

t h e

# ESSENCE

o f d e s i g n

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PART  
VII:  
SPACE

I read an interesting commentary on the Internet the other day which stated, “Anyone can be made aware of basic color and design elements and principles, and from there it is a matter of making the framer’s sense of aesthetics more sophisticated.” There was also reference to a comment of mine about limiting the number of elements in relation to better controlling a design while learning and achieving greater sophistication. Both of these statements are true.

In this “Essence of Design” series, I address the depths of design from an academic standpoint, and yes, it is up to each individual to better understand these principles and to put them to proper use. It seems that we educators agree that knowing the basics is only the beginning, and that comparing, studying, analyzing, and critiquing completed frame designs may be an integral part to becoming a better frame designer.

I have stated many times that it remains the job of the framer to enhance and protect the art, and to never sacrifice the dignity of the art for a flashy design. The art must always remain the focal point—the first thing that is recognized and visually explored by the viewer. This will be further explored in Part X: Emphasis.

## Space

This month, the topic is Space. Truly understanding space will better prepare the designer to utilize it in framing design and when applying the factors of proportion, emphasis, and balance. Space is the distance around, or between, items used to unify or highlight an image. All physical things exist in space. Space envelops us completely, but its reality is in the forms that give it definition, as in the use of mats and frames.

While space is defined as a measurable distance between pre-established points, two-dimensional space only involves length and breadth, three-dimensional space adds depth, and four-dimensional space adds time or motion. Visual design is actively concerned with three specific types of space: pictorial, illusionistic, and actual.

## Pictorial Space

Design relating to a flat surface, such as a cutout paper silhouette is known as pictorial space (see Photo 1). Although there appear to be no borders, the design is contained within obvious dimensions. This type of decorative spatial concept involves two-dimensional images, or those in which a picture has height and width but no depth. Space then exists *across* a plane rather than *in* it.

Pictorial space is concerned with shapes and space interacting on a flat surface with no implied depth. Cut paper silhouettes, stencils, and flat wood-



Photo 1: The Chinese paper cut silhouette is a perfect example of two-dimensional pictorial space, limited only to height and width, with no depth or thickness.

block prints are good examples of pure, pictorial, two-dimensional space. These types of images are commonly found as patterns on fabric, decorative marbled papers, panels, wallpaper, and borders.

### Illusionistic Space

When the concept of depth must be achieved, multiple planes are established through techniques of overlapping, layering, size, and perspective. These plastic spatial concepts (also called illusionistic space) are those dealing with three-dimensional images in relatively two-dimensional presentations. It is the establishment of creating one vertical plane behind another.

Ancient Egyptian art utilized pure overlapping to establish depth (see Photo 2). Paleolithic cave drawings, Meso-american wall paintings, tapestries, and banners also often used this form of depth dimension.

Layering was also used to establish distance by making the lower edges of a work appear to be closest to the viewer while the top edges appeared to be furthest away. This is commonly seen in Asian paintings and by Persian artists in both paintings and illuminated manuscripts.

Size is also used in conjunction with the above mentioned layering techniques for establishing distance. Most often, the larger an image is in size, the closer it appears to the viewer. By establishing the horizon line as an eye level reference point, the farther down or lower in the picture window, the nearer the item will appear. The higher in the window, the farther away (position or vertical location).

Linear perspective, established during the 15th century, first utilized vanishing points to create the illusion of diminishing details and converging parallels as a depiction of space. Diminishing detail simply means that



Photo 2: Egyptian and Meso-American art are examples of overlapping techniques used in illusionistic space by layering vertical planes in order to establish depth.

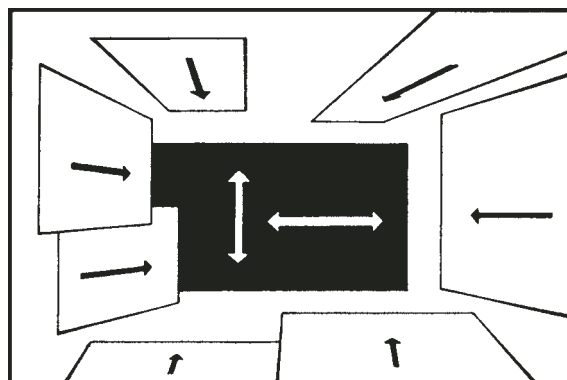


Diagram 1: Shallow space features three-dimensionality with a specific depth limitation. Shadow boxes best represent this type of illusionistic space.

items close up are sharp, with a loss of definition through hazy shapes, indistinct lines, and grayed values for distance. Vanishing points are a mathematical system for creating a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, as exemplified by a set of disappearing railroad tracks. The western approach to linear perspective involves the closing of spaces as images fade into the distance, away from the viewer.

