

The Principles of Design

Balance

- Symmetrical, Asymmetrical, and Radial

Emphasis and Focal Point

Scale and Proportion

Repetition and Rhythm

Variety and Unity

Unity:

The sense of oneness, of things belonging together and making up a coherent whole.

Design is both a verb and a noun. To design something involves *organizing the formal elements*- line, space, light and color, texture, time and motion- into a unified whole. Design is also a field of study, which will be discussed in a later chapter. This chapter focuses on the design principles that can apply to all works of art.

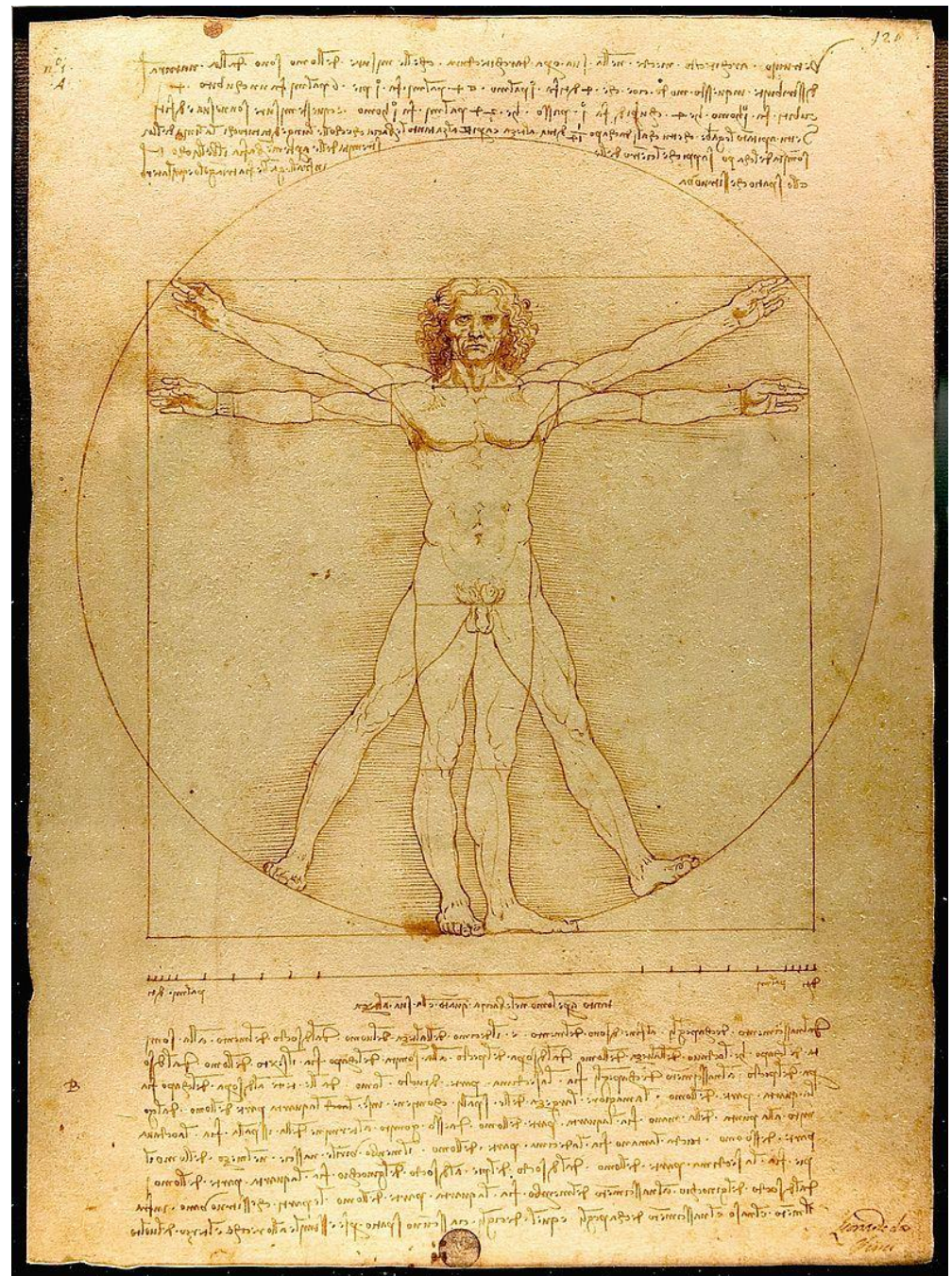
*The organization of the formal elements in a work of art is the **composition**.*

Leonardo da Vinci
“Study of Human
Proportion: The Vitruvian
Man”, 1492. Pen and ink
drawing.

