

# Christine Pilkinton Fine Art

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*To send light into the darkness of men's hearts  
- such is the duty of the artist. Schumann*

## Composition

Composition is the term used for the arrangements of the elements in or the subject matter of a painting. A successful composition draws in the viewer and pulls their eye across the whole painting so that everything is taken in and finally settles on the main subject of the painting.

In his *Notes of a Painter*, [Henri Matisse](#) defined it this way: "*Composition is the art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings.*"

1. **Unity:** Do all the parts of the composition feel as if they belong together, or does something feel stuck on, awkwardly out of place?
2. **Balance:** Having a symmetrical arrangement adds a sense of calm, whereas an asymmetrical arrangement creates a sense of unease, imbalance. ([See example](#))
3. **Movement:** 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. ([See example](#))
4. **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. ([See example](#))
5. **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. ([See example](#))
6. **Contrast:** Strong differences between light and dark, or minimal, such as [Whistler](#) did in his *Nocturne* series. ([See example](#))
7. **Pattern:** An underlying structure, the basic lines and shapes in the composition.
8. **Proportion:** How things fit together, big and small, nearby and distant.

Above taken from **About.com**

Painting: The 8 Elements of Composition in Art

# Composition Art Quotes from RobertGenn.com

A painting that is well composed is half finished. ([Rohan Baikar](#))

Developing a composition is a creative process involving intuition and thinking more than following rules. ([Alessandra Bitelli](#))

Does it feel like the elements in the painting's composition belong together, or are they separate bits that just happen to be in the same painting? ([Marion Boddy-Evans](#))

Composition, an arbitrary, inexact process, appears to be guided best by intuition and chance rather than science. ([Peter Ciccariello](#))

Even in front of nature one must compose. ([Edgar Degas](#))

Good composition is like a suspension bridge; each line adds strength and takes none away... Making lines run into each other is not composition. There must be motive for the connection. Get the art of controlling the observer – that is composition. ([Robert Henri](#))

As a rule, someone who has difficulty with painting in any medium is not prepared to believe that the real trouble is ignorance of drawing and composition. ([William Herring](#))

Realtors preach - 'Location, Location, Location,' while artists should preach - 'Composition, Composition, Composition.' ([Doug Mays](#))

I put in my pictures everything I like. So much the worse for the things - they have to get along with one another. ([Pablo Picasso](#))

The right use of color can make any composition work. ([Fairfield Porter](#))

Don't waste time trying to find that perfect composition. Remember life is short, and while contemplating the wonderful texture and taste of that ice cream cone, and why you prefer one flavour over another... your ice cream cone is melting. ([John Stuart Pryce](#))

## **Six compositional boo-boos** March 2, 2012 -Robert Genn twice weekly letter...

Last night, while on jury duty, my fellow juror and I agreed the most common fault seen among entries was in composition. Well drawn, well rendered and well coloured--all came to naught when the composition had significant faults. I've often written about what an artist should do. In this letter I'm giving six common pitfalls. Last night we noticed them all.

**Weak foreground.** The foreground appears as an afterthought. Wishy-washy, unresolved or inconsequential--it fails to set the subject onto a reasonable ground or to lead the eye to what the artist would have us see. Even in abstract or mystical work, a foreground needs to be implied and understood as a vital contributor to the whole.

**Homeostatic conditions.** Homeostasis means equidistant lineups of trees, rocks, blocks of colour, or other patterns that are too mechanical or regular. It includes trees growing out of the tops of people's heads. While sometimes seen in nature, homeostasis is a natural human tendency--a subconscious reordering and regularizing within the brain. "Even in front of nature one must compose," said [Edgar Degas](#).

**Amorphous design.** The general design lacks conviction. A woolly, lopsided or wandering pattern makes for a weak one. Often, the work has unresolved areas and lacks cohesiveness and unity. "Everything that is placed within the enclosing borders of the picture rectangle relates in some way to everything else that is already there. Some attribute must be shared between all of them." ([Ted Smuskiewicz](#))

**Lack of flow.** Rather than circulating the eye from one delight to another, the work blocks, peters out and invites you to look somewhere else. "Composition," said [Robert Henri](#), "is controlling the eye of the observer." Effective compositions often contain planned activation (spots like stepping stones that take you around), and serpentine (curves that beguile and take you in.)

