Leading the eye

A picture is successful when every detail falls into place and each element—light, tone, color, texture, form, and spacing—helps to create a clear and lucid image. Every inch of this painting by the Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch (1629–1694) contributes to the design. A woman chooses some bread from a boy’s basket. De Hooch leads your eye past them into a courtyard and through an arch to the canal bank, where a neighbor watches from her doorway. Maybe she sent the boy around to the house. Areas of sandy color—the tiles, the dais under the chair, the cushion and curtains, the house opposite—also lead the eye in a circular movement.

Light from the courtyard shines on the woman’s face.

PAINTING STRUCTURE
A great deal of work goes into making things fit effortlessly into place. A picture must be organized on the surface and into depth, and the two must work together. Here geometry has been used to define the space. A grid structures the surface (the placing of doors and windows) while perspective recession (pp. 28–29) creates a sense of depth. The two plans meet in a line running across the bottom of the window and along the courtyard wall to the vanishing point beside the woman in the doorway.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL
De Hooch loved painting light shining onto walls and through windows. Here a pattern of blue leaves and birds frames two shadows; on the left is the name Cornelia Janne and the trademark of the man’s family, on the right that of the woman’s family and the name Cornelia or Cornelia. Glinting golden in the sunlight, with the orange curtains echoing the half curtains of this interior.

A Boy Bringing Bread

PIETER DE HOOCH 1629–1694; 28 x 23 cm (73.5 x 59 cm)

De Hooch’s delightful painting shows a simple domestic scene. A boy has brought a basket of bread, and the woman of the house chooses a leaf. It is the kind of event that happens every day; the very ordinariness of the scene is its charm. But by treating the subject with enormous poise and dignity, de Hooch creates a painting that celebrates the pleasures of a quiet life in which simple activities are valued and enjoyed. Lucid geometry establishes a calm and ordered setting, while gentle sunlight infuses the scene with warm colors that suggest peace and well-being; it is hard to imagine anything disrupting the tranquility of this household, which seems so remote from the speed and noise of contemporary life.
Symmetry/asymmetry

FACES, FLOWERS, FRUIT — symmetry is a natural phenomenon. Or is it? The two sides of a face are surprisingly different. If each side is repeated to make exactly symmetrical versions, the two faces look like different people. Our bodies may look symmetrical, but we don’t experience them as such. Most of us use one hand and foot far more than the other, and we are conscious of our hearts being off-center. Our relationship to symmetry is therefore ambivalent. A symmetrical composition, around a central axis, is very pleasing if, like our faces, it contains minor differences; but perfect symmetry, in which one half of a picture mirrors the other exactly, can seem either boring or uncanny. It is also very static. Asymmetry, in which there is an obvious difference between the two halves, is a more dynamic option, but it requires a subtle balancing act of another kind if the imbalance is to appear interesting rather than awkward.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews
THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH
1780: 29 x 46 (71 x 115 cm)
The famous English portrait artist, Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88) painted these newlyweds on their farm in Suffolk. It was unusual for him to place his sitters in a real landscape, so the picture must be a celebration of ownership. This may explain the picture’s asymmetry, with the vast sweep of land on the right and the couple placed to one side on the left. The couple seem to be in a garden — the young wife would not be willing to venture far in her ice blue gown and pink satin slippers — yet the cornfield is only a few feet away. With his gun under his arm and dog by his side, the master looks more at home in these surroundings than his wife.

A CENTRAL PIVOT
The tree is the fulcrum of the composition. It unifies the figures, whose mass is balanced on the far right by three spindly trees and a clump of wheat sheaves. The principle is similar to that of a teeterboard, in which an object is balanced by a small weight, out on a limb...

THE VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINTS
GEORGE AND ANTHONY ABBOT
Antwerp (1600s) 161 x 110 (40 x 28 cm)
The Virgin and Child appear in the orb of the sun, whose warmth radiates out in exquisite wave patterns. A line of dark trees at shrubbery height separates heaven from earth, the vision from the two saints. St. George wears elegant silver armor decorated with gold rings, wrapped around his legs in a snake’s skin. His broad-brimmed hat echoes St. Anthony Abbot’s hat. The older man is accompanied by his attributes — a hog and the bell rung by his father to summon alms from the faithful.

