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ESSENCE

o f d e s i g n

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PART XII:
U N I T Y

The selection and arrangement of the formal principles in a work of art or framing is called design. Line, texture, color, shape, intensity, space, and rhythm are all easily identifiable elements of design, while proportion, balance, and emphasis may be tougher components to pinpoint, but are just as important to complete the package. The “pulling together” of a work of art or framing design using the tools of these principles creates a quality known as unity. It is perhaps the closest thing to a rule that exists in both fine art and all aspects of design. Unity implies a congruity, or fusion, among the individual elements; that they are in harmony from careful planning.

Unity is defined as “...making into or becoming a single unit.” The various individual elements in a design must all appear intentional and interrelated, or the basic design will fall apart. A viewer will always subconsciously look for organization within a design—something that feels comforting and familiar.

Review of Principles

The *elements* of line, color, texture, shape, intensity, and space are all the ingredients or building blocks with which the artist or designer works. The *factors* of proportion, balance, emphasis, rhythm, and unity are the recipe or directions for assembling them into an aesthetic and successful design. Together the elements and factors form the principles of the design process, and together they will either unite any given design, or make it feel weak or fall apart.

It is important to understand the integration of the first group of elements in order to grasp the second group of factors. It is easier to identify the elements than the factors. The elements of any design are the materials of the designer, while the factors establish the methods

by which materials are set into motion or are used. Just as it is true that shape and space flow in and out of each other, and that texture can be the result of highlights and shadows of line and color, all the principles work together for a unified whole. If they are isolated then one may dominate the other and the design is lost.



Photo 1: Intellectual Unity—Though all the items are different in color, shape, and texture, a unity of theme, as well as unity through variety, has been achieved. (Photo courtesy of Larson-Juhl, design by Greg Perkins, CPF.)

Unity:

Visual vs. Intellectual

One’s initial response to a successful frame design is a feeling of *visual unity* in that the whole dominates over the individual parts. Each selected element (line, color, texture...) has a meaning and impacts the total presentation. Visual unity denotes a harmony between the chosen elements that is apparent to the eye. No one thing stands alone or demands attention.

Meanwhile, *intellectual unity* illustrates a common theme or central idea.

An object box showcasing Great Grandmother’s handkerchief, purse, and photograph represents this concept of common theme (see Photo 1). A unified theme, however, does not necessarily produce a unified design. Thus, visual unity and intellectual unity are two separate and individual issues which must not be confused.

Though a common theme is a great starting point to achieve unity, it is essential that the chosen elements from line, color, texture, shape, intensity, and space be controlled, organized, and integrated. This is managed through the binding qualities of the remaining principles of organization (rhythm, proportion, balance, and emphasis).

Four Ways to Achieve Unity Limited Elements

Though unity may be achieved in many ways, there are four basic concepts which remain the easiest to help inte-

grate unity into a successful design. First, limit the number of elements used in a framing design to between three and five. (See this series in *PFM*, February 2000.) This reinforces design concentration by integrating a few specific principles and ensures some degree of oneness since there is less to distract the viewer. It is a matter of “less is more” as seen in many award-winning designs.

Proximity and Strong Boundaries

The second way to achieve unity is through proximity. Frames around paintings, and fences around gardens, are examples of proximity through strong enclosure. The frame surrounds the collectibles into a unit while setting them apart from the rest of the room. But it's not enough to merely have Grandpa's personal possessions randomly scattered within a frame. They must somehow relate to each other (see Photo 2).

Compare the overlapping of Great Grandmother's objects to that of the more scattered look of Grandpa's. It is necessary to establish visual unity by manipulating the elements of space, placement, and emphasis to create visual flow within the design (see Diagram 1).

Repetition of Patterns

The third way to develop unity is through repetition (textures, patterns, shapes), also known as rhythm. *Remember:* once the use of an element has been established, it still only counts as one

element when reused (in the three to five limit). This can be a similarity in size (multiple openings cut the same dimensions), shape (echoing the oval in a pair of glasses), or color (picking up sepia tones in an aged photo). These techniques help tie things together.

Rhythm/repetition can produce both variety and unity. Emphasis, balance, and rhythm all work together towards unifying a good framing design. The unity created through



Photo 2: Proximity—It's not enough to have Grandpa's possessions randomly scattered within a frame. Compare the overlapping of objects in Photo 1 to the more scattered look of these keepsakes. (Sample courtesy of Crescent Cardboard.)

repetition of a button framed alongside an identical button may be good, but is not nearly as interesting as unity created through the contrasting variety of a button framed with a buttonhole. Thus, mirror images may be slightly too academic to be visually stimulating and perhaps border on repetitious monotony because they are too literal.

Harmony of the Parts

Establishing harmony of the parts is the fourth unifying method. The design components should all share something in common. This may be achieved by tailoring the use of the chosen elements to

reflect specific categories such as a particular type of art (botanical, art Deco, Impressionist) or historical period (Elizabethan, Louis XIV).

The moulding styles used in design readily reinforce establishment of a mood, color, and often, specific period of any given design. This establishes both visual and intellectual unity through a consistency of period and style, which ultimately creates harmony.

Unity and Variety

Too much unity through consistency and similarity may

be deadening or boring, and variety is the counterpart to unity. However, if variety gets out of control through too much contrast, unity also suffers. If repeating specifically chosen colors, textures, and shapes helps to establish unity, then modifying or isolating those

same elements might create more variety through contrast. Use of contrast should be tasteful and subtle.

