

# Composition

What are the rules of composition? The main rule is: if it works and serves the artist purpose, then it is a good composition. There is however several guidelines that have been found since the beginning of art on what looks best. These best compositions are hard to over come and still have your art pieces work.

Golden Section or golden spot. Vitruvius, in the 1st Century B.C., After studying Pompeii wall paintings, wrote in his “De Architectura” The best place to place the main subject of a painting was at the golden section or golden point. Which is at the intersection of a 3 to 2 ratio on the painting. When you are setting up your piece if you can place the main interest on the golden spot the piece will probably look a lot better than if you place the main subject in the center of the page.

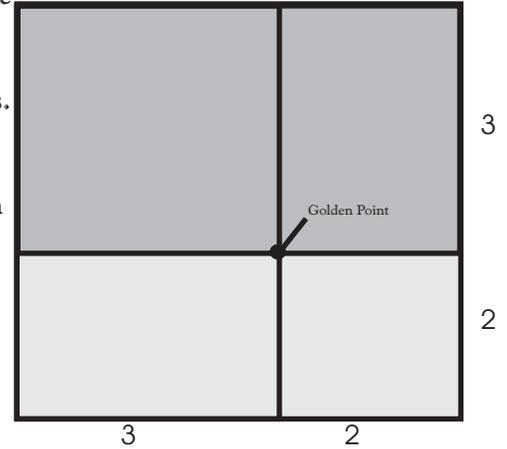
The Golden Triangle. In the Renaissance, this geometric form was very popular and used in virgin and child paintings. This form of composition is a basic triangle in the painting from the corners of the painting to the other side middle.

The Strong Diagonal This composition became a favorite in the Baroque period.

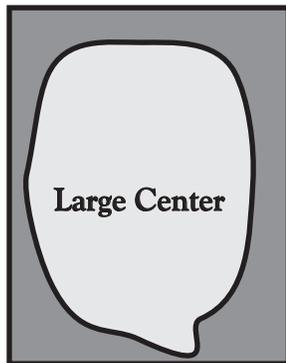
The S curve or Z This composition is used a lot in Landscapes.

The L shape Also popular in landscapes.

The Large oval in the center of the piece. Used in portrait work and still lives.

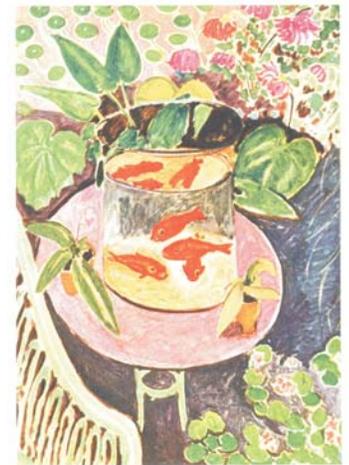


## Good Examples:



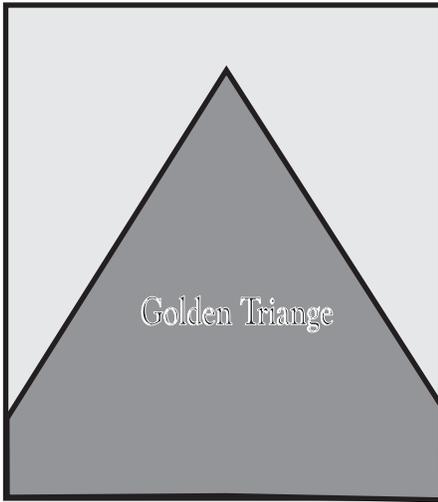
Avoid having part or shape pointed near an edge

Large Center Composition is used all the time. You should be careful with this one because if the center object become a small center object it will become one of the bad compositions. With the Modern Abstract Artist this composition sometimes becomes an object itself ie.. Jasper Johns’ “Flags”, “Targets” and “Numbers” paintings also Frank Stella’s shaped canvases. Here you see Matisse’s “Goldfish” saved by the strong diagonal in the



bottom left corner. Georgia O’Keeffe’s “Purple Petunia” 1927 the large center object overtakes the canvas so that center of the painting is almost at the golden point. Van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” are a good example of a large center object.

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## The Golden Triangle

The golden Triangle is a shape that is close to the large center object but has a triangle shape and sometimes a repeating shape like in the Van Gogh's "The Zouave, 1888" as seen below



Jan Vermeer

to the left. Almost every Madonna and child format is a golden triangle. In Katherine Levin-Lau's, 1997, (bottom right corner) Painting of Mother and child, while using herself as the Madonna the child is hard to make out among the leaves, but she complete the triangle with a strong light on her hands and blouse in the bottom corners. Jan Vermeer's was well aware of the golden triangle when he painted his painting "The Lacemaker 1632-1675" (upper right corner).

