

the  
simple secret  
to better painting

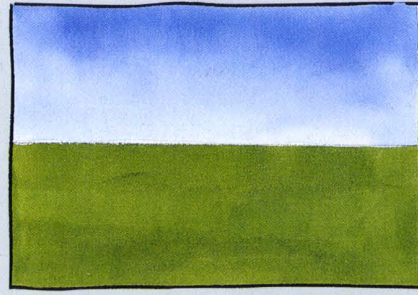
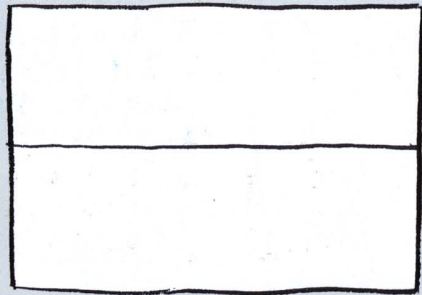
How to immediately improve your work with  
the **golden rule of design**

Greg Albert



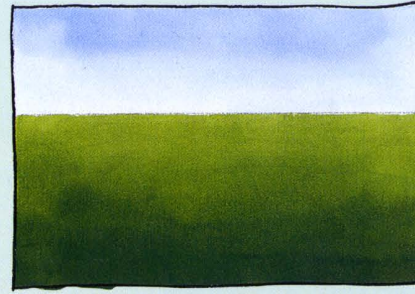
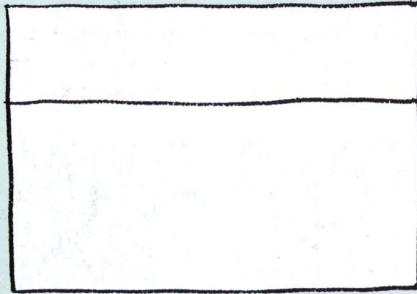
**NORTH LIGHT BOOKS**  
CINCINNATI, OHIO

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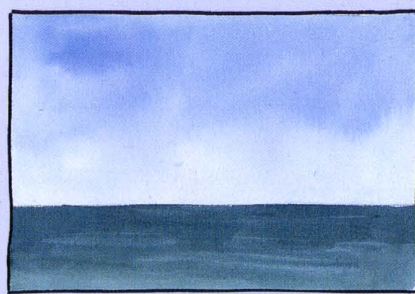
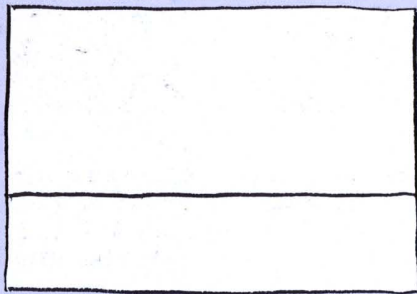
### Boring

Dividing a picture in half is boring. Placing the horizon in the middle of a landscape is too dull. Neither sky nor ground dominates.



### Interesting: ground is dominant

When the picture is divided unequally, the intervals are not the same. Placing the horizon about a third from the top makes the ground dominant and creates more interest.



### Interesting: sky is dominant

Placing the horizon about a third from the bottom makes the sky dominant.



### Boring

Dividing a picture into equal parts violates the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. Don't divide a landscape into bands of equal width.

The edge or frame of a visual image creates the illusion of space within that boundary. Even a blank canvas suggests space, albeit undefined in any way. Draw a line or any mark on that blank canvas and the pictorial space within the frame is more defined. Draw a line across a

rectangle and the line could be the sea meeting the sky, an edge of a table, the bottom of a wall or window.

How you divide the rectangle should follow the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**: *Never make any two intervals the same.*



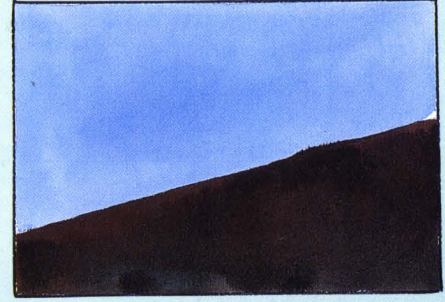
**Boring**

Don't divide a picture into equal halves, as does a diagonal from corner to corner.



