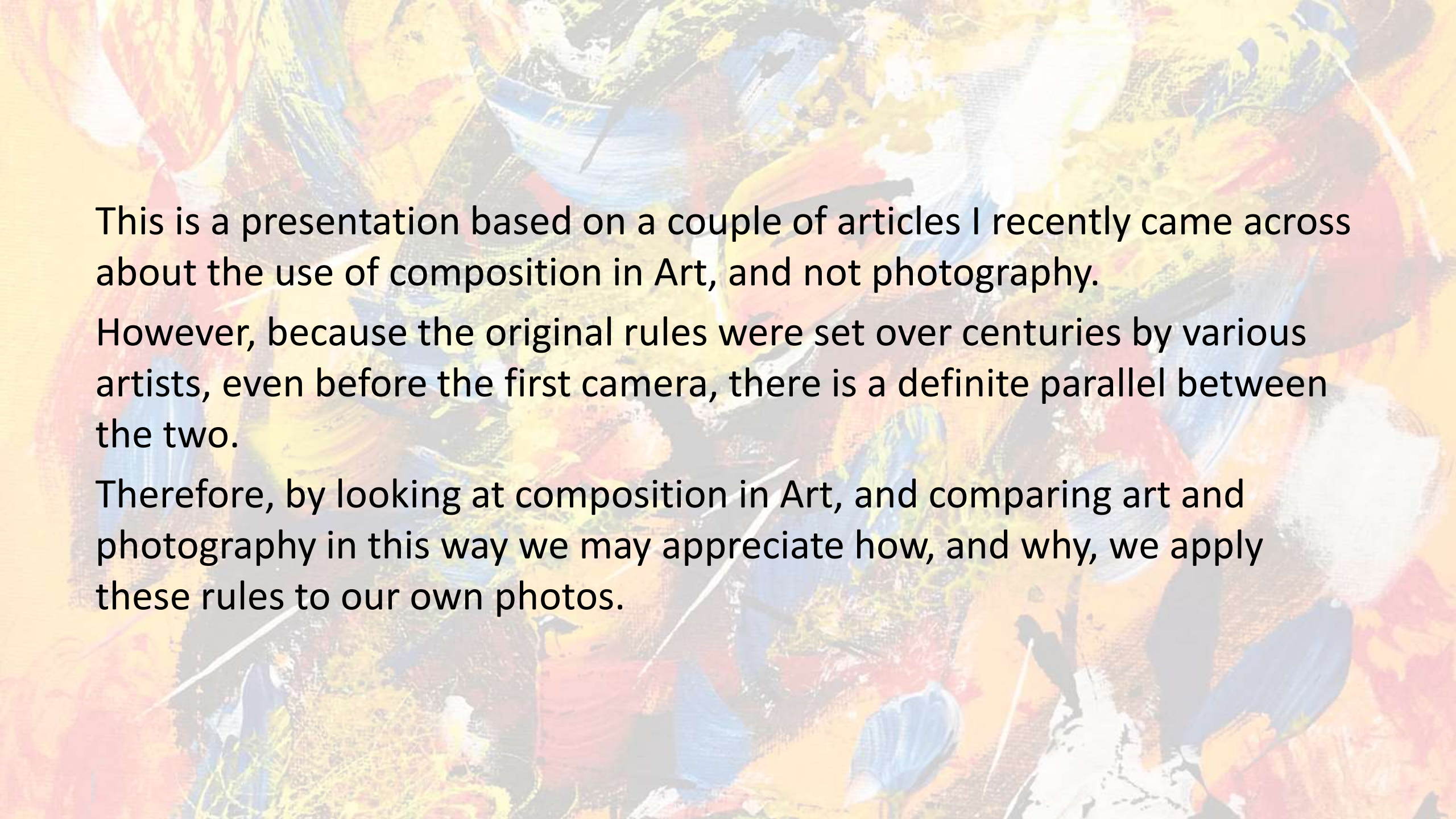


An abstract painting with a vibrant, textured background. The composition is dominated by warm colors like yellow, orange, and red, interspersed with cooler tones of blue and white. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and artistic spontaneity.

# Composition For Artists

Based On An Original Article By Dan Scott

An interpretation by Graham Evans



This is a presentation based on a couple of articles I recently came across about the use of composition in Art, and not photography.

However, because the original rules were set over centuries by various artists, even before the first camera, there is a definite parallel between the two.

Therefore, by looking at composition in Art, and comparing art and photography in this way we may appreciate how, and why, we apply these rules to our own photos.

