

THE Essence of Design

Part V: Shape

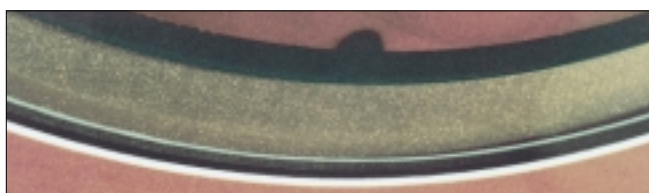
by Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF

Photographs, whether RC, Ilfochrome Classic, or antique keepsake, are often best showcased when the period styling or nature of the image is reflected in the shape of the window opening or frame. For centuries, oval and round frames have held portraits of some of the finest families in history, including our own. What better place than the photography issue to discuss shape and its importance as an element of framing design?

WHAT IS SHAPE?

Shape is an element integral to design. It creates beauty, refines craftsmanship, and reinforces unity. Artists use shapes to develop the illusion and fantasy inherent in their art. Framers use more tangible objects, such as mats and frames, in the form of shapes to complete their presentations (see Photos 1a and 1b).

Shapes are areas which stand out from the space surrounding them because of a defined boundary, or because of a difference of line, color, or texture (see Photo 2). They are recognized because of actual geometric or physical form consisting of height and



Photos 1a and 1b: Following the contour of the small guitar shape in the opening edge of the window mat establishes shape as a dominant element in this design.

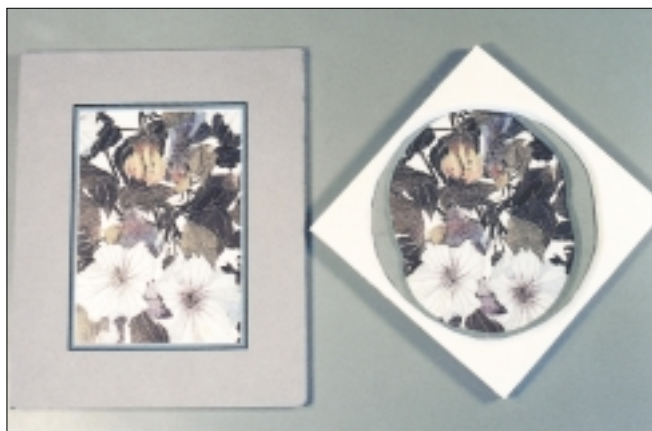


Photo 2: The left sample does not use shape as a design element since all openings and edges are based on the given rectangle. But the square outer shape of the right sample, with its inner free form circular shape, does. Color, texture, and shape count as three elements.

weight. Thus, shape defines a specific area. It then communicates ideas and emotions to the viewer and often is used as a vehicle to stimulate or excite.

NATURAL SHAPE

When considering pure shape, there are four general categories (also known as characteristics): natural, geometric, abstract, and non-objective. Natural shapes make up all of our surroundings such as stones, leaves, puddles, and clouds. They are anything found in the natural environment. Plants, animals, and the human body are all natural shapes.

GEOMETRIC SHAPES

Natural shapes (not man-made) may also be characterized as geometric. One of the most common geometric natural shapes is that of the hexagon. It is part circle, part square, and is naturally found in honeycombs, turtle shells, mineral deposits, snow crystals, and biological tissues.

Geometric shapes are comprised of triangles, squares, circles, etc. and, as mentioned above, are closely

related to nature, architecture, or, in this case, picture framing. Rectangular, square, hexagon, round, oval, and multiple opening mats all constitute use of geometric shape as an element in mat design (see Photo 3). Frames that are multi-sided, oval, rectangular, offset, etc. also create geometric shapes, and this is done with mouldings creating the shape.

ABSTRACT SHAPES

Natural shapes reduced to their essence become stylized or abstracted. American Indians have converted religious, earth, and animal forms into distinctive abstractions and patterns, which often have very specific symbolic meanings. These shapes are used as designs on pottery, weavings, and jewelry. They emulate natural forms, yet evolve into abstracted patterns of their originals.

NON-OBJECTIVE SHAPES

Non-objective shapes are those that don't originate in any recognizable shape or object. Though they may have been stimulated by an actual natural form such as the human body, the resulting design no longer resembles the original, upon which it was based. This is most notable in many contemporary artists such as Kandinsky, as well as some of the later paper projects by Matisse.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGS OF SHAPES

Framing uses shape as the perimeter surrounding artwork, thus creating its border. Horizontal shapes within an artwork, such as a landscape, predominate



Photo 3: The four samples illustrate how different shape openings visually effect the impact of the inner artwork. These are all in the same sized 8"x10" mats with 1 1/4" borders, but the surrounding spaces either open up or confine the image.