The Asian approach involves inverse perspective which establishes the viewer as the vanishing point. This creates more spatial freedom (or openness) moving outward from the art through the use of layering and size variations. In this case, the objects closest to the viewer are larger and located in front of other shapes.

Size is best visually determined in these paintings by actual size ratio. If a mountain is to be 10 feet high, the trees will be one foot, a horse one inch, the man a size of a bean.

Subcategories of illusionistic space include shallow space, in which a three-dimensional concept is embraced but there is a total depth limitation (see Diagram 1), and infinite or deep space, in which images appear to continue on endlessly. A shadow box would fall into the category of shallow or limited space. A picture frame, however, can act as a window through which one sees an ongoing recession of dimensional images often creating the illusion of infinite space.

Period hunt prints and landscapes utilize a two-dimensional pictorial concept in which the illusion of three-dimensional space has the quality of endlessness found in nature. Most art for framing deals with illusionistic space, as two-dimensional images which create a visual illusion of depth and space meant to give the feeling of three-dimen-

sionality. As framers, we need to be aware of the types of depth to maintain a continuity in design between art and frame package.

### Actual Space

Pictorial space only implies space on a flat surface through positives and negatives but with no depth. Illusionistic space creates the three-dimensional sense of space by adding depth through various artistic techniques. Actual space relates specifically to three-dimensional items where space is real and tangible. It concerns itself with artworks such as pottery, jewelry, sculpture, family mementos, and other special objects.

How does all this relate to framing and when does it become an element to be counted? The very essence of framing calls for the layering of glass, mats, fillets, and spacers. Spacers are used to create the illusion of depth in a physical way—the reality of three-dimensionality through actual space. An area (actual three-dimensional space) is shaped into a room by the enclosing planes or walls. Likewise, the area within a frame creates a specific three-dimensional space, but that is the “given.” A design must be taken one step further for space to become a countable element. A good example is the faux etched mirror which uses two sets of spacers to create physical depth using actual space (see Photos 3a and 3b).



Photo 3a: This is an 8"x 8" layered framed mirror accented with heat applied laminate in a faux glass etch design.



Photo 3b (detail): A mirror is placed behind two sheets of faux glass etched designs three-dimensionally spaced apart using black spacers. Space will be a countable element in this project as it is an integral part of the visual creation.

### Space and Line

The physical properties of a line contain other spatial ingredients. They may be long or short, thick or thin, straight, angular, curved, on different spatial planes, or placed in contrast to one another. A long, thick line will appear larger and closer to the viewer than a short, thin line. A diagonal line may appear to transcend planes, while vertical or horizontal lines may feel more static.

A wide v-groove placed on the inside of a narrow v-groove will visually vie for dominance, and ultimately distract the viewer from the artwork. It works as a barrier. When a double v-groove design is used around a window opening, the wider of the two should be placed farther to the outside away from the window.

### Space and Color

Prior to the days of Paul Cézanne in the late 19th century, deep space was considered to begin with the level of the picture plane, then recede from it. Today, color is used to address spaces in front of the picture or frame plane. Analogous colors (three or four neighboring colors on the color wheel) create spatial movement while contrasting colors provide accents or focal emphasis (see Diagram 2). The wider a v-groove line, the lighter the color should be to avoid visual distraction.

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## Space and Texture

The interesting thing about textures is their impact on spatial depth and placement. Sharp, clear, bold textures will appear to advance, while fuzzy, dull, or minuscule textures recede. Care must be taken when integrating textural matting of both visual and tactile nature. If a textured fabric mat is chosen as a liner, it should not compete with the

colors and textures of the top or surface mat. If a liner is meant to enhance and recede, a bold, primary-colored, large, open weave, canvas-wrapped mat will not

recede enough to be secondary in the design.

## Space and Shape

When considering space in the creation of artwork, the concept encompasses two- and three-dimensionality within the image. When relating space to picture framing, it deals with the shape and proportions of mats and frames, placement of three-dimensional objects within the frame, and frame design and decoration.