Imagine a pretty drawing of a house with a path meandering up to it, trees either side in careful balance, a classic landscape scene that just 'works'.

Where is this masterpiece?

- The Tate?
- The National Art Gallery?



No, it's stuck to a fridge door,  
created by a 4-year-old.



As a young child, visual harmony and composition comes naturally. Children seem to start out with a near perfect sense of composition. If you have small children or are lucky enough to have any of your old drawing's created by you as a child, I'm sure you'll find the same to be true. Younger children see the edges of the paper as a whole frame to fill, and they often fill them with a great sense of balance.



When you start to grow up, you know – really old like 9 or 10, that's where the drawing problems start.

The focus shifts and is aimed away from composition to the pursuit of something far more important, where the accolades are huge and respect even greater, the quest for the ultimate prize ..... ***realism***.



# A reframing of priorities

The importance that was once placed on the edges of the page, the 'wholeness' of the piece, are now disregarded in favour of singular objects, and the representation of these objects as accurately and as detailed as you can possibly make them.

The prize is no longer for composition, a 10-year-old doesn't care, the focus is on accuracy, and realism, especially '**hard things to draw**' like hands or faces.

But the **ultimate goal**, the real award winner is this . . .

*If you can draw a crumpled can of Coke realistically you are king of the art room.*



# The simplest way to start

Once you have been diverted from the path of composition in childhood it is hard to get it back.

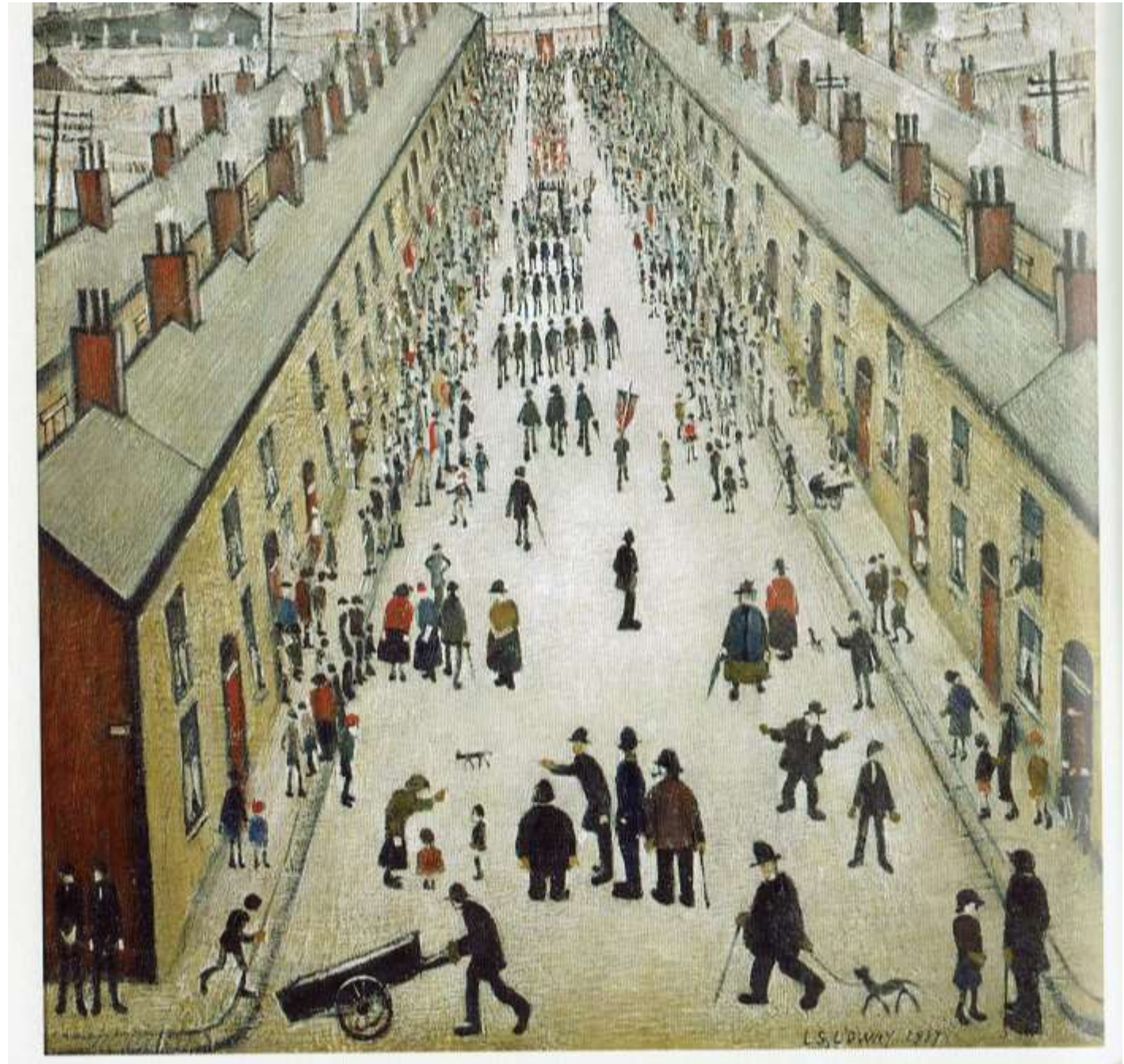
You will now have a natural tendency to place objects in the centre of a picture, which is due to the strong influence of art formed in school.