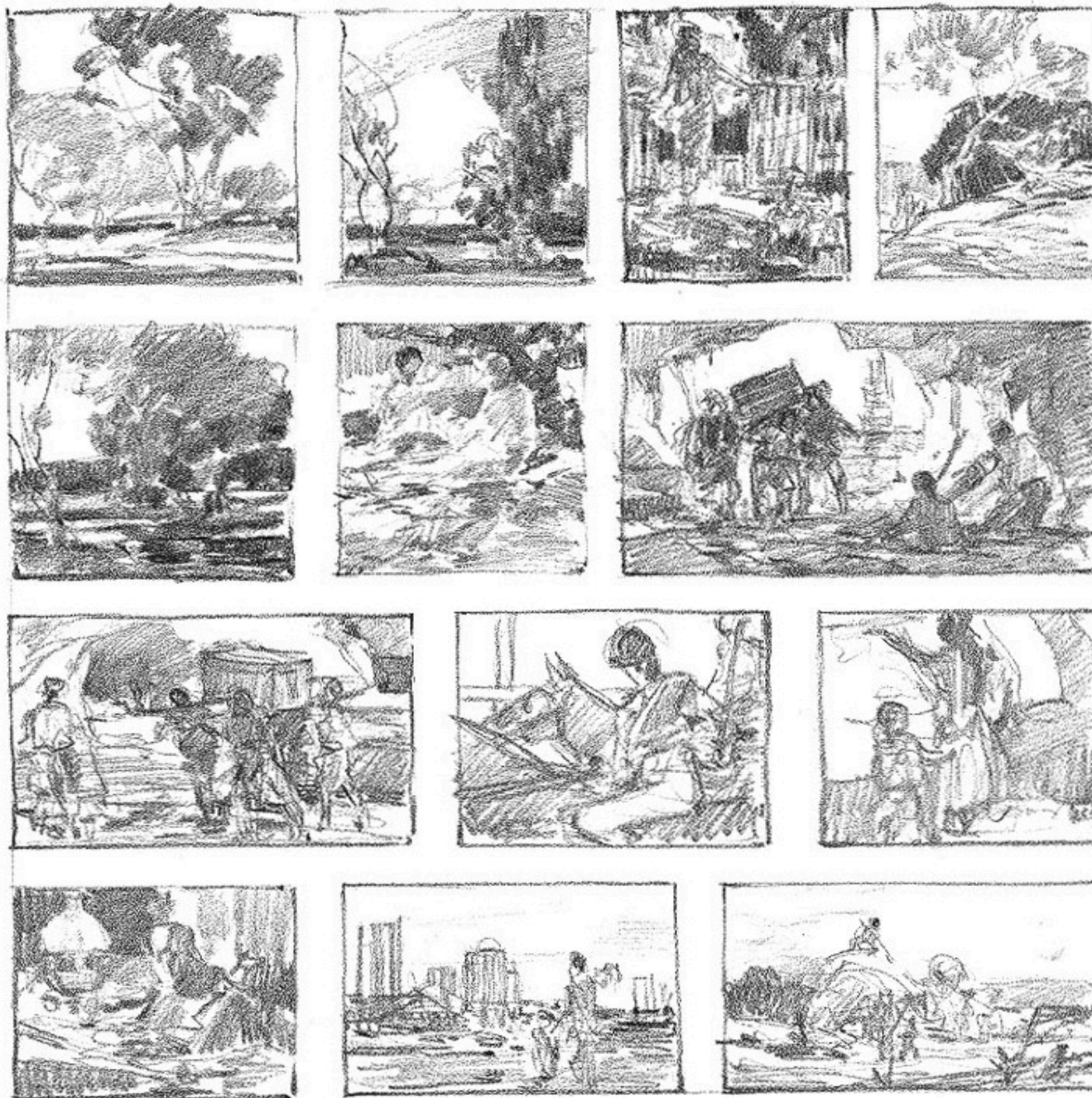
**Too much going on.** Overly busy works tire the eye, induce boredom and make it difficult to find a centre of interest or focus. Less is often more. "Take something out," said the American painter and illustrator [Harvey Dunn](#).

**Defeated by size.** Effective small paintings often work well because they are simple and limited in scope. But when artists make larger paintings they often lose control of the basic idea and what is ironically called "the big picture." "The larger the area to be painted," says [Alfred Muma](#), "the harder it is to have a good composition."