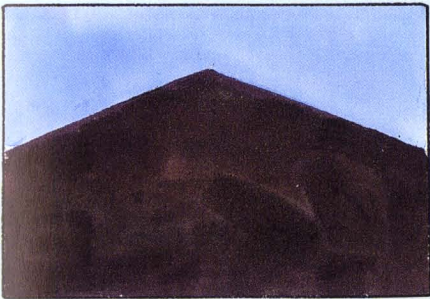
**Better**

Although not corner to corner, this oblique divides the picture into equal halves. The line divides each side into lengths of the same proportion.



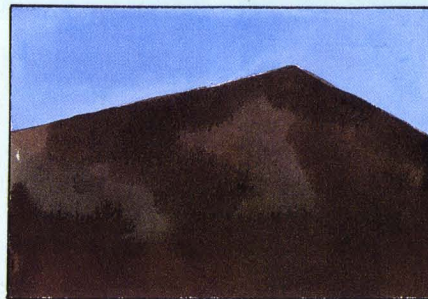
**Best**

This oblique divides the rectangle into unequal portions. The distance from the top to the line on the right is not equal to the distance from the bottom to the line on the left.



**Boring**

Placing a mountain peak in the exact center with sides of equal length violates the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION: Never make any two intervals the same.**



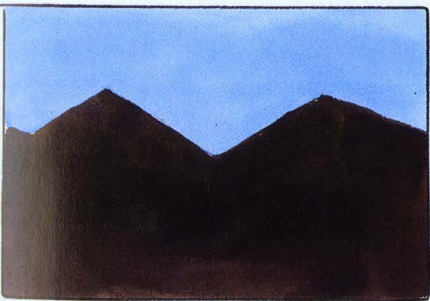
**Better**

Placing the peak off-center makes it more interesting. However, the sides of the rectangle are divided into the same intervals.



**Best**

In this arrangement, no two intervals are the same. The sides of the mountain are different lengths, the peak is off-center, and the sides of the rectangles are divided into four different lengths.



**Boring**

The sides and angles are equal and they divide the rectangle in half in this example. It is monotonous and boring.



**Better**

This mountain skyline is nearly as boring because the peaks are spaced equally, are of the same angle, and have sides of the same length.



**Best**

This skyline is more interesting because the angles and the lengths of the sides are varied.

**Enhance visual interest**

Almost any equal division of your picture will be boring; for example, dividing a picture with a line that goes from corner to corner on the diagonal. Although one side is

not the mirror image of the other, it still creates regular intervals and is therefore boring. Any division of space is an opportunity to enhance visual interest.

**Boring: even steps down in size**

The figures are all different in height so there is some variety, but the step-down pattern is boring.



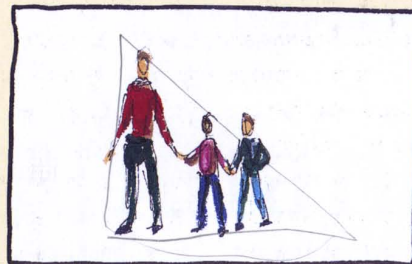
**Boring: symmetrical arrangement**

Shape, color and texture add interest, but this symmetrical arrangement is still static.



**Boring: trees are the same height**

Odd numbers are more interesting than even. Three is the smallest odd number that is inherently interesting. However, the trees are all the same height, a boring arrangement.



**Better: more dynamic arrangement**

Putting the taller figure to one side in an asymmetrical arrangement is more dynamic.



**Better: asymmetrical arrangement**

Placing the taller object to one side creates a more dynamic, asymmetrical arrangement.



**Better: tree height varies**

This is better: the middle tree is now taller, but it is still a static, symmetrical arrangement.



