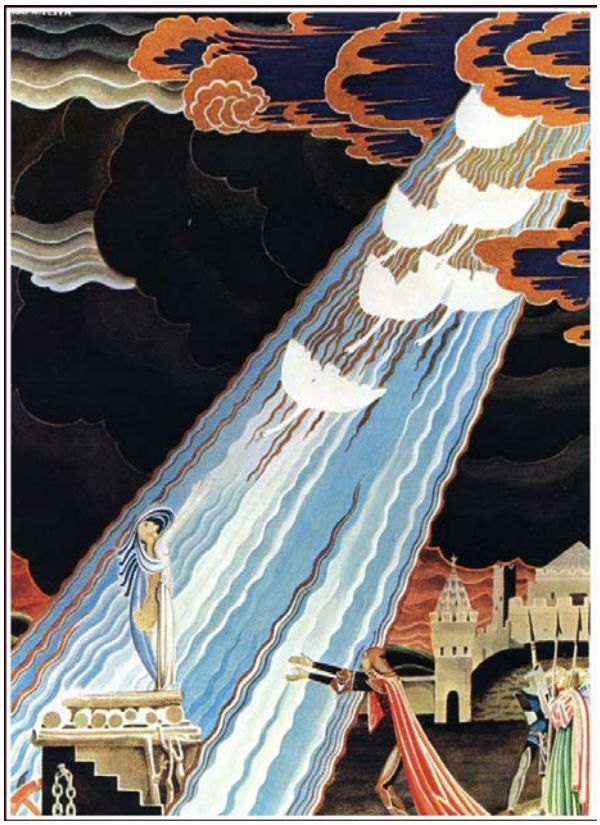
Making a good idea better through composition

1. Composing the WHOLE image

We are Decision Makers! Conscious Choice in creating an image

As illustrators we need to consider **Conscious Choice** as an integral part of the design process. ALL elements of what we *do* or *do not* choose to put into our illustrations should be **intentional**. Every decision you make effects the overall read of the image you are creating. Therefore these should be *decisions* not *defaults*.

CONCEPT is the first building block of that image; the first choice you make. The second you should consider is overall COMPOSITION.



Kay Neilsen, Six Swans

Composition, is generally what hits the eye first. In Six Swans the early 20th century Danish illustrator **Kay Neilsen**, we are struck first by its strong the diagonal lighter form, between the 2 darker triangular areas of the composition, out secondary read in the subject matter.

Composition forms the structure or foundation on top of which the image rests.

Just like a building, a great image is built from the ground up, on a strong foundation.

Chris Ware, Building Stories

Conversely, great subject matter and great drawing, will *always* be undone by poor composition.

Strong composition draws attention to the image. It leads the viewer's eye around the image with ***intent*.** It can create mood and atmosphere, and tell a story, simply through the arrangement of individual **design elements**, parts of the image, and their underlying **directional lines**.

2. Picture Plane and Directional Lines

You may be used to hearing the word *composer* when referring to a great piece of music. A composer chooses the different musical elements that he or she will arrange to fill the framework of a particular piece of music. He or she chooses which qualities to emphasize, which instruments to play, and when and how to play them. Millions of minute decisions are made by the song's composer, all of which add up to a completely intentional experience for the listener.

Gary Kelley, Jazz Illustration

Composing an image is very much the same. The "artistic composer" chooses the different elements that will fill the framework of that particular piece of art. We refer to that framework as the **Picture Plane**. The illustrator intentionally chooses which **compositional concepts** to utilize in arranging their **design elements** inside of the **Picture plane**. Just as in the analogy of writing music, millions of minute decisions are made by the artistic composer that all add up to an intentional experience for the viewer.

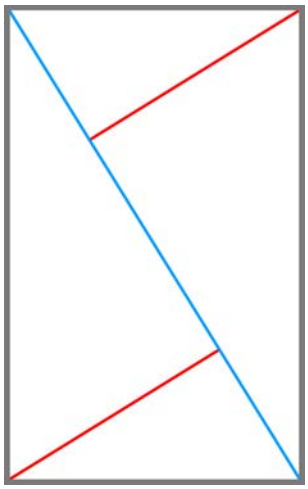
FRAMING:

The idea of intentionally choosing what is contained within the edges of the composition and what is not, is called **Framing**. The **picture plane** is the space in which you *compose* the image. Your image is everything that ***is*** and ***is not*** within the frame made by the outside edge of the image. Just as in the analogy of a great piece of music, sometimes the magic happens in the space between the notes. Every mark made or not made within that rectangle of the picture plane is the image, and in a great work of art, all of it is intentional.

