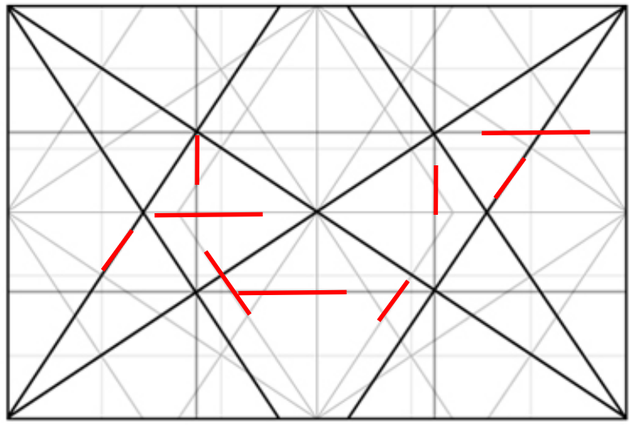
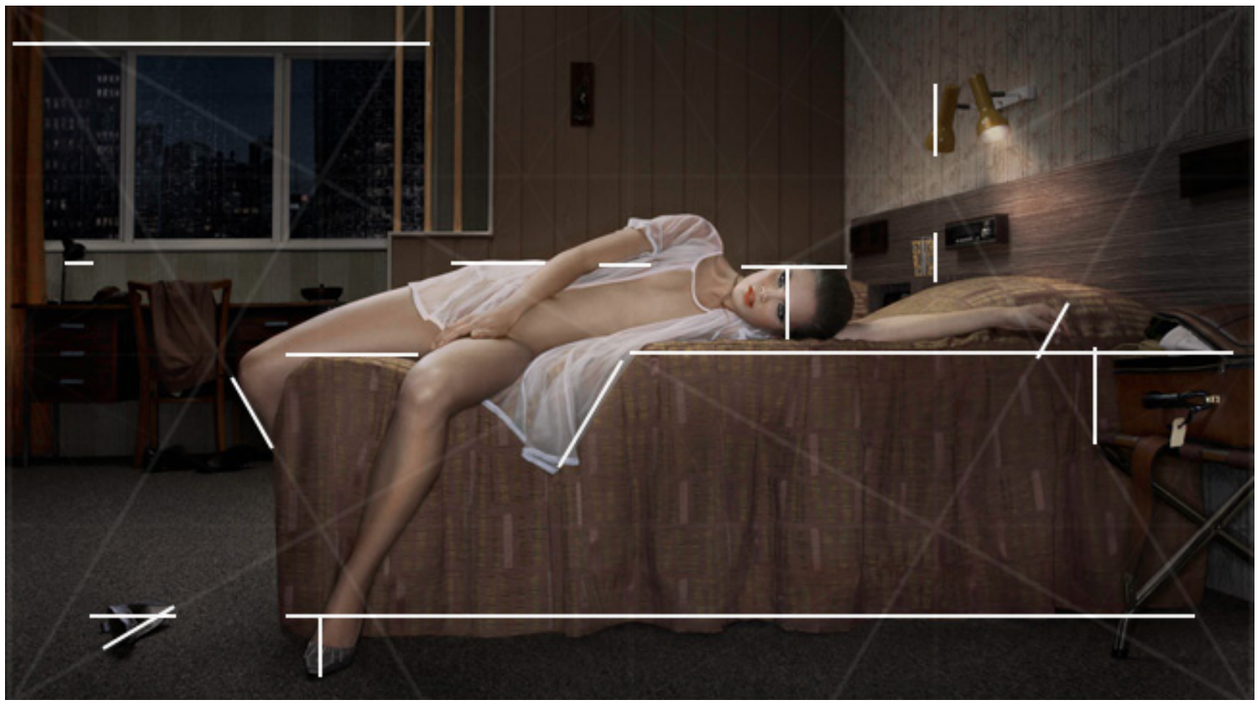
based upon | Composition Part 3 | Hidden Techniques

Locking into the grid

Once you have selected your grid based on the angles of your subject, you can create multiple areas where aspects can lock into the grid, or line up. For example the angle of a limb, a cloud, a chair, a rock, a bed etc.

Examples:
Erwin Olaf photograph
Annie Leibovitz's vanity fair Hollywood cover photograph
Herbert James Draper 'By summer seas'

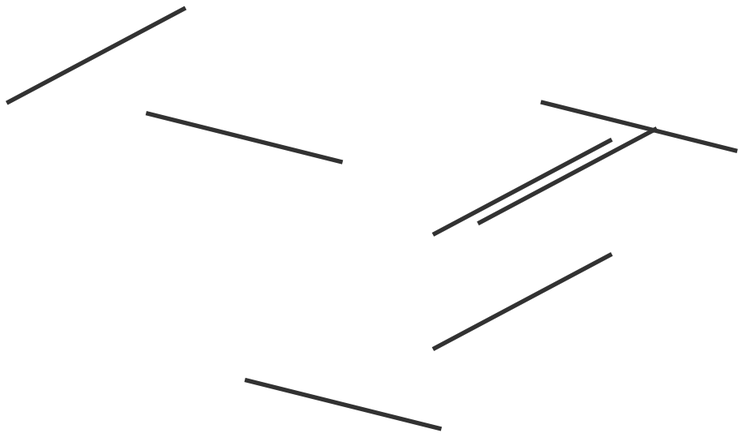




Gamuts

This is limiting the number of diagonal angles in your composition. This is usually informed by the angles in your grid. There are usually 6 - 8 dominating gamuts in paintings by the old masters.
Gamuts are also a way of creating rhythm, repeating the diagnols in various aspects of your work create a unity and pulse like Annie Leibovitz does with Charleze (right). This also works with repeating shapes.

