setting it aside and starting the next one fresh or by taking a photo for later comparison. Next, create a similar image with a more complex background. What choices can you make about any additional elements and the negative space that build support for the subject without overwhelming it? Is there a threshold where the negative space overcomes the subject?

Related concepts:

- Focal Point & Emphasis
- Balance
- Variety & Contrast



# PICTURE PLANE

**The picture plane is the two-dimensional surface that contains the image; it is bounded by the frame.**

## THE CONCEPT

In representational art and photography, the picture plane is like a window through which you are looking at what is depicted in the image: a projection of the three-dimensional world onto a flat surface. In painting, the picture plane is the surface that is worked upon. In photography, it is what is contained within the frame, the perimeter of the photo.

To crop an image is to reduce the picture plane by bringing in the outer boundary, trimming off content along the edges. An artist crops to create the composition from a larger image, remove unwanted or distracting elements, to bring attention to specific element/s, to change the image's aspect ratio (comparison of width to height) or orientation (horizontal landscape or vertical portrait), to alter how the elements interact on the picture plane, and to convey a feeling or message.

Photographers may compose their shot with the viewfinder or live view panel of the camera, intending to use the photograph exactly as captured with the shutter snap. Or they may shoot wider to allow

more flexibility for cropping and determining the final frame later, giving them a chance to implement compositional techniques like rule of thirds or centering the subject. The choices a photographer makes about where and how the camera is pointing is called framing.

### Imagine:

- How you might compose a 4-inch square image compared to a billboard sized image
- Digital zoom on your smartphone camera - rather than getting closer, you are actually cropping out more and more along the sides
- Trying to pick a person out of a crowd versus if the crowd dispersed and the person was standing apart
- One shot from a movie that always stuck with you

Artists—whether using a photo reference or painting from real life, such as plein air, still life, live model—can work out what they would like in the picture plane by doing a series of thumbnail drawings,

value sketches, or reference photo cropping experiments before beginning. This prep work helps the artist determine where items should be creatively repositioned, added, or removed to create a strong composition.

Using a viewfinder will focus your attention on a smaller area. You can cut two cardboard L-shapes, use a pre-cut mat or picture frame, buy one, build one, or use finger frames. Cropping tools help you quickly try out many potential framings, ignore extra visual noise, and better judge spacial relationships among elements.

Where elements are placed in the picture plane create expectations and interpretations: viewers think high elements will fall, believe elements along the bottom of the frame are heavier, and feel elements being pushed towards negative space.

The picture plane is most often a rectangle, though that is not always the case. Round works used to be more common, including the circular Renaissance tondos, oval bubble portraits, and miniature portraits for locketts. Esphyr Slobodkina

Painted a series of oval abstracts. Street and graffiti artists are often constrained or influenced by the shape and size of the available surface. And Elizabeth Murray contorted her canvases into a variety of unconventional shapes.

Note, the term picture plane is also used to describe a theoretical vertical plane in between the foreground and background of a three-dimensional representation. But here, picture plane refers to the pictorial surface, bounded by the edges of the image.

## EXAMPLES



The figure in the painting is of a woman with polio that Wyeth witnessed crawling with surprising strength of will. The expansive field between her and the house, positioning of the figure, soft palette, and exquisite rendering makes this painting feel melancholy and mysterious. The sense of space is powerful.

*Andrew Wyeth, 1948*  
*Christina's World*  
*Museum of Modern Art*



In her “film stills” series, Sherman creates publicity shots for fake movies. In this one, the heroine looks up and out of the frame—strong, perhaps defiant, a little uncertain, hopeful. The familiar style of the photograph makes us question true identity versus fictional character, transformation for the pleasure of others, and the portrayal of women in media.

*Cindy Sherman, 1980*  
*Untitled Film Still #58*  
*Museum of Modern Art*



This monumental fresco, the first of Rivera’s in the US, shows the spirit of Califia surrounded by examples of the state’s prosperity. The mural fills the space: extending thirty feet from each step up the height of the wall, California’s achievements continuing onto the ceiling.