PS: "A well-composed painting is half done." ([Pierre Bonnard](#))

Esoterica: The path to stellar composition is spotted with potholes. Further, compositional design can be unique to the individual, and intuitive. This approach can be unreliable. Habitual poor composition can have long-term effects on otherwise excellent work. After our engaging juror effort (there were many excellent, compositionally sound paintings), over a straight-up gin Martini (for a change), my friend and I loftily decided to found a "School of Composition"--where only composition would be taught. Like the tattoos on the girl's back, it seemed like a good idea at the time

## THUMBNAIL ROUGHS



The habit of setting down your mental conception of a subject in miniature roughs can play a most important part in your development as an artist. The best way is to shut your eyes

and try to visualize what is taking place, as it would be in life. You have no detail to go by, so just suggest the material. Think of some kind of light. It will come.

### Diagonal towards the right

A diagonal motion towards the right gives a stronger feeling of space than a diagonal towards the left. When we read pictures the eye moves from left to right which is also how we are used to reading text.

Towards right is stronger.



Towards left is weaker.



Example: Cezanne (1839-1906)

**Use a diagonal shape to bring the viewer into the painting from the bottom.** Think of the bottom edge of a painting as a ledge the viewers have to cross to enter the space. If you show them where they can easily step over that ledge, they are more apt to feel invited into the picture. The diagonal can be established by a large, dark clump of bushes in the foreground; a road or pathway to walk along; a knife lying on the edge of a table pointed to the rest of a still life arrangement; or a shaft of light coming from over the viewer's shoulder into the space. Once you have persuaded the viewers to enter the painting, it is helpful to lead them through the space and out again. Don't take them down a road that ends in the middle of the painting or suggest they follow a piece of cloth that disappears behind a box within your still life arrangement.

### Diagonal - strong motion



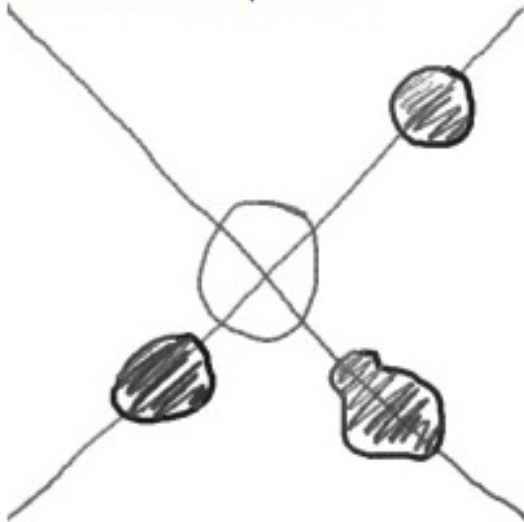
Example: Anders Zorn (1860-1920)



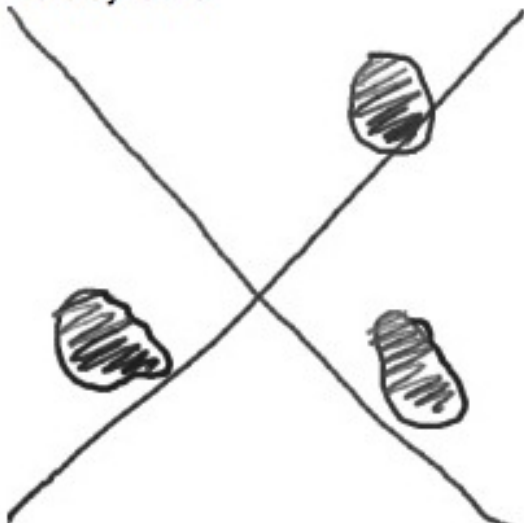
### **Bull's eye – dynamic in the composition**

Bull's-eye is an effect when an important part of an image is brought to the centre through two imagined diagonal lines. Important objects should not be placed over these two lines. A dynamic composition is achieved if you place important objects so that their centre of gravity is not in the middle of, or on, these two lines.

Focus in the middle or on the two diagonal lines = static composition.



Focus on the sides of the diagonal lines = more dynamic.



**Avoid putting the center of interest in the middle of the painting.** It's very hard to engage viewers in a complete painting if they are focused on what's happening in the middle, or the "dead center," as it is appropriately called. It's better to move the horizon line up or down in a landscape, to make the focal point into one of the four quadrants of the rectangle, or to use one of the time-tested principles such as the golden mean to determine the best placement of the center of interest.

### **No interesting focus point**

If there is no focal point in the image the eye will keep shifting its gaze without finding anything. Contrast, colours or composition is a means to avoid this problem.

There are paintings when this is not of interest like for example monochromatic or certain abstract works of art.



