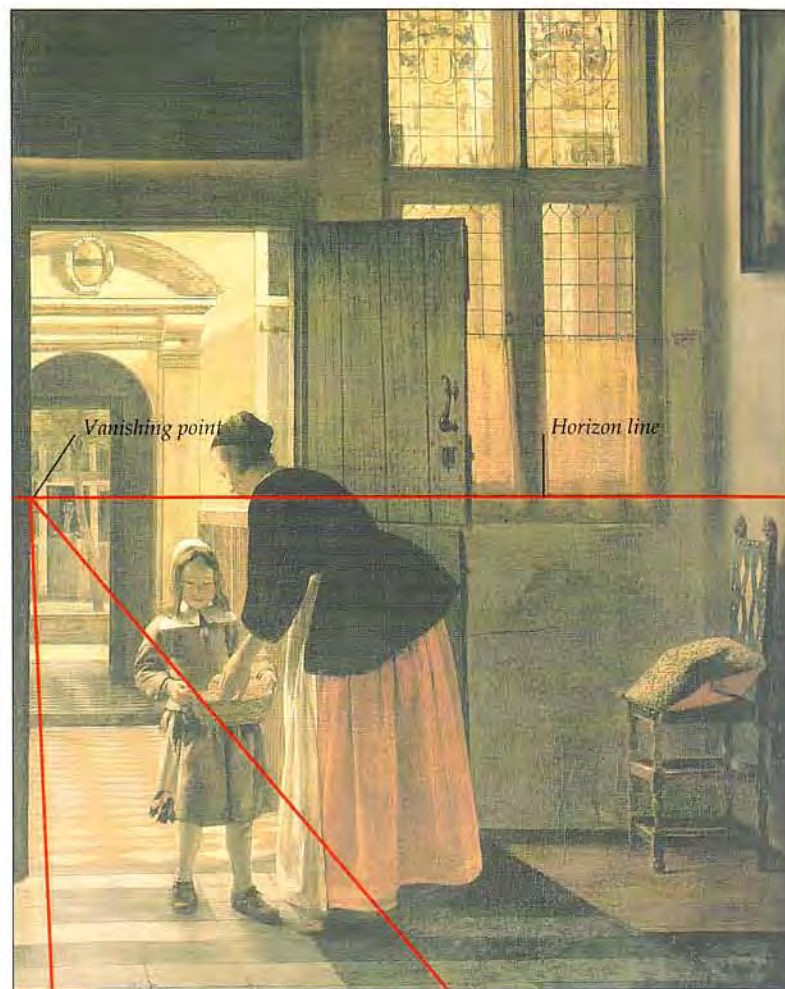


# Leading the eye

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 (1629–1684) 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

**VISUAL LINK**  
A woman, framed in a doorway on the far bank, looks toward us. Her gaze links foreground and background (the surface and the interior), while her curiosity mirrors ours.



**COLOR PLAY**  
The woman's red skirt is the only intense color in the picture; her black jacket is also the darkest area. So as not to compete for attention, the boy is dressed in brownish gray midtones. The two are united by the light from the courtyard that illuminates her face, his head and shoulders, and the basket of bread.

**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 made to 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 shields; on the left is the name Cornelis Jansz and the trademark of the man's family, on the right that of the woman's family and the name Marnic or Maerti – indicating the occupants of this quiet and ordered home. Through the leaded window, the viewer can see the house across the way, glowing golden in the sunlight, with its orange curtains echoing the half curtains of this interior.



## A Boy Bringing Bread

PIETER DE HOOCH 1664; 29 x 23 1/4 in (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 loaf. 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 tranquillity of this household, which seems so remote from the speed and noise of contemporary life.

**COLOR CONTRAST**  
De Hooch uses two sets of colors in the painting: warm (yellow, orange, red, brown) and cool (blue-gray), plus black and white.

**WOMAN'S CURVES**  
The architecture, with its emphasis on verticals and horizontals, is the perfect foil for the curving volume of the woman as she inclines toward the small upright of the boy. She, the boy, and the cushion are the only soft, rounded forms in the picture.

**LATE ADDITIONS**  
The woman and boy are so central to the picture that it is surprising to learn that they were painted last. Infrared photographs reveal that de Hooch made an underdrawing in which the perspective scheme and architecture were planned before the figures were added.

**VARYING TEXTURES**  
One's eye travels along the floor tiles, moving through spaces painted in alternating bands of light and dark, warm and cool. The shady gray of the interior changes to warm orange in the courtyard, to gray under the arch, sandy brown on the canal, gray-brown on the canal wall, and pale brown on the far side.

**HERALDIC SHIELD**  
The escutcheon over the doorway is nothing more than a dark blue band across a gold disk glinting in the sunlight. It is highly likely that de Hooch invented it; since, despite their seemingly detailed realism, his courtyard views were often imaginary.