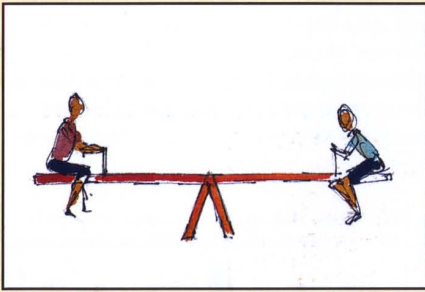
**Even better: mama, papa, baby**

These three trees correspond to Mama Bear, Papa Bear and Baby Bear. This is a pleasing grouping and complies with the **ONE RULE: Never make any two intervals the same.**



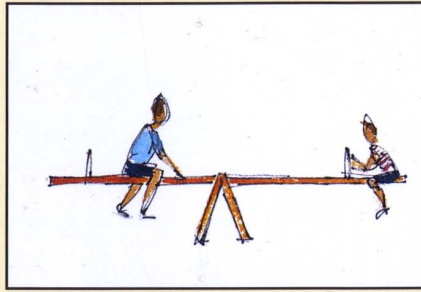
**Best: different heights and spacing**

This is a variation of the three bears. Not only are the three trees of different heights, they are no longer equidistant.



### Static balance

When children of the same weight are equidistant from the center, they balance perfectly and the seesaw remains level.



### Dynamic balance

If one child is bigger and both are equidistant from the center, the seesaw doesn't remain level. To keep the seesaw level, the bigger child must move closer to the center, or the smaller child farther from the center.



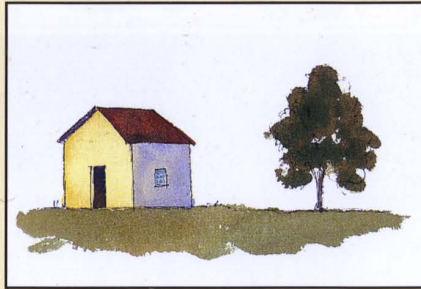
### Symmetrical arrangement

Avoid centering things. The center is the most boring part of the painting. Symmetrical compositions are naturally static.



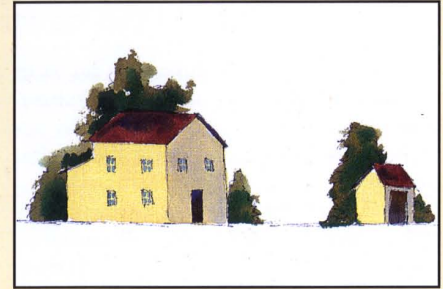
### Asymmetrical arrangement

Although the image is still centralized, the tree and house are asymmetrically arranged and visual interest is increased.



### Static balance

The tree and the house have identical visual weight and energy. A static balance is created.



### Dynamic balance

The house and tree on the left have greater visual weight, but the house and tree on the right counterbalance the weight, creating a dynamic balance.

Achieving balance is a matter of adjusting visual weight and visual energy. If balance is created with visual elements identical in both weight and energy on either side of a central axis, a static balance is achieved. Static balance does not follow the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION: Never make any two intervals the same.**

If the balance is created with two visual elements that are not identical in weight and energy, a dynamic bal-

ance is achieved. Intervals are not the same and the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION** applies.

Static balance is also called *formal*, *classical* or *symmetrical* balance because it is based on an equal or even (symmetrical) arrangement along a central axis.

Dynamic balance is also called *informal* or *asymmetrical* balance and is based on an uneven arrangement.

**CONTRAST  
CREATES  
CLARITY**

**NO CONTRAST  
CREATES  
CONFUSION**

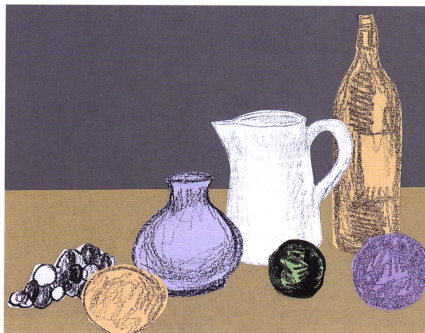


**Strong contrast**

Strong tonal value contrast increases the clarity of your paintings and attracts and retains the viewer's attention.

**Weak contrast**

Lack of value contrast can weaken your painting. It is important to provide at least one element of strong contrast.



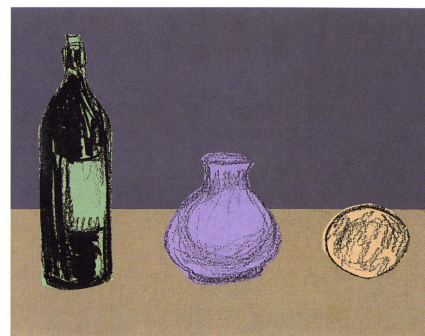
**Diagonal division of space is boring**

Don't inadvertently line up objects to create a diagonal division of space, a boring partition of the composition.



