

# Composition

Examples of types of pictorial composition from the  
book “Design and Composition”

by Nathan Goldstein.

Powerpoint presentation by Carol Strockwasson.

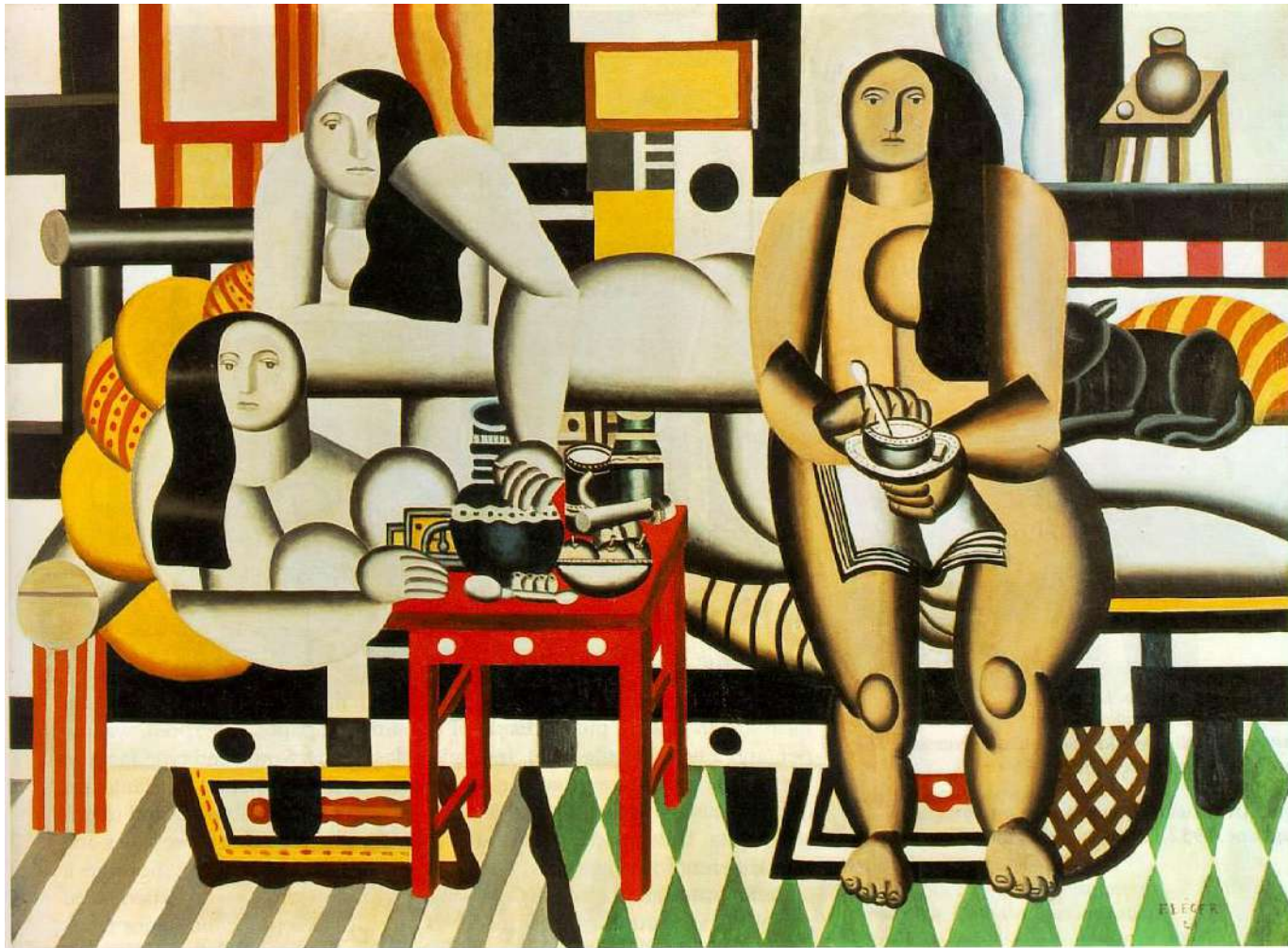
# My reasons for the study of compositional structures

- A deeper understanding of all art whether representational or abstract.
- A knowledge of how to begin to solve my own compositional problems by exploring how artists before me solved or did not solve their problems in their work.
- A tool for my use to learn how to take an idea into a deeper meaning through the use of compositional structures

# 1. Grid Structure

- Based on a crisscross pattern in a work that emerges from its vertical and horizontal directions and edges of shapes and volumes, and the alignment of elements and parts. The grid by itself has no center-no point any more important than any other point.

Fernando Leger, *Three Women*.  
1921, oil on canvas 6' X 8" 3"



Very strong grid structure.

Conrad Marca-Relli, *The Blackboard*.  
1961. Collage of oil and canvas, 84" X 120"



very subtle grid structure



Francisco de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Vessels*.  
1633-1640. Oil on canvas, 18" X 33"



Subtle suggestion of Grid Structure

## 2. The Circle Structure

- Circularity suggests a central point even when nothing marks the spot. The center point of the circle structure marks the point of balance. Weight or gravitational pull is what is being balanced. The grid structure and the circle structure are two primary structures that work well together and are often found to underlie virtually all compositional structures.

Nicholas Poussin, *The Funeral of Phocion*.  
1648. Oil on canvas, 3' 11" X 5' 10"



The grid and circle structures used together.



Matisse, Dance(I).  
1909. Oil on canvas, 8' 6" X 12' 9"



Circle structures create their own collective center.

# Leonardo da Vinci, Cataclysm



Photo Scala, Florence - courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali

Almost purely circular, still can sense the not entirely subdued grid structure. Balancing point is left of center just under the light toned arc of falling rocks.



## Renoir, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*



Circularity on the picture plane and 3-dimensional space. Balancing center is woman holding the glass in drink, one of the least animated figures, her calmness is characteristic of a circle structures balancing center. Around her move arcs and spirals. The balancing center is not likely to drift far from the physical center of the painting. Note the subtle grid structure.

