

Composition by Harry Sternberg

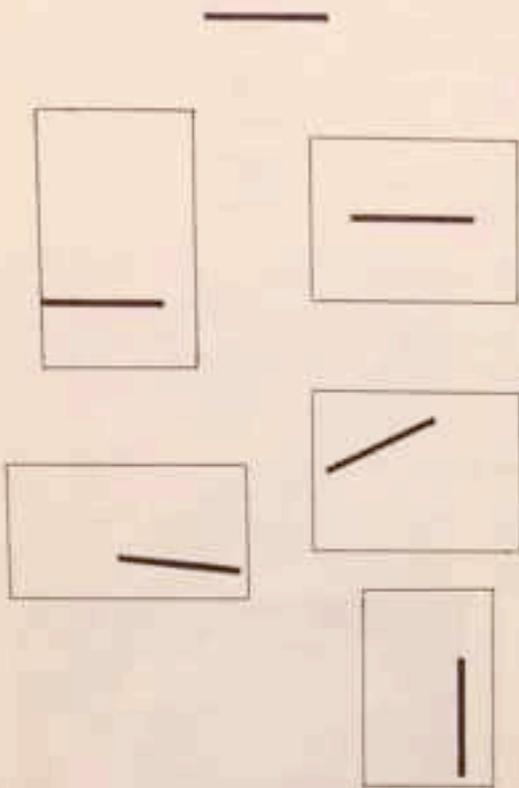
WHAT IT IS

In making a picture the artist uses line, tone and color to create shapes. The position in relation to the borders, the size, the direction, their values in tone, color or texture are the means by which the artist designs his pictures. This designing, organizing or structuring a picture is composition. The words composition, design, organization, and structure will be used interchangeably throughout this book.

WHAT IT DOES

The organization of a picture performs many functions. It guides and directs the observer's eye, controls the speed of this movement and serves to direct the eye to the artist's choice of climax. It can help to communicate violence, stability, beauty, or ugliness. It can arouse, intensify or soothe emotional reactions.

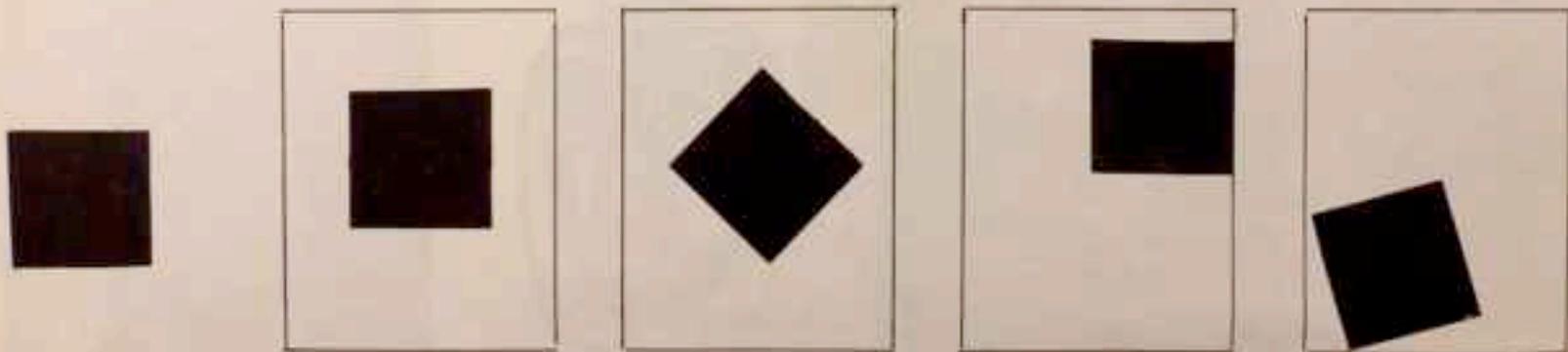
The role that composition plays in picture making is demonstrated in the analyses, where recognizable subject matter has been removed and the basic design structure remains.



To begin a picture it is necessary first to establish the area in which the picture will be made by drawing the enclosing border. This picture border is frequently referred to as the picture frame, or the frame of reference. The vertical and horizontal lines of the border make a frame of reference for measuring the position and the activity of the elements in the picture.

Many artists begin a picture by drawing the subject and then attempting to enclose it with a border. This inevitably leads to compositional difficulties. It can be likened to the builder who erects the walls for his building and then attempts to place a foundation under them.

This principle of design is demonstrated by using a black square. Note that the square has no pictorial significance until it is related to a border. Only then can its activity and nature be understood, for the square changes into a triangle in a different frame relationship.



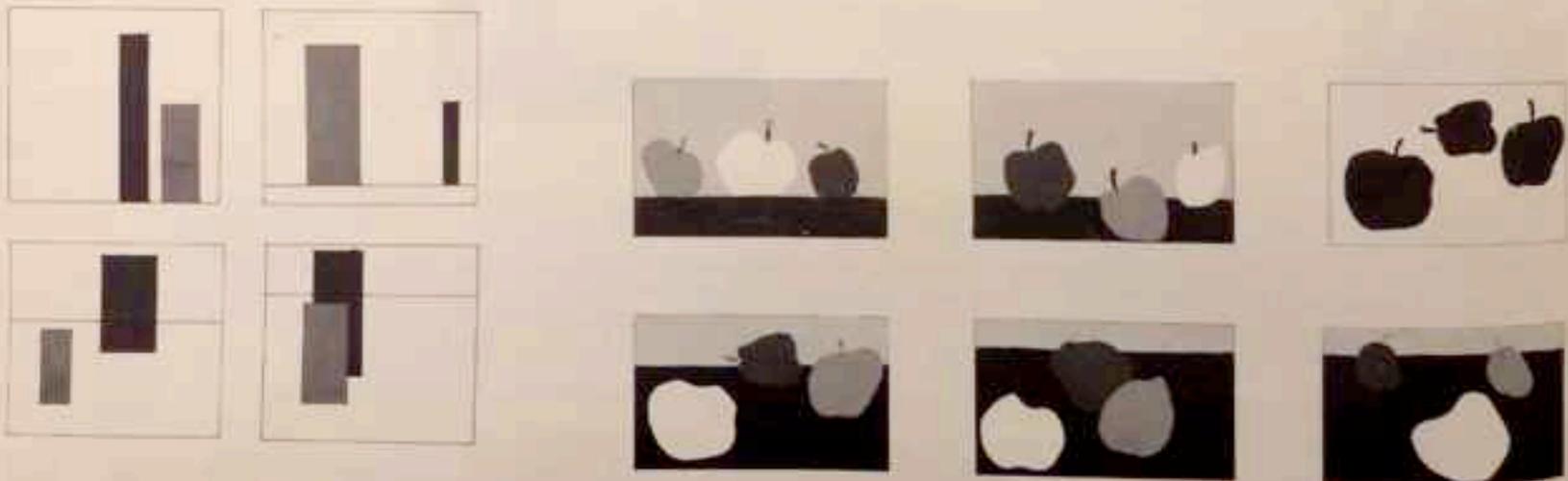
Flat or deep space?

