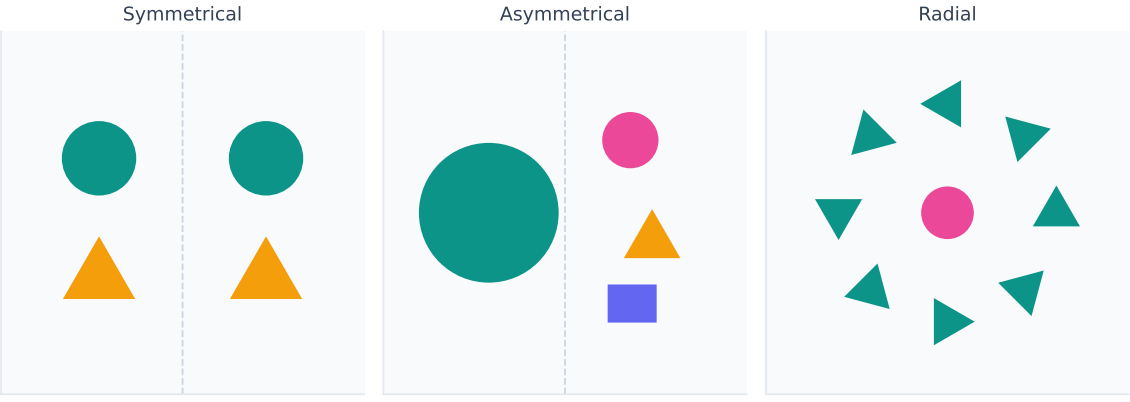
Principles of Design

AP 2-D Art and Design

Balance

The **principles of design** are the "rules" for arranging the elements of art. The first is **balance** – the visual distribution of weight so a work feels stable.

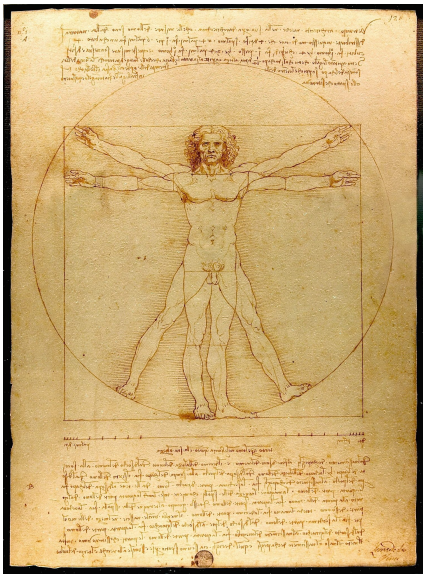


AP Art 2-D · Principles · symmetrical, asymmetrical, radial balance

Symmetrical balance mirrors a central axis; asymmetrical balance weighs different elements; radial balance radiates from a centre

- **Symmetrical (formal) balance** mirrors both sides of a central axis – calm and orderly.
- **Asymmetrical (informal) balance** uses different elements of equal **visual weight** – dynamic and lively.
- **Radial balance** arranges elements around a central point.

Visual weight is affected by size, colour, value, and position: a small bright shape can balance a large dull one.



Leonardo's Vitruvian Man: the figure is drawn with near-perfect symmetry about a central vertical axis, and the surrounding circle gives it radial balance too

Composition balances light, mass, and interest across the picture plane

Emphasis and Focal Point

Emphasis makes one part of a work stand out as the centre of interest – the **focal point**, where the eye is drawn first.

- Emphasis is created through **contrast** – of size, colour, value, isolation, or placement.
- Leading lines and the rule of thirds help place a strong focal point.

- **Subordination** keeps other areas quieter so the focal point leads.

Contrast

Contrast is the difference between elements – it creates energy, variety, and readability.

- Contrast can be of value (light/dark), colour (complementary), shape, texture, or size.
- Strong contrast attracts attention and defines a focal point; low contrast unifies and calms.
- In design, value and size contrast create clear **visual hierarchy** .

Movement and Rhythm

Movement leads the viewer's eye through a work; **rhythm** is the repetition that creates a visual "beat".

- Movement is the path the eye takes, guided by line, edges, colour, and placement.
- Rhythm types: **regular** (even), **flowing** (curving), **progressive** (gradual change), and random.
- Repetition with variation keeps rhythm interesting rather than monotonous.