Joseph M. Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Troops Crossing the Alps*.  
1812. Oil on canvas, 57" X 93"



Strong circular pattern

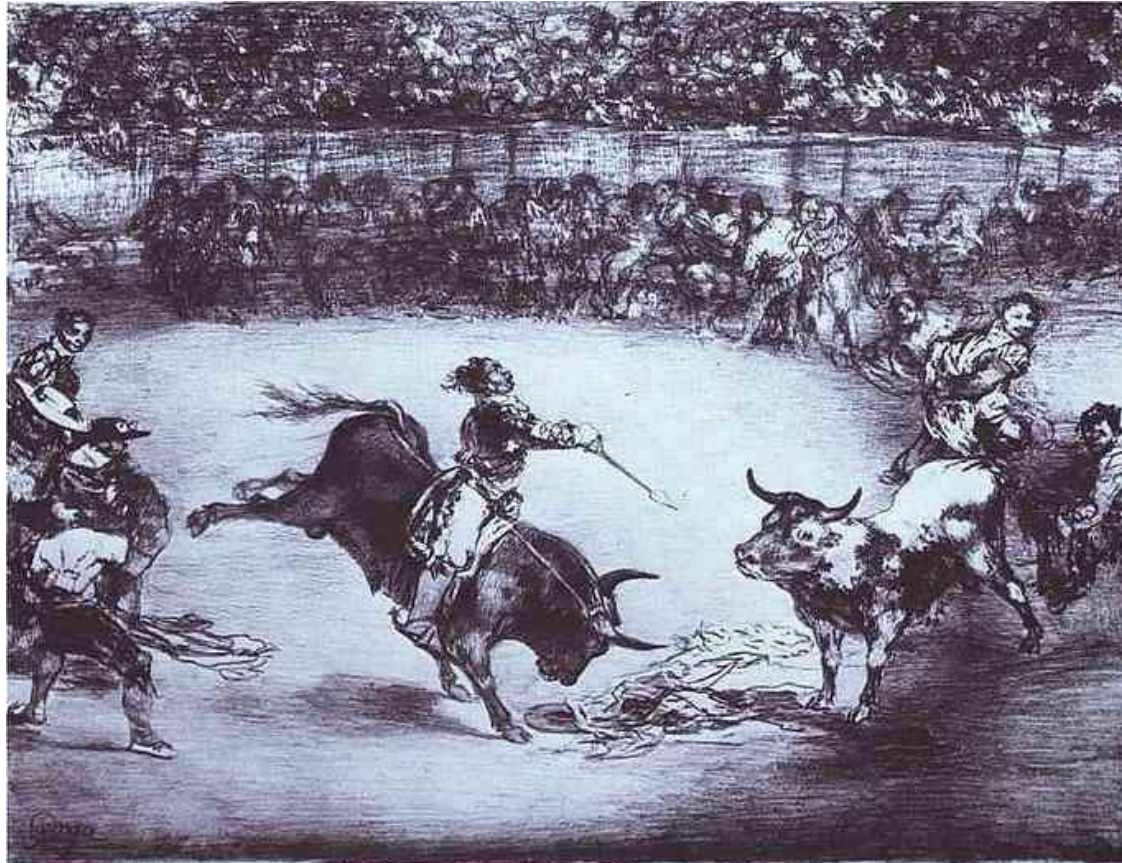


Edgar degas, *The Millinery Shop*.  
1879-1884. Oil on canvas. 100 cm X 110.7 cm



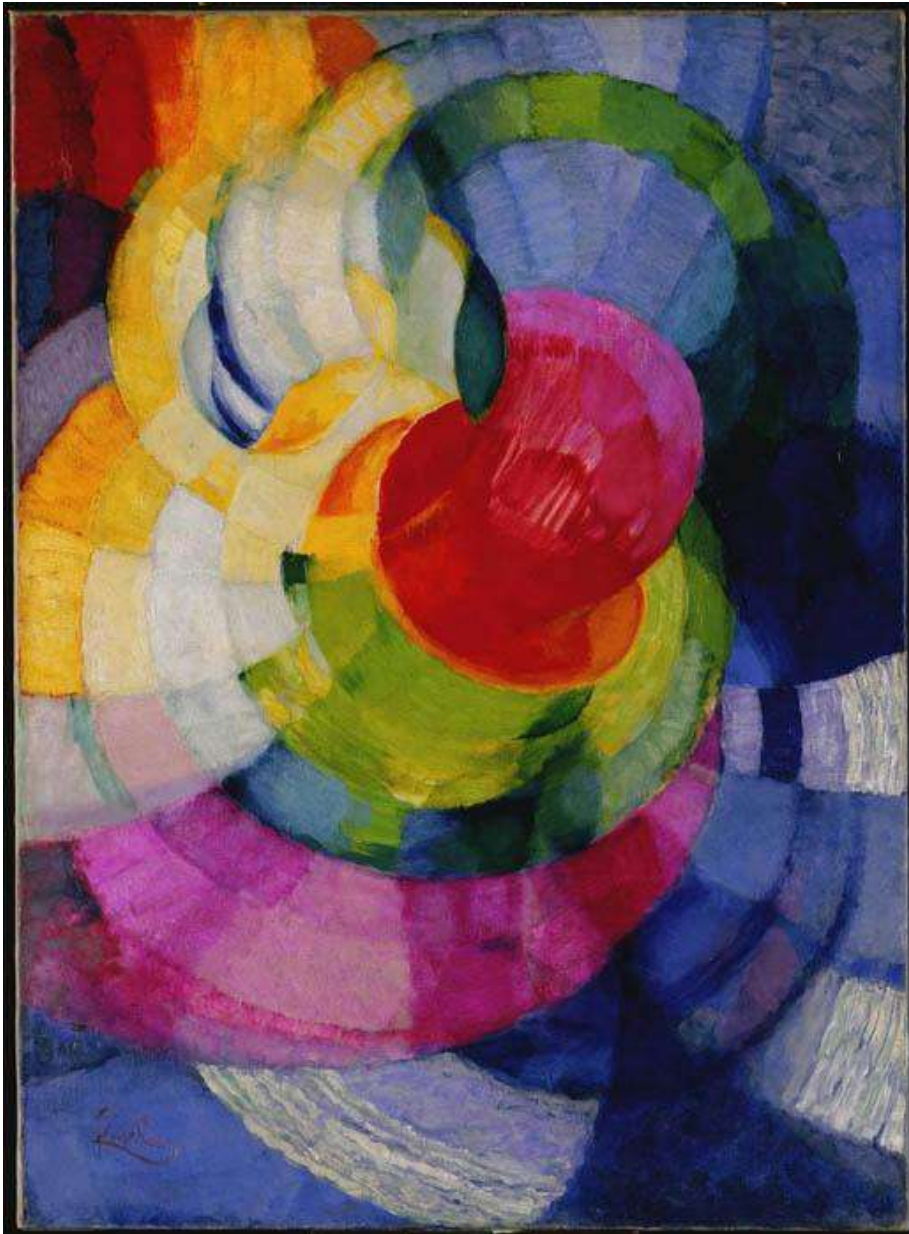
Circular structure only faintly perceived.

# Francisco Goya, *El Famoso Americano*. 1815. Lithograph, 12" X 15"



Circularity on the picture plane and the 3-dimensional plane. Balancing point is the burst of light right of center. Grid structure is muted.





Frank Kukpa, Discs of Newton  
1912 oil on canvas 39" X 29"

A circular structure may come forward as a prominent theme in representational and nonobjective art.

