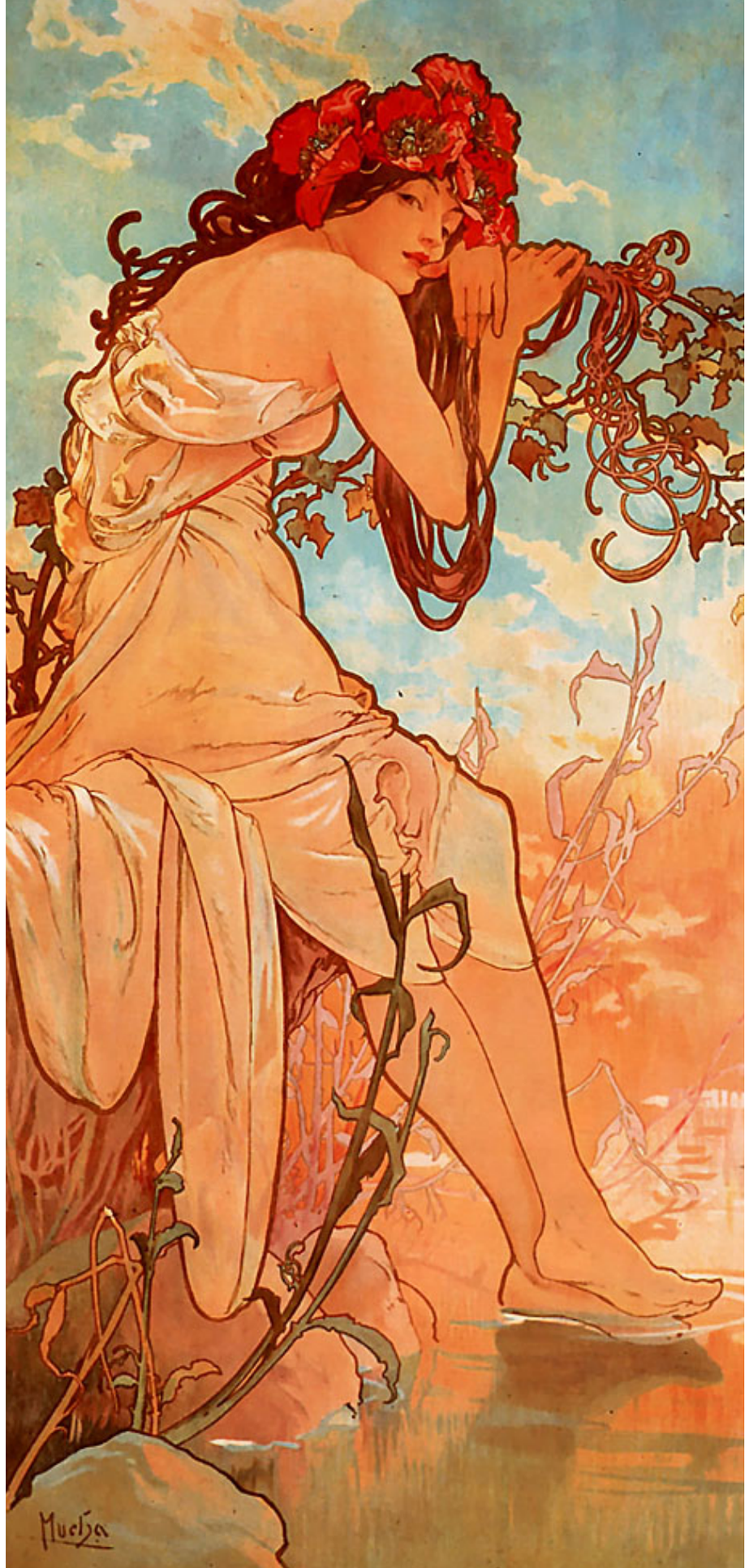


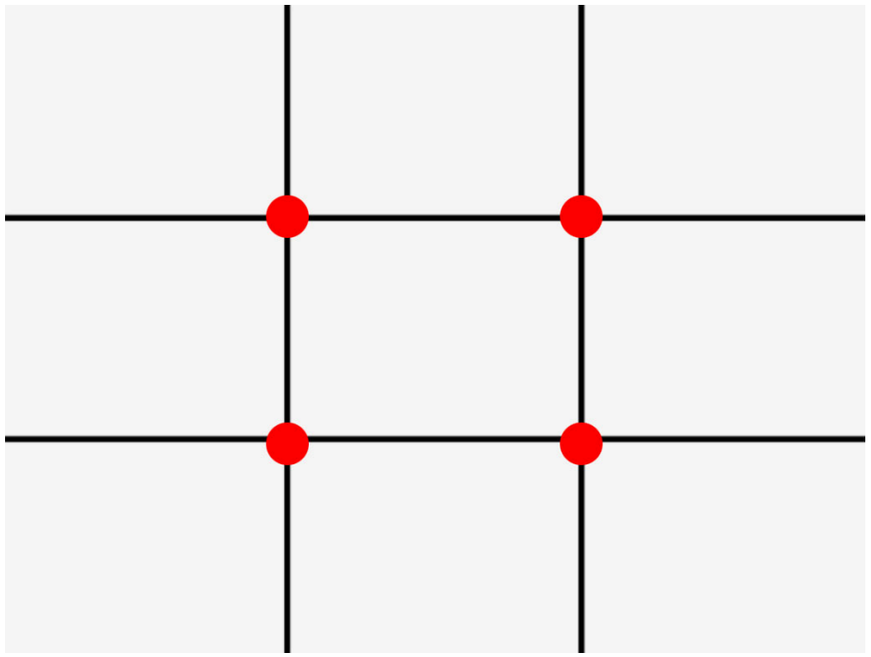
ART ASSIGNMENT #12A

A Deeper Dive Into Composition

Alphonse Mucha, *The Seasons - Summer,* 1896.

- **In this class, I'll be bringing in lots of topics that have already been covered in past sessions, *especially* Elements and Principles of Art such as Color, Shape, Space, Balance, Contrast and Harmony, as well as the *Rule of Thirds* and the *Fibonacci Spiral*. These are all key learnings we need to have for building up successful visual compositions.**







WHAT DOES THE TERM 'COMPOSITION' MEAN IN ART?

- **The term 'composition' refers to how an artwork is structured by its creator in order to:**
  - ***Engage the viewer***
  - ***Keep the viewer's eyes moving through the piece***
  - ***Effectively communicate a story, mood or message***

- **In other words, it's the way different Elements of Art (Color, Shape, Line, Space, etc.) are combined/arranged by the artist in space and how different Principles of Art (Movement, Variety, Unity, Emphasis, etc.) are developed.**

- **Composition design is about acknowledging the "whole", and understanding that a visual piece *is not* just about one part, or seeing each area/element as being separate, but about how everything works *together*.**

- Learning about Composition can seem daunting at first, as there's *so* much involved. As long as you continue learning, you practice analyzing successful works created by artists throughout history with this knew knowledge you've gained, and you start making mindful use of these tools and strategies in your original works, you'll start seeing *immense* difference in the quality and success of your own work.



Alphonse Mucha, *The Feather, 1899.*