Van Gogh's The Starry Night: swirling brushstrokes sweep the eye across the sky (movement), and the repeated curls give it a rolling rhythm

Pattern and Repetition

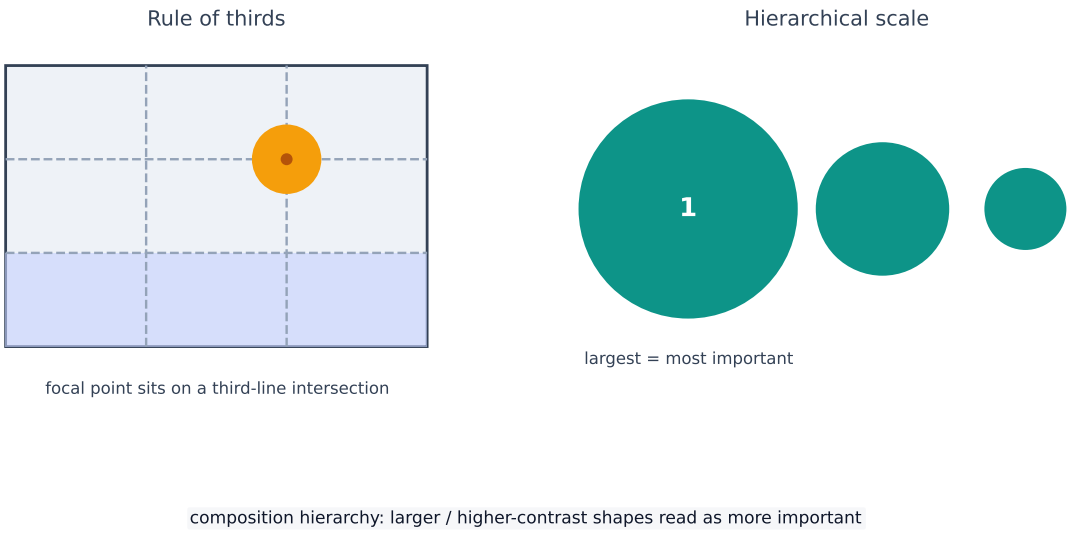
Repetition reuses an element; a **pattern** is the repeated element arranged in a predictable way.

- Repetition of shape, colour, or line builds unity and rhythm.
- A pattern is a repeated **motif** – regular (a grid or tessellation) or irregular.
- Too much repetition feels monotonous; changing scale or colour adds variety.

William Morris's Strawberry Thief: one motif of birds among strawberries repeats in a regular pattern across the whole cloth

Proportion and Scale

Proportion is the size relationship between parts; **scale** is the size of an element relative to something else.



The rule of thirds places key elements on the third-lines; hierarchical scale makes the important element largest

- Proportion compares the sizes of parts within a work (head to body).
- **Hierarchical scale** makes the most important element the largest.
- Exaggerated or distorted proportion can express emotion or draw attention. The **golden ratio** is a historic guide to pleasing proportions.

Unity and Variety

Unity holds a work together as a whole; **variety** adds interest so it is not dull. Good design balances the two.

- Unity comes from repetition, **proximity** (grouping), **continuity** (aligning elements along a line or edge so they read as one group), and a limited palette.
- Variety is difference that prevents monotony. **Harmony** comes from similar elements.
- The best works achieve unity **with** variety – order that still surprises.

Composition

Composition is how all the elements and principles are arranged within the **picture plane**.

- The **format** (portrait, landscape, square) shapes the design.
- The **rule of thirds** places key elements along third-lines and their intersections.

- **Cropping** decides what is included and what is cut, changing emphasis and tension.
- A strong composition unifies the elements while creating a clear focal point – this is what the AP portfolio's 2-D skills are judged on.

Worked example (applying the concept). To explain **balance** in a composition: *"The large dark shape on the left is balanced by three small bright shapes on the right – this is asymmetrical balance, which gives the piece visual weight on both sides while keeping it dynamic rather than static."* A full answer names the principle, points to specific evidence in the work, **and** states the effect on the viewer.

Exam tips

- For every work, state which **principle** organises it – balance, emphasis, contrast, movement, or unity.
- Justify **balance** through **visual weight**, not just symmetry.
- Ensure one clear **focal point**, and name the **emphasis** technique that creates it.
- Aim for **unity with variety** – name the unifying device and the source of interest.
- Plan **composition** with the **rule of thirds** and thumbnails before committing.

Vocabulary card meanings

Symmetrical (formal) balance: A design whose two sides mirror each other. Asymmetrical (informal) balance: A design that feels steady even though the two sides differ. visual weight: How strongly a shape, colour, or mark pulls the eye. Radial balance: Parts arranged around a centre, like spokes. Emphasis: The part of a picture the artist makes the eye notice first. progressive: Changing step by step, as a size or a colour grows. Hierarchical scale: Making a more important figure larger than the others. Unity: The sense that the parts of a picture belong together. variety: Differences among the parts, so a picture is not monotonous. proximity: Placing things near each other so they read as a group. continuity: A path the eye can follow without a break. Harmony: Colours or shapes that agree with one another. format: The shape and size of the picture area. Cropping: Cutting the edges so that only part of a scene remains.