

sure. You then determine the size and placement of this form on the drawing surface to accommodate all remaining information that you wish to incorporate into your composition.

These initial steps in starting your drawing are important ones and have a significant impact on the end result. If these initial steps reflect accurate sighting and good decisions on your part, it will help you to move further along in your drawing with greater ease. In addition to sighting for relative proportions, you will begin to utilize the second and third applications of sighting as your drawing progresses.

## The Principles of Composition: Theory Versus Application

Composition is an intricate and often complex issue. Whether considering music, literature, theater, or the visual arts, composition plays a significant role from its most basic to its most sophisticated application. A strong and sensitive awareness of composition is vital to the creation of a work that is unified. While some

contemporary artists are specifically and legitimately interested in subverting traditional paradigms of art making, you must first understand rules or traditions in order to successfully subvert them. The ways in which an artist expresses concern for compositional elements can make or break a piece of music or literature or visual art. A successful composition is more than visual organization, ultimately enabling an artist to successfully convey content and meaning. And it is only with a command of composition that an artist can consciously explore alternatives to the generally accepted canons of composition.

It is one thing to understand the concepts behind the development of sound composition and another thing altogether to be able to apply these concepts successfully. Oftentimes compositional principles are discussed only in abstract or theoretical terms, and exercises in the application of these principles (particularly in two-dimensional design courses) may be limited to the use of abstract elements such as circles or squares or swatches of color or texture. This is a valid approach for the study of composition at an introductory level, but you must also understand the *application* of these principles at a more concrete level. How do these principles apply to a composition involving a still-life arrangement, a portrait study, an urban or rural landscape, a figure in an interior space, a figure in the landscape, an abstract image, and so on?

Bear in mind that an understanding of the principles of composition and their application should ultimately extend beyond the abstract and the theoretical. You must recognize the application of these principles in work from a variety of visual art disciplines that utilize concrete, recognizable imagery. Numerous works by widely recognized artists provide excellent examples of the principles of composition in practice. In addition to the great Renaissance and Classical masters, a number of contemporary artists' work provides strong and interesting examples of different applications of compositional principles in relation to a variety of subject matters. Examples of work by contemporary artists who explore composition in a variety of ways can be found throughout this book.

Too often composition is a point of focus in an introductory design class but is not given significant consideration in your subsequent course work, where the emphasis may be on a particular media or technique or subject matter. Make composition an integral



**Figure 1-23.** Student work. Rebecca Marsh McCannell. Marking the repeated head width across the drawing surface and the repeated head height up and down the drawing surface helps to locate the position of forms more quickly in relation to the unit of measure.



part of your concerns at every opportunity. Theory is one thing, application is another.

Following are some key concepts considered to be basic to the study of composition and its application. Use them as a guideline in creating, analyzing, discussing, and critiquing your work, the work of other students, and the work of historical and contemporary masters.

## REVIEW OF SOME SIMPLE DEFINITIONS

**Composition:** The way the component parts (the formal elements) of a work of art are arranged in the given space. How the formal elements are arranged not only determines the strength of a composition but also is essential in conveying and supporting content or the communication of idea and meaning.

**Elements (formal elements):** The elements include point, line, plane, shape, form, mass, volume, texture, value, color, positive space, and negative space

(Figure 1-24). The elements are those things in a composition that are tangible individually or as a group, regardless of subject matter or style. The elements are the basic building blocks for a realistic work of art or an abstract work of art.

**Positive space:** The figure(s) or object(s) or tangible thing(s) in a composition. Sometimes an object can be both positive and negative, depending upon its relationship to other tangible things in the composition.

**Negative space:** The “empty” areas; the space that exists between, around, and behind tangible forms and in part defines tangible forms. Negative space is as significant in a composition as positive space. Tangible forms may act as negative space to other tangible forms (Figure 1-25).

**Format:** The given space in which a work of art is composed; the relative length and width of the bounding edges of a drawing surface, such as 18" × 24". Format, in part, controls the composition (Figure 1-26).

**Figure 1-24.** Student work. Jamie Hossink. This thumbnail study shows concern specifically for the arrangement and distribution of shape, volume, texture, value, and positive and negative space.







**Figure 1-25.** Richard Diebenkorn, American, 1922–1993, *Untitled*, 1962. Ink and graphite on paper, 17 × 12½ inches. (43.18 × 31.75 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased through anonymous funds and the Albert M. Bender Fund. © Estate of Richard Diebenkorn. Because of Diebenkorn's thorough attention to both the figure and the environment within which the figure is located, many tangible forms function as both positive and negative space. The bed, for example, is both negative space to the figure and positive space to the wall and other information behind it.





**Figure 1-26.** Student work. Gypsy Schindler. A variety of formats are explored in these compositional studies of a still life of keys, scissors, and paintbrushes.