# Symmetry/asymmetry

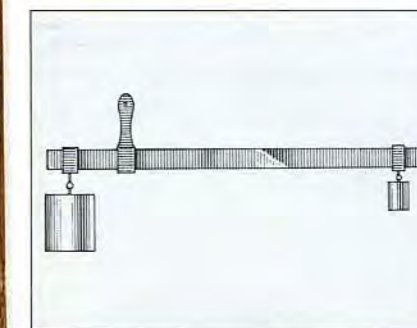
FACES, FLOWERS, FRUIT – symmetry is a natural phenomenon. Or is it? The two sides of a face are surprisingly different. If each side is repeated to make exactly symmetrical versions, the two faces look like different people. Our bodies may look symmetrical, but we don't experience them as such. Most 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.



Point of balance and center of composition

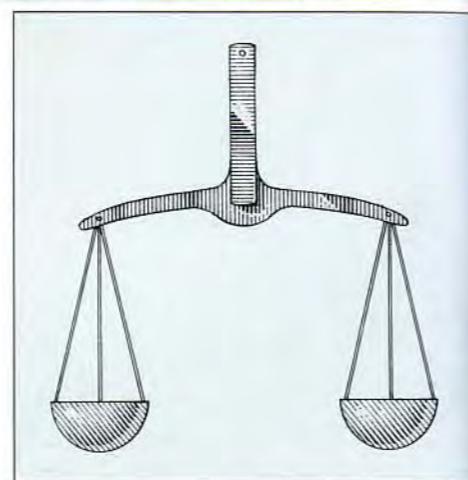


**THE VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINTS GEORGE AND ANTHONY ABBOT**  
Antonio Pisanello; mid-15th century;  
18 1/2 x 11 1/2 in (47 x 29 cm); egg tempera on wood  
The Virgin and Child appear in the orb of the sun, whose warmth radiates out in exquisite wave patterns. A line of dark trees at shoulder height separates heaven from earth, the vision from the two saints. St. George wears elegant silver armor decorated with gold trim; wrapped around his legs is a snarling dragon. His broad-brimmed hat echoes St. Anthony Abbot's halo. The older man is accompanied by his attributes – a hog and the bell rung by his order to summon alms from the faithful.