# 3. Triangle Structure

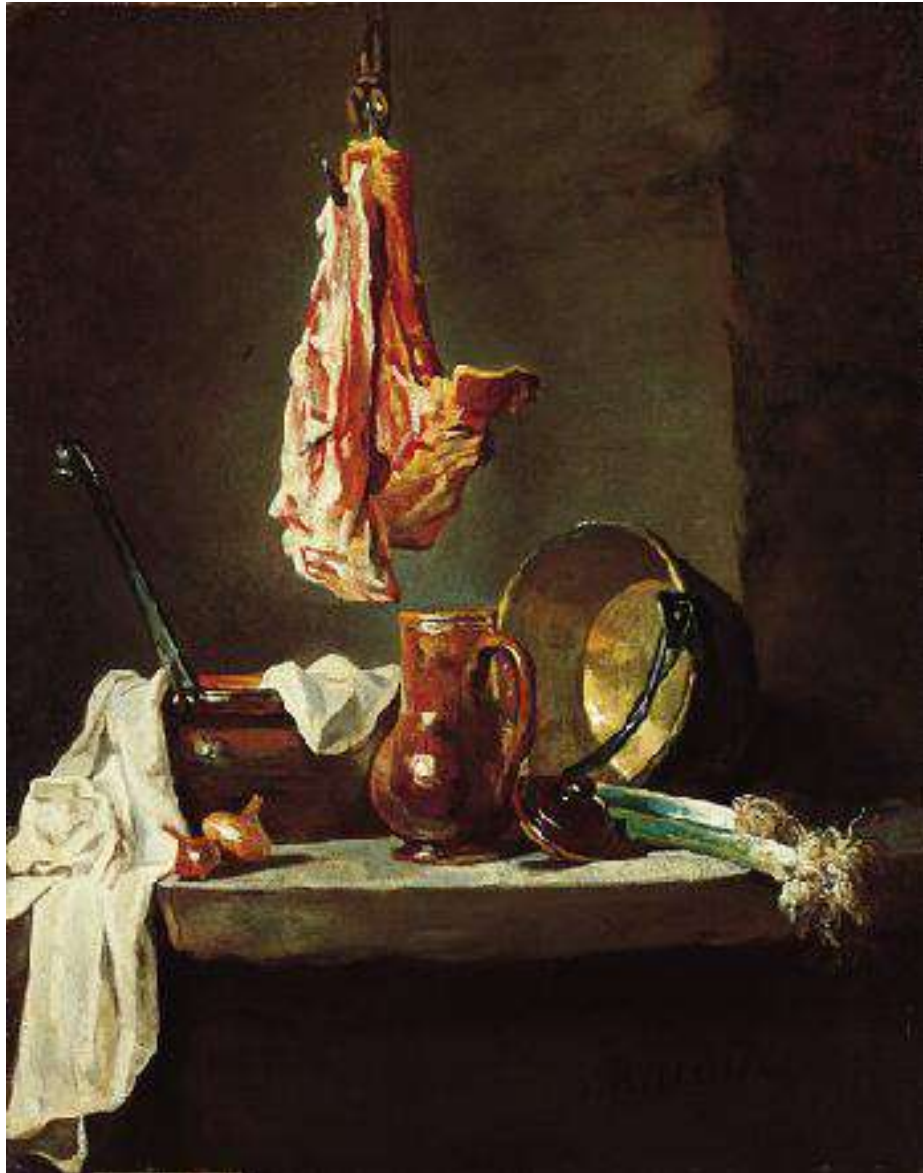
- The triangle structure can be aggressive as its points push outward or it can show stately stability when vertically orientated and when not plainly evident in the design.



Rufino Tamayo, *Animals*.  
1941. Oil on canvas, 30" X 40"



Triangle structure with turbulent behavior. Forces inside the triangle add even more energy to its own restless behavior amplifying the artists expressive point. Note: painted on the eve of Americas entry into WWII.



Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin,  
*Still life with cooking Utensils.*

1728-1730.

Oil on canvas, 15" X 12"

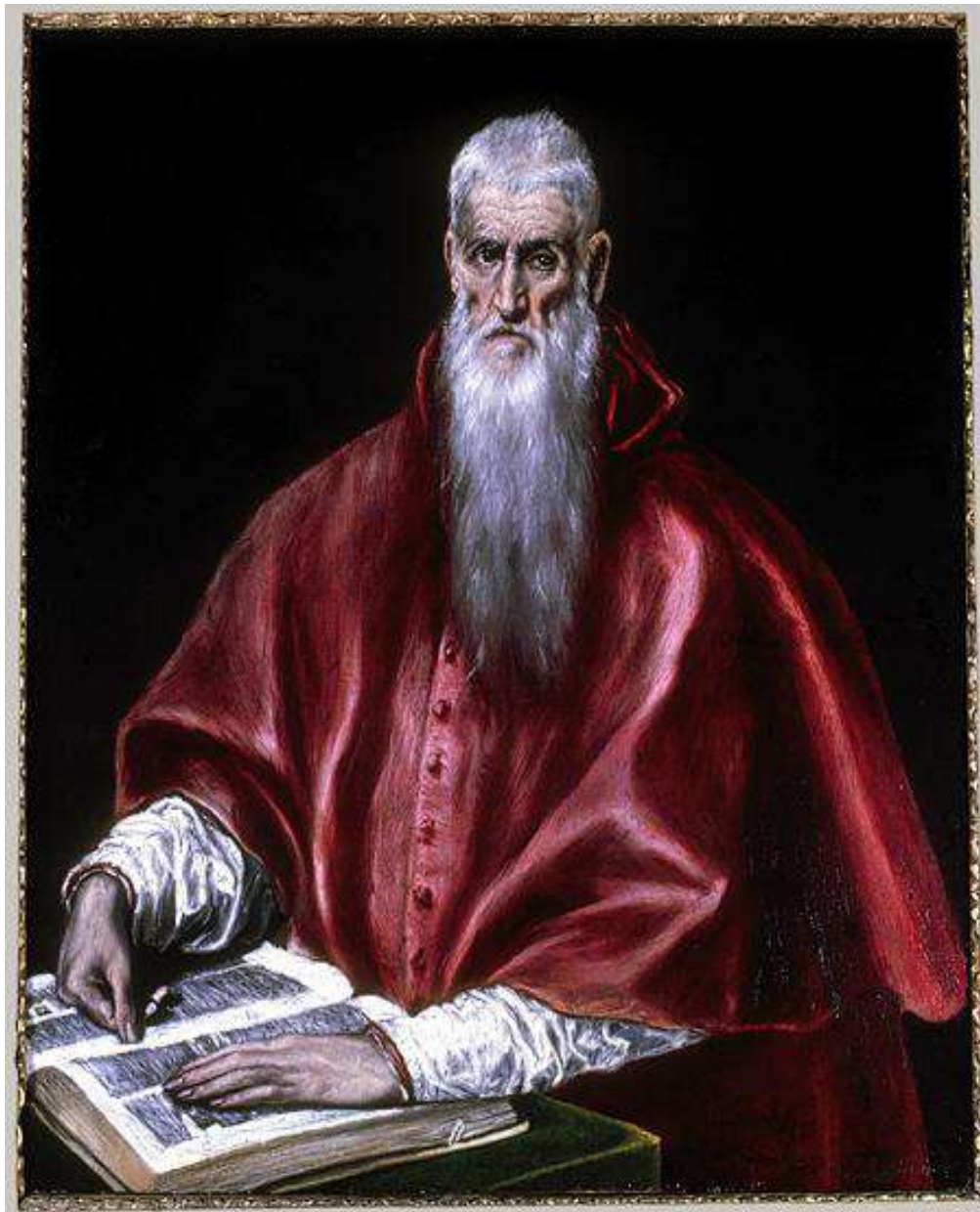
Triangle structure with strongly stable alignments. A sedate mood yet triangle movements give the work a feeling of energy.