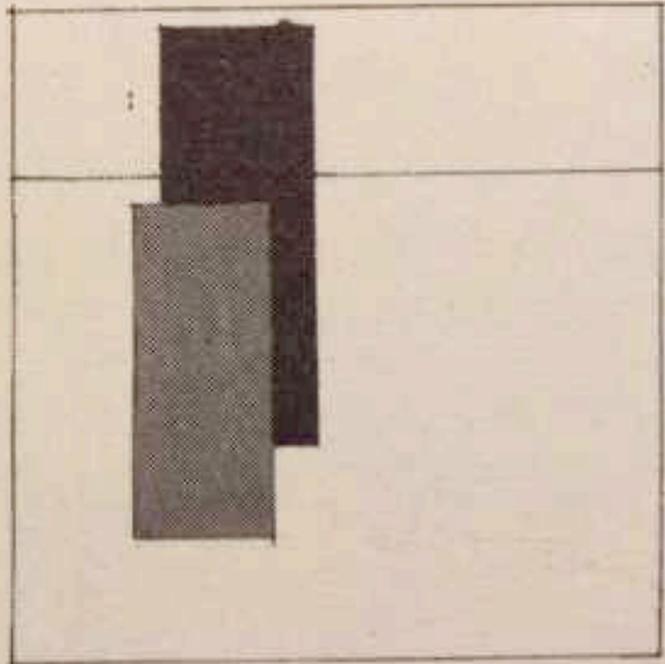
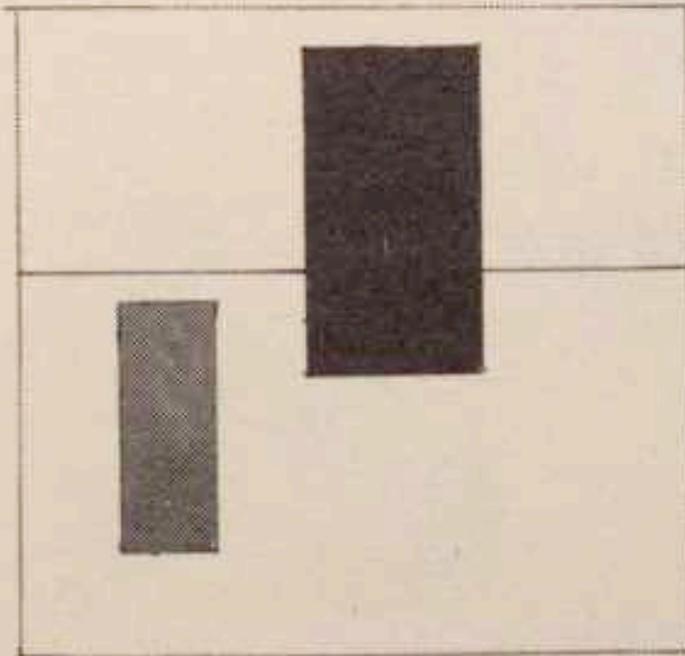
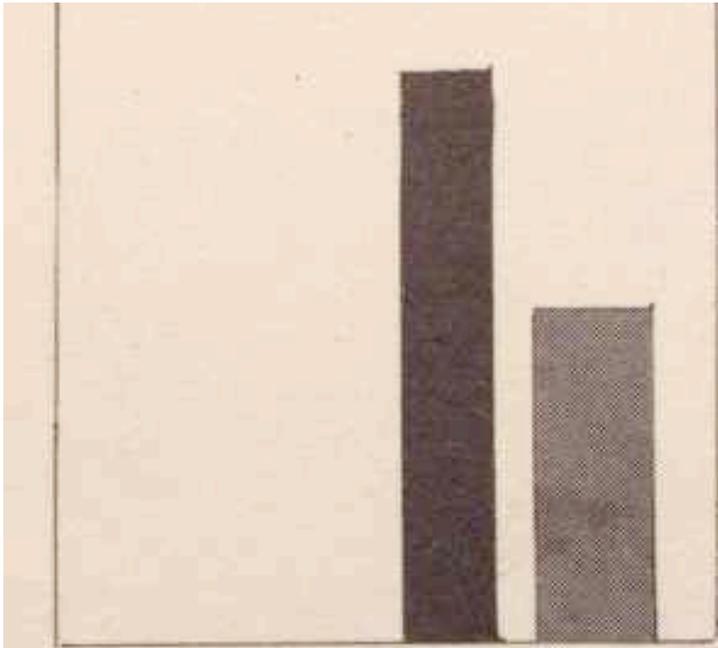
FLAT OR SHALLOW SPACE

Since the first picture was made, artists have been challenged with the problem of creating the illusion of space on a flat, two-dimensional surface. This has made available to us a rich reservoir of various technical means of achieving space.

