

7

PATTERN AND DESIGN

DESIGNING WITH SHAPE • SENSING
PATTERN • FRAMING • CROPPING •
STRADDLING OPPOSITES •
IDENTIFYING TANGENTS

The difference between sketching and designing is that the former is concerned with *things* while the latter is concerned with the *relationships* between things. Design — or composition, a synonym — goes beyond drawing objects to drawing the whole pattern and considering the entire piece of paper. We all have a sense of what it means to compose in this way, but no one knows exactly. And no one needs to. What we hope to develop in this chapter is a pattern-sensing mode which will help you bring disparate parts together in a formal composition.

Imagine you're part of a play in rehearsal, and you've just been shifted from actor to director. Now you're responsible for more than lines; you're in charge of the whole production. You'll need to step off the stage and come out into the house seats. From here you'll be moving actors, props, and background. You may know exactly what effects you want or you may take an "I'll know-it-when-I-see-it" attitude. Stepping back, taking a whole view, having a plan but being willing to experiment are the essential conditions for compositional drawing.

It is a discipline without rules. The many attempts to formalize compositional laws have given us interesting, subjective, and often contradictory results. I prefer to show you a way *into* design by giving you three basic ideas about the subject:

1. The building blocks of a picture are *shapes* which include those of the subject and those of the background.
2. Good design grows out of a sense of wholeness and is expressed in the relationships of the parts rather than in the skillfulness of rendering any particular part.
3. Picture relationships are invariably based on some form of ambiguity or paradox.

These ideas may seem unfamiliar at first, but their threads have been interwoven throughout the text, and I think you will recognize them when you see them.

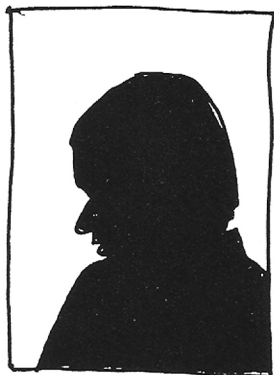


Reducing your picture to a simple pattern of shapes will help you organize it. This can be accomplished in your mind or in a little compositional sketch like this.



Christy Gallagher, *Coffee and Tea*. Pastel.

This composition is made up of two shapes . . .



The Picture Puzzle

The visual world is a vast and unbounded collection of shapes, but a drawing of that world is more like a picture puzzle — a number of shapes within a given border. Some of those shapes are going to be the objects you're drawing, but just as important to your picture are the shapes of the spaces between, behind, and extending to the borders of your paper. These background shapes can easily escape detection. Your alertness in recognizing them, however, will be a measure of your growing sense of design.

Before we go into this aspect of drawing, I want to define the shape terms to be used throughout this section. Generally, I will refer to *positive* and *negative* shapes, but to avoid endless repetition, I will also use the terms "figure and background" shapes, "black and white" shapes, "light and dark" shapes or "spaces." At times distinctions will be made between these terms, but for now consider that they will be used interchangeably. So long as you remember that *everything* is a shape, you'll have no problem in following these definitions.

Recognizing Shapes

In silhouette, a man's head and shoulders are a single shape. Drawn on a piece of paper, a silhouette would actually create a second shape: the shape of the space behind the head and bounded by the paper's outer edges. This, therefore, would be a two-piece puzzle as shown in the example at left. The woman's head, below, is also a single shape. In this case, however, the head touches the top of the paper, leaving a white background shape on either side. The outer edges of the picture comprise the edges of these shapes. In addition, one small white shape is trapped inside the woman's stylish hair-do. In the expanded view, we see each of these shapes separated and numbered as if they were four jigsaw puzzle pieces: three white shapes and one black shape — a total of four shapes. Returning to the left-hand example, let's study the particular character of each of the white shapes. Ignore the black shape altogether. You'll notice that as you draw the white negative shapes, you are also drawing the black positive shapes. Positive and negative shapes share common borders.

Imagine you are looking at the same landscape that Christy Gallagher saw when she made the drawing at right. Further imagine that you are viewing this scene through the cut-out window of your viewfinder which crops the scene the same way it is cropped here. You see, as she did, the dark

1



the silhouette shape of the head and shoulders . . .

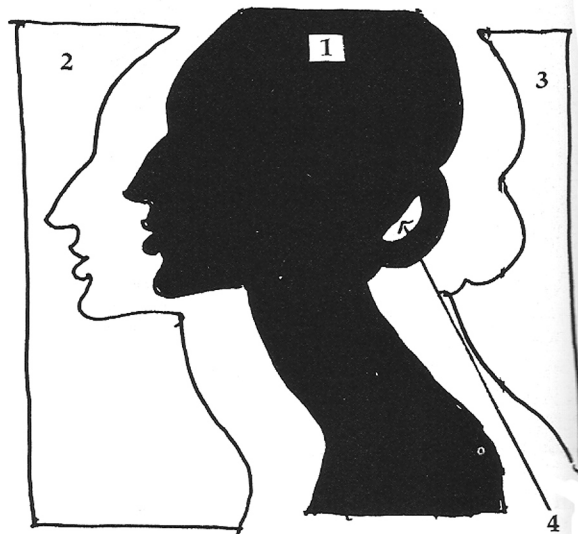
2



and the white shape of the background

This composition is made up of four shapes . . .

. . . the woman's silhouette plus the white shapes on either side of the head and the trapped shape in her hair.



masses of trees cutting across the lighter shapes of field and sky. By squinting, you see the pattern even more strongly, reducing it to the quality of a two-dimensional poster. If you squint enough, you can reduce all trees and shadows to a single dark shape. This shape would normally be a good starting place for your drawing, but let's imagine that you take the opposite tack. Shift your attention to the field and sky shapes. Squint through the cut out window of your viewfinder and note the three large light shapes and then numerous smaller ones.

Now let's pause a moment. Does it really matter whether this landscape is a white-on-black or a black-on-white problem? Why go to all the trouble of seeing it both ways when one way will do? These questions get to the very heart of design.

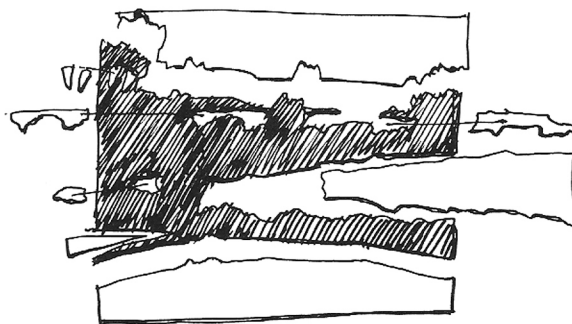
We stated earlier that to design we have to shift to a pattern-sensing mode so we can see the whole instead of its parts. To understand what this means, let's consider that there is a little struggle going on between figure and background shapes, each one trying to assert itself. Like undisciplined and unruly siblings, they jealously compete for your attention. The design suffers if either sibling wins. Your role is to be an impartial referee, giving each equal treatment and always ruling in favor of the overall design. This means favoring neither figure nor background but using them both to support each other.

Tying shapes together

Thus far we've been discussing figure and background as the two separate entities that comprise the shape world. There is more to the picture, however. When you squint your eyes, you see a pattern of light and dark shapes. While some of these are the physical objects themselves and the background behind them, others are the result of light and shadow play and differences in local value.

Project 7 - A — Three Simplified Landscapes

Look around your outdoor environment and select a view with some good light-and-dark contrasts. Your subject may be trees or buildings or both. Frame your subject through a homemade viewfinder as described in Chapter 4 and squint strongly to reduce all the shapes to either black or white. Omit all details and textures. Assign a black tone to the darker shades of grey and a white tone to the lighter shades. At times, merge like tones into larger shapes. You may outline shapes in order to fill them in but don't leave outlines in your finished drawing. Work rapidly and no larger than 4x5½. When you have completed your first drawing, do two others either from different views or of different subjects altogether. Take about five to ten minutes for each drawing.



The dark shapes are tied together in a single shape almost resembling an alligator's profile. The more numerous white shapes surround and are trapped within it.

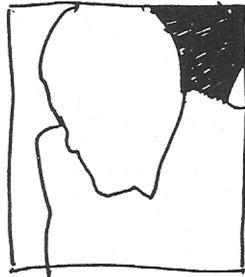


Christy Gallagher
Pastel

Face and shoulder shadow.



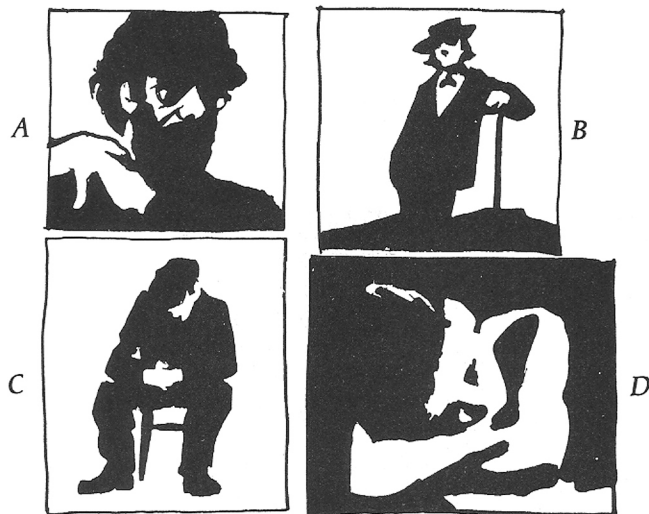
Background shadow.