## VISUAL PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

The visual principles of composition are concepts or ideas that become evident by examining the arrangement of the elements of composition. Principles come into being through the placement and arrangement of the elements, by the implied action of the elements, and by the artist's intent to build visual and conceptual relationships among the elements.

**Balance:** A feeling of equality or equilibrium in the weight or emphasis of various visual elements within a work of art. Balance can be symmetrical, nearly symmetrical (approximate symmetry), or not symmetrical (asymmetry). Simply, think of the visual weight or relative importance of the elements used in the composition.

**Harmony:** A consistent or orderly arrangement of the visual elements of a composition creating a pleasingly unified whole. Simply, think of *recurring similarities* in the elements used, such as recurring line, recurring value, recurring color, recurring shape, or recurring texture (Figure 1-27).

For creating harmony, consider the use of repetition, rhythm, and pattern.

**Repetition:** In repetition, some visual element(s) are repeated, providing stepping stones for our eye to follow.

**Rhythm:** Rhythm is the orderly repetition of visual elements or repetition in a marked pattern, which creates flowing movement.

**Pattern:** A two-dimensional application of rhythm or repetition, such as the repeated motif in a wallpaper or textile design.

**Variety:** Variety is the complement or counterpart of harmony, introducing change, diversity, or dynamic tension to the recurring visual elements of harmony. Simply, think of *recurring differences* in the elements used, such as differing line, differing value, differing shape, differing size, differing texture, differing color, and so on.

**Emphasis/domination:** The development of focal point(s) created through some type of contrast or difference such as contrast of value, contrast of color, or contrast in the degree of development or definition (Figure 1-28). You can also isolate a form to create emphasis.

**Movement/directional forces:** The development of primary and secondary visual paths of movement. It is helpful to keep in mind the basic notion that influences our visual priorities. Our eyes are inclined to try to join together things that are the same or similar in some visual way. If, for example, there are a number of instances of a particular shape in a composition, our eye will move back and forth between those repeated shapes in an effort to group or organize or bring them together. The same idea holds true for textures, values, and the like. Repetition of similar elements is key to creating visual paths of movement (Figure 1-29).





**Figure 1-27.** Odd Nerdrum, Norwegian, *Girl with Twig*, 1991. Charcoal on lambswool paper, 48 × 39 inches. Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection: Purchase, Collectors' Group Fund. 1991.042.002. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/BONO, Oslo. Nerdrum uses recurring shapes/edges throughout his composition to create visual harmony. The curve of the twig, which is significant in the title of the work, is repeated in the contours of the landscape, in the curve of the cloth, in the contour of the breasts, and in other places.



**Proportion:** Consider the proportion (relative size or amount) of one compositional element to another—proportion of dark values to light values, proportion of large shapes to small shapes, proportion of rough textures to smooth textures, proportion of foreground space to background space, proportion of positive space to negative space, proportion of near elements to far elements, proportion of stable shapes or masses to unstable shapes or masses (Figure 1-30).

**Economy:** Economy involves the idea of sacrificing detail for the sake of unity. Consider how you are interpreting what you see, particularly in the negative space or background information. You don't have to include everything you see—you can simplify or edit.