This work contains all of the
principles of design, and refers
to the Roman architectural
historian Vitruvius, who saw
the circle and the square as
ideal shapes. The figure is in
perfect proportion, balanced,
and symmetrical.

Center- navel (connection to
life)

Earthly and heavenly world are
unified into a coherent whole



BALANCE

As a design principle, Balance refers to the even distribution of weight in a composition.

All art deals with *visual weight*, the apparent “heaviness” or “lightness” of the shapes and forms arranged in the composition.

Artists achieve visual balance in compositions by one of three means- symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial. They may also deliberately create a work that appears to lack balance, knowing that instability is threatening and makes the viewer uncomfortable.

Symmetrical Balance:

Mirror image of shapes and forms on either side of an imaginary dividing line. Elements correspond to one another in size, shape, and placement.

Taj Mahal, Agra, India,
Mughal period, c. 1632-48



Asymmetrical Balance

- Balance can be achieved even when the two sides of a composition lack symmetry, if they seem to possess the same *visual weight*.
- When this happens, there is asymmetrical balance.

VISUAL WEIGHT INFLUENCERS

POSITION



ISOLATION



VALUE



COLOR

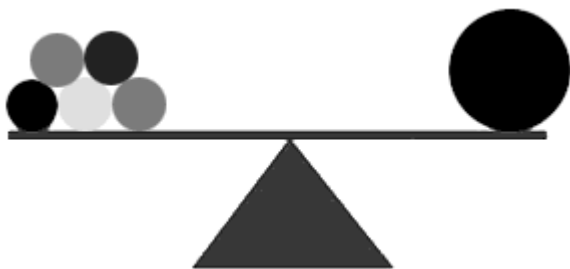


VALUE CONTRAST





Sarah Welch, *"Holdouts"*, 2017. This two page spread from a longer comic book has visual balance on each page. The left page is balance with multiple squares to make up one larger square. The right page has balance between the small inner panel square and text bubble on the upper left and right, and the larger square.





Asymmetrical vs. Symmetrical Balance: two prints by Carlos Hernandez, founder of Burning Bones Press in Houston, Texas



Johannes Vermeer,
*Woman Holding a
Balance*, c. 1664.

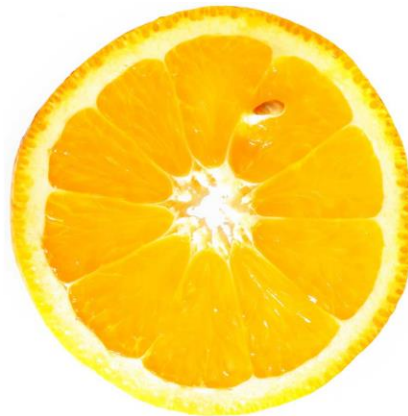
The areas of light and dark balance each side of the design. The subject matter is balanced between the spiritual and material worlds.



If we manipulate the image, it no longer has a sense of balance. The darkness has far more visual weight now than the light does, and it seems more overwhelming.

Radial Balance

- With radial balance, everything radiates out from a central point.
- Radial balance is very familiar in nature, and it commonly possesses spiritual and religious significance.





Tibetan Sand Mandala, in the process of creation by Buddhist monks (above left) and completed (above right). The image radiates out from a central representation of a deity, and is intended to bring about enlightenment through meditation.

Emphasis and Focal Point

- Emphasis is used by artists to draw the viewer's attention to one area of the work.
- This area is the focal point of the composition. It is easy to find the focal point of a radially balanced composition; it is always the center.
- Emphasis can also be established by creating strong contrasts of light and color, or by the organized implied lines of linear perspective.



