

# Visual Communication

## **LANGUAGE**

The formal visual elements, combined with composition (and possibly a few other things), is the **LANGUAGE** used to visually communicate a message. This is known as **VISUAL LANGUAGE**.

## **NARRATIVE**

The message being communicated is the **NARRATIVE** of the artwork. Think of it as the story the artwork is telling you.

*Narrative symbols* are representations of real world things. These are often used as a part of the overall artwork, to help communicate the overarching narrative.

## **ABSTRACT**

What does a **THOUGHT**... look like; smell like; taste like..? A thought is not a thing - it can't be held, seen, smelled, tasted...

Abstract is thought before we give it meaning and a label. Abstract is not aiming to represent something real.

## **REPRESENTATION**

When you recognise yourself in a photograph on someone's phone, you may say "look, that's me"... Really though, it is not you, it is a **REPRESENTATION** of you.

# Analysis of Artworks

**IDENTIFY** *which* formal visual elements have been employed

**RECOGNISE** the *quality* of the visual element(s)

**EFFECT** speculate what the element(s) would likely make someone *think/feel*

**COMMUNICATE** what *concept* is the artist interested in, and how have the elements been employed to communicate their thinking

**CONTEXT** identify who/what *inspired/influenced* the artist

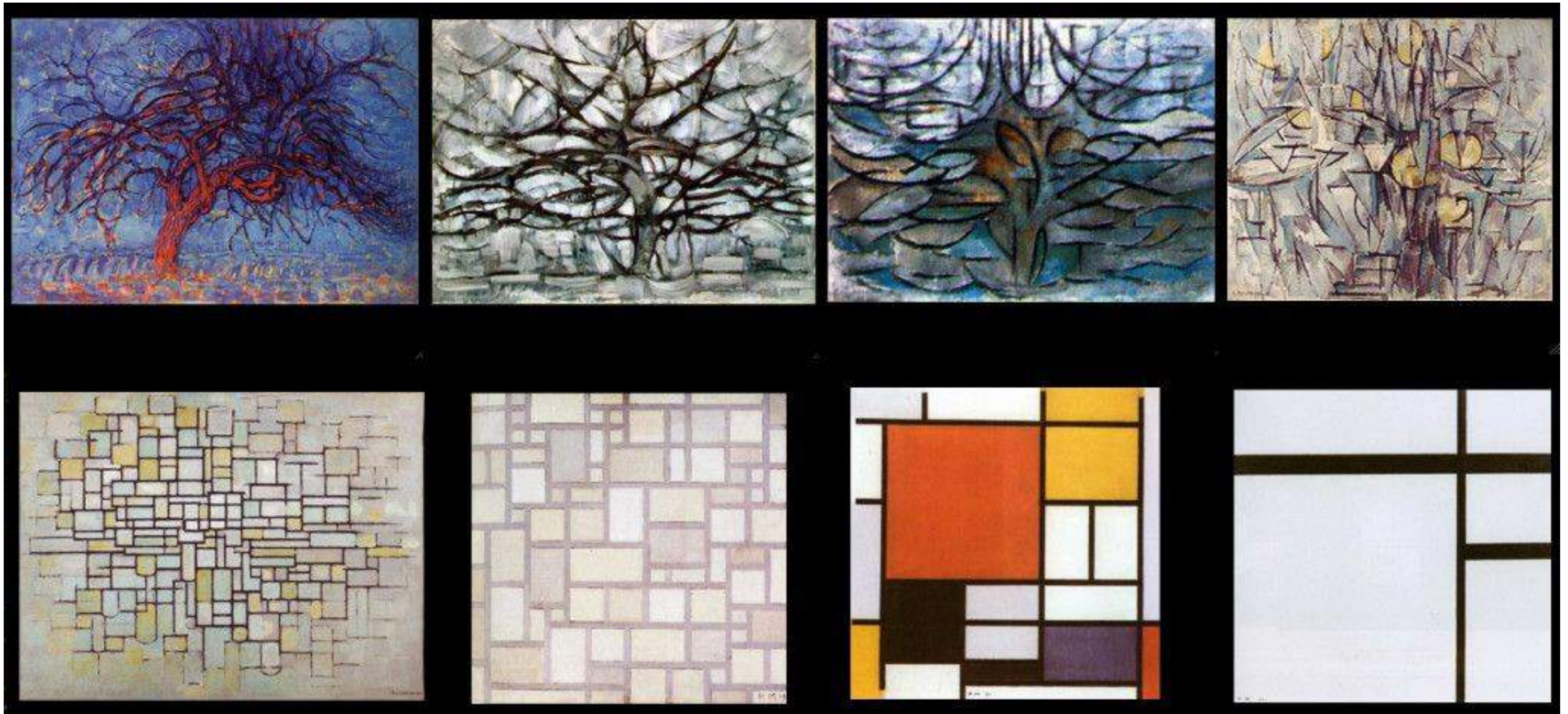
# Contextual Research

**CONCEPTUAL** - Do some research to discover what the artist's intentions were while producing the artwork

**VISUAL** - Analyse how the artist used the formal visual elements, and composition, to create an effective narrative, communicating the intended concept

**TECHNICAL** - Identify techniques and processes used. State why you think the artist made this choice - consider what effect the process has had on the visuals, and how this aids in communicating the narrative

# Abstraction



Piet Mondrian is probably best known for his paintings consisting of geometric lines, separating space into rectangles and squares, which may or may not be filled with planes of flat colour - see example 7 if read left to right in 2 rows. Though abstraction does not intend to depict reality, this series illustrates how there can be many levels of abstraction (all of the given examples are an interpretation of reality - including the first one). If we compare the first and last panels however, it is obvious that the last is entirely abstracted, and bares no resemblance to the reality it has been abstracted from. The painting in the last panel then functions purely on language; the dominant elements being shape, line, and tone.