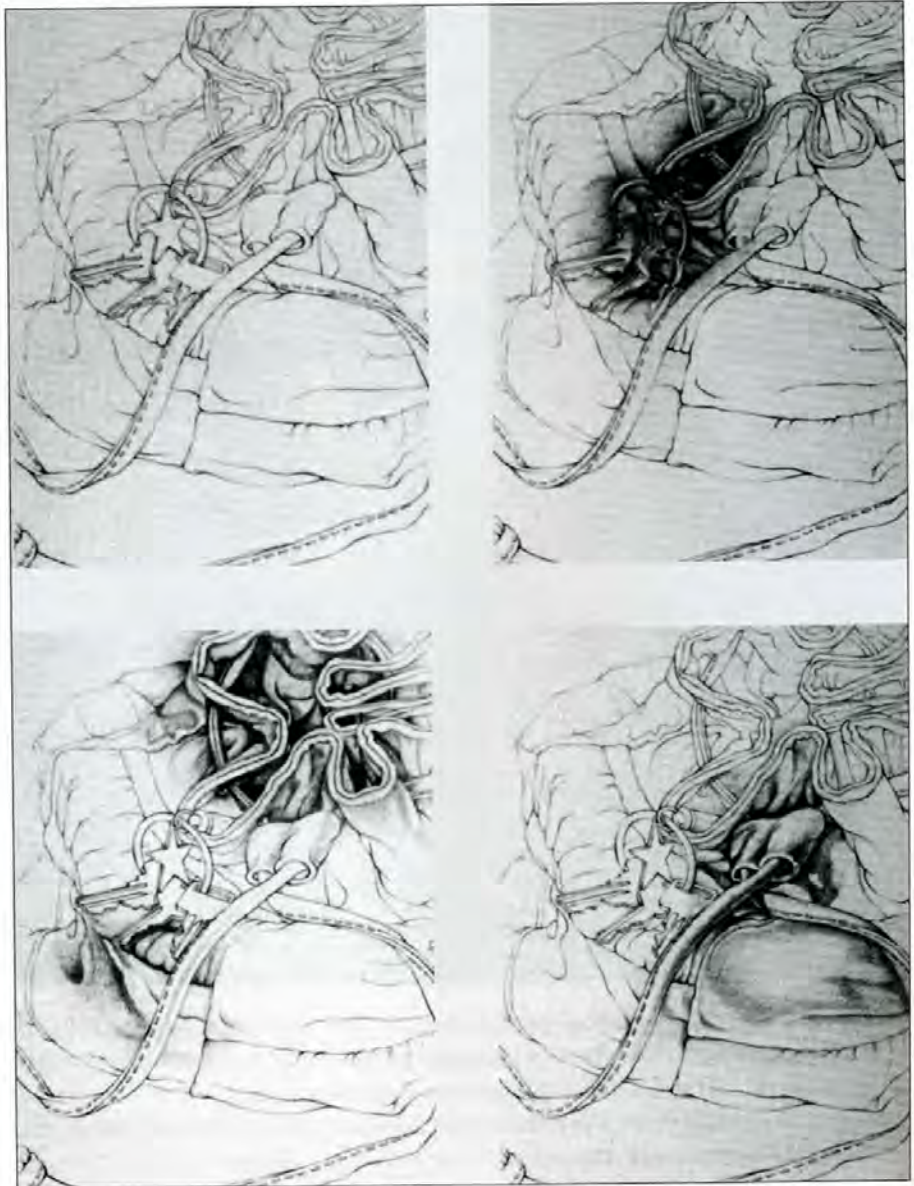
Whether your interpretation of positive and negative space or background information is literal (based on actual visual information) or nonliteral (based on invention), consider the option to edit or simplify the composition (Figure 1-31).

**Unity:** Very simply, does it all work together?

### VARIABLE COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

Variable compositional elements address indeterminate factors to be considered when composing or designing a drawing. There is no right or wrong way to consider these variables. What is important is to be aware of these variables as they relate to the elements

**Figure 1-28.** Student work. Vickie Marnich Reynolds. This drawing investigates four different compositions created by shifting the tonal focal point in each individual study of a fabric bag with a drawstring top.