Both shadows tied together in a single shape.

Project 7 - B — Three Faces

This project is similar to 7 - A except that you will make your studies from three magazine photographs — the larger, the better — of human faces with strong light and dark contrasts. Tape a sheet of tracing paper over each photograph and reduce all the features to either white or black shapes. Fill in the dark areas. Where a tone changes gradually from light to dark, make an arbitrary division between the two. You may outline your shapes before filling them in but, again, don't leave outlines in your final drawing. Keep your drawing simple and allow five to ten minutes for each drawing.



Answers:
 A. One black shape, eight white shapes.
 B. Two black shapes, five white shapes.
 C. One black shape, four white shapes.
 D. Three black shapes, four white shapes.

In design, different shapes of the same tone are frequently merged in order to unify the picture. Light, shadow, and local value areas are combined to weave figure and ground together. Darks merge with darks, lights with lights, and middle-tones with middle-tones regardless of their different sources. The new shapes formed by such mergers are little pieces of unified design and are themselves interlocked to form the large connected pattern of the picture as a whole.

We've already seen this interlocking function in shape tie-ins and mergers in Chapters 1 and 4, respectively. By extending this function to all areas of your picture, from center of interest to background shapes, you tend to lock your jigsaw pieces together into a tighter, more cohesive organization. Additionally, you do something else which is essential to design: you introduce paradox.

Let's look at a simple use of paradox in the shape tie-in at left. The first design shows a man's face-shadow running into his shoulder-shadow. The next shows the cast shadow on the wall behind him. In the third example, all the shadows are merged, eliminating the distinctions between them and creating a new, ambiguous shape. This new shape is a combination of form and cast shadows, but it is also simply a flat, black shape. Unconsciously we tend to jump back and forth between seeing it as dimensional and seeing it as flat — as well as seeing it as descriptive and seeing it as abstract. These paradoxes play with our perceptions and allow us to participate in the work. Such viewer participation plays a lively part in a work of art.

Shape tie-ins are but one of the half-dozen paradoxes we'll be looking at in the latter half of this chapter. For now, let's see if you've grasped the basic idea of figure and background tie-ins. Count the black and white shapes in each of the illustrations below. You need not have an exact count if your answers indicate you have a general idea of the concept. Of course, any connected shapes are to be counted as one.

Count the shapes in each picture. (Answers below.)

Sensing patterns

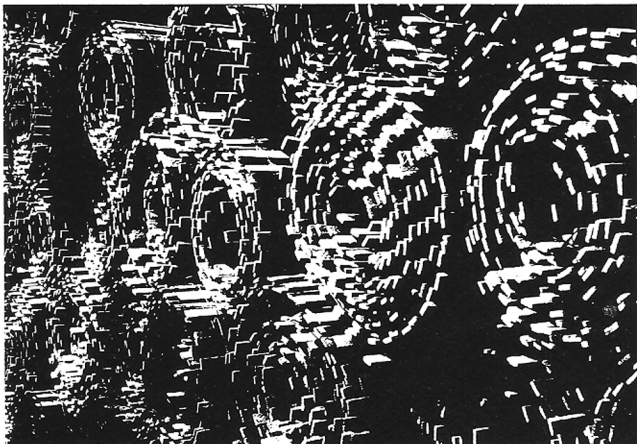
Our pattern-sensing mode is a way of perceiving that usually by-passes words. Artists don't necessarily "understand" visual pattern, or know why they like one pattern better than another. They do know from experience, however, that even the murkiest of hunches is likely to produce something worthwhile. Accounts of Willem de Kooning as a young painter in New York have described his intense visual curiosity. While walking down the street, he would suddenly stop and stare as if transfixed at a puddle of oil on the sidewalk. This may seem eccentric until we realize that it's not really any different than stopping to gaze at a sunset. Many unlikely combinations of shape and color can trigger our pattern-sensing mode if we are open to the inspiration.

Your pattern-sensing mode is essentially nonverbal, but you can develop it by playing a little verbal game called "What's the Pattern?" Look in any direction, in all kinds of locations, and describe what you see in a single sentence and in the language of shape. Rather than name objects, use words like "area," "mass," "piece," and "shape." For example, the view outside my window — a distant, tree-covered hill with a stretch of snow-covered field in the foreground and light sky in the background — might be described as a "dark bumpy mass sandwiched between two light shapes."

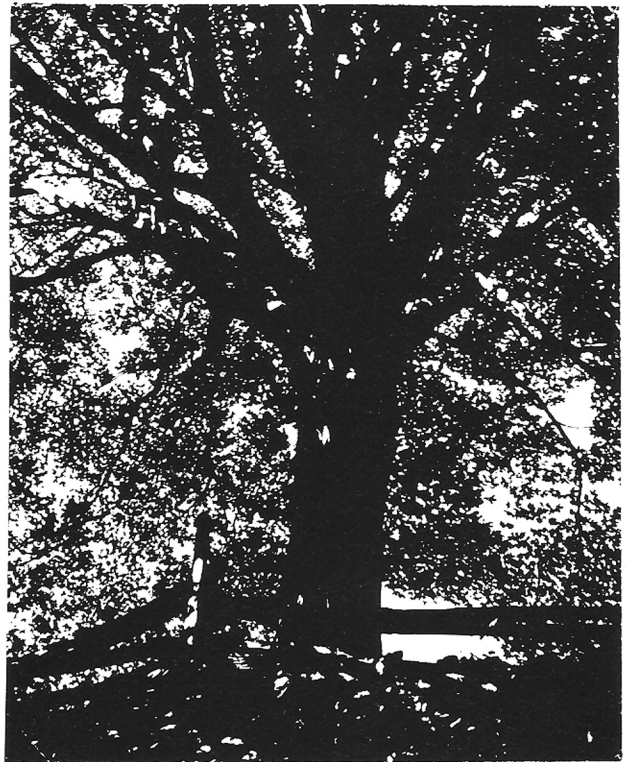
The wording of your description may at times be awkward, but don't trouble over syntax. "A dark central rectangle with irregular little lights and darks on top and dark curving lines below, against a middle-tone background" describes an ornate end-table with books on top. Even an overburdened sentence like that can be a great help in organizing your seeing.

As summing up and simplifying your subjects becomes a natural part of your seeing, you will be able to drop the use of words altogether. For now, the very act of trying to express such scenes in words can make you want to draw them. It's as if the visual part of your mind were to say to the verbal part, "You haven't quite described it . . . let me show you."

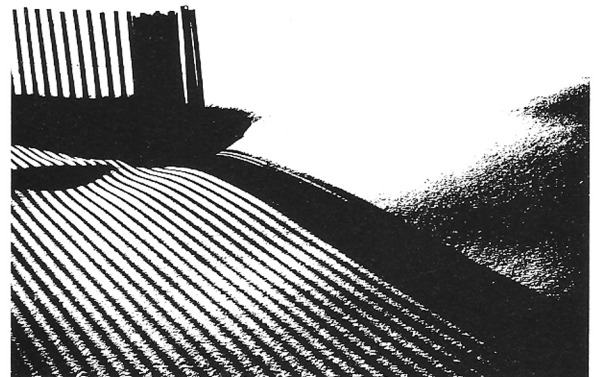
Sometimes the pattern will jump right out at you, but if it's hard to discern, remember to squint. If you have to, squint even to the point where you can barely make out individual objects. The few blurry darks and lights that remain are your pattern.



*Small rectangular chips
arranged in groups of spirals.*



Massive dark shape with black and white filigree halo.



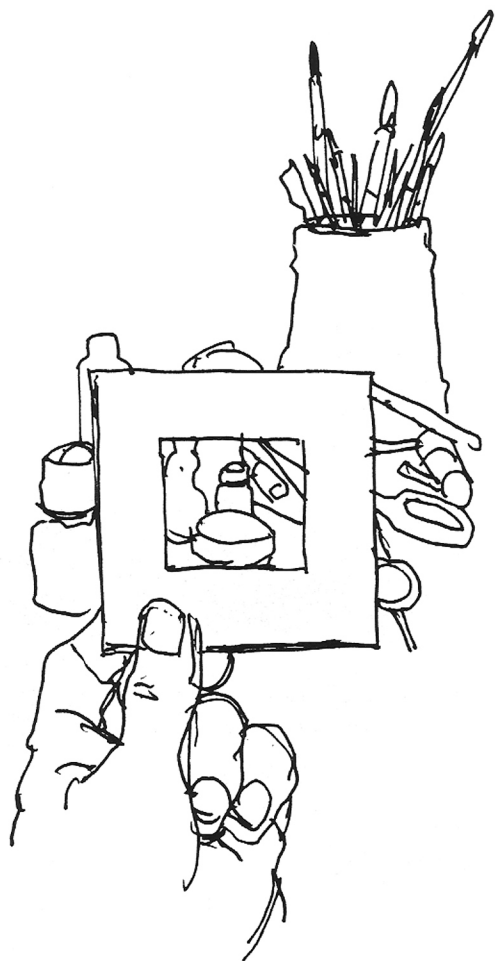
Black and white stripes in straight and undulating patterns.

