

the

ESSENCE

of design

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PART XI: EMPHASIS

Emphasis is a concentration or establishment of centrality, otherwise defined as a high point or climax. In every successful composition of music, literature, or art, some single component must dominate. Emphasis might be the dominant beat in a musical rhythm, the character which most holds our attention in a book, or the point to which our eye is first drawn within a frame. It is the point to which our eye immediately turns when we walk into a gallery.

Emphasis in design is achieved by use of the many base elements including line, color, texture, shape, and proportion. It utilizes physical positioning to control visual concentration within the space of a frame.

As framers, we are enlisted to create an environment for a piece of artwork, photo, or object in order to protect it. As designers we work towards visually enhancing and showcasing it in a unified manner while never detracting from or overpowering the art.

Visualization or Eye Movement

What people think they are looking at, and what they actually see, are often two different things. Scientific studies tracking eye movement have found that although



Photo 1: The eye is manipulated to move both clockwise and counterclockwise in this antique shadow box, depending upon your visual interests. (Framed by Frame City, Pleasant Hill, CA for a PPFA competition.)

we may believe that we choose what we want to look at, the human eye really follows an unconscious flow taking in color, shape and details about viewed objects and their surroundings.

There is a significant difference between the perception of where people think they look and where they actually do look. We are never even aware that involuntary eye movement is taking place. What we actually see is a rough overview of an image, or framed artwork, with one or two areas in very clear

detail. We actively search out interesting visual features that have a meaning for us in a piece of artwork. As our

eye fixates on tiny specific areas, our peripheral vision is what fills in the rest of the rough image, and what in turn determines where our eye will be drawn next. This is also why the visual flow within a framed piece will vary from viewer to viewer.

In my design classes one of the exercises I give the students is to pay attention to the flow of their eye when I flash a slide on the screen (see Photo 1). Some students would see the portrait upper left first, then move down

to the flower cluster then to the purse and ultimately back to the photo by way of the silver chain. Some see the purse first then the portrait, down to the corsage

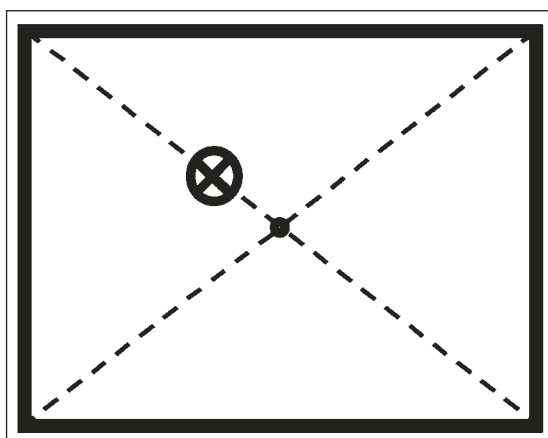


Diagram 1: The natural emphasis or focal point on any image is slightly above left of center.

and back to the purse. Some circle round and round the chain to the purse with only an occasional flash to the photo or flowers.

It doesn't matter what the initial emphasis within a framed piece is as long as the presentation keeps the eye moving around within the frame and does not throw the viewer out of it. Having the portrait face away from center would have done that.

Focal Point

All items should have a center of interest. Without an obvious visual dominant point of focus, the human eye will naturally settle just slightly above left of center to begin to observe an image (see Diagram 1). This location is generally where the most important or prominent figure, any critical action, or the most vibrant color in a painting will appear. However, any marked contrast will create emphasis. The design factors of proportion, balance, rhythm, and emphasis are all extremely interdependent and play off each other in a well-executed design.

All designs will showcase some type of emphasis no matter how subdued. Any mark on a solid surface becomes a focal point. When more than one single spot is showcased, there is a hierarchy of focus. In visual design, there are supporting colors and shapes which dramatize and/or direct the eye. Since no two people are alike, the focal emphasis will vary from viewer to viewer. No singular framing design is the "right" solution to a framing project; it is merely one solution to any given design problem. This is evidenced every year at the PFFA National Framing Competitions.