LS Lowry 1935  
Berwick Upon Tweed

It is not just through the handling of the paint, but the composition of the painting itself, where everything is biased towards the centre.

If you want to change and move towards a more sophisticated composition, there are a few things to consider.



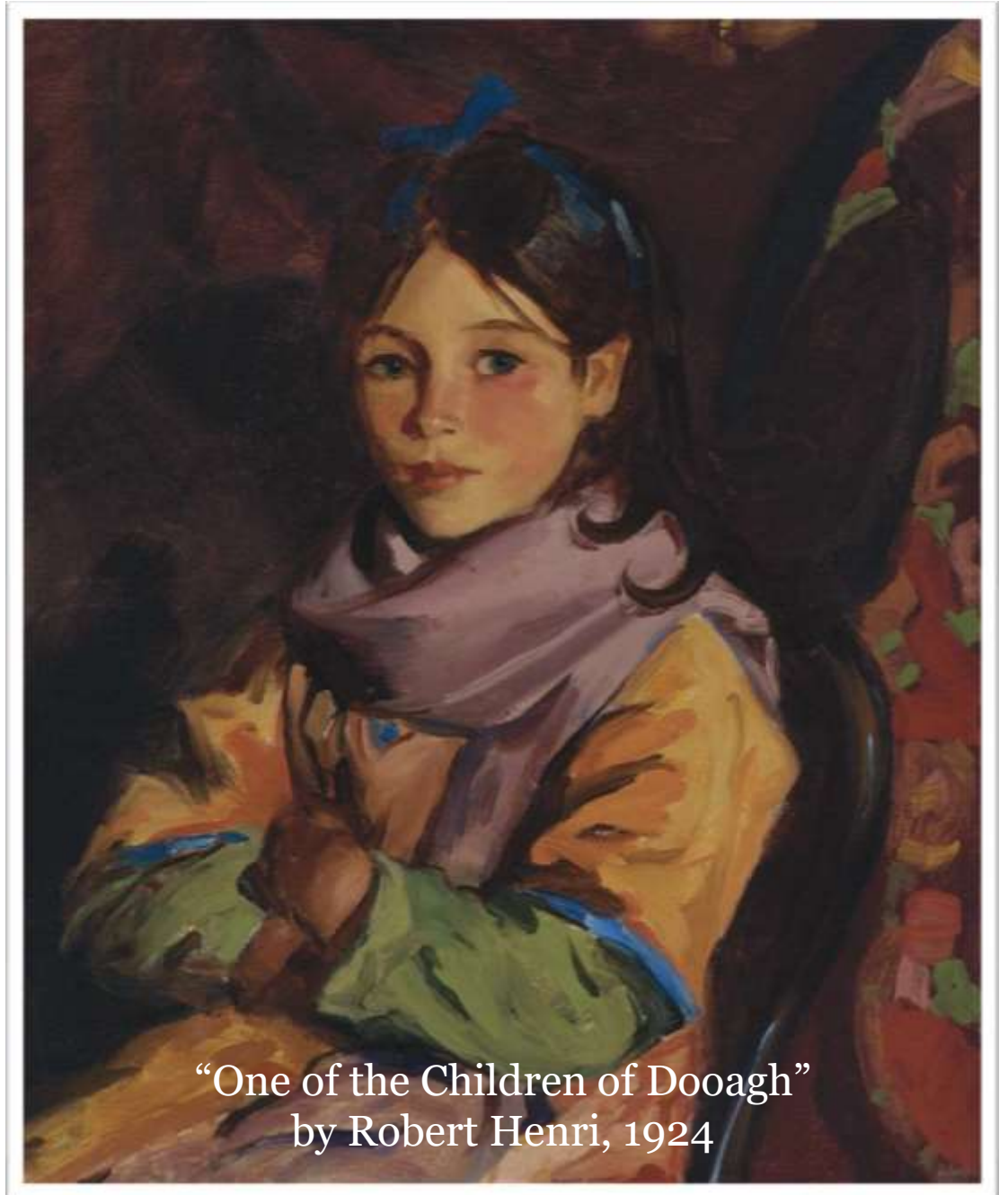
# Composition



*“Good composition is like a suspension bridge - each line adds strength and takes none away.”*