- **A lot of beginner artists skip over learning about Composition and this is a *huge* mistake, as no amount of mastery over your drawing/painting medium, or even choosing a beautiful and interesting subject to draw/paint (or having a great concept to work with) will automatically lead to a successful piece that people will connect with, find interesting or visually pleasing. There will *always* be at least some amount of strategizing and planning to do in-between the creation of the concept and the production of the final piece.**

- **If the artist has no clue about Composition, it's easy for her/him to create pieces that are confusing, overwhelming to look at, or simply not very interesting.**

- **On the contrary, if the artist has *average* skill with the drawing/painting medium on hand, but she/he has a good understanding about Composition, she/he could create a very appealing, balanced and harmonious artwork that's able to communicate a story, mood or message using even a relatively simple subject and a minimal amount of elements.**

- **Just like a music composer takes time to structure a song with notes and harmonies she's/he's placed *intentionally* throughout the beginning/middle/end to take the listener through a journey, so does the visual artist take time to mindfully plan for her/his use of Elements and Principles of Art in order to capture the viewer's attention and keep her/his eyes moving through the piece. Just like a writer needs to "prune" unnecessary characters, lines, actions, etc. in order to keep things simple so that the reader doesn't get confused or bored, so does an artist need to think of simplifying and creating a visual hierarchy so that the viewer's eyes go directly to what matters most.**
- Knowledgeable artists know that great visual compositions (from highly abstract to highly hyperrealistic and everything in-between) *rarely* happen accidentally, and it's not about always working intuitively and getting lucky. There's *always* some amount of planning and even exploration or practice work involved *before* starting the final piece.
- Remember that you have *seconds* to call the viewer's attention and make her/him want to keep looking at your work.