Directional Lines:

The Artists of the 16th century **Baroque** movement used exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted detail, and strong diagonal composition within a static frame. This makes it fairly easy to identify the directional lines in their compositions.

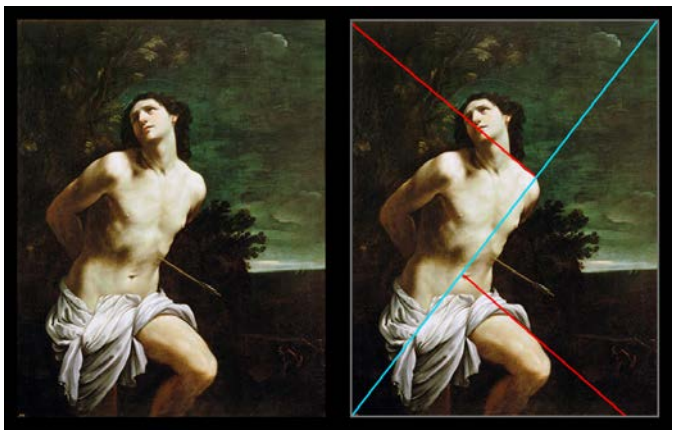
Guido Reni St Michael Archangel



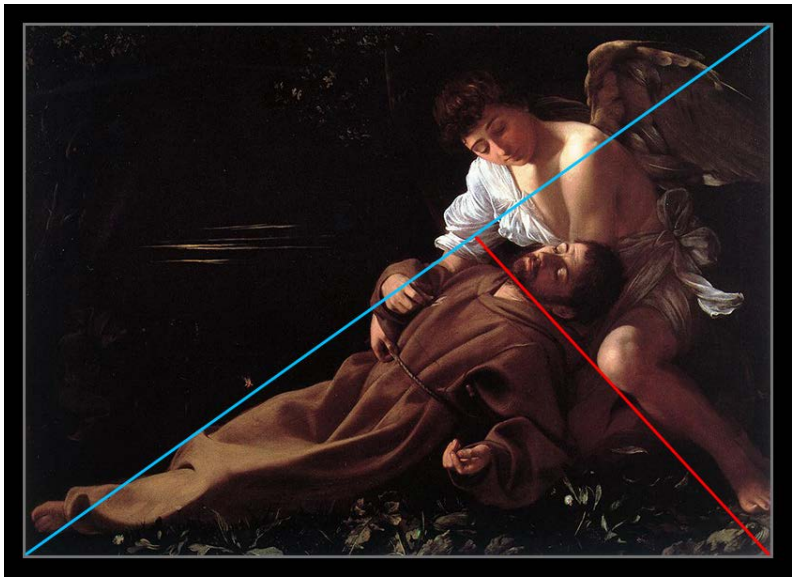
Directional Lines

Baroque artists were masters of the use of these directional lines, carefully guiding the viewer around the picture plane to produce feelings of drama, tension, and exuberance.

Note in these Baroque paintings how these two different directional lines, highlighted in blue and red, are clearly composed at opposite angles, and are used a s a tool to guide the viewer over and over again.



Guido Reni, St. Sebastian.