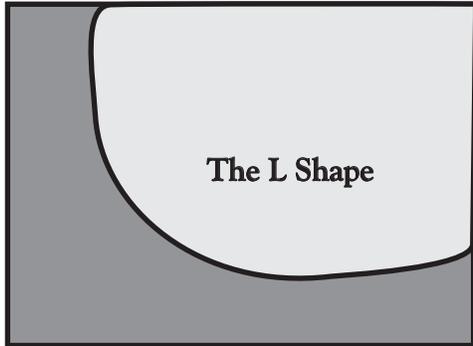
Vincent Van Gogh



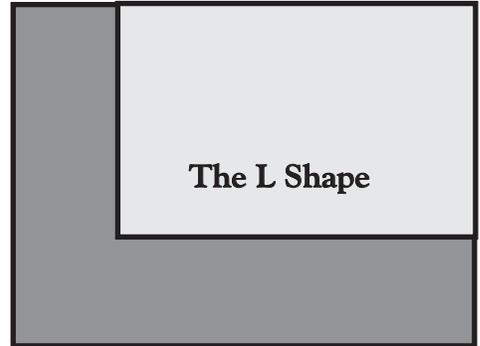
Katheryn Levin Lau



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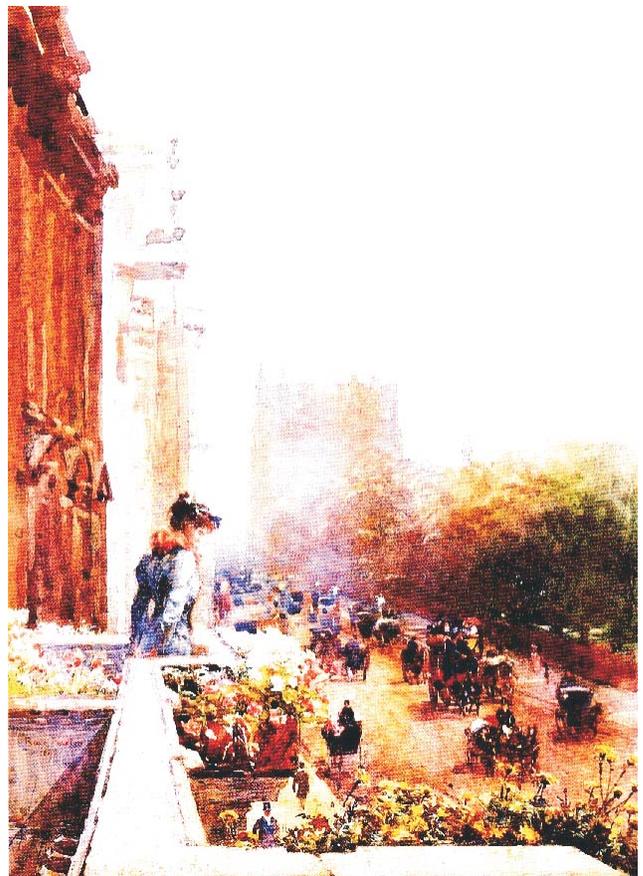
The L Shape



The L shape, here you have Matisse using an interior scene like a landscape and Rose Barton 1856-1929 in her "Piccadilly in June" using a city scene in a L shape. In composition it is rare that you will see a pure shape most times the compositions are more complex and a mixture of several shapes. Also the contrast, values, texture and lighting conditions can effect the picture shapes. The L shape seems to work if the space left out of the L is large or small so it is usually a good