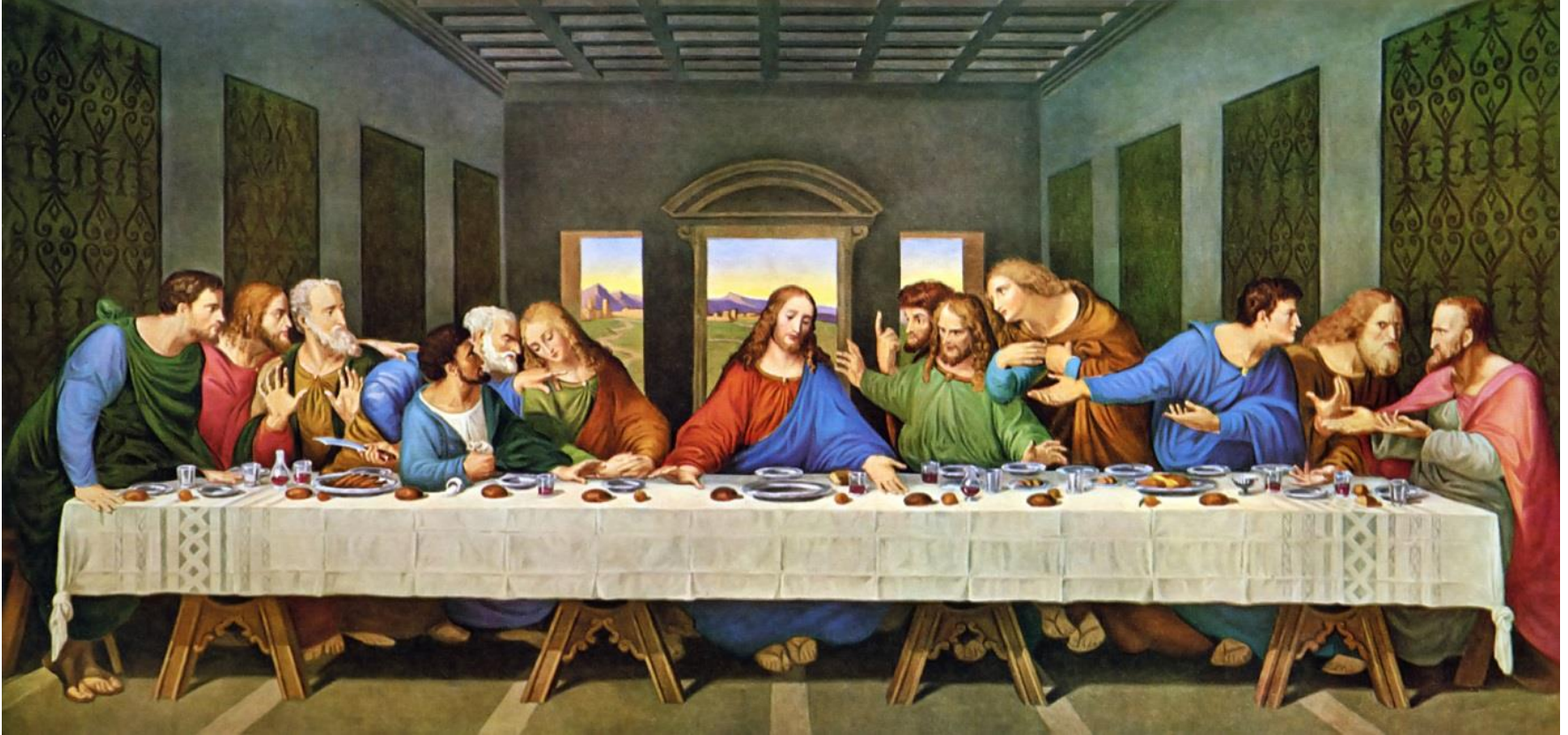
Anna Vallayer-Coster, *Still Life with Lobster*, 1781.

By using a complimentary color scheme, the red lobster becomes a strong focal point, with the red vibrating against the green tones of the background. (This is also achieved by the color's intensity – the red is far more intense than the dull greens of the background, and so it stands out visually.)



