

Composition For Paintings & Drawings From Observation

Andrew Newland

**TEACHING
ART & DESIGN**

Sheeaun, Kilmaley, Ennis,
Co. Clare, Ireland.

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What Makes A Good Composition?

This is not an easy question to answer. For any rule that you may make, you will probably find an example that defies that rule. It is easier to find a reason why a particular composition has or has not worked, after the work has commenced. It is difficult, therefore, to talk about composition until you have begun to create pictures of your own, and for this reason the subject is introduced at this stage, although in practice it ought to be the first thing to be considered in drawing or painting from the subject. In these notes I shall try to identify a few points to consider as you select and compose your own pictures.

Selecting The Subject

This is of course the first decision that has to be made. It is important to make a decision about which aspects of the subject you consider to be most important. This should help you to decide on what to include and what to leave out.

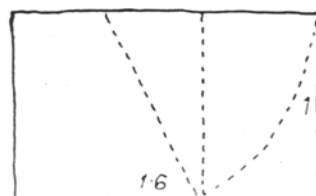
There may be a variety of reasons why you have chosen to draw or paint from a particular subject. It may simply be that the subject has some interest to you personally, or that the object has a pleasing shape. Alternatively it could be that you like the effect of light on the subject, or that the colours of the subject strike you particularly.

Being aware of whatever it was that first caught your eye should help you to decide on the best way to compose the subject, and may influence the media you use.

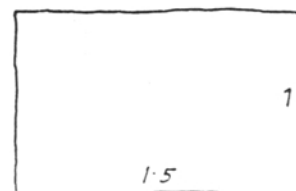
The Proportion Of The Image

Most drawings and paintings fit into a rectangular format. The so-called 'Golden Rectangle' has often in the past been regarded as the ideal proportion for a picture. The shape is derived from using the diagonal of half a square as the radius for an arc; the square is extended to the end of the arc, as in the diagram. The resulting rectangle has a proportion of approximately 1 : 1.6, referred to as the 'Golden Section'. The shape that was added to the square will be found to have the same proportion as the larger rectangle itself; this only occurs with rectangles drawn to this proportion. Research in the 19th century showed that most people selected something approximating to the 'Golden Rectangle' when asked to choose a rectangle of the most satisfactory proportions. It is in fact quite a long rectangle.

The viewfinder of most 35mm cameras has a proportion a little shorter than this, usually about 1 : 1.5. This is quite a pleasing proportion, and if you intend to photograph your work is obviously the most convenient to use.

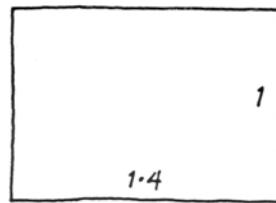


*The
Golden
Rectangle.*

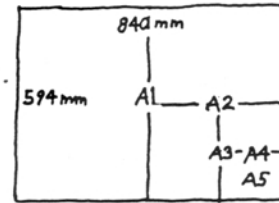


*The
Proportion
of a
35mm
negative*

Many sheets of paper and sketch books now sold are made to international 'A' sizes. These have a proportion of approximately 1 : 1.4. If divided in half, each half also has the same proportions, making it convenient for scaling things up or down. Thus A4 (the size of this sheet of paper) is half of A3, and A3 is half of A2, and so on, each size having the same proportions. It is a noticeably shorter proportion than the previous examples.

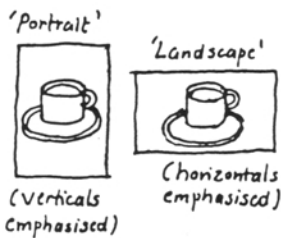


The Proportion of 'A' size papers.



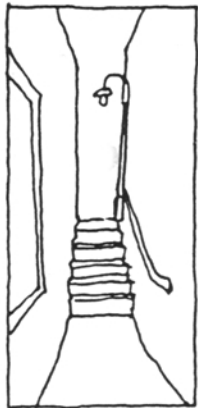
'A' sizes:
A1 : 840 x 594 mm
A2 : 594 x 420 mm
A3 : 420 x 297 mm
A4 : 297 x 210 mm
A5 : 210 x 198 mm
This sheet is A4 size.

Art boards and sketchbooks are often still made to measurements such as 16 by 12 inches, or 10 by 8 inches, proportions even shorter than the previous examples, being approximately 1 : 1.33 and 1 : 1.25 respectively. You will have to judge yourself how appropriate such proportions might be to your subject.



