

## Module 4

### The Artistic Principles

This module explores the artistic principles -- the means by which the elements in a work of art are arranged and orchestrated. They include:

- Visual Balance
- Repetition
- Scale and Proportion
- Emphasis
- Time and Motion
- Unity
- Variety

Visual art manifests itself through media, ideas, themes and sheer creative imagination. Yet all of these rely on basic structural principles that, like the elements we've been studying, combine to give voice to artistic expression. Incorporating the principles into your artistic vocabulary not only allows you to objectively describe artworks you may not understand, but contributes in the search for their meaning.

The first way to think about a principle is that it is something that can be repeatedly and dependably done with elements to produce some sort of visual effect in a composition.

The principles are based on sensory responses to visual input: elements APPEAR to have visual weight, movement, etc. The principles help govern what might occur when particular elements are arranged in a particular way. Using a chemistry analogy, the principles are the ways the elements "stick together" to make a "chemical" (in our case, an image). Principles can be confusing. There are at least two very different but correct ways of thinking about principles. On the one hand, a principle can be used to describe an operational cause and effect such as "bright things come forward and dull things recede". On the other hand, a principle can describe a high quality standard to strive for such as "unity is better than chaos" or "variation beats boredom" in a work of art. So, the word "principle" can be used for very different purposes.

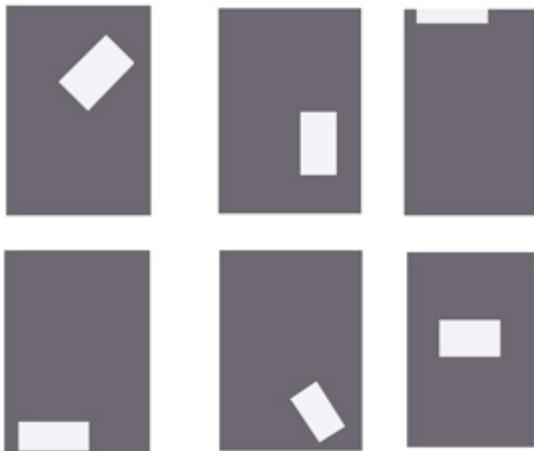
Another way to think about a principle is that it is a way to express a value judgment about a composition. Any list of these effects may not be comprehensive, but there are some that are more commonly used (unity, balance, etc). When we say a painting has unity we are making a value judgment. Too much *unity* without *variety* is boring and too much variation without unity is chaotic.

The principles of design help you to carefully plan and organize the elements of art so that you will hold interest and command attention. This is sometimes referred to as *visual impact*.

In any work of art there is a thought process for the arrangement and use of the elements of design. The artist who works with the principles of good composition will create a more interesting piece; it will be arranged to show a pleasing rhythm and movement. The center of interest will be strong and the viewer will not look away, instead, they will be drawn into the work. A good knowledge of composition is essential in producing good artwork. Some artists today like to bend or ignore these rules and by doing so are experimenting with different forms of expression. The following are important principles in composition:

- **Balance**

All works of art possess some form of visual balance – a sense of weighted clarity created in a composition. The artist arranges balance to set the dynamics of a composition. A really good example is in the [work](#) of Piet Mondrian, whose revolutionary paintings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century used non-objective balance instead of realistic subject matter to generate the visual power in his work. In the examples below you can see that where the white rectangle is placed makes a big difference in how the entire picture plane is activated.



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The example on the top left is weighted towards the top and the diagonal orientation of the white shape makes the whole area a sense of movement. The top middle example is weighted more towards the bottom, but still maintains a sense that the white shape is floating. On the top right, the white shape is nearly off the picture plane altogether, leaving most of the remaining area visually empty. This arrangement works if you want to have a feeling of loftiness or simply to direct the viewer's eyes to the top of the composition. The lower left example is perhaps the least dynamic, the white shape resting at the bottom, mimicking the horizontal bottom edge of the ground. The overall sense here is restful, heavy and without any dynamic character. The bottom middle

composition is weighted decidedly towards the bottom right corner, but again, the diagonal orientation of the white shape leaves some sense of movement. Lastly, the lower right example places the white shape directly in the middle on a horizontal axis. This is visually the most stable, but lacks any sense of movement. Refer to these six diagrams when you are determining the visual weight of specific artworks.