Caravaggio, St. Francis in Esctasy

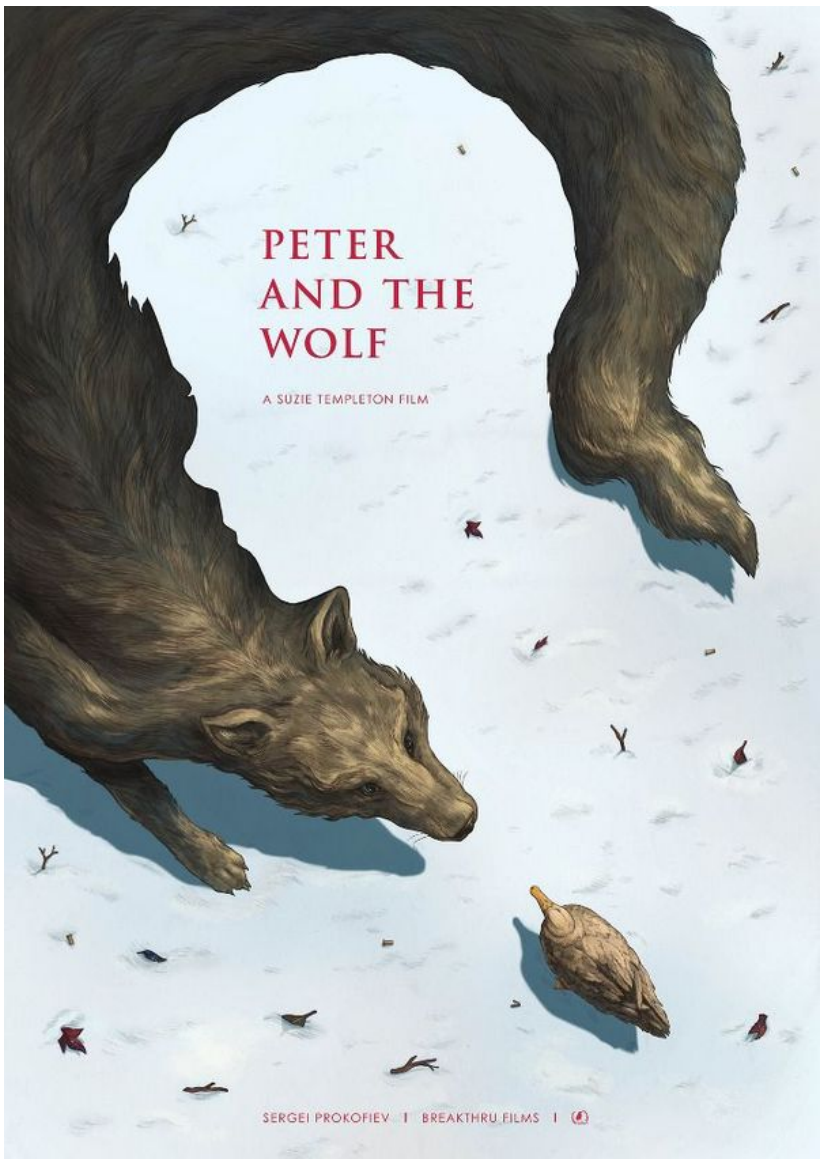
In this image by contemporary illustrator Goni Montes can you see some of the same ***directional lines*** being used to guide us around the picture and produce a feelings of drama?

3. Sometimes its about what you leave out: Negative Space

Magic can sometimes happens in the empty space between marks,

Aubrey Beardsley

Or in the shapes formed by the breathing room left in an image,



Phoebe Morris, Peter and the Wolf

Or in the resting the space for the eye, space that is left **intentionally empty**.

Tomer Hanuka

We refer to this area of openness on the picture plane as **negative space**.

Use Negative Space:

To create a resting place for the eye.

Aubrey Beardsley, The Climax

In this image, the artist **Aubrey Beardley**—a major figure of the 19th century Art Nouveau movement—chose to leave almost half of the composition as the white of the background paper. Why would he do such a thing?

Try this: Look carefully at the image and imagine that Beardsley had chosen differently. Imagine he had chosen to include within his composition tight patternmaking inside those white shapes, and realistically rendered ripples on the water.