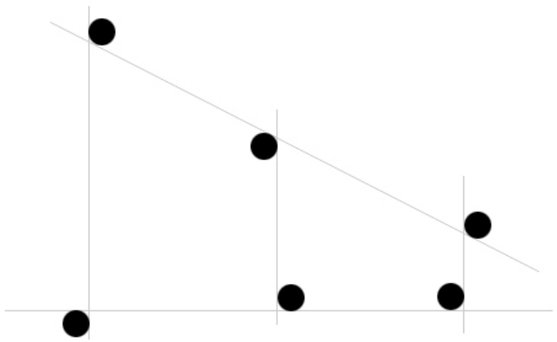
Examples:
Annie Leibovitz's vanity fair Hollywood cover photograph
Peter Paul Rubens 'Lion-hunt'
Annie Leibovitz, Charleze

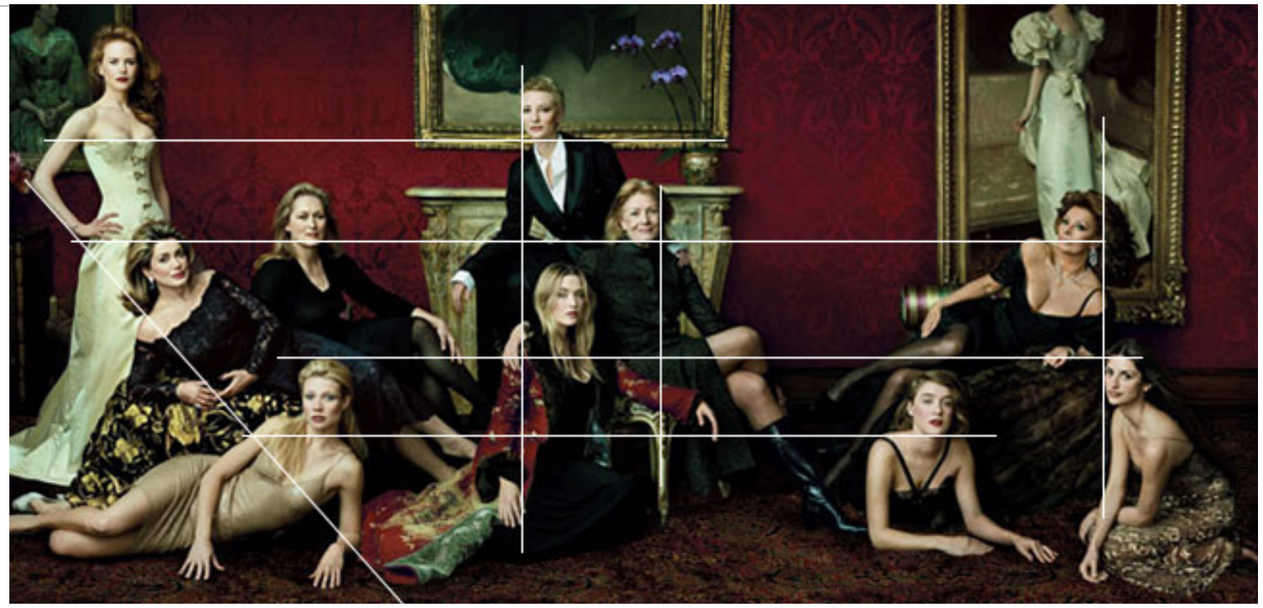


Coincidences

Objects that coincide with each other on the same line throughout the image all called coincidences, they create unity and movement, similar to radiating lines and arabesques.
In Annie Leibovitz's photo below right, can you see how her shirt coincides with the background, and how her head lines up with her arm. This helps unite objects because they share the same line, and it creates a movement from object to object, keeping the eye moving with the canvas.

Examples:
All Annie Leibovitz





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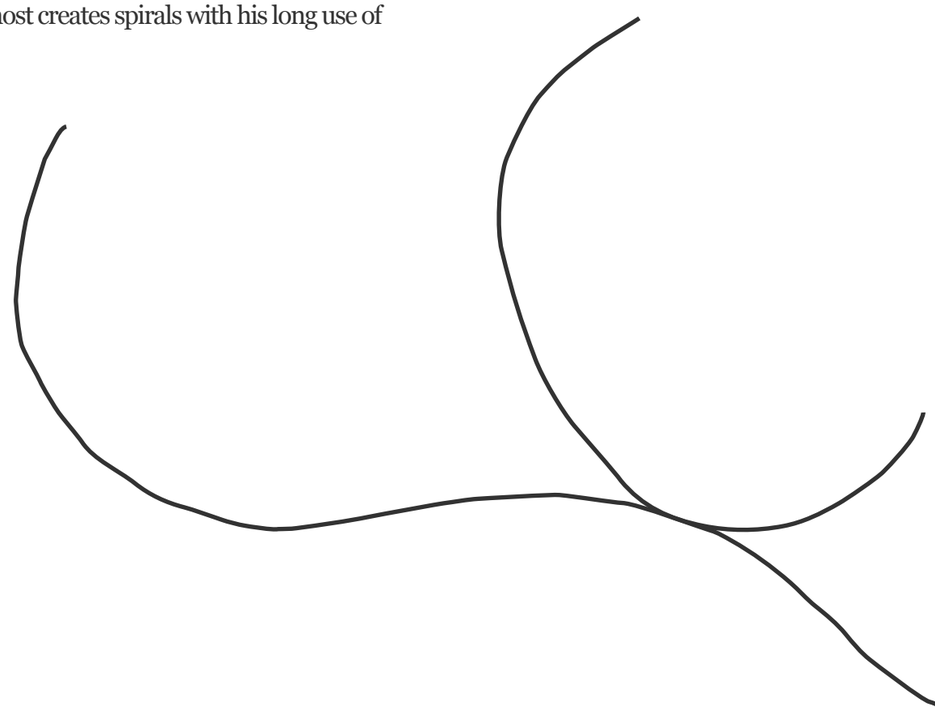
Arabesques