Project 7 - C — A Pattern in Reverse

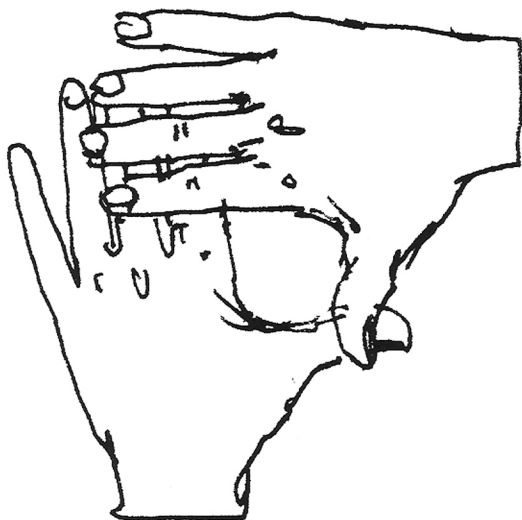
Set up a still life from the list below:

1. a random, looping length of rope on the floor;
2. a close-up arrangement of scattered pushpins, many of them overlapping and touching;
3. a portion of a bicycle or tricycle.

Each of the subjects has strong shape patterns which you are to reveal in pure black and white by drawing the background shapes only. Draw and fill in all the trapped shapes as carefully as you can and leave the figure shapes pure white. Move in close. Make your drawing 8x10 inches and use any drawing medium. Allow 40-60 minutes.



A homemade viewfinder offers an excellent way to preview possible compositions.



Your hands can simulate a viewfinder.

Framing

As I write these words, I am looking at my own drawing table in front of me. Canisters of brushes, ink bottles, tubes of paint, scissors, tape dispenser, books, and two coffee cups make up only a partial inventory of the clutter before me. It's a mess to be sure, and typical of the confusion of shapes in the visual world. (Have you noticed that almost any time you begin to draw something, even something simple, it's more complicated than you had anticipated?) When you really look at it, any piece of reality is as complex as my drawing table, which when I attempt to draw it, will present me with the same problems I always confront when beginning a new drawing. What do I include? What will I leave out? How big or small will I make the elements? In short: what will be the arrangement of objects and empty spaces?

I can use my viewfinder (see Chapter 4) to simplify the organizational problem. (If, as often happens, I cannot find my viewfinder, I can use my two hands to frame the area.) The hole of the viewfinder should approximate the proportions of the drawing paper. Scanning my table through the viewfinder enables me to select some objects and crop others. It allows me to focus on one area at a time. This makes the subject understandable to me in design terms.

In these small ink and wash sketches, I considered a variety of compositions. In the horizontal format, I could take in more of the elements, but a vertical design offered some interesting diagonals and unusual croppings. Either works well, but since my subject was generally horizontal, I favored that direction. I tried several different eye levels, viewpoints and distances from the subject. With each new position, the objects and the spaces between them changed shape, and a whole new pattern was created. Notice that the total number of shapes in each case is reduced due to the cropping, shape mergers, and background tie-ins. By simply framing the scene, a complex problem becomes more manageable.

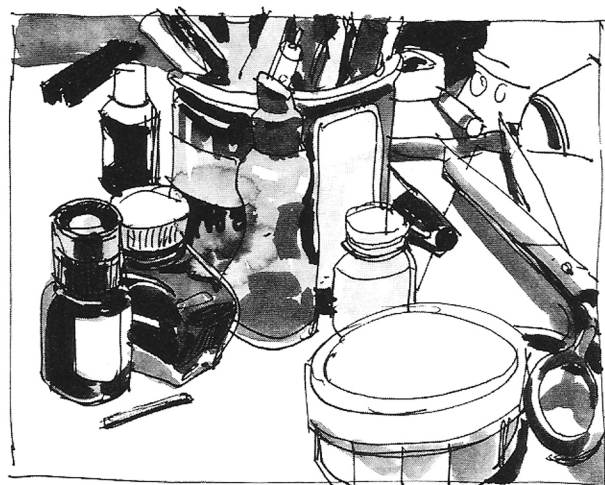


Generally I drew the arrangements as I found them, but on occasion I shifted objects to make a better design. If something looked too confusing, I omitted it. If a space looked too blank, I moved something into it. My decisions were made almost unconsciously — I just played with the shapes until something clicked for me.

I've learned the value in seeing more than one possibility in a subject. Even if I'm only planning to make a single drawing, I scan the subject slowly with my viewfinder for possible approaches before I choose the one most appealing to my own pattern sense. Deciding on a particular arrangement is usually more a matter of, "Hmmm . . . this looks promising, I'll see how it works out," than of, "Ahah, that's exactly what I'm looking for!"



A dramatic overhead view opens up white spaces and makes possible a vertical composition with strong diagonals.

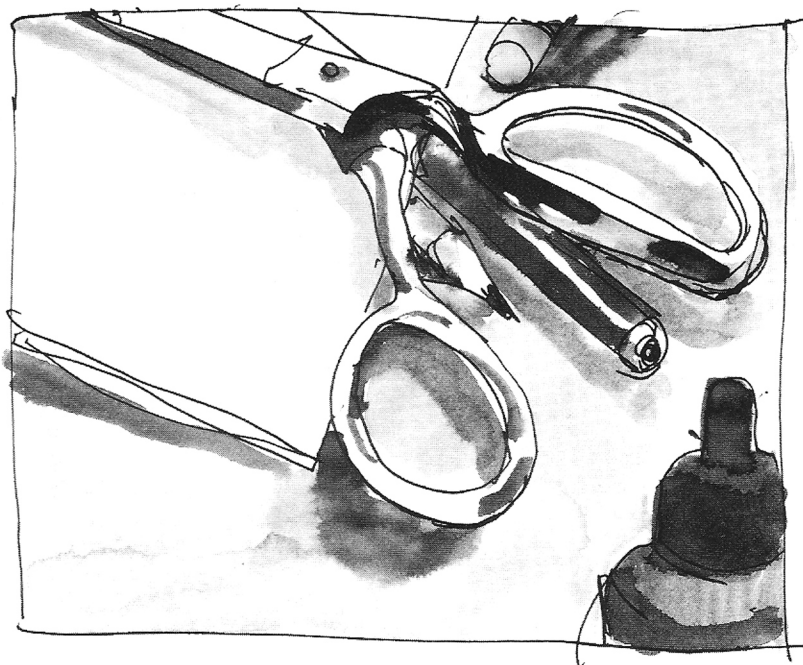


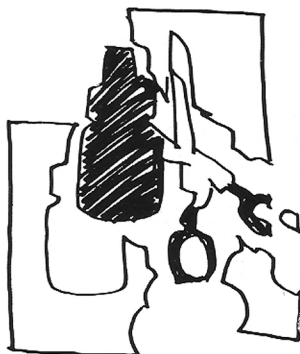
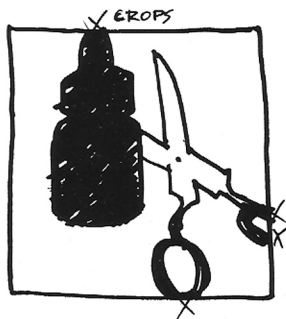
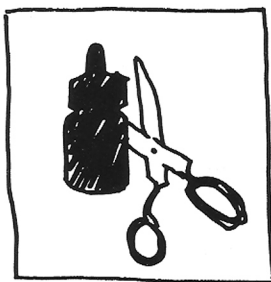
In this view, everything is clustered toward the center. Only a touch of the dark background is showing.

Moving in very close brings out a subject's abstract qualities. Shapes become larger and more mysterious.



The large open area in front gives an added feeling of depth. Cropping is confined to the top border.





*Tighter cropping
adds more
background
shapes.*

Cropping

We can view cropping as something that just happens whenever our background hits the edge of the paper, or we can view it as a radical design device. Cropping helps develop nerve because it requires absolute decisions. Objects are either in or out of the picture. Adventurous cropping will cut right across important aspects of the subject. It brings the viewer in closer and breaks up the background. Revealing only parts of objects, cropping adds an abstract quality to a work of art. The viewer becomes less aware of things and more aware of shapes, angles, and tones. In this way, cropping emphasizes design.

Radical cropping is a recent innovation in the history of Western art, evolving out of the separate influences of Japanese woodblock prints and photography. The eighteenth century woodblocks of Hiroshige, Hokusai, and others featured oblique and obscured figures and buildings cropped at bold angles. The first photographers started out imitating painters by carefully centering their subjects within the picture area, but very soon — either by mistake or by experimentation — began cropping in more daring ways. They moved in for close-ups, let figures walk in and out of frame, and had unidentifiable fragments cut off at the borders. Painters of the late nineteenth century were excited by these innovations and began to incorporate them into their work. The use of a picture's borders to create new shapes has been a part of art ever since.