The orientation of the proportion is also of course important. A picture that is taller than it is wide (referred to as 'Portrait' format), will tend to emphasise the vertical elements in it. Likewise a picture in 'Landscape' format will tend to emphasise the horizontal elements in it. This is worth considering if you find that your chosen composition has a height equal to its width; you could extend it slightly in either direction to make it taller or wider, depending on which you felt needed greater emphasis.

Sometimes you will see a square format used. For many pictures this may not be a good choice, as it could leave you feeling that the two overall dimensions were competing with each other for importance. On the other hand it might suit some subjects.



In some instances a very long or very wide composition might be appropriate. When we look at a landscape out of doors, for example, we tend to be aware of the horizontal panoramic view, moving our eyes from one side to the other to take in the subject. A wider than usual composition would help to give a sense of this panoramic view. Occasionally you will come across a very narrow vertical subject, for example the view down a narrow alleyway between buildings. Here a tall narrow composition would obviously heighten this sensation.

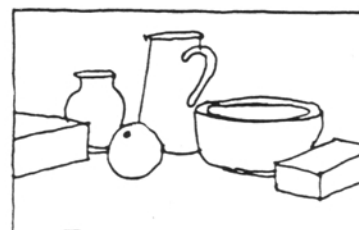


Formal And Informal Compositions

Broadly speaking compositions could be broken down into two categories, 'formal' and 'informal'. An example of a formal composition might be a painting of a house, with the front wall parallel to the picture plane, and the building placed centrally in the picture area. The geometric nature of the composition would emphasise the importance of horizontal and vertical lines in the building. In general a symmetrical composition will create a more formal appearance.



Formal Composition



Informal Composition

On the other hand, a still life arrangement might be a more informal composition, with the objects arranged more haphazardly, facing in different directions and unequally spaced. Sometimes when arranging the subject in this way, you may find that you have unintentionally ended up with two items symmetrically placed. This could look inappropriate for the rest of the picture.

Positioning Objects Within The Picture

Placing objects in the composition will have the effect of dividing up the picture area. For example in a landscape, the position of the horizon will often divide the picture into two areas; the sky and the ground. Alternatively the objects may divide the composition vertically; for example the corner of a room might divide a view of an interior into left and right areas.



Picture area divided by the 'Golden Section'.

The relative proportions of these areas needs careful thought, as does the overall shape of the composition. For example, placing a horizon exactly in the middle of a landscape, will divide it into two equal areas, which may compete for dominance in the eye of the viewer. A horizon one third of the way down from the top of the picture is a common choice, but if the sky is the main point of the picture, you could reverse the proportions by putting the horizon two thirds of the way down the picture. You could use the 'Golden Section' to divide the picture area into two areas in proportion to one another.



Composition dominated by centrally placed object

Any object placed in a central position in the picture will tend to draw attention to itself. In some cases this will be desirable. For example in portrait painting the figure is usually centrally placed for obvious reasons. On the other hand if you don't want any particular feature to dominate the composition, it would be better placed to one side.

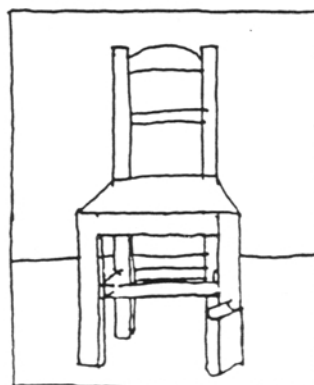
Sometimes it is possible to balance two or more objects in a composition. For example one important item on one side, and two other smaller ones on the other. If the two items are too similar, then they might end up competing with each other for the viewers attention. One way to get around this would be to make one appear smaller by moving it further back, or to make it look different by turning it around.



Composition with object placed undesirably close to edge of picture.

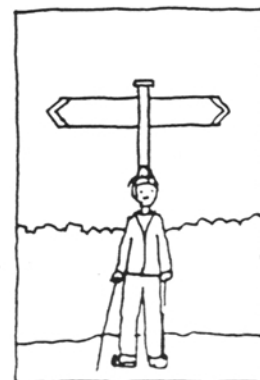
Placing objects on the edges of the composition can cause problems, especially if they are important elements in the picture. They have the effect of drawing your attention away from the middle of the picture. Objects placed right on the extreme edge of the composition tend to look particularly awkward; they can give the impression that you only just managed to squeeze them in. You may also find that if you frame the picture, that they end up being partly obscured by the edges of the frame. A better solution in these circumstances is to deliberately arrange these objects to be partially cut off by the edge of the picture.