There are three basic forms of visual balance:

- Symmetrical
- Asymmetrical
- Radial



Examples of Visual Balance

Left: Symmetrical Middle: Asymmetrical Right: Radial

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**1. Symmetrical** balance is the most visually stable, and characterized by an exact – or nearly exact - compositional design on either (or both) sides of the horizontal or vertical axis of the picture plane. Symmetrical compositions are usually dominated by a central anchoring element. There are many examples of symmetry in the natural world that reflect an aesthetic dimension. The Moon Jellyfish fits this description; ghostly lit against a black background, but absolute symmetry in its design.



Above: Moon Jellyfish, (detail), digital image by Luc Viator.

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But symmetry's inherent stability can sometimes preclude a static quality. View the Tibetan [scroll painting](#) to see the implied movement of the central figure Vajrakilaya. The visual busyness of the shapes and patterns surrounding the figure are balanced by their compositional symmetry, and the wall of flame behind Vajrakilaya tilts to the right as the figure itself tilts to the left. Tibetan scroll paintings use the symmetry of the figure to symbolize their power and spiritual presence.

Spiritual paintings from other cultures employ this same balance for similar reasons. Sano di Pietro's *'Madonna of Humility'*, painted around 1440, is centrally positioned, holding the Christ child and forming a triangular design, her head the apex and her flowing gown making a broad base at the bottom of the picture. Their halos are visually reinforced with the heads of the angels and the arc of the frame.



Sano di Peitro, *Madonna of Humility*, c.1440, tempera and tooled gold and silver on panel.

[Brooklyn Museum](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org), New York

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The use of symmetry is evident in three-dimensional art too. A famous example is the *Gateway Arch* in St. Louis, Missouri (below). Commemorating the westward expansion of the United States, its stainless steel frame rises over 600 feet into the air before gently curving back to the ground. Another example is Richard Serra's *Tilted Spheres* (also below). The four massive slabs of steel show a concentric symmetry and take on an organic dimension as they curve around each other, appearing to almost hover above the ground.

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Eero Saarinen, *Gateway Arch*, 1963-65, stainless steel, 630' high. St. Louis, Missouri.

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Richard Serra, *Tilted Spheres*, 2002 – 04, Cor-ten steel, 14' x 39' x 22'. Pearson International Airport, Toronto, Canada.

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**2. Asymmetry** uses compositional elements that are offset from each other, creating a visually unstable balance. Asymmetrical visual balance is the most dynamic because it creates a more complex design construction. A graphic poster from the 1930's shows how offset positioning and strong contrasts can increase the visual effect of the entire composition.



Poster from the Library of Congress archives

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Claude Monet's '*Still Life with Apples and Grapes*' from 1880 (below) uses asymmetry in its design to enliven an otherwise mundane arrangement. First, he sets the whole composition on the diagonal, cutting off the lower left corner with a dark triangle. The arrangement of fruit appears haphazard, but Monet purposely sets most of it on the top half of the canvas to achieve a lighter visual weight. He balances the darker basket of fruit with the white of the tablecloth, even placing a few smaller apples at the lower right to complete the composition.

Monet and other [Impressionist](#) painters were influenced by Japanese woodcut prints, whose flat spatial areas and graphic color appealed to the artist's sense of design.



Claude Monet, *Still Life with Apples and Grapes*, 1880, oil on canvas.

The Art Institute of Chicago.

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One of the best-known Japanese print artists is [Ando Hiroshige](#). You can see the design strength of asymmetry in his woodcut '*Shinagawa on the Tokaido*' (below), one of a series of works that explores the landscape around the Takaido road. You can view many of his works through the hyperlink above.



Hiroshige, *Shinagawa on the Tokaido*, [ukiyo-e](#) print, after 1832

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In Henry Moore's *'Reclining Figure'* the organic form of the abstracted figure, strong lighting and precarious balance obtained through asymmetry make the sculpture a powerful example in three-dimensions.