## Narrative Symbols



Magritte has painted a **representation** of a pipe. In French he writes "*This is not a pipe*". His intention was to make clear the difference between reality, and what is depicted. The picture tells a story - it says 'this is a pipe' - with the text included in the frame, Magritte reminds us that this is *just* a story (or **narrative**). The writing is then correct - it is not a pipe; it is something that **symbolises** a pipe.

## Narrative Symbols



Banksy is now a world renowned artist whose work sells for big money, but it wasn't always so..! His process (how he produces and displays his work) was, and still is, illegal. Using stencils allowed him to produce large images quickly, so as to avoid the police. The language used is then largely led by the process. The process has been led by the necessity to avoid law enforcement.

Banksy uses very representations narrative symbols. He has chosen to use very little abstraction so that the concepts he is aiming to communicate are easily and immediately accessible to the viewer.

In the given example he has employed incongruous\* narrative symbols, juxtaposed\* in the frame. His work often makes comment on social and/or political issues. Some politicians, in favour of the war in Iraq, argued that their intention was to bring peace and stability to the region. It seems likely that Banksy was making comment on the irony of warring for peace.

\*Incongruous - not in keeping with the surroundings

\*Juxtaposed - placed close together

## Narrative Symbols



In the example included, Arnulf Rainer has made no attempt to represent reality - it is not a picture depicting a scene or a thing. Instead his intention is to communicate feelings and emotions through the use of visual language only (having made no attempt to depict a narrative symbol). His rejection of anything representational means that his work is entirely ABSTRACT. He is aiming to EXPRESS feelings and emotions in his work, so this work falls into the category ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM.

Which feelings, moods, and/or emotions being communicated can be somewhat open to interpretation, though most could speculate that the process has been in creating one fairly delicate and small drawing, then painted over with larger, more energetic marks.

Art is precious! It is bought and sold as a commodity/investment by the wealthy elites, and has very great historical value. That the artist has spent time and effort creating a delicate drawing, and has then all but redacted it by overpainting, is significant. In some ways this is an act of destruction. There is a feeling of frenzy in the marks being made in the overpainting; also the dark tones, and desaturated colour could suggest something sinister.

Though this artwork does not employ narrative symbols, the story it tells cannot be ignored; it therefore has narrative, despite being entirely abstract (aside from the artist's signature).

## Narrative Symbols



Marcel Duchamp (the artist) was avant-garde\* in his approach to his practice. The included example is a photograph of one of his most famous artworks, titled 'Fountain'. It is reasonable to speculate that most people would describe an artist as someone who creates artworks. Duchamp caused a stir with this piece, and others like it, as he displayed many 'found objects' as his work. He did not have a hand in creating the artworks themselves. This sparked a fierce debate about whether (as the traditional view would have it) the artist should craft their own artworks.

A debate still continues with many different and opposing viewpoints, but a widely accepted view is that Duchamp was challenging the viewer to think outside of the paradigm\*. In the included example, he has taken an everyday object (a urinal) and placed it in an art gallery context. Within this context, the viewer is already primed to consider what they see both from the perspective of recognising the abstract qualities of the objects (purely focusing on the language of the artefact. Duchamp has gently prompted the viewer in this direction by first changing the orientation of the object (it is not functional as a urinal in this orientation), signing it as if it were a painting, and placing it in a gallery context. When considered purely aesthetically, it is very beautiful!

\*Avant-garde - new and experimental ideas and methods

\* Paradigm - a typical example of something - the 'norm'

