Principles of Design

Taken from: **Picture this: Perception and composition** by Molly Bang

Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm.

Carl Andre

Twenty-fifth Copper Cardinal. 1974, Copper. 25-unit square, .5 x 250 x 250 cm overall.

Vertical shapes are more exciting and more active. Vertical shapes rebel against the earth's gravity. They imply energy and a reaching toward heights or the heavens.

Ansel Adams. Redwoods, Bull Creek Flat, Northern California, 1960.

Ancestor Figures. Dogon, Mali. Reitberg Museum, Zurich.
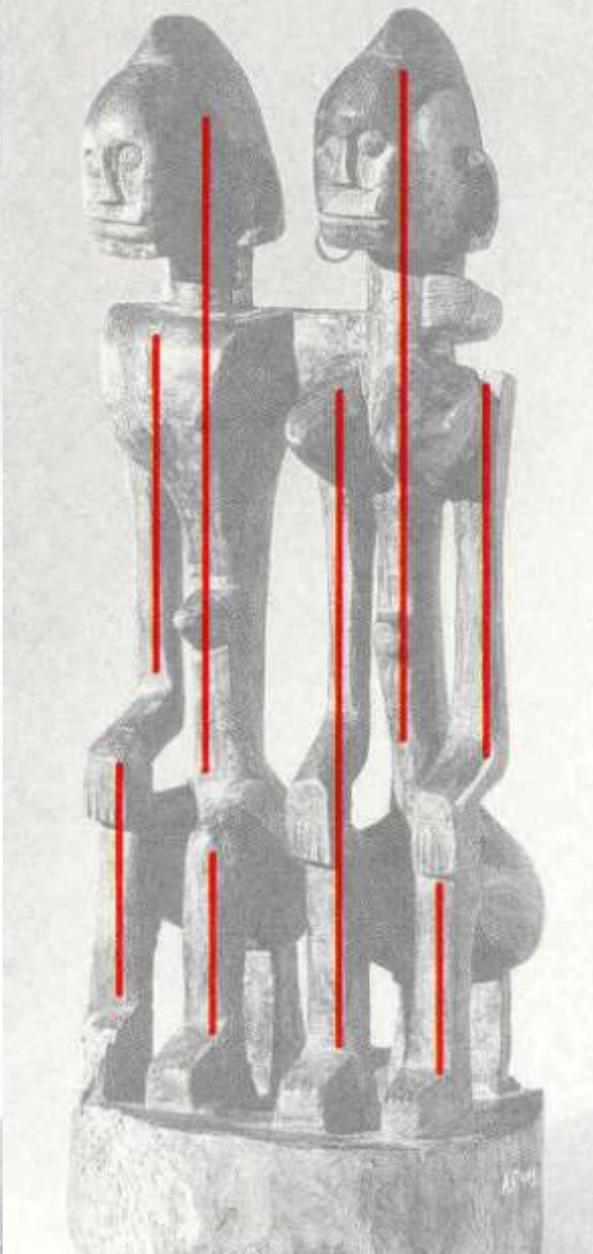
Vertical emphasis in the Dogon ancestor figures.

The seated *Ancestor Figures* of the Dogon tribe also embody qualities of dignity and stability typically associated with the vertical line.

The Dogon artist emphasized verticals, note the long necks, upper arms, fingers, and toes and greatly Understated every other direction (look at the almost nonexistent forearms) The lines to which we refer here represent the axis or predominant visual direction that runs through the center of the forms. Lines such as these are implied lines, not actual ones-we use our imagination to complete a visual suggestion.

If a horizontal bar is placed across the row of verticals, stability reigns again, as in a Greek temple.
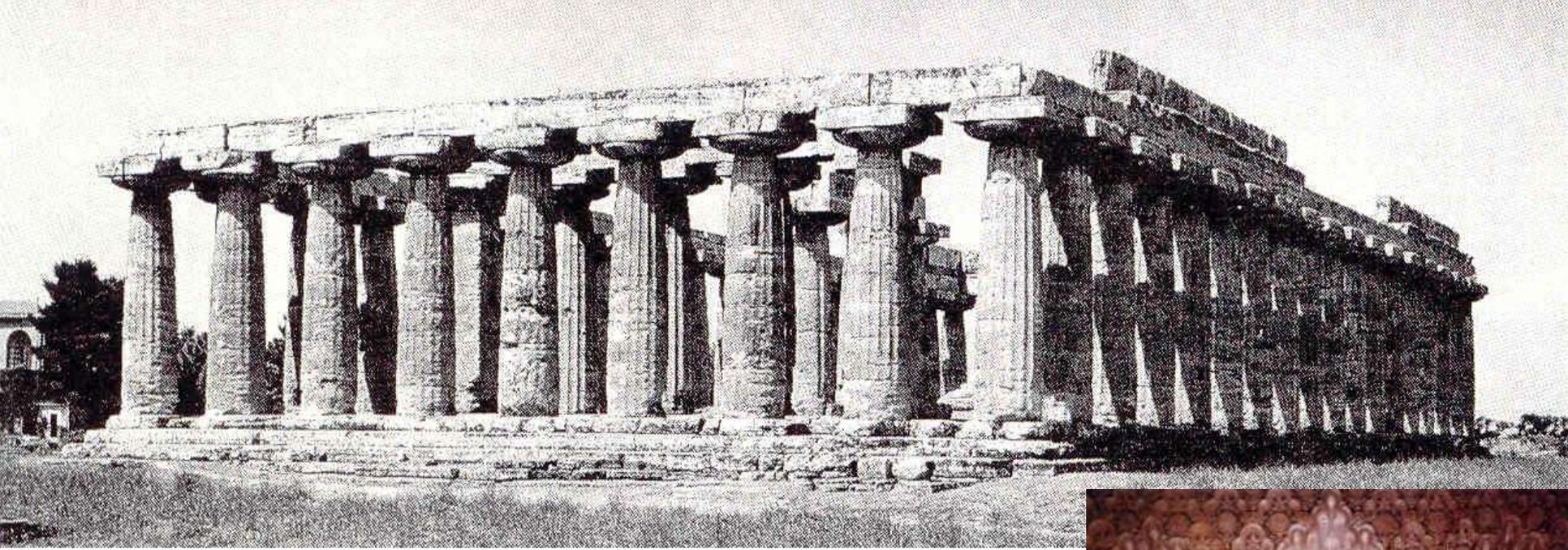
Basilica, Paestum, Italy 550 B.C.
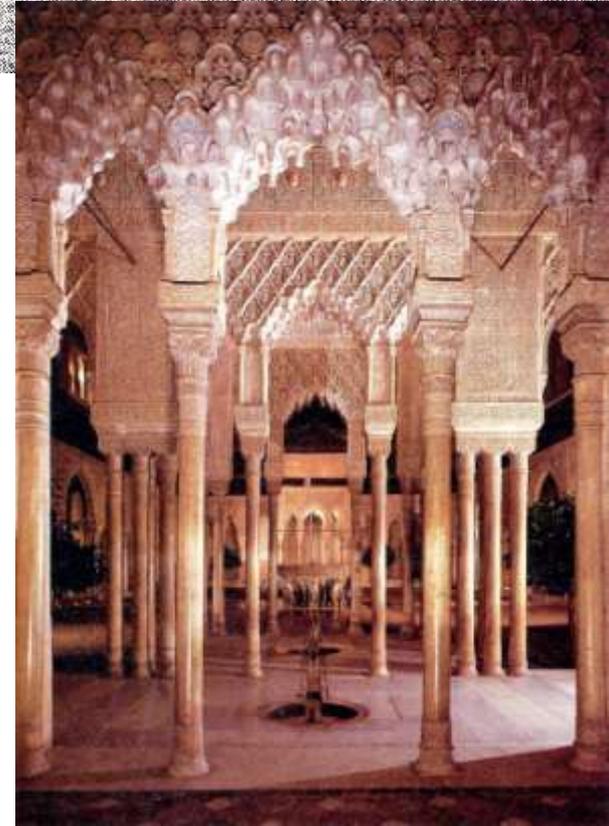
Court of the loins, The Alhambra, Granada, Spain. 1354-1391.

Diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension.