Creating flowing smooth lines through the composition gives movement and guides the eye through the work. This should be subtle and does not need to fully join, instead allowing the eye to fill the gaps. Try to incorporate this technique whenever you can as it gives great continuity and fluidity.
(Sometimes it helps to blur your vision so you can locate them and thus emphasise).

Right, Degas almost creates spirals with his long use of arabesques.

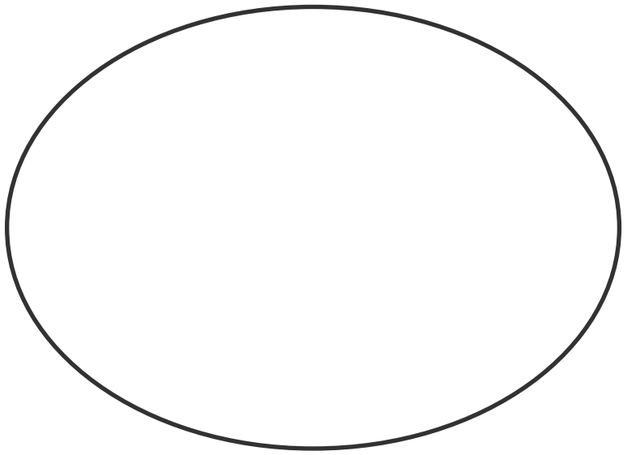


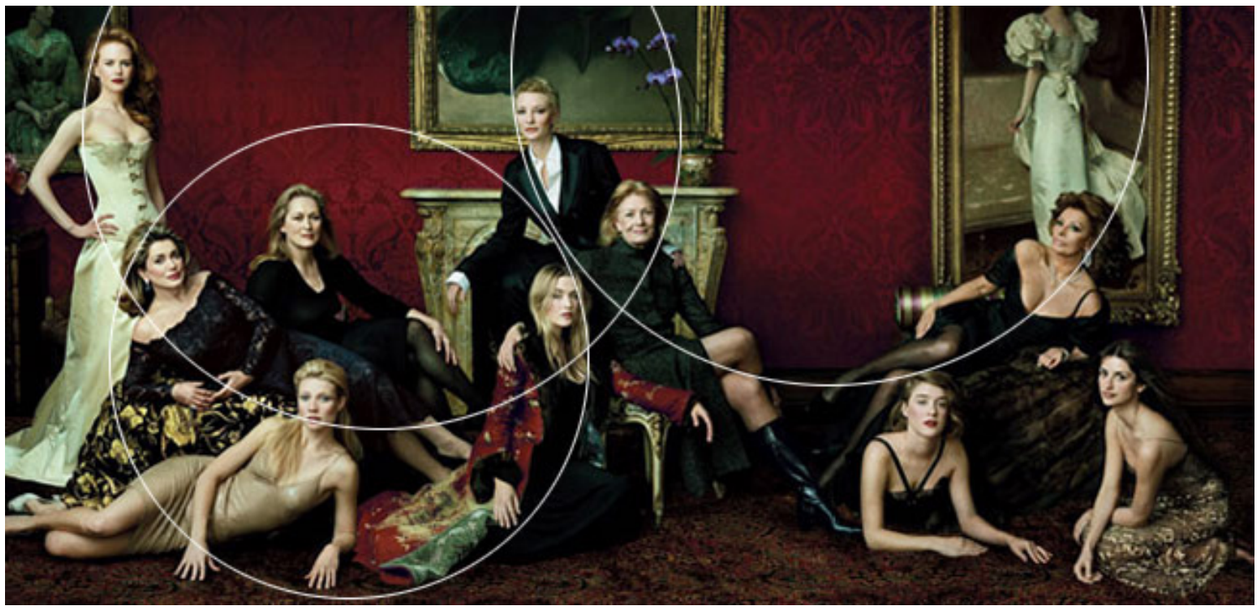
Ellipses

Using elements to create ellipses within the composition creates unity and movement, similar to the arabesque. An ellipse is a form of enclosure and is the center of a flower that unites every petal.

In art, the best ellipses are the ones which aren't obvious. The circular shapes which are implied in the lights and shadows of your subject and the background can be made to provide the elements with unity. Also used to aid with the movement generated by the arabesque. Objects like hair, fabric, branches, arms, or clouds can all be used to incorporate this technique into your art and move the viewers eye where you want it.