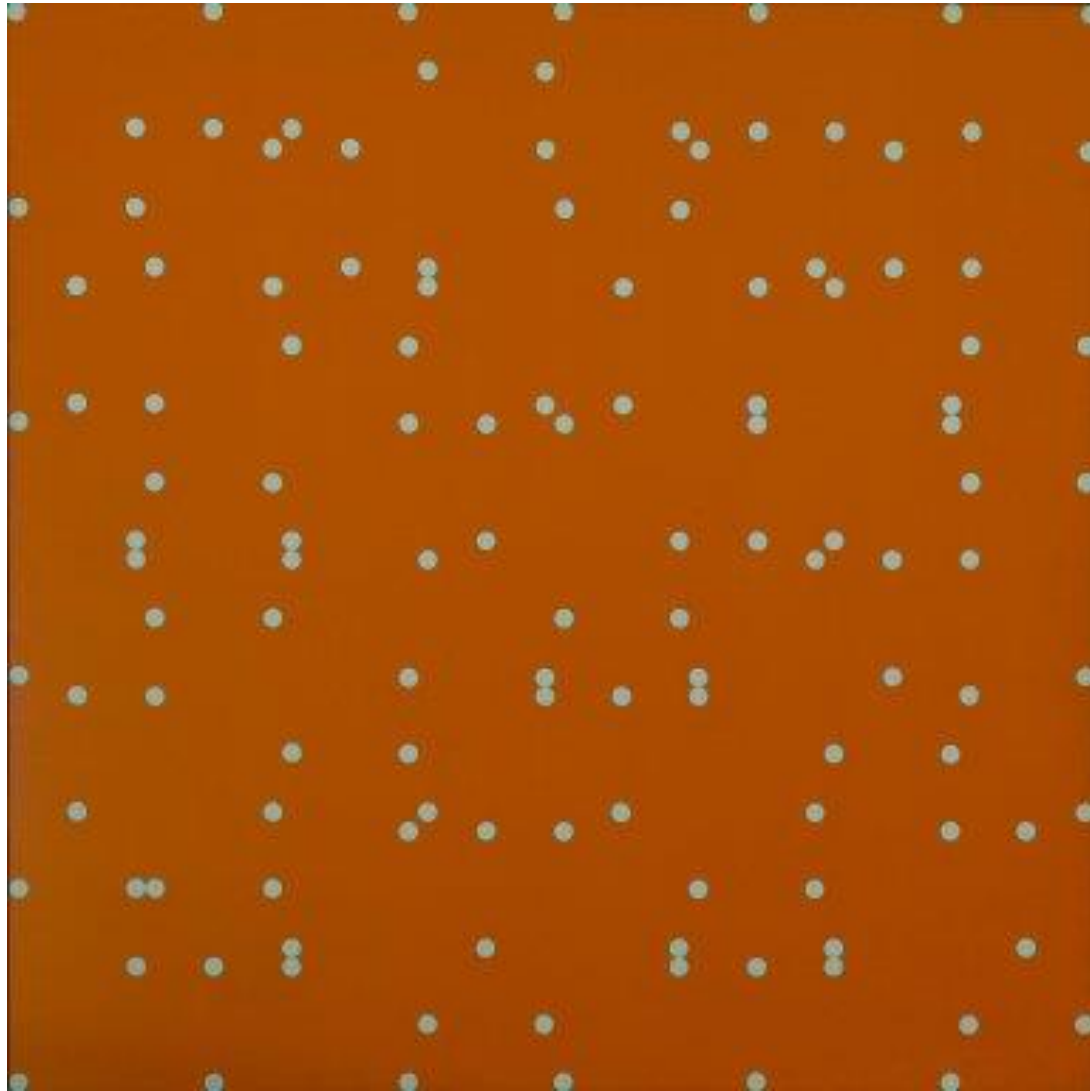
Georges de la Tour, *Joseph the Carpenter*, c. 1645.

Rather than by the use of color contrast, this composition emphasizes the focal point by contrasts in value. The bright light on the child's face contrasts sharply with the dark surroundings, and draws our eye in to look at it.