Photo 4: The use of a square frame hung at the diagonal sets off both the free form inner mat openings, which echo the curved lettering forms, but also reinforces the dark bold curvilinear natural shape of the near vertical Japanese brush stroke. Chris A. Paschke, artist.

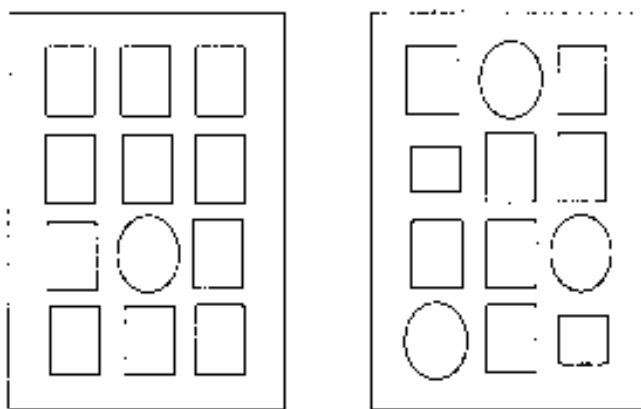


Diagram 1: A single oval will dominate a multi-opening sea of rectangles. A variety of ovals, squares, and rectangles use shape in a much more balanced presentation, even when not symmetrical.

within a horizontal frame presentation. Vertical images are emphasized when placed within a vertical frame format.

Maintaining or reinforcing the shapes within art creates a harmony between the frame and its contents. It also emphasizes the mood of the original shapes of the artist's images, as the strong, near vertical Japanese brush stroke is reinforced by the square frame hung at a diagonal (see Photo 4). Therefore, design selections of specific matboard openings and moulding perimeter shapes are extremely important. They may either reinforce the original feeling and mood of the art, or throw the entire presentation into an unsettling visual arena.

For centuries, psychologists have studied the reaction of the human mind to visual shape stimulus. Ink blot responses attempt to standardize human reaction and emotion in connection with specific lines, colors, and values that create non-objective shapes.

These studies have determined that although it remains somewhat individualized, squares generally evoke a feeling of perfection, stability, symmetry, and self-reliance. Rectangles stretch those emotions into

a more solid base as a result of the stronger horizontal. There is also a tendency to soften the rigidity and perfection a bit, so it feels more relaxed.

CONTROLLED TENSION

Compositional balance must be considered when arranging shapes within a confined unit, such as the frame or shadow box. Dark, dense shapes appear heavier and attract

more attention. Shapes of intense color must also be offset to adjust the visual balance within a frame.

A single portrait with the subject dressed in dark clothing amidst a multiple opening mat of light colored portraits will be the first photo a viewer focuses on. This dark shape will dominate even if all the images have the same opening dimensions. The desired end result utilizes what is known as controlled tension to direct or balance the images. Visual interest and balance must be achieved or the design will not be effective. Good art will already contain this necessary element, but object boxes, multiple openings, and wall groupings must be controlled by the framing designer.

SHAPE DOMINANCE

The concept of controlled tension is to arrange shapes to gently guide the viewer's focus from one element or object in a frame to another. This may be achieved through controlled vision or shape dominance. This in turn stimulates use of other elements such as rhythm and movement. The determination of visual importance or controlled vision of an object, photo or framed unit may easily be manipulated by shape, either by the outer frame perimeter or the inner mat opening.

A single oval opening amidst a sea of eleven rectangular openings in a multi-opening mat will attract shape dominance, or greater visual importance. Three oval openings with seven rectangular and two square openings will better balance the visual dom-



Photo 5: The accented parallel v-groove reflects the double line of the downstroke on the left leg of the letter "A". This creates a repetition of shape while also using color and line. Limited edition print by Karlgeorg Hoefler, author's private collection.

inance depending upon the location of the shapes within the frame (see Diagram 1).

The size, subject, and surface decoration involving line, color, etc. also add to shape dominance. An oval surrounding a portrait will often dominate an oval surrounding a garden snapshot. An oval opening would also have less visual strength if there were ruling pen or tiered mat lines, or several surrounding rectangles, even if it were the only oval in a twelve opening mat.

Since a shape consists of a border or outline, and visual control is the goal in framing, if you elect to showcase shape as an element through pen lines, tiered mats, cathedral mat, or offset corners, the execution must be clean and perfected. The parallel between the diagonal within the image and the v-groove qualifies shape as an element (see Photo 5). The idea is to make a statement so shape becomes recognized as an elected element within the design and is

counted in the "three to five" design principle limitation.

SHAPE AND MASS

Shape is a two-dimensional design, mass is the three-dimensional version of the same thing. In life, they are essentially inseparable.