## Language Communicates Narrative



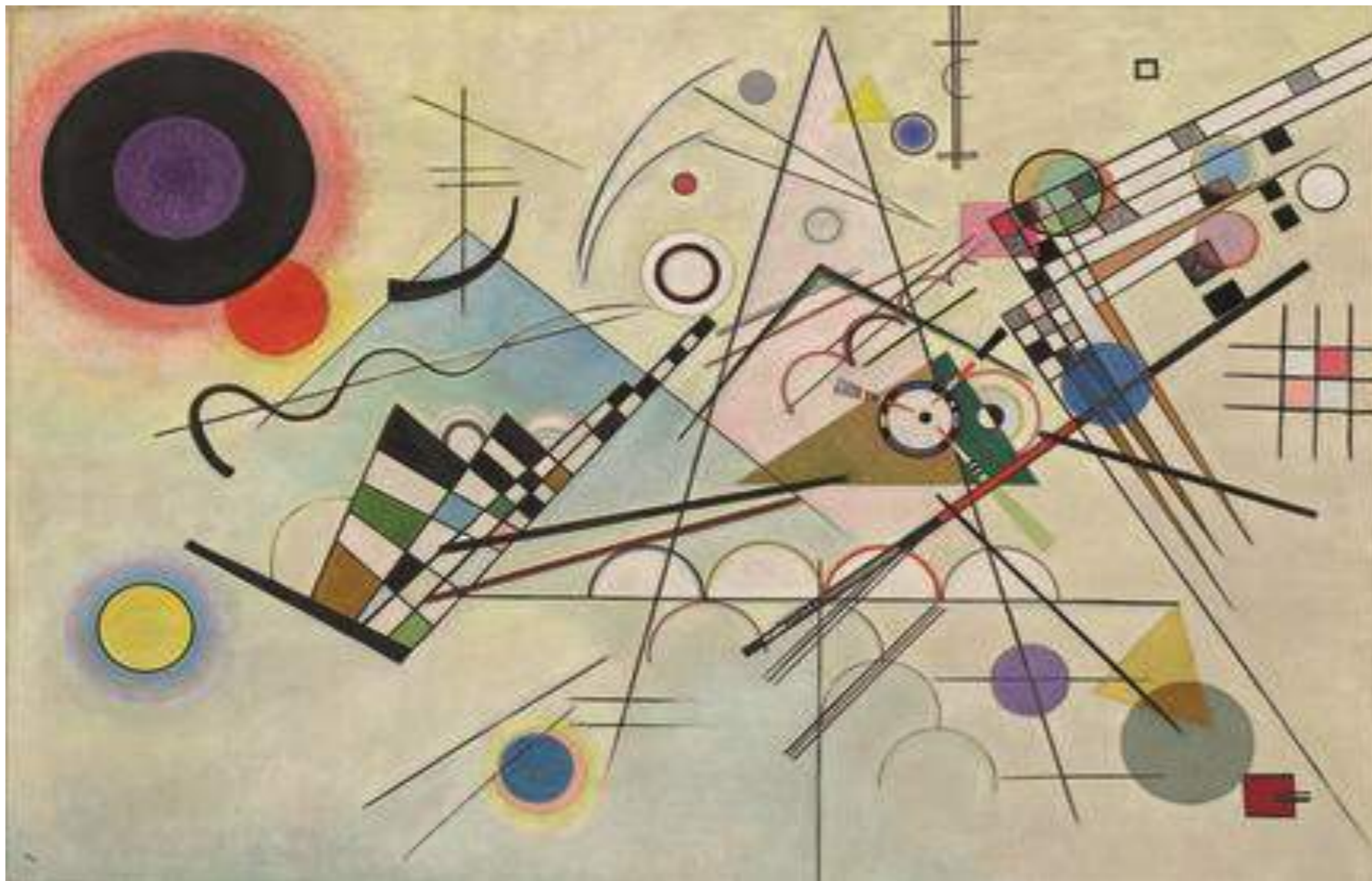
Edward Hopper's work is generally known for depicting isolated figures in a context. Often these figures will appear pensive and reflective. In this piece he has broken from his norm, and has depicted a group of people. However, on closer inspection, this group is disjointed; the individuals appear to be in their own worlds. They are together in a social context, but experiencing the depicted event in apparent isolation from each other. The language used is more typical of Hopper's 'style'; planes of flat colour exist, and the palette is muted (aside from the woman's red dress, ensuring this is the first point of attention for the viewer). The geometry of the context ensures line is employed to separate individual spaces throughout the frame. This is metaphorical of the human narrative depicted; there is separation upon separation, but all within a shared space. The language is mirroring the narrative.



## Contrasting / Analogous

For things to contrast, they must be in relationship with each other, but be strikingly different. For example, black and white are contrasting tones (NB they are in relationship as they are both tones, but they are as different as possible within this relationship); red and green are contrasting colours (they are in relationship as they are both colours, but they are strikingly different visually). Shapes can be contrasting too - a square and a circle are both shapes, but are very different to each other. Contrasts can exist within all the formal visual elements. Often this will create a lively dynamic.

By the same token, all of the formal visual elements could have analogous relationships - analogous shapes, lines, tones, textures, forms, patterns, colours. Things that are in relationship with each other, and are similar to each other as well, are considered 'analogous'. For example, red and orange are analogous colours. A square and a rectangle could be considered analogous. Analogous relationships tend to evoke a more calming atmosphere, or peaceful feeling.



Note Wassily Kandinsky's example (left) whereby both contrasting and analogous relationships are juxtaposed in the frame. This creates a feeling of liveliness within an overall balanced, calm, and harmonious composition.

There are contrasting lines - some straight and geometric, and some curved and organic. There are warm dominant colours used in places throughout (which are analogous with each other), but these contrast the cool recessive colours which tend to recede into the background more.

# Identifying the Formal Visual Elements



The formal visual elements could be likened to the alphabet - they are the building blocks which can be employed to communicate concepts. They are abstract in and of themselves i.e. a road stretching into the distance may form a line, but a line isn't necessarily a road...

A line itself is not a 'thing', though 'things' may be linear. The depiction of a road stretching into the distance has the narrative 'road'. If we forget about the narrative, it is simply a line.

The formal visual elements are more precisely known as the formal elements of visual language. There is then a distinction between 'language' and 'narrative'.

Aside from 'A' and 'I', the letters of the alphabet are not words and have no meaning (or narrative) by themselves - in this regard they are abstract. When identifying the formal visual elements in an artwork, it is very helpful to forget the narrative entirely, so as to view the artwork in abstract terms.

The formal visual elements are:

- SHAPE
- LINE
- TONE
- TEXTURE
- FORM
- PATTERN
- COLOUR

*Andrew G. ...*

## Shape



Shapes are 2 dimensional areas of space. The area is separate and distinct from the area it is surrounded by. Shapes can be created by using line to separate space. As in the example above though, Ellsworth Kelly has used blocks of colours and neutrals to depict a separate and distinct 2 dimensional space.