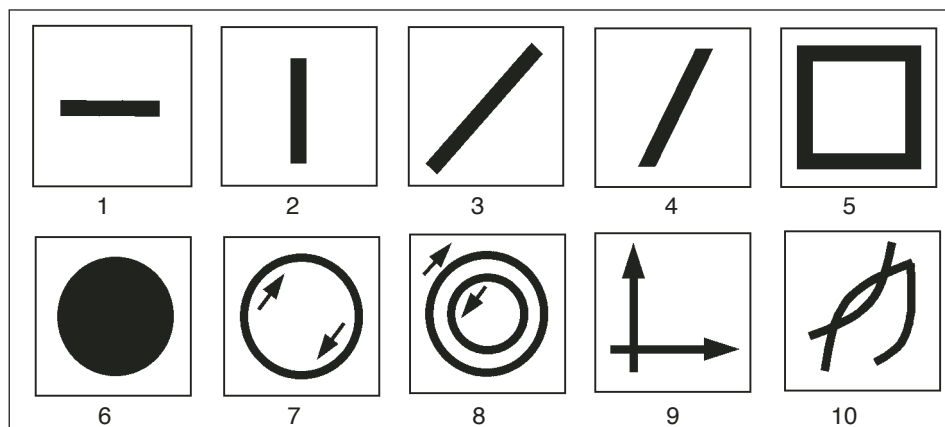


Diagram 2:

Basic emotions may be stimulated by the use of visual manipulation:

- 1) Horizontal = stillness; symbolizing repose
- 2) Vertical = striving upward; symbolizing growth and life
- 3 & 4) Diagonals = unsteady, restless, about to topple; symbolizes movement
- 5) Square = a combination of repose and life, yet self-contained; symbolizes tranquility while confining movement, making it enduring
- 6) Circle = the natural, self-contained calm
- 7) Rotating circle = symbolizes continuous movement and flow

Contrasts keep visuals alive and flowing, they keep the viewer occupied and interested:

- 8) Contrasting rotations symbolize restlessness.
- 9) Lines in different directions create movement and countermovement.
- 10) Opposing curves symbolize freedom and movement.

When approaching framing design from a technical layout standpoint, never forget the focus must remain on the artwork and great care should be taken to control the viewer's eye by directing the focus or focal point within the frame. In order to best explain the concept of controlling the eye, we must begin at the beginning and consider emotional reactions to visual stimulus.

Emotional Reactions

A viewer's emotions may be stimulated (almost controlled) by the movement or flow of the eye as an image is observed. Reactions such as restfulness, peacefulness, agitation, playfulness, and even confusion may be stimulated by visual arrangements or placement within a frame. Quite simply, some eye movements are emotionally more soothing or disturbing than others (see Diagram 2).

A casual viewing of the horizontal line in Box #1 allows for peaceful



Photo 2: The antique photos vary in size and placement surrounding a central family image. Although it's not always possible with this many photos, the images have been arranged to face towards the center whenever possible.

movement of the viewer's eye from left to right, stimulating a passive and quiet response. As such, the visual eye movement of a traditional landscape in a no-frills, traditional, single matted, horizontal framing presentation would also evoke a gentle response.

A diagonal moving from upper right to lower left, as seen in Box #3, is not as comfortably familiar, so the emotion evoked is more unsettling and dynamic. It makes a stronger visual statement and may be more difficult to successfully execute.

Consider a continuous circular movement of the eye in Box #7. This creates a somewhat natural movement reflecting the positive continuity of growth and comfort and is not at all unsettling. Regardless of moving clockwise or counterclockwise, this is the basic eye movement we experienced in Photo 1.

A multiple opening mat using progressive chronological portraits surrounding larger central images would reinforce the clockwise flow of the eye through the rotation of the outer portraits. A child's portrait history of annual school photos surrounding a large high school portrait is a perfect example of this. The emphasis would remain the larger dominant central image though all the others will obtain adequate attention also.

A multiple opening mat with assorted window sizes and shapes often stimulates the contrasting movements of Box #8, with both clockwise and counterclockwise visual stimulus occurring (see Photo 2). This is far less peaceful than Box #7, since the eye attempts to circle both right and left to assorted images.