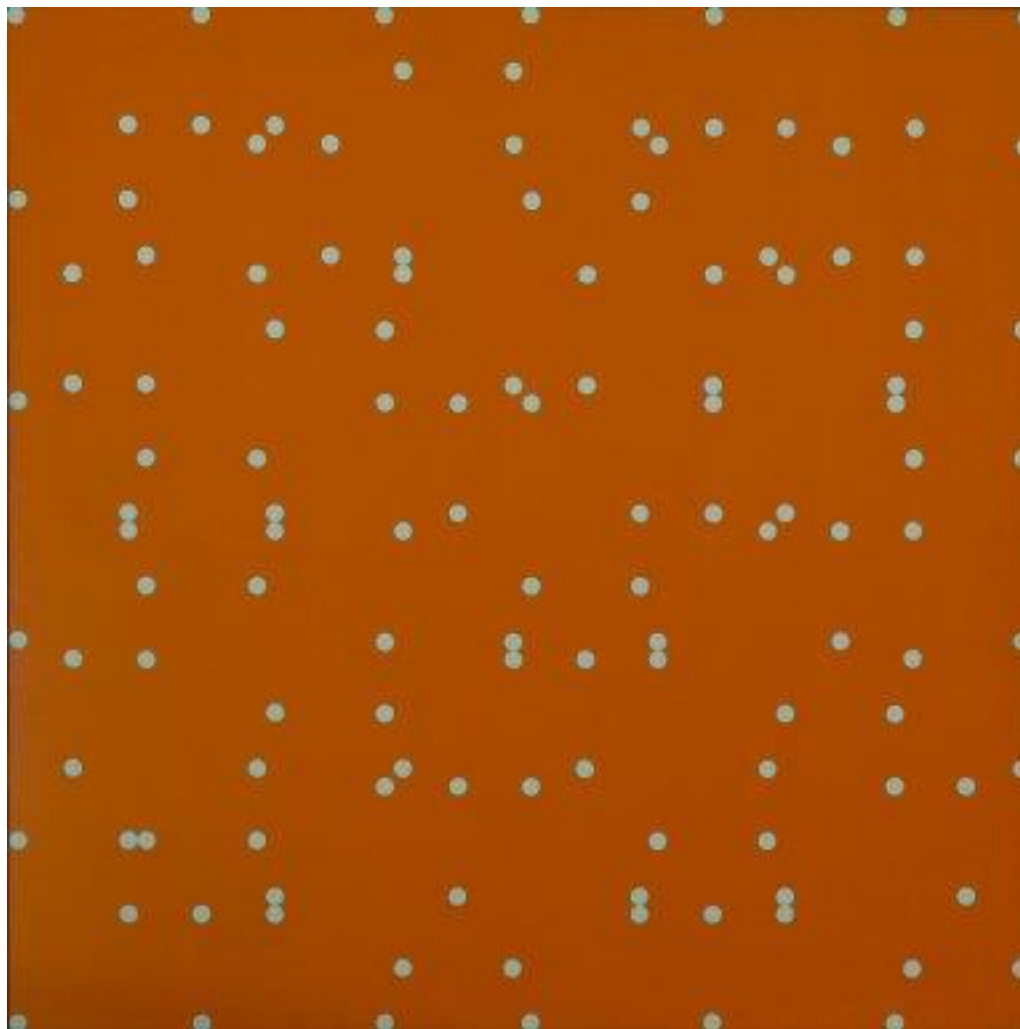


Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (replica in restored version).

The focal point is at the center of the composition, right at Jesus's head. The artist establishes this with the use of linear perspective, by placing the vanishing point at Jesus's head.



Where is the focal point?



Larry Poons, *Orange Crush*, 1963. This work is afocal – there is no one point where your eye wanders comfortably to rest. It bounces around the composition, always in motion.

Scale and Proportion

- Scale is the word we use to describe the dimensions of an art object in relation to the original object that it depicts or in relation to the objects around it.
- There is “small-scale” and “large-scale” work.
- Proportion refers to the relationship between the parts of an object and the whole, or the relationship between an object and its surroundings.



Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, 1983-1988.

This is an example of a large scale work. The cherry and the spoon are in proportion to one another.





Do-Ho Suh
Public Figures
October 1998-May 1999.

Note the relationship between the scale of the monument, and the scale of the figures holding it up. This plays with our expected sense of proportions.

The scale of the people carrying the monument base have been purposely diminished to create content. The base is purposely lacking the expected statue of a public hero standing on top of it.

Suh explains, “Let’s say there’s one statue at the plaza of a hero, who helped protect our country. There are thousands of individuals who helped him and worked with him, and there’s no recognition for them.”

He considers the small figures in the sculpture the “little people” behind the heroic gesture.