BALANCE OF OPPOSITES
Juan de Juanes’s composition pivots around a central vertical axis running through the Virgin, bell, and hog. The saints are balanced as evenly as the figures on a revolving weather vane. St. Anthony faces us and St. George turns away. It is a balance of opposites: dark/light, old/young, bearded/ clean-shaven, humble/dense (humble) corn. Even the plants grow in a symmetrical pattern, but the horses head breaks the symmetry. Symmetry gives equal weight to the two sides of a painting as surely as a well-balanced pair of scales. It was used by some artists as a symbol of divine harmony (pp. 16–17).
Sacred geometry

How can composition be used to make a statement of religious belief? Artists in Renaissance Italy concentrated on celebrating the order and harmony that they thought governed the universe, since God's creation must be rational and beautiful. Mathematics was the key; it demonstrated that everything had its place in a logical system, ordered by divine intelligence. In his book of 1435, On Painting, the architect and theoretician Leon Battista Alberti applied this belief to painting. He invented the term "composition" to describe the application of mathematics and geometry in organizing all the parts of a picture into a lucid and harmonious design that exemplified the clarity of God's creation.

Numbers, therefore, determined the relationship between parts of a painting: certain numbers being considered especially significant: three (Holy Trinity), five (Christ's wounds), and seven (days of the creation).

The Baptism of Christ
PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA
1440-45. 5'6 x 3'9 1/2 x 1'6 1/2 cm. tempera on wood.

Piero della Francesca was a mathematician as well as a painter. The stillness and grandeur of his altarpiece comes from the mathematics governing its design. Christ stands at the center; the vertical axes runs through the dove and the water trickling from the bowl, to Christ's face, hands, and leg. The composition is based on the ratio of 3:2 - thirds (where the tree and St. John stand) and halves (Christ's loincloth where the horizontal division of the square meets the circle).

Divine symmetry

Christ's body forms the central axis of the composition. The other elements are arranged on either side of the cross in almost perfect symmetry (divine perfection). Mary and the saints are placed in standing and kneeling pairs with almost identical poses. The angels mirror one another in almost every detail; even their glances are paired to create communion between Heaven and earth. One angel looks up, the other down. The Virgin and St. John look down at the kneeling saints, who gaze heavenward.

INTERCONNECTING SHAPES

The clarity and unity of Piero's picture also comes from its geometry: a circle (heaven, spirit) over a rectangle (earth, matter). Linking the two is the dove (Holy Spirit) placed at the center of the circle, and along the top of the rectangle. The equilateral triangle enclosing Christ (his apex at his toe) represents the descent of the Holy Spirit. Christ forms the link between Heaven and earth, spirit and matter.

TONAL SYMBOLISM

The sun and moon above the cross indicate Christ's immortality; the cloud above his head symbolizes his divinity. The form and his dominion over the realms of day and night, life and death, good and evil. To convey this idea, the angels were dark and the sun, darker.

CLEANSING BLOOD

The angels collect the blood flowing from Christ's wounds. Raphael emphasizes the cross as a reminder, washing our sins with his blood. He portrays the world's cleansing of guilt, sin, and sin.

ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

The garments of Mary and the saints balance against dark and serene against joy, since Christ's supreme sacrifice brings joy to humankind.

SUPPORTING ROLES

Mary, Magdalene, and St. Jerome are all associated with mourning. The stone at the angel's hand indicates his dress, which is exposed to the sun. The theme of the redemption through sacrifice.

FOREGROUND REALITY

The cross, mustard, and angels are set against an idealized landscape with no middle ground to connect the two realms. This is a devotional image, not quite of this world. The saints act as mediators between us and the realm of divinity, kneeling before the cross just as worshipers kneel before the painting.