Ando Hiroshige. Rain Shower on Ohashi Bridge.
19th century.
Color woodblock print, 13 7/8" x 9 1/8"
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift from J. H. Wade.
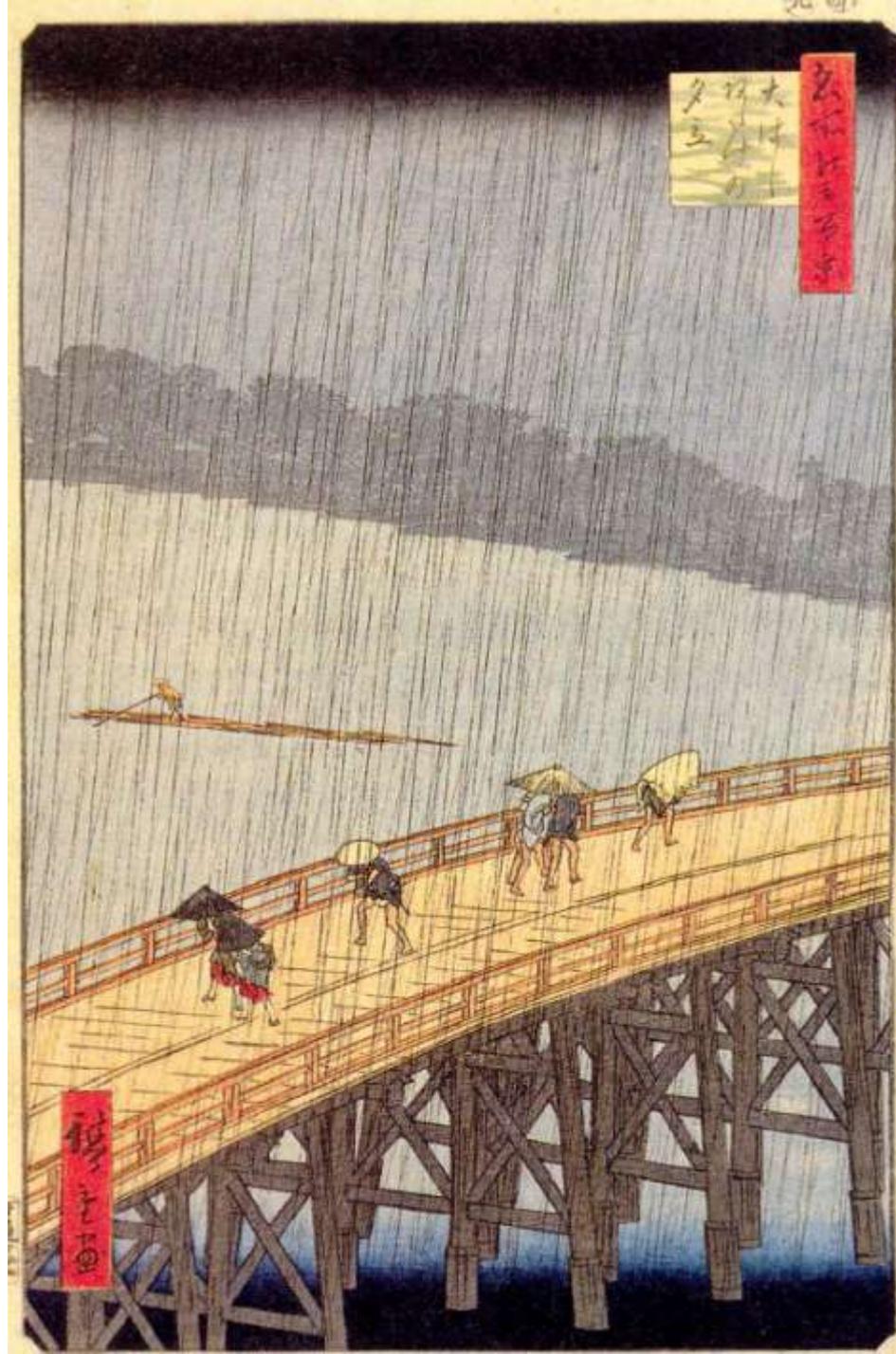
A triangle placed on a flat base gives a feeling of stability.
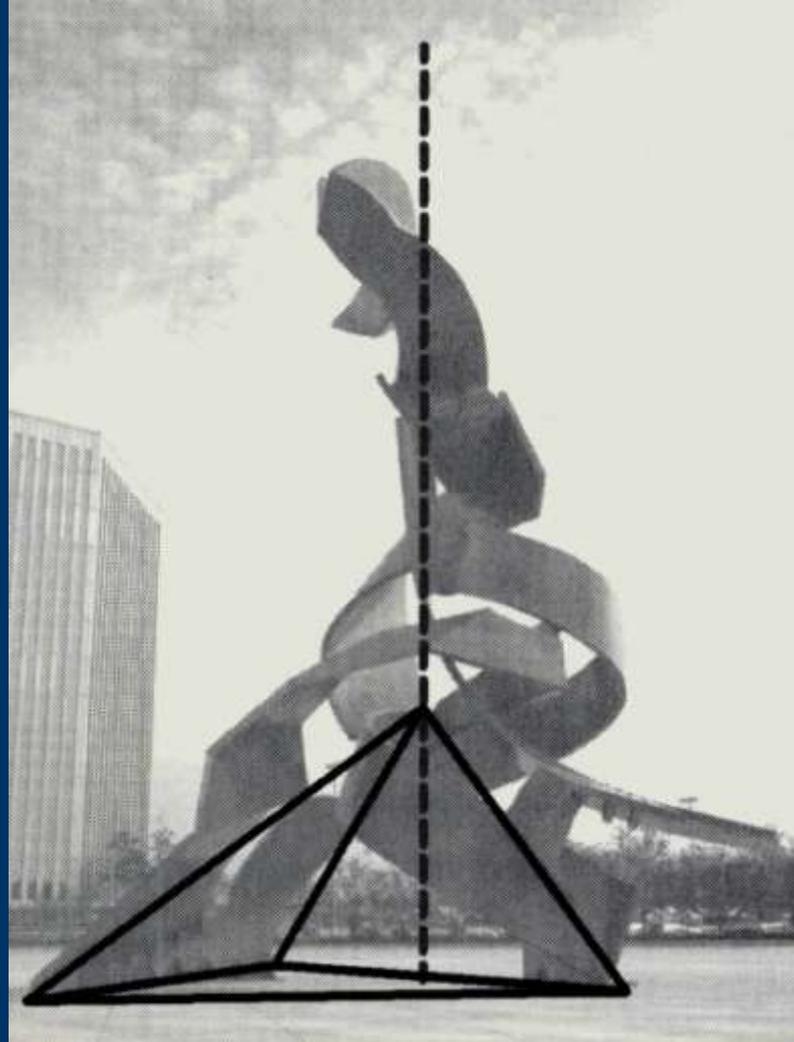
Jerry Peart, **Blue Geisha,** 1985.
Often the challenge to a designer or sculptor is to integrate structural stability with free and dynamic form. Peart is a master of this integration. His forms dip and swirl and dance through space: all the while honoring their *gravitational center.* **In** this sculpture, Peart Holds the points in contact with the ground to the necessary minimum of three. The accompanying diagram demonstrates that these points and the center of gravity form a stable tetrahedron. The supports also form an inplied triangle which gives a feeling of stability.

The same triangle placed on a diagonal gives a sense of movement.

The upper half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness and triumph;
objects placed in the top half often feel more "spiritual."