Hokusai

The Great Wave off Kanagawa, from the series Thirty Six Views of Mount Fuji
1823-29

Note the relationship between the scale of the mountain, which is known to be large, and the scale of the wave. This plays with our expected sense of proportions.



While the wave is visually larger than the distance mountain, our sense of scale causes us to diminish its importance. The wave will imminently collapse, yet Mount Fuji will remain. For the Japanese, Fuji symbolizes not only the everlasting, but Japan itself, and the work juxtaposes the perils of the moment with the enduring life of the nation.

Proportion

As opposed to *scale*, which refers to the relative size of an object, *proportion* refers to the relationship between the parts of an object and the whole.

When the relationships between parts of a figure seem normal, it is said to be “in proportion” and the representation is more likely to seem harmonious and balanced. “Perfect” proportions were determined by the Classical Greeks. It is based on the fact that each part of the body is a common fraction of the figure’s total height. According to the canon, the height of the head ought to be $\frac{1}{8}$ of the total height of the body.

**Note: the term ‘perfect’ is in quotation marks because it is unrealistic and idealized.*

Proportion in Figures

Jean-August-Dominique Ingres

Mme. Riviere, 1805

If you look carefully, the woman in the painting appears to have an extremely long right arm.



Polyclitus, *Doryphoros (The Spear Bearer)*, 450 BC

Polyclitus was a Greek sculptor who determined the perfect proportions of the human body in a now-lost text called *The Canon* (from the Greek *kanon*, meaning “measure” or “rule”)



Repetition, Pattern, and Rhythm

- Repetition often implies monotony. When we see the same thing over and over again, it can get boring. However, when the *same or similar* elements repeat themselves, such as shapes, colors, or a regular pattern, a visual rhythm will result.
- Rhythm demonstrates that repetition is not necessarily boring. It indicates a movement through repetition.



Kente cloth



Auguste Rodin, *The Three Shades*, 1881-86.

Each figure is exactly the same – they are cast copies of the same pose repeated. However, by setting them at different angles, the artist exposes a wide array of visual differences. This begins to form a visual rhythm – the bodies show movement and variety through the repetition.



Still from the film *Stray Dog*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1949. Shadows form a striped pattern that makes the shot more visually complex and interesting. In this case, the pattern is an important clue to the story: it suggests prison bars, and the possibility that these men may end up there.