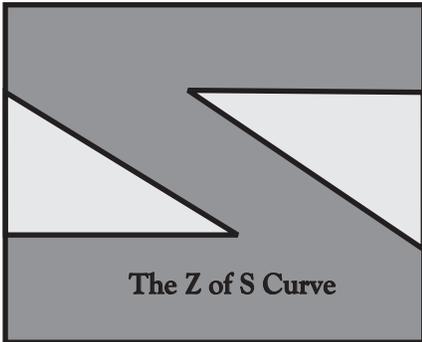


48 DÉSIRÉ LAFIT, RED TABLE, 1928

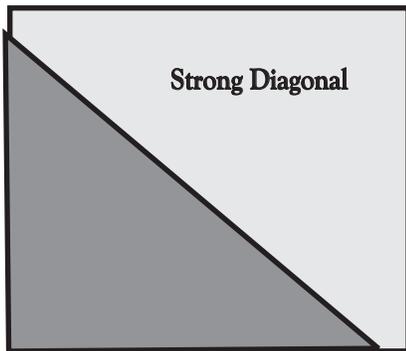
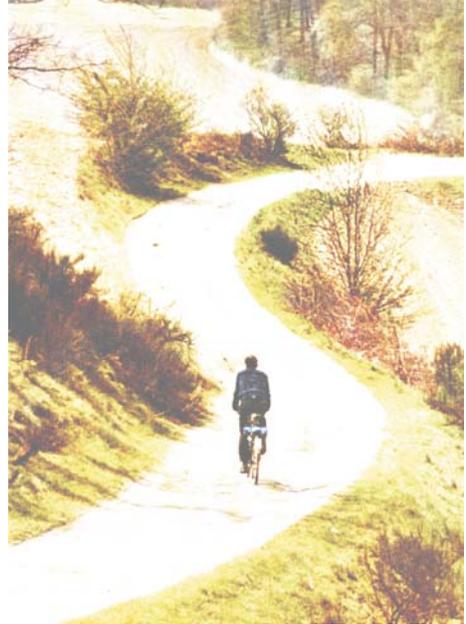


composition. One that is hard to mess up.

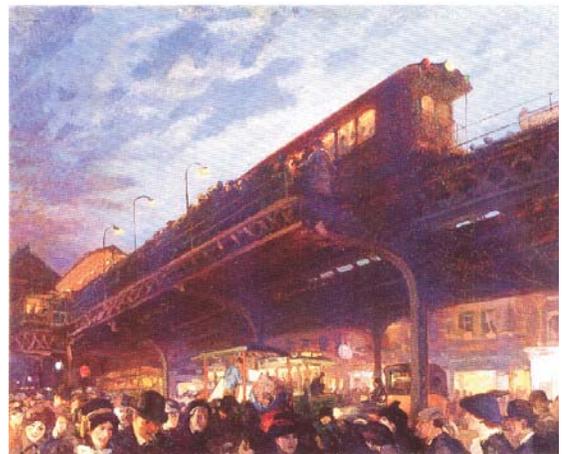
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The S or Z curve is used mostly in Landscape scenes as seen in these photographs by G. Isert.

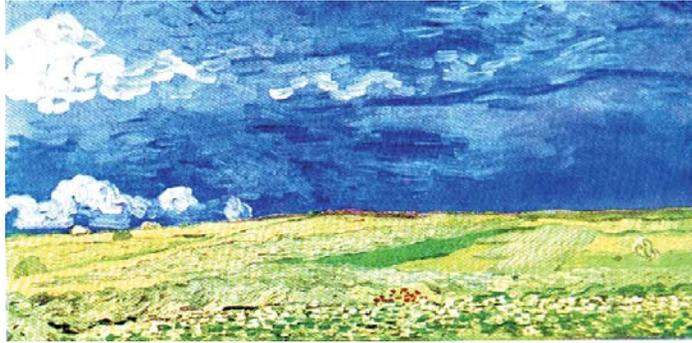


The Strong Diagonal is Shown there by Van Gogh's "Boats at the Beach bottom left and by John Sloan's "Six O'clock Winter".



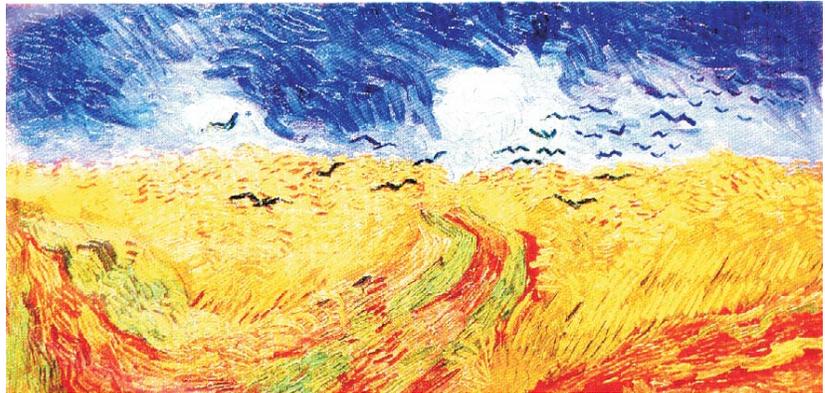
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Symmetry vs Asymmetry If a composition is split in equal parts as in symmetry the results are usually poor. Asymmetry is usually where it is at. Try to put the horizon line toward one of the golden sections as did

Van Gogh did in his landscapes that he painted near Arles just before his death.



The compositions that are very poor and should be avoided are: Dividing the piece in half, either in landscape or in Portrait. Placing too many objects with too much space between them. This is the same as have too many plots in a story it distracts from what you want the viewer to look at.

## Examples of poor Composition