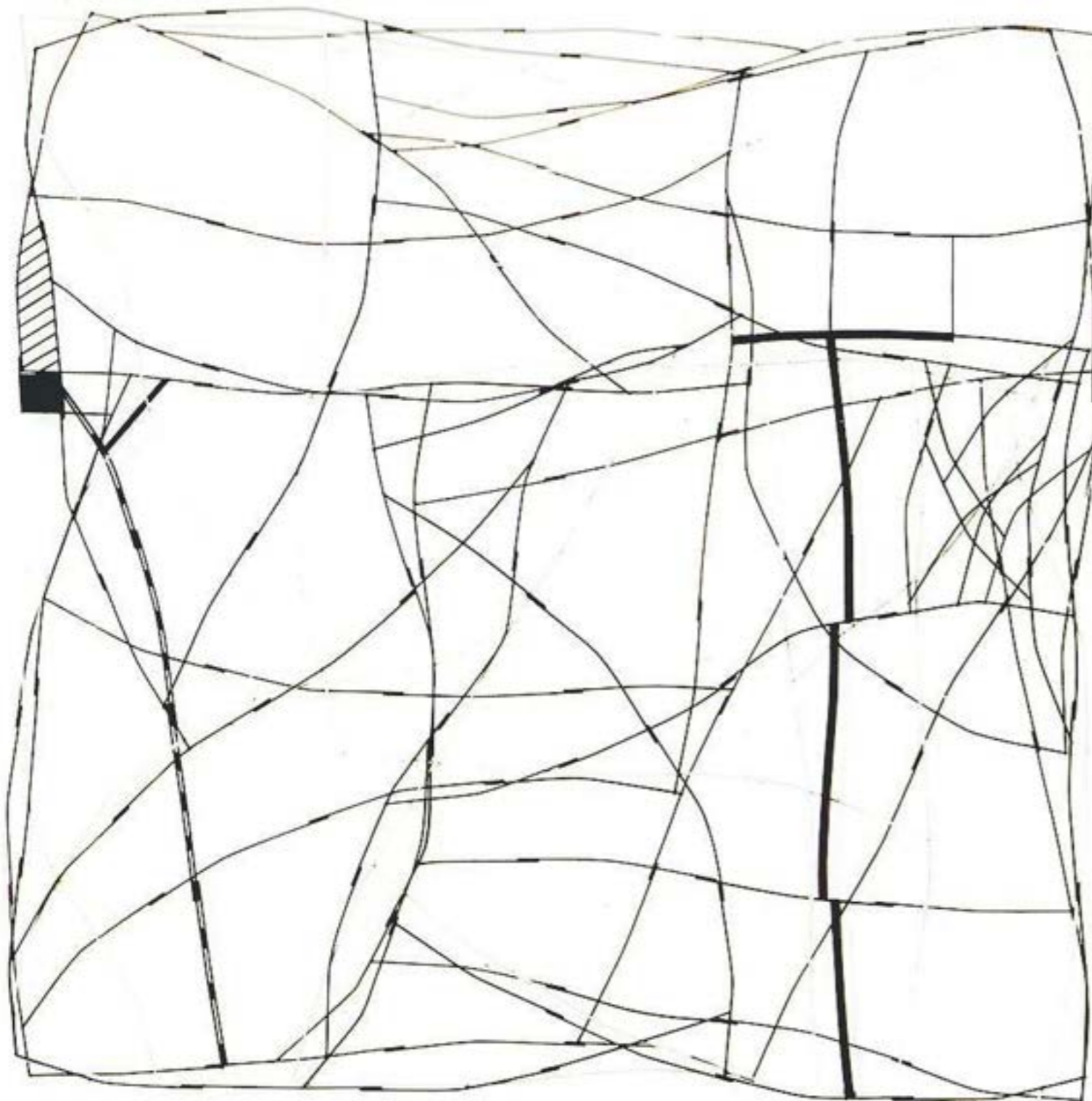
Shapes have similar or different characteristics, like size, colour, positioning. Just like anything else, shapes can be contrasting or analogous, depending on their characteristics. These characteristics will create a relationship between the shapes. Consider the panel on the left and the one on the right in the included example. On the left, the red shape stands out, and appears 'heavier'; this means it is resolved being on the bottom i.e. it appears stable. On the right, the black shape appears heavier than the yellow one; this creates a sense of tension. In the middle panel, the shapes resemble pebbles - if pebbles were stacked like this, they would quickly lose balance. This also creates a feeling of tension.

# Line

What is a line?

What is the function of a line?

What does a line communicate?



Claire-Voile n° 182, 2010, bois peint, 150 x 150 cm. (collection privée)

Paul Klee (example artwork left) answers the first question for us... *“A line is a dot that went for a walk”*. Consider what a line does - it has two opposing functions; it both leads the movement of the eye (bridging areas together), and stops the movement of the eye. The eye will travel with the line, following it. Conversely, a line may stop the eye from travelling, acting as a visual barrier (this allows us to use line to separate space, creating shapes). What a line communicates is very much down to the quality of the line i.e. its characteristics. Consider how strong, heavy, and stable a train is; if we consider a train whilst disregarding the narrative ‘train’, it is simply a line. Comparing this to the line made from cotton thread, we would likely use different adjectives - the thread would be considered more fragile, softer, and lighter. The adjectives we could use indicate the (often unconscious) communication taking place.