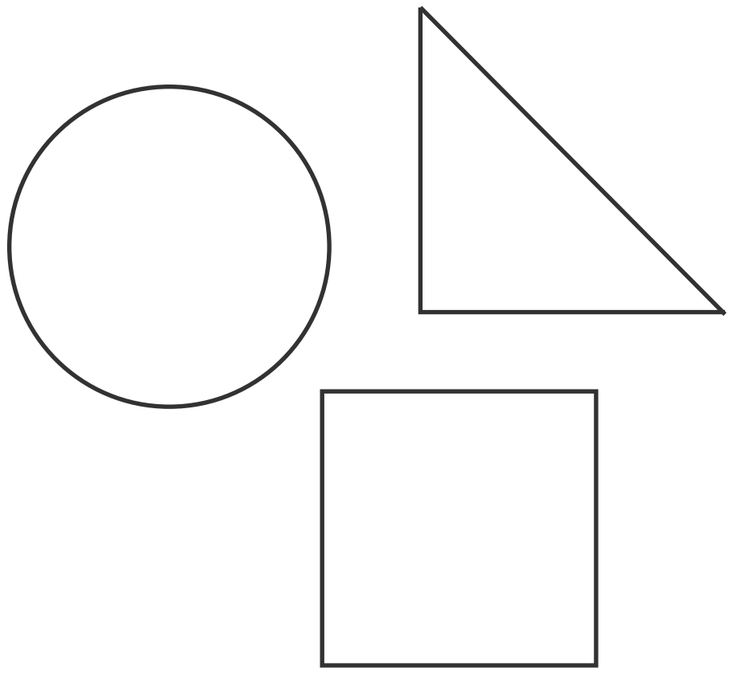
Examples:
Annie Leibovitz's vanity fair Hollywood cover photograph
Peter Paul Rubens 'Lion-hunt'
George Frederick 'Endymion'

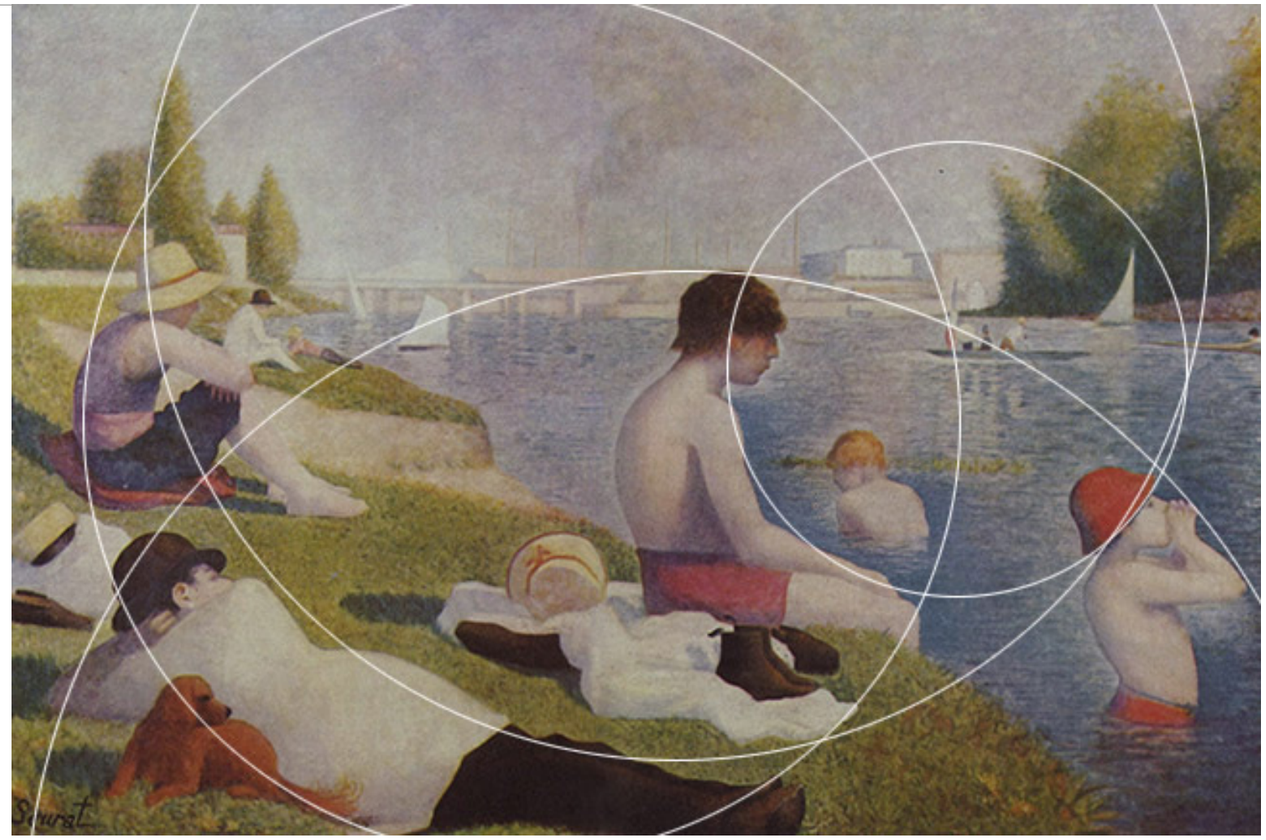




Enclosures

Creating simple circular, square or triangular shapes that enclose part of the composition help to give interest and unity.
Similar to ellipses, they do not need to fully join but suggest the shape with a number of elements such as the curve of an arm, to the curve of a hat to the sweep in a tree in Seurat's paining (right).