Dirk Bouts, *The Last Supper*.  
1464.  
Oil on panel, 71" X 59"

Dominant structure is the triangle both on the picture plane and 3-dimensionally as a pyramid. The grid is strongly evident and circular theme is seen in the figures around the table. Another triangle is in the spatial field with its apex at Christ's head.





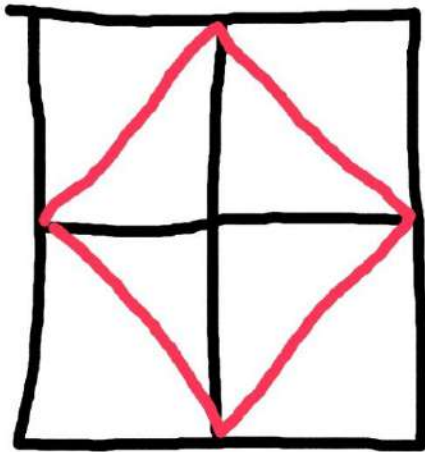
El Greco, *St Jerome*.  
1600. Oil on canvas,  
43" X 37"

Subtle triangle force



## 4. The Diamond Structure

- The Diamond structure can be dominant or subtle minor theme. It offers a stabilizing effect.



Shapes or lines that are near or start at the origin of the dividing lines can give a stabilizing quality to a composition.

Edgar Degas, *The Dance Foyer at the Opera Rue le Peletier*.  
1872. Oil on canvas, 12" X 18"



Note the reflected pillar and the dance bar come close to establishing vertical and horizontal dividing lines.

Diamond structure offers subtle stability. This painting based primarily on the grid with a circle of dancers and arcs as a secondary structure. Closer inspection shows a diamond with its 4 points striking at or near the center of each of the frames sides.

Theodore Gericault, The Raft of Medusa.  
1818-1819. Oil on canvas, 16' X 23' 9".



Diamond structure offers stabilizing effect. Storm tossed scene of tumult and terror is further intensified by a large and some what askew triangular structure and by smaller triangles and diagonal lines. If it were not for the stabilizing effect of the diamond, located low in the picture format the works conflicting tilts and tensions would endanger the balance .





Jean Clouet, *Francis I.*  
1525-1530.  
Oil on panel, 37" X 29".

Underlying Diamond structure



Piet Mondrian, *The Mill by the Water*. 1905.  
Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard. 11" X 15".



Interesting interplay of the grid and the diamond

# 5. Central Location Structure

- The central location exerts a stabilizing influence by its central location but can easily become overbearing or isolated. The centrally placed subject must be integrated with the rest of the image.

Rembrandt, *Self Portrait*. 1657. Oil on canvas.



Central Location strongly lit face with torso's diamond shape its rounded form is echoed by the large circles in background.



Oskar Kokoschka, *Portrait of Adolf Loos*.  
1909. Oil on canvas 29" X 35"



Central location: the central figure is integrated by brushwork as the background sometimes moves aside for the figure and sometimes advances upon it. Note the diamond structure.



William Harnet, *Old Models*.  
Oil on canvas 54" X 28"

Central Location: the grid of the door and shelf stabilizes the bold diagonal thrusts.

Edgar Degas, *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub*. 1885. Pastel on Paper, 32" X 22"



Central Location: artist related the shape characteristics between the central configuration and its surroundings. Square-ish drape is subordinate to the rounded shape of the woman's torso. The shallow rounded tub is subordinate to the square-ish shape of the lower limbs.



## 6. Two Centers Structure

- When two centers instead of one are present, there can be a high or low degree of tension, depending on their placement in the format and on the struggle for dominance. Two center structures do not touch and there is usually some degree of intended confrontation.



Pablo Picasso, *Two Nudes*.  
1906.  
*Oil on canvas, 59" X 36"*.

Two Center structure with very stable arrangement, also present are the stabilizing effects of the grid structure.

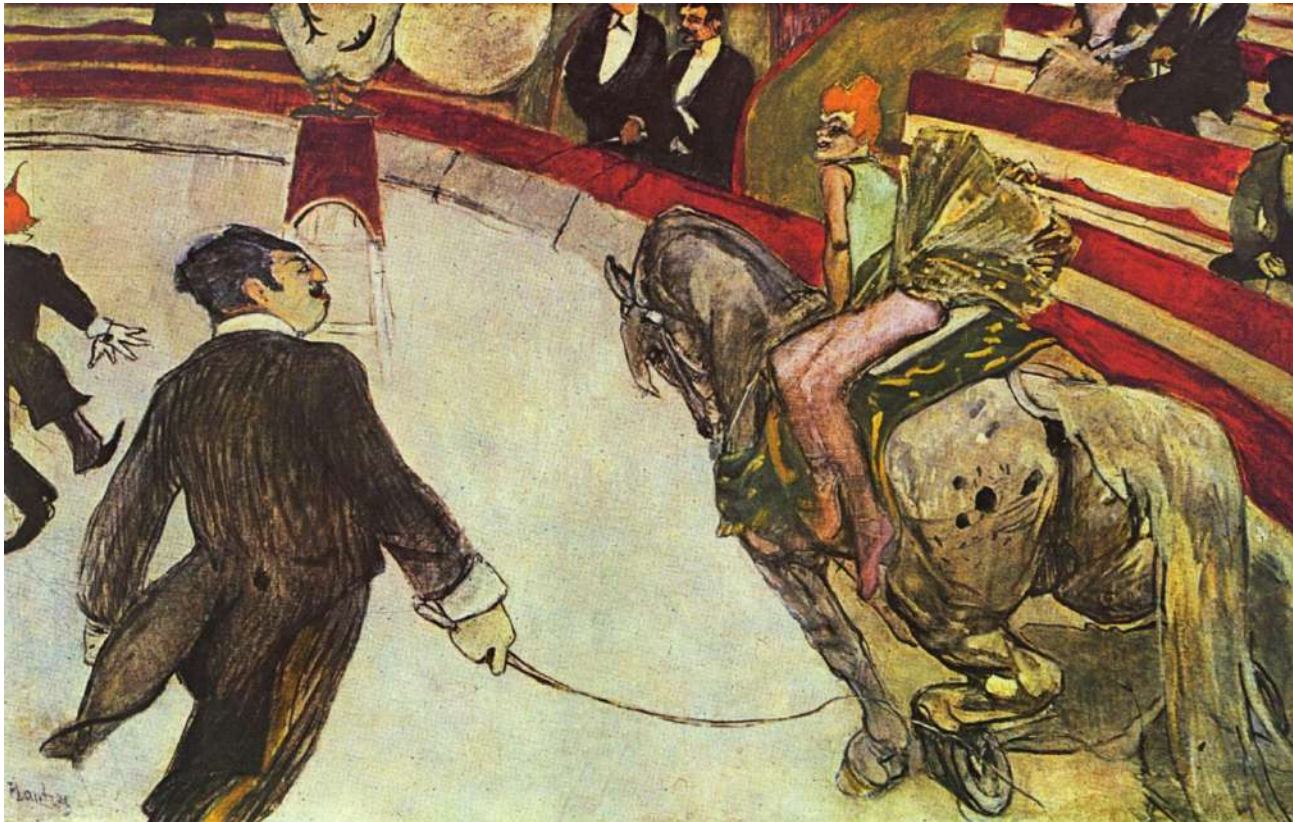


Adolph Gottlieb, *Orb*.  
1964. Oil on canvas, 90" X 60".