*“No one is an artist unless he carries his picture in his head before painting it, and is sure of his method and composition.”*

as quoted by Robert Henri.



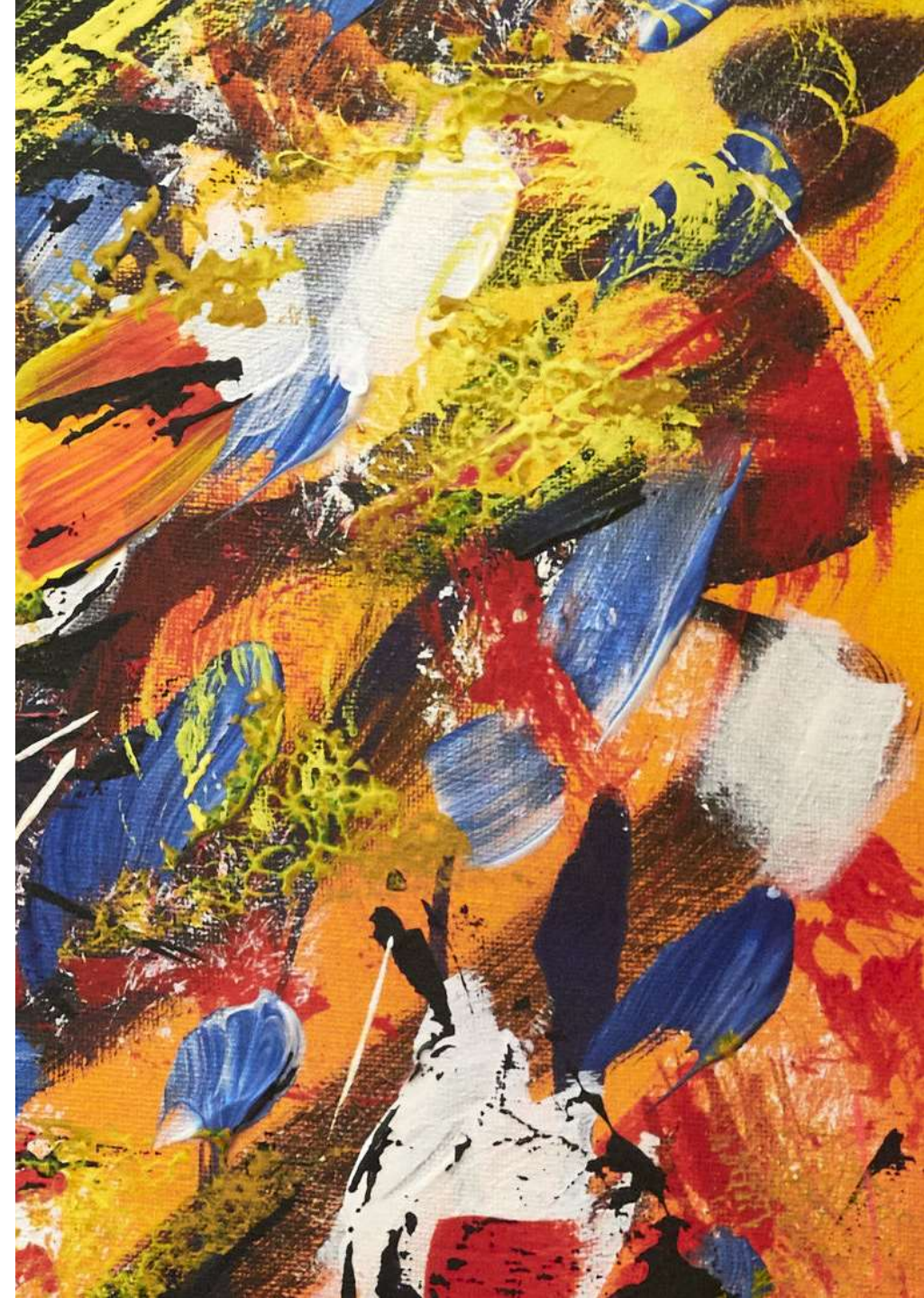
“One of the Children of Dooagh”  
by Robert Henri, 1924

# ***What is Composition ?***

## **Dictionary Definition :**

**com·po·si·tion/ ,kämpə'ziʃən/Noun**

1. The nature of something's ingredients or constituents; the way in which a whole or mixture is made up.
2. The action of putting things together; formation or construction.