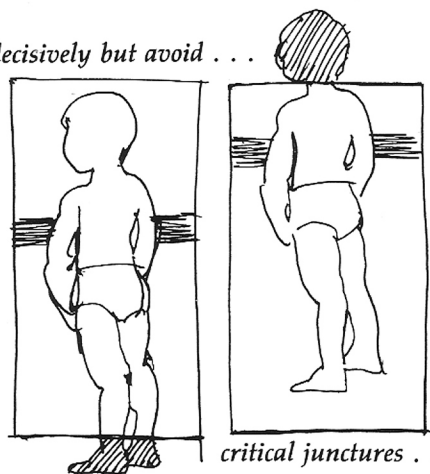


The reasons for cropping may be varied, but they tend to fall into two categories. First, cropping brings the viewer in closer for more intimate contact with the subject. Second, cropping divides one big background into smaller, more numerous, and more distinctive shapes. Notice the diagram of the scissors and bottle on the left-hand page. In the top picture, the objects are placed in the center of the paper. The surrounding white area can be considered a shape, but it is too large and all-encompassing to have any real identity. When we move in and crop, however, as we've done in the second example, we give the background a set of more assertive and muscular shapes. Now there are three or four identifiable shapes, and they play a more active part in the picture's design.

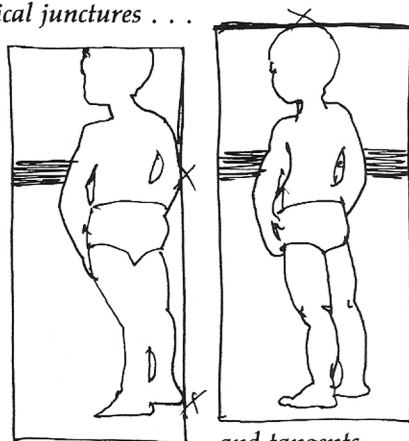
In composing your picture, generally follow a "crop and float" formula.

Although there are no rules for cropping, I like to follow a *crop and float* formula. This means that if you crop the top of an object, you let the bottom float or vice versa. If you crop one side of an object, let the other side float. Also, it's best to avoid cropping at narrow junctures. People, for example, should not be cropped at the ankles, wrists, or neck because it suggests amputation. Finally, avoid cropping at tangents, where the edges of the figure or object exactly meets the edge of the paper. Such cropping is confusing to the eye.

Crop decisively but avoid . . .



critical junctures . . .

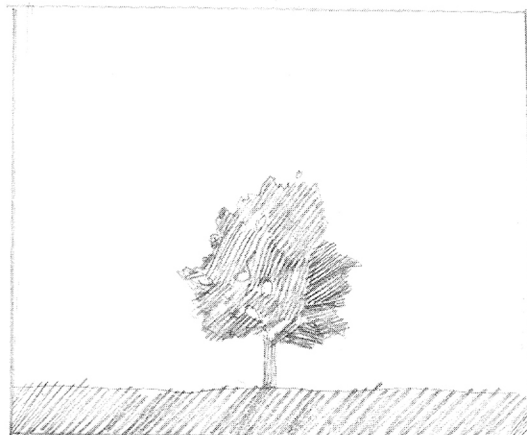
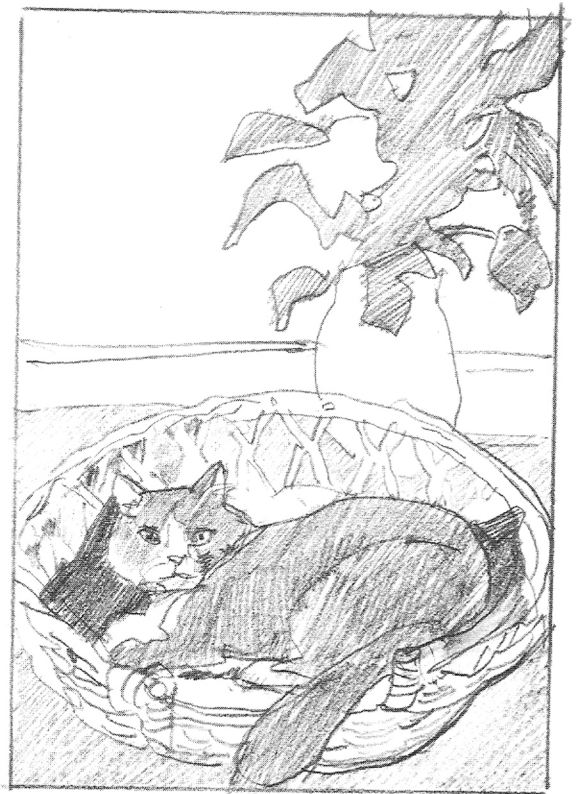


and tangents.

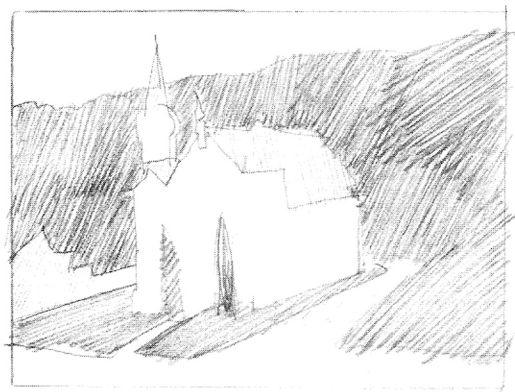
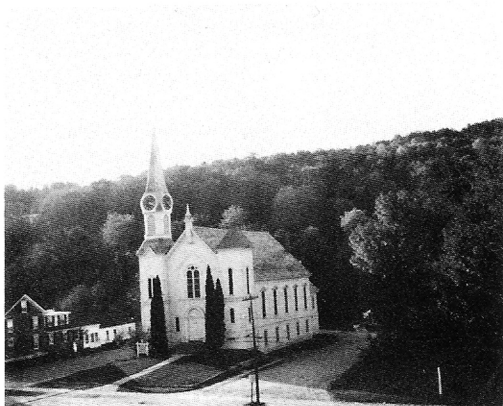


Radical cropping forces the design aspects — we are made more aware of the light and dark shape pattern and the edges of the paper. (The ankle crop is less objectionable when the legs are cropped at different places.)

1. Do I want a horizontal or a vertical composition?



2. Do I want more background or more figure?



3. Can I reduce my subject to five shapes or less?

Three compositional decisions

Most design decisions take place in the first few minutes. If you're doing a sketchbook study, you make a few quick decisions in your head, perhaps a few vague strokes on the paper, and then plunge right in. If you're doing a carefully executed piece, you might try a few little compositional studies first. Either way, you make a very early commitment to a plan. Of course, as you draw, you'll continue to make small changes and modifications, but chances are, if any of those changes are major, you'll begin a new drawing.

I place a good deal of emphasis on ways of getting started. Perhaps this is because I remember how often I've sat with sketchbook in hand, pencil poised, subject before me, feeling totally stuck. The problem for me was always the same: pressure. I felt pressure because I was afraid I couldn't remember all that I was supposed to know. I felt pressure that I was about to spend a lot of time and effort and might still come up with weak results. And I felt the pressure of wanting to say something artistically and not knowing how. It finally occurred to me that all these concerns were irrelevant if I couldn't get started. From this experience, I derived a strategy which gets my pencil moving. I ask myself three compositional questions which get me quickly involved in the design of my picture:

1. Do I want a vertical or a horizontal composition?
2. Do I want more subject or more background?
3. Can I reduce my subject to five shapes or less?

If you're generally slow to get started, I recommend that you memorize these questions, and make them part of your internal dialogue. Then make your decisions quickly, almost impulsively.

Decision #1 (vertical or horizontal format): Before you start drawing, consider both arrangements, perhaps with the aid of your viewfinder, and then make a quick decision. Usually it will seem an obvious choice. Logic would dictate, for example, that for a standing figure you turn your paper vertically, and for a reclining figure, horizontally. Occasionally, however, you'll want to do the opposite just to keep from getting into conventional habits.

Decision #2 (more figure or more background): In most drawings, you'll probably want your center of interest to dominate, but that doesn't necessarily mean it needs to occupy more space. Sometimes isolated and lonely qualities can be emphasized by making the background shapes larger. (Decision #2 is really just a tricky way to get yourself thinking about the background shapes before you start drawing.)

Decision #3 (five shapes or less): Reducing your subject to a few shapes and getting them down on your paper gives you a basic design to work with. There's nothing magic about the number *five* except that it's just about all the human eye can take in at a single glance. The idea is to force your subject, no matter how complicated, into a simple pattern. Sometimes this entails squinting and perhaps even a value sketch. A strong commitment to the initial plan will make the middle and late stages of your drawing much easier.

Project 7 - D — Four Compositional Studies

Select two still life objects or a sleeping pet and make a series of four compositional studies in pencil. These studies should be simply drawn with a small number of shapes and only three values, not counting the white of the paper. Make these studies no more than 4x5½ inches and do them in the following order:

1. a horizontal composition;
2. a vertical composition;
3. a close-up composition (horizontal or vertical);
4. a distant view (horizontal or vertical).

Use your viewfinder to frame each composition and allow about five to ten minutes each.

Designing with straddles

A number of ideas in this book are based on paradox. I call them *straddles* because they place one foot in each of two opposing camps. Here are some examples:

- Sometimes, as when drawing blind, you draw better when you don't even look at your picture.
- You can discover your own tendencies through copying and emulating someone else.
- You strive to create illusions while simultaneously reminding viewers that they are looking at a drawing.
- Your goal is to draw accurately yet it is also desirable to intensify certain aspects.
- You can tie figure and background together in a common shape that is neither and both at the same time.