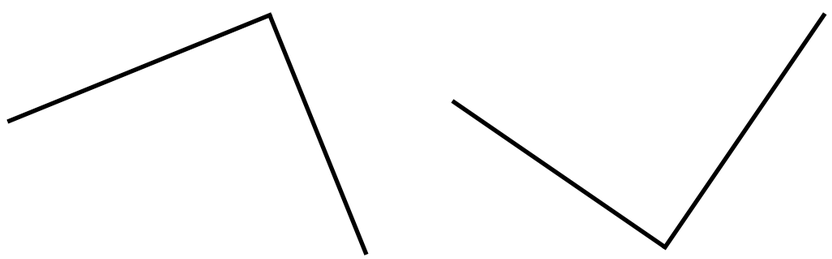




Right Angles

Creating a number of rotated 90 degree right angles in your composition gives structure and strength.

A right angle is a Karate stance, a cross, a bracket for joining wood, the flexing bicep, the end of a hammer, it conveys strength and stability. This is required to balance your arabesques and ellipses like Vadim Stein's photograph on the right.



Radiating lines

Radiating lines are the branches stemming from a tree trunk. Lines that radiate from a common point on your grid relate the objects together especially when objects share the same line.

By lining up the angles of the subject to radiate from a single point you can create unity and stability, as well as drawing the eye to the central point. This point can be off the canvas or in the canvas.

Examples:
Mary Cassatt 'The Boating Party'
James Draper 'The Kelpie'
Vincent van Gogh 'Self-Portrait'

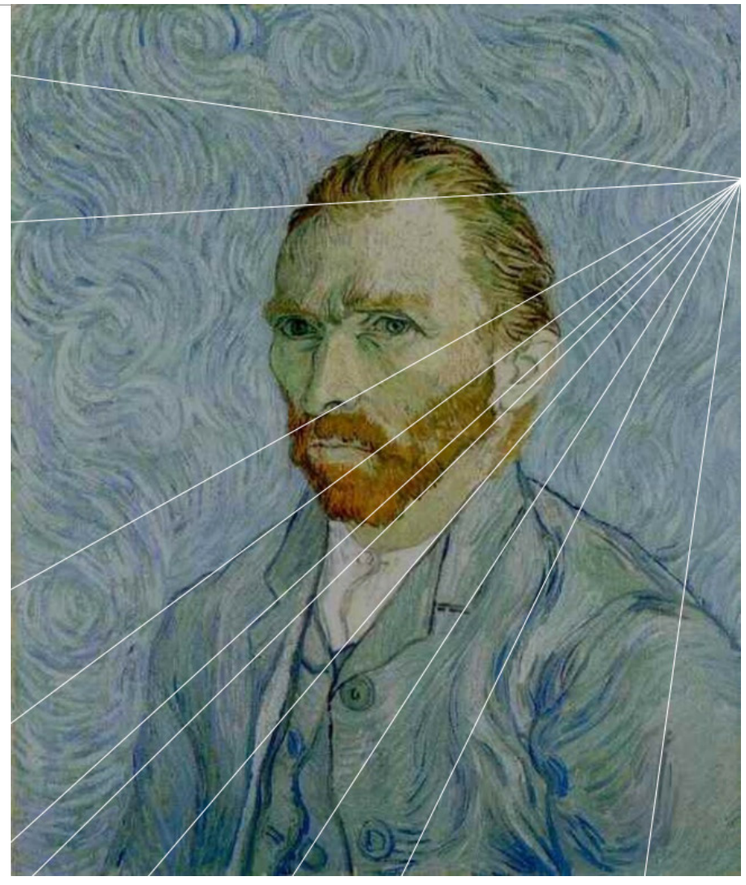


Figure to ground relationship

This is the definition between the subject and the background. The more defined the subject is from the background the easier it is for the eye to view it.
Similarly the body shape, if the limbs are spread apart like the surfer in Toby Harriman's photo the subject has clear definition.
The examples below are highlighted where there is clear definition, you can see that most of the main subjects are defined, using light and dark is the most effective way of defining a subject.

Area of greatest contrast

Light attracts the eye, so be wary where you place the lightest areas if you don't want this to be the focus. Although we can accept things we know to be bright such as sky, sun, a light or lamp, and we then look for the next brightest thing.

The area of greatest contrast is where the lightest light is against the darkest dark. This is the first place the viewer's eye will be drawn. Even a light that is not the brightest will be seen as the brightest if it is in close proximity to the darkest dark (see simultanious contrast).

Below in David Bellemere's photo we are immediately attracted to the models pale face because her dark hair gives the greatest contrast. Notice the highlights on the water droplets are brighter but our eyes do not notice them.