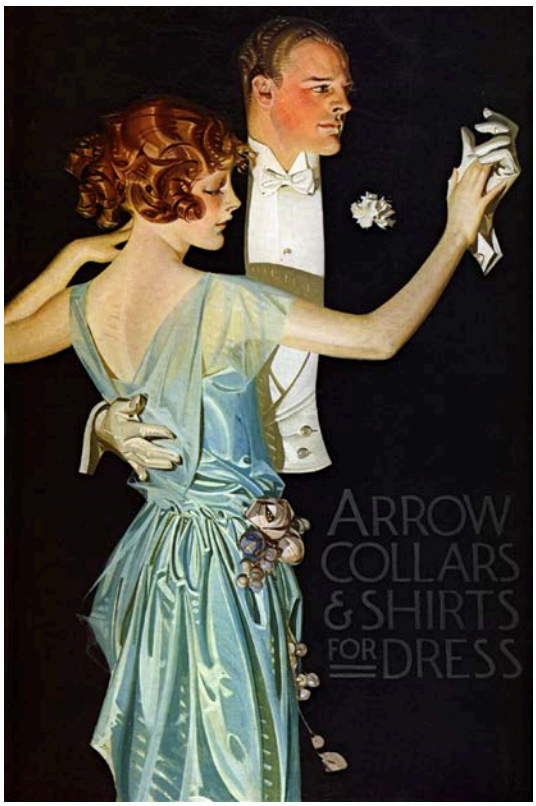
How would your experience as a viewer change?

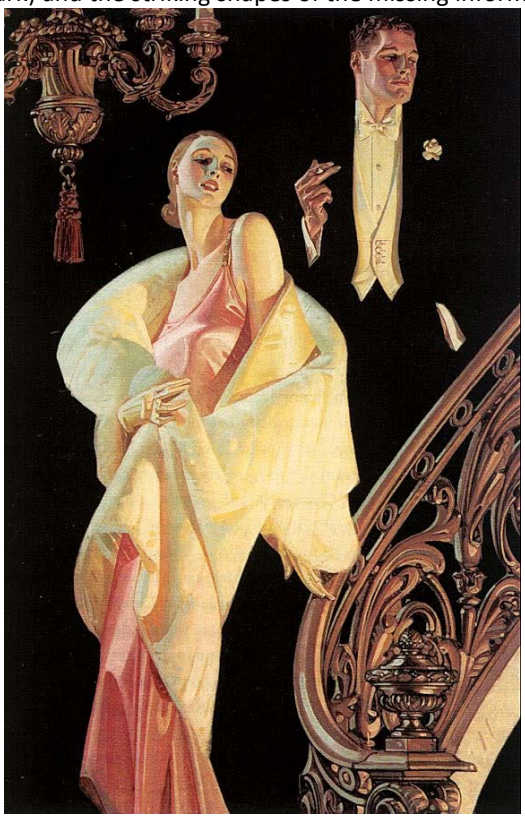
Thankfully Beardsley, a true master of design, understood the impact that *contrast* between negative and positive spaces can create. As well as the importance of a place within the composition for the eye to rest.

Use Negative space …

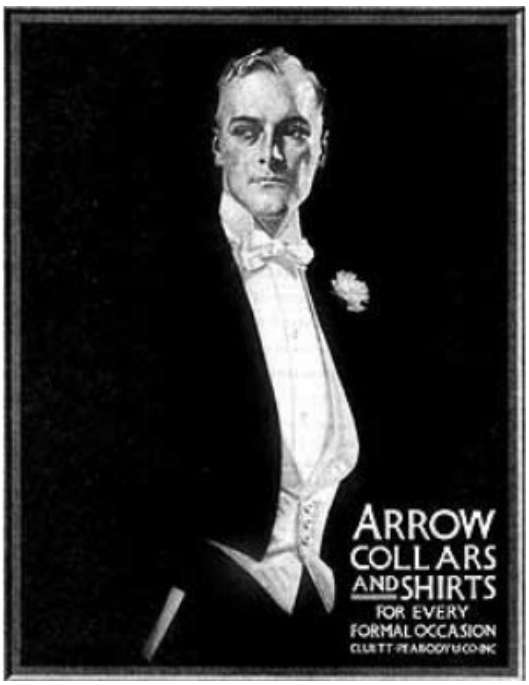
To create contrast through *missing information*:

Take a look at how **J.C. Leyendecker**, one of the preeminent American illustrators of the early 20th century, uses negative space in these illustrations of his advertising character known as *The Arrow Collar Man*. The black of the ground and the black of this dapper character's tuxedo become one form. The eye is draw both by the contrast in values (light and dark) and the striking shapes of the missing information.