Norman Rockwell, *Nanny,* 1936.

There are two key questions that encapsulate everything else, which I'd recommend always starting with:

- ***<u>What do I want to say?</u>*** **(What's the main message, story, or mood you want to communicate through our piece?)**
- ***<u>How am I going to say it?</u>*** **(How are you going to make use of Elements and Principles of Art to communicate this?)**

Continue coming back to these questions throughout the process and practice self-evaluating when you're done. Ask yourself if you succeeded, as well as *why/why not*.

There is *a lot* to talk about when it comes to Composition.

For today's class, I've broken this topic down into five main topics to continue learning about and making mindful use of as you're creating original pieces, that'll get you well on your way towards creating great visual compositions.

I. Story/Mood/Message

II. Visual Hierarchy + Simplification

III. Flow + Leading Lines

IV. Format + Positioning + Framing

V. Balance + Harmony

I. STORY/MOOD/MESSAGE

- **One of the first things to give thought to when starting to plan for a new piece, is the story, mood or message you're looking to convey.**
- **Whether you're planning for a full scene with a background, middleground and foreground with a vast array of elements, or will be working on a piece that centers around a single common/everyday object with little-to-no background, or anything in-between, you should be looking to transmit *something* through it.**
- **If it's a more complex piece that includes human figures, etc. who're doing specific actions, then perhaps there's more of a specific story/ narrative to the piece. If the piece is a still life arrangement, perhaps it's simply just a mood or a feeling. If it's a human or animal portrait, we're likely looking to communicate the person's or animal's personality and spirit. There's always *something*!**
- Once you've decided, start giving thought to how you can use different Elements of Art such as Color and Shape, and Principles of Art such as Emphasis and Movement to transmit this idea.



Edward Hopper, *Room in New York,* 1932.



Henri Matisse, *Cat with Red Fishes,* 1914.

II. VISUAL HIERARCHY + SIMPLIFICATION

- **The term ‘visual hierarchy’ refers to how we arrange elements in space in order to show their order of importance. We should plan for a focal point and for supportive elements.**

- **By making use of information we’ve learned in past classes on Elements and Principles of Art, we’re able to give certain elements or areas *heavier visual weight*. This will have an impact on what the viewer sees first, second, third, etc. **Refer to class #6****

A few factors that we can play with in order to develop heavier visual weight in certain elements/areas and less in others are:

- *Size* (larger elements call the viewer’s attention more/have a heavier visual weight than smaller elements)
- *Overlapping* (closer elements have a heavier visual weight than elements that are farther away)
- *Detail* (more detailed and/or textured areas will have a heavier visual weight)
- *Contrast* (this can be created with any opposing Elements of Art, such as Color and Value- small vs. large, light vs. dark, detailed vs. blurred, etc.)
- *Placement in space* (elements that are close to the edges will call our attention less and isolated objects usually call our attention more than objects that are in groups)

II. VISUAL HIERARCHY + SIMPLIFICATION



Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol, 1875.*

- **Less if often more in a drawing or painting, and it's important to keep simplification in mind. By removing the "noise"/unimportant detail, and making sure that we're bringing focus to what matters most, the results are often more impactful, interesting and balanced.**

Here are a few different ways that you can simplify your composition:

- Use a limited color palette or a tried and true color scheme **refer to class 3**
- Compress the range of values
- Develop less detail/sharpness in areas that are not as important
- Consider removing elements that are not contributing to the composition



Maurice de Vlaminck, *Restaurant de la Machine a Bougival,* 1905.