When arranging several objects together in a composition, you will have to consider the total shape made by an adjoining group of objects. For example if the edges of two shapes happen by chance to align with one another, it may be difficult for the viewer to properly interpret the individual shapes. Similarly odd effects are given if something in the distance appears to be sitting directly on top of something in the foreground.



Compositions that are difficult to 'read' correctly.

← A chair and a book



→ A Figure and a signpost

Focal Points Of The Picture

In some pictures there will be one or more items that appear to act as focal points to attract the eye of the viewer. The face in a portrait is an obvious example. Figures in a landscape are another; the eye is naturally drawn to the human interest in the subject.

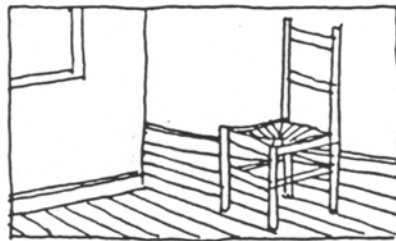
Alternatively it could be that a distant building provides the same effect in a landscape, or in a still life it could be the largest item in the composition.

Obviously care has to be taken in placing these features, bearing in mind the points mentioned previously.

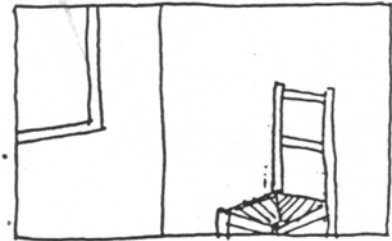
Using Perspective To Help The Composition

This can play an important part in the composition. For example a view along a path will tend to lead your eye into the picture, the perspective of the sides of the path contributing to a sensation of depth. Similarly in a view of an interior, the floor can lead your eye into the picture. It will also give the viewer a clear idea of the relative positions of the various walls and items of furniture, since it can be seen where they are placed on the floor.

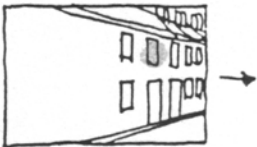
On the other hand, if you place something in the foreground of your picture that has no direct link with the rest of the composition, it may be difficult to get across how this object relates in scale and position to the rest of the picture.



Floor explains relative positions of objects



Lack of Floor makes it difficult to 'read'

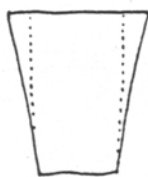


Perspective leading your eye out of the picture.

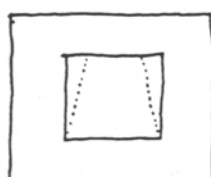
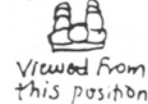
However, a perspective that leads off to the side of the picture can be undesirable. This is often the case when looking at one side of a room for example. This could be counteracted if there is a second set of lines leading to another vanishing point, that would lead the eye back towards the middle of the picture.

Sometimes the chosen view can produce odd results in the appearance of things. For example, an object that becomes wider the further it is away from you, might end up being drawn with parallel edges, because perspective would make the sides converge towards a vanishing point. It could be very difficult to make this look anything other than a drawing error, and might be better avoided by using a different viewpoint.

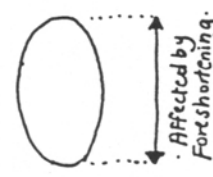
Similarly a shape that is elliptical, with the longer dimension across the ellipse in a similar direction to your line of sight, could end up being drawn as a circle because of the effect of foreshortening. Again this is likely to look 'wrong' despite your best efforts, and could be avoided by changing your eye level.



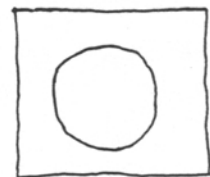
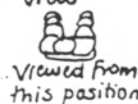
A shape like this in plan view



Could end up looking like this in the final perspective.



A shape like this in plan view



Could end up looking like this in the final perspective

Affected by Foreshortening

The Effect Of Tone On The Composition

So far we have only been considering the effects of outline shapes, but of course the arrangement of light and dark tones is also important. Sometimes it is possible to make a well balanced composition in line, that does not work so well in tone, because the tones draw attention to inappropriate parts of the picture.

One way of using tone is to try and arrange for the light and dark parts of the picture to balance one another in terms of area. Using dark areas to separate light areas, and vice versa, can help to clarify the subject matter.

A strong contrast of tone will tend to attract attention. In the past portraits were often painted against a very dark background in order to focus attention on the face. Placing items of extreme tonal contrast at the edges of the picture is probably therefore not a good idea in general.