Can you recognize the contradiction in each of these statements? Surprisingly, whatever strength these ideas have is a result of that contradiction.

Combining opposing ideas — straddling — is a vital part of design and far more common to both art and life than is generally realized. Too often we approach drawing as a discipline in which there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things. The idea that opposites can exist side by side can be perplexing to those of us brought up to see things as either/or, true or not true, correct or incorrect. This is a Western habit of thinking that sadly inhibits much of our understanding about whole systems in general and art in particular. Eastern thought has a lot to teach us about paradox.

Yin/yang is an ancient Chinese idea in which the world is seen to be comprised of coexisting opposites. Understanding comes not from choosing between opposites but from embracing them. The Zen Buddhists have a particular knack for making a virtue out of contradiction. Here, as best I can recall it, is a typical Buddhist paradox based on learning and innocence.

When I was young and knew nothing, a tree was simply a tree, a mountain simply a mountain, and a lake simply a lake.

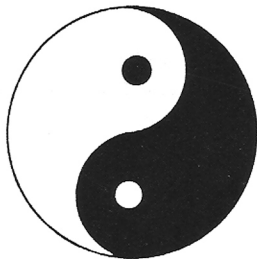
When I had studied and learned some, a tree was much more than a tree, a mountain much more than a mountain, and a lake much more than a lake.

When I became enlightened, a tree was once again just a tree, a mountain just a mountain, and a lake just a lake.

Is the third state of consciousness exactly like the first state? Well, yes and no.

Modern physicists have found that light sometimes acts wave-like and other times acts particle-like. Even though these properties are mutually exclusive, scientists accept that light is both. In effect, they concede that the ancient yin/yang idea of both/and is more applicable here than the traditional scientific notion of either/or.

When you look for them, straddles are everywhere. The opposing characteristics of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote is a straddle. The earthy, realistic, cynical one illuminates the romantic, idealistic, deluded one. And vice versa. They act as foils for each other. In a sense, I've had these two characters, one on each shoulder, advising me during the writing of this



The ancient Chinese yin/yang symbol.

book. Don Quixote encouraged me to present drawing as an adventure, a quest filled with high risks but offering great rewards. Sancho told me to come back down to earth and explain the little tricks, the how-to's, the step-by-step procedures of drawing. It wasn't until I stopped thinking in terms of either/or that I could listen to them both.

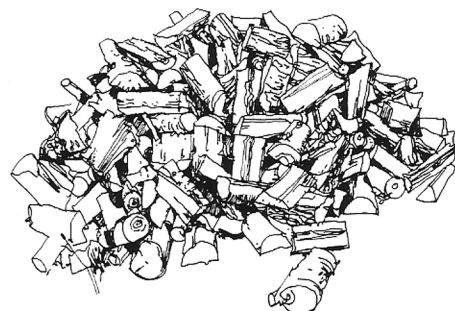
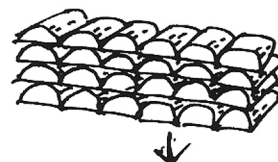
The either/or habit is hard to break. It's difficult to imagine that things can be both simple and complex at the same time or that something could be simultaneously rational and emotional or specific and general. When one voice says, "Make your shapes recognizable" and another voice says, "Strive for a what-is-it quality," rather than feeling you must choose between the two, find a way of incorporating both. When you shift from an either/or way of thinking to a both/and mode, you set up the possibilities for creative solutions.

I don't want to convey the idea that a straddle is simply a 50-50 compromise, an average. That would be like saying that if you had one foot in a bucket of ice water and the other in a bucket of scalding water, on the average, you'd be pretty comfortable. We can be sure that Dickens' famous opening line from *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," does not translate to, "It was a so-so time." Straddling means getting the most out of each opposing quality. Over the next few pages, we'll look at some of the more important straddles that apply to picture organization.

Repetition and variation

Earlier, repetition and variation were presented as a textural device, but it's really a "whole-systems" principle so ripe with possibilities that it's presented again here as an aspect of picture design. By finding some way of repeating shapes in your drawing, you set up a pleasing visual rhythm. By making those shapes individual and varied, you provide an interesting

Repetition



repetition with variation, a straddle



Variation





This drawing of the Cathedral in Florence impresses us as intricate, but the plan is quite simple. The single large shape contains a variety of repeated rectangles, circles, and arches. The birds and people are added repetitions.

counterpoint to that rhythm. This is the straddle. The viewer jumps back and forth between seeing the unified whole and seeing the individual part.

There are lots of ways of repeating shapes. The simplest is to draw similar things. A cluster of houses, or a mass of bare tree branches are two such examples. You might lay out a group of soda or beer bottles, some standing, some lying at different angles with irregular spaces in between. If you draw manufactured items in which every object is exactly the same, you'll have to rely on an irregularity of positioning (some side views, some front views, some three-quarter views) and negative shapes in between (some tight spaces, some open spaces) to provide the variation.

Objects of basic shapes like boxes or balls make variation harder to achieve than do objects which are asymmetrical, like shoes, or different from end-to-end, like wood screws. All of these objects make good subject matter, and each one offers a different challenge.

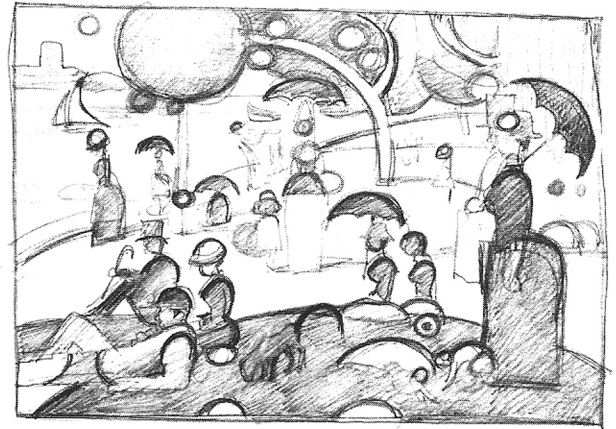
Another way to play with the repetition/variation straddle is to draw a single object or animal either from a photograph or from your imagination, as I did with the

drawing of the monkeys on page 185. Then recopy it, altering it slightly by stretching, twisting, or bending, and fit it tightly near the first object. Continue to do this until you fill the page. The result has almost a wallpaper feeling, only much more personal and imaginative.

Beyond drawing similar things, there are more subtle ways of combining repetition with variation. Shadows, for example, can echo the shape of your center of interest. Negative shapes can do the same thing. Trapped little background spaces within the mass of a houseplant tend to echo the leaf-shapes.

Disparate objects included in the same picture can resonate with one another. I am reminded of an early Dutch still-life which includes a melon cut in half alongside a mandolin. The eye links up these two shapes and makes a satisfying connection.

Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon at the Grande Jatte* represents the bourgeoisie relaxing in the park. All the expected objects are there: playing children, parasols, trees, and boats. What is not so obvious is the way the elements are put together to form a series of curves and circles. Rounded trees, half-round umbrellas, quarter-round bustles, and the curving postures of figures on the grass serve to vary a pattern that is barely discernable. Even the curving tails of dogs and a pet monkey add to the subtle resonance. Although initially inspired by the actual scene, such a composition is ultimately the result of careful organizing and arranging. This bending and reshaping of reality is another example of intensifying. It moves a step beyond merely reproducing what is seen in order to impose a stronger sense of pattern. Often such hidden repetition is the most effective kind and, as you might guess, the hardest to achieve.



Seurat, *Sunday Afternoon at the Grande Jatte*

A variety of moods advance along the bobbing heads like a tune along a progression of musical notes. Drawing based on a painting by R. Levers.

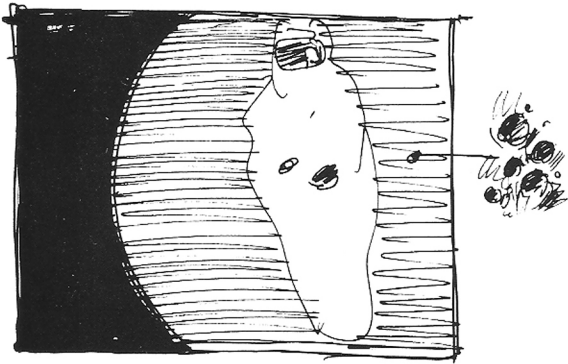


Simplicity and complexity

Although we have said that straddles involve contradictions, they are more a matter of language than reality. In those moments when we experience reality fully, we see through apparent contradictions and find instead complementariness.

A work of art may straddle simplicity and complexity in a number of ways, but for now let's apply it only to patterns and consider the two extremes. In one, your drawing is composed of a very few, orderly shapes. In the other it's broken up into a great diversity of shapes. Straddles introduce complexity into the first example and simplicity into the second.

To impose a straddle on a simple pattern is to find and emphasize the individual shapes and unique textural strokes within your drawing. Imagine a composition of just two shapes; an open meadow and a clear sky. Such a design might not hold our interest without some enrichment details. If the field were sufficiently alive with grasses, clover patches,



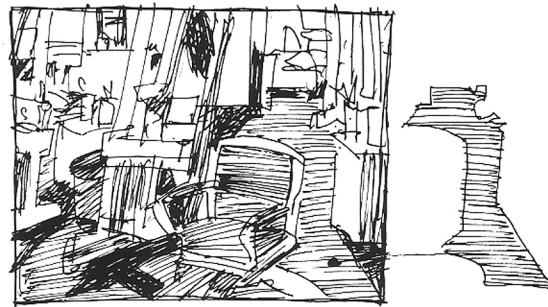
A simple overall pattern with complex enrichment shapes.