Above image: Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1951. Painted bronze.

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Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Photo by Andrew Dunn.

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**3. Radial balance** suggests movement from the center of a composition towards the outer edge - or vice versa. Many times radial balance is another form of symmetry, offering stability and a point of focus at the center of the composition. Buddhist [mandala](#) paintings offer this kind of balance almost exclusively. Similar to the scroll painting we viewed previously, the image radiates outward from a central spirit figure. In the example below there are six of these figures forming a star shape in the middle. Here we have absolute symmetry in the composition, yet still generating a feeling of movement by virtue of the concentric circles within a rectangular format.



Tibetan Mandala of the Six Chakravartins, c. 1429-46

Central Tibet (Ngor Monestary)

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Raphael's painting of Galatea, a sea nymph in Greek mythology, incorporates a double set of radial designs into one composition. The first is the swirl of figures at the bottom of the painting, the second being the four cherubs circulating at the top. The entire work is a current of figures, limbs and implied motion. Notice too the stabilizing classic triangle formed with Galatea's head at the apex and the other figures' positions inclined towards her. The cherub outstretched horizontally along the bottom of the composition completes the second circle.



Raphael, *Galatea*, fresco, 1512

Villa Farnesina, Rome.

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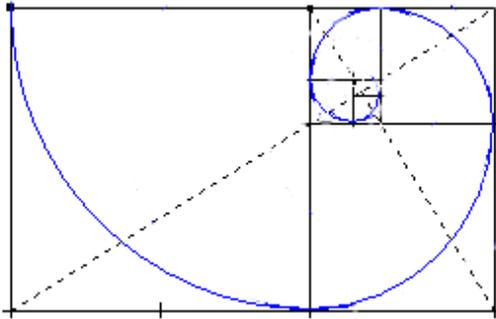
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Within this discussion of visual balance, there is a relationship between the natural generation of organic systems and their ultimate form. This relationship is mathematical as well as aesthetic, and is expressed as the [Golden Ratio](#).

Here is an example of the golden ratio in the form of a rectangle and the enclosed spiral generated by the ratios:



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The natural world expresses radial balance, manifest through the golden ratio, in many of its structures, from galaxies to tree rings and waves generated from dropping a stone on the water's surface. You can see this organic radial structure in some natural systems by comparing the satellite image of hurricane Isabel and a telescopic image of spiral galaxy M51 below.



Hurricane Isabel 14 sept 2003  
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Messier51 sRGB  
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A snail shell, unbeknownst to its inhabitant, is formed by this same universal ratio, and, in this case, takes on the green tint of its surroundings.



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Environmental artist Robert Smithson created '*Spiral Jetty*', an earthwork of rock and soil, in 1970. The jetty extends nearly 1500 feet into the Great Salt Lake in Utah as a symbol of the interconnectedness of our selves to the rest of the natural world.



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Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.

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### **Repetition**

**Repetition** is the use of two or more like elements or forms within a composition. The systematic arrangement of a repeated shapes or forms creates **pattern**.

Patterns create **rhythm**, the lyric or syncopated visual effect that helps carry the viewer, and the artist's idea, throughout the work. A simple but stunning visual pattern, created in [this photograph](#) of an orchard by Jim Wilson for the New York Times, combines color, shape and direction into a rhythmic flow from left to right. Setting the composition on a diagonal increases the feeling of movement and drama.

The traditional art of Australian aboriginal culture uses repetition and pattern almost exclusively both as decoration and to give symbolic meaning to images.

The *coolamon*, or carrying vessel pictured below, is made of tree bark and painted with stylized patterns of colored dots indicating paths, landscapes or animals. You can see how fairly simple patterns create rhythmic undulations across the surface of the work. The design on this particular piece indicates it was probably made for ceremonial use. We'll explore aboriginal works in more depth in the 'Other Worlds' module.



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Australian aboriginal softwood coolamon with acrylic paint design.