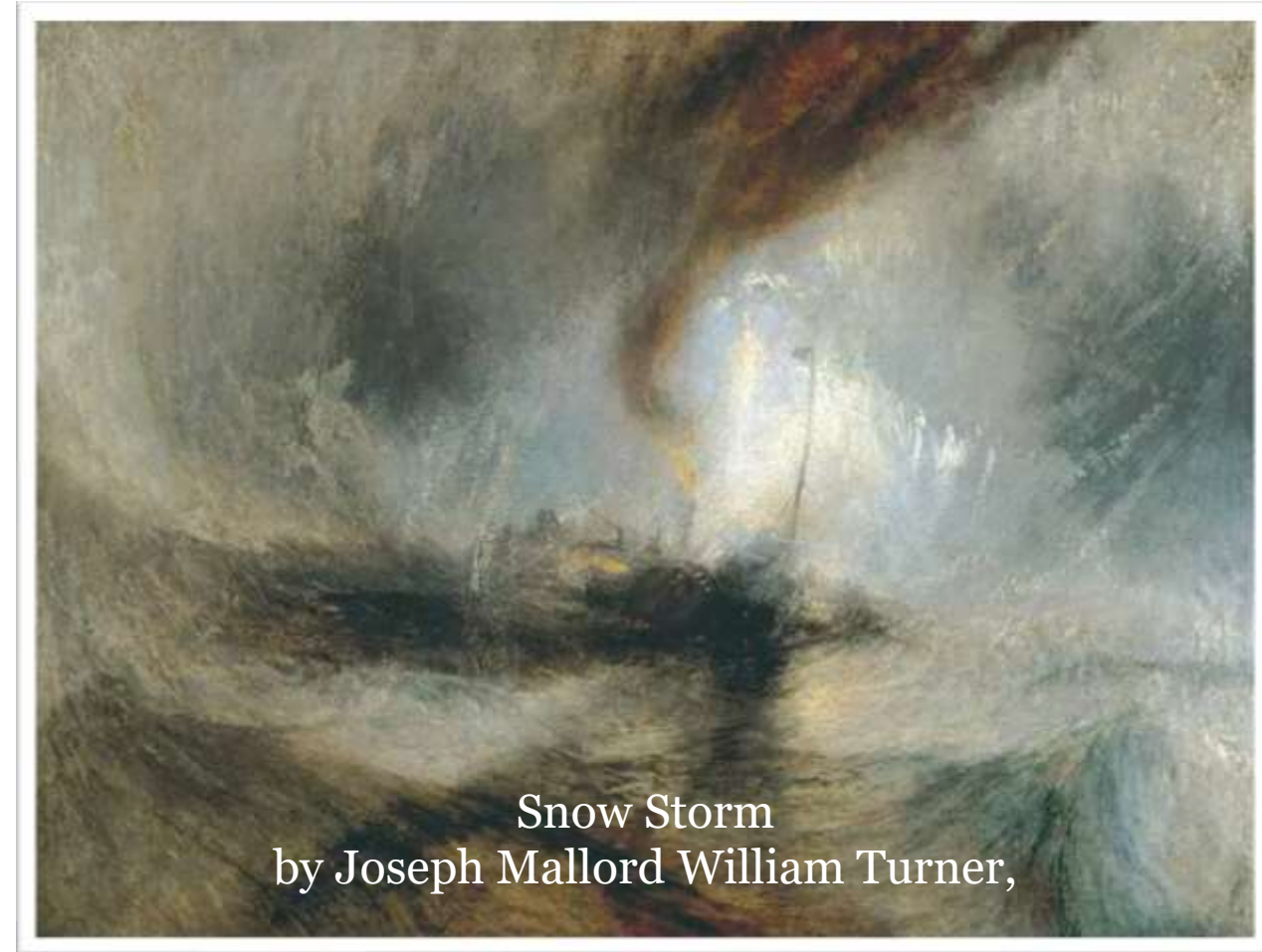
# What Is Composition in Art?

Composition is a broad term. So broad that it can be difficult to clearly define.