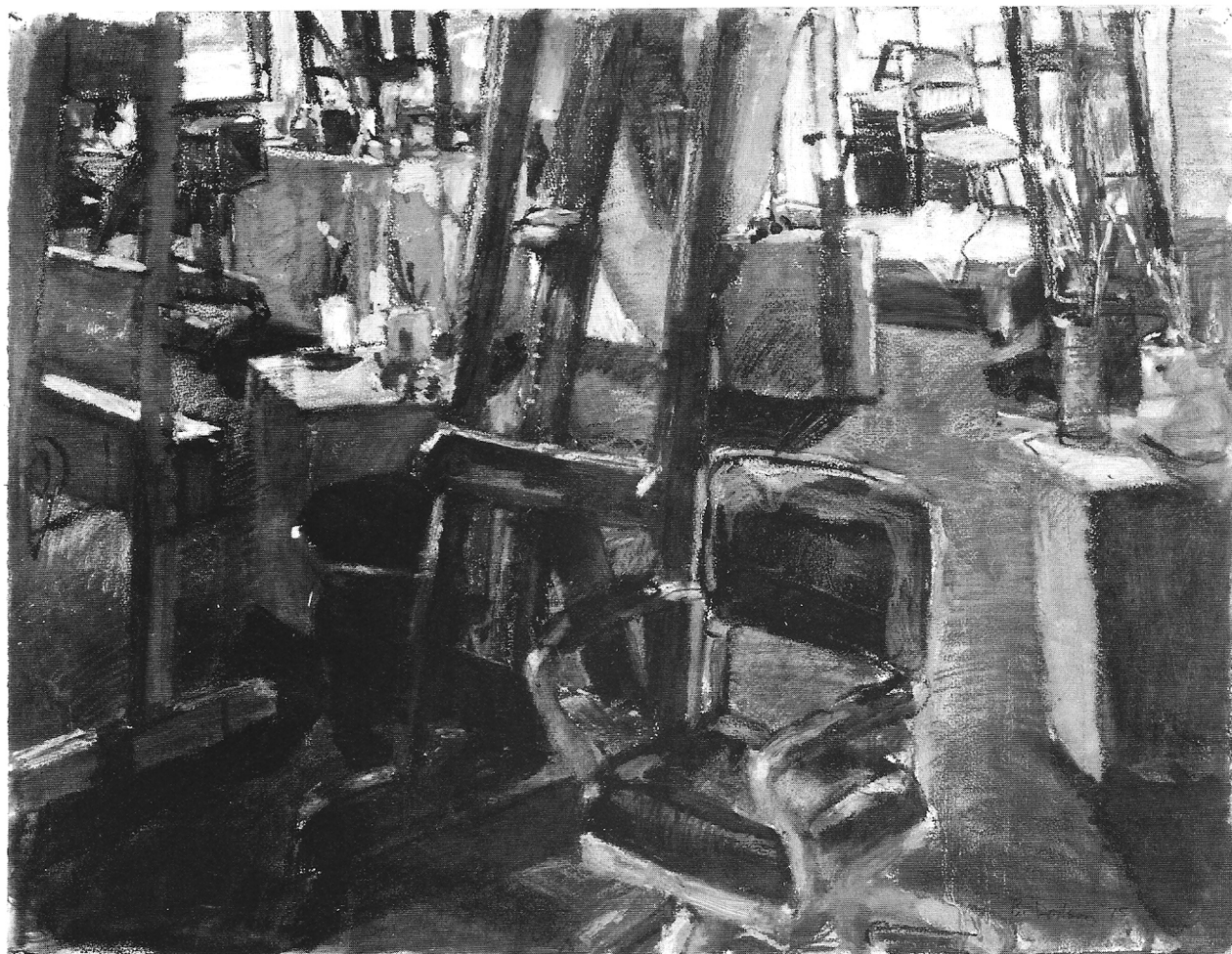
wildflowers, and perhaps a worn path, the simplicity of the design would take on some complexity. This is the kind of problem that the painter Andrew Wyeth handles so deftly.

When you are drawing a complicated subject, straddles can simplify and standardize shapes or tones. Let's say you are doing a tangle of different junk yard objects. To maintain some sense of organization, you may want to alter the shapes to make them seem somewhat more uniform, or you might want to flatten the tones so the whole pile has more evenness and regularity. You will be eliminating the confusion of enrichment shapes, particularly in the background. In other words; you'll want to strengthen the similarities of the pattern and lessen the disparities. Paul Cézanne was a master at reducing complex irregularities to a unified structural whole.

Complexity invests a picture with diversity and richness while simplicity gives it coherence and unity. The mental "stretching" that occurs when we grasp these two ideas at once is the pleasure of an art experience.

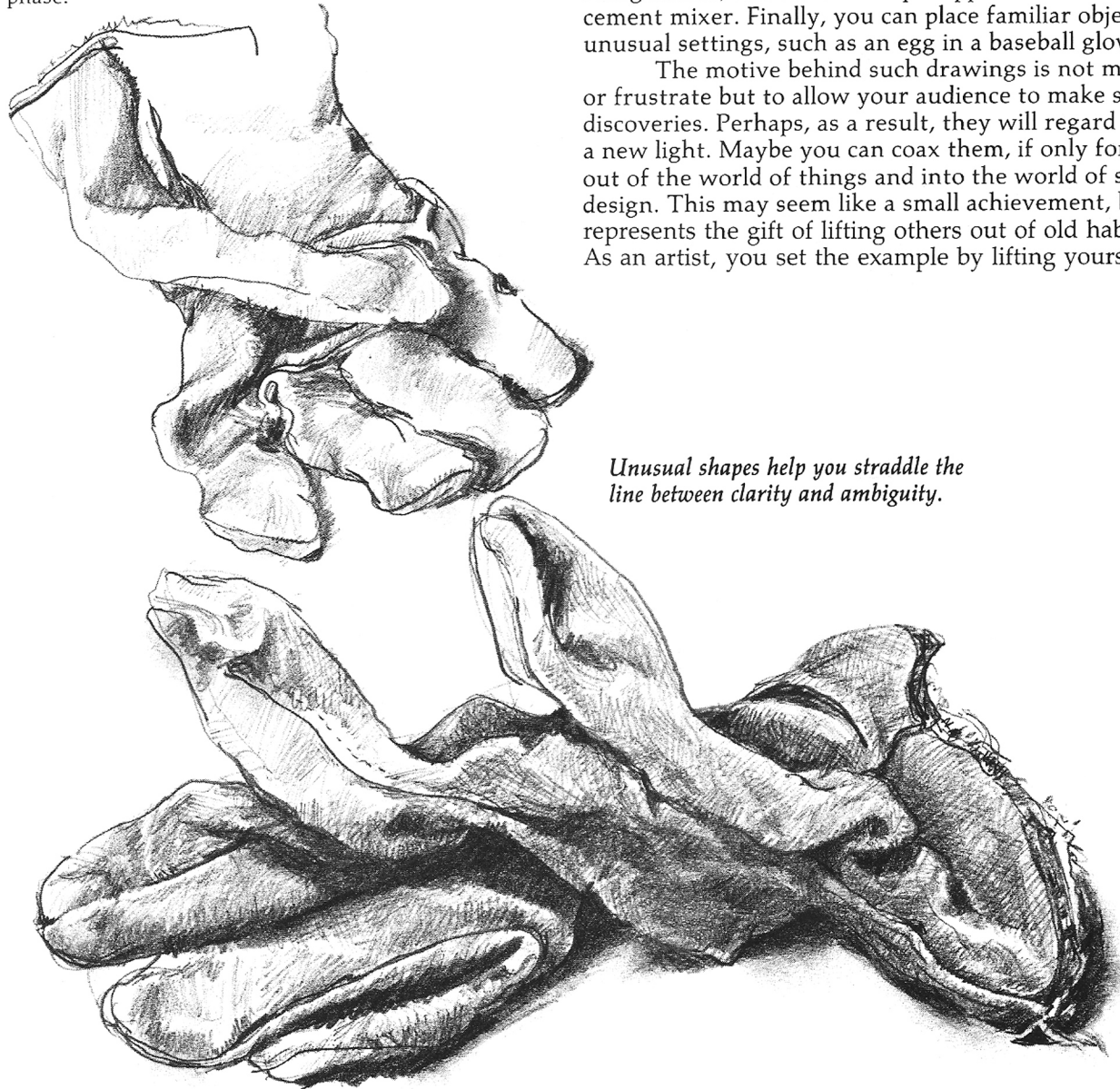


A complex overall pattern with simplified enrichment shapes.