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Rhythmic cadences take complex visual form when subordinated by others. Elements of line and shape coalesce into a formal matrix that supports the leaping salmon in Alfredo Arreguin's *'Malila Diptych'*. Abstract arches and spirals of water reverberate in the scales, eyes and gills of the fish. Arreguin creates two rhythmic beats here, that of the water flowing downstream to the left and the fish gracefully jumping against it on their way upstream.



Alfredo Arreguin, *Malila Diptych*, 2003 (detail).

Washington State Arts Commission

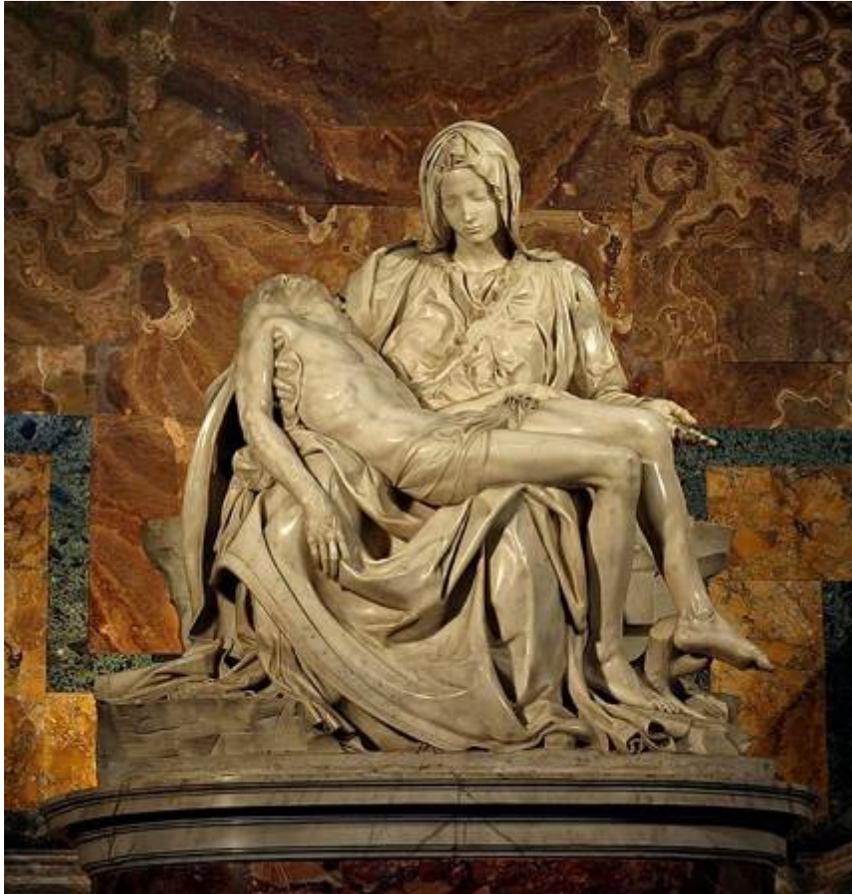
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The textile medium is well suited to incorporate pattern into art. The [warp](#) and [weft](#) of the yarns create natural patterns that are manipulated through position, color and size by the weaver. The Tlingit culture of coastal British Columbia produce spectacular [ceremonial](#) blankets distinguished by graphic patterns and rhythms in stylized animal forms separated by a hierarchy of geometric shapes. The symmetry and high contrast of the design is stunning in its effect.

### **Scale and Proportion**

**Scale and proportion** show the relative size of one form in relation to another. Scalar relationships are often used to create illusions of depth on a two-dimensional surface, the larger form being in front of the smaller one. The scale of an object can provide a focal point or emphasis in an image. In Winslow Homer's watercolor [A Good Shot, Adirondacks](#) the deer is centered in the foreground and highlighted to assure its place of importance in the composition. In comparison, there is a small puff of white smoke from a rifle in the left center background, the only indicator of the hunter's position. Click the image for a larger view.

Scale and proportion are incremental in nature. Works of art don't always rely on big differences in scale to make a strong visual impact. A good example of this is Michelangelo's sculptural masterpiece '*Pieta*' from 1499 (below). Here Mary cradles her dead son, the two figures forming a stable triangular composition. Michelangelo sculpts Mary to a slightly larger scale than the dead Christ to give the central figure more significance, both visually and psychologically.