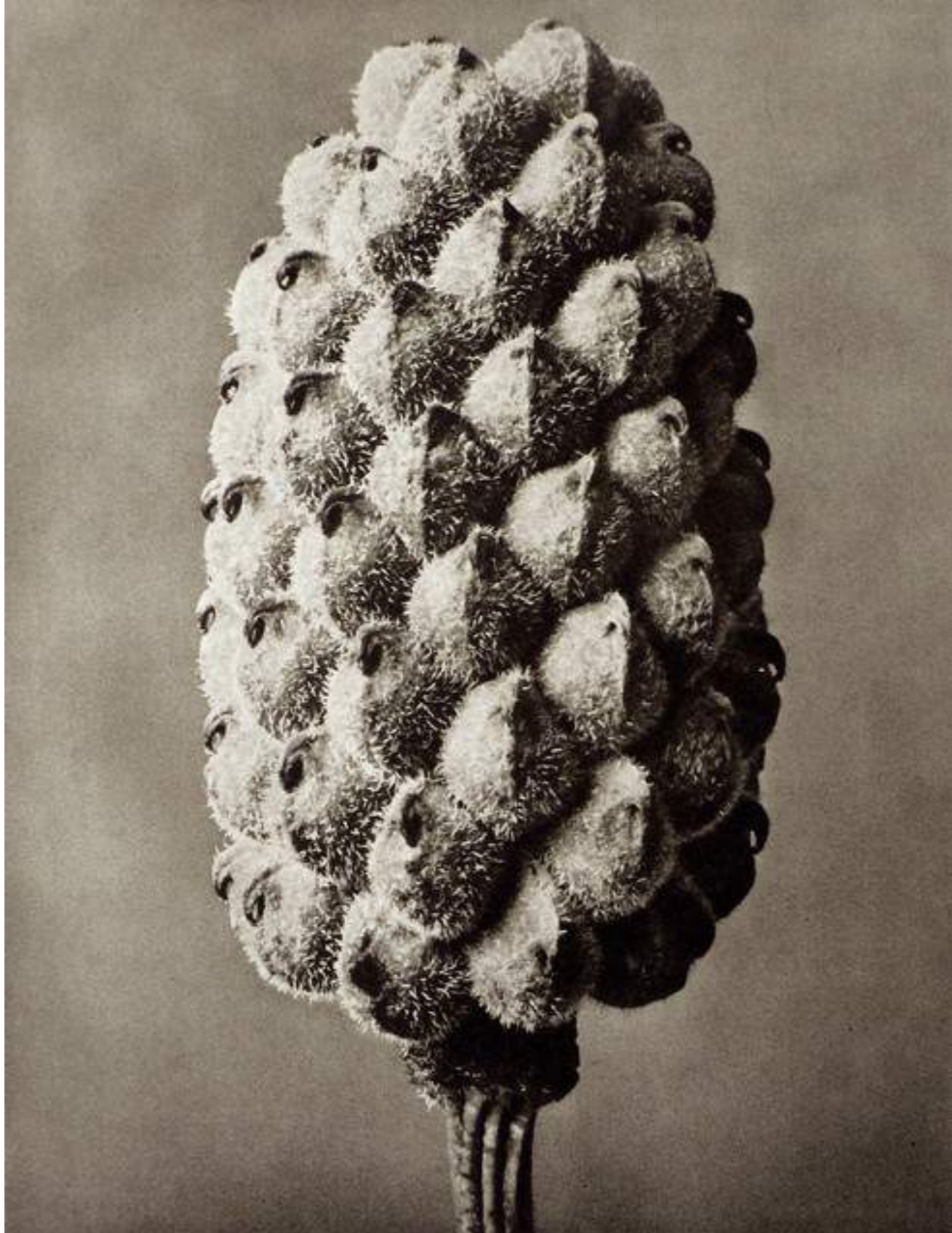
## Tone



Our eyes are sense organs i.e. they sense stimulus from the outside world, and send this information to our brains. Just as our ears sense pressure waves, and translate this into what we call 'sound', our eyes sense a particular frequency of electromagnetic waves, which we call 'light'. There are two different types of information our eyes can tell us about the electromagnetism we sense - how strong is the signal being received (how much light is there); what is the frequency of the electromagnetic wave (what colour it is). We have different cells in our eyes for detecting the two different signals - **rods** detect how strong the signal is; **cones** detect the frequency of the electromagnetic wave. Considering only the signals from the rods (we'll cover colour later), if there is no light detected, our brains translate this information into seeing black. If there is so much light our eyes are overwhelmed, this will be translated by our brains as seeing white. Anywhere in the middle will be translated as grey. In visual language, these three states are known as shadows (black), mid-tones (greys), and highlights (white). The nature of these tones in visual practice can change the abstract communication quite drastically.

In the example of the left, Edward Weston has gone to a great deal of effort to ensure that the tones have a gradual transition, creating a calm and serene aesthetic. In the middle example Robert Longo has partially posterised the tones (meaning there are jumps from flat planes of tone). On the right, Banksy's piece is fully posterised - there is quite a drastic jump between shadows and highlights (creating a sense of liveliness and action [going with the narrative]).

## Texture



This Karl Blossfeldt photograph is a depiction of a plant. The photograph has two dimensions—width and height. Depth is depicted very effectively, however. Through the use of directional light, creating shadows, mid-tones, and highlights, we can get a strong sense of this plant's form.

First we can read the overall form i.e. the plant as a whole, and its cylindrical nature. Then we can pay attention to the individual segments, making up the overall form. Investigating further still, we can note the hairs or prickles on the surface of the plant.

It is likely that you are familiar with the word 'texture' and have a good understanding of its meaning. In the context of visual language, it is not much different from its colloquial use. Consider some adjectives for the surface texture of this plant. Whether it was in your real life experience, or in this photographic depiction, these adjectives would be likely to be the same.

In the context of visual language, some deeper questions are asked however e.g. what unconscious feelings or associations is this texture likely to raise within the viewer? In this case, the small hairs/spikes are likely to be considered less comforting and inviting, and closer to the opposite.

## Form

Included is an example of one of Barbara Hepworth's artworks. Though this is an accurate depiction of the sculpture, we can only have a limited understanding of it from this photograph - we cannot walk around it, feel the surfaces, examine the materials, get an accurate perception of the scale... This is because this depiction is 2 dimensional (it only has width and height [not depth]).

A 'form' is 3 dimensional i.e. a circle is a 2 dimensional shape, whereas a sphere is a 3 dimensional form.

Forms can be contrasting and analogous. Consider the overall egg shape; it is rounded, substantial in volume, and appears solid and robust. A void exists within it however, but this space is filled with apparently fragile lines. These two elements of the artwork are contrasting. In this way, the piece is dynamic - our minds move between considering the solid, robust structure, and the fragile one it contains.

