Composition

Composition means the selecting and arranging of appropriate elements within the picture space so that they express the artist's idea clearly and effectively. It makes a great deal of difference how we put together the things we draw within our picture space. Often a picture will succeed or fail, depending on how well it is composed.

Composition, as a basic step, means combining forms and space to produce a harmonious whole. When we make a picture, we arrange the picture elements such that a successful composition results. The composition of a picture can be arranged in several ways. For instance, a visual arrangement is called visual composition. In composing a picture we can divide it into thirds, where we place our objects in the picture space, how important we make them in size and value, and how they relate to each other and to the outside borders of the picture.

Good pictures, we see, do not simply happen. They are not the result of mindlessly throwing together miscellaneous objects or filling up a background with details. No artist has a draft on canvas or paper, unless we plan our picture carefully. It is likely to be the success with an executed painting. A well-composed picture, in other words, will give the viewer a visual sense of order and balance, although he may not realize it. For instance, the landscape painter composed his picture in such a way that the subject is a dominant element, and he divided the picture into sections to create depth.

Artists may use various techniques to create a composition. They may use color, line, shape, texture, and space. Each of these elements can be used to create a sense of unity and interest in the picture. Artists may use color to create a sense of mood or emotion. Line may be used to create a sense of movement or direction. Shape can be used to create a sense of form or structure. Texture can be used to create a sense of realism or abstraction. Space can be used to create a sense of depth or distance.

Composition is an essential aspect of making pictures, and it is important to understand the principles of composition. By learning the principles of composition, artists can create pictures that are both visually appealing and meaningful.
The picture starts in your mind

Before making a picture, the artist must decide what he wants to draw in it. He has in mind his subject matter, and then he has to arrange it so that the picture will be as effective as possible. But, in order with, he needs an idea.

Ideas begin in the mind, and then is genuinely where pictures begin, too. In fact, the mind or imagination is a natural reservoir of pictures. When we hear a word or think of an idea, the imagination goes to work and projects a picture in the mind.

Suppose we have the phrase: "Two pretty young maidens sitting on a bench in the park." Instantly the imagination re-creates a picture of a young man and woman close together on a bench, perhaps backed by each other's arms. He traces the walk, the sunbeams shining, the glowing lawn.

Or, we may be listening to the radio and hear a crime plan which begins with these words: "It is dark. A blue sedan drives up to a gas station. From it the figure of a man emerges, the lower half of his face covered by a handkerchief. The townsman reaches the station, his right hand drawn automatically to his pocket. Instantly we conjure up a mental image, a picture of the whole scene-packed under-the cat, metal frame, dinner-up alongside the gas pump, the door swinging open, the sinister figure of the gunman moving stealthily toward the station. Every word is built in the imagination.

We are always forming such mental images of things which we hear, read or think about. These images are the raw material of which pictures are made.

The first mental image which our mind forms in response to a picture idea is just one possibility. As we think about it, different variations may occur to us. We must try out these variations before deciding which will make the best picture.

The artist sketches the plan. As one image follows another, through the mind, we get these drawn on paper as the basis of rough sketches, working out the arrangements of the objects which we set in our imagination. Both our thinking and our sketching should be broad and flexible at this point. This is not the time to bother with details.
Basic thinking and arranging

When you have a good mental image of what you want to show in your picture, the picture is already partly completed. The next step is to arrange the object as effectively as you can.

Here we show you the kind of basic thinking you must do in composing. Start by simplifying the object in your picture. On your preliminary sketches, reduce these objects to their simplest shapes. You need to try them out in different arrangements to find the one you like best, and this will be easier if you ignore the details and concentrate on the big forms. These large forms must be properly related or the picture will be unsuccessful.

The elements

Above, we see three picture elements—a man with a gun, his victim, and a tree. Our problem is to arrange them in the picture space in such a way to have a good composition.

Placing the elements

Next, let us see how severely simple the picture elements have been made. They are completely free of detail. It is almost as if we decided on the general size, shape, and value of the picture elements and then cut them out of pieces of black, white, and gray paper. Our composition problem then is to find a manner of shuffling them around until we arrive at the best arrangement. Naturally, we will work with a pencil—a "sketching tool"—and try each arrangement of the picture elements in a rough sketch.