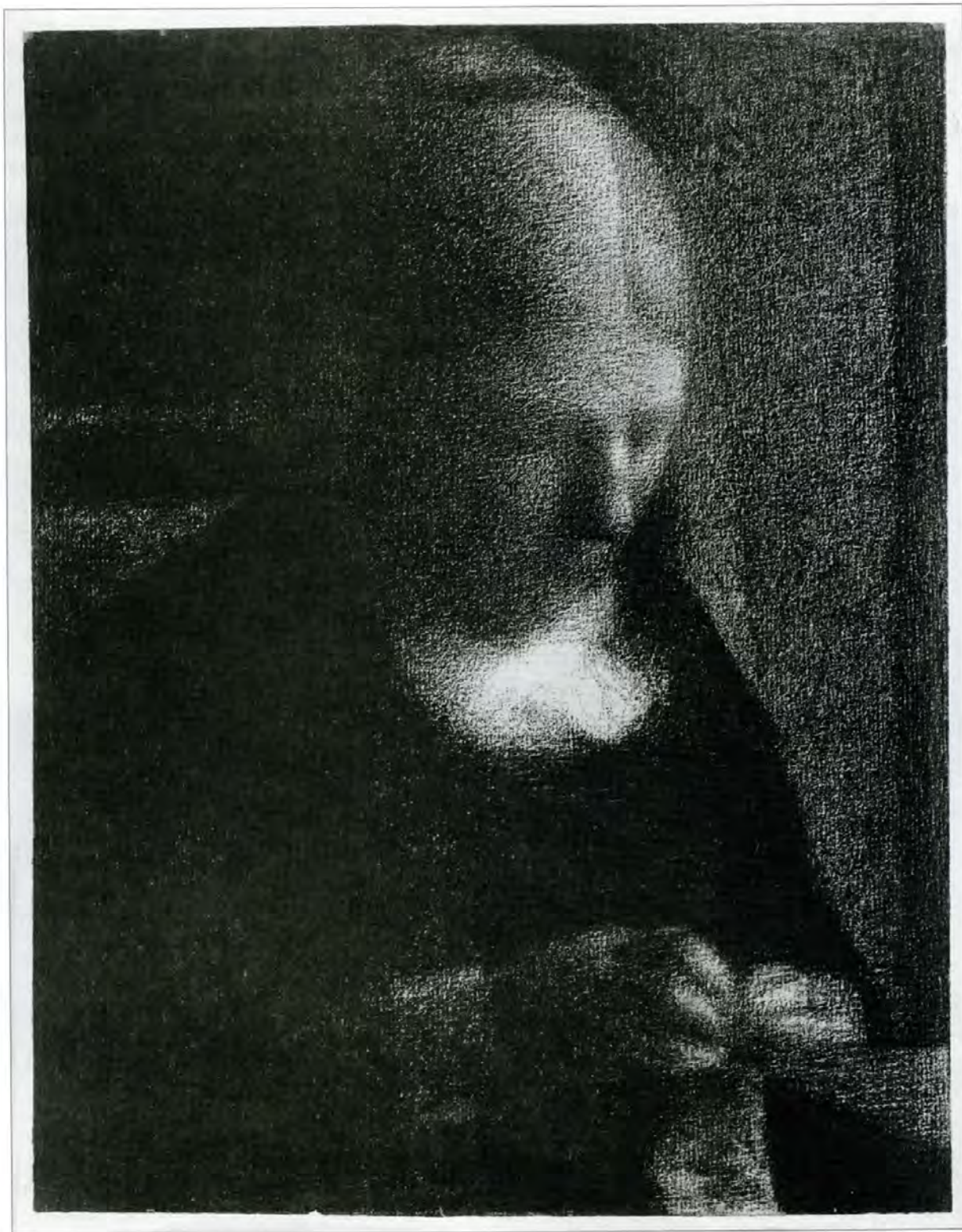






**Figure 1-29.** Richard Diebenkorn, American, 1922–1993, *Still-Life: Cigarette Butts and Glasses*, 1967. Black ink, conte crayon, charcoal, and ballpoint pen on wove paper, 13<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Diebenkorn, in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art. Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. © Estate of Richard Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn repeats rectangular shapes of various sizes, oval and round shapes, and slender elongated shapes throughout this still-life study to create a number of primary and secondary visual paths of movement.





**Figure 1-30.** Georges Seurat, French, 1859–1891, *Embroidery; The Artist's Mother*, 1882–1883. Conte crayon on Michallet paper. 12 $\frac{3}{16}$  × 9 $\frac{7}{16}$  inches (31.2 × 24.1 cm). Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1951; acquired from The Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection (55.21.1). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY. In this image of the artist's mother, Seurat appears to be considering the proportional relationship of dark to light shapes, large to small shapes, and background to foreground area. The limited areas of strong light on the face, chest, and hands help to emphasize her concentration on the act of sewing.



and principles of composition and to recognize that you have choices and that you control these variables to help you achieve desired results.

**Size:** Large or small, long or short, size is relative. For example, a long line appears even longer when juxtaposed with a short line, and a small shape appears even smaller when seen next to a large shape.

**Position:** The primary positions of forms or objects in space are horizontal, vertical, and diagonal. In a given format, the positions of forms can be changed in relation to one another. The relation of one form to another may be parallel, perpendicular, diagonal, overlapping, end to end, and so on. The position of forms can be changed in relation to the total format as well.

**Direction:** When the position of a form implies motion, it is thought of as moving in some direction. The direction of movement can be up or down, side to side, on a diagonal, toward or away from you, back and forth, over or under, and more.

**Number:** A single form may be repeated, added to, or multiplied any number of times. A form can occur once in a composition or many times.

**Density:** The density of a form is determined by the number of units within its area. The units may be close together or far apart. By increasing the density of a form, we can increase its visual weight or its visual energy. For example, by massing a number of lines (units) closely together, a dense shape or form may be implied. If those same lines are spaced farther apart, the density of the implied form decreases and it carries less visual weight.

**Interval:** The interval is the space between forms. There can be equal intervals, unequal intervals, small intervals, large intervals, progressively smaller intervals, progressively larger intervals, intervals forming a pattern, and so on.

**Proximity or nearness:** The nearer forms or shapes are to each other, the more we group them together. Individual shapes can have enough proximity to create a totally new shape by their tendency to group together.

**Similarity:** As forms or shapes correspond to one another in shape, size, direction, value, texture, color, or some other characteristic, we perceptually tend to link or pull them together (Figure 1-32).

## USING A VIEWFINDER: WHAT DOES IT DO FOR YOU?

- Your viewfinder is your window to the world, blocking out visual distractions and helping you to focus your attention on what you are drawing, in much the same way as the viewfinder of a camera.



**Figure 1-31.** Student work. Amy Bailey. By keeping the negative space sparse and economical, Bailey focuses our attention on the subject of this powerful self-portrait.