Project 7 - E — Clarity and Ambiguity

Select an object of some complexity to draw. Notice that from certain angles, the identity of the object is very apparent while from others it is almost unrecognizable. For this project, approach your subject from the less descriptive angle, but draw it as carefully and accurately as you can. In this way it is possible to straddle ambiguity and clarity. Strive to balance the two in equal measure. At the end of one hour, try to evaluate whether or not you succeeded. If you feel your drawing is too weighted on the ambiguity side, intensify the identifying textures and details of the object. If weighted on the other, make some changes in the lighting to allow part of the object to fade into obscuring darkness. Allow 20 minutes more to complete this second phase.



Clarity and ambiguity

A drawing which holds our interest is one which asks the questions as well as provides answers. Sometimes it's the question that invites the audience in ("What is it?") and it's the answer that satisfies ("Ah, I see, an old pair of workman's gloves"). Just as often, the audience's interest is provoked by a recognizable object ("That looks just like my old gloves") and the questions follow ("Why put them on an elegant Oriental rug?").

The tendency toward opening (questions) and toward closure (answers) is the basis of this straddle. The idea is to present tantalizing clues without providing full disclosure, offering something that, at first glance, is vaguely recognizable but not altogether discernable.

One simple way of captivating a viewer is to draw your subject from an unusual view such as an extremely foreshortened perspective, or you might interweave your subject with strong light and dark shapes going the other way, as in the watercolor sketch by Ann Toulmin-Rothe.

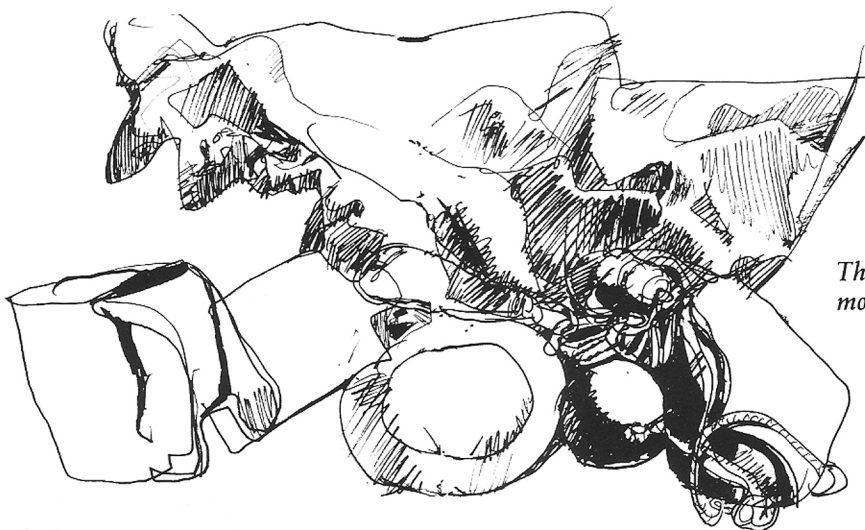
The clarity/ambiguity straddle is more easily made any time you draw objects which are themselves hardly recognizable, such as an antique apple corer or the gears of a cement mixer. Finally, you can place familiar objects in unusual settings, such as an egg in a baseball glove.

The motive behind such drawings is not merely to tease or frustrate but to allow your audience to make some discoveries. Perhaps, as a result, they will regard the objects in a new light. Maybe you can coax them, if only for a moment, out of the world of things and into the world of shape and design. This may seem like a small achievement, but it represents the gift of lifting others out of old habits of seeing. As an artist, you set the example by lifting yourself out first.

Unusual shapes help you straddle the line between clarity and ambiguity.



Ann Toulmin-Rothe, *In and Out of Shadows*. Watercolor.



These elements are unrecognizable to most people as fishing gear.

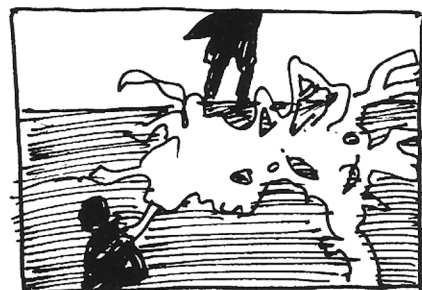
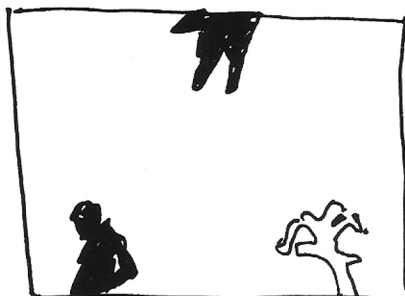
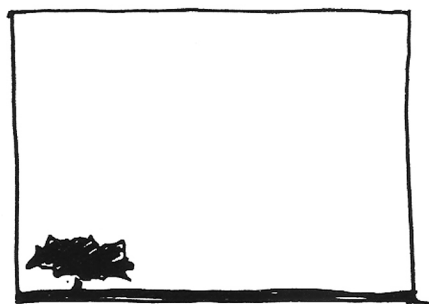
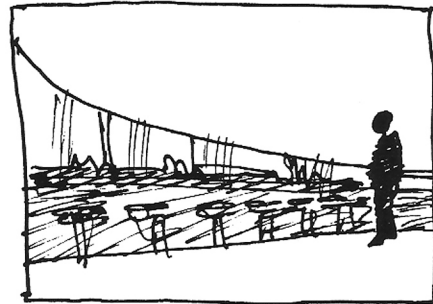
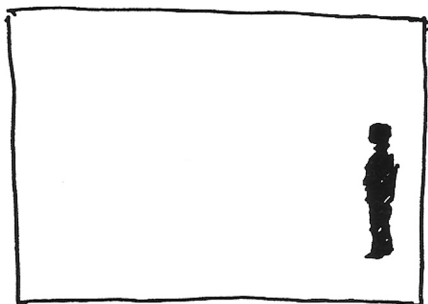
Balance and imbalance

"Motion or change," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "and identity or rest are the first and second secrets of nature." Emerson's secrets apply to art as well. We are drawn to order, stability, and symmetry at the same time that we are attracted by freedom, dynamism, and mobility. The difficulty of formulating perdurable rules about composition arises from the opposing nature of these attractions. Our challenge in composition is to find some specific way of satisfying both of these needs simultaneously. In other words, while we can recognize that no specific rule of design applies in all cases, we find in every good picture a creative tension (or *balance*, if you prefer) between Emerson's first and second secrets.

Every student is cautioned against placing the center of interest in the center of the paper. Too static. What students are not generally told is that a center placement is fine if you can find some other way of introducing disequilibrium. Similarly, you've probably been warned about placing a focal point near the edge of the paper. Too unbalanced. But if you can inventively pull the viewer's eye back into the picture, satisfying the need for order, you can go ahead and do it.

Shapes near the edges are precarious . . .

unless you bring them back into the picture.



Admittedly, few compositions are based on such extreme placements, but you need to try this to experience the push and pull of picture design.

As a practical matter we can say that (1) we want to keep the viewer's eye within the picture area, and (2) we want to keep it moving. Usually creative tension takes place between elements of different sizes and shapes. Small shapes can balance larger ones by means of their location, contrast, or emotional associations. Higher contrasts catch our eye more readily than lower, and isolated elements carry more significance than the same elements closely grouped together. Some objects are simply more interesting to us than others — like the human face or form.

Symmetry/asymmetry, order/disorder, balance/imbalance — the same basic logic underlies each of these pairs of words. You can push one half of the equation as long as you realize that, as forces build in one direction, you must counter with forces in the opposite direction. By experimenting with placement, you expose yourself to a little risk and sometimes considerable uncertainty. But a little precariousness is good for design.

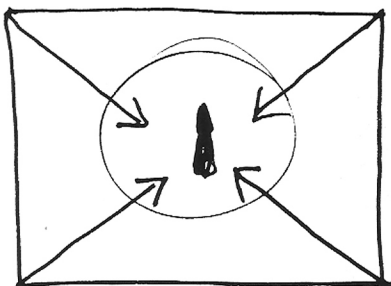
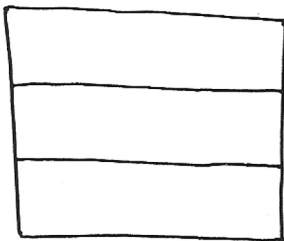
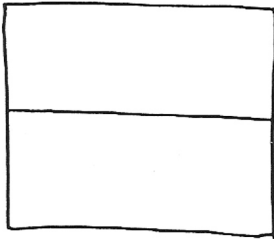
Project 7 - F — Balancing Extreme Compositions

Make a full tonal drawing of a still life in any medium you choose and place the center of interest in one of two locations on your paper:

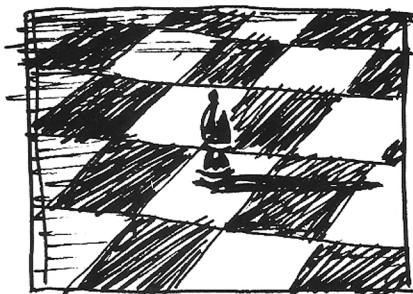
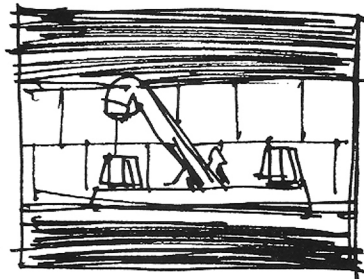
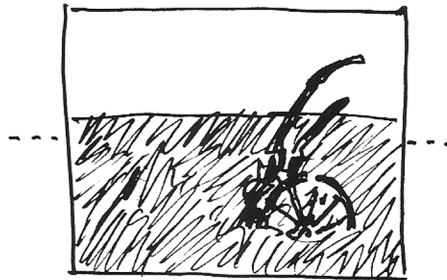
1. in the true center of your paper; or
2. near the outside edge of your paper.