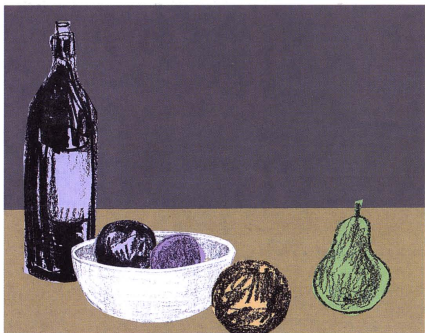
**Better, but still too parallel**

Arranging objects in an irregular triangle is often a good strategy because there is an uneven number of sides. However, avoid making any one side of the triangular arrangement parallel to the side of the picture frame because the intervals thus generated are too much the same.



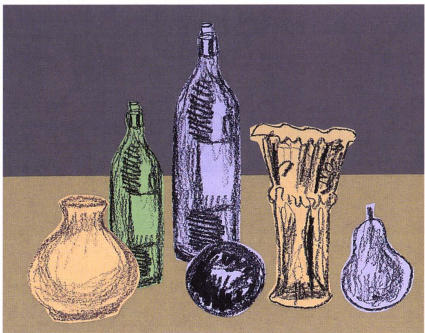
**Equal spacing is boring**

Talk about dull! Don't line up objects so they are equally spaced, from each other or from an edge, as in this case where all the objects are the same distance from the bottom—boring!



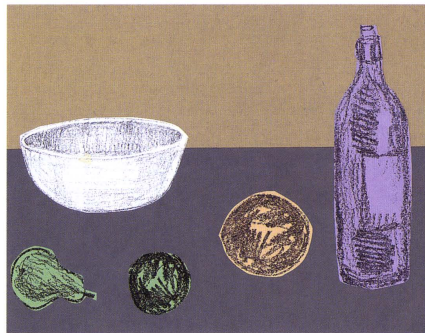
**Objects that parallel the frame are boring**

Avoid placing things parallel to the picture frame. In this example, the wine bottle is too close to the edge and parallel to it, creating a boring strip of space along that edge. The arrangement is also unbalanced, with the visual weight to the left, leaving a dull expanse of space in the upper right.



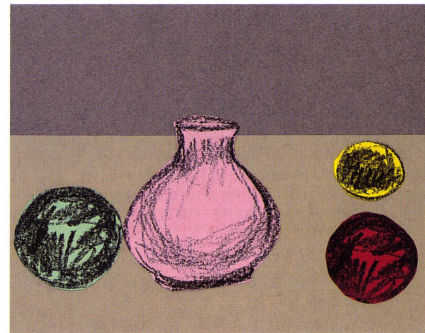
**A symmetrical triangle is boring**

Don't pile objects up in a symmetrical or equilateral triangle. Placing a single tall object in the middle divides the picture into two equal (and therefore, boring) halves. This arrangement is inherently static and uninteresting.



**Lack of depth is boring**

Overlapping creates depth. When objects are equally spaced with no overlap, the viewer has no clues to the space they occupy.



**Objects in a row are boring**

Don't place an object so it appears directly above another object. Such an arrangement is confusing, boring and often flat. Better to relate the objects on an oblique. Don't let objects touch on a single tangent point.

A good composition, be it still life or any other genre, is the product of a series of decisions. Ideally, each decision should be consciously made by the artist, based on informed deliberation. All too often, beginners start

working without thinking things through, going by habit or convention. The framing or cropping of the shapes in your composition should be consciously chosen from the beginning.



**Simple, pleasing composition**

The five objects form an interesting, irregular shape. The center of visual gravity of the grouping is located at one of the sweet spots. The center of interest includes the head of the statue and the neck of the wine bottle. There are no two intervals that are the same.



**Weak composition**

The white statue is too close to the center of the design, with objects of equal weight on either side, forming a regular (boring) triangle. The green bottle on the left is the same size as the gray vase on the right and both are located the same distance from the nearest side.