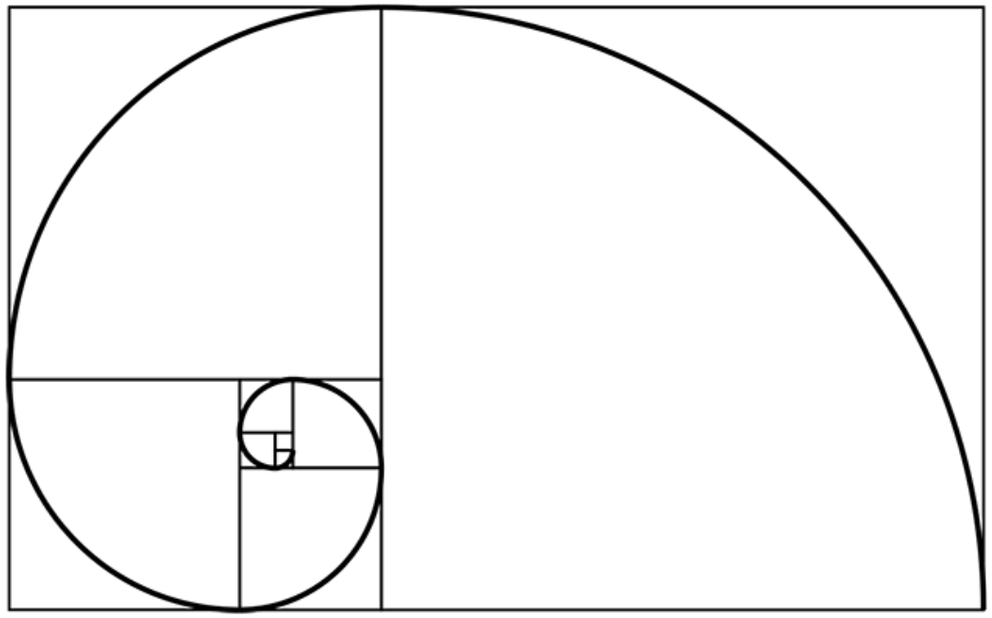
André Derain, *Banks of the Seine at Chatou,* 1899.