- Your viewfinder reflects your actual drawing format in the same proportions. (Example: an 18" × 24" drawing format is proportionately reflected in a 1½" × 2" viewfinder, each having a ratio of 3:4).
- Your viewfinder binds and gives boundaries to your negative space, defining specific shapes and allowing you to observe these shapes outside of and around the major forms that you are drawing (Figure 1-33).
- Your viewfinder provides constant verticals (along the left and right sides) and horizontals (along the top and bottom) against which to compare observed angles.





**Figure 1-34.** Student work. Gypsy Schindler. Even though the figure is primarily vertical in this seated position, the student uses a horizontal format to allow for exploration of the forms in the space around the figure.

one corner to the opposite corner of any rectangular shape and extending it allows you to then scale up the rectangle or scale down the rectangle by building any larger or smaller rectangle that also utilizes the same corner-to-corner diagonal (Figure 1-38).

## GENERAL GUIDELINES CONCERNING COMPOSITION

### Pay Attention to Both Positive and Negative Space

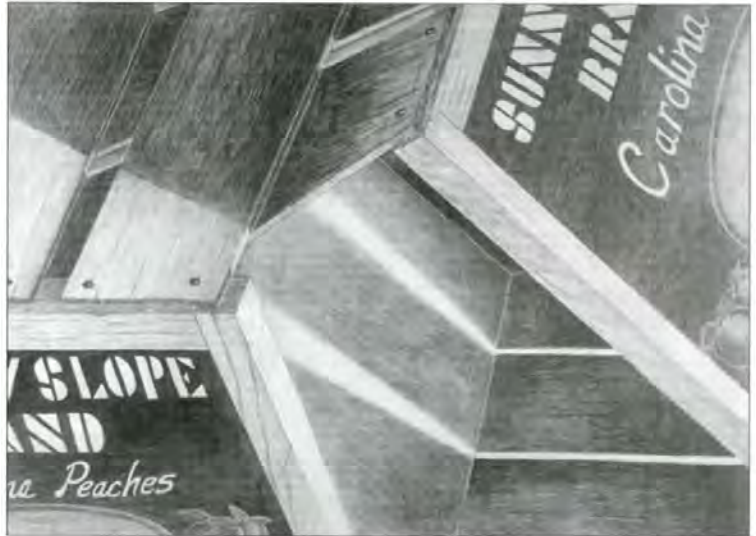
Think of positive and negative space as puzzle pieces locking together, sharing the same edges, dependent upon one another. Would a cup still be a cup without the negative or empty space inside of it?

### Consider How the Forms Occupy the Format

The forms that you are drawing can dominate the format in terms of size, which creates a natural division or break-up of negative space into tangible and identifiable shapes (Figure 1-39). The forms can be smaller in the format, forcing greater attention to the development or activation of negative space (Figure 1-40).

### Watch General Placement of the Forms

- Consider directional thrusts and visual paths of movement—think of them as stepping-stones that lead you through the composition. Elements that are similar to each other in some way are visually attracted to one another, creating implied visual paths of movement (Figure 1-41). The eye will

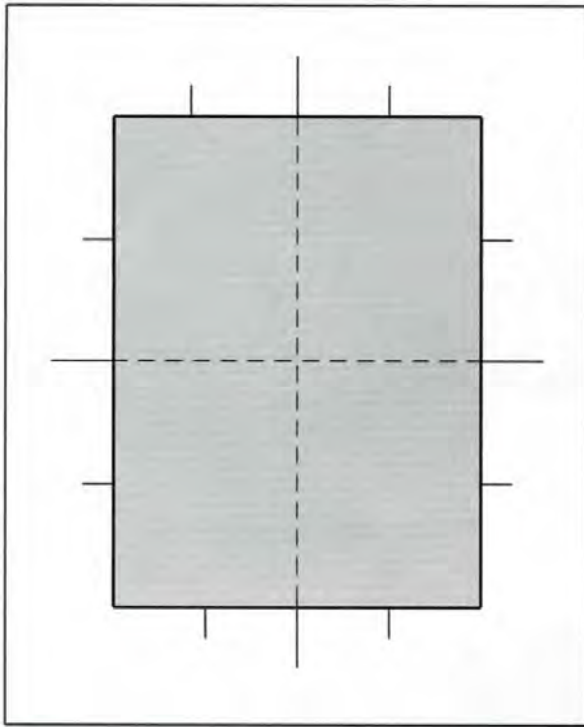


**Figure 1-35.** Student work, University of Cincinnati. Elizabeth Reid. A close-up and cropped view of peach crates provides an interesting and somewhat abstract composition.