*Diego Rivera, 1931*  
*The Allegory of California*  
*The City Club*

## QUICK-TAKE EXERCISE

Download one of the two photographs linked below and crop it in five new ways:

[Ballet N.Y.C. 1938](#)  
by André Kertész

[Czechoslovakia. Slovakia. Okres Hnusta. 1967. Wedding.](#)  
by Josef Koudelka

You can use a smartphone or image editing application, or print it out and use a viewfinder. Experiment with rotating the photo a few degrees, adjusting the aspect ratio, and zeroing in on specific parts of the image. Try small modifications and radical changes. Change the subject. Think about how the story differs as you change the picture plane.

## PORTFOLIO-BUILDER PROJECT

Compose an image with the subject at a distance, a wide shot, with an environment full of other elements. When your image is complete, experiment with different croppings to refine your composition, by cutting, using a viewfinder, or by manipulating a digital version. Does your message come across more effectively in one of the cropped images or in the zoomed out format, why?

### Related concepts:

- Subject & Space
- Viewer & Viewpoint
- Focal Point & Emphasis
- Unity & The Whole

# VIEWER & VIEWPOINT

**The viewer is the audience witnessing and interpreting the image. Artists make decisions—including where to place the viewer relative to the artwork itself—that affect perception and analysis.**

## THE CONCEPT

The viewer's perspective, or point of view, of the image determines how the viewer places themselves relative to the subject and how they perceive the relationships between all the elements of the image. The mood and message of an image can be changed by altering the height or angle from which the viewer sees the subject (which can skew the proportion of the subject), what is in front of or behind the subject, the background, the subject's size, proximity, lighting, and level of detail, and any other shift that impacts what information the audience can collect.

How much setting information the artist chooses to include affects how the viewer reads, interprets, and responds emotionally to the image. When the image is zoomed out, placing the audience farther away from the subject, the viewer has a larger scope of reference for the context of the image and the relationship of the subject to the surrounding objects, figures, or situation. The viewer can see more about the environment and orient themselves as an outside observer. The depth of the image can create distance

and more rational observation of the subject. When the image is zoomed in, the viewer can easily read and connect with the emotional state of the subject. Up close, the viewer can feel like they are seeing the subject through the artist's eyes, like they are intruding or lurking, or like they have gotten to know the subject by having access to the details or an intimate glimpse.

### Imagine:

- Seeing a postcard-size reproduction, then seeing the full-scale 10'x10' painting - scale and in-person viewing have a huge impact on the experience
- Comparing a child's eye-level view of a scene to an adult's perspective
- Looking over a painter's shoulder onto their hands in action versus seeing the painter from some distance
- Seeing a subject so close that the details become patterns or shapes and the subject's identity is obscured
- An image with hands or feet along the bottom of the frame, like a first-person shooter video game where "your" hands are in the foreground

In art, the viewer is a complex topic; many external factors determine how we view an image. Being told something is or isn't art, seeing an image in a museum or context that imbues it with value, or if the artist is known or unfamiliar impact the viewer's reaction. Those preconceptions affect how long people are inclined to engage with an image, influence whether they search for significance and meaning, and change their aesthetic response. Beyond that, individuals have differing tastes, education backgrounds, and personal reference points shaping their perception, appreciation, and understanding of images being viewed. And finally, the viewer cannot truly know the mind of the artist or the original meaning firsthand. Critique and consideration, paired with our personal response, are our tools for getting as close as we can to understanding. Who creates the meaning of the image, the artist, the viewer, or both?

Not all art is intended for others; some works are made only for the artist, or for the sake of the process. Yet still, when we view it, we become participants.

## EXAMPLES



This sensuously Frenchified harem woman looks directly at the viewer who is positioned quite intimately within her space.

*Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 1814  
Grande Odalisque  
Louvre*



This atmospheric watercolor is more about the dreamy, romantic feeling created by this grand landscape rather than the distant subject illuminated on the hilltop. Turner passes along his own experience of the scene's natural beauty and its magical light.

*Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1798  
Norham Castle, Sunrise  
private collection*



The close positioning of the taxi, which takes up a quarter of the frame, puts the viewer in the crosswalk (maybe tense from danger or relieved by a near miss). There is enough background information for the viewer to orient themselves in the setting.

*Ryan McGuire  
Pixabay*

## QUICK-TAKE EXERCISE

Go outside and find an interesting architectural feature (a bridge, a gazebo, a house with an unusual roofline). Walk around the subject and see how its contours change as you look from different viewpoints. Use a viewfinder to limit your field of view and concentrate on shapes and forms. Get very close so you can see some of the details and the subject fills the span of your vision, crouch down and look up at the subject, find elevation and look down upon or straight onto a different part of the subject. Find an angle that creates an intriguing shape against the sky. Look through openings in the subject, such as arches or windows. Take photos of this exercise or make mental notes about what you observed.

## PORTFOLIO-BUILDER PROJECT

Choose a reference image you have strong feelings about. Describe the image's subject and viewpoint, and what feelings and experiences those artistic choices create. Then create a new image that evokes the opposite feelings of the original reference, by using the same type of subject but changing the viewpoint. Try moving the angle from which you are viewing the subject; alter the distance between viewer and subject to change the information provided in the foreground or background; adjust the subject's level of detail. Concentrate on changes to viewpoint rather than to subject. Think about the role your viewpoint choice had on the message. Find images by other artists that convey the feelings you tried to evoke in your image and reflect on how important the viewpoint was or was not for each.

### Related concepts:

- Harmony
- Tension
- Unity & The Whole

# LEAD THE EYE

**To lead the eye is to influence how the viewer looks at the different elements in the image. The focal point is the most important area of the image.**

## THE CONCEPT

As a viewer reads an image, their attention travels around the picture plane; this is referred to as eye movement, the gaze, or the path of interest. The artist can lead the eye or guide the gaze by arranging the elements to affect how the viewer experiences the image. The artist can influence the order elements are viewed in, direction the viewer looks, if the gaze stops, if the eye scans quickly, etc. A meticulously arranged image might feel cinematic or like sequential art, as the viewer's eye pans the image and uncovers the story.

Viewers take a quick survey of the overall image. They will likely look at the center first; they'll scan left to right (in cultures that read that direction), top to bottom, looking for visual cues to determine the subject and message. Viewer's will pay more attention to elements that are known conveyors of intel: faces and text. As when reading a website or magazine, where the large headlines are read first and brightly colored calls-to-action (webpage buttons or phone numbers) are noticed, we mark elements that stand out due to their color, size, shape, or other striking attributes.

The focal point is the part of the image that the artist wants the viewer to pay the most attention to; this is the subject and/or a significant indicator of the image's intended meaning. Located in the positive space, the focal point is the center of interest. Other areas of importance are called accents or points of interest. Multiple points of interest keep the viewer's eye moving as they collect and process the different pieces of information.

### Imagine:

- An image of San Francisco's Lombard Street and how your sight zigzags down it like a car
- When everyone around you turns to look at something - you impulsively do as well
- A stop sign, a yellow arrow sign
- Da Vinci's Last Supper, where Christ is the center of the image, where architectural lines converge, and the subject of the hubbub at the table
- A person in a landscape - we look for faces instinctively and figures kick our storytelling nature into action

In composition, intentionally breaking the rules can be as (or more) effective and provocative than following them. So it's likely no surprise that an artist may create an image that has no focal point, where the eye continually moves around the image, or multiple focal points, which battle for attention. For example, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings have no single center of interest, only a canvas filled completely with his emotion, energy, and process.

The viewer might flicker around an image with no clear focal point, trying to decipher the story, or they might give up on an over-busy image. Just like in The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly, where after the triangular final duel is established, the camera, and our attention, shifts quickly between the three characters. It is helpful if that tension resolves and a clear winner emerges. However, artists may decide to intentionally keep the visual tension unresolved in order to deliver a certain idea or feeling.