Think of it as the way in which we arrange the visual elements to communicate our ideas about the subject.

A well-composed painting is clear, concise, and interesting.

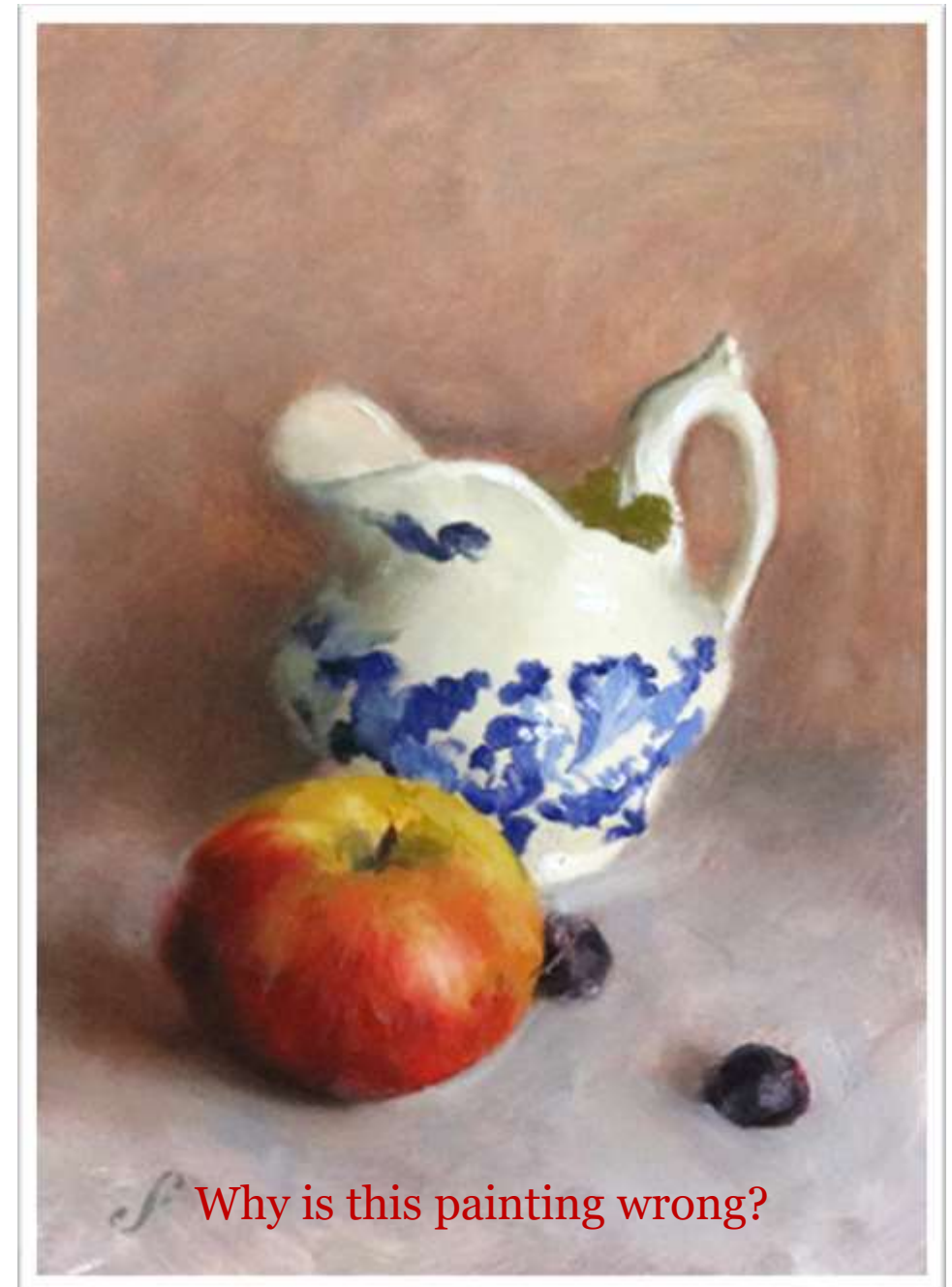
All the pieces appear to work in perfect harmony. It will look like a cohesive painting, rather than an arrangement of parts.



Snow Storm  
by Joseph Mallord William Turner,

# What Is Poor Composition?

A poorly composed painting is harder to spot.  
A painting can be wrong for many reasons, and it  
can be difficult to narrow down on the main culprit.  
You might know something is off but be unable to  
put your finger on what.



*f* Why is this painting wrong?