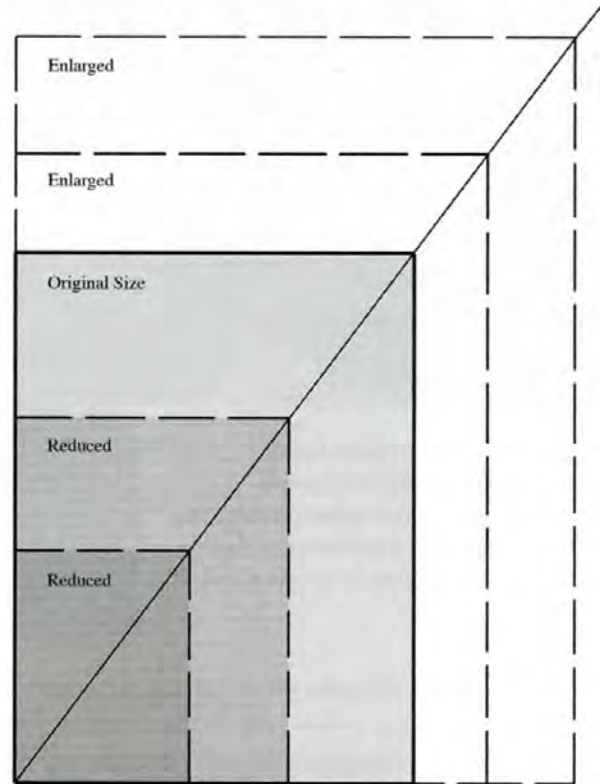


**Figure 1-36.** Deborah Rockman, American, *Dark Horse No. 5*, 1981. Colored pencil and charcoal on paper, 10 × 8 inches. Collection of Carol Fallis. The use of a viewfinder helps to reveal an interesting and somewhat ambiguous view in this figurative composition. The human form takes on a different character when aspects of the form are isolated from the rest of the body.





**Figure 1-37.** The toned area of the viewfinder indicates the window or opening through which you view the subject you are drawing.



**Figure 1-38.** The lightest toned area indicates the original rectangle that has been proportionately reduced and enlarged using a corner-to-corner diagonal.



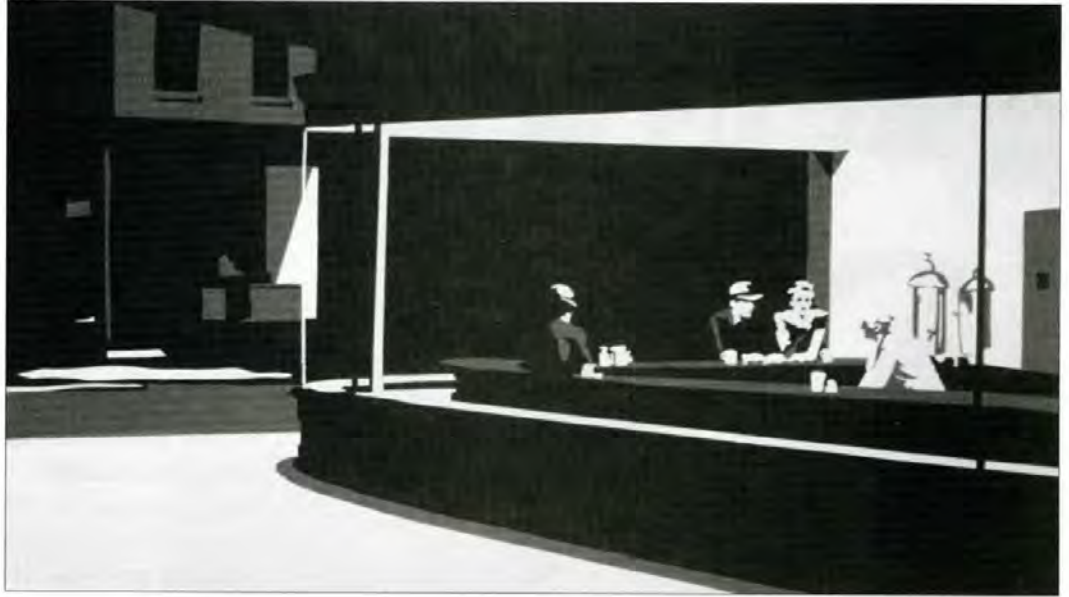
**Figure 1-39.** Student work. The view of the plant is such that it dominates the composition, moving off the top, right, and left sides of the drawing surface. As a result, the negative spaces around the plant are more clearly defined and are emphasized by assigning value to the negative shapes rather than to the positive shapes.



**Figure 1-40.** Student work. The smaller scale of the figure in this thumbnail study requires that greater attention be paid to the space around the figure in order to more fully activate the composition.



**Figure 1-41.** Student work (after Edward Hopper). Dave Hammar. The recurring values of white, gray, and black; the recurring rectangular shapes; and the recurring vertical elements help to create visual paths of movement.



**Figure 1-42.** Student work. Erik Carlson. One consideration in placing the figure closer to the right side of the page is the visual weight of the figure's gaze as he looks toward the left.

move back and forth between them in an effort to join them together. Provide room in your placement of objects for movement to occur.