The bottom half of the picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or more constrained; objects placed in the bottom half also feel more "grounded."
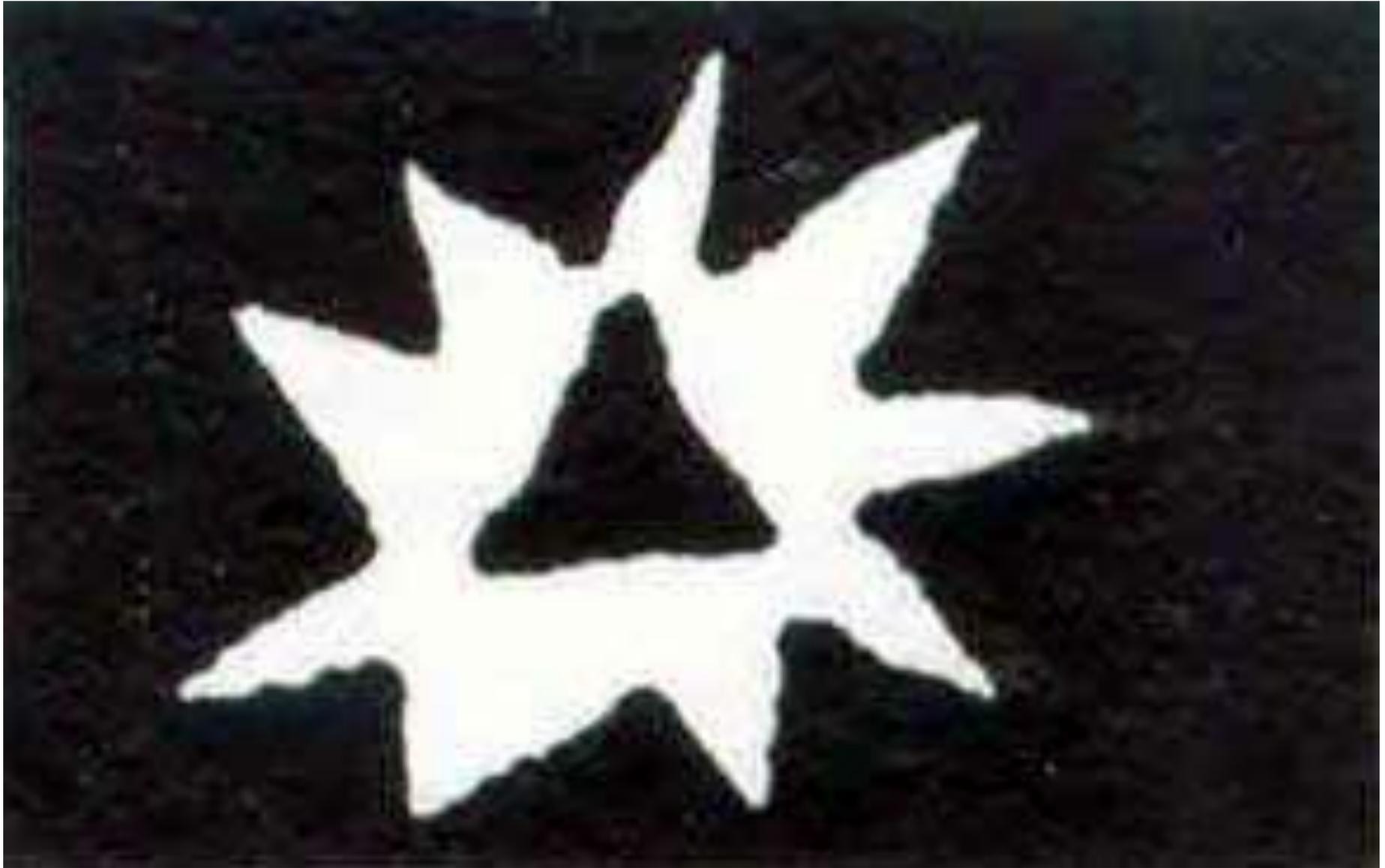
The center of the page is the most effective "center of attention." It is the point of greatest attraction.
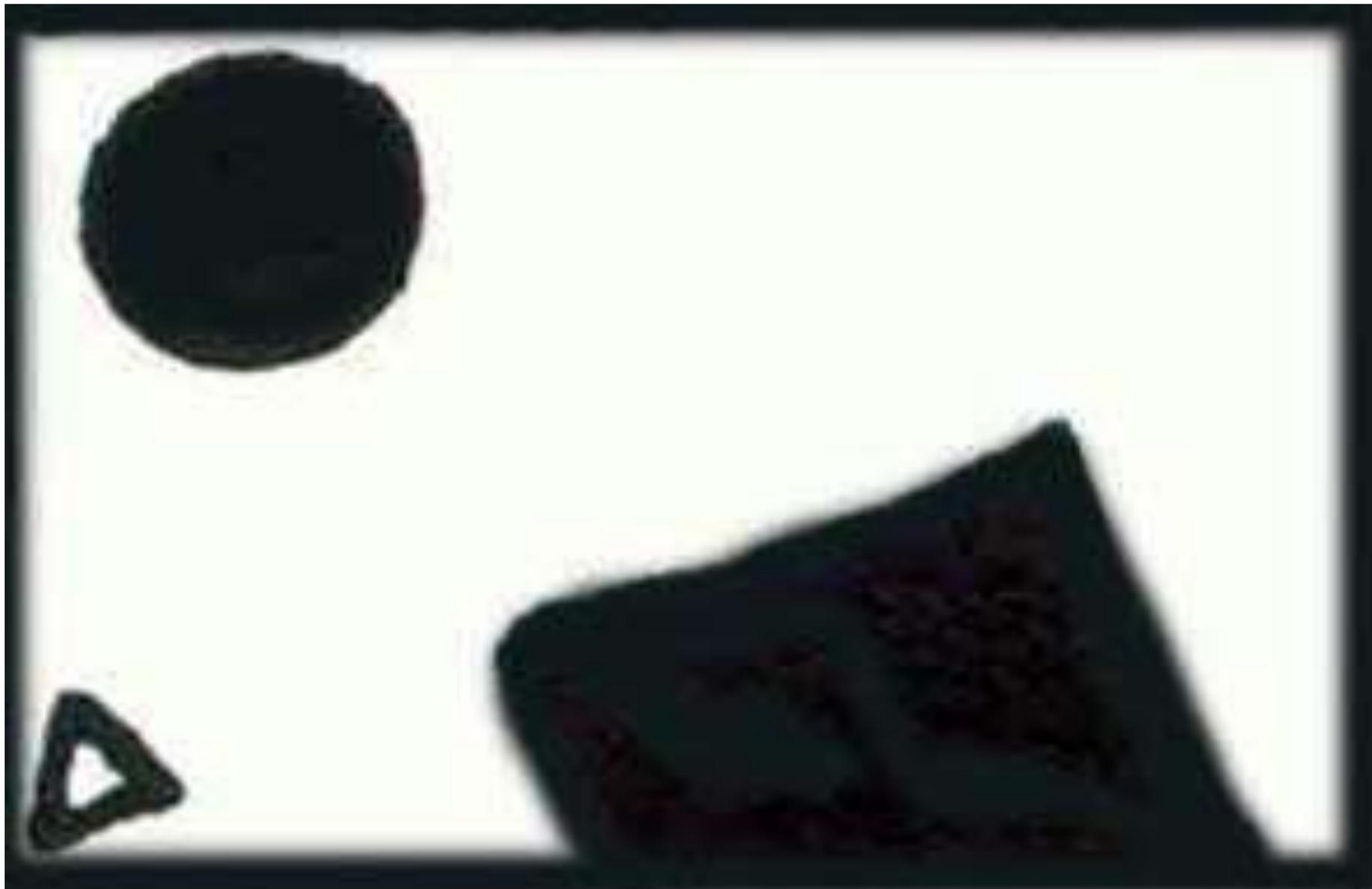
The edges and corners of the picture are the edges and corners of the picture-world.

White or light backgrounds feel safer to us than dark backgrounds
because we can see well during the day and only poorly at night.

Bright and pale colors glow like jewels against dark backgrounds.
Against white or pale backgrounds, bright colors often look washed out.
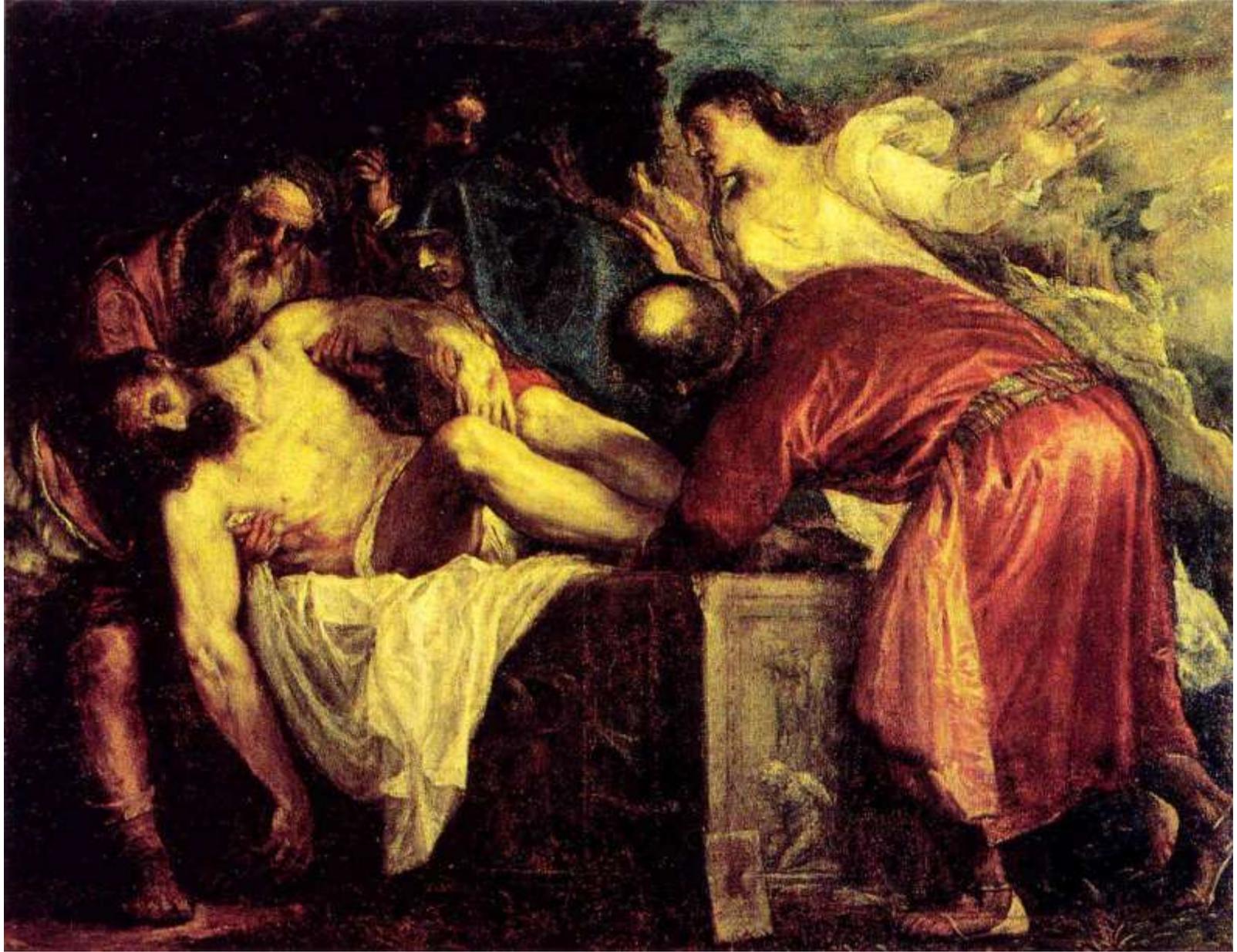
Titian.
The Entombment
1559. Oil on canvas, 4'6" x 5'9".

Curved Line

Curved lines generally appear to move more slowly than diagonals. A curved line is inherently graceful and fluid, lending itself naturally to the portrayal of easy-going, tender subject matter. As in Mary cassatt's Mother's Kiss.