Example: Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

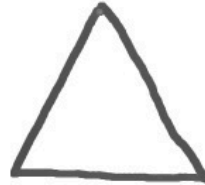
## Rhythm – variation

When drawing objects which have similarities you should strive to achieve a variation in shapes, size and colour. The following example shows how you can achieve this type of variation.



## Stable

A triangle with its base pointing down is the most stable picture composition. This was very common during the Renaissance.



Example: Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1683-1754)

## Instable

A composition based on a triangle with the base pointing upwards will be considered instable. This can be a way to create motion and activity in an image.



Example: William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905)

**Don't shy away from leaving some areas of the painting open and airy.** Many people who work from photographs fail to adjust for the fact that the camera has a limited depth of field and will only document what happens within a narrow space. When they paint from those photographs, they wind up filling their paintings with all the leaves and flowers shown in their close-up shots or with just the foreground elements of a landscape. Since everything in the background of their photographs is a blur, they don't know how to develop those sections of their paintings. That's why it helps to take a lot of photographs of a potential painting subject—details, overall shots, various exposure settings, etc.—so that you have enough information to paint a complete view of the subject.

**Consider repeating colors, shapes, and patterns to help create interest throughout the painting.** This is one of the “rules” of composition that often gets repeated, and it certainly has merit. If you only have one red object in your still life, it will overwhelm the rest of the picture. If you only have one orange shape in your landscape, it will likely become the focal point of the image. The best thing to do is to repeat colors, shapes, and patterns. You don't need the exact same mixture of red or the same textural pattern. Just make sure to maintain some level of repetition and variety.

**Try to look at the paintings objectively: Turn your paintings upside down or look at them in a mirror.** Put them away for a few days. We all become so completely engaged in our drawings and paintings that we can't judge them objectively. It helps to turn the image upside down, put it away for a while, or look at it in a mirror so you begin to see it differently and can therefore recognize how to improve it.

**Recognize that fences, roads, railroad tracks, and other pathways are like arrows pointing viewers' eyes in a specific direction.** Make sure that if you point them toward one area of the painting you don't leave them there.



# Four Rules of Photographic Composition

by [Elizabeth Halford](#)

Here are four hard and fast rules of composition I can't live without:



Thirds – This may be the most widely known rule of composition among photographers. There's even an option in most DSLRs to switch on a visual grid in your viewfinder. This rule states that for an image to be visually interesting, the main focus of the image needs to lie along one of the lines marked in thirds. For example, according to this rule, a horizon shouldn't be smack bang in the middle of a photo, but on the bottom third. A single tree in a field should be aligned with one of the two vertical lines.



Rule of odds – The rule of odds states that images are more visually appealing when there is an odd number of subjects. For example, if you are going to place more than one person in a photograph, don't use two, use 3 or 5 or 7, etc. Of course this is a pretty silly notion for an engagement shoot, right? Or a wedding shoot. Or a family with only two kids. But when possible, when you are not just shooting real life but composing images (still life, family groups, flowers) remember the rule of odds. Studies have shown that people are actually more at ease and comfort when viewing imagery with an odd number of subjects. I'd be very interested to know the different opinions readers have for why that is. I'll share mine in the comments below.



Rule of space – I used to get this rule mixed up with the rule of thirds. The rule of space probably comes naturally to you and you don't even know it's a rule of composition. The rule of space says that in order to portray movement, context and the idea that the photo is bigger than just the part that you're seeing, you need to leave clutter free 'white' spaces. For example if you're photographing a runner, give him a space to run into. Don't photograph him with all the space in the world behind him because this doesn't help the viewer picture the forward motion & the space he has yet to run. If you're making a portrait of a woman laughing at something not in the photo, leave space in the direction where she is laughing. This leads the viewer to wonder what's just beyond the boundaries of the photo. What is she laughing at? The reason I got this mixed up with the rule of thirds is that naturally, when giving your subjects space, they will be placed in a third of the photo.



Viewpoint – Often referred to as POV, point of view is the most basic of composition rules. And it's as simple as clicking the shutter. You are your viewer. Your camera is their eye. If you photograph a dog at eye level, your viewer will be viewing the dog at eye level (which gives the idea/feeling of equality). If you photograph a dog from below, your viewer will be seeing the dog from below (a low shot gives the notion of dominance). If you photograph a dog from above, you are projecting a feeling of your viewer's superiority in relation to the dog. What's your favourite rule of composition? What goes through your head each and every time you compose a shot? Read more from our [Composition Tips](#), [Photography Tips and Tutorials](#) Category

Read more: <http://digital-photography-school.com/four-rules-of-photographic-composition#ixzz21hCSaMxP>