Rene Magritte, Golconda, 1953, oil on canvas

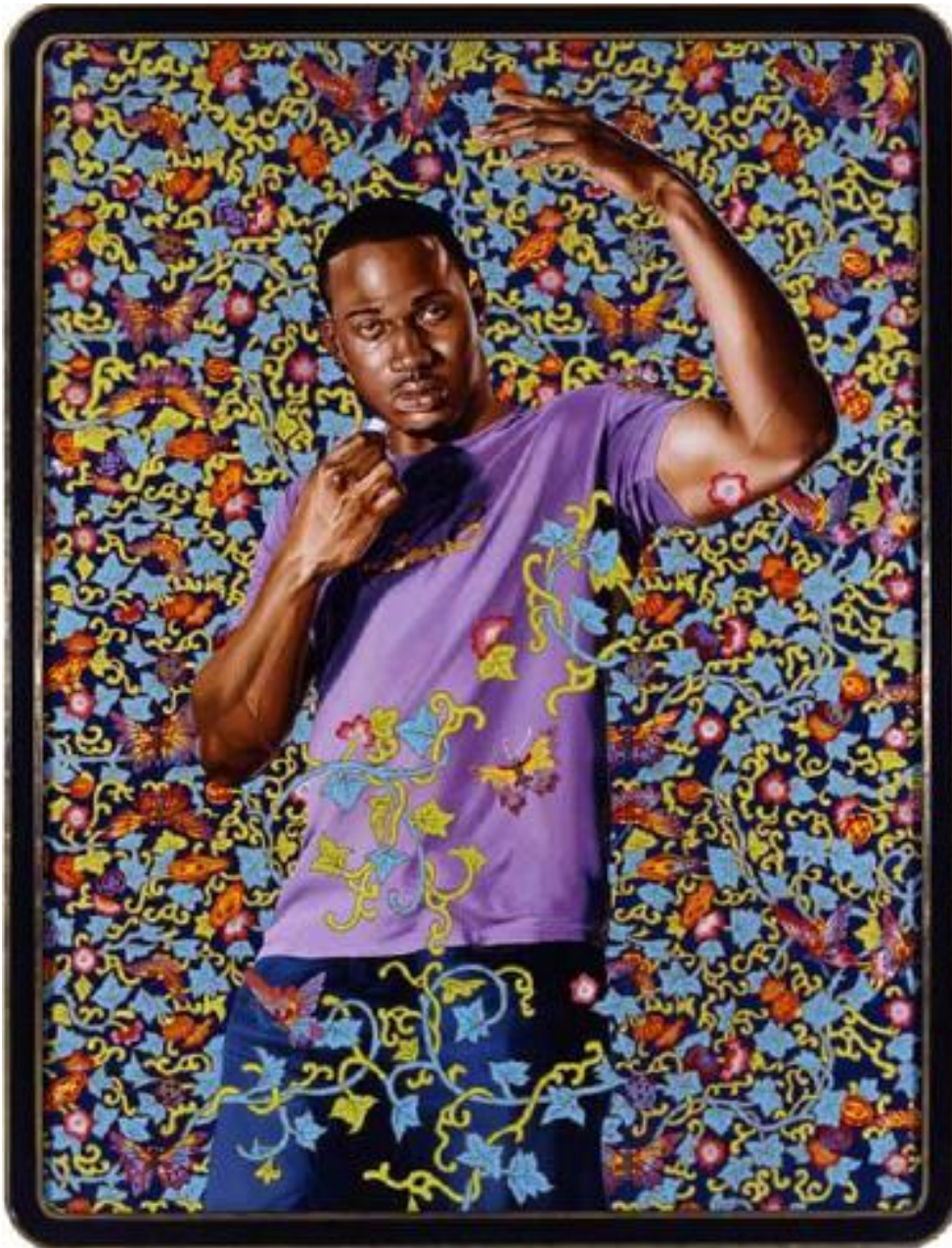
The same image of a man is repeated, and he faces different directions, and gets smaller in space. The windows on the building also repeat at different heights. Both the windows and the men form rhythm in the composition.

Pattern

- Any formal element that repeats itself in a composition – line, shape, mass, color, or texture – creates a recognizable pattern.
- In its repetitive and organized use of the same motif or design, pattern is an important decorative tool.
- Pattern as decoration can be pleasing to the eye.
- Pattern often uses symbolism to create meaning, and is not always purely decorative.



Kente prestige cloth (detail), Ghana; Ewe peoples, 19th century.
Patterned textiles are closely associated with social prestige and wealth among the Ewe and Asante societies of Ghana.