There is a resolved ratio of different textures, and proportion of differing forms. The white of the inside is in relationship with the external portion of the sculpture. The 3 dimensional volume removed from the overall form is an amount that does not appear to risk the structural integrity of the piece, so there is not a sense of drama or tension as there would be if the piece looked so fragile it was likely to collapse under its own weight.



## Pattern



The photograph above depicts a crowd of photographers, however one stands out. In the bottom left is the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (HC-B). He stands out in this image as he breaks the pattern. The other photographers are depicted as a group, and due to their visual similarity, they are read (visually) as one mass. HC-B breaks the pattern in this image by being visually quite different. He is depicted at a larger scale, and, balding, he is differentiated from the crowd. HC-B's photograph (left) has a definite sense of rhythm. The human figures depicted are in their own small groups, and have similar dress. In the foreground (bottom left), one stands out. She is breaking the pattern, carrying bread. Once we have studied the stand-out figure, we apply this learning to the rest of the similar figures. This shortcut that our brains take means that we do not have to work hard to understand the image, thus it has a calming effect.



## Colour



As stated in the 'Tone' section, colour is our brains' interpretation of the frequency of electromagnetic waves reaching the photosensitive cells in our eyes. Different frequencies mean different colours. For reasons not yet fully understood, colours have relationships which we find more and less pleasing.

Some colours stand out more, and some appear to retreat into the background. Warm colours are dominant, so will appear more intensely in our vision, attracting more of our attention. Cool colours are recessive, so do the opposite, appearing to withdraw to the background.

In Henri Matisse's 'Icarus' (left), the blue of the background is very vibrant and bold, so though it is a cool colour, it is in balance with the yellow, which is a brighter tone, and slightly more de-saturated. The much greater area the blue covers, also adds to these colours being in balanced harmony.

Black, grey, and white are not colours (they are called neutrals). The black figure is the main subject of the narrative; central in the frame, and dominating the composition as one singular shape. Yet it has the feel of being negative space, as if the figure has been cut out of the background, rather than placed on top of it.

As the figure has created a shape, and therefore is separating space, it has framed the relatively small red dot. Because this red dot is in separated space, is not part of a pattern (as the yellow shapes are), and is a very warm dominant colour, it is the single element which calls for the greatest focus of attention from the viewer. The artwork is very cleverly balanced!

# Composition

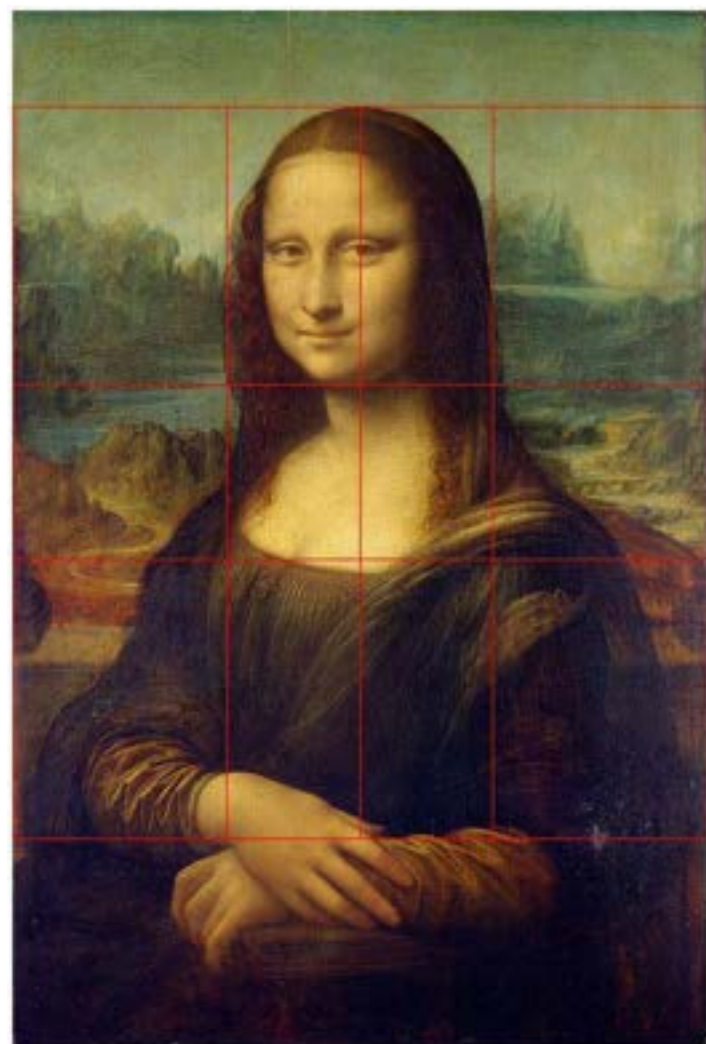


## Rule of thirds (left)

To apply the rule of thirds, the artist will imagine the frame divided into thirds vertically, and horizontally, creating a grid pattern as shown in the example by J M W Turner. Note that there are four points where the lines cross over each