Roger Brown's Surrounded by Nature, the artist uses curved line in a less agreeable manner. Ordinarily, curved lines suggest peace and tranquility. Here, a series of circles sets the stage for fear. The armed and armored people contained within the innermost circles are protecting themselves against something, but we do not know what that something is. Perhaps they themselves do not know. The title of the painting and the visible evidence suggest that nature has not run amok. The mere fact that nature is near appears to pose the only threat.
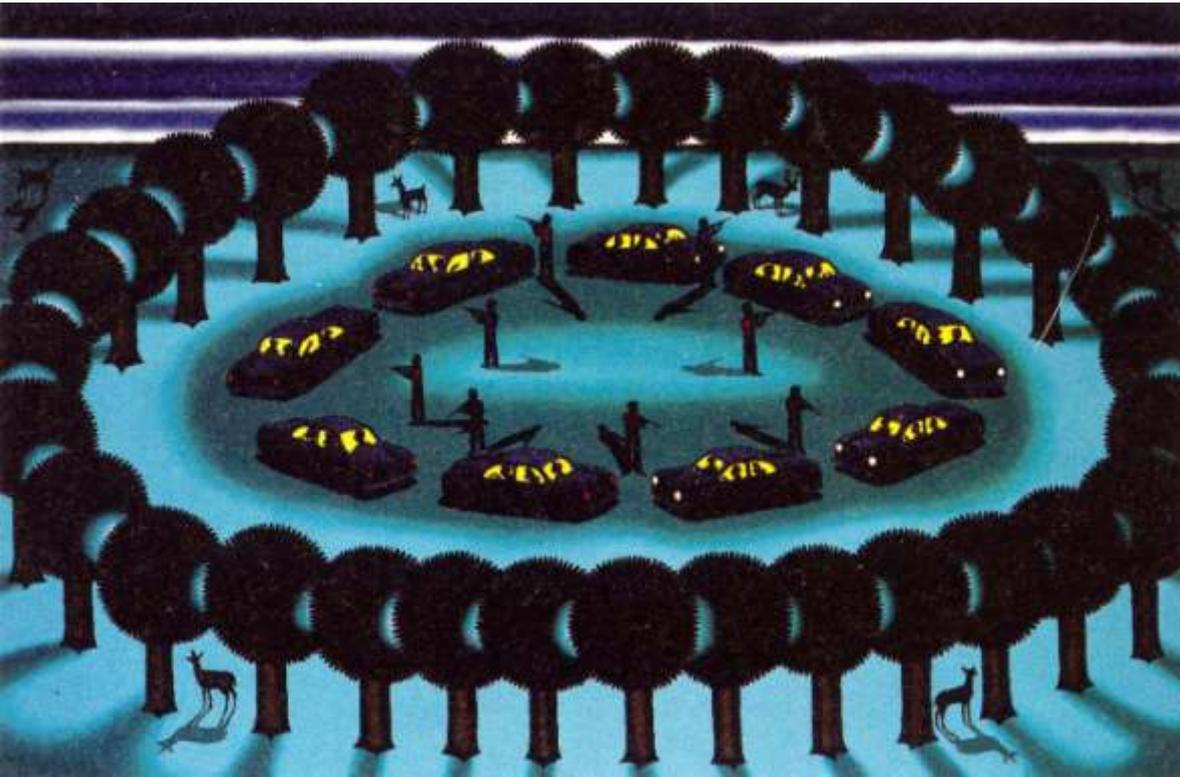
Mary Cassatt. Mother's Kiss. 1891. Drypoint and soft ground etching in color, 13 5/8 x 8 5/16"

Roger Brown. Surrounded by Nature. 1986. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72".

Compositions using combinations of elements

Suzuki Harunobu. Girl on Kiyomizu Terrace. 1767-1768. Woodblock print (7 colors), 11 1/8" x 8 1/16". Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

This composition contains a figure made of curved line, behind a railing made up of horizontal lines. In front of the figure are violent diagonal lines and in the background the planks of the flooring are made up of more diagonals. The composition in divided down the middle by the top of the railing. There is a reoccurring shape in both the top and bottom of the picture, that of a triangle (the tree, and the woman), the bottom triangle's apex is the top of the handrail, which overlaps the top triangle whose apex is the woman's head.

Using the rules we have talked about so far we could surmise that the figure of the woman is the tender subject matter of this composition, protected by the stability and calm of the railing from the motion and tension of the environment around her.

Titian. The Entombment.
1559. Oil on canvas, 4'6" x 5'9".

Organizational line
Orders or organizes the individual parts of art into a cohesive unit, forming a significant part of the work's structure. Generally to appreciate the structure of a work of art, we must step back, and view the work from a distance. Too close attention to individual details causes us to lose sight of the artist's larger organizational decisions.

The Entombment by the Venetian Renaissance master Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) provides a clear example. As we see in the diagram of this painting, horizontal and vertical organizational lines divide the canvas into four parts. Overriding this breakup of the space is a tightly controlled series of organizational lines that lead us through the scene: The bald spot of the foreground figure with his back to us is perfectly aligned with the relatively centralized vertical division of the composition, establishing a moment of pictorial stability (and a momentary pause from the solemn proceedings). But we do not stay for long on this spot. As the bald man helps lower Christ into the coffin, the diagonal of his back, reinforced by the strong diagonal of the theatrically posed, cloudlike Mary Magdalene just behind, leads us up and over toward Christ. The cluster of figures occupying the top left quadrant of the composition receive, in a kind of slow motion, the emotional velocity of the figures on the right. A single arm and leg punctuate the bottom left 'area. These two limbs, along with the triangular form of the drapery, lifelessly complete the arc of mourners. Many other areas in this painting vie for our attention as well. Organizational lines lead us to each area in its turn.
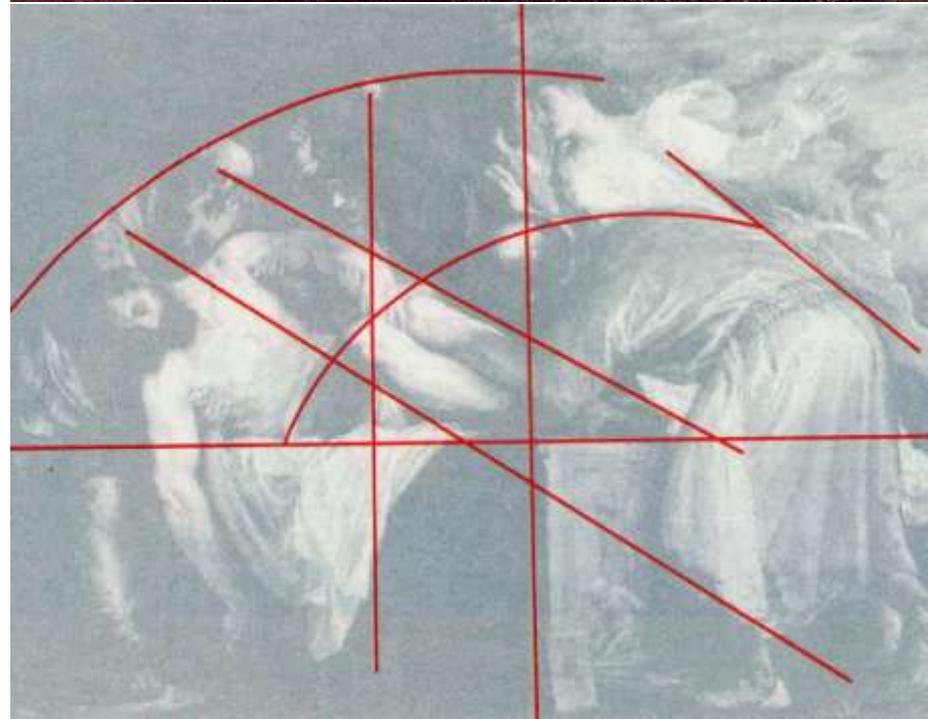
## Organizational lines in Titian's The Entombment.

Symmetry

A simple way to balance or unify a work of art is through symmetry, the mirrorlike repetition of the two halves of an image or object. Symmetrical structures are compositionally stable

Leonardo da Vinci. Study of Human Proportions According to Vitruvius.