Above image: Michelangelo's *Pieta*, 1499, marble.

St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

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When scale and proportion *are* greatly increased the results can be impressive, giving a work commanding space or fantastic implications. Rene Magritte's painting [Personal Values](#) constructs a room with objects whose proportions are so out of whack that it becomes an ironic play on how we view everyday items in our lives.

American sculptor Claes Oldenburg and his wife Coosje van Bruggen create works of common objects at enormous scales. Their [Stake Hitch](#) reaches a total height of over 53 feet and links two floors of the Dallas Museum of Art. As big as it is, the work retains a comic and playful character, given in part to its gigantic size.

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## Emphasis

**Emphasis** – the area of primary visual importance – can be attained in a number of ways. We've just seen how it can be a function of differences in scale. Emphasis can also be obtained by isolating an area or specific subject matter through its location or color, value and texture. Main emphasis in a composition is usually supported by areas of lesser importance, a hierarchy within an artwork that's activated and sustained at different levels.

Like other artistic principles, emphasis can be expanded to include the main *idea* contained in a work of art. Let's look at the following work to explore this.

We can clearly determine the figure in the white shirt as the main emphasis in Francisco de Goya's painting *'The Third of May, 1808'* below. Even though his location is left of center, a candle lantern in front of him acts as a spotlight, and his dramatic stance reinforces his relative isolation from the rest of the crowd. Moreover, the soldiers with their aimed rifles create an implied line between them selves and the figure. There is a rhythm created by all the figures' heads – roughly all at the same level throughout the painting – that is continued in the soldiers' legs and scabbards to the lower right. Goya counters the horizontal emphasis by including the distant church and its vertical towers in the background.

In terms of the idea, Goya's narrative painting gives witness to the summary execution of Spanish resistance fighters by Napoleon's armies on the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1808. He poses the figure in the white shirt to imply a crucifixion as he faces his own death, and his compatriots surrounding him either clutch their faces in disbelief or stand stoically with him, looking their executioners in the eyes. While the carnage takes place in front of us, the church stands dark and silent in the distance. The genius of Goya is his ability to direct the narrative content by the emphasis he places in his composition.



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *The Third of May, 1808*, 1814. Oil on canvas

The Prado Museum, Madrid.

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A second example showing emphasis is seen in [Landscape with Pheasants](#), a silk tapestry from 19<sup>th</sup> century China. Here the main focus is obtained in a couple of different ways. First, the pair of birds are woven in *colored* silk, setting them apart visually from the gray landscape they inhabit. Secondly, their placement at the top of the outcrop of land allows them to stand out against the light background, their tail feathers mimicked by the nearby leaves. The convoluted treatment of the rocky outcrop keeps it in competition with the pheasants as a focal point, but in the end the pair of birds' color wins out.

A final example on emphasis covers both design features and the idea behind the art. Many world cultures include artworks in ceremony and ritual. African *Bwa* Masks are large, graphically painted in black and white and usually attached to fiber costumes that cover the head. They depict mythic characters and animals or are abstract and have a stylized face with a tall, rectangular wooden plank attached to the top\*. In any manifestation, the mask and the dance for which they are worn are inseparable. They become part of a community outpouring of [cultural expression](#) and emotion.