# Composition in Two Questions

It's very easy to get lost in all the composition rules, red tape, and artistic rhetoric.

But, at the end of the day, it always comes back to this:

***Composition can be broken down to two basic questions:***

***1. What do you want to say?***

What is your big idea? What is the message you want to communicate through your work?

***2. How are you going to say it?***

How are you going to arrange the visual elements in a way that communicates your message?



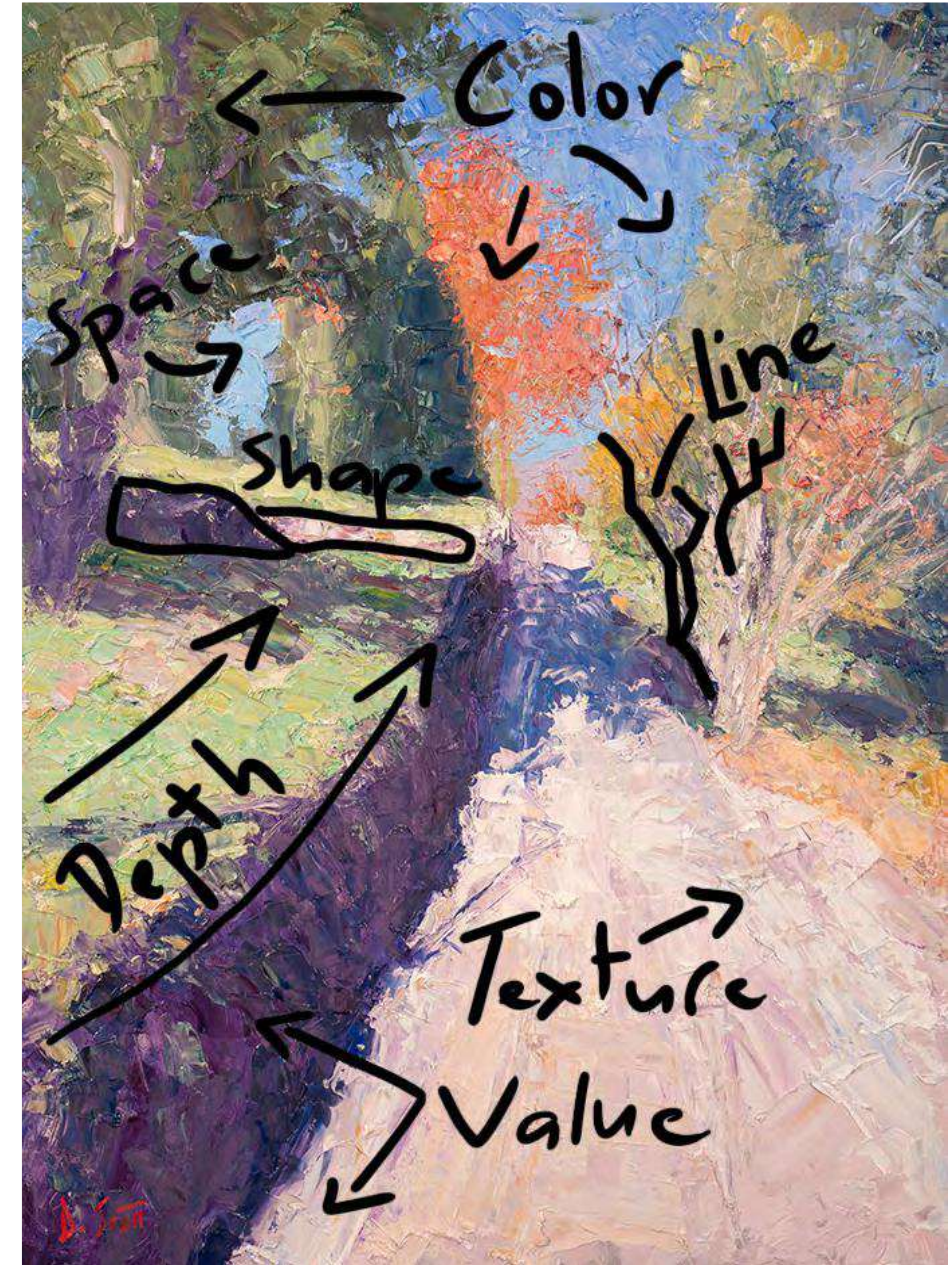
# Visual Elements

## (The Building Blocks of a Painting)

The visual elements are the building blocks of a painting and your tools of composition.