An awareness of tone can provide you with some fresh ways of looking at subjects. For example you might find that a pattern of shadows becomes the main theme in a composition.



Composition based on
the observation of tone.

The Effect Of Colour On The Composition

In the same way as with tone, strongly contrasted colours, or very bright colours attract attention. A person wearing something bright red would be an obvious example. You will have to consider carefully where best to use such points of focus in your picture.

Very often when making a picture the effect of one coloured surface seen against another is not really given proper consideration. The effect in the finished painting can be very striking however if you exploit such colour combinations. For example a bright orangey red tile roof could look dramatic if seen against a deep blue sky; the complementary colours enhancing each other.

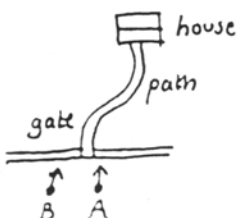
As with tone, being aware of the effect of combining colours can lead you to different ways of looking at the subject.

Manipulating The Subject Matter To Make A Good Composition

At first sight it may seem that in making drawing or paintings from observation, there is limited scope for changing the composition; you are stuck with the way things are in reality. However there is quite a lot that you can do to change things. Very often a small adjustment can make a big difference to the way that the subject is viewed.

First of all you may be able to move the subject itself. This is obviously easy to do if you have a still life subject, but it may be possible on a larger scale. For example if drawing the interior of a room, you may be able to move the furniture if it helps the composition.

Secondly you may be able to make quite a difference by moving your position to right or left. This will change the perspective you have, and will move things in the foreground in relation to those in the background. Moving to the left, for example, will show more of the left facing side of the object, and objects in the foreground will appear to be further to the right.

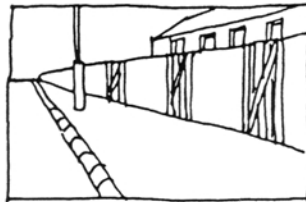


View
From
Position
'A'

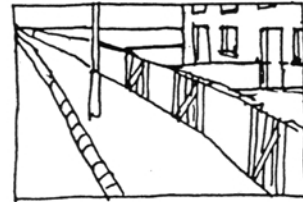


View
From
Position
'B'

You may be able to change your eye level. For example a low eye level may not show the layout of a space particularly well. Using a stool or standing up at an easel may help. Usually your first impression of a space or a landscape is from walking into that space, but when you sit down to start to draw you will of course have a lower eye level. In these cases you may need to draw from a standing position to produce the end result you originally intended. In a landscape you may be able to get the viewpoint you require by viewing it from an upstairs window, or by using a nearby hillside if there is one, although this may involve other changes to the overall perspective.

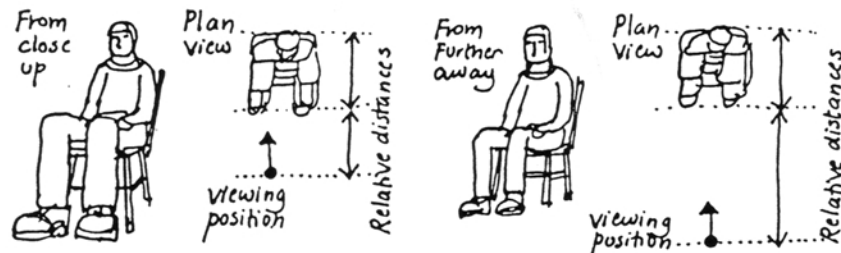


View from a low eye level does not explain what there is behind the wall.



View from a higher eye level explains this better.

Moving towards or away from the subject will also change the composition. For example if you are sitting very close to a subject, the nearest part will appear very large in your picture area. Moving away from the subject will make the nearer parts not so much larger proportionally. This effect is often seen in figure drawing. A seated figure facing you and fairly close to you could have the lower legs twice as close to you as the upper part of the figure. Therefore the lower legs would appear to be twice as large as the rest of the figure. Moving back from the figure would reduce this distortion of the subject.



If none of these produces the sort of composition that you are after, then you could resort to moving parts of the subject in relation to other. The key thing to remember here is that if you want your drawing to look like the subject, then this process must not be taken too far. There will inevitably be problems associated with it, for example you may find that in creating more space between the horizon and the foreground, that you now have to know what to put into the space created. However, used with discretion, it can help to make the composition that little bit better.

Analysing Finished Pictures

You will learn a great deal about composition from practice, and in particular it helps to try and work out why a particular drawing or painting has, or has not really worked very well. There will probably be many factors at work. Looking at drawings and paintings by other artists can be useful too, if you try and analyse the composition used.