The placement of images within a frame has a great deal to do with the direction the image itself faces. Portraits on the left, facing left, will throw the viewer's eye out of the frame, while by making the portraits face the center the eye remains within the frame (see Diagram 3). This can feel aggressive or disheartening. Diagonal lines or obliquely placed objects are very strong and evoke viewer emotion by their angles. When using

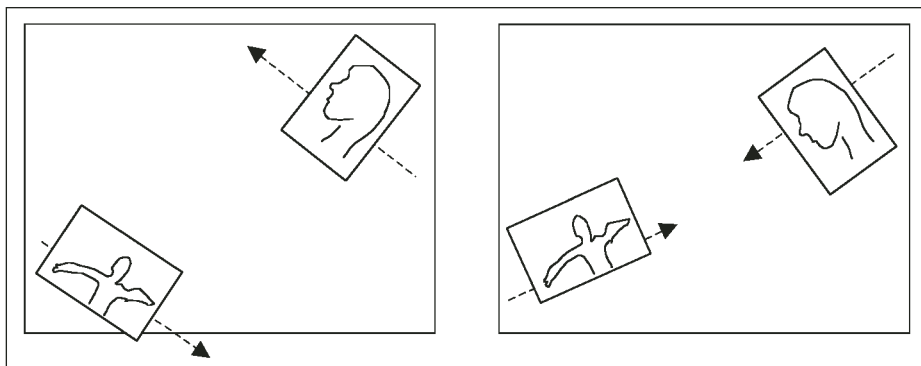


Diagram 3: The placement of images within a frame has a great deal to do with the direction the image itself faces. The portraits on the left will throw the viewer's eye out of the frame, while by placing the portraits facing center the eye remains within the frame. Diagonal lines or obliquely placed objects are very strong and evoke viewer emotion by their angles. When using diagonals in a shadowbox think through the placement and the reason why you have chosen a diagonal placement.

emphasis diagonals in a shadow box, think of the reasons you have chosen a diagonal placement. It will evoke more emotional response.

Allowing the eye to search the outer edges of a decorated, painted, or specialty mat; uniquely cut frame; or multiple opening design can give a designer the power to evoke excitement and intrigue through visual stimulus. Placement of additional surface accents or designs such as a calligraphic surname or offset mat corner can easily bounce the eye from point to point. This motion can create more unsettling responses depending upon the actual direction the eye moves. Be careful with framing accents. Often, less is more.

Perceived Movement

Look at the four circular examples in Diagram 4 and try to determine the direction the wedge is moving. The first brings the eye into the circle with the ultimate focus at the center point, while the second is moving to the right drawing the eye away with it. The third wedge is diving down into the center with rather extreme concentration, while the last is falling from the center allowing the eye to drop from the image altogether.

Thus the two most centralized and positive visual movements will be the first and third, and therefore the most successful designs. The idea is to hold the viewer's eye within the frame of the picture and not to pull it from the image to the outer wall or dash it to the floor.

In the corresponding photos (see Photos 3a, b, c, d), the ribbon of the featured gold medal is laid to sig-