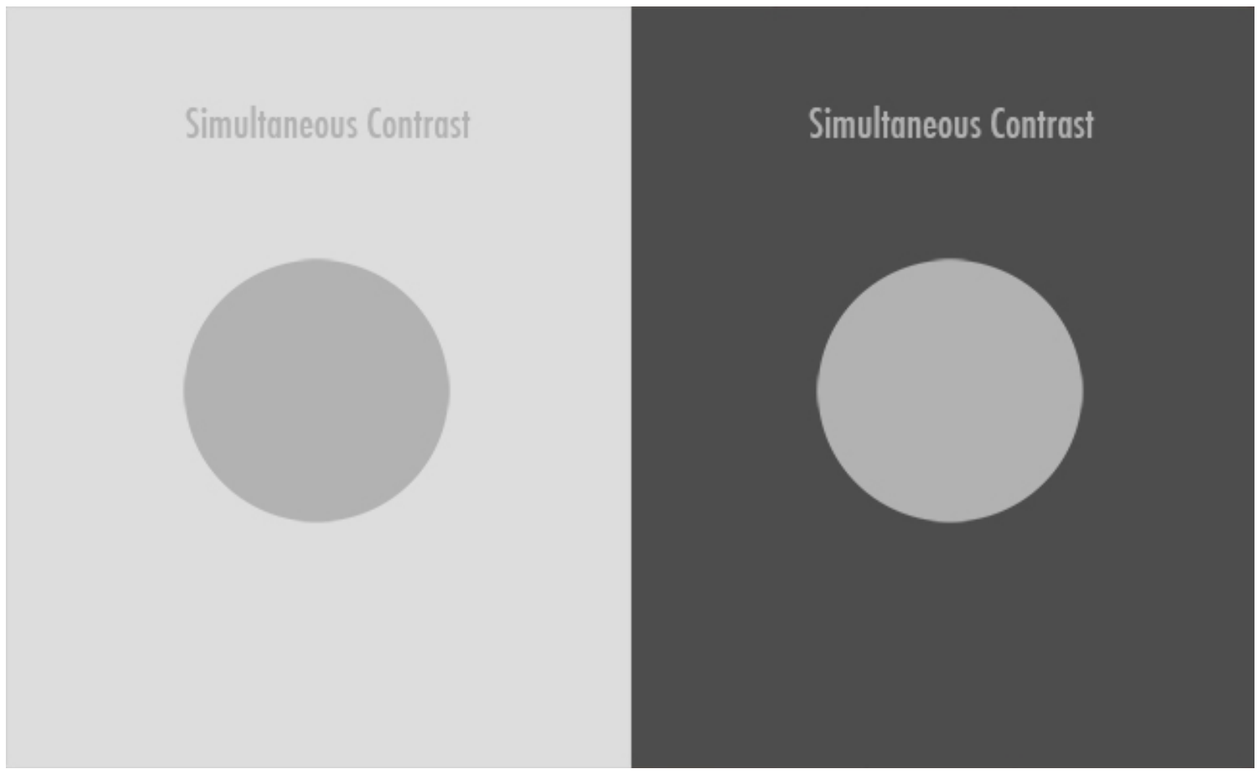
Below right in Annie Leibvitz's shot she uses the light of the water to help create her model's silhouette in high contrast.

Right, is a screen shot from game of thrones, the window is the greatest area of contrast but because our minds accept this as a light source our eyes follow the light to the actress in silhouette.

Simultaneous Contrast

This is about control of light, you can see by the diagram below that the same neutral grey can look lighter or darker depending on what value is placed around it. If you want a light to look lighter, you surround it by darks. If you want a dark to look darker you surround it by lights.

You can see how Patrick Demarchelier has gradiated the background of his photograph to emphasise the light and dark of the dress.



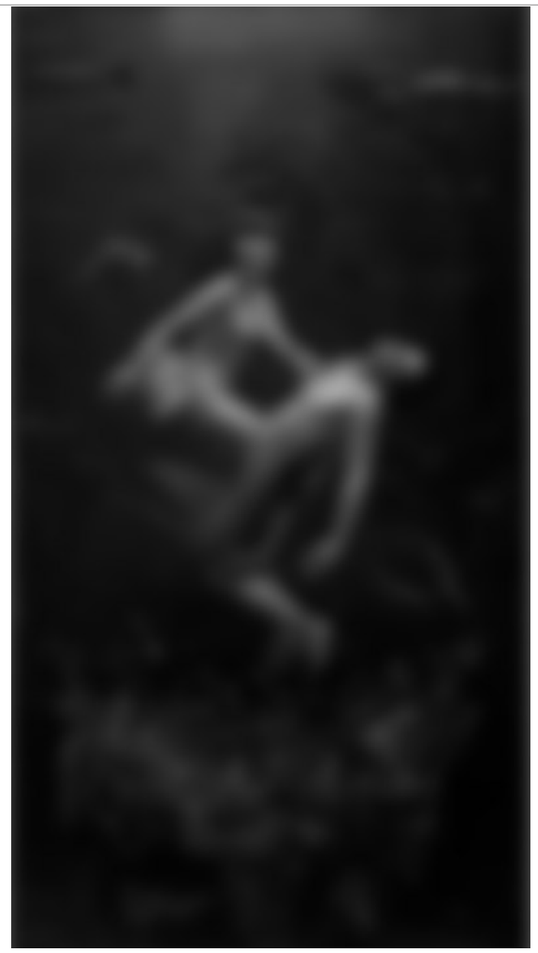
Black and white blur

If you squint your eyes you'll be able to see the distribution of value in your work. This means the value of dark to light and mid tones as well as the proportion of each.