1485-1490. Pen and Ink, 13 ½" x 9 ¾"

Humans are pretty close to perfectly symmetrical, from this may come or pursuit of symmetry.
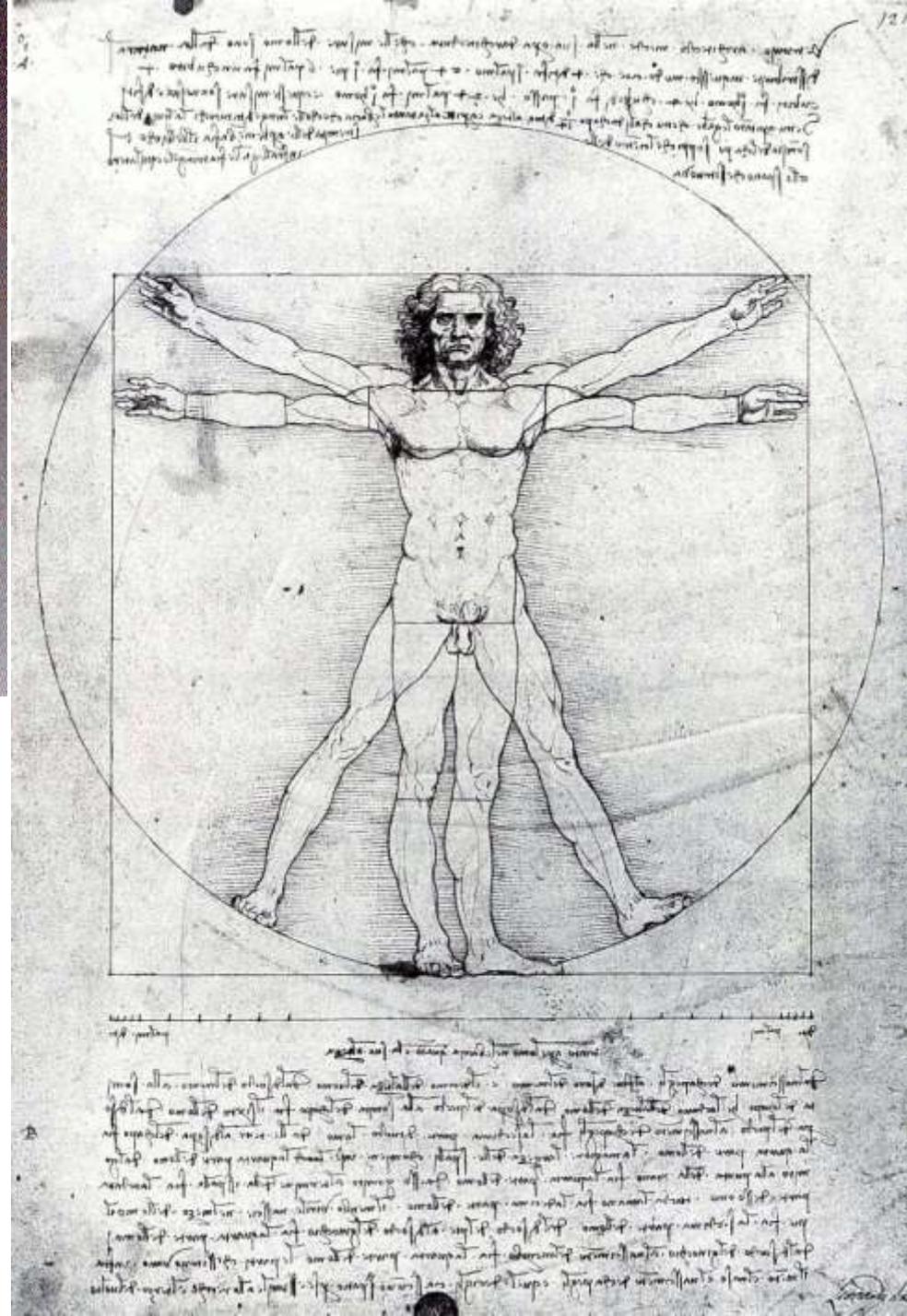
Francisco de Goya
The Executions on the Third of May 1808.
1814-1815. Oil on canvas. 8'9" x 13'4".

Approximate Symmetry refers to a composition in which two clearly differentiated halves of a composition alludes to a central axis, as in Goya's work.

Alan Rath

Asymmetrical compositions rely on an balance of dissimilar parts to achieve a balanced whole. In some ways, the less symmetrical the work, the more active it will appear.
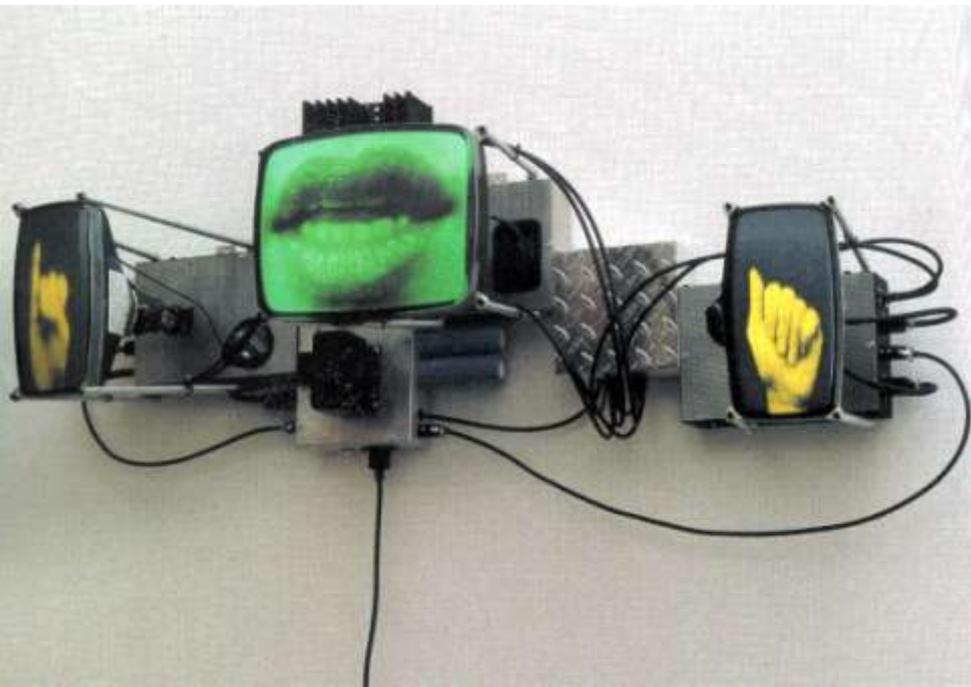
Abstraction

Two representations of the same Greek myth. The original presents the subject a realistically as possible, showing the terror and pain of Laocoon and his sons, and the writhing energy of the snakes. In Hesse's composition the human elements have been removed entirely, leaving the general idea of conflict and entanglement, not the direct representations of the human or reptilian.

Eva Hesse
Laocoon
1966
Acrylic paint, cloth-covered cord, wire, and papier-mâché over plastic plumber's pipe
120 x 24 x 24 in. (304.8 x 61 x 61 cm.)
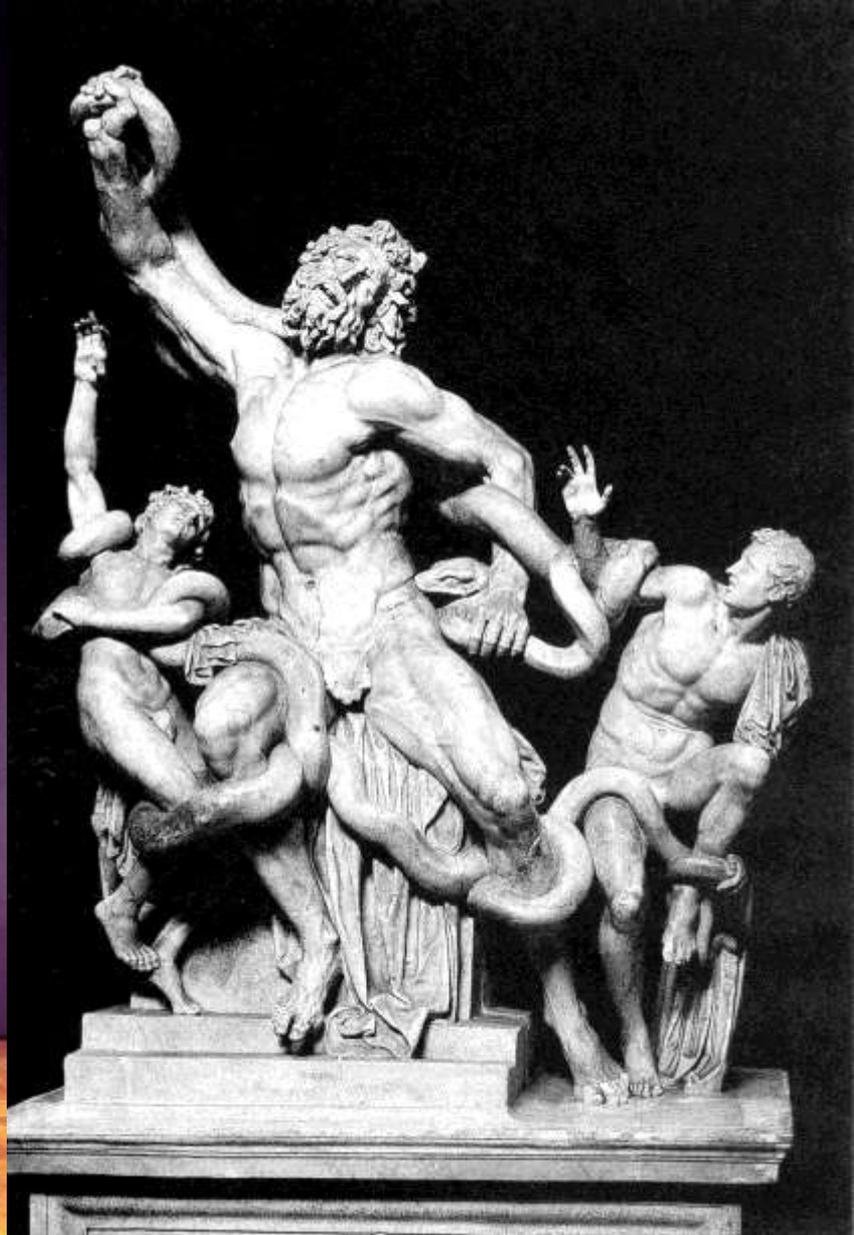
Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros
Laocoon and His Two Sons. 1st-2nd century B.C. Marble, height 96" (2.44 m). Vatican Museums, Rome.
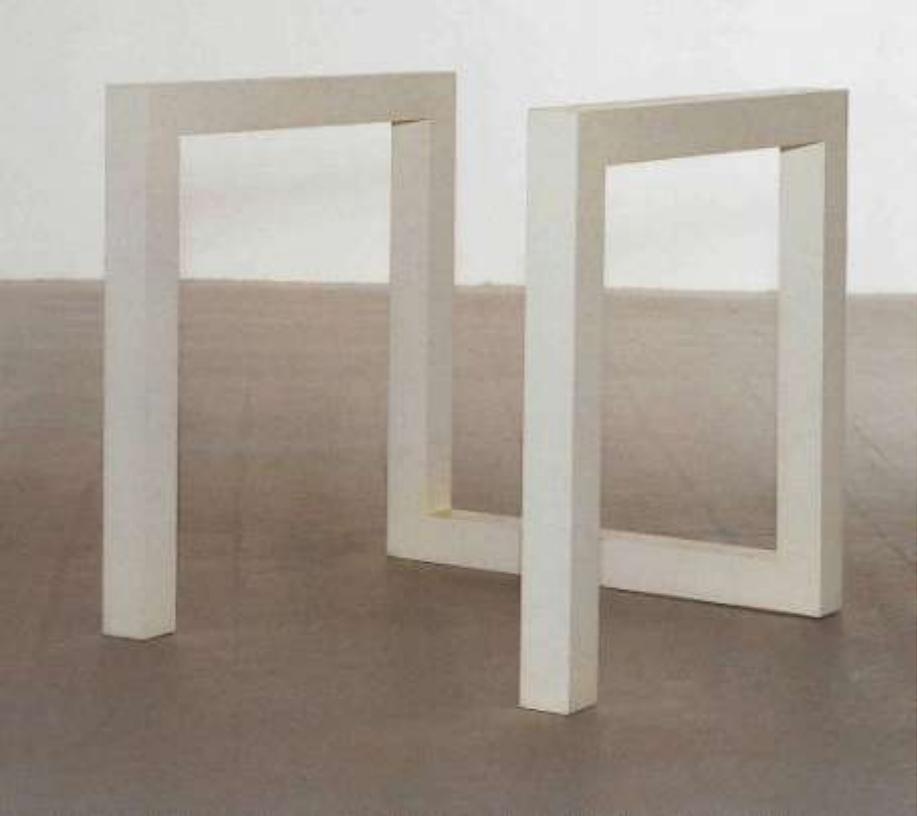
Implied Line and Shape