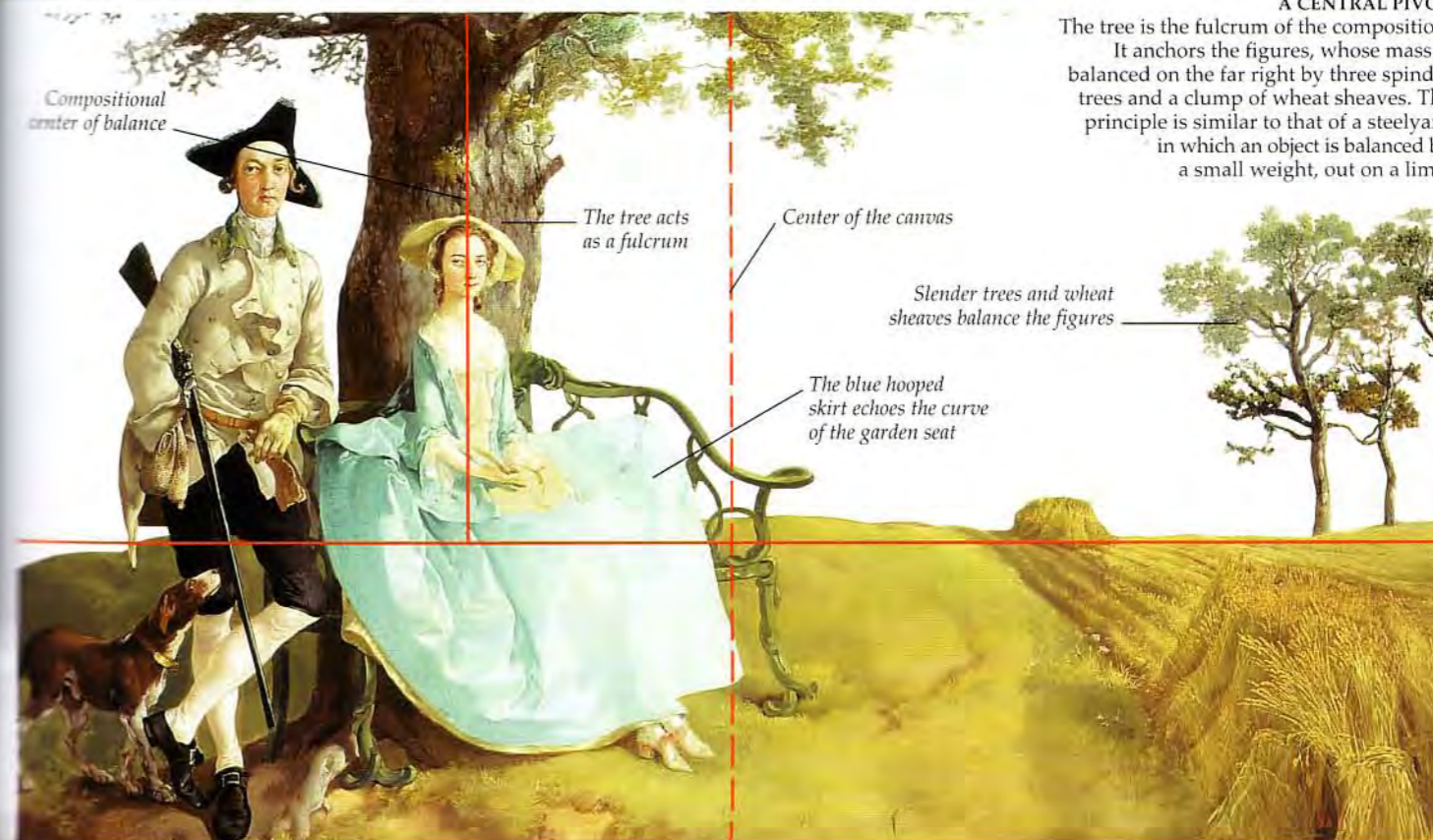
A CENTRAL PIVOT

The tree is the fulcrum of the composition. It anchors 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 steelyard in which an object is balanced by a small weight, out on a limb.



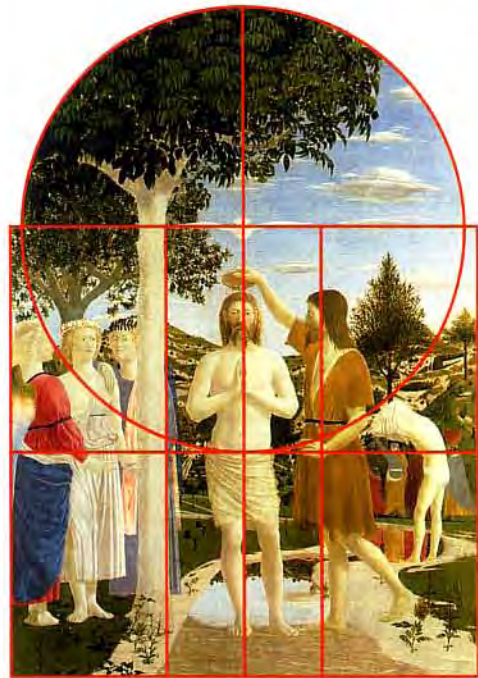
BALANCE OF OPPOSITES

Pisanello'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, humbly dressed/flamboyant. Even the plants grow in a symmetrical pattern, but the horses heads break 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).



## INTERCONNECTING SHAPES

The clarity and meaning 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 (its apex at his toe) represents the descent of the Holy Spirit; Christ forms the link between Heaven and earth, spirit and matter.



## The Baptism of Christ

**PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA**  
1440-45; 5 ft 6 in x 3 ft 9 1/2 in (167 x 116 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 axis runs through the dove and the water trickling from the bowl, to Christ's face, hands, navel, 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 lies where the horizontal division of the square meets the circle).

Their sashes float on symmetrical arabesques



The pose of the angels is almost identical

## 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.



The angel holds a chalice to collect the blood of Christ

The angels balance on tiny clouds

## TONAL SYMBOLISM

The sun and moon above the cross indicate Christ's immortality (his conquest of time) and his dominion over the realms of day and night, life and death, good and evil. To regenerate the idea, the angels wear dark and light, respectively.