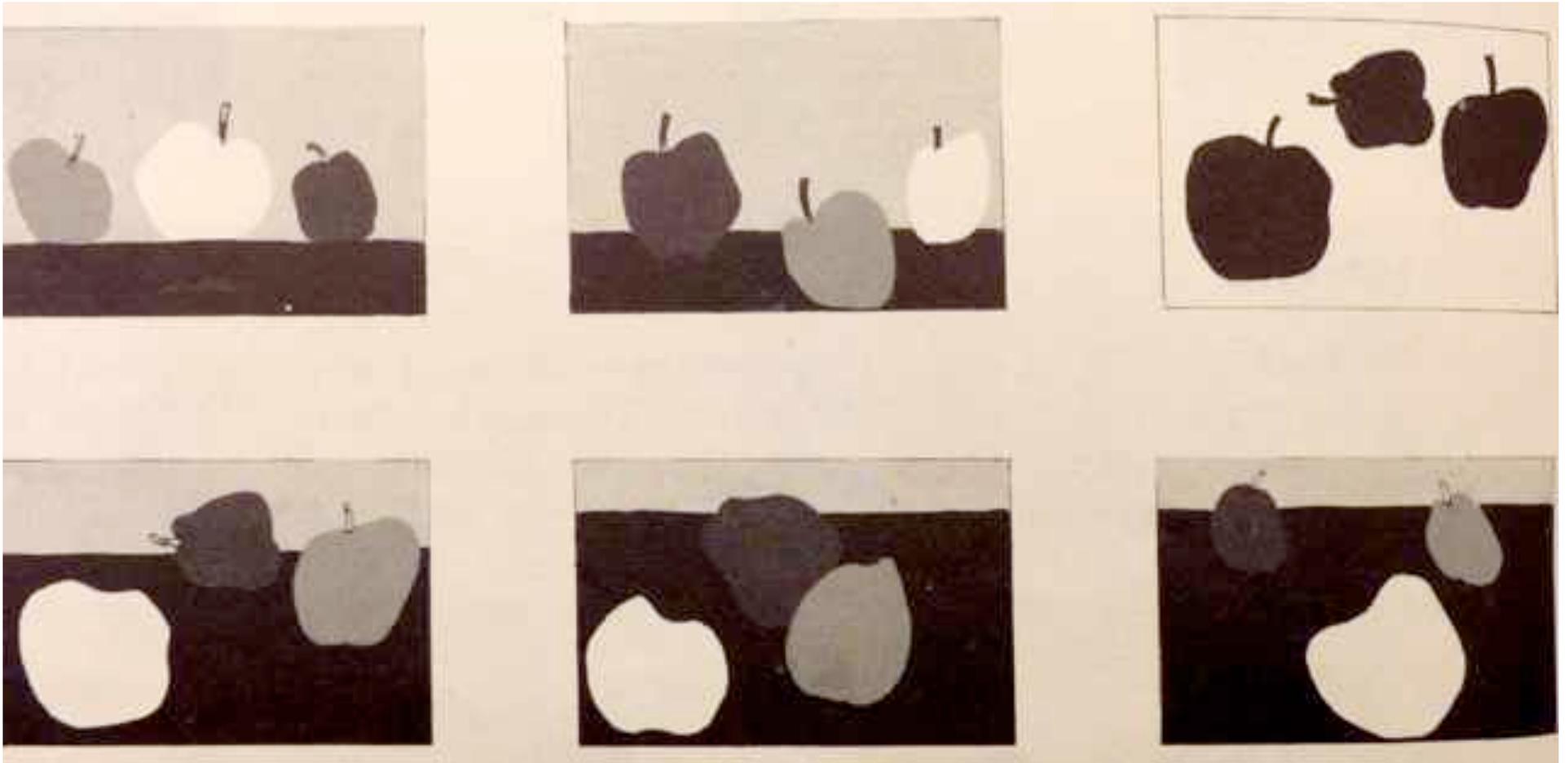
All pictures can be divided roughly into two categories— flat space and deep space. Though many pictures combine these, generally one concept of space or the other is dominant. Most of pictorial art is primarily flat in spatial concept. Only for a limited time in relation to our total art history were pictures made with deep spatial emphasis. This was during the Renaissance, and from that period the theories of perspective evolved. This section of the book concentrates on two-dimensional composition, which dominates contemporary art thinking.

A sense of depth of space can be realized by using planes parallel to the picture frame (without perspective). It is apparent in the illustrated student exercises that they vary in feeling of depth and space. As the horizon, or eye level line, is raised, the sense of depth is increased. The partial overlapping of one subject on another tends to intensify the depth feeling.





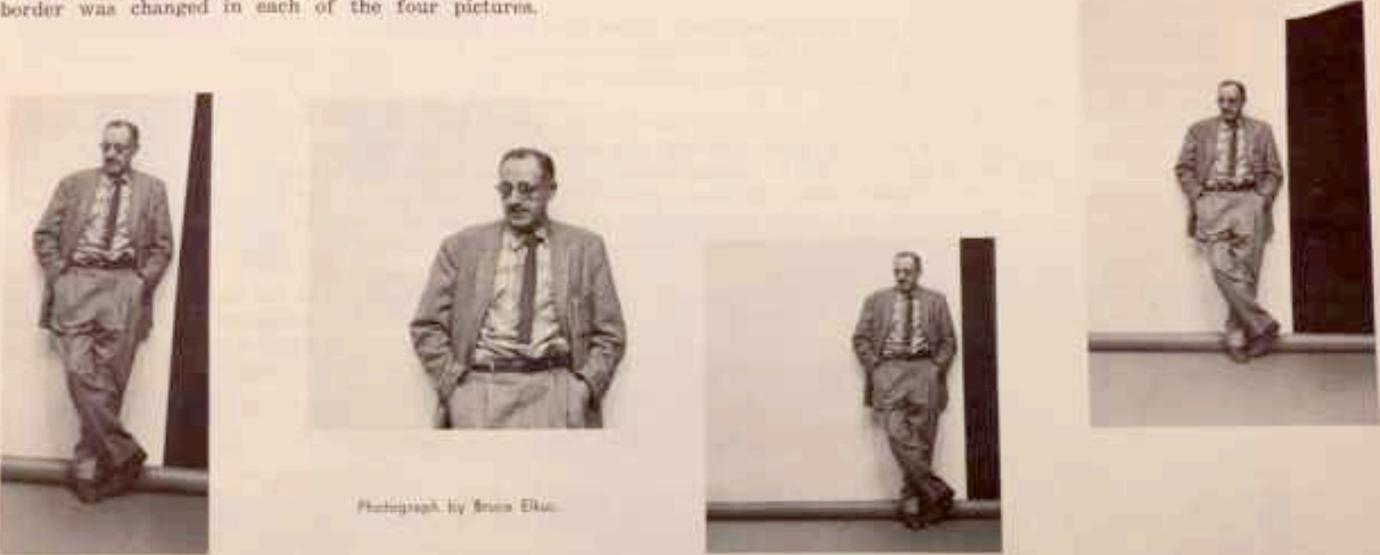
Low or High Horizon Line?



Where is the focal point in relation to the picture plane?

THE PICTURE BORDER

One photograph of the author was taken. By using an enlarger, the relationship of the figure to the border was changed in each of the four pictures.



Photograph by Bruce Elkis.

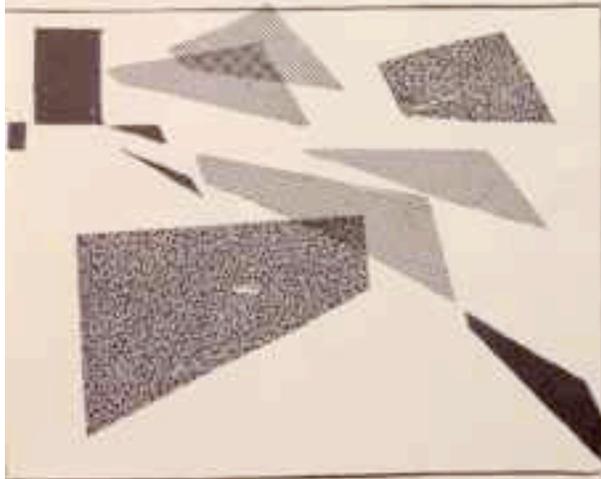
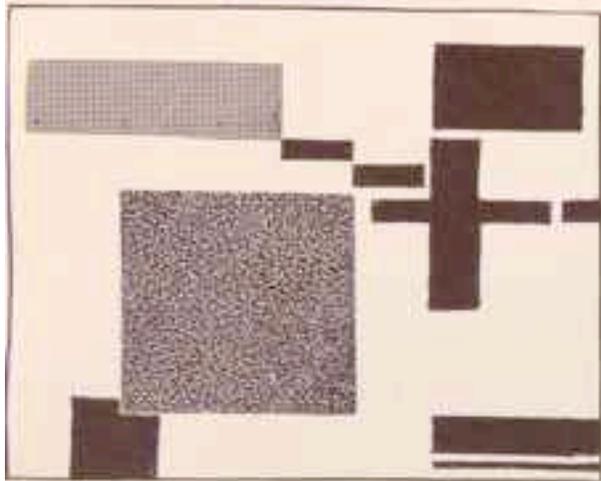
EXERCISE