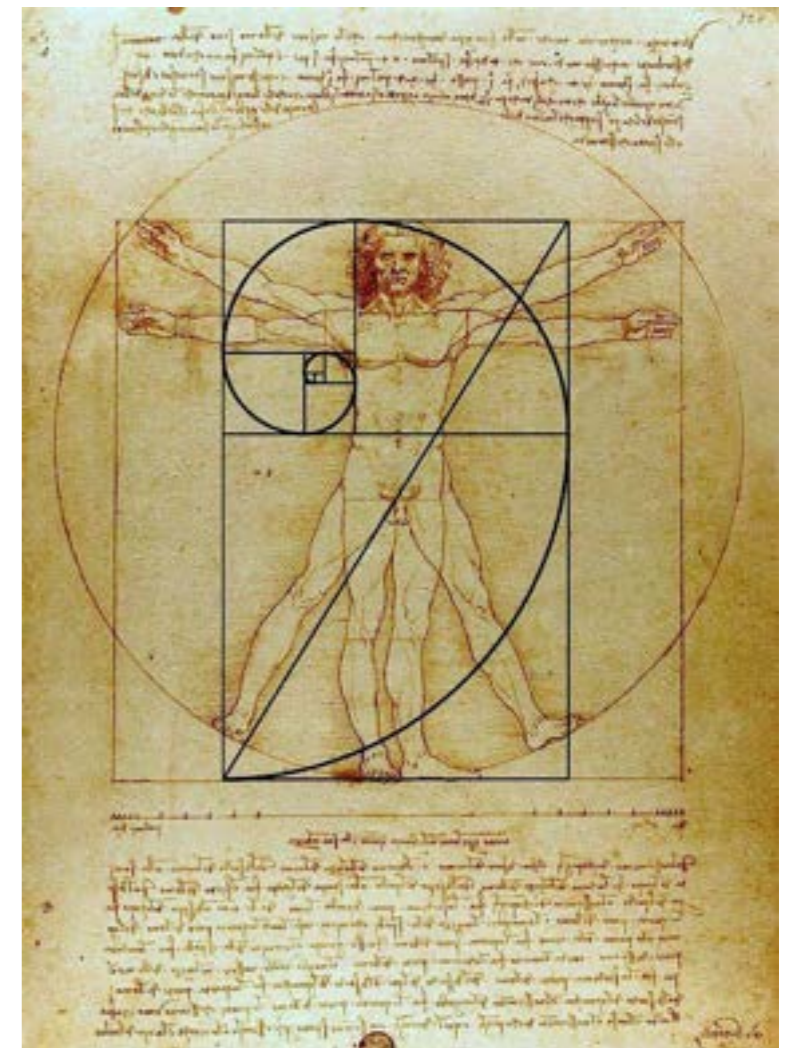


other (or intersect); these are called intersecting points. To conform to the rule of thirds, an image must place important focal points on or near one or more of these intersecting points. Also consider the lines themselves - the horizon is very close to one.



## Phi $\phi$ (left and right)

Phi is a mathematical term for a particular ratio. 2:1 is a ratio which could be applied to the rule of thirds, but  $\phi$  is more complex. It is relevant to composition in art is because it is both culturally significant (having been used and studied in many works or great art and architecture), and significant in philosophy, mathematics, biology, science. It is otherwise known as the golden section, or golden mean. The proportions of this ratio can be found throughout nature - trees, sea shells, vegetables, and throughout the human body, as illustrated by the Leonardo da Vinci examples included. The 'golden rectangle' is found in many ancient Greek artefacts.



# Composition



## **Leading lines (left)**

In this example (thought to be a Salvador Dalí), the line is the focal point of the piece. Its red colour and bright tone attract the eye. However, as lines lead the eye, it draws attention to the dark shape. Notice the black line which depicts the shadow; it is performing the same function - drawing the viewers' attention to the dark shape. Notice too, the negative space between these two lines - it forms an acute triangle pointing toward the dark shape.

Although the initial focal point of this piece is the red line, it could easily be argued that the dark shape is actually the main focal point, especially considering there are a number more lines leading to it - the painting depicts a wall with peeling paint; where the edges of the colours of the wall change are lines too.

## **Colour—warm dominant / cool recessive (right)**

In this painting by Claude Monet he has chosen a composition where the vast majority of the scene is filled with cool, recessive colours. In contrast to this, the sun is depicted as a red dot.

Warm colours stand out (or are 'dominant'); cool colours fall away into the background (or 'recede'). Monet has ensured that the main focal point of this piece is the sun, due to the colour contrast.

Note the red line depicting the reflection of the sun on the water - it guides the viewers' eye toward the figure on the boat in the depicted foreground.



# Composition

## **Dynamic tension (left)**

In this artwork Umberto Boccioni has employed an aesthetic typical of the Futurist style he was working within. The many lines lead the eye - there is a distinct feeling of movement (or dynamism) in the piece. The viewer's eye is led out of the frame in different directions; there is then a conflict in the viewer's attention, creating a sense of tension. There is then a fair argument for the use of dynamic tension in this piece.

Dynamic tension, however, often requires a central focal point from which the viewer's eye is led out of the frame (see right). It could be argued that Boccioni's artwork has a central focal point (the central bright 'X' shape); presuming this were the case, this artwork would conform to the definition of 'dynamic tension' - a number of features drawing the eye out of the frame, in contrasting directions



## **Simplification (right)**

In this example, Van Gogh has filled the frame with the main subject matter, ensuring there is nothing distracting or competing for the viewer's attention. For context, he has included a horizon line, ensuring the vase does not appear to be floating in space, but there is nothing else aside. The background is then considered 'negative space'.

Negative space can also be used in markedly different proportion to the main subject, but since it is apparently empty, there is still nothing competing with the main subject matter for the viewer's attention (see left).

To create a composition employing simplification, simply ensure there is nothing which distracts from the main subject matter in the frame.



## Composition



### **Frame within a frame (left)**

Henri Cartier-Bresson has chosen this hole in the wall to frame the human figures in this photograph. The line created by the dark bricks of the otherwise bright wall has been used to ensure a separate and distinct space within.

The very outside of the photograph is the first frame; the space created within this frame is another frame.