**Acceptable composition**

The flowers and the bust are too similar in size, so they compete for attention. The lime and the orange are related vertically, an awkward placement. Through the use of artistic license, you can adjust one of the objects to be more dominant.



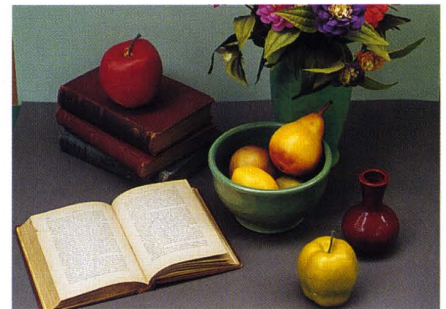
**Unbalanced arrangement**

The arrangement is weighted on the left, with a vacant space in the upper right corner. The composition is crowded with too many objects of similar visual weight, so they are competing for the viewer's attention.



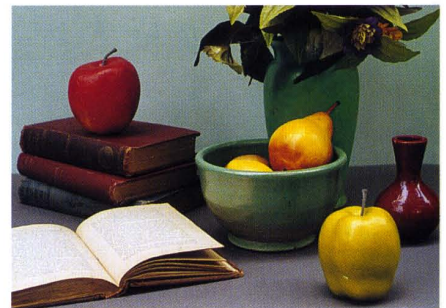
**Well-balanced arrangement**

The triangular shape of the objects seen as a group is countered by the oblique thrust of the background drapery. The center of interest is formed by the bottles on the left. The tall wine bottle and the bottom of the drapery align with the perpendiculars determined by the **Rule of Thirds**. One improvement would be to rearrange the lime, lemon and small red vase on the right so the intervals between them are not equal.



**Vantage point makes a difference**

The unusually high vantage point of this composition makes one uneasy because it isn't clear where the viewer could be standing.



**Pleasing arrangement**

This composition exhibits a more natural viewpoint. The objects are irregularly spaced from each other and the edges of the frame. Together, the objects form an interesting shape.





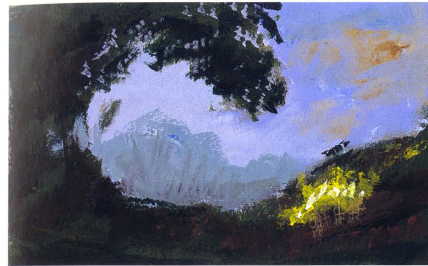
#### **J Composition**

Think of this as a lazy *J* or swoosh that can appear as shown, backward and upside down. The curved bowl of the *J* is a good place for the center of interest. Here, the bowl is located at one of the sweet spots.



#### **O Composition**

This composition is more or less circular, but not centered exactly in the middle of the painting rectangle.



#### **C Composition**

The letter *C* can be thought of as a half or open *O*. Don't situate the opening right at the center.



#### **L Composition**

The *L* can be turned around or upside down. It's important to keep one side of the *L* longer than the other. Equal lengths would be boring.



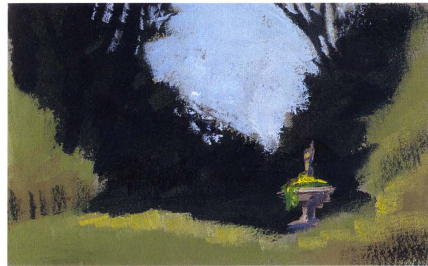
#### **T Composition**

A vertical and horizontal crossing in a composition creates a natural focal point at the point of intersection. The quadrants created by the crossing should vary in dimension to maximize visual interest.



#### **X Composition**

Compositions based on the letter *X* include those that have lines radiating from a single point. Make sure that linear elements radiating outward do not go directly into a corner, forming in effect an invitation for the viewer's eye to exit the picture.



#### **U Composition**

The uprights of the letter *U* (or *V*) can be used to frame a center of interest. Be careful, however, to avoid making both sides equal, which is boring. Make one side larger, more dominant or dynamically balanced than the other.



#### **S Composition**

The letter *S*, as written or as its mirror image, is a natural lead into a composition. The classic example is a road curving into the picture.