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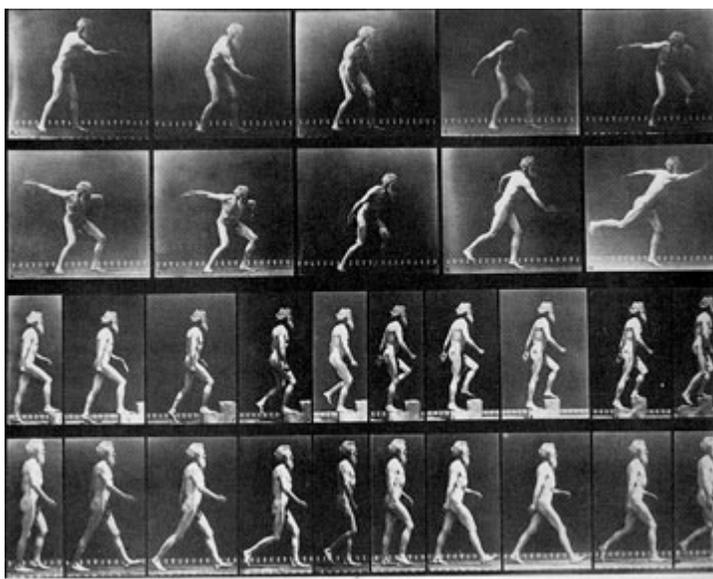
\* The above example is taken from [‘The Art of Burkina Faso](#) by Christopher D. Roy, University of Iowa.

· **Time and Motion**

One of the problems artists face in creating static (singular, fixed images) is how to imbue them with a sense of **time and motion**. Some traditional solutions to this problem employ the use of spatial relationships, especially perspective and atmospheric perspective. Scale and proportion can also be employed to show the passage of time or the illusion of depth and movement. For example, as something recedes into the background, it becomes smaller in scale and lighter in value. Also, the same figure (or other form) repeated in different places within the same image gives the effect of movement and the passage of time.

An early example of this is in the carved sculpture of [Kuya Shonin](#). The Buddhist monk leans forward, his cloak seeming to move with the breeze of his steps. The figure is remarkably realistic in style, his head lifted slightly and his mouth open. Six small figures emerge from his mouth, visual symbols of the chant he utters.

Visual experiments in movement were first produced in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Photographer Eadweard Muybridge snapped black and white sequences of figures and animals walking, running and jumping, then placing them side-by-side to examine the mechanics and rhythms created by each action.



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Eadweard Muybridge, sequences of himself throwing a disc, using a step and walking.

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In the modern era, the rise of cubism (please refer back to our study of 'space' in module 3) and subsequent related styles in modern painting and sculpture had a major effect on how static works of art depict time and movement. These new developments in form came about, in part, through the cubist's initial exploration of how to depict an object and the space around it by representing it from multiple viewpoints, incorporating all of them into a single image.

Marcel Duchamp's painting [Nude Descending a Staircase](#) from 1912 formally concentrates Muybridge's idea into a single image. The figure is abstract, a result of Duchamp's influence by cubism, but gives the viewer a definite feeling of movement from left to right. This work was exhibited at [The Armory Show](#) in New York City in 1913. The show was the first to exhibit modern art from the United States and Europe at an American venue on such a large scale. Controversial and fantastic, the Armory show became a symbol for the emerging modern art movement. Duchamp's painting is representative of the new ideas brought forth in the exhibition.

In three dimensions the effect of movement is achieved by imbuing the subject matter with a dynamic pose or gesture (recall that the use of diagonals in a composition helps create a sense of movement). Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture of [David](#) from 1623 is a study of coiled visual tension and movement. The artist shows us the figure of David with furrowed brow, even biting his lip in concentration as he eyes Goliath and prepares to release the rock from his sling.

The temporal arts of film, video and digital projection by their definition show movement and the passage of time. In all of these mediums we watch as a narrative unfolds before our eyes. Film is essentially thousands of static images divided onto one long roll of film that is passed through a lens at a certain speed. From this apparatus comes the term '*movies*'.

Video uses magnetic tape to achieve the same effect, and digital media streams millions of electronically pixilated images across the screen. An example is seen in the work of Swedish Artist Pipilotti Rist. Her large-scale digital work [Pour Your Body Out](#) is fluid, colorful and absolutely absorbing as it unfolds across the walls.