M3_P3 Leyendecker



J.C. Leyendecker

Contemporary Illustrator **Edward Kinsella** uses much the same trick in these portraits of pop culture icons David Bowie and Marilyn Manson.

Edward Kinsella

Use Negative space …

To create tension through *space between opposing elements*:

Norman Rockwell uses the negative space within the illustration, *Let Nothing You Dismay*, to manipulate the viewer's emotions. Here the space between characters becomes filled with tension. It's like the visual version of the long pause right before something important or shocking is said. The composition makes the viewer feel every inch of that couch.

And In this illustration, again by Leyendecker for Arrow Collar Shirts, we feel the space between the two men. There is room left in the composition for the game.

4. Balance, Unity, & Rhythm

Balance

Balance in art refers to the ways in which the different elements of a piece (such as lines, shapes, colors, and textures) are arranged in terms of their weight. Balance can be symmetrical, with elements arranged equally from an imaginary line in the middle of a piece. Balance doesn't necessarily have to mean symmetry, though. Asymmetrical balance is achieved when elements are arranged unevenly in
a piece but work together to produce overall harmony.

Ukiyo-ye is a genre of woodblock prints and paintings that flourished in Japan from the 17th through 19th centuries. Literally translated from the Japanese as *"pictures of the floating world",* this genre exemplifies the consideration of Balance as a Design Principle. Consider these images from Edo Period Master, **Hokusai** from his series *36 views of Mount Fuji*. How is balance being employed with intention in each? Is the Balance Symmetrical or Asymmetrical?

Symmetrical vs. **Asymmetrical Balance**

Lets look at Contrast between **Symmetrical balance** and **Asymmetrical Balance** through these two compositions by the renowned early 20th century American illustrator **Norman Rockwell**.

Symmetrical Balance is when an image has **equal weight** on equal sides of the central element or object in the composition.

Gaiety Dance Team, Norman Rockwell, 1937

Boy and Girl Gazing at the Moon, Norman Rockwell, 1926

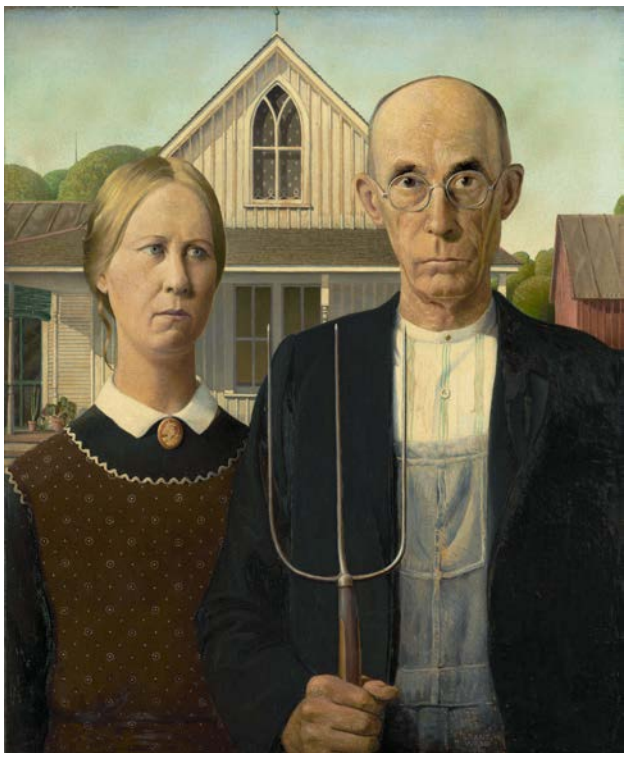
See what happens when **Rockwell** takes *the same basic composition* but shifts over that compositional weight to create an **Asymmetrical Balance**. In this the weight is focused on the left side of the page, pulling us toward the boy. Not only does he support the girl physically; he actually anchors the whole composition.

Unity

Unity is the relationship among the elements of a visual image that helps all the elements function cohesively. Unity gives a sense of *wholeness* to a visual image.