Mark off a series of equal-sized picture borders in several sheets of white paper. Cut a number of squares, circles and triangles out of any black paper. Try placing these in different positions and different relationships in each of the picture borders. When the arrangement, or the composition, feels right, paste them into place with rubber cement. Study the results and see if you can "feel" how each picture acts differently.

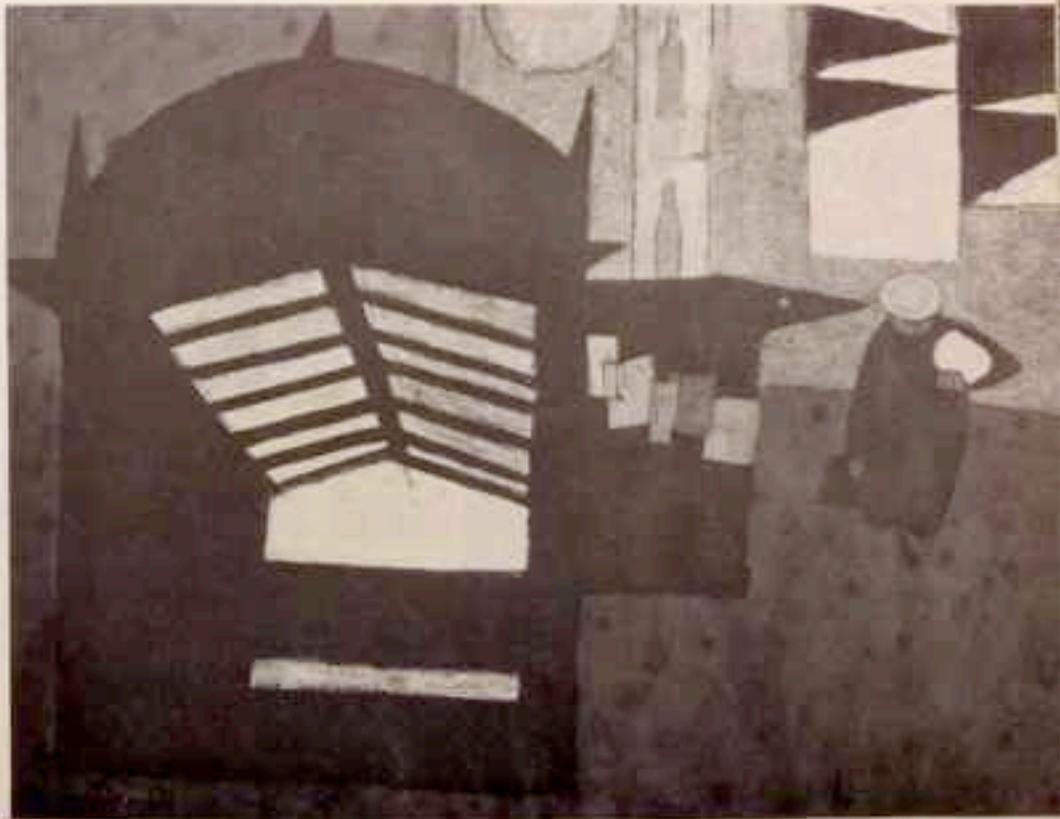
This should serve to stimulate and exercise your sensitivity to spatial relationships and their activity.



Vertical lines go back into space more than horizontals and verticals



In one design exercise all the planes are vertical and horizontal to the borders of the picture. In the other a greater penetration of space results from tilting the planes into perspective depth. A deeper sense of space and greater spatial activity result.



G. PRESTOPINO.
Subway.
ACA Gallery.



This flat design has shallow depth, but the overlapping planes help it to go back in space

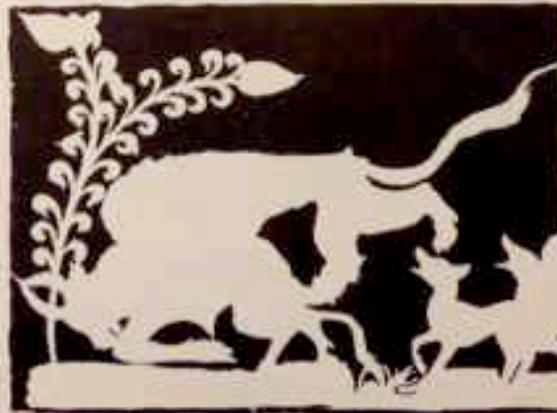
Positive & Negative Space

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

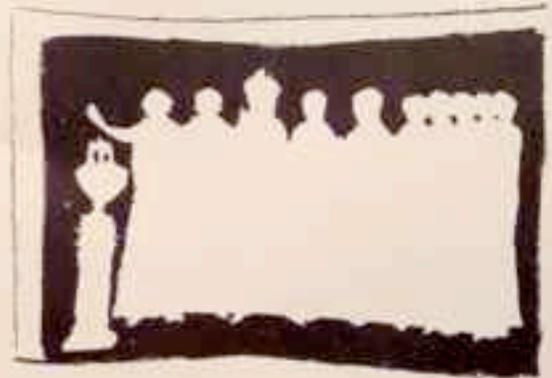
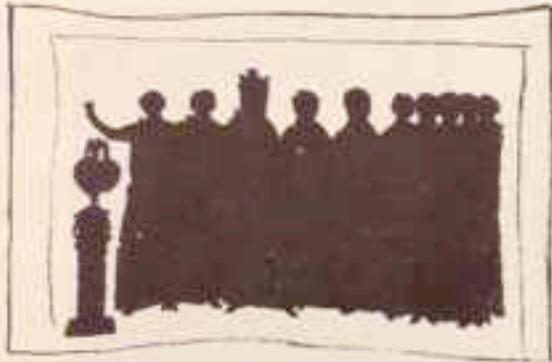
The borders of a picture, the picture frame, enclose a defined area of space, generally considered as negative space. The shapes or objects placed in the picture create positive space, and the remaining area is negative space. The interrelationship between these two is one of the dynamics of composition. Sole concentration on the positive elements, the figure, vase or tree, inevitably results in compositional inadequacy. The artist must be conscious of both types of space when he designs his picture.