They are:

<b>LINE :</b>	A narrow mark that spans between two points. This is the most fundamental visual element at your disposal.
<b>SHAPE :</b>	A contained area defined by edges.
<b>COLOUR :</b>	The different hues (red, blue, orange, green)
<b>TEXTURE :</b>	How rough, smooth, glossy, etc. the surface is.
<b>VALUE :</b>	How light or dark a colour is.
<b>SPACE :</b>	The space taken up by (positive) or between (negative) objects.
<b>DEPTH :</b>	The illusion of distance on a flat surface. Depth is typically divided into a foreground, middle ground, and background.



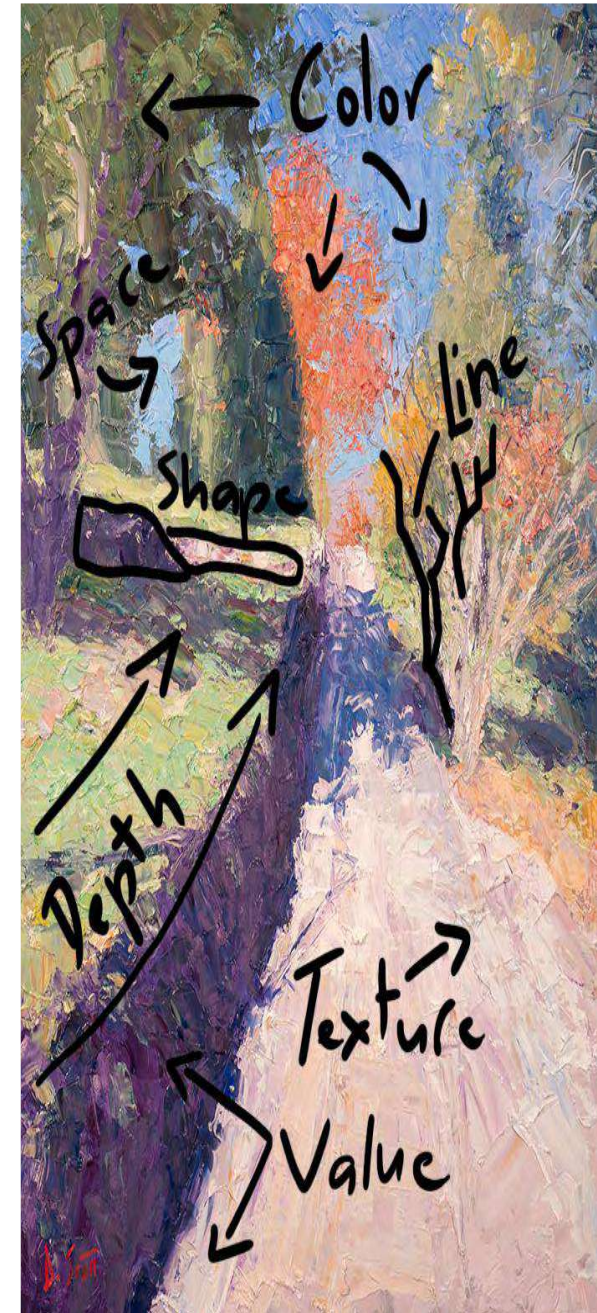
# Principles of Art

## (The Glue Holding It All Together)

If the visual elements are the building blocks, the principles of art are the glue holding it all together.

They are:

<b>RHYTHM :</b>	The visual tempo of your work created through repetition and pattern.
<b>BALANCE :</b>	The visual weighting of elements.
<b>EMPHASIS :</b>	The arrangement of elements to place emphasis on certain areas. Otherwise known as a focal point.
<b>GRADATION :</b>	A gradual change in a certain element to help connect the composition (long lines to short lines, large shapes to small shapes, dark to light tones, etc.).
<b>HARMONY :</b>	The way distinct parts work together towards a similar vision or idea.
<b>VARIETY :</b>	The use of different elements to create interest and contrast.
<b>MOVEMENT :</b>	The illusion of movement through clever placement of the visual elements (think of Vincent van Gogh's energetic brushwork).
<b>PROPORTION :</b>	The relative size of one element in comparison to another.



# Composition Rules

## Theories, and Techniques

There are several rules, theories, and techniques that can help you craft more interesting compositions.

Let's look at some of the important ones.

Keep in mind, these are not to be treated as rule-bound law.

Rather, they are suggestions or guidelines at best.



# Composition Rules

## Theories, and Techniques

In this photograph we can identify where rules have been applied to create a pleasing composition.

These are:

- Framing
- Leading Lines
- Rule of Odds
- The Rule of Thirds
- Balance