[Series of rough sketches showing different arrangements of the elements]
Problem

Here are two different situations which are well worth mentioning to the reader in the notes. Before you cut these down the many possibilities which you can discover for yourself by working with rough compositions:

- In one composition, the figure becomes a shadow. It takes up a large part of the picture, and the picture becomes an independent shape to the background.

- In the second composition, the figure becomes a shadow. It also takes on a shape for the figure in the background.
Lesson 3

Famous British Course

Composition — how to make pictures

The four main elements of composition

To make your study of composition as definite as possible, we have divided the subject into its two basic elements — area, depth, line, and value. Here we show you what these elements mean, and how Austin Briggs sees them to compose a picture. As the years you will probably apply each of these principles with conscious study. With experience, however, you will compose your pictures the way your favorite masters do, instinctively thinking of area, depth, line, and value at the same time.

Picture area

Picture area is the flat surface within the four borders of your picture; the surface on which you draw and paint. When you think in terms of picture area, some chief questions are: How big are your shapes and what are your colors? Is the picture divided into parts or sections? Is the light distributed over the picture? Are the shapes placed in such a manner? Are the important shapes near the center or at the corners?
Depth

Depth is the illusion of distance in a visual scene. To create the illusion of depth, you make things appear to come to you, and as they appear closer, they appear to have more value differences. The feeling of depth is created by the broad plane of the scene. For instance, if the large figure in the middle is larger than the small figure in the distance, making the small figure appear off into the distance, and the large figure, which grows smaller as it moves toward the small figure and the rear, which are shown in dashed up front but become solid further back.

Line

Line is the visual artistic expression of things. The line of thought can be seen in the figure, the second showing a line and the third showing a line moving. The lines are shown using curved lines to show the sense of movement. The lines also flow into the background, showing how the lines flow into the background.

Value

Value is the illusion of distance in a visual scene as shown by the colors on the figure. The value is shown by the color differences in the figure. The shapes are shown in dashed lines and are shown in the figure. The colors are shown using the colors of the figure, and the shapes of the figure are shown using the colors of the figure.
Picture area

The artist's first consideration in composing a picture is the picture area. This is simply the flat surface on which you draw or paint within the borders of your picture.

If you have ever taken a snapshot you have probably worked with picture area. To take your photograph, you looked at the scene of the camera and moved back so that the whole subject was in the picture—so the you moved closer so the subject would appear larger and clearer. These simple steps in manipulating the space in a photograph are basically the same steps you use to control picture area in drawing or painting.

To use your picture area most effectively, you must weigh carefully where you place things within it and what size you make them. Your choice of size and placement should never be accidental or arbitrary. When you have placed an object in your composition, pause and study the gap and location you have given it. Ask yourself, "Does this create the effect I had in mind?" If not, try making things larger or smaller. Move them to different places until the lines between your borders seem you are satisfied with the result.
Vary your sizes with a purpose

When we show but a single thing in a picture, the painter's eye cannot help but be drawn to it. Not because he wants to make this single object, it is the center of interest, but because it is the most important thing in the picture. However, when we add a second object, the situation becomes more complicated. Unless we establish a scale of relative importance among these things, the viewer's eye will not know where to go and he may not understand the message that the picture is supposed to convey.

Again, one of the artist's ways of showing what is important in his picture is through the relative sizes he makes his objects. He, for example, wants to compare two figures in a story illustration. We can make one figure somewhat the other so that it is just slightly -- depending on the nature of the work -- making each figure. If we want the viewer's interest to be divided equally between the two figures, we can make them both the same size. It is possible to place strong emphasis on a figure by drawing it in the foreground and making all other figures much smaller. The same rule applies when we have many figures or objects in a picture.

These, admittedly, are very simple truisms. The justifications are obvious. However, the basic principle remains the same: The way we give to things and where we place them convey their importance in the picture. We should never be chosen haphazardly or without regard to the effect is still probable. It should be decided again just as carefully as the action in poor.
Overlapping

Most of the pictures we make have more than one object in them, and each object differs from the others in size and shape. Overlapping provides a good way to organize these varied objects into interesting, unified arrangements.

When we arrange things in a picture, we are applying a principle which we often use in everyday life. Most of the things we see are parts hidden or overlapped by other objects. Overlapping, however, can also help us to organize our picture ideas more directly. By partly concealing the secondary objects through overlapping, we can make the primary ones more prominent.