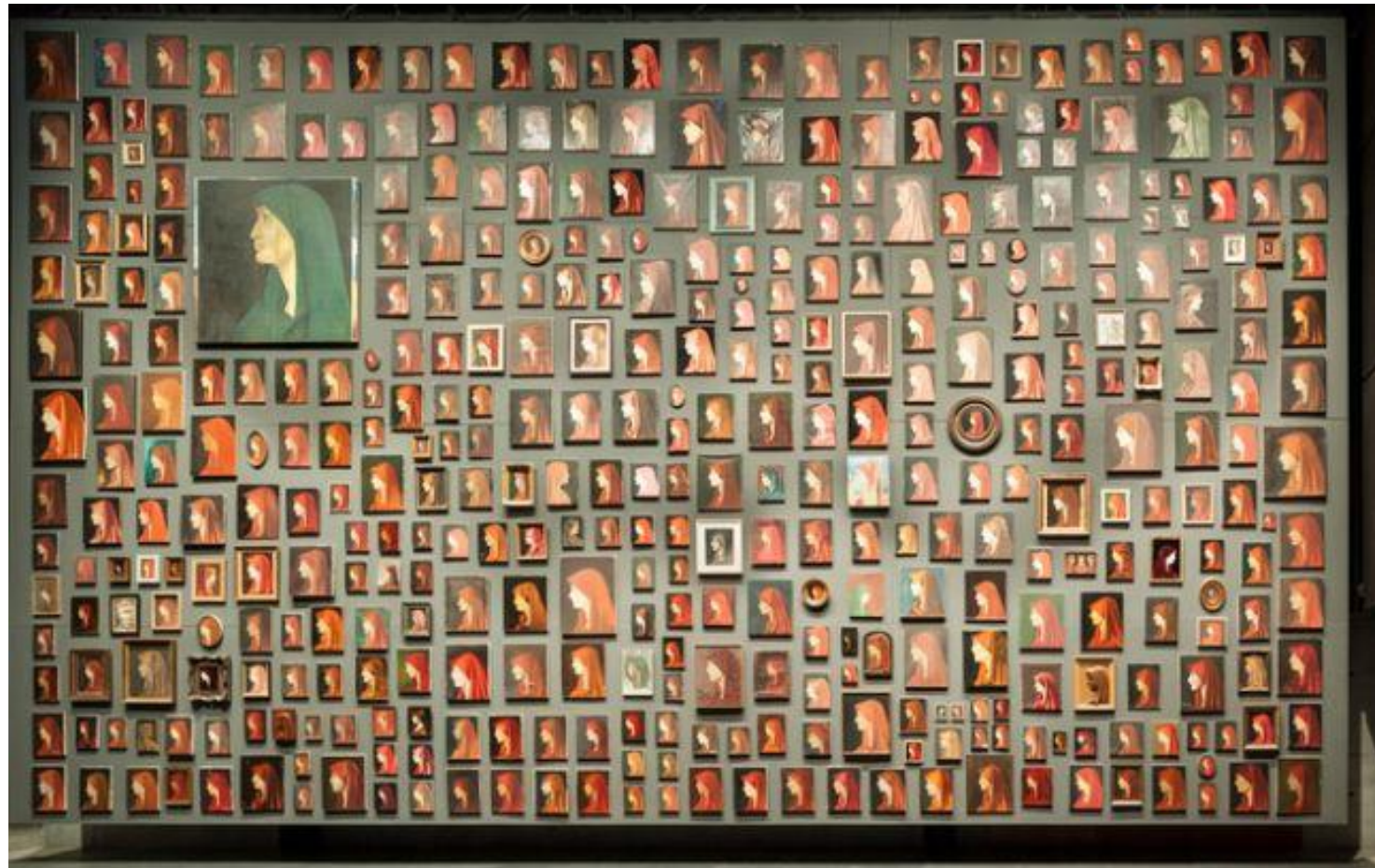
Artist Spotlight: Kehinde Wiley

Wiley juxtaposes pattern with contemporary figures in poses from European paintings. He does this to “quote historical sources and position young black men within the field of power.” The patterned backgrounds are taken from decorative sources such as wallpaper, and take away the place or location of the painting.



Unity and Variety

- When all visual elements are in agreement, the artwork has *unity*. No individual part is valued more than another.
- *Variety* shows us different aspects to the composition, and breaks the potential for visual monotony within unity.
- A good work of art must generally have both unity and variety, and it is the artist's job to find a *balance* between the two.



Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project

This large scale installation consists of more than 450 reproductions of a lost 1885 painting of 4th-century Roman Saint Fabiola by French artist Jean-Jacques Henner. Each painting is different in size, material, color, and even shape. This gives the installation variety. The installation feels unified through the color of the wall, which compliments the red in the paintings, and through the fact that the paintings are similar and arranged on a grid.



Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939

Perhaps reflecting her own Catholic upbringing, and the predominance of symmetrical altarpieces in Mexican churches, Frida Kahlo's double self-portrait is itself symmetrically balanced. Kahlo was married to a successful painter, the muralist Diego Rivera, and the portrait represents his rejection of her. The Frida on the right, in native Tehuana costume, is the Frida that Rivera had loved. The Frida on the left is the rejected Frida, more westernized. A vein runs through them both, originating in a small photo of Rivera as a child on the once-loved Frida's lap, passing through both hearts, and terminating in the unloved Frida's lap, cut off by a pair of surgical scissors. But the flow of blood cannot be stopped, and it continues to drip, joining the embroidered flowers on her dress.

Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (right) Architect: Frank Gehry



Left:

Louise Bourgeois
Maman
1999

Maman is a bronze, stainless steel, and marble sculpture.. It depicts a spider, among the world's largest, measuring over 30 ft high and over 33 ft wide. It is installed outside of the museum pictured above.