Sun-like form and dark angular form create an turbulent character and are posed in an irreconcilable tension.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *In the circus, Fernando: The ringmaster*.  
1888. Oil on canvas, 39" X 63".



Two center structure can show both centers joined in a common action. The large arc at the top right turns upon the ringmaster and is followed through with the whip.

## 7. The Bridge Structure

- Similar in appearance to Two center structure the bridge is the dynamic opposite. Often composed of two centers(can be more) but instead of confrontation, the centers in a bridge structure are harmoniously joined by parts and alignments like a real bridge.

Thomas Eakins, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*.  
1871. Oil on canvas, 32" X 46"



An actual bridge joins the paintings two large dark centers. The racing scull is the bridge joining the reflections of the two land masses.

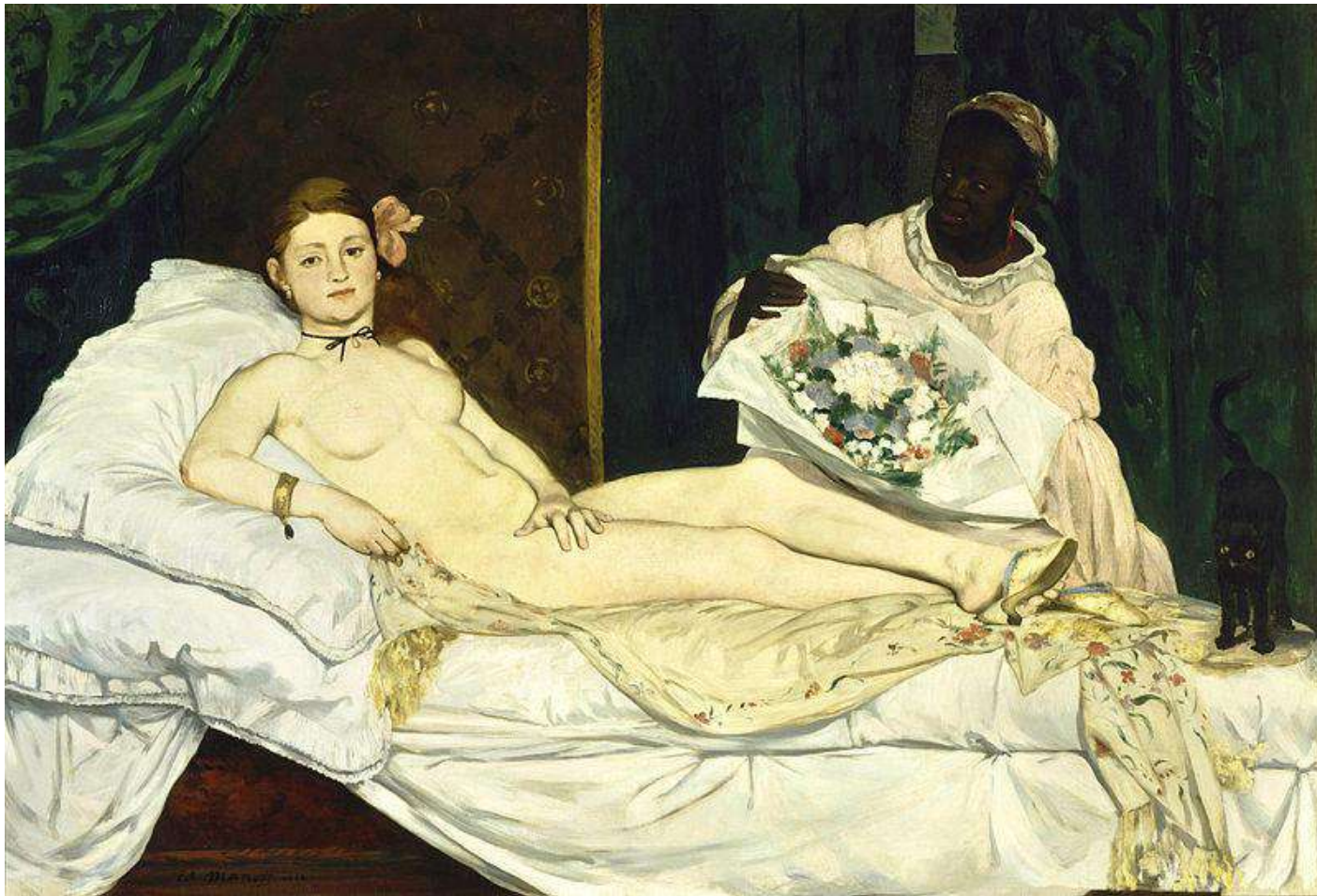


Jan Van Eyck, *Madonna and Child with Chancellor Rolin*.  
1433. Oil on panel, 26" X 24".



Sometimes the bridge is only implied by strong rhythmic movement. A picture enveloping arc running from a point just above the chancellor's head is powerful enough to jump the distance separating him from the Madonna and continue curving upward to terminate in the figure of the angel.

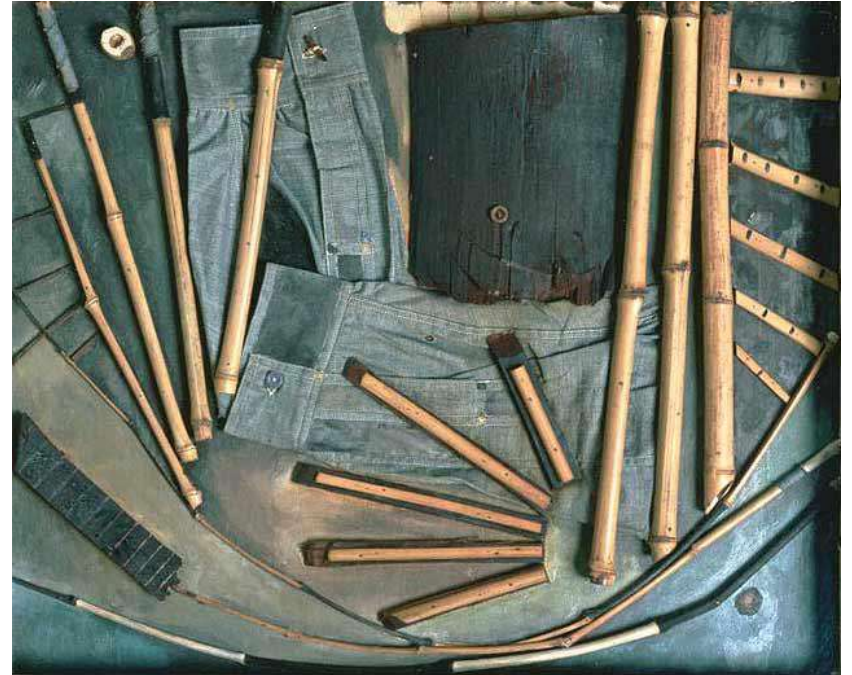
Edouard Manet, *Olympia*.  
1863. Oil on canvas, 51" X 74"



A bridge structure



Arthur G. Dove, *Goin' Fishin'*.  
1925. Collage on wood panel, 19" X 24"



The bridge structure, the arc connecting the two centers can run in a convex or a concave direction. In this example I have turned the image upside down to show that it works in either position.