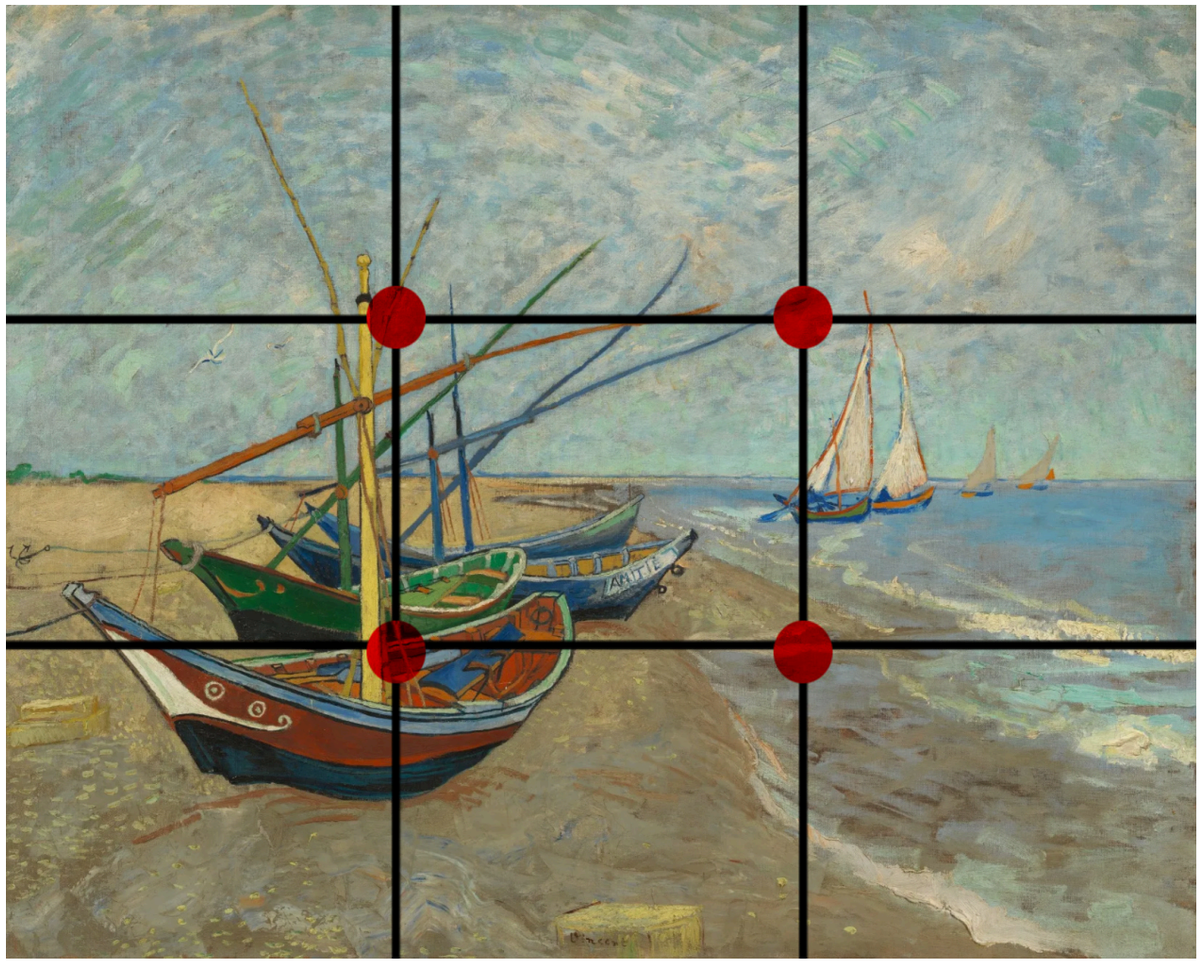
III. FLOW + LEADING LINES

- **One of the main objectives behind designing a composition, is engaging the viewer. As visual artists, we don't only want to capture the viewer's attention immediately, but also keep her/his eyes on the piece for as long as possible.**
- **In order to do this, we must utilize *visual hierarchy* and create a "flow" that leads the viewer's eyes from the most important area/element, to the supportive elements, and finally keep them circling back if the composition lends itself to it. This will lead to movement and that's what we want.**
- We're looking to stay away from drawings/paintings that are stagnant and boring, such as those in which the subject is right smack in the middle of the piece, or pieces in which *everything* has the same amount of visual weight (which makes it so that the viewer doesn't know what to look at), or there's *way* too much symmetry.
- This is why it's great to practice with the *Rule of Thirds* or the *Fibonacci Spiral*, as they lead to visual compositions that are, not only aesthetically pleasing, but also interesting to look at and keep the viewer's eyes flowing. **Refer to class #6**



Mary Cassatt, *Portrait of the Artist,* 1878.





Vincent Van Gogh, *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Les Saintes,* 1888.

III. FLOW + LEADING LINES



Wayne Thiebaud, *Pie Counter,* 1963.

- ***Leading lines*** **or** ***flow lines*** **are suggested/implied (or sometimes very obvious) lines that direct our attention through a painting. They are a very useful tool we can use to create visual flow and to emphasize our focal point(s).**
- ***Converging lines*** **created by linear perspective techniques also result in flow lines that can pull our eyes into the piece and right through to the focal point.**



Claude Monet, *Train in the Snow,* 1875.



Claude Monet, *Road Toward the Farm* 1869.

IV. FORMAT + POSITIONING + FRAMING

- **The format of your piece (rectangle, square, circle, diptych, triptych, etc.) should support, or go hand in hand, with your composition design. The size and proportions of your paper, canvas, etc., is part of your composition!**

  Ex.: Alphose Mucha's paintings were long, vertical rectangles, which supported the length of the single females' body, and the other elements and motifs he added in his designs.