The two examples on the right demonstrate how negative space can be analyzed. The negative spaces in both are intensely active and visually sensuous.



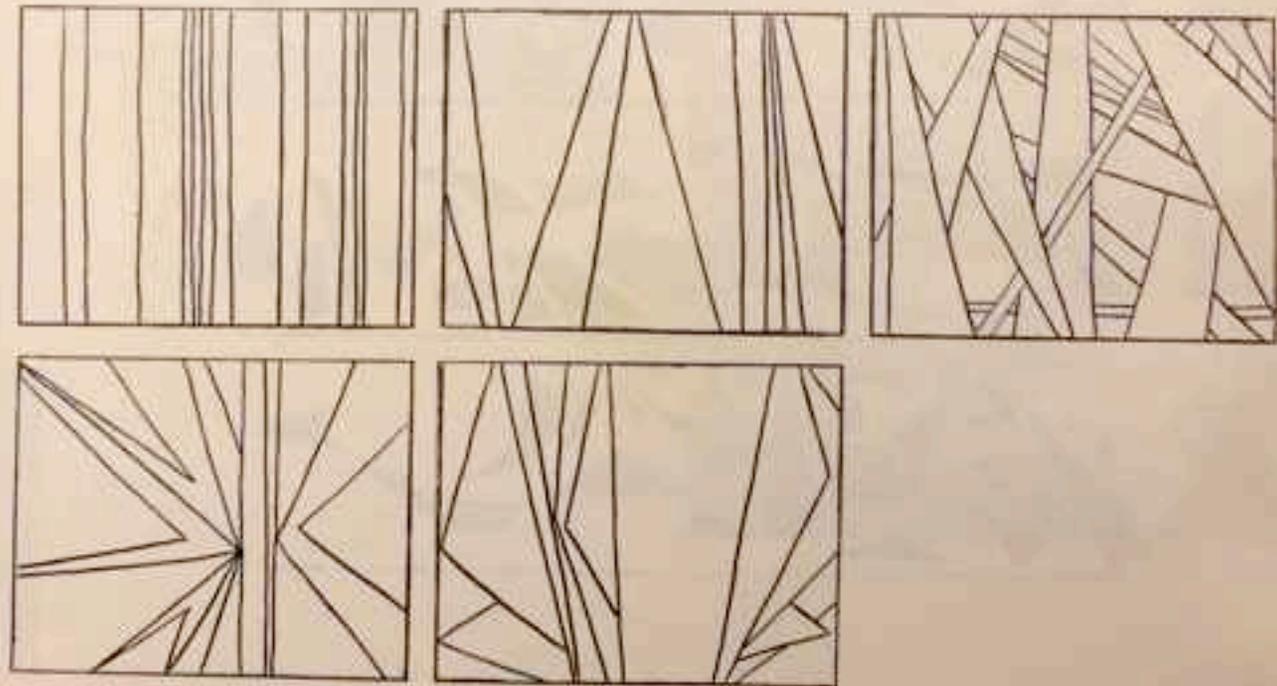
The picture is analyzed for positive and negative space to illustrate this design principle. In one the total positive area is depicted with black. In the other the negative area is blacked in.



Detail from a Byzantine Mosaic.

Tension is a term used to describe the attraction and repulsion of elements in a composition. This spatial sensation of activity can be used not only to create a dynamically alive picture, but also to intensify the communicativeness of a picture.

The student exercises illustrate optical communication of verticalness, ascent and descent, depth of space, and compression and expansion.



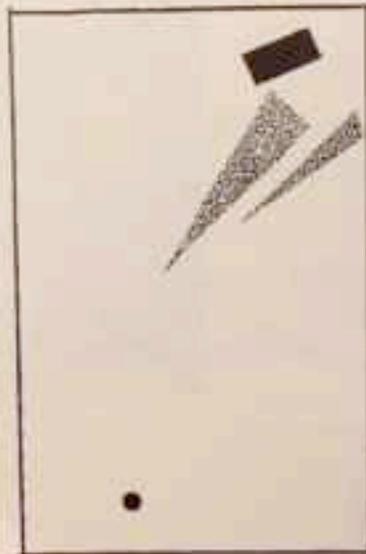
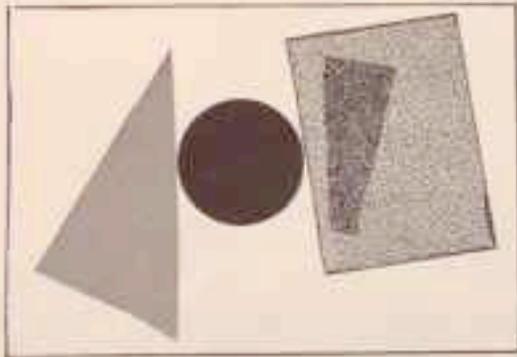
THE ACTIVITY OF SHAPES

The action of balance and imbalance, the sense of movement about to happen, as shown in the designs below, involve the use of the square, circle and triangle. These three basic forms are capable as well of visual statements of action and tension by themselves. By changing their shapes and directional thrusts, the nature of the squareness or roundness is kept, but each is capable of a variety of spatial expressions.



THE ACTIVITY OF SHAPES

The three exercises on this page demonstrate the ability of design to express smallness and largeness, movement and space, and crowded jostling.

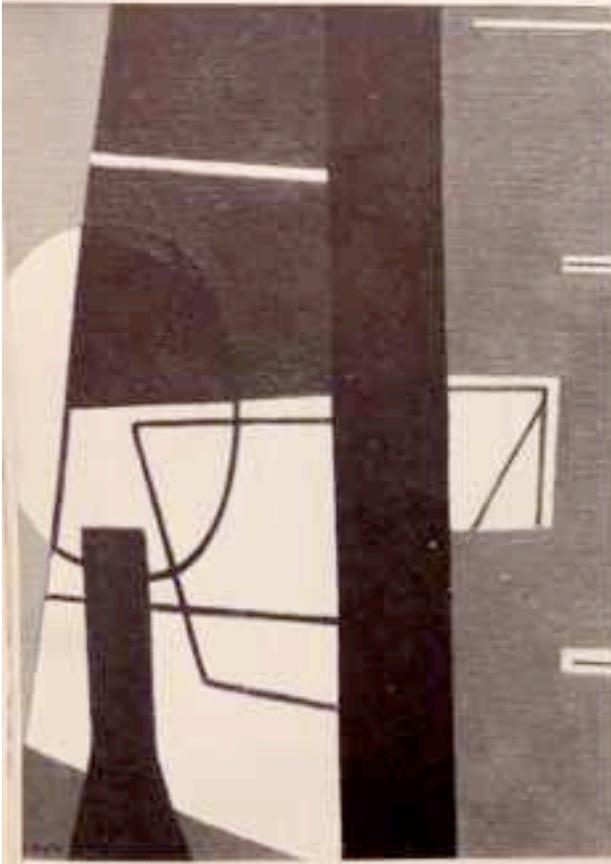




THE ACTIVITY OF SHAPES

By using black and white values, it is obvious that a white object in the foreground can be projected by making the background dark, or vice versa. The movement of the blacks and whites is limited by the outlines of the forms.