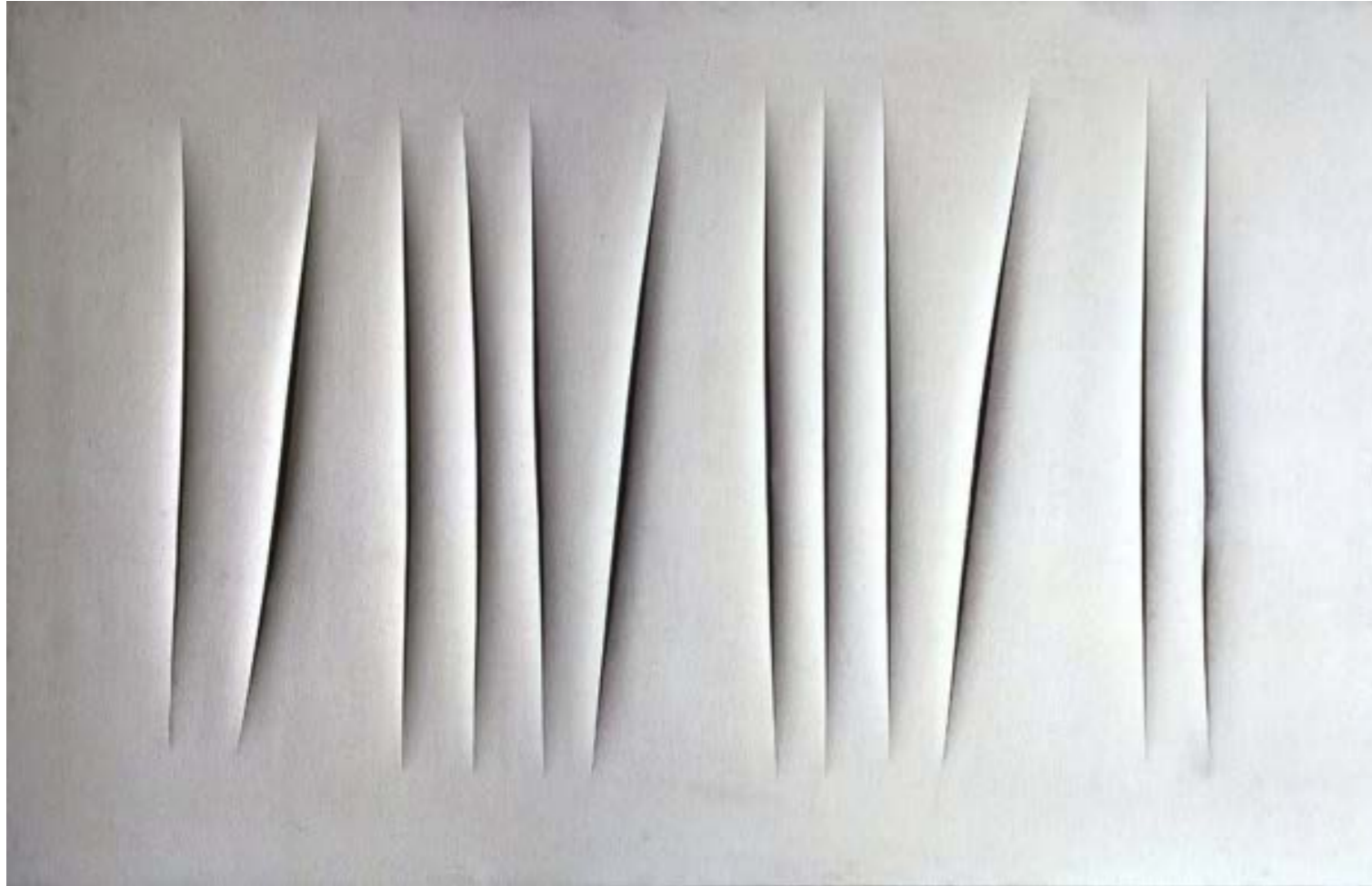
Note the figure on the very bottom right of the picture. All of the other figures are inside the frame created by the line; the boy in the bottom right is framed within his own space too.

### **Negative space (right)**

Consider the immediate narrative of this photograph by Arnold Newman. The most immediately recognisable narrative symbol is the man in the bottom left; aside from him, there initially appear to be little else other than abstract shaped of different tones. If we take the man to be the subject of the photograph, then the space around him is the negative space (negative space is the area around the subject). In this case though, the negative space is largely filled by the lid of a grand piano (the man is famous pianist Igor Stravinsky).



# Composition



## **Rhythm (left)**

Rhythm and pattern have a close relationship. In this artwork, Lucio Fontana has broken the surface tension of the canvas by cutting it several times. The cuts are very similar to one another, so there is a clear pattern in the piece, but it is the choice of placement of the cuts which ensures a very clear sense of rhythm to the piece. Consider the spacing of the cuts. Consider too, the groupings and their relative proportions 2:4:4:2; there is a clear rhythm to them. Also consider the negative space, and how the eye methodically moves left to right with the 'beat'.

## **Symmetry (right)**

In this painting, Georgia O'Keefe has chosen to position the skull in the vertical centre of the canvas. The natural symmetry of the skull is immediately apparent. She has chosen to paint a near symmetrical background also, with both sides of the canvas appearing to mirror each other on first glance. However, upon closer inspection, there are a great many notable differences on the two sides of the frame. This then ensures the overall work is asymmetrical. Our brains have to take short cuts to make sense of the infinite information they are flooded with. If something was perfectly symmetrical, then our brains would have the perfect opportunity for a short cut - analyse one half; apply the learning to the other. This piece creates tension as our brains will initially attempt a shortcut, but will then have to expend more effort looking for the asymmetries.