## CLEANSING BLOOD

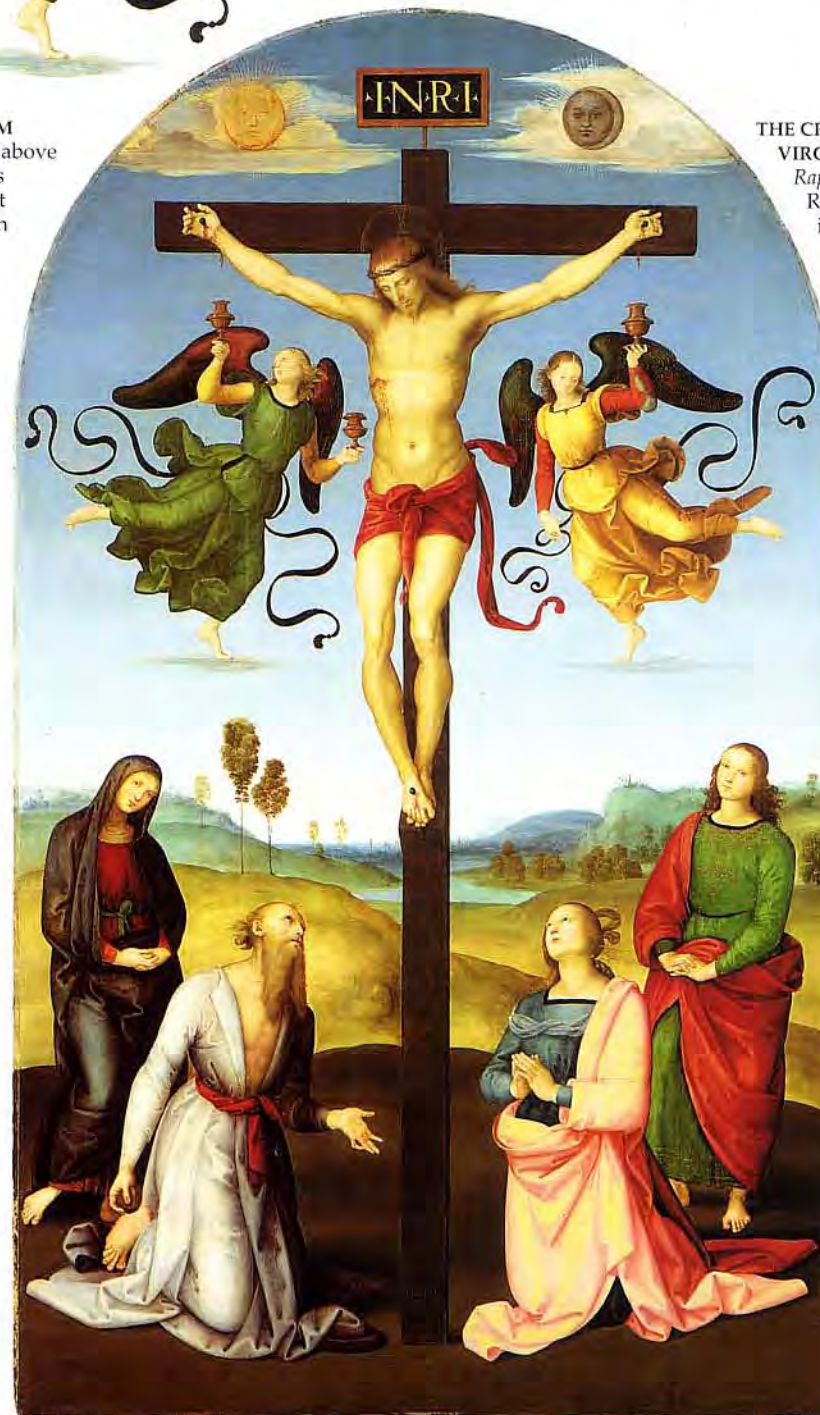
The angels collect the blood flowing from Christ's wounds. Raphael emphasizes Jesus's role as a redeemer, washing away our sins with his blood. He portrays a world cleansed of guilt, sorrow, and sin.

## ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

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

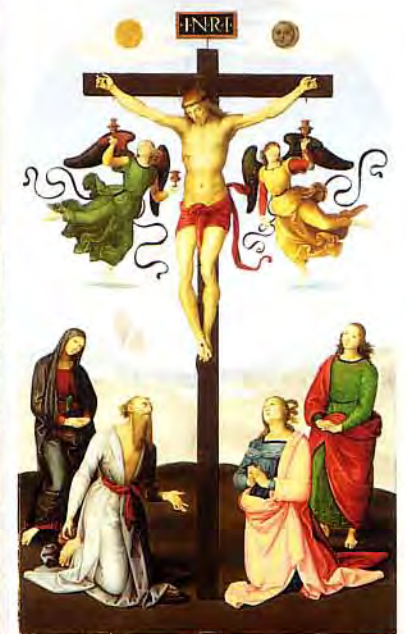
## SUPPORTING ROLES

Mary Magdalene and St. Jerome are both associated with penitence. The stone in St. Jerome's hand indicates his years spent in the desert in penance and prayer; his chest is exposed so he can beat his breast. The theme of the painting is redemption through sacrifice.



## THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST WITH THE VIRGIN MARY, SAINTS, AND ANGELS

**Raphael; 1502; 9 ft 1 1/2 in x 5 ft 3 3/8 in (280.7 x 165.1 cm)**  
Raphael's altarpiece, dedicated to St. Jerome, is a devotional image designed for prayer and meditation. The Virgin and St. John stand on either side of the cross while St. Jerome and Mary Magdalene kneel in contemplation of Christ's sacrifice. The calm and balanced composition creates a profound sense of peace, order, and harmony. The clear light and brilliant color give no hint of Christ's suffering. This serene picture is consoling rather than realistic.



## FOREGROUND REALITY

The cross, mourners, and angels are set against an idyllic Umbrian 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 worshippers knelt before the painting.