Cropping

Every picture may be used to overlap objects. This is sometimes called "cropping." The borders may be used to crop a large part of the object — as long as the part which remains is typical enough to identify the object.

When we draw all of each object in a picture the effect tends to be flat and uninteresting. This principle holds true if the objects are arranged as in right.

The objects here are the same as those in the picture on left — for the effect is much to overwhelming because the objects are spread out wide and overlapped. The face cropped by the borders makes a "lost in.

When all the objects are drawn entirely within the borders, the picture may appear formal or abstract. But when parts of the objects extend beyond the borders in a similar way, the result will be a more lively picture.
Applying common sense to composition

Although the actual making of pictures may be new to you, you will find that you have a good deal of practical experience and judgment which you can apply in composing them. The same rules of standard form hold true for the pictures as for real life. For example, a person, like a bottle, has a base and neck, or crown and stem, so have too much in one corner—and under ordinary conditions, some of these elements are good.

Below are examples which will help you in your thinking about picture making and your everyday experiences. They demonstrate that there is nothing illogical about composing a picture. It calls for the same kind of common sense and judgment you use in solving the ordinary problems of daily living.
Points to remember

On this page we show you some very common-sense rules for arranging objects inside the picture area. Work through rules carefully and try them in your mind; they will help you to avoid unnecessary errors. Although our examples are very simple, the points that they make apply to much more complicated pictures also.

1. Don't split the picture in half. Everything is concentrated into the right half of the picture, with the left half completely empty.

2. Try the whole picture area. Notice how the figure is almost completely off center and how this splitting the picture in half.

3. Don't leave things up. The size of placement is important. Things are placed on a line or equal distance.

4. Turn the placement. Things look very interesting when they are not in perfect and overlapping.

5. Don't crowd the bottom. Here the objects have been scattered into the bottom half of the picture, and the upper half is empty.

6. See the upper half first. It is a mistake to make any of your pictures more than the space in the upper half of the picture. You.

7. Don't make everything. Things are lined up vertically, and the result is monotonous. The objects seem to sell on top of each other.

8. Break things to the side. The objects are more interesting because of empty space above. The objects are placed next to one another.

9. Don't leave a hole. You will frequent if you have things up filling the bottom. The center of the picture becomes an empty hole.

10. Make good use of your space. The space in the center of your picture is最大最宽 - use it to good use. There is just not possibility.

11. Don't let objects just touch. This toffee apple in the bottom is too close to the bottle which creates an empty space in the white space.

12. Spacing the objects keeps the hurt and color in areas. The bottle, bowl, and fingers together keep, and there is a better feeling of balance.
Applying the principles — Norman Rockwell

Norman Rockwell is famous for the human interest and the humanity which he puts into his pictures — but these are just as much to the skill with which he composes them. In creating this composition for a magazine cover, Rockwell gave careful thought to the size of the major figures and where he should place them. In overlapping the objects, he made sure that the important objects, being characterized as much as possible by their size, were not obscured. His purpose was to make the things you have been studying about size, shape, color, and overlapping and just as important to the success of a magazine cover as they are to your human compositions.
Depth

Depth in a picture is the illusion of distance in a third dimension. If our pictures are to possess a convincing sense of reality, we must suggest a feeling of depth in them.

One way of giving a feeling of depth in pictures we have seen, is to make things, nearest and more important, grow bigger as they get nearer from the eye.

At the same time, we must arrange our objects in depth so that they suggest some picture idea accurately. Purpose and effect we are working for must be the guiding considerations here, just as they are when we arrange our objects within the borders of the picture, or picture area.

In the illustration below we see how Reed Lodker has arranged two figures in depth to make a dramatic personality picture. He has placed one figure in the foreground, as close to the viewer that we have a feeling of being directly connected in the situation. The other figure is further off, but within noticing distance, as required by the story. Far in the background, even the high mesa appears fine.

In his preliminary sketches, Lodker tried out other possible arrangements in depth. The diagrams below illustrate the kind of thinking he did. Like him, you should always examine your effect very carefully to decide whether the figures are at just the right depth— and make changes and adjustments until they will come near the way you want it told.
Use depth in an interesting way

Overlapping, trapping, and making objects appear smaller as they recede into the distance are useful devices for giving pictures a sense of depth, an illusion of reality. It is not enough, however, to create depth in a composition — we must do it in an interesting way.

