

Q: What is a composition?

A: Any mark made on the picture plane is considered a composition.

The Elements of Composition in Painting

To construct a composition, first one must consider line, space, shape, hue, tone and texture.

LINE Perhaps more useful in abstract than in representational painting, the use of line can be a useful tool in determining a composition's direction.

SPACE In both representational and abstract work positive and negative space are used in relation to one another as a way of altering composition.

SHAPE The relative size and juxtaposition of shapes can drastically alter the composition.

HUE The use of colour is one of the key elements in altering the balance of a painting. The relative strength of colours will change according to the context ie: yellow on a predominantly white painting will not carry the same weight as it will on a black painting.

TOPE Also known as value, the use of tone can be used to alter the balance of a painting.

TEXTURE Visual patterning can be used to draw attention to parts of a painting. Think of a checked pattern on a tablecloth or how the look of burlap will be different from the look of satin.

To activate the components above and add interest to the structure of the composition, one must consider the effects of proportion, contrast, movement, variety, repetition, unity, harmony and balance.

PROPORTION Mathematically the Golden Section is expressed as 1.618. This can be useful, but proportion also refers to the relationship of one element in proportion to another.

CONTRAST Juxtaposing wide differences in elements create emphasis. This helps to provide the painting with a clear focus.

MOVEMENT The viewer's eye is drawn around the painting by the individual life and vitality of the elements.

VARIETY Differences in tone, colour, shape, etc. create visual interest and this variety can strengthen a painting.

REPETITION The rhythm of properties that are repeated, usually, with slight modifications, give emphasis and unity to a work.

UNITY Elements should be integrated so that the image has an overall unity with nothing left isolated or out of account.

HARMONY A peaceful coexistence of elements, if desired, or at least a sense that the elements aid the intentions of the artist.

BALANCE Closely related to proportion, but is usually applied to shapes and masses, this can refer to both symmetry as well as asymmetry or anything that still seems to be in balance.