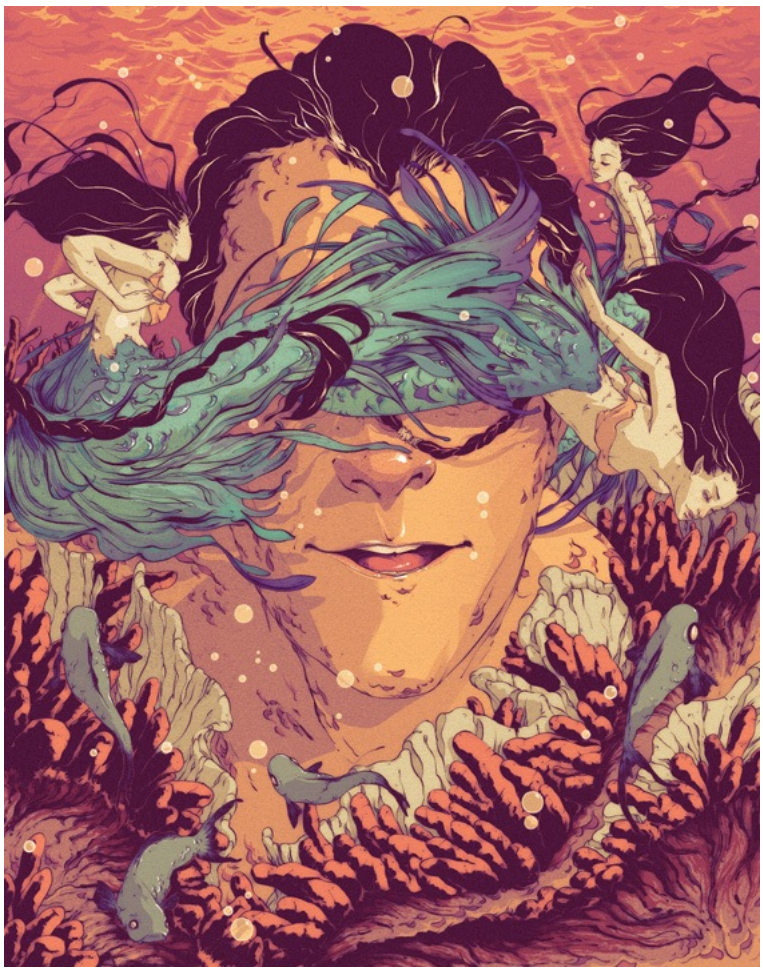
There are many ways to create unity in an image. It can be done through placement and composition, shape, symmetry, color, concept, and so on.

In the classic image of *American Gothic* shown here, how many different ways that the artist employed to create unity can you find?



American Gothic, by Grant Wood, 1930

- Symmetrical composition, reinforced by peaked roof with symmetrical window and pitchfork
- Unified straight directional lines.
- Unified color palette
- Unified facial expressions and shape of faces



Goni Montes

Here Contemporary illustrator Goni-Montes uses the same techniques with a completely different result. He creates a unified whole though:

- Overall warm color palette
- Mark making & brush stroke
- And Overall Movement and Flow

Mark Ulriksen

And here Contemporary illustrator Mark Ulriksen creates contrast through his split blue / orange color palate, but creates a sense of unity in other ways. **How do you think he does this?**