- With the human figure as subject matter, consider psychological directional thrusts—the direction of the gaze of the figure carries visual weight. Consider this in the placement of the figure (Figure 1-42).
- Be aware that similar or like forms (shapes, values, textures, patterns, colors, etc.) are attracted to each other and the eye will move back and forth between them in an effort to join them together (Figure 1-43). How are they distributed throughout your format? What visual path of movement are you encouraging in the viewer?
- Avoid “shared edges”—the edge of an object and the edge of the paper should generally not be the same for any duration, as this creates an ambiguous spatial relationship. Individual forms should not share edges with one another if spatial clarity is desired.
- Consider outermost contours in terms of sound or movement—quiet versus loud, active versus inactive. Give these outermost contours the appropriate amount of room they need to breathe and move (Figure 1-44).





**Figure 1-43.** Student work. Jack Snider. In this compositional study, there is careful consideration for the distribution of repeated values and textures as a way of encouraging visual paths of movement through the composition.



**Figure 1-44.** Student work. Michael Moore. The main forms of this still life are shifted slightly to the left of the composition to account for the handles of the spatula and pans thrusting into the space on the right.

- Consider whether the shapes inherent in the objects you are drawing thrust out into the surrounding space or remain close to the major mass. How does this affect both placement and scale (Figure 1-45)?
- Avoid cutting your composition in half. Avoid cropping forms at points of articulation (where two parts come together) or cutting forms in half. If cropping, strive for an unequal and dynamic division such as one-third to two-thirds or two-fifths to three-fifths (Figure 1-46).

### Consider the Kind of Space You Wish to Establish

Consider vertical, horizontal, and diagonal paths of movement (both actual and implied), and be aware of the role they play in establishing different kinds of space in a composition—shallow, deep, ambiguous, and so on (Figure 1-47). When vertical and/or horizontal elements dominate a composition, they reinforce the two-dimensionality of the surface being worked on, seeming to move across the picture plane from side to side and top to bottom (Figure 1-48). When diagonal elements dominate a composition, they reinforce the suggestion of depth or space, seeming to move into the picture plane (Figure 1-49).

### Consider Viewpoint in Your Composition

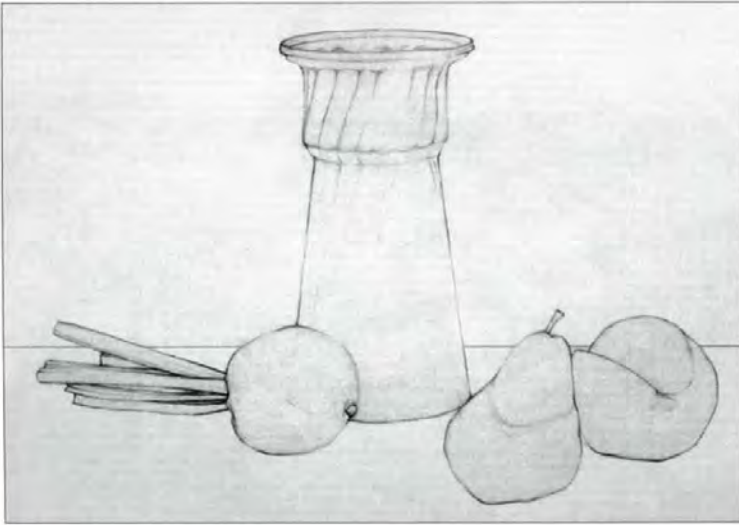
Don't assume that the most obvious viewpoint is the best viewpoint. Alternative and unusual viewpoints offer visual excitement and an element of the unexpected. Try viewing your subject matter from a position well above or well below the subject matter, looking down or looking up (Figure 1-50). Try viewing your subject matter from off to one side or the other, rather than approaching it from a direct frontal view.

Consider the position or location of your light source, exploring unusual directional light sources—try lighting your subject matter from below, from the side, from above. Notice how the information changes (especially patterns of light and shadow) based upon the direction of the light source (Figure 1-51).

### Consider Options for the Development of Negative Space or Environment

- You can respond to the actual information before you, editing what seems unnecessary for your compositional or expressive needs (Figure 1-52).





**Figure 1-45.** Student work. Emily LaBue. In establishing compositional placement and scale of forms, the stalks of the beet extending to the left in this simple still life must be considered in relation to the self-contained nature of the other forms.

**Figure 1-46.** Student work. Jody Williams. In this cropped study of the figure, notice that no forms are halved by the edges of the composition or cropped at a point of articulation.



**Figure 1-47.** Student work (after Edward Hopper). Ralph Reddig. The combination of strong diagonals and vertical elements that diminish as they recede (creating implied diagonals) pulls the viewer into and through the limited space of the train car's interior. Recurrent shapes and values support the visual movement through the composition.