This does not necessarily need to be balanced but should be considered and inform the effect your trying to create.

Arantzazu Martinez (right) has her light value in the centre drawing the eye directly to her subject.

Ruben's (below) has his lightest area in the centre- the man's white robe. He has very dark areas on the right where the horse is, which is balanced with the man on the left with spear. Although these values are not symmetrical like Martinez they still balance.



Edge flicker

This refers to areas of high contrast around the edges of your canvas. High contrast draws the eye so you don't want to have this on the edge of your canvas. Your subject shouldn't have to compete for attention.

The idea is to keep the viewer in the image as long as possible, but when you have high contrast near the edge it creates an escape route for the eye and weakens the composition.

This painting below by Thomas Eakins displays clean, subdued contrasts around the edges. As does the high key portrait to the right.

On the top far right Bouguereau's painting has been adjusted to show the effect of bad edge flicker by increaseing the light areas in the wood, our eye is now drawn away from the subject and out of the frame.

Aeriel Perspective

This is the perception of depth in our atmosphere. This can also be referred to as “Screening” or “Plane Separation.” It is an illusion that we can use to enhance the third dimension.

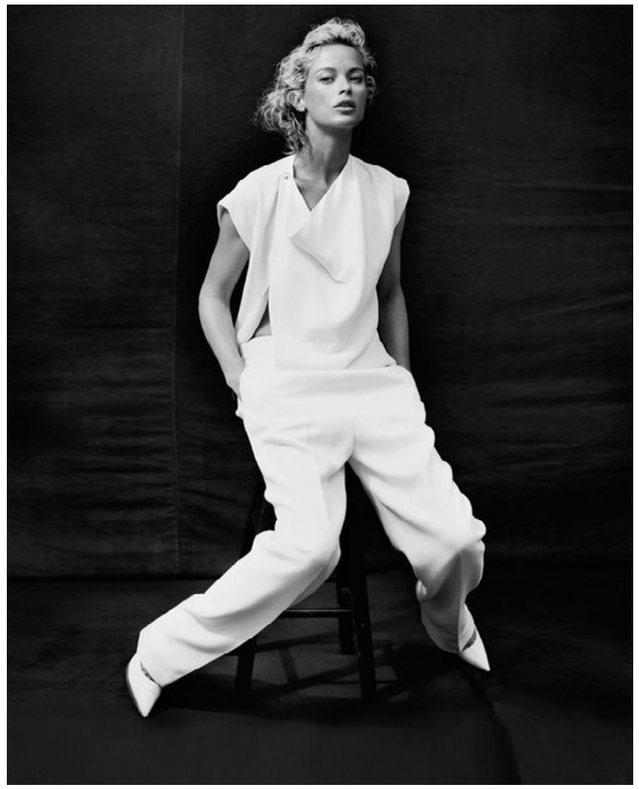
See how the image below by Karezoid Michal Karcz creates staged layers of depth. Fog, mist, rain, dust, snow and smoke are great for this if it fits with your mood.
Kyle Thompson uses fog, Frieke Janssens uses smoke and Tavis Leaf Glover uses water spray, all to create the same effect of aerial perspective.

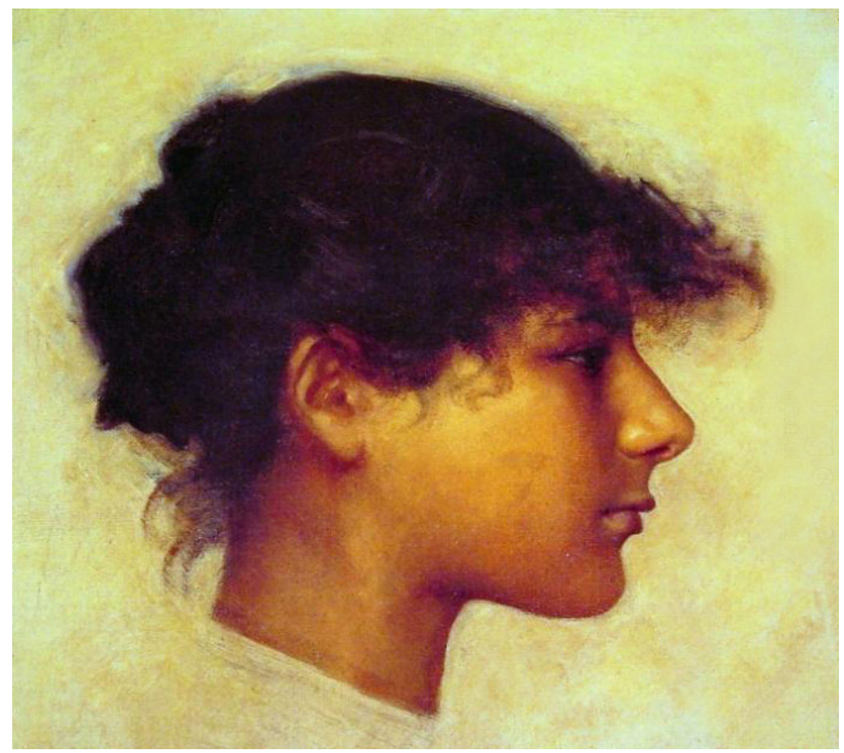
Breathing room

This has to do with gravity, sky and breathing, you may do this naturally in your work but its worth being aware of it. If the frame is too close to your subject it can have a claustrophobic effect and upset the balance. Top to bottom balance is just as important as side to side.

