

A balancing act

A sense of balance helps the artist successfully negotiate the challenges of the compositional tightrope.

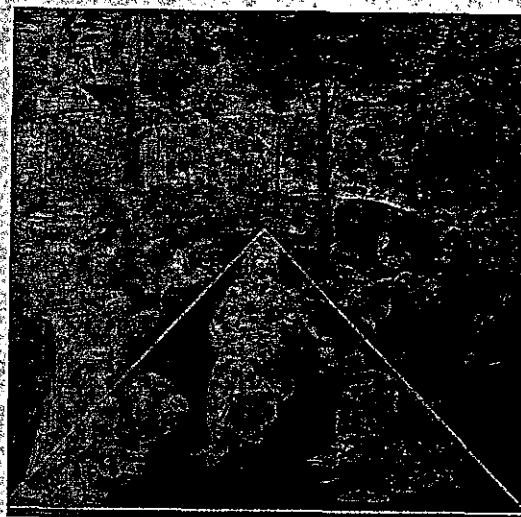
A good composition stops a viewer in his tracks. Once you have his attention, you can reel him in, guide him around your work, and, above all, keep him interested. The art of creating the perfect composition has preoccupied artists for centuries. Back in the days of the Renaissance, artists used the "Golden Section," a rather complex mathematical theory based on current notions of ideal proportion as a geometrical framework for perfectly balanced compositions. Although the approach to composition is much more relaxed and intuitive nowadays, balance remains key. Below are some of the core compositional approaches worth bearing in mind as you design your pictures.

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Compositional maps

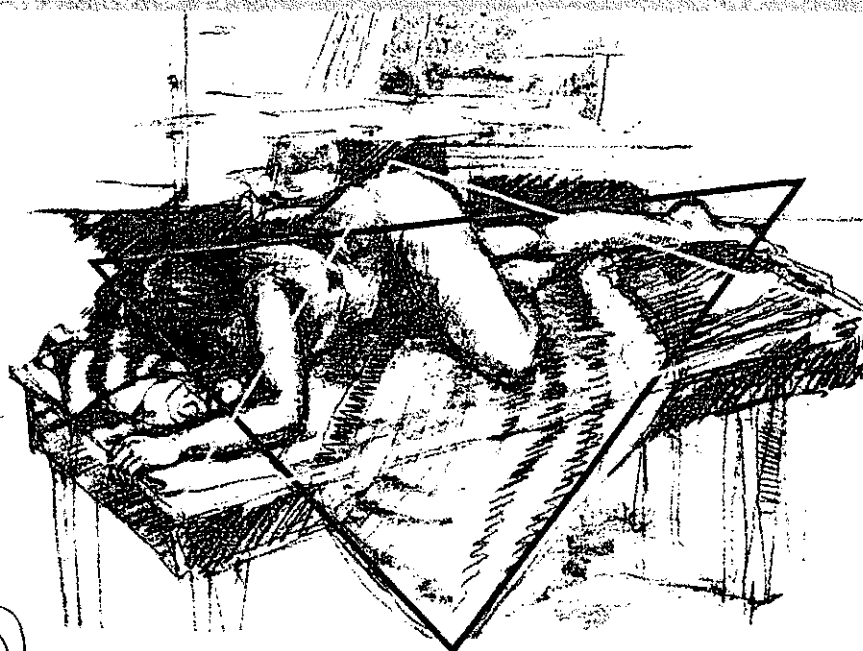
Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci was a genius of composition. Learn more about balance from other Old Masters such as Giotto, Titian, and Raphael. See if you can spot the underlying compositional "map" that directs the onlooker to the main feature of each painting.

In *The Adoration of the Magi* (1481) (right), Leonardo positioned the key figures inside a "triangle" with the head of the Virgin at its apex. She is surrounded by space and the other figures lean in toward her, drawing the eye to the focal point of the painting.



45 The telling triangle

As a naturally dynamic shape that you can tilt any way you want, a triangle is a great starting point for arranging effective compositions. Set it on its base for a stable and grounded composition or on a point for a more energetic image.



A high viewpoint and triangular composition make this watercolor of coffeepots (above) an arresting, intense image. The eye of the viewer is constantly kept on the move, from one edge of the triangle to the next point, as it takes in each object in turn. The invisible triangle holds the group together and stops the eye getting lost in this richly patterned painting.

You can incorporate more than one triangle into a composition. An inverted triangle (left) interacting with a basic triangle adds extra interest and dynamism to this arrangement.

★ MAKE A WORK OF ART OF YOUR CHOICE ANY MEDIUM ANY SUBJECT THAT USES THE TRIANGLE!