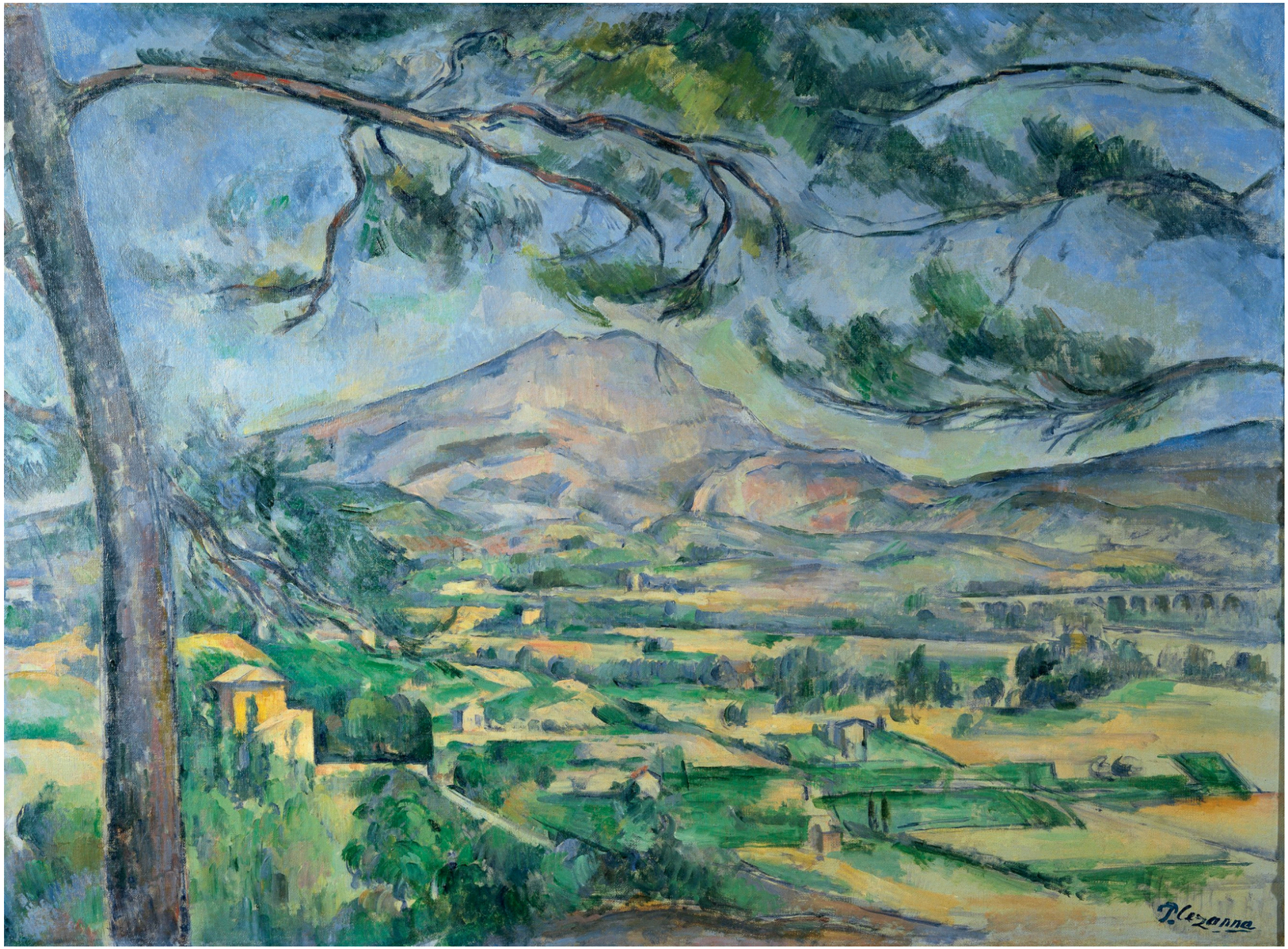
- **The positioning of the subject in space is also essential to consider. As mentioned previously, placing the subject right in the middle of your drawing/painting space is often very boring and will lead to uninteresting pieces that the viewer won't want to look at for very long. It'll also break up the space into equal halves, which is something we usually *don't* want to do, as this leads to a static feel.**

- **By making use of the *Rule of Thirds* or the *Fibonacci Spiral*, your compositions will be not only aesthetically pleasing, but also asymmetrically balanced and interesting to look at because they'll keep the viewer's eyes flowing through the piece.**

- **Using the *Rule of Thirds* or the *Fibonacci Spiral* will also help you develop *negative space* in your visual compositions, which as explained in class #4 is *just as essential* as active areas. We don't want so much negative space that the subject gets lost in the vast emptiness, or so little that the subject appears cramped (or an important part is cropped off). What's *inside* of the drawing/painting space and what's kept *out* is important.**