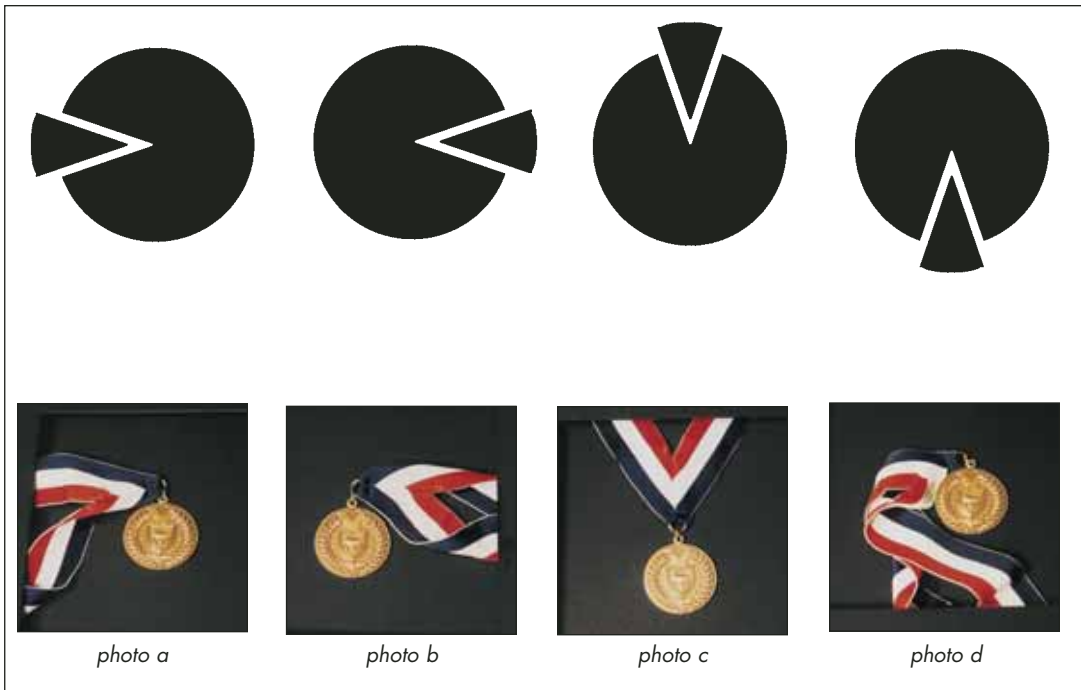


Diagram 4: The wedges create movement in four different directions depending upon their placement. The first appears to be forcing into the circle; the second leaving it; the third is falling into it; and the fourth is dropping out of it.

Photos 3a, b, c, d: These photos support the diagram above with assorted placement of the ribbon coming from all four basic directions of the frame. Although the medal remains central, the ribbon dictates movement of the eye.

nify the wedge moving into or dropping from the frame center. Notice your eye movement as you study the samples.

While it is important to keep the viewer's attention inside the frame, it is also acceptable to create a visual hesitation as the eye moves into the artwork from the matting and framing. By utilizing fillets, v-grooves, French lines, tiered matting, or painted bevels, this visual pause may reinforce other selected design elements, as long as they don't overpower the art.

Circling the eye or dropping it off of the edge are also acceptable as long as something, such as a shape, color, or flowing design ultimately draws the eye back into the frame, at very near the visual exit point, just above or below it. The ribbons can draw the eye away from the central medal to the window edge, where the remaining mat and moulding designs must work harder to maintain visual attention.

Sleuthing Emphasis

In Photo 4, the glass etching in the upper left corner of this shadow box effectively leads the eye around the inner objects to help tell a story. Again, pay attention to your eye

movement as you view this framed presentation. Someone hone into the magnifying glass, then down the ribbon, up the right side of the inner framed book, to the glass etching upper left, and come to rest on the oil lamp and pipe lower left center. Others begin with the etching upper left to the framed book, then the oil lamp, and end up concentrating on the magnifying glass.

It's often a matter of personal interests. At no point is the viewer thrown from within the frame, but rather caught up in the warmth of it. The upper left outer edge etching not only helps to pull the eye around, but it also helps fill a potential void or large vacant space that might have been uncomfortable in the upper left corner. It's a very nice presentation.



Photo 4: This award-winning Open Competition shadow box is an excellent example of placement within the frame to elicit active eye movement while maintaining good emphasis on the book. (Photo courtesy of PPFA Hall of Fame.)

Dominance and Proportion

Dynamic use of rhythm and repetition are frequently found in successful framing designs. Each portion of the design (frame, mats, colors...) must hold its proper portion of visual dominance, emphasis, or attention. To get the viewer's attention, a featured portion needs to be in contrast with its surrounding area.

When utilizing proportion and larger

dimensions to attract attention, a different concentration occurs.

The inner art image will always make a statement, whether fragile and delicate or bold and domineering. The matting and frame selected to showcase that image must never overpower it. Proportion plays a large part in visual emphasis. When a narrow moulding has been selected to surround a small image with traditionally balanced three to four inch mats the artwork is allowed to speak (see Diagram 5).