The same four categories of shape are found in mass: natural, geometric, abstract, and non-objective. Mass in its actual three-dimensional entity is one of the most important elements of design, the human figure being the most widely used natural mass.

For geometric mass, a square becomes a cube and still represents stability. A circle becomes a sphere and represents satisfying wholeness and eternity, like the earth. A tri-

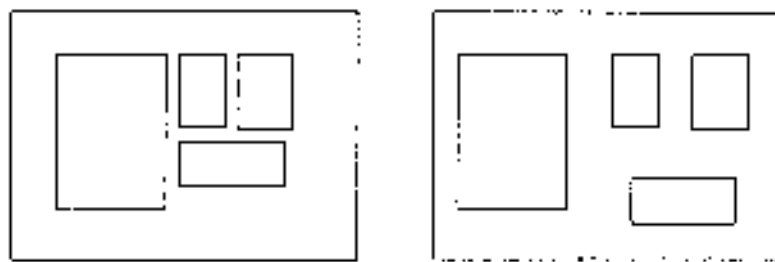


Diagram 2: Openings placed very close together create too much tension, while those placed far apart feel unrelated. Too much void is equally as distracting, unless lettering is to be added surrounding the openings.

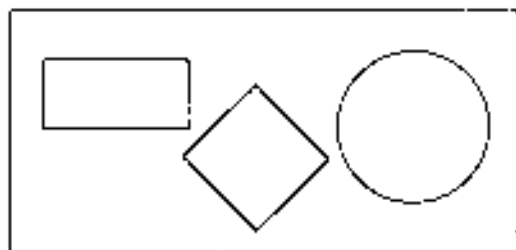


Diagram 3: The placing of curves next to straight lines in a multiple opening mat creates too much negative space.

angle becomes a pyramid and often symbolizes religious, or spiritual monuments such as the Great Pyramids of Egypt. Two additional shapes evolve with three-dimensional mass. The cube evolves into a cylinder as seen in vases, thimbles, spools, etc. The pyramid evolves into a cone as often seen in artistic glass and pottery designs.

Abstract masses are often sculpture or the oddities that we are asked to frame. Meanwhile, non-objective masses are generally organic in nature, such as a piece of blown glass. These somewhat bimorphic shapes are ones inspired by nature without truly representing them.

They are curvilinear shapes that, in art, suggest the possibility of life.

Shape in the form of mass is what the framer deals with when framing objects and keepsakes. Using the power of visual control, concentration, shape dominance, and emotional control by using placement, interaction, and balance is vital in this type of framing design. As a successful frame designer, you must maintain total control over the visual impact of the completed design.

SHAPE RELATIONSHIPS AND MULTIPLE OPENINGS

Understanding shape and mass, as defined in this article, is not nearly as important as realizing their impact on the viewer. The relation-

ship of shapes to their surroundings have a major effect on a successful design. The shape itself is considered a positive area. The shape surrounding it is considered the negative area. These are most commonly known as positive and negative



Photo 6: The right half of the pieces are hung with negative shapes in mind. The center left square hung at the diagonal leaves a great deal of void around it, so by moving it higher than the top horizontal helps balance it. The two certificates left are placed slightly too far from the grouping leaving a negative shape too wide to be visually comfortable.

space, yet they are indeed created by the presence or void of shapes.

Negative shapes are equally as important as positive shapes. For example, if openings are cut too closely together in a multi-opening mat, the negative shapes will be too weak to properly balance the images. When this happens the controlled tension becomes intense and uncomfortable (see Diagram 2).

On the other hand, shapes placed too widely apart seem disconnected from each other, a surplus of bad negative shape occurs, and a poor design is the result. When this happens, the vast shape created by improperly placed openings develops space that must be counted as an element. (See upcoming Part VII: Space).

Another situation to watch out for is the placement of curves next to straight lines in a multiple opening composition (see Diagram 3). This also creates too much negative space through bad shape composition. A rectangle, diamond, and circle placed together leave vast areas of voided space that attracts undue attention away from the art.

A wall grouping is another design in which multiple shapes might end up together on a wall (see Photo 6). The same problem occurs with too much space being created by voids of negative shapes being put together.

Often the proper use of shapes in rela-

tion to placement and the creation of positive versus negative space is instinctive. There are few hard and fast rules for how far apart openings must be placed, or how many work well in a given outer perimeter shape. The art will tell you when the spaces are correct—if you listen to it.

When counting elements, shape is more difficult to label than line, color, or texture, but it is every bit as important. Understand that lines produce shapes, that shapes become mass, and that too much negative shape creates negative space that must be dealt with.

Intensity and Value are the subjects of the next installment in this series, and in the meantime... mind your positive and negatives! ■