Some images are able to immediately capture and trap the viewer's eye. A single element can be quite arresting if

it connects emotionally with the viewer, presents a new or unique take on the subject, or makes the viewer linger to unlock a mystery. A risk with this type of composition is that the sole point of interest is not compelling enough to hold attention. For example, a straightforward photo of a rose might be quickly processed and the viewer moves on without more consideration.

## EXAMPLES



In this French neoclassical painting, each of the three female figures is a point of interest, as are the detailed harps, and to a lesser degree the furniture and statue. The figure in bright white—where the lines of the harp point to—is the subject. The right figure looks to the left figure, who looks at the central figure; these lines of sight form a triangle that the viewer’s eye follows.

*Jean Antoine Théodore Giroust, 1791*  
*The Harp Lesson*  
*Dallas Museum of Art*



In this close-cropped portrait with minimal background, the viewer finds it difficult to look away from Sharbat Gula’s piercing stare. The viewer’s gaze may travel around the curves and lines of the cloak, but her unusual eyes, locked on yours, are the center of attention.

*Steve McCurry, 1984*  
*Afghan Girl*  
*National Geographic*



Molina intuitively made work that reflected the principles of human perception, resulting in collaborative work between the artist and a neuroscientist studying eye tracking and how we read images. Blurring and diagonals push attention to the center, even before the viewer recognizes the faces and bodies there.

*Mariano Molina, 2011*  
*Center of Gaze*  
*University of Leicester*

## QUICK-TAKE EXERCISE

As you encounter images today—ads, social media, periodicals, websites, news—think about how you read them. What images did you look at longer and why? Was there an image that was unclear about where you should look? Ask yourself why. If an image would be improved with a clear focal point, draw a new version in your sketchbook or manipulate the original image with a digital application.

## PORTFOLIO-BUILDER PROJECT

Take a dozen paperclips (or some other small object) and arrange them multiple ways on a solid white surface, like a tablecloth or big piece of paper. You can unfold some of the paperclips, pile them up, spread them out, etc. Create three images that move the eye in different directions, for example Z-shaped zigzag, in a circle or spiral, back and forth between two points of interest, keep pushing the eye out of the picture plane, or all pointing towards a single focal point. If you would like to go one step further, use one of your paperclip arrangements for reference and create a new image, with a subject of your choosing, that utilizes the same composition.

### Related concepts:

- Subject & Space
- Emphasis
- Leading Lines

# CRITIQUE ONE

Take time to carefully observe this photograph while going through the critique process described on pages 10-11.



Ansel Adams  
*The Tetons - Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*  
1942  
National Archive  
Photograph

In this photograph, the Snake River curves through untouched wilderness, as the water, sun coming through the clouds, and pristine snow gleam in the darkness. The serpentine river creates depth in the image, leading the viewer's eye into the craggy mountain range. Black and white photography creates focus on form, texture, negative space, and (of course) value. Though considered "straight photography", the artist worked meticulously and intentionally to show the light, manipulate exposure, crop the picture plane, and share his love of nature.

Adams took this shot in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park while working for the National Park Service (putting it in the public domain). It is included on the Voyager Golden Record, taking a glimpse of our beautiful planet out into the stars. Adams' work combines masterful technique with a spiritual connection to the subject matter.

## CRITIQUE TWO

Take time to carefully observe this painting while going through the critique process described on pages 10-11.



Paul Cézanne  
*Still Life with Apples*  
1894  
J. Paul Getty Museum  
Oil on canvas  
2.15' x 2.67'