However, with the wider design proportions that have emerged in home decorating in the past few years, the same narrow moulding selected for that image will not stand up to wider six to eight inch mats without dwarfing the artwork. The viewer's visual attention and the emphasis will have been directed inadvertently to the outer frame and away from the inner art.

In turn, a three-inch-wide moulding used on a three-inch mat surrounding a small image throws the balance off, and the image is overwhelmed by frame. When a much wider mat and fillet replaces this narrow mat, the concentration better remains within the frame on the art. The fillet helps draw the eye into the inner image (see Diagram 6).

Solving the Mystery

Understanding emphasis and focal point is not difficult if you pay attention to where your eye travels when you view any item. As a framing project is laid out, if the inner mat color is too hot for the art that color will dominate the eye. Everything must flow to everything else. Flow is the operative word here. Nothing should dominate to the exclusion of all else, although there will be a focus.

A multi angled or tabernacle frame is very powerful and eye catching and should only be used with art of equal intensity. It would not be suitable for a soothing Victorian image, for example. Portraits with direct eye contact to the viewer or an emotional image of perhaps the Madonna and Child would be a better choice. The artwork must be allowed to flourish and make its own statements.

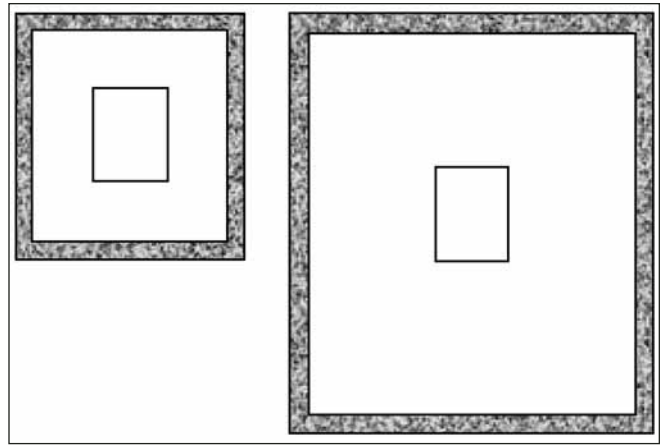


Diagram 5: A small 1" moulding feels balanced and proportional on a small image, but the same moulding on a much larger window mat will dwarf the artwork.

Emphasis may remain only a factor that helps mortar together the other framing elements, but is every bit as powerful. It can create or destroy an otherwise strong design as much as incorrect proportions or one that is out of balance. The difference with emphasis is that if you can't attract a viewer in the first place, no one will be around to view the other strong aspects of your design.

There is no real mystery to understanding framing design. There are very specific elements and factors that help guide the way to a successfully unified piece. In the final installment of my series, "The Essence of Design," in December, we'll recap them all and explore pulling it all together in Part Twelve: Unity. ■

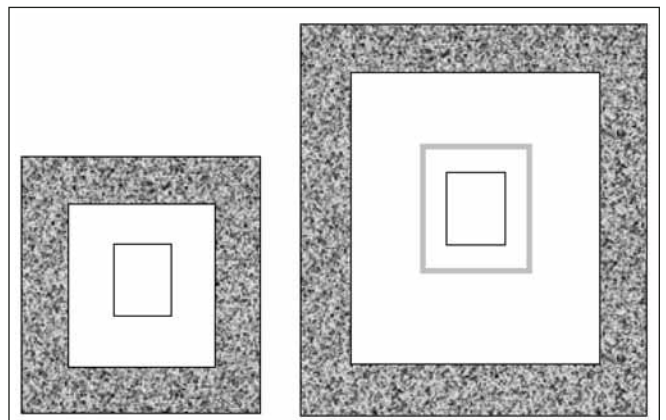


Diagram 6: If a 3" moulding is selected for the same tiny image, the moulding and mat are too close to the same width, making it feel unbalanced. Adding a wider mat and inner fillet will better accent the art, pull the viewer into the image, and keep the design in balance.