Are created through mental rather
than physical connections
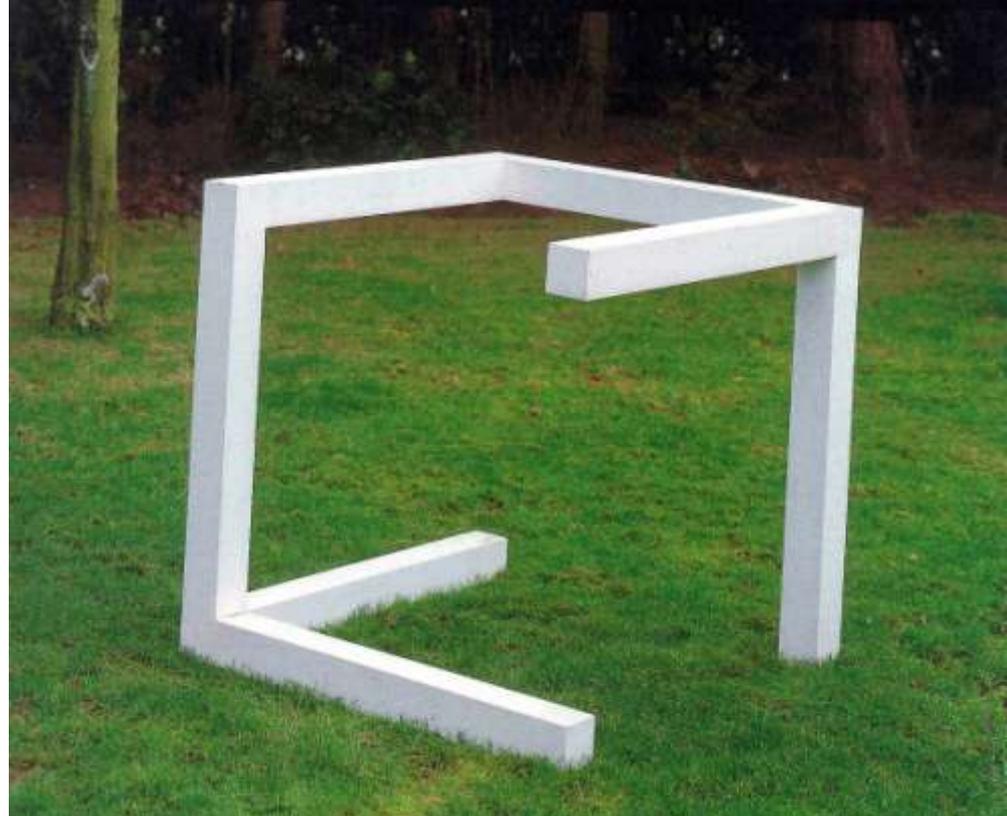
Sol LeWitt

(Left) Incomplete Open Cube
1974
White paint on aluminum
105 x 105 x 105 cm.

(Right)Incomplete Open Cube
1974
White paint on aluminum
105 x 105 x 105 cm.

Giovanni da Bologna

*The Rape of the Sabine
Women*
1583
Marble
13 ft 6 in.

The Rape of the Sabine Women, by Giovanni da Bologna
relies on a series of implied lines for its impact. Starting at
the bottom and exploding upward, the repeated diagonals
in the sculpture create a vortex as powerful as a whirlpool.
At the bottom is the husband of the captured woman. In
the center, a standing Roman soldier is intent on securing
a wife for himself. The agitated movement culminates at
the top with the extended arm of the embattled woman.
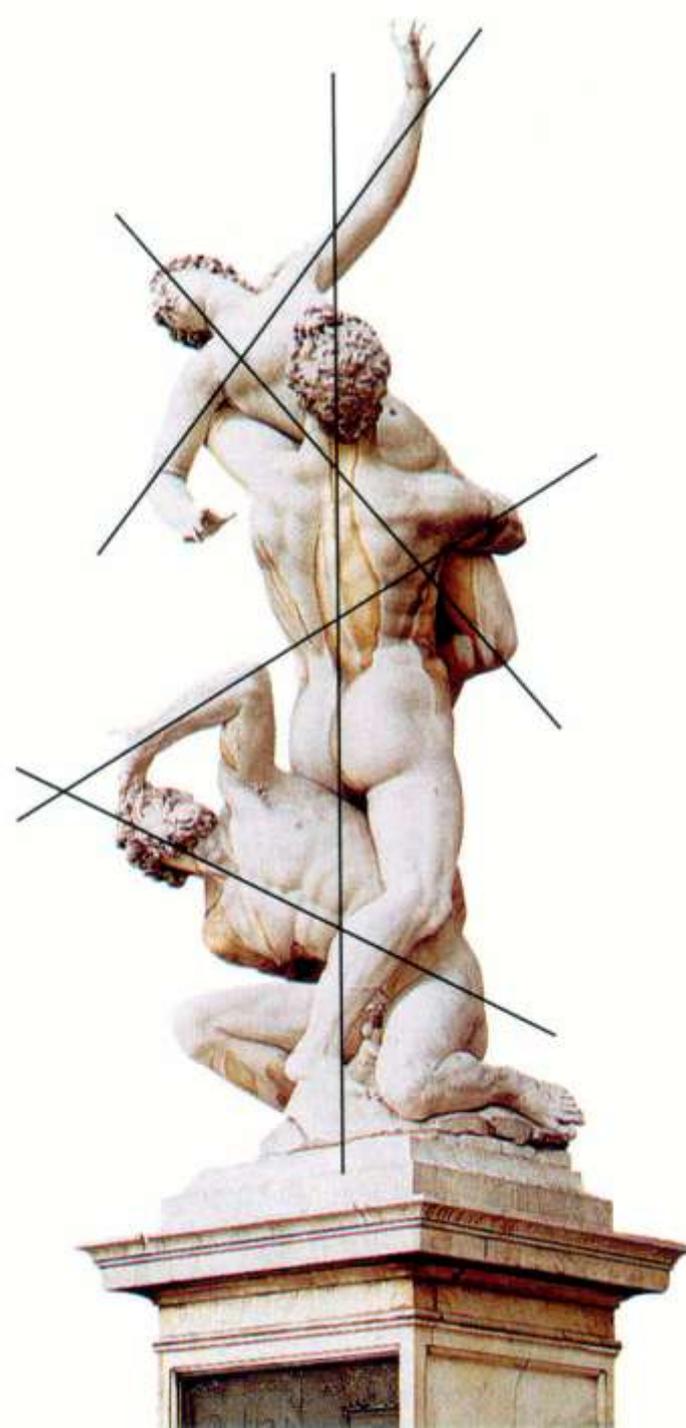
Principles of Design

3-Dimensional Design

Degrees of Dimensionality

Relief

Flat backing, somewhat like a sculptural painting

Robert Longo, Corporate Wars (Detail)
1982
Cast aluminum, lacquer on
wood relief, 7 x 9 x 3 ft (2.1 x 2.7 x .9 m)

Three Quarter Work

Designed to be viewed from the front and sides only

Bat-Man Pendant
Columbia
Tairona
1200-1600
Gold

<u>Free Standing Work</u>
Designed to be seen from all sides.