The drawings on this page show eight and seven ways of suggesting depth in pictures. Unless there is some special reason for it, do not use any objects in a row, closed them into a hall or a room or at the picture depth, or arrange them in a zig-zag or another direction such as in a curve or at a triangle. It is much better to place things in such a way that they make a variety of horizontal and volumetric patterns in depth.

Choose the location in a picture can be increased by selecting a different view from the one you were used. In the front view the objects may be all of one size or lined up at regular intervals. By taking another view, it must be possible to suggest the objects of different intervals, to make some large and some small for the sake of variety. You may try a view from the side in place of one from the front, or change the angle of vision in some other way. There are always new possibilities worth considering.

Don’t just be satisfied with an ordinary composition to keep repeating the same few basic arrangements in your picture. Try to create something new. Think — experiment — move your objects around in depth until you arrive at arrangements that are useful and interesting. This is what the best artists do.
Using props to create depth...

On this page we see Al Parker use "props"—objects—to build a sense of depth in his pictures. In each of these illustrations the figure or figures are the source of interest, and they are placed toward the rear of the picture. Parker arranges the objects in the picture so that they create a strong feeling of depth and at the same time lead our eye back into the depth to the source of interest.

The piece of the table has created the basic feeling of depth in the picture.

Parker has overlapped all the elements of his illustration so that they not only blend but add depth. They also have a slight shading over all shapes around the edges. The background itself is made up of value in space, part of the picture.

In this illustration of Parker sitting at a round table and chair, placed far against the alpine of background so her features could be left the proper shape of the chair tells the rest of the story. The woman's posture is arranged to depth so that your eye moves the object to her.
Design in depth — Peter Nelick

In this cover illustration for a farm magazine, Nelick's centre of interest is the two figures and the tractor and plow. He drew them large and placed them in the left foreground, so they would dominate the scene. He arranged the plowed furrows to carry our eye sharply back over the hillsides to the farm — and further emphasized this movement to depth by the direction of the tractor and the road at the left, as well as the location of the farmer.

Groupings in depth — Steele

Here Steele had three sets of figures to arrange in this scene, and he composed them to create a striking effect of depth. He made the most important figure larger and placed him in the foreground. The others he made smaller and placed them further back, staggering the groups for variety and interest. The diagonal of the bench top pulls our eye sharply back into the room and strengthens the sense of depth. Note that the left tripod is actually larger than the figures at the rear.
Line

The term "line," as generally understood, is simply the outline of a shape. When we apply it in composition, however, line means the direction in which our eye moves as we look at a picture. We create the directional trend of line by arranging the objects in the picture so that their shapes or short space lines lead the eye smoothly and naturally to a center of interest.

Controlling the movement of the viewer's eye within the picture borders is a very important part of picture making. The artist must always be aware of what the lines in his picture do. In composing a picture we must plan these lines to help guide the viewer's eye. We should make sure that our line leads to another, and ultimately to some center of interest. If we work carefully, we may create strong lines that lead to important parts of the illustration or scene in altogether.

It is also important to be aware of the type of movement that directional line creates. It can move our eye along quite smoothly and rhythmically from one thing to another, grouping and relating objects which belong together. On the other hand, the movement may be sharper -- the artist may purposefully create a clash of lines. This may be appropriate if he is drawing a sense of violence or conflict.

Line can be a strong force in a picture and should be always lead the viewer so that he will see and feel the things we want him to.

Here is an obvious case of line to guide the eye of interest to a definite point. The crooked path of the road and the curving shape of the hills are deliberately placed to lead the eye to the church. Four lines of the closest features and further down our attention to the church.

Here is what would happen if our placement of lines were thoughtless. First, instead of leading our eye to the church, the lines that lead past it are too long and too firm. The whole line leads too far out of the picture. Both a sense of depth here but not to a well-composed picture.

Here is a fine example of how the use of line can add to the composition. Here we use the shape of the tree to lead our eye to the church and another structure near the church.

