

## BALANCE – SYMMETRY

Balance is concerned with the distribution of visual interest -- what is where in a composition.

There are two systems for controlling balance:

Symmetry	a mirror image
Asymmetry	without symmetry

In this lesson you will:

- Learn about symmetry.

- Make a symmetrically balanced composition.

It is necessary to balance many things in a composition: visual interests (this lesson), unity and variety, figure and ground, realism and abstraction as well as many logistical concerns (time, space, cost, etc.).

### BALANCE

Balance is a skill that everyone uses almost all of their waking hours. It is balance that allows you to stand up and walk around. You balance your checkbook and hopefully find a balance between your academic and social life.

Balance in design is similar to these kinds of balance. You have already had to balance between unity and variety. Your physical sense of balance will play a part in your ability to balance the visual information in a composition.

Visual interest is what you balance in design. Different colors, shapes sizes, etc. create different degrees of interest. It is the distribution of this interest that you need to control. We will study the abstract (non-figurative) aspects of balance to make it easier to understand how balance works. Subject matter changes the situation because different objects can call more (or less) attention to themselves because of their content and relationships to other objects in the image.

Balance can also be described as achieving equilibrium. The problem with this definition is that artists rarely want things to be equal. It usually means that no part of the composition calls too much attention to itself at the expense of the rest of the image. This increases unity, but decreases variety, and hence interest.

Balance is usually a desirable characteristic of a composition. There are times, however, when it is desirable to deliberately throw the balance off in order to call more attention to some aspect of an image. For this lesson we will attempt to achieve balance as a way of learning how to control attention in a piece of art.

There are two systems for achieving balance: symmetry and asymmetry.

The word symmetry comes from the Greek roots syn, meaning with or together, and metron, meaning measure.

### SYMMETRY

Symmetry means a mirror image -- one side is the mirror image of the other. Symmetry can occur in any orientation as long as the image is the same on either side of the central axis.



This type of image has great appeal -- it makes for "good" shape relationship. Many people automatically gravitate to symmetry. We are symmetrical after all -- two eyes, two ears, etc... Look around at consumer products and graphics (printed materials) to see how many use symmetry. You will find that it is the dominant organizational concept.

Symmetrical balance is formal balance.

### SYMMETRICAL BALANCE

A vertical axis is required to achieve balance with symmetry. Part of the reason is that we have struggled throughout our lives to perfect our balance in order to stand, walk, ride a bike, etc... To do this we must have exactly the same weight on both sides of our bodies. Our axis of symmetry is vertical and this makes a good model for symmetry in visual information.

Symmetrical balance is also called formal balance because a form (formula) is used -- a mirror image about a vertical axis. The results look formal, organized and orderly.

There is a strong emphasis on the center axis in symmetry since all of the information is reflected from there. This should be taken into consideration when designing with symmetry. It is easy to over emphasize the center.

Symmetrical balance guarantees left to right balance, which is the most important aspect of balance. But there is more to balance than that. Top to bottom balance is also important. Most images seem more stable if the bottom seems slightly heavier. If the top seems too heavy the composition can look precarious.

Balance between the center and the outsides of the image must also be considered. Fortunately our own sense of balance is usually good enough to feel when the balance in a composition is wrong. Pay attention to your own sense of balance and you will do well. Your sense of balance, like anything else, can be improved with practice and experience.

#### TYPES OF SYMMETRY

Symmetry means that the sides are exact mirror images of each other. This limits symmetry's application to abstract images since objects in the real world are not truly symmetrical. Try folding a leaf down the center and notice that the opposite sides do not exactly correspond with one another. Fine artists rarely use pure symmetry for this reason. It is more applicable to commercial designs.

#### NEAR SYMMETRY

Near symmetry is based on symmetry but the two halves are not exactly the same. Slight variations will probably not change the balance but there is more potential for variety and hence more interest. When the sides become too different, symmetry ceases to exist and balance must depend on other concepts (asymmetry).

Near symmetry is more versatile than pure symmetry. It is used in many graphic images since type throws off the symmetry but the balance is still achieved. It is also occasionally used for formal fine art images, especially early Christian religious paintings.



### INVERTED SYMMETRY

Inverted symmetry uses symmetry with one half inverted like a playing cards. This is an interesting variation on symmetry but can make for an awkward balance.



### BIAXIAL SYMMETRY

A symmetrical composition can have more than one axis of symmetry. Biaxial symmetry uses two axes of symmetry -- vertical and horizontal. These guarantee balance: top and bottom as well as left and right. The top and bottom can be the same as the left and right, or they can be different. The most regular and repetitive image occurs when they are the same.

More than two axes are possible. Snow flakes and kaleidoscopes have three axes of symmetry.

Radial symmetry is a related concept and can use any number of axes since the image seems to radiate out from the center, like a star.

### UNITY AND VARIETY

Symmetrical images have a strong sense of unity because at least half of the image is repeated. At the same time they lack variety because only half is unique. A biaxial image is only unique in one fourth of its format since that fourth is repeated in all the corners.

When the top/bottom and left/right are the same, only one eighth is unique. As the repetition increases, so does the unity. In other words symmetrical images are usually well balanced and formal with good unity, but can lack excitement since they are so repetitive.

The strong sense of order and repetition make symmetrical images more acceptable to many people. That is why they are used so often in the applied arts. It is for the same reason that symmetry is rarely used in the fine artist. It is not that order is not wanted, but rather that variety is wanted to generate interest and to give the artist more freedom.

#### ASYMMETRY

Asymmetry, also known as informal balance, means without symmetry. You will study asymmetry next.

#### Project

##### SYMMETRICAL COMPOSITION

Make a symmetrically balanced collage using only circles, triangles and/or rectangles. The shapes can overlap or be trimmed to make new shapes. Up to five colors may be used. The composition may have any axis of symmetry. Biaxial, radial or inverted symmetry may be used. There should be no reference to subject matter. Make the project on a 9 inch by 12 inch piece of colored paper. A sheet of 12 by 18 paper can be used as a border.

Decide what colors you will use. Try stacking several sets of colored paper, varying the order and the amount of each that shows until you find a color scheme that will work. Try to make all of the colors equally visible, but vary the amount of each to get more variety.

Try to make all of the colors operate as figure in the design. Also try to make all the colors act as ground so that there is not one background.



The collage rough becomes the finished project when you glue down the pieces.

#### COLLAGE ROUGH

Move all of the parts of the composition around trying different combinations, proportions and relationships before you are satisfied. Try taking pieces off. If they are not missed, leave them off. Also try adding more pieces if part of the image lacks interest. Working this way is called using a collage rough. A collage is not done until the last piece is glued in place.

Because you are using only five colors and geometric shapes, unity and balance are more or less assured. It is interesting that you need to work toward getting. Use your sense of balance to determine if the image is correctly balanced. It should not look top or bottom heavy or be too crowded in the center or along the edges.

When you are satisfied with the composition, measure, mark and carefully glue the image together. Since there may be many layers of paper involved, either glue pieces from the top of the stack down or from the bottom up.