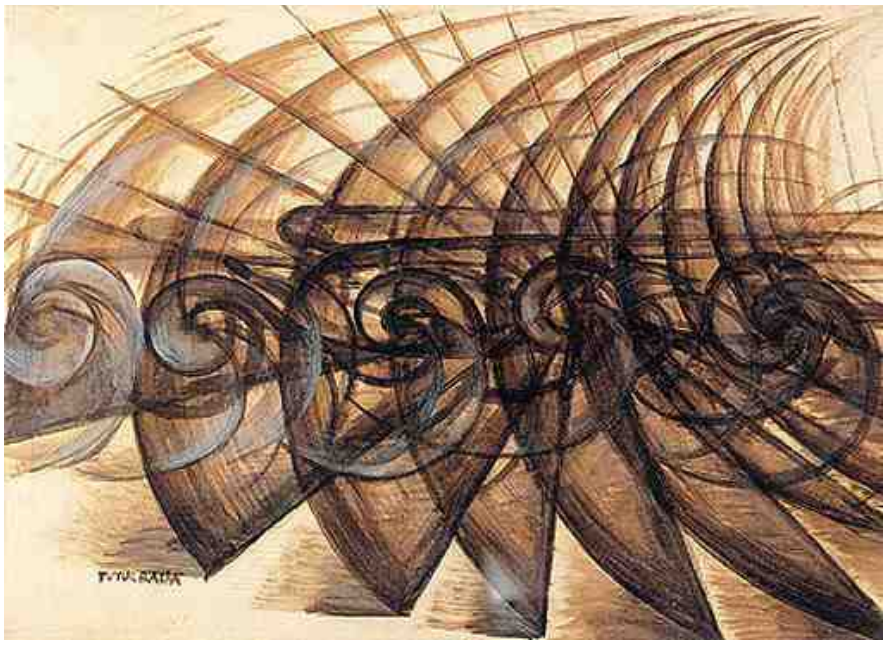
5. Rhythm & Movement

Movement

Movement is an *instability*, or a sense of *time taking place* within the image itself.

States of Mind I: The Farewells - Umberto Boccioni 1911

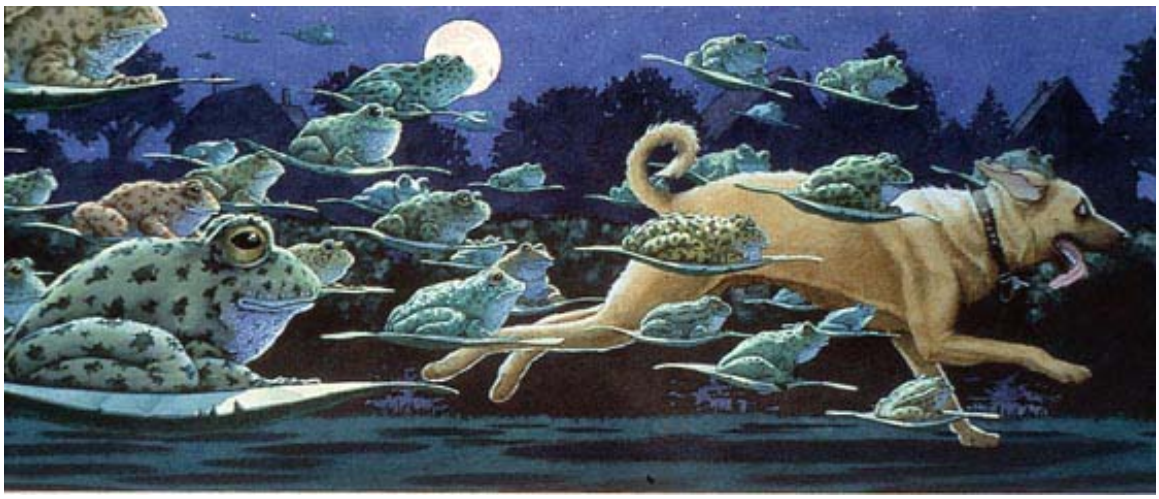
Futurism was an art movement in early 20th century Italy, obsessed with the idea of ***movement***. Using various a variety of media, futurists used the principles of design to depict themes of the contemporary social issues of the time. These themes included *the increasing speed of technology*, for example the automobiles and airplanes of the industrial revolution.



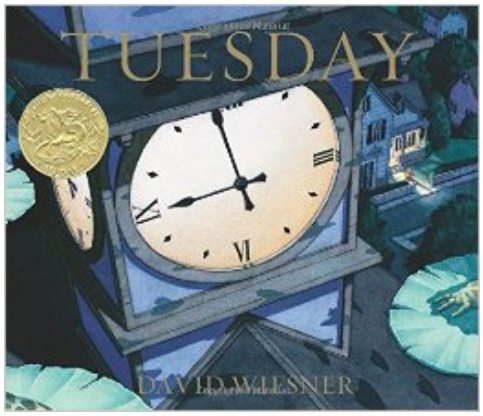
Giacomo Balla

Movement can be achieved by using graphic elements such as ***directional lines*** that direct the eye in a specific direction, much as an arrow would, or though curved forms which more softly pull the viewer's eyes, or through a series of repeating forms, or by creating marks that get progressively larger or smaller, creating a more subtle sense of movement.