John Sloan, *The Cot*.  
*Oil on canvas, 36" X 30"*



The bridge, here the movement  
takes a large S-shaped direction.

## 8. The Cantilever

- Any large configuration entering the format from any side and ending within it. Cantilevered parts can connect with other parts but occasionally such configuration may stand alone. Cantilevered forms can be met by similar ones approaching from the other side. Compositions based on this structure usually show the cantilevered segment as exerting a substantial amount of visual and physical weight that must be counter balanced in some way.

Paul Cezanne, *Still Life with Peppermint Bottle*.  
1894. Oil on canvas, 26" X 32"



Cantilevered parts connect with other parts



Christian Berard, *On the Beach (Double Self-Portrait)*.  
1933. Oil on canvas, 31" X 46"



Cantilevered compositions can stand alone

Giorgio de Chirico, *The Soothsayer's Recompense*.  
1913. Oil on canvas, 53" X 71"



Cantilevered forms are met by similar ones approaching from the other side.

Pierre Bonnard, Rue Vue d'en Haut



Houses on either side of the street can naturally assume the cantilever form.

Hiroshige, Snow Scene at Ochanomiqu



Land masses on either side of the river naturally assume a cantilever form.



Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still life with a View of the Sea*. 1646. Oil on Canvas, 23" X 36".



Still life arrangements can lend themselves to the cantilever form.

# 9. THE Even Spread

- Avoidance of emphasis, even distribution of elements, all over sameness of characteristics.
- An intended compositional structure that keeps viewer from settling on any feature in a work and to respond to the picture planes overall pattern of elements
- In the absence of strong points of emphasis the center is likely to be the formats measurable center.
- Requires sophisticated awareness of the energies generated by the visual elements because it can be easily compromised by strong directed movement, an intense hue or a subdivision.



Gustav Klimt,  
*The Park*

Even Spread made up of many small shapes, values and colors, where only in the lower left is there a departure from the sameness of the rest of the surface.

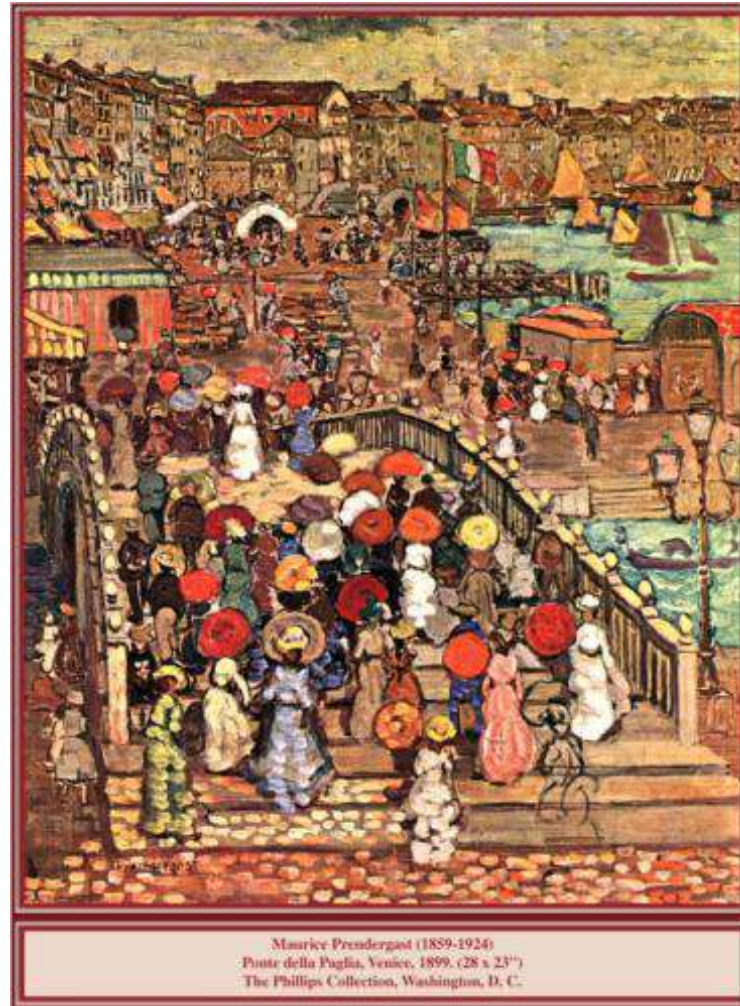


Jackson Pollock, *Echo*(Number 25, 1951).  
1951. Enamel paint on canvas, 7' 7" X 7' 2"



Even spread works well with abstract and non objective work, here the eye gravitates to the measurable center as the compositional center.

Maurice Pendergast, *Ponte della Paglia*. 1898-1899. Oil on canvas, 28" X 23".



Even spread can serve numerous styles and subjects

# 10. The Radial Burst

- Similar to the circle structure in its rounded configuration and center. But the circle rotates around and is held together by its center the radial burst explodes from the center outward.
- Unsuitable to stilled classical images but has an appeal to artists of an emotional expressionist disposition.



Wassily Kandinsky, *On White II*. 1924. Oil on canvas, 39" X 36".



John Marin, *Lower Manhattan*.  
1922. Watercolor and charcoal on paper cutout attached with a  
thread, 21" X 26"



Arthur Dove, *Abstraction No.2. 1911.*  
Charcoal on paper, 20" X 17"





# 11. Emphasis on Diagonality

- Diagonality structure means movement, unease tension.
- Sense of out of balance
- Suggestion of conflict and a look like shattered glass

Carlo Carra, *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*.  
1911. Oil on canvas, 6'6" X 8'6".



John Sloan, *Wake of the Ferry II*.  
1907. Oil on canvas, 26" X 32".