The point of this project is to see if you can keep the center of interest in these uncomfortable places yet make them work by the introduction of light, shadow, texture, pattern, or other objects. Try to introduce some excitement into Problem #1 or some stability into Problem #2. Make a few preliminary sketches of possible solutions. Then, select your best solution and do a full tonal drawing in the medium of your choice. Allow approximately one hour.

Equally divided pictures areas and centered subjects are generally avoided as being too static . . .



. . . unless you find a way to introduce disequilibrium.





The left side of the shape is simple and serene. The right side is angular and active.



Active and passive shapes

This straddle is particularly suited to drawing the figure. Although the human body is symmetrical, even in repose, we usually want to present it in a way that illustrates its dynamic qualities as well. This suggests, if not a rule, certainly a useful device: if you make one side of the figure simple, contained, and passive, make the other complex, protrusive, and active.

One way you can do this, developed by the classical Greeks, is to present the standing figure as a set of counterbalances. The weight on one leg creates an out-thrust hip and a lowered shoulder. With the addition of a jutting elbow or an extended hand, you have a lot of action going down one side. The other side of the figure is a simple, curving stretch. The two complement each other.

Another way to accomplish this active/passive straddle is to draw the hands differently — one open and the other closed. The open one is more convoluted and therefore more active in terms of shape. In comparison, the closed hand is passive.

Clothing can accomplish a similar effect, as can hair. A loose garment can be bunched up on one side and hanging limply on the other. When handling a hair silhouette, the more active side might have more wisps and curls emerging from the mass. Accessories like a fringed shawl or the knot of a scarf can add to the busyness of the active side. On the passive side — in addition to keeping the shapes simple — lowering contrasts, blurring edges, or even merging with a background rectangle can help to subdue the shape.

Working with opposite sides of the figure will help you see how balance is obtained through the equilibrium of opposing forces. You can probably see that this straddle is a first cousin to balance/imbalance and also to simplicity/complexity. Actually, all of the categories of straddles we've looked at are related, and frequently they fold into one another. You needn't try to keep them all in your head. If you remember to look for and develop opposites, appropriate straddles will be suggested by what you see.

Tangents

A tangent occurs where one shape just touches but does not overlap another shape. I hesitate to say anything is bad in drawing, but tangents are such attention-getters that you will probably want to avoid them. Occasionally, they are a deliberate design device, but usually they are a visual coincidence that the artist has failed to notice.

In the example at top right, the one woman's elbow, instead of resting on the ledge, seems to be leaning against the other woman's head. In the second example, the tangent is at the point where the woman's nose appears to touch the window. Is the rectangular shape a window in the background or some other object actually touching the woman's nose? These tangents become a distracting focus for our attention.

Another sort of tangent occurs when the straight edge of one of the elements in a picture runs into and connects with the straight edge of another element so that they share a common border. The extent to which such tangents can mislead is illustrated in the examples at lower right.

In the matter of tangents, you will want to consider the edge of your paper as one of the elements in your drawing, too. Avoid letting the edge of any object end there, whether in a point like the elbow or in a line like the car roof. At times tangents may be interesting, even comical, but they are only desirable insofar as it is the artist's intention to use them.

M. C. Escher, a Dutch artist with a scientific bent of mind, was one of the few who regularly used tangents to good effect. Background and foreground objects, particularly in his flocks of birds or schools of fish, share boundaries to the extent that one cannot say which is which. When you look at many of Escher's drawings, your mind flips back and forth between positive and negative, foreground and background as the shared borders are perceived first as one and then as the other.

Unless you are doing something deliberate, you can easily correct a tangent by separating, overlapping, or otherwise jogging the arrangement of picture elements. If it occurs in nature, you will want to change your position.

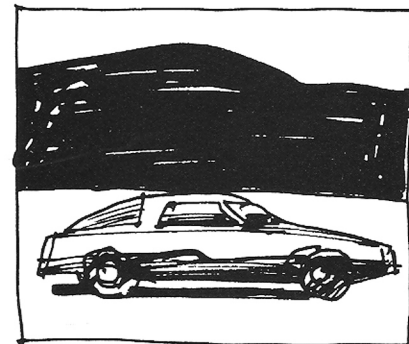
One is less likely to let tangents slip in if one deliberately makes a few and experiences the results. When you're sketching, stick two objects up against each other, or end some object at the edge of your paper. In a short while you'll have developed your consciousness of tangents and will not accidentally create them.



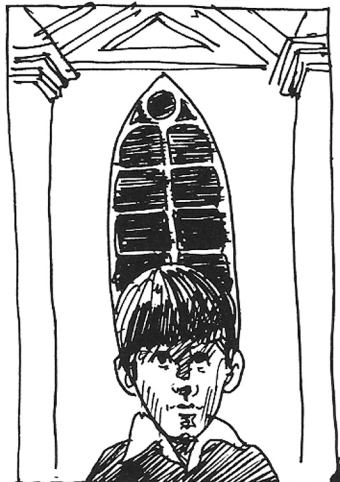
Elbow against head.



Nose touching window.



Car supporting mountain.



Window resembles hat.

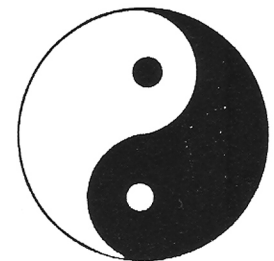
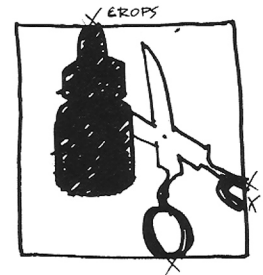
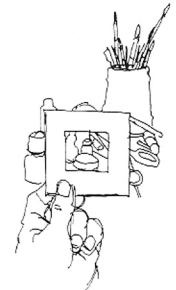


Man standing on dog's back.

KEYS TO CHAPTER 7

Pattern and Design

- **Design with shape.** Use shapes as building blocks for composing your picture.
- **Sense pattern.** Look for the abstract arrangement of lights and darks in your scene. Reinforce this pattern in your mind by describing it in words.
- **Frame the scene.** Use your viewfinder to put boundaries around the scene you are about to draw.
- **Crop the scene.** Cut off parts of your subject at the borders to create more background shapes and a more intimate composition.
- **Straddle contradictions.** Establish creative tension by embracing opposing ideas in a single picture.
- **Identify tangents.** Avoid unwanted coincidences where picture elements just touch but do not decisively overlap.



SELF-CRITIQUE OF YOUR PROJECTS

Project 7 - A — Three Simplified Landscapes

YES NO

- Are all the shapes in each of your pictures either black or white? _____
- Are your drawings bold and simple with a minimum of detail? _____
- Did you succeed in eliminating all outlines from your finished drawing? _____
- Even though your composition is simplified, does it convey at least a vague idea of the actual subject? _____
- Did you stay in the language of shape, giving equal attention to black shapes and white shapes, figure and background? _____
- How many shapes are in your picture? _____

Project 7 - B — Three Simplified Photographs

YES NO

- Are all the shapes in each of your pictures either black or white? _____
- Are your drawings bold and simple with a minimum of detail? _____
- Did you succeed in eliminating all outlines from your finished drawing? _____
- Even though your composition is simplified, does it convey at least a vague idea of the actual subject? _____
- Were you able to treat features as shapes rather than things? _____
- How many shapes are in your picture? _____

Project 7 - C — A Pattern in Reverse

YES NO

- Are all the shapes in your picture either solid white or solid black? _____
- Were you generally able to concentrate on drawing the background shapes and not the figure shapes? _____
- Were you able to capture the character of the figure shapes even though you only drew the background shapes? _____
- Looking at your picture from a distance, is an overall pattern readily apparent? _____

Project 7 - D — Four Compositional Studies

YES NO

- Did you make your studies simple and use only three tonal values? _____
- Did you consider the size and characteristics of the figure shapes as well as the background shapes? _____
- Did you use your viewfinder to frame each composition? _____
- For the close-up, were you able to create additional background shapes by cropping? _____
- In each of the four studies, did you manage to create a distinctly different composition? _____

Project 7 - E — Clarity and Ambiguity

YES NO

- Did you render your subject in careful and accurate detail? _____
- Make a simple outline of your drawing. Is it unrecognizable as an object? _____
- After your evaluation at the end of the first phase, did you feel the need to intensify either quality? _____
- Do you feel your final drawing effectively straddles clarity/ambiguity and exerts pull in *both* directions? _____

Project 7 - F — Balancing Extreme Compositions

YES NO

- Does your drawing have a definite center of interest, and is it placed either in the center or near one edge of your paper? _____
- Have you introduced other elements to counterbalance your center of interest? _____
- Did you try out more than one solution in your preliminary compositional sketches? _____
- Are your shapes, tones, and textures carefully executed? _____
- Do you feel your picture effectively straddles balance/imbalance and exerts pull in both directions? _____