This is most often addressed within either a shadow box or a multiple opening frame, and the key is to relate all objects, allow for smooth visual transition, and to

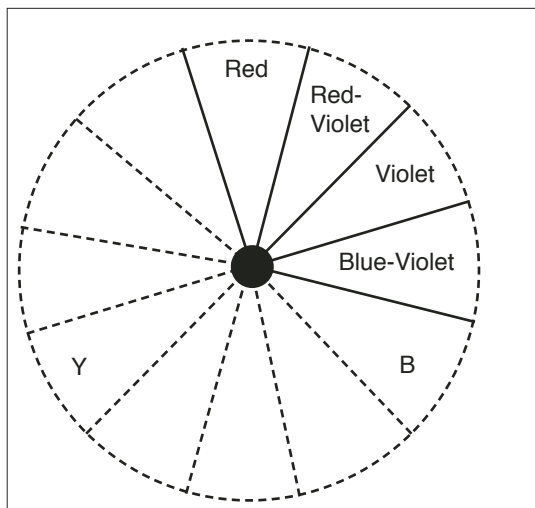


Diagram 2: Analogous colors are three or four colors in adjacent proximity on the color wheel, and in which one color dominates the group.



Photo 4: Space is not a counted element when shape is featured in a wall grouping presentation. Common lines and use of horizontals will hold groupings together while even spaces between maintain individuality.

showcase the art by controlling all positive and negative spaces. Using multiple opening mats can create situations where combined shapes reveal large empty spaces or potentially distracting voids. An example would be an oval within a rectangle (as seen on the far right in Diagram 3). These may be controlled by adding subtle surface decoration or additional cutouts (as seen on the far left and center in Diagram 3).

## Positive and Negative Space

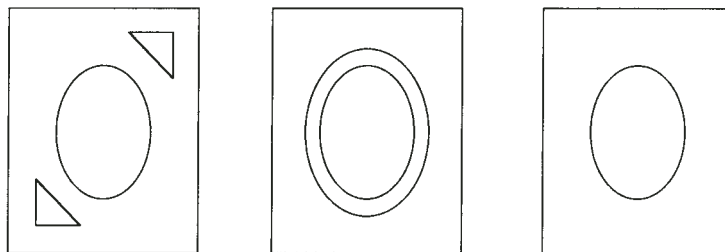
The area or space in which objects or images exist is called positive space. There is also negative space. This may be the distance, void, or

interval between things akin to moments of silence in music, a pause in speech, or the blank mat area between multiple openings. Positive and negative spaces are equally important in the layout and visual unity of a design or grouping.

We are probably most aware of space when arranging wall groupings (see Photo 4). The negative spaces between the frames, or objects within a frame, should remain constant in order to establish a rhythm and pattern. By concentrating on alignment and negative spaces between the frames, visual unity can be achieved. The same is true with a shadow box showcasing numerous items. The spaces between items are every bit as important as the items themselves.

### Space Within Framing

If all things exist in space, we must expect them to move about within it. A picture frame is generally rectangular in shape, has edges which can be interpreted as lines, exists in space, has a relatively smooth texture, can be seen only in light values



*Diagram 3: An oval or circle window within a rectangular mat is a common problem when dealing with distracting negative spaces as a result of shape.*

(intensity), and has a color which is variable. Often, space appears to be more of an application (a factor) than an actual tool (an element) because it can involve so many of the other basic elements, but it remains every bit as important and independent.

Line directs the eye around the interior of a frame and, as we have explored, all types of lines create individual spatial relationships. A ruling pen line is an example of two-dimensional pictorial space and is not recognized as a space element. A v-groove line, though physically three-dimensional use of actual space, also would still count only as a line element.

A surface marbled paper strip (line) contrasts with a botanical print differently than a deep bevel wrap using the same marbled paper would. The second example adds depth, contrast, and potential shadows which also introduce the use of

intensity. Generally, the only time that space will be recognized in framing is with multiple opening mats, shadow boxes, extremes in accented border width, or framed wall groupings. They all utilize space in quite a dramatic way to achieve a particular

design response or end result.

Space is not a countable element when shape or proportion have been recognized for the same reason. It must be consciously noted and counted when it is an integral part of the design as in the faux glass etched photo sample, or an oval window in a rectangular mat using no negative space decoration.

Recognize the elements that shout and praise the ones that whisper... as good use of design principles. In April, I will unfold the, "Rhythm of the Design," as the interplay between art and its framing continues to progress to unified design. ■