Auguste Rodin
The Kiss
1886-98
Marble, over life size.
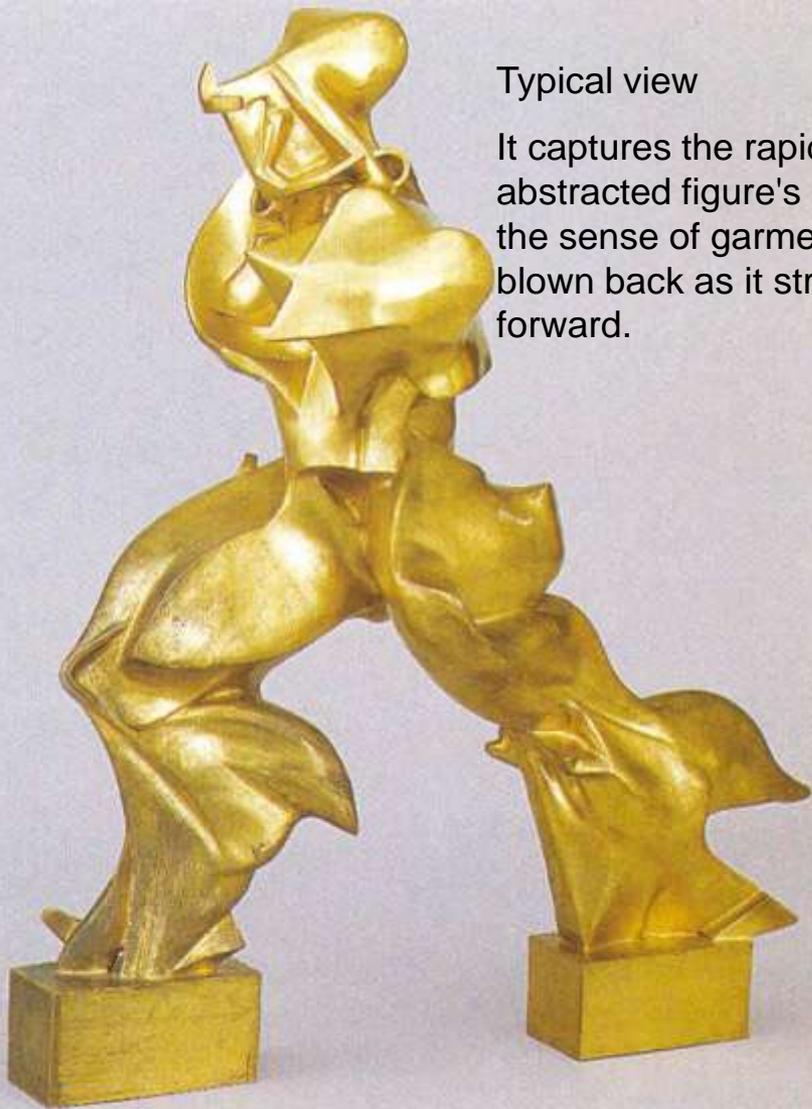
Typical view

It captures the rapidity of the abstracted figure's motion, the sense of garments being blown back as it strides forward.

My photos:

This is a three dimensional object and its properties change depending on the viewers point of reference.

Umberto Boccioni

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space

1913 Bronze

A head-on view would never make sense by itself, but it gives us a bit more information about the piece. Here we discover that the front of the "face" is like a crucifix, and that where the upper garment opens down the center, it is caught by the wind and billows outward like an exterior rib cage. Here and there, areas of unfilled space are drawn into the embrace of the sculpture by flaring projections from the figure. We can also see the slick trajectory of the thigh from the hip.

Boccioni makes us want to explore the sculpture from all sides to see what happens. Good three-dimensional art is like this: It compels us to walk all the way around it, examining it from many angles.
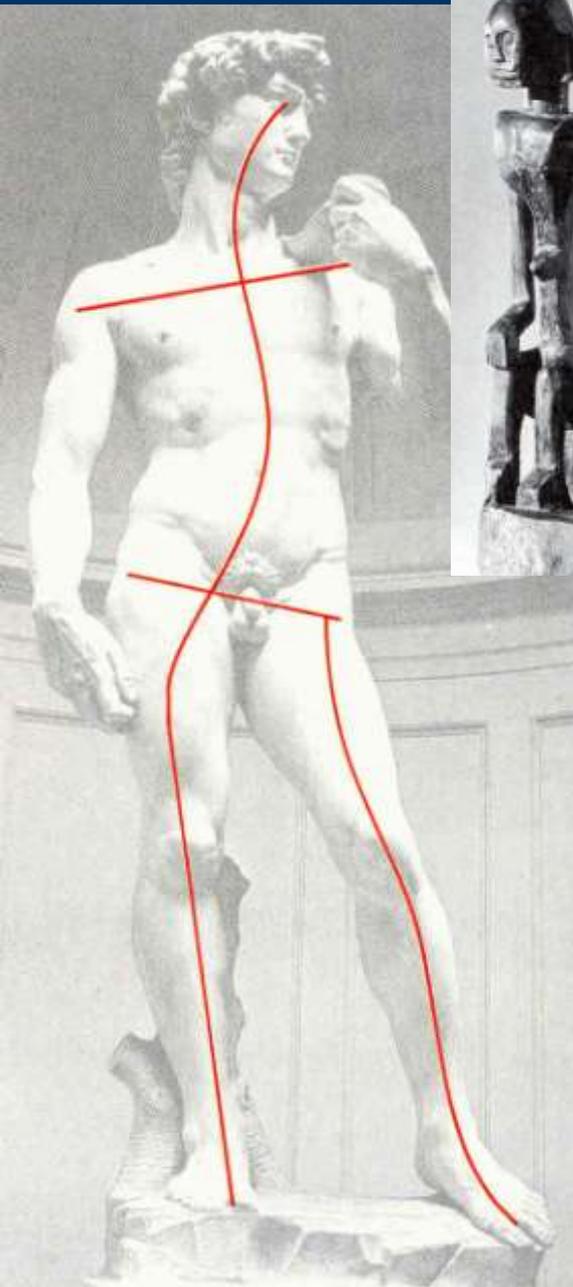
Michelangelo Buonarroti. David. 1501-1504.
Marble, height 18' (5.49 m).
Galleria dell' Accademia, Florence.

Contrapposto in Michelangelo's David.

The standing posture of a relaxed human being isn't rigid. In Michelangelo's sculpture of David the right leg supports the weight of the body while the left leg is relaxed, employed mainly for balance. This shifting of the weight places the hips at an angle, causing the shoulders to slope in the opposite direction. We refer to such a pose as contrapposto, which is an Italian word meaning "counterpoise." For most people the contrapposto position is a natural, comfortable way to stand.

If we compare the softly curving line that flows from David's head down to his weight-bearing foot with the strict vertical axis of the Dogon sculpture, the rigid poses of the one and the relaxed pose of the other are immediately apparent.

As a young architect Frank Lloyd Wright worked for Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) in his Chicago-based architectural firm. Sullivan is known for steel-frame construction that led to the emergence of the skyscraper. Sullivan's famous axiom, "Form follows function," became the touchstone for many architects. This meant that the purpose of a building should be the starting point for its design. This principle is thoroughly visible in the plan for the Guggenheim Museum. According to Wright's design, visitors would enter the building, take an elevator to the top and enjoy a continuous art-viewing experience while descending along the spiral ramp.

Andrea Zittel   A-Z UNIT FOR AVERAGING EIGHT BREEDS, 1993
Steel, wood, glass and electronics, 183 x 434 x 46 cm

Steve Barry   (My) Progress

In the foreground, on the right-hand side of the painting, there was a woman sitting, gazing towards the left. Behind her, in the center, was a man. Her husband, I guess. He was wearing a black cape and a hat. He had a pair of gloves, wearing one and holding the other. She was also in black except for this fluffy thing around her neck, this white ruffle. It seemed very impersonal, very static. He gazed out towards the viewer. She gazed at no one. There were stairs nearby and a reference to travel with a map hanging on a wall in the background ♦ The composition felt a little funny. There's a man and a woman and no connection between them. They're in different worlds. It has a very solitary feeling even though there are two people. This gives the painting a mysterious quality because you can't quite figure out this lack of contact. What are they looking at? It just never made sense. It looked wrong ♦ There's a woman sitting, looking out into space and a man standing up with gloves on, as if he's ready to go out. When they X-rayed the painting, they found that there had been a child in the picture, between the two figures, holding onto his mother's hand and clutching something that looked like a whip ♦ There was a theory that a little boy had been sitting in the chair with a rattle in his hand and somehow the missing spirit of the child lit the painting with melancholy. When you knew that there was a child who had been playing between them, it felt like a ghost was present. The painting became much deeper, it had a new dimension. One can speculate why he was painted out... ♦ The story was that the child had died so they removed him, and instead Rembrandt painted a chair. I had just had a child when I heard the story so, I used to come over here when there was no one in the room. It was just like sitting with them. They were friends of mine. Good, solid friends who had experienced a loss ♦ It was a traditional pose, her sitting and him standing. I assume they were husband and wife but they didn't seem in love. I think there was a third interest in the painting. It might have been a dog ♦ They were like porcelain dolls. They didn't seem very realistic. The woman had a far away look in her eyes but she was not looking out, she was probably looking at the child ♦ They removed the child after the portrait had been painted so there's not a look of sadness or grief on their faces because the child was there initially ♦ The woman had a very maternal impact. Everyone's dream of what you want your mother to be like, proper, solid and well-fed. Someone who contributes to your future and with whom you could live your entire life ♦ I loved her face, she had ruddy sort of cheeks but she didn't look common. She looked more alive than the man who was self-assured and a little pompous. But it was the detail in the clothing that spoke to me. I remember the flowers embroidered on her hair and those gorgeous white collars. I don't remember the woman's feet ♦ It was another dark painting except for the very white lace. The black and white clothes stood out sharply against the neutral background. The black was very deep and the crisp white lace against it really brought the painting out. It was a little smaller than *The Storm*, maybe it was 3 feet×4 feet, something like that. They were a very impressive couple. They dominated the room.