## Conclusion

- ***Unity and Variety***

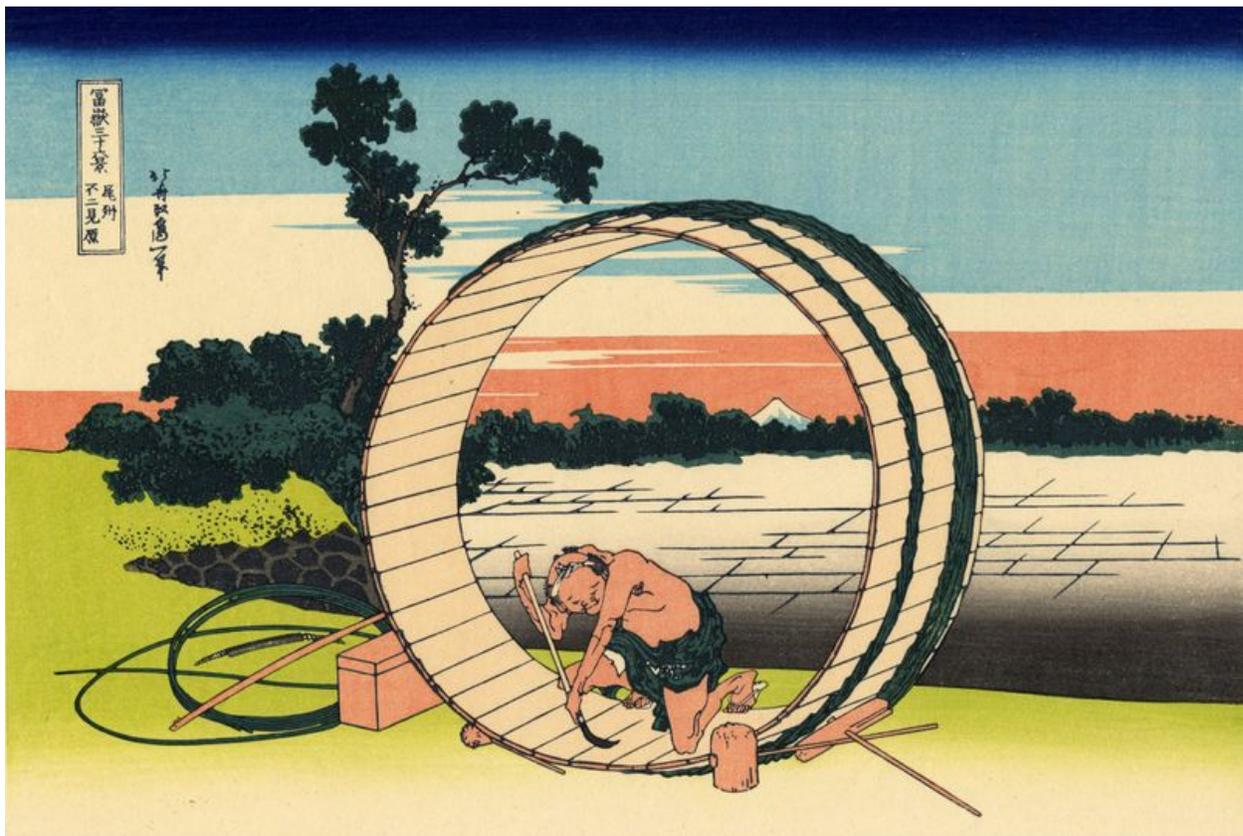
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Ultimately, a work of art is the strongest when it expresses an overall **unity** in composition and form, a visual sense that all the parts fit together; that the whole is greater than its parts. This same sense of unity is projected to encompass the idea and meaning of the work too. This visual and conceptual unity is sublimated by the **variety** of elements and principles used to create it. We can think of this in terms of a musical orchestra and its conductor: directing many different instruments, sounds and feelings into a single comprehensible symphony of sound. This is where the objective functions of line, color, pattern, scale and all the other artistic elements and principles yield to a more subjective view of the entire work, and from that an appreciation of the aesthetics and meaning it resonates.

We can view the woodblock print, “Fuji Viewed from Rice Fields in Owari Province” part of the series, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* designed by Katsushika Hokusai to see how unity and variety work together. Hokusai made use of nearly every element and principle in his work, including a range of values, colors, and textures in his depiction of a barrel maker set against a parched rice-field with Mount Fuji in the distance. The unity of the print is held in place by the large barrel which encloses and unifies the individual elements of the composition.



Fujimi Fuji view field in the Owari province  
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