In Photo 3, unity is attempted by reintroducing the elements of color and shape through the blue and white diamonds in the lower mat border. The rust-colored background in the lower third of the artwork is also echoed. The diamonds were minimized by repeating only four on either side, maintaining isolated or limited contrast. It

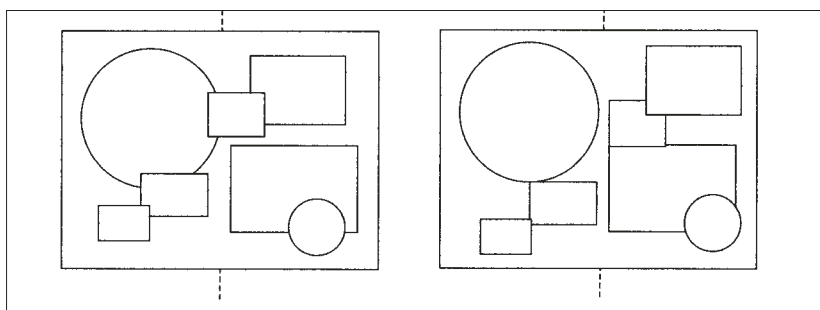


Diagram 1: Unity through Proximity—There is more to balance and unity than just even weight on either side of an imaginary central point. Overlapping the images in a shadow box will integrate them and allow for visual control or emphasis. Controlling the movement and flow of the viewer's eye is a major part of successful design. On the other hand, static placement where objects barely touch or align without interaction makes the design appear dull and lifeless. This eliminates unity and, in turn, viewer interest.

would have been more dominant if the shapes had been placed at the lower left corner running from the draped blanket onto the mat. Either solution represents an integration and use of visual unity through color, shape, and in the second concept perhaps, placement or emphasis.

Developing Variety

Variety, contrast, and in turn, unity can be achieved by expanding on the base idea. For example, when a customer brings in a photograph of his or her Great Grandmother, suggest that they also bring in a few additional personal items of Grandmother's, like her handkerchief, clutch purse, broach, necklace, or personal letter (see Photo 1). Though all the items will be different in color, shape, and texture, you can create a unity of theme, as well as unity through variety.

Unity and variety are fundamental in art and framing. Unity leads to order, while variety brings vitality through contrast. They interact and balance each other so that an active oneness dominates over monotony or chaos. If variety gets too extreme (painted bevels, glass etching, embossing, decorative cutouts), unity is lost, but too much consistency can also kill the design.

No single frame design is the perfect solution to a problem; it is only one solution. Just look at the myriad of design presentations at any PFFA National Print Competition. There can be one print and one theme, and 50 variations as a solution. And while they are all regional winners, I have seen some that are successfully unified, while others attempt to showcase too many design ideas. Again, less is more.

Unity Through Color

Color probably offers the most variation when used for unity. This is because of the endless opportunities for color relationships. There are two basic ways to organize colors for unity. Unity through *color hues* would target analogous colors, or any two colors adjacent to a key

color on a color wheel. They perhaps reflect an ink color from the art in a surface mat or panel design (see Photo 4). Unity through *color contrast* or those directly opposite on wheel, might utilize complementary colors in a liner mat or painted bevel.

Unity through color is seen in Photo 4, where analogous colors from within the photo were used for the surface and middle liner mats. The red $\frac{1}{8}$ " bottom liner is both a direct color echo from the trim on the French storefront, and a complementary color to the green foliage surrounding it. It also unifies the design by using analogous, warm colors in all of the mats selected. If the same triple mat of $\frac{1}{8}$ ", $\frac{1}{4}$ " and 2" used all mauve mats, it would lose the variety and visual interest. Though all the colors would be represented in the photo, and in unified harmony, there would be no contrasts.



Photo 3: Visual Unity—Visual unity is achieved through repetition and rhythm by reintroducing the blue and white diamonds from the artwork into the lower mat border. (Artwork courtesy of Larson-Juhl.)



Photo 4: Unity Through Color—Unity through the use of warm analogous colors enhances this photo. The moulding options will either pull colors from the tree bark and dark windows, or will harmonize with the middle mat and texture of the sunless afternoon haze.

Design Integrity

The quality that makes a design a unique expression is integrity—a quality or state of being whole. Unity in an artist's conception is what makes it personal and original. Unity in a frame design includes everything from using appropriate materials (as in conservation framing) to the way a framing design is presented.

Fundamental Unity

By studying the principles of form and design, the beginning designer will gain an understanding that will later help with successful intuitive and creative expressions of framing design. The elements of line, color, texture, space, intensity, shape, and

rhythm cannot exist on their own. They are impacted by the technical use of the factors of proportion, balance, and emphasis. The overlap as they borrow from and impact each other to become more visible or expressive. Unity remains the total effect of a frame design which results from all its component parts. It is achieved by opposing forces brought into harmony.

This is not to say that all principles will always be

present in every design. It is possible for a framing design to be devoid of variations, of multiple colors, or more than one texture. They form the body from which the designer can choose, the tools to create a successful unified design. However, the one principle that is essential to every work of art or framing design is the principle of unity. No design will ever be truly successful without the sense of unity that relates the parts and harmonizes all its elements into a total composition.

Design With Pride

For the past two years, every other month, I have discussed the essence of framing design in this series from the basics of traditional and formal fine art design theories, with a specific principle targeted each time. The principles remain the same whether for painting, sculpture, or picture framing but practical use and integration do somewhat vary. Once the concepts have been understood then award-winning, unified framing designs are simply a matter of execution. With a better understanding of unity and contrast, collaborating the other elements and factors into the perfect design for any customer or framing competition is easy. The principles of framing design are funda-

mental for successful and consistent creations.

So, there are framing competitions to be won and customers to wow! As a successful framing designer you can showcase your imagination and ability, establish a specialized niche for yourself as an innovator in design, and capitalize on creative press releases. Good design isn't everything... it's the only thing. ■

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