# 12. Emphasis on Horizontality

- Suggest tranquility and low tension
- Verticals can take on a stately quality and may carry the impact of an exclamation mark.
- Charles-francois Daubigny, Dieppe 1877

Claude Monet, *Nymphéas*(*Water Lilies*).  
1920-1921. Oil on canvas. 77" X 234"



“Nymphéas” shows only a few strong horizontal movements, and no horizon line to guide, we know the surface of the water and everything floating on it to be horizontal. A long horizontal format plays its part in a picture's dynamic condition. (an example of our knowledge of the world influencing perception of the painting)

Antonio Canaletto, Venice, *The Basin of San Marco on Ascension Day*.  
1735-1741. Oil on canvas, 4' X 6'





# 13. Emphasis on Verticality

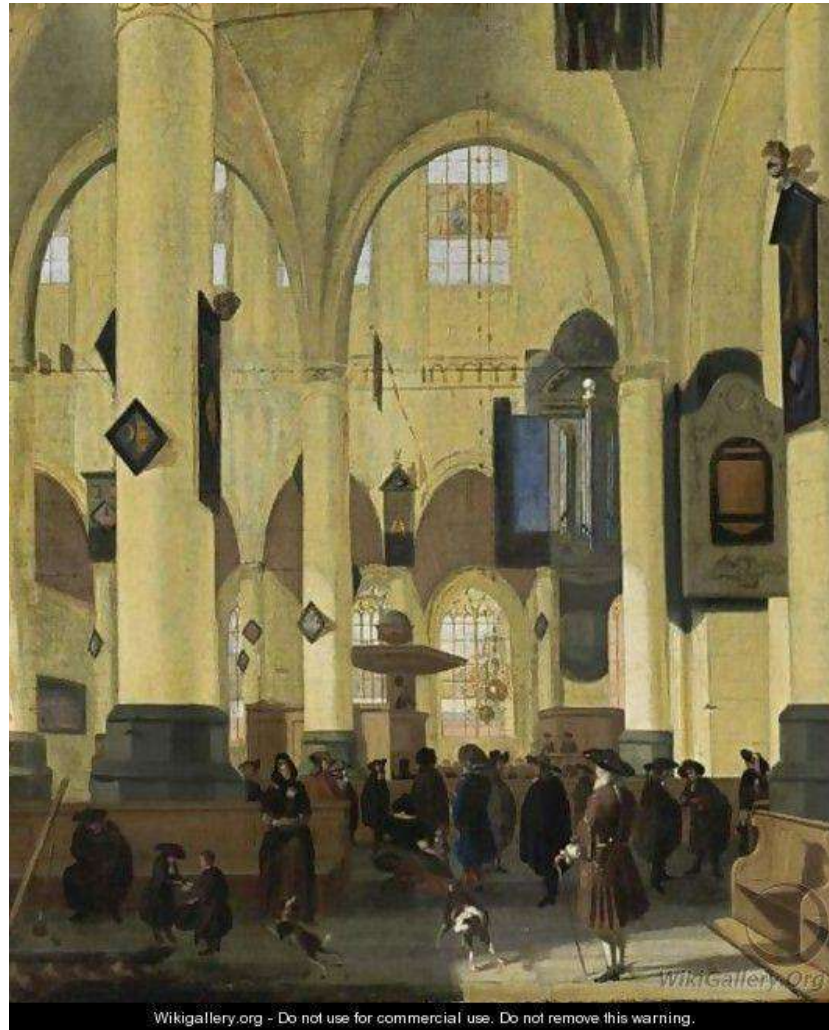
- Suggest action
- Vertically oriented elements and parts express energy and create tensions with elements and parts in all other positions.

Giorgio de Chirico, *Great Metaphysical Interior*.  
1917. Oil on canvas, 37" X 27".



Painted 1917, Oil on  
Canvas. 37<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" X 27<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

Hendrick van Streek, *Interior of the Old Church in Amsterdam*.  
1690. Oil on canvas, 21" X 18".



1690's Oil on canvas,  
21 7/8" x 18 3/4"



Paul Cezanne,  
*Pines and Rocks*.  
1896-1899.  
Oil on canvas,  
32" x 25  $\frac{3}{4}$ "



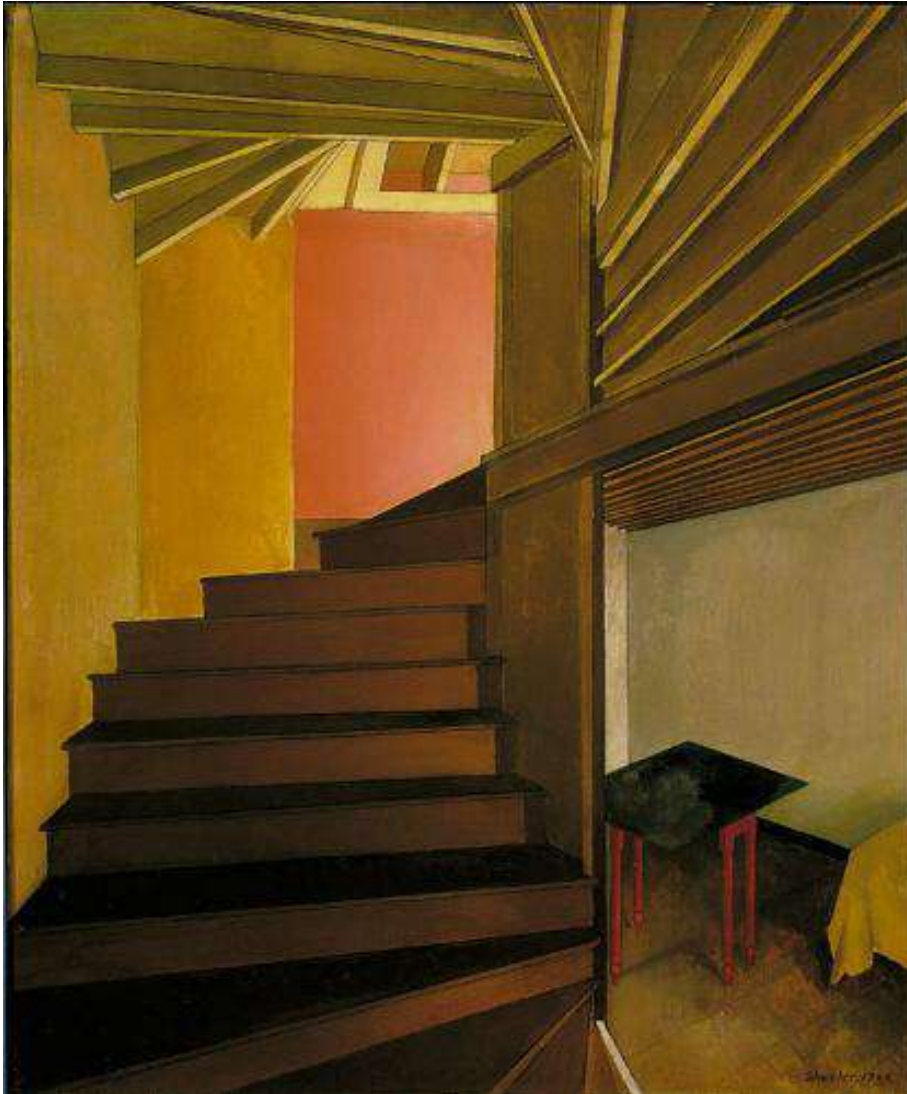
Richard Estes, *Downtown 1978*.  
Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"



# 14. Curvilinear Dominant

- Usually arranged with other structures as the grid or the triangle
- Based on a simple or complex network of curves and spirals underlying a works imagery