The top example in each has been cropped in a way which interferes with the breathing room.

Examples:
Jean Baptiste Corot ‘Repose’
Vouge photo
John Singer Sargent





Gazing direction

This is the implied direction of your subject's gaze or the way an object is facing.
This horse and cart are facing out of the picture leaving a lot of negative space on the left. If this is not part of the narrative it can leave the picture very unbalanced. You can see by flipping the direction of the horse and cart to face inwards it changes the narrative and draws more attention to the negative space on the left, making the picture more balanced.

Phi calipers

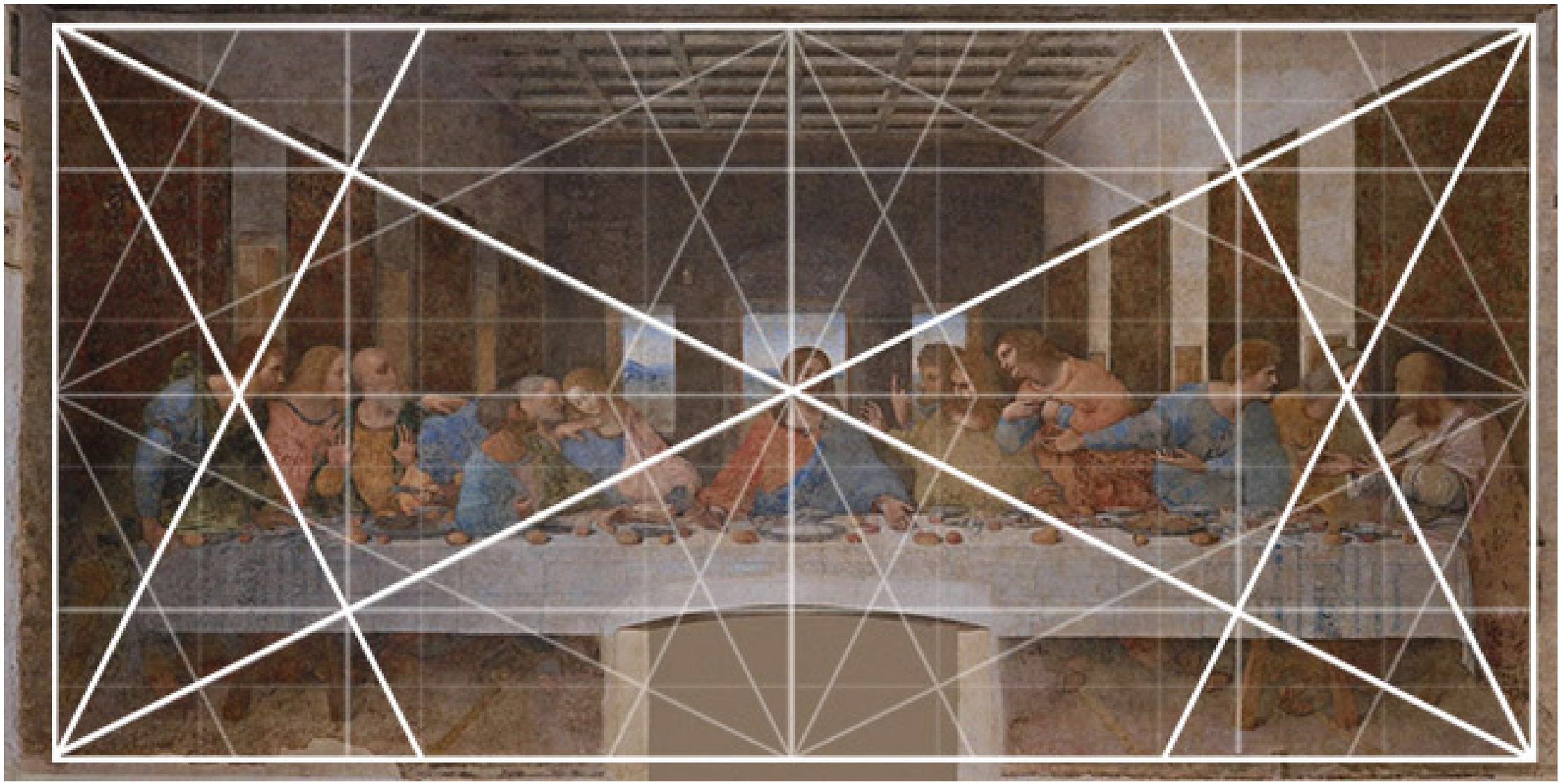
Using Phi calipers is a great way to help create harmonic proportions throughout your painting. It's an old technique that was used by master painters.

The calipers keep the proportion of phi, 1.618, no matter how wide they are, one point to another equals 1, and that point to another equals .618. See how Seurat has used this to design his painting and how often the rule applies.
We have a set in the studio.

Tavis Leaf Glover

This guy is a photographer and composition geek. Go to his site: www.ipoxstudios.com
Most of the information in this presentation has come from this source. He has done a blog for everyday of the year on different compositional techniques and analyzing paintings.
Go to 'The canon of Design' where you will find a number of free articles or become a master pass member to get them all.

There are also links to further reading material as well as videos and websites of related material. Happy geeking!



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4—8 Swan Road
London SE18 5TT UK
Call +44 (0)20 83202122
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