IV. FORMAT + POSITIONING + FRAMING

- ***Framing* is a technique that can help create a visually pleasing effect, as it integrates the piece, and can also bring attention to the focal point. It involves positioning shapes and other elements to "frame" certain areas of the piece.**
- **Just like when you actually take a painting to get framed so that you "enclose" the image and simultaneously bring attention to it when you hang it up on a wall, you can also create *implied framing* in your drawings or paintings by using elements such as trees, windows, etc. that are already part of the image.**
- It's *not* necessary to force this technique and try to artificially create frames around your focal point(s). Instead, consider how you can arrange and depict what's *already* there to frame important areas.
- **Value and Shape are also Elements of Art that we can use to frame our focal points. For example, a light object or animal can be "framed" by developing dark values around it. Or the shape of the structure of a tunnel can create an implied frame around the train coming through it.**



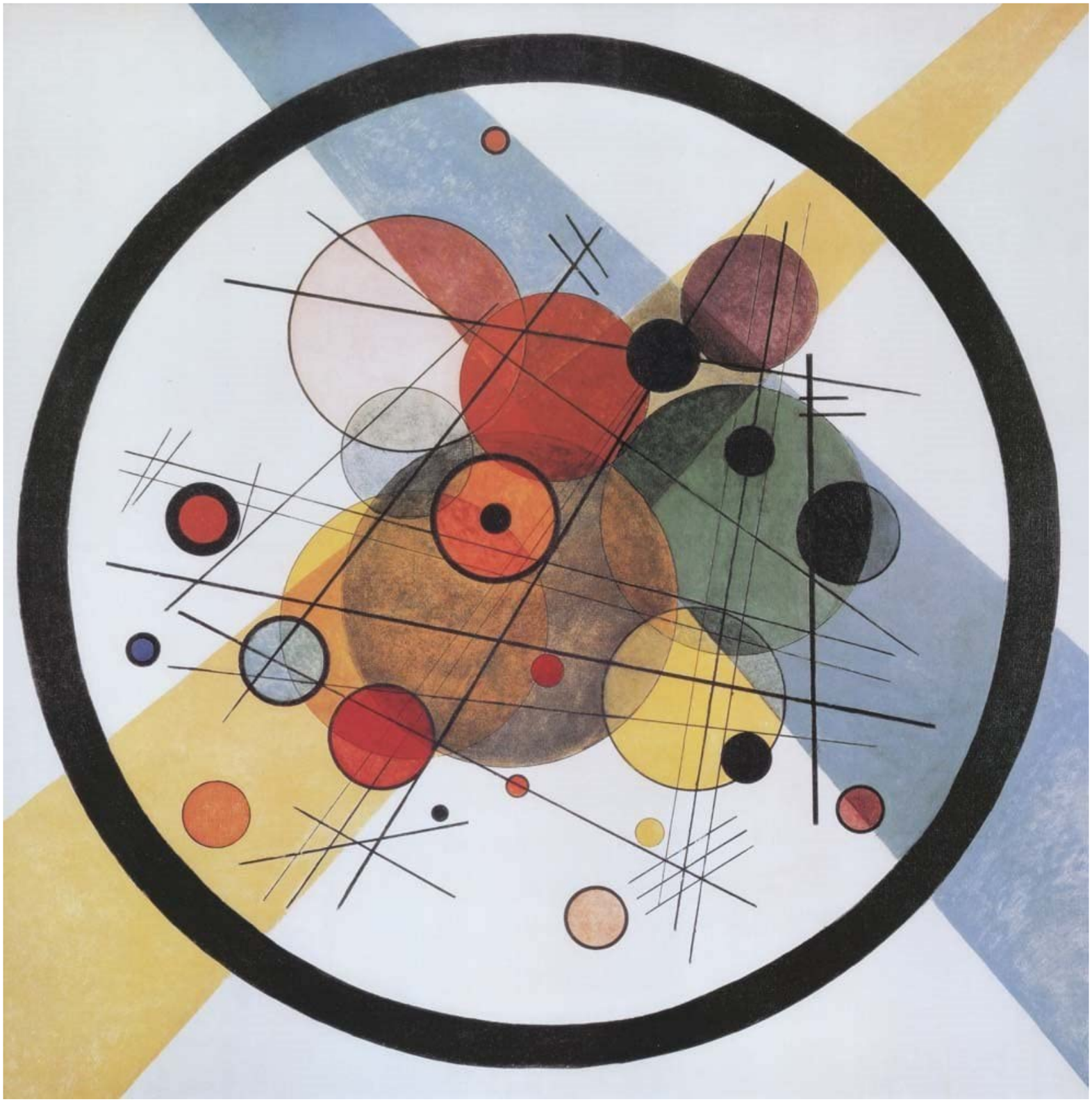
Paul Cezanne, *France Landscape,* 1880.