By interweaving the blacks and whites so that they move from one element of the design into another, a sense of relatedness is felt and a rich visual movement of tone is made possible.



E. CRAWFORD.
Fishing Boat No. 1.
Grace Sengelsch Gallery.



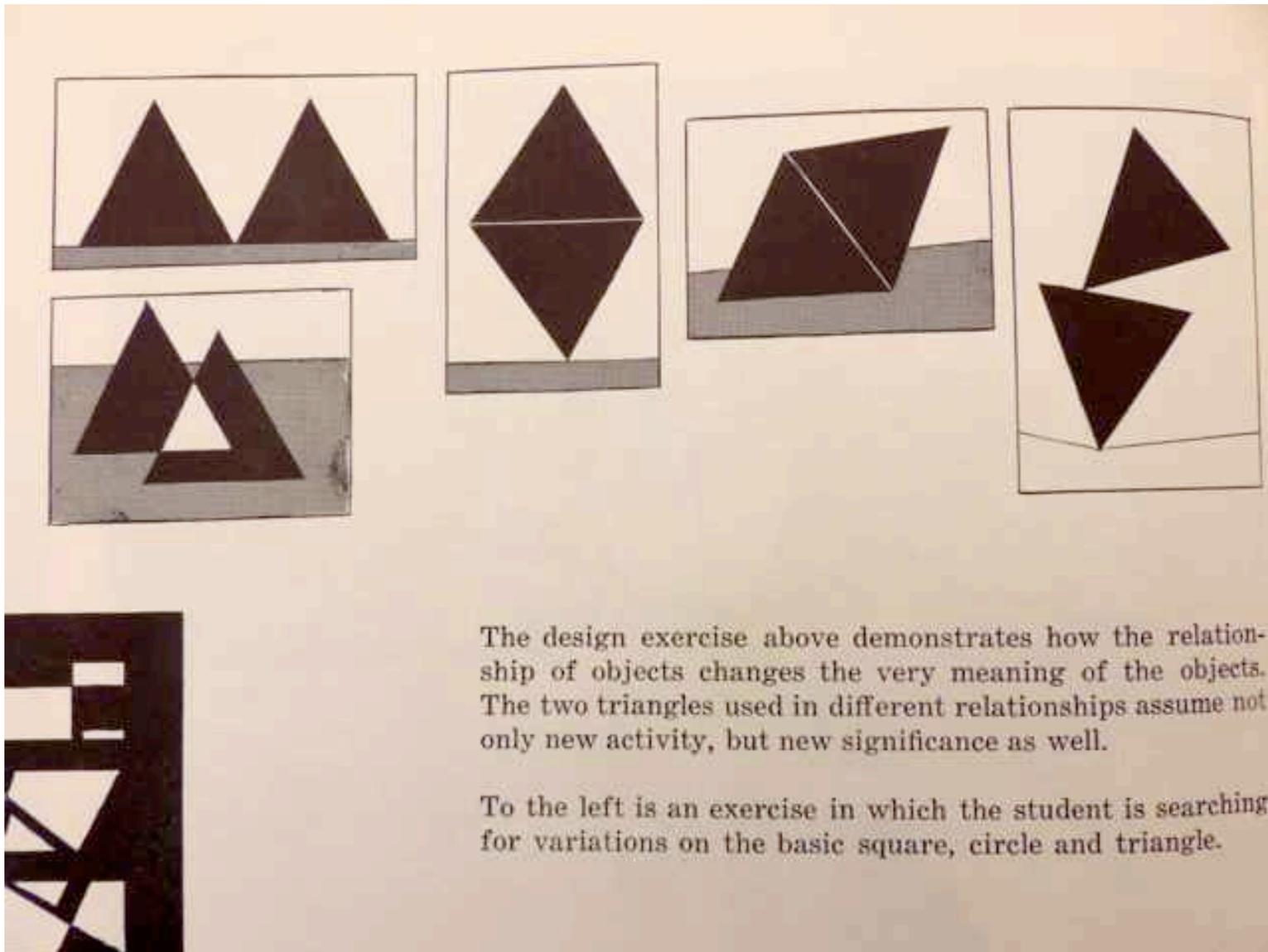
E. MUNCH.
Death Chamber.