Sophie Calle

Last Seen

Olafur Eliasson

The Weather Project

Tate Modern

Tom Freedman

Untitled

The artist's name written in ink until the pen ran out.
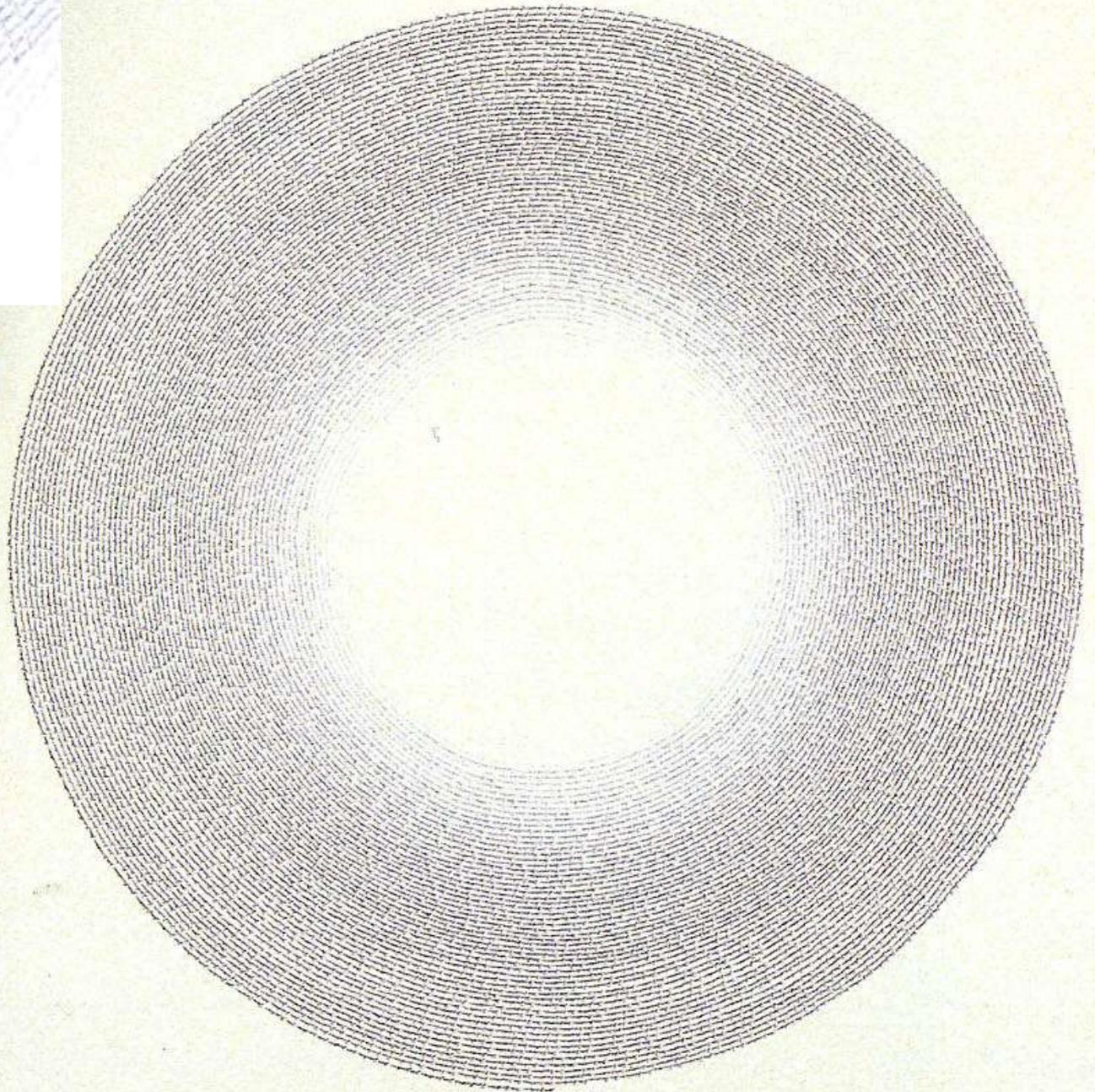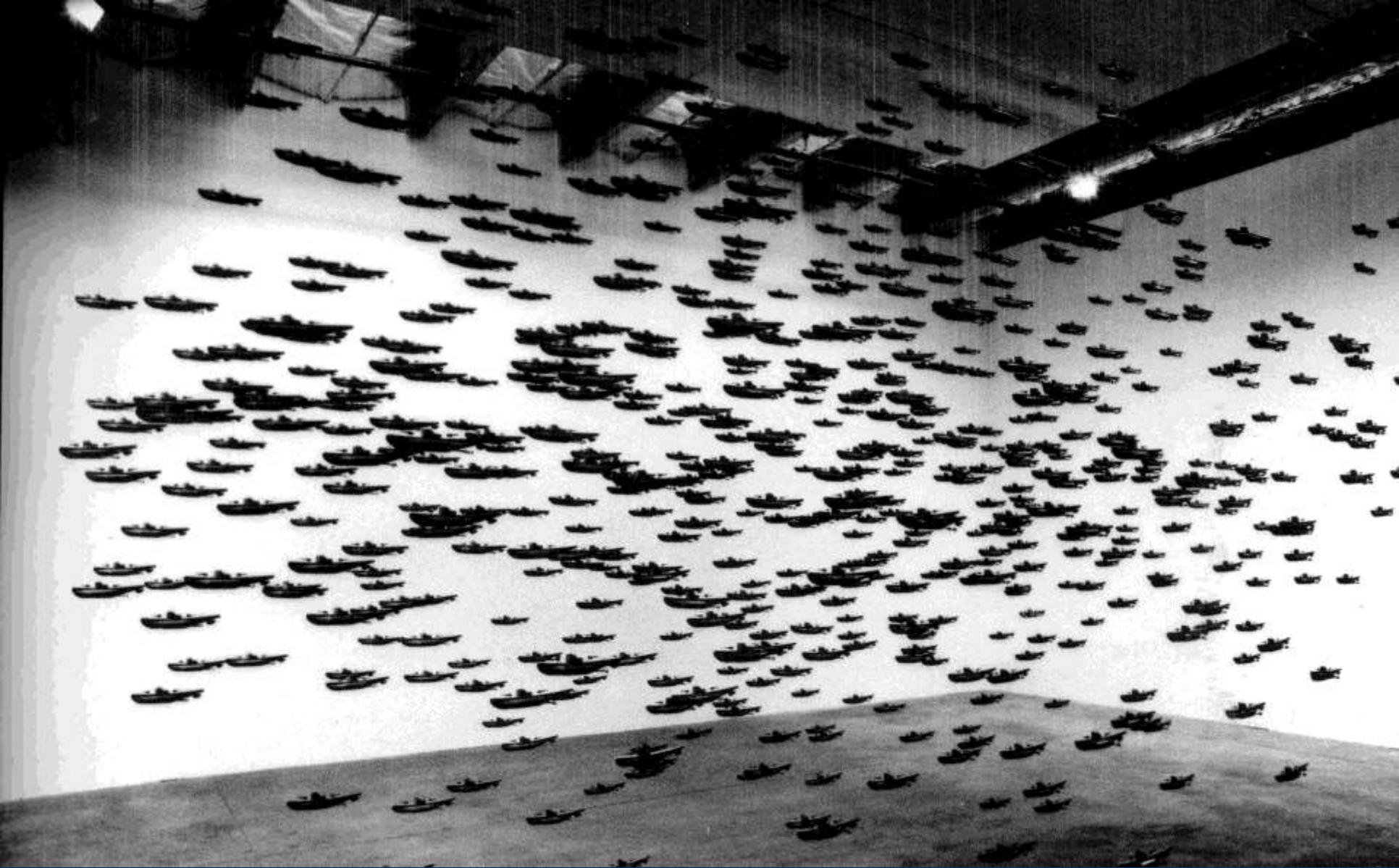
Chris Burden
All the Submarines of the United States of America, 1987

Vitaly Komar, America's Most Wanted