Claude Monet, *Arrival of the Normandy Train,* 1877.



Sir Winston Churchill, *Racecourse,* 1921.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Circles in a Circle,* 1923.

V. BALANCE AND HARMONY

- Usually, what we're aiming for when working on a drawing or painting, is to create a sense of balance and harmony, as this is what'll be aesthetically pleasing for the viewer.
- **Harmony leads to a sense of cohesiveness in the piece. It's about how all the different parts play with each other to create a "whole". As we talked about in a previous class, it's important that we reach a balance between *variety* and *repetition*.**
- **If there's not enough variety, the visual composition will probably be boring. But if there's no repetition at all, it'll probably look unstructured and "all over the place".**
- We can learn to develop interesting, asymmetrical balance via the placement of the main elements and supportive elements within space according to the *Rule of Thirds*, *Fibonacci Spiral* or similar strategies, as well as by strategically creating heavier and lighter visual weights in our different elements.

V. BALANCE AND HARMONY

- **Look for ways to stress the similarities between the separate parts making up the whole, whether it's through color (color harmonies), line, shape, texture, etc. You want to create a sense of togetherness, *while* keeping a visual hierarchy. **Refer to rhythm and pattern in class #5.***
- **Another key piece of information to consider when it comes to creating balance is that it's best to use odd numbers and not pairs when it comes to the adding elements in space.**
- **Pairs create competition between elements, which can lead the viewer to get confused as to what's most important. Playing with odd numbers will lead to more interesting pieces that are more aesthetically pleasing.**
- There *are* pieces in which the artist intentionally makes use of the Elements and Principles of Art to create anxiety, confusion and/or overwhelm in the viewer. But again, this is done *strategically* and requires knowing the psychological effects that different Elements of Art can have on the viewer **Refer to class #2.*
- You'll always be able to find examples of successful paintings in which "rules" are broken.



John Singer Sargent, *Fisherwoman,* 1913.



Claude Monet, *The Japanese Bridge (The Water Lilly Pond),* 1899.

COPYING THE REFERENCE VS. DESIGNING YOUR COMPOSITION

- **To finish up, it's worth noting the difference between composing a piece, versus simply copying the reference image or whatever it is you have in front of you in real life.**

- **Beginners who haven't learned about composition usually go with simply copying what their seeing to the best of their abilities, and this is *not* the same as composing a visual piece. Unless, they took time to take their own photos or took time to arrange those objects they have in front of them using their knowledge of Elements and Principles of Art, focal points, depth, etc.**

- **However, *even* in those cases in which the composition is original, creating a successful visual piece *is about making artistic choices*. Not about simply copying what you see. **This is okay for studies.****

- A drawing/painting should have the artists' hand in it and, in my opinion, should *enhance* the scene and perhaps be even *more* interesting than the photo itself. It's an *artistic interpretation* of the scene or subject.

- Plus, *rarely* is a reference photo perfect for creating a drawing or painting. Usually, I open my photos in an editing software and at the very least modify the cropping, alter colors, and maybe even edit it (take something out or bring something in, etc.). **Check out class on 13 on How to Use Reference Photos for more ideas.*

CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT #12:

- **Choose 5 objects you have at home and create a still life arrangement making mindful use of Elements and Principles of Art such as color, shape, balance, variety and harmony.**
- **Take at least 10 different photos (feel free to use your phone camera), exploring different angles and perspectives, and moving your elements around. Change the way they group together and overlap over each other to practice coming up with interesting compositions that show depth.**
- **Use your camera's viewfinder to experiment with your positive and negative spaces and cropping/framing.**
- **Don't forget to think of a focal point, supportive elements, and implied lines to pull the viewer in and keep her/his eyes moving.**
- **Once you're done with your photoshoot, choose your three best photos, giving thought to which you feel will lead to a better drawing/painting.**