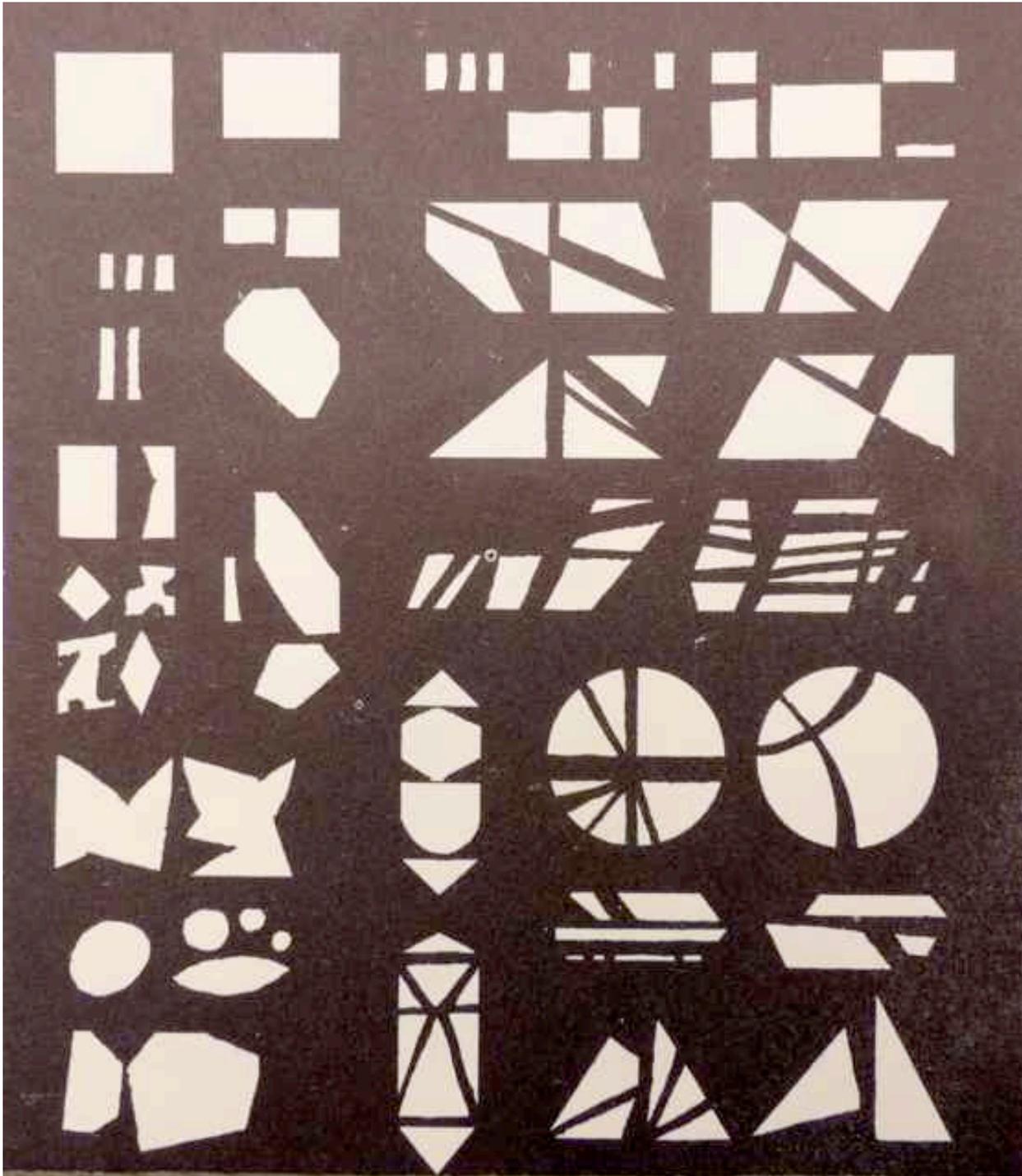


PICASSO.
Three Musicians.
Collection Museum of Modern Art

This painting incorporates many of the design principles discussed in the previous chapters.

Note where the horizon line is

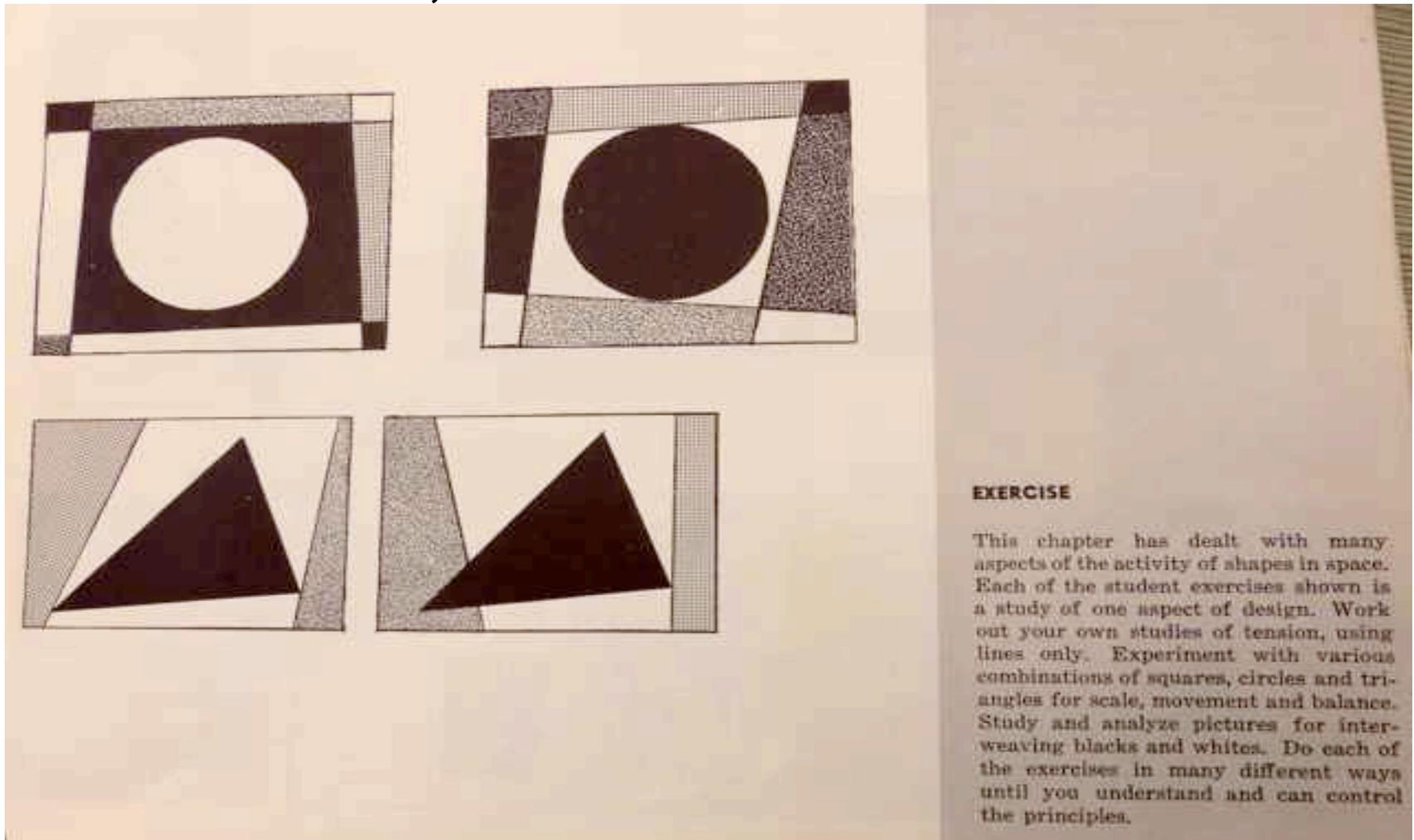




Exercise:

Draw squares, rectangles, triangles and circles. How many variations can you create?

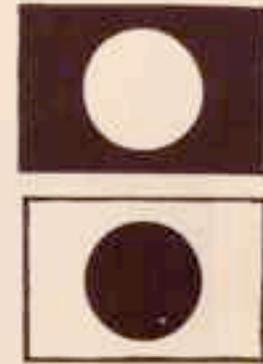
Exercise: Create tension using lines only.
Create tension using a variety of shapes for
scale, movement & balance