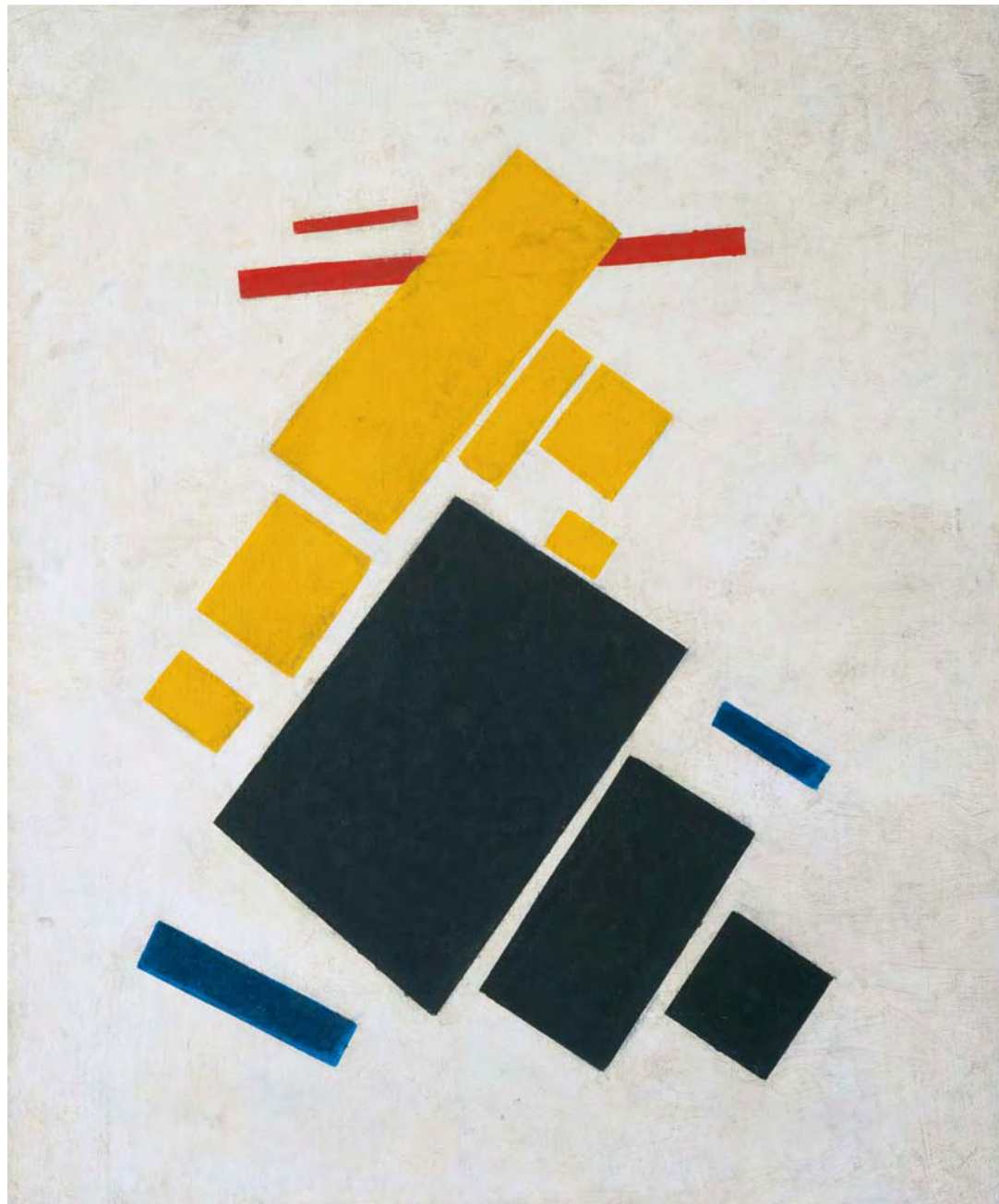
In *Still Life with Apples*, one of many paintings that tackle the same subject matter, Paul Cézanne fills the canvas with forms both accurate and impossible. The objects—shown from multiple perspectives at once, but still easily identifiable—look precariously balanced, imbued with tension, yet anchored together. Cézanne adds interest to what could be cliché and boring by placing the subjects, and the audience, slightly off-kilter. He makes the static more dynamic, embedding a sense of time and motion, by depicting it how we would experience it in reality, by moving around it, panning our vision, tilting our head.