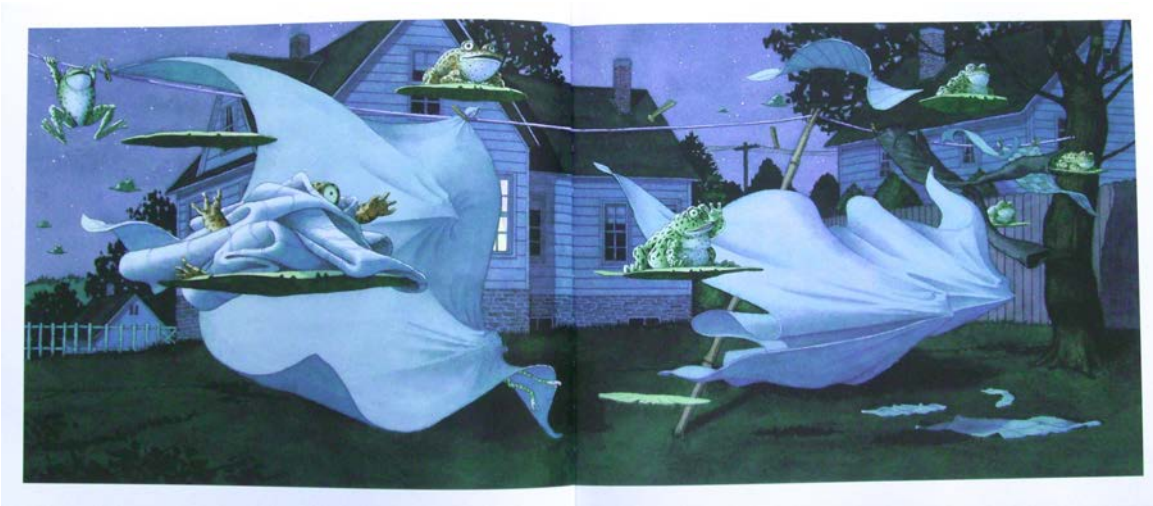
Now that we can recognize this design principle in the abstract, lets look at it in a more representational style of art.



Consider how illustrator David Weisner uses all of these techniques to convey a sense of motion in these illustrations from his Caldecott winning, silent children's book, **Tuesday**.



Compositional Movement can be reinforced by using rendering techniques such as blurring certain areas, or creating movement trails or marks, or as in the illustration below from ***Tuesday***, use fabric drapery as a motion indicator, but an illustration successfully conveying movement will have this principle integrated into its compositional underpinnings.



Rhythm

Rhythm, design's first cousin to *Movement*, is a principle of art that's difficult to verbalize. Rhythm in art—just like rhythm in music—is a unifying force *undulating* throughout the overall piece. First consider how **rhythm** is being created abstractly in the first piece by *Balla*, then notice how the same techniques are applied in the more representational image below it by Illustrator *Gary Kelley*.

Giacomo Balla's "Automobile in corsa" (1913)

Gary Kelley

Rhythm signifies that the various design elements are all working in unison to lead the viewer's eye through a composition in a specific order. Assuming that you've heard rhythm in music before, try to translate that to something you'd **see** instead of **hear**. Rhythm is essentially a visual beat.

Case Study: Gary Kelly and the Visual Beat

Pastel Illustrator Gary Kelley's work is infused with this sense of a visual beat. In **Harlem Heat** Even the buildings and sky seem to dance. All of the curvilinear forms reinforce a sense of music within the piece. Kelley references Pablo Picasso, the Cubists and the Futurists whose work we looked at before as key influences. **Do you see this in his work?**

Gary Kelley's illustration *Harlem Heat*


Pablo Picasso, Guernica 1937

6. CASE STUDY **Paul Goble**

So far we've examined **framing, negative space, balance, unity, rhythm, and movement** as compositional tools you can choose to employ to lead a viewer's eyes through an image. Lets take a look at how one illustrator uses all of these techniques together the masterfully designed illustrations of Paul Goble for his Caldecott award winning children's book, The Girl who Loved Wild Horses.