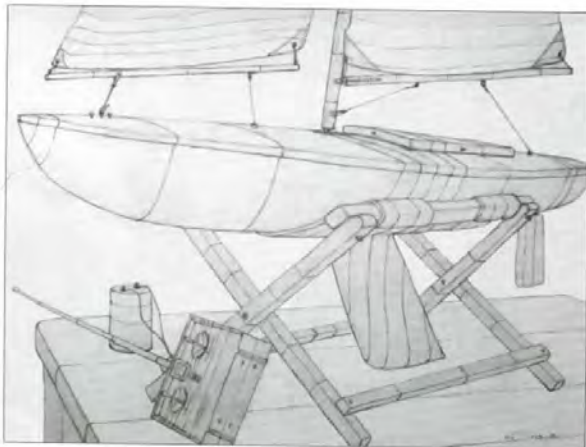




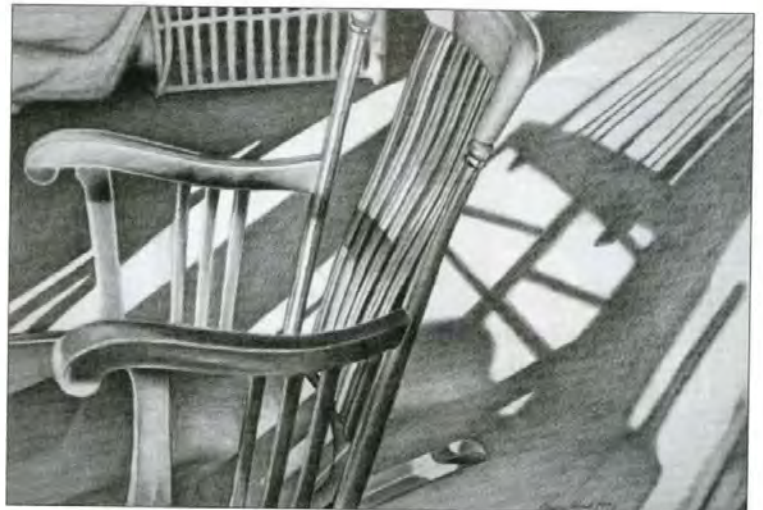
**Figure 1-48.** Student work. Gypsy Schindler. Even though the figure is a three-dimensional form, the strong repetition of vertical and horizontal elements serves to reinforce the two-dimensionality of the drawing surface in this composition.



**Figure 1-50.** Student work. Nik Macaluso. In this psychologically charged drawing, the viewer is positioned well above the subject, observing the unfolding scenario from an omniscient perspective.



**Figure 1-49.** Student work. Scott Luce. Numerous diagonals in this composition suggest depth or space. Viewpoint is an important consideration because the same subject viewed from a different vantage point would provide a number of horizontal elements.



**Figure 1-51.** Student work. Gypsy Schindler. Because of directional light, compositional arrangement, and viewpoint, this drawing is as much about the beautiful patterns of light and shadows as it is about the rocking chair itself.





**Figure 1-52.** Michael Mazur, American, 1935–2009, *Her Place #2: Study for Closed Ward Number 12*, 1962. Brush and pen and brown ink on paper, 16¾ × 13 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Bertram Smith. Courtesy of the Estate of Michael Mazur and Mary Ryan Gallery, New York. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Mazur maintains a highly simplified negative space to focus our attention on the stark figure of the singular woman.





**Figure 1-53.** Student work. Andrea Helm Hossink. The negative space behind the figure is subdivided into rectangular shapes in response to a wall and a small faceted column.

- You can respond to the actual information before you as a reference for the simple geometric division of space (Figure 1-53).
- You can develop a nonliteral space, a space that focuses on mood or atmosphere (Figure 1-54).
- You can invent a literal or imagined space or environment based on a working knowledge of perspective principles and scaling methods (Figure 1-55).

### THUMBNAIL STUDIES AS A METHOD FOR EXPLORING COMPOSITION

It can be a daunting task to build a strong composition while taking into account all of the variables that should be considered. And there is never just one good compositional option when observing and drawing a still life, a landscape, a figure or figures, a room interior, or any other subject matter. Depending upon your viewpoint, lighting, the size of your drawing surface, and many other variables, potentially many strong compositions can be developed based on the artist's decisions and choices. Different artists will approach the exact same subject matter in different ways and will compose their work differently.

Often times a student will develop a drawing that is well executed and sensitively drawn but poorly composed. Visual balance may be lacking, objects may be cropped by the edge of the paper in awkward or in-

**Figure 1-54.** Student work, Minnesota State University–Moorhead. Kevin Olson. The negative space around the figure is based on invention rather than observation, with the intention of suggesting water or a fluidlike atmosphere.