Cézanne endeavored to paint not only what we see, but also how we see it. His focus on color, light, and perspective were integral to how he so uniquely captured three dimensional objects and scenes on two dimensional surfaces. Each visible, multi-faceted brushstroke was a reminder of his hand at work; his distortions inspired the Cubists and left an enduring mark on art history; and just as he said he would, he astonished us with an apple.



## CRITIQUE THREE

Take time to carefully observe this painting while going through the critique process described on pages 10-11.



Kazimir Malevich  
*Suprematism: Airplane Flying*  
1915  
MoMA, New York  
Oil on canvas  
1.92'x1.58'

In *Suprematism: Airplane Flying*, Kazimir Malevich uses larger shapes to give form and their arrangement and angles to add movement. The black square, a theme for the artist, is included, then stretched and enlarged twice over. The shapes, clearly related and interacting, are similar but different, creating a pleasing balance of variety and harmony.

This painting is thought to depict the concept of an airplane, or airplanes, in flight (an alluring idea for the artist) or the view from the sky (aerial photography was a fascination of his).

Suprematists believed that an artwork's truth—feeling created by color and form—was more important than its content. In the *Suprematist Manifesto*, Malevich says, "Color and texture in painting are ends in themselves. They are the essence of painting, but this essence has always been destroyed by the subject". Though not representational, the subject was indeed reality. Malevich's ideas and work had a huge impact on modern and abstract art.

## CRITIQUE FOUR

Take time to carefully observe this painting while going through the critique process described on pages 10-11.



Marc Chagall  
*Birthday*  
1915  
MoMA, New York  
Oil on cardboard  
2.65'x3.27'

A kiss that bends reality. Here, Chagall floats to and twists toward his beloved Bella. The pair extends across the picture plane, a diagonal that adds motion to the bodies already filled with movement - they are carried away, transported. The detailed patterns contrast pleasantly with the simplistic rendering of the figures. The hard line where the wall meets the floor (on the left) dissolves in the interesting negative space created between her flowing dress and his wobbly legs. The eye travels in a loop around the couple, glancing into the room, but returning to the head-over-heals romance.

Chagall's happy, dreamy works align with his words: "Only love interests me, and I am only in contact with things that revolve around love." Chagall is associated with neo-primitivism, fauvism, cubism, surrealism, and magical realism.

## CRITIQUE FIVE

Take time to carefully observe this painting while going through the critique process described on pages 10-11.



Hilma af Klint  
Group III, no 5. *The Key to the Present Work*  
1907  
*The Foundation Hilma af Klints Verk*  
Oil on canvas  
4.92'x3.87'

Hilma af Klint was a prolific, but relatively obscure, abstract artist of the early twentieth century. *The Key to the Present Work* was part of a series of 193 works, divided into several groups, called *Paintings for the Temple*. She demanded that the collection stay together and not be shown until twenty years after her death, when more people could understand it.

In creating the series, af Klint developed her own design system and symbology (male was yellow and female blue, spirals represented evolution, for example) to be able to materialize her spiritual experiences, vision of the astral plane, and the invisible forces around her. Swirls and curves interplay with rectilinear shapes and straight lines in paintings that sometimes veer to scientific, sometimes religious. Though unsure of the exact meanings herself, af Klint used her visual code to channel her occult vision into physical reality.

She is the first abstract artist, with paintings predating the earliest non-representational, non-figurative works of Kandinsky and Malevich.

# COMPOSITION ART LAB

Composition refers to the way different components are structured to form a whole. The arrangement of all of the constituents of an image should draw the viewer in, then guide their focus to specific visual elements, applying (or breaking) rules and conventions regarding composition, storytelling, and design. An image that is visually arresting and well-structured will more effectively convey a narrative, evoke feeling, transfer information, or provoke delight.

Understanding fundamental composition concepts is a great foundation for beginning artists, but equally valuable for advanced artists who rely on their technical skills more than conceptual knowledge. While this book is geared towards people who want to practice art, it is also great for those wanting to learn more about appreciating art and reading images.

[www.AmandaHinton.com](http://www.AmandaHinton.com)