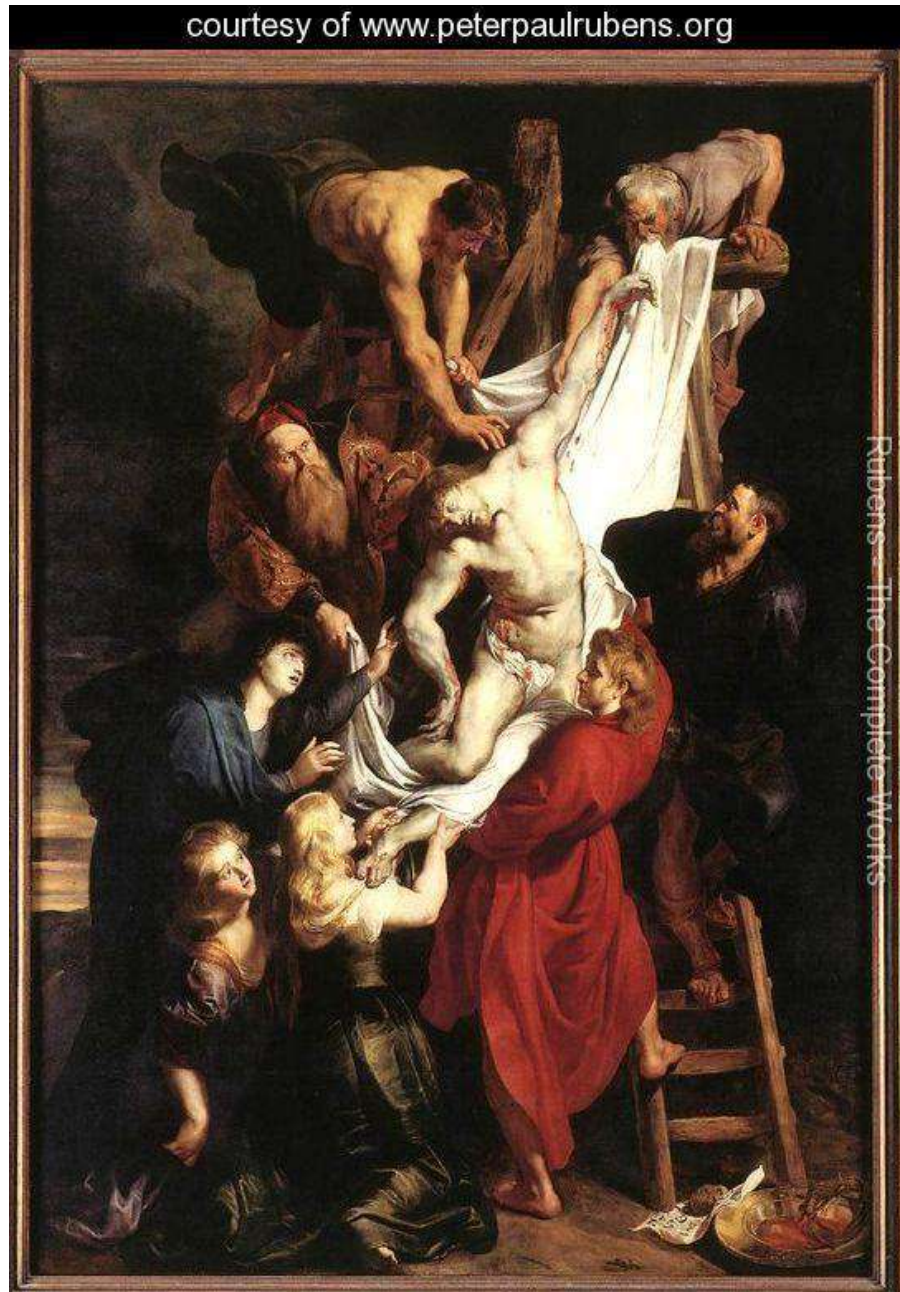




Charles R Sheeler, Jr.,  
*Staircase, Doylestown*  
1925. Oil on canvas  
25" X 21"

Example of work based  
on a spiral but composed  
entirely of straight lines  
and angular shapes.

Peter Paul  
Rubens,  
*Descent from  
the Cross.*  
1611-1614  
Oil on panel  
13'10" X 10'1"



Rubens - The Complete Works

Baroque artists emphasized the sensual and undulating nature of forms in curves and spirals



Jean Antoine Watteau, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*.  
1717. Oil on canvas, 4'3" X 6' 4"



Not all curvilinear dominant systems display powerful energies. They can underlie works of a more gentle nature.





Chaim Soutine, *Woman in Red*  
1922, oil on canvas, 25" X 21"

Curvilinear compositional  
structure based on a simple S-  
shaped movement

Frank Kupka, *Amorpha, Fugue for Two Colors II*.  
1909-1912, oil on canvas, 44" X 27"



A more symphonic complex of arcs and ovals. Constructing a composition of curves and spirals instills a pliancy and motion that is expressively effective because it wells up from the very core of the work.

# 15. The L Shape

- L shape underlies many still life and landscape paintings.
- It is a compositional factor in any picture where a large shape or mass with its back to the wall of the frame turns a corner.
- Use of the L shape can threaten to isolate other shapes.
- Challenge is to integrate it with the L shaped area to achieve unity and design.



George Inness, *Sunset at Montclair*.  
1885. Oil on canvas, 30" X 40"



The L shape sends two tree trunks into the shape of the sky, and in doing so takes smaller shapes of the sky into itself, forming a bond between both large areas. The heads of the children also link together the formats tow large shapes.

Pierre Bonnard, *The Lessons*.  
1898, Oil on cardboard, 20" X 13"



Another solution when the division between the L shape and the rest of the format is pronounced, is to strongly relate shapes values textures and colors between the two areas.

Here an island(table or piano) of dark values, textures, and shapes inside the L shape relates with similar elements inside the vertical rectangle. At the bottom the dark island joins the vertical rectangle by the value of the rug that crossed between them reducing the chance of isolation.



Marc Chagall, *Paris Through the Window*.  
1913, oil on canvas, 52" X 54"



Making the L Shape a see through  
unites the two large areas.



# Notes

- Some compositional structures fall outside these 15 classifications
- The grid and circle structures are the most common and usually underlie all structures.
- Most works contain more than one compositional system. Although one is predominant
- A hierarchy of compositional strategies is a frequent characteristic in works of commanding aesthetic worth. The more we search for and find such systems in the works of old and contemporary masters, the more accessible do they become for our own use.

Jan Van Eyck, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*.  
1434. Oil on Panel, 32" X 23"



Example of use of many structures. Based mainly on the bridge structure but circularity is a strong secondary system. Slightly muted is the grid and in the repetition of vertical directions an emphasis on verticality.

Paul Cezanne, *The Card Players*,  
1890-1892, Oil on canvas, 52" X 71"



The centrality of the large configuration of the card players is the chief system but nearly as evident is the radial burst originating at the round drawer pull. The diamond is also strongly present, its top at the frame above the central seated figure its bottom at that figures ankles and its left and right points at the backs of the other two card players. The stabilizing grid is subtly evident.