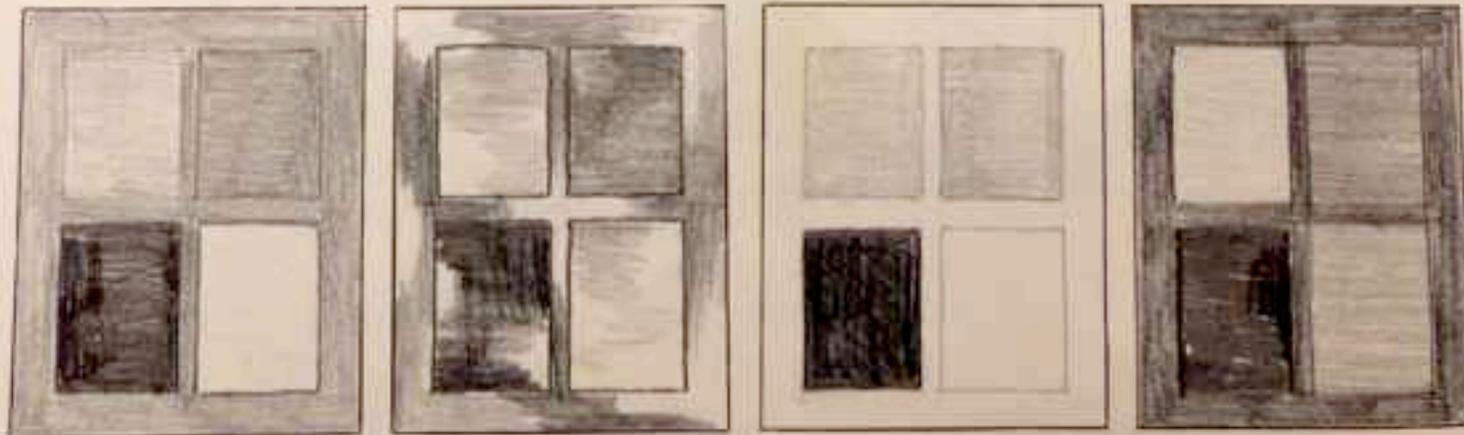
VALUES

Values are the range of tones beginning with white and running through the scale of grays and middle tones to black. Values afford the artist additional implements to serve his compositional needs.

That a tonal value has no meaning except when related to a background is demonstrated in the exercise below. The square of middletone changes with each change of tonal environment.



The observer's eye can be guided and directed to any part of a picture at the artist's will by use of tonal contrasts.





Exercise:

Create a triptych

1) Realistic drawing

2) Stylized shading

3) Paint with black,
grey and white



VALUES

The 16th century Persian painting and the 20th century Orozco analyzed on this page show the similarity of concern with flat pattern for design.



EXERCISE

Paint, with tempera, a series of squares ranging in tone from light gray to black. On each square paint an identical gray and then a middle value. Note how the value will change in each square.

Make a composition in values. Trace it three times. Change the values around in each picture. See which is most expressive.

COMMUNICATION THROUGH DESIGN

The effective part that design plays in communication has been touched upon in previous chapters. It is necessary to enlarge on this because of the important role design plays in picture making.

The class problem illustrated was to begin with a picture and then reverse all the picture's values. In making this change the scene was transformed from a summer scene to a winter one. Then the original picture was cut apart and all the shapes were pasted down into an abstract design.





An analysis of the cubical or volume structure of the Tintoretto painting.



TINTORETTO.
Miracle of St. Mark.
Academy, Venice.



An analysis of the volume movement in a Rubens painting.

ANALYZING PICTURES

Analysis serves as a means of design dissection to bare the underlying structural elements in a picture.

When looking at a picture, we experience a complex set of visual experiences. The story, the symbols, the details, all the elements of the picture, interfere with seeing the design structure. These distractive elements must be pushed aside in order to observe the structure beneath. This can be accomplished by analysis.

All literary detail must be eliminated. Each object in the picture is then reduced to a basic shape. It is only then that the structural skeleton of the design can be seen. In this chapter various analytical means are discussed and demonstrated.



EL GRECO.
Kneeling Saint.



GRUNEWALD.
Altar Triptych.
Photo: Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum
of Art.



Analysis of Black.



Analysis of Black, White, and Gray.

WALTZING PICTURES



BRUEGHEL



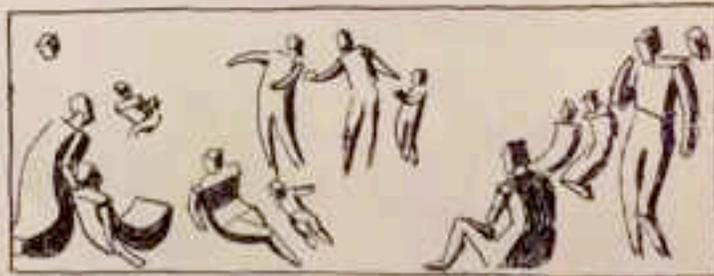
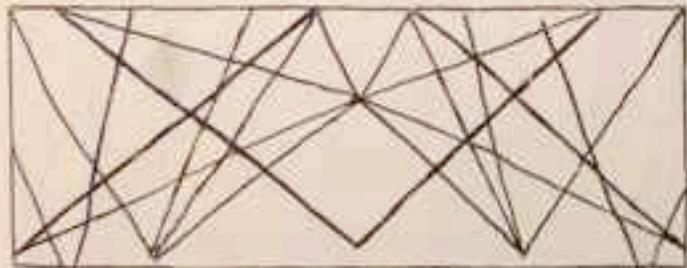


BRUEGHEL

Find the darks.
Then the mid
tones

Rhythm and
Movement is
clarified





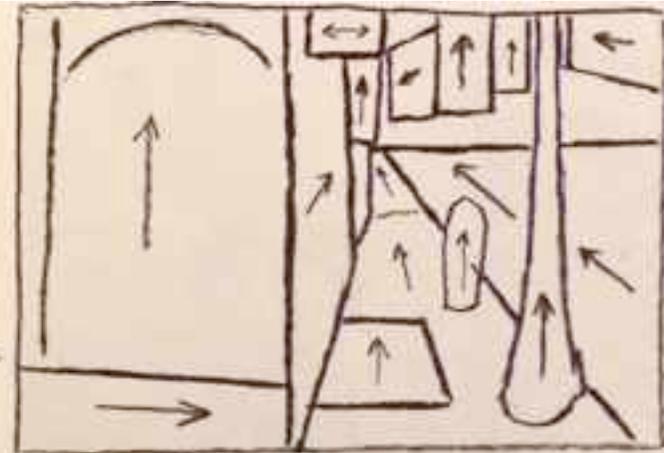
The use of the triangle as a basic design element was common to the Renaissance. The analysis of the Tintoretto at the left makes this quite evident.

The analysis to the right dissects the volume movements of some of the figures.

Follow the directional lines



JACK LENINE
Asteca
Collection of St. Bernard's



The design of the
into perspective,
width and view
direction of the



CEZANNE.
Still Life with Apples.
Collection Museum of Modern Art.

EXERCISE

Various principles of composition and methods of analysis have been developed in this book. With sheets of acetate or tracing paper and black lithograph pencil or ink, and with the wealth of reproductions available, an exciting field of learning can be opened for exploration and study.

No other exercise can better develop an understanding of design, nor better inform on the structural principles of picture making, than intensive and thorough analysis of the masters.