All of the lines in this picture work against good composition. The line of the mountains and road, and the view of the road, could lead a view, and our eye past the scene and not into the left of the picture. The large tree leads our attention out of the picture.
Using line to full advantage

The diagrams above show how one may use line to strengthen and clarify composition. A general rule is that the eye follows the lines naturally. When you plan a picture, make it a point to study the direction of the lines in your rough sketch. Heads, shoulders and other main forms keep the eye within the picture. Ask yourself: Do the background lines become confused with the lines of the center of interest? Are the lines drawn together at the same level? Should the eye be drawn out of the picture? The main form should be visible but not enlarge the form, into the picture and keep from the main forms?
Composition — how to make pictures

*John Singer*

Here is an excellent example of well-arranged perspective in an illustration. The composition is so arranged in depth that the eye looks at the house, right-hand side, and then across the yard towards the big tree in the background. The eye, on the other hand, then looks at the arched doorway and the house again. The eye then moves across the floor to the figure in the foreground.

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*Paul Nash*

Although the figure is a small figure, it is seen to best advantage. The eye moves right and left, and then back to the figure. This is done through the use of the line and the landscape to guide the eye up to the figure.

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*Dane Shuler*

The arrangement of the figure in the picture is due to the position of the figure in the landscape and the foreground. The figure is placed in the middle of the picture, and the eye moves left and right to follow the figure. The eye then moves back to the figure, and the picture is balanced.

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*E. P. Sargent*

The arrangement of the picture is done in such a way that the eye moves from the left to the right, and then back to the left, following the figure. The eye then moves to the background, and the picture is balanced.

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*Picture content*

The picture shows a person in the foreground, with a house in the background. The person is standing in front of the house, and the eye moves from the left to the right, following the figure. The eye then moves back to the left, and the picture is balanced.
Value

Value – lightness or darkness – is the fourth of the elements of composition. Although last in order, it is by no means last in importance. Like tone, shape, and line, value can play a leading part in the making of a picture.

Most pictures have a mood, and a major factor in creating this mood is the overall value. We give the picture a "key," as it is frequently called. For example, a picture of a gay picnic or a children’s party should probably be painted light in value, or in a fairly "high key." But if we wished to paint a scene with a feeling of solemnity and dignity, we could accomplish this mood by making the picture dark in value or in a "low key." In a woodcut, light value or a picture of a storm, we might logically select a wide range of contrasting values ranging from pure white to solid black.

Values should be consistent within a picture, particularly where we use them to set the mood. For example, the overall effect of the picnic scene might be ruined if parts of the picture as some of the figures in it were painted in gray, number tones, out of key with the rest of the illustration. And, similarly, a picture with a mood of dark despair could be weakened by thoughtlessly introducing light or gray tones.

Just as the proper use of line leads our eye to a focal point in a picture, so our eye tends to go to those parts where there is the greatest contrast of values. This is because objects become more conspicuous when placed near to a value that contrasts with their own. On the other hand, when an object is surrounded with values that are nearly the same as its own, it is not so likely to attract our attention. Thus, our eye is drawn to the black hat on a man standing in front of a pile of snow — but it is not attracted where he stands since he stands in front of all of a pile of mail. We can use this principle to help focus attention where we want it in a picture.
Plan with a few simple values

Before you begin to paint, you should always try to decide on a basic value pattern. In general, the basic value plan of most pictures can be reduced to one of the following:

- Light against dark
- Dark against light
- Dark and medium (or between tone) against light
- Light and dark against medium

Sometimes these patterns are clear and strong, and can be recognized at once. Others, however, they are more subtle. The value pattern may be heavily worked with textures or made up of detailed forms that obscure the basic scheme of darks and lights. Still, if you appraise the picture you will see that one of these basic value patterns is there underneath, and that it holds the composition together.

A picture in which the values are not solved in big, simple terms is usually confusing. To avoid this problem, work on the values of the happy areas of your picture right at the start. A good way to do this is to make small value sketches, much like the illustrations below, so you can quickly try out a number of different value patterns and see which one works best.

In the pattern of dark against light, the figure and the light together make another matter edge against the background. In the pattern of light against dark, the figure and its shadow are made up of dark and light in a pattern of shadowed light and lighted shadow.

There is a pattern of light and dark against each other. From the more limpid, or draw because the dark here is more the background than the shadow. Here is no way that the figure is the source of shadow.

The light and dark areas are used against the light and shadow. The light figures largely against the light, the light figure against the wall in shadow. The principle of summarizing tones and edges is a pattern of light and dark.
Creating a center of interest

When we arrange objects in a composition, we must always keep their values in mind. We can create a dark object stand out by placing it next to or in front of a light one. We can make a light object important in a picture by setting it against a dark background. By contrasting the value of one thing with the value of another, we can create a center of interest.

Obviously, the strongest and most attention-getting center is achieved by placing the lightest shape in the picture against the darkest one—or vice versa. And, likewise, we can make objects almost indistinguishable by grouping them with others that are closely related in value. Things that are not important in the theme of the picture can be placed down in the low. Never allow an accidental use of contrast to draw the viewer's attention to the wrong place and distort or confuse the picture's message.

To learn how to control values in composition, make some sketches like the still-life demonstrations below. Keep the picture uncomplicated and, using only two or three simple objects, work for various degrees of contrast. Without any details, don't let them destroy the effects of high and low values that make up your picture. By practicing this way, you will soon know how to make the viewer's attention turn to where you want it.

Here we are emphasizing the idea of using one center of interest. Don't forget, though, that large, light, and dark can all be used for the same purpose. Usually, you will build most centers of interest near your main light with all or most of these elements of composition.
Controlling values in a composition

Broadly speaking, there are four ranges of value, or value keys, in which pictures are painted. On this page we show you these four keys and the effects created by each.

The middle key pictures are the original direction here. It was painted by Al Parker, who selected this key because he felt it represented the mood he wanted. The other pictures show how the same subject would look in the other keys. Note in each picture a value bar with a bracket indicates the range of values used.

Notice that the relationship of values is consistent in each of these pictures. For example, the girl’s face is always the lightest tone, her black eye one of the darkest. Always choose the key most appropriate to your subject — and stick to it as you paint.
Composition – how to make pictures

Evolution of the composition

1. The first attempt was too static. The figureariat the composition in half was made too flat. The vitality is in the confront and exhilaration.

2. In the second attempt, something new evolved in the scene, giving the eye a new thrust. The vitality is in the confrontation and excitement.

3. A more dynamic scene shows the figure in action. The figure is more prominent, and the scene is more dramatic.

4. Turning the figure toward the audience with a smile, the figure seems to be looking at the picture frame or at the audience.

5. The third attempt shows the figure in motion with a smile. The figure seems to be looking at the picture frame or at the audience.

6. The final attempt shows the figure in motion with a smile. The figure seems to be looking at the picture frame or at the audience.

The completed illustration

The finished illustration, as it appeared in the magazine.

Some subject, many compositions

The composition appearing on this page was one of a series of advertisements for American Airlines Airline package mail, which was illustrated by a series of production problems. A series of carriages which had been supplied with local trains for these trains were unable to maintain delivery schedules, and the delay in production made it impossible for the golf-aline mail to be made on time. Instead of “on the ground,” the problem was to show the golf-aline mail to be troublesome and to give the story up with the game. As the entire series of advertisements was in a business tone, it was decided to depict the business men in a more relaxed – which, of course, was necessary. The hope in the advertisement explained that American Airlines Airline was looking for new business.

You learn to draw by drawing
Composing an advertising picture

On this page we show you another advertising illustration in its early stage development as a composition. The subject is an advertising artist who is having trouble generating an idea for his client's products, which are piled up on his desk. The atmosphere is one of frustration and despair—the man is obviously tired. In making pictures, the number of approaches to working into the composition via a given subject are numerous, and there are many ways of doing it that are good. The important point to remember is the selection of the right composition to solve the advertiser's specific problem—to get his message sent to the public.
The four elements of composition in action

In this seemingly simple picture, notice the bold, clear, and imaginative way Al Parker applies the four elements of composition.

First, Parker has done some interesting things with the picture area. He has divided it up into groups of blackboard, map, figures, and desk. There is no continuous repetition of similar size and shape. Instead, we find a careful, sensitive placement of objects that is designed to maintain interest through variety.

Through his use of the desk, Parker creates a feeling of depth. They also work as directional lines, leading our eyes back to the figures and their faces, the center of interest.

Finally, we see the picture strengthened by Parker's use of the principle of placing dark against light and light against dark in the heads and their backgrounds. The greater variety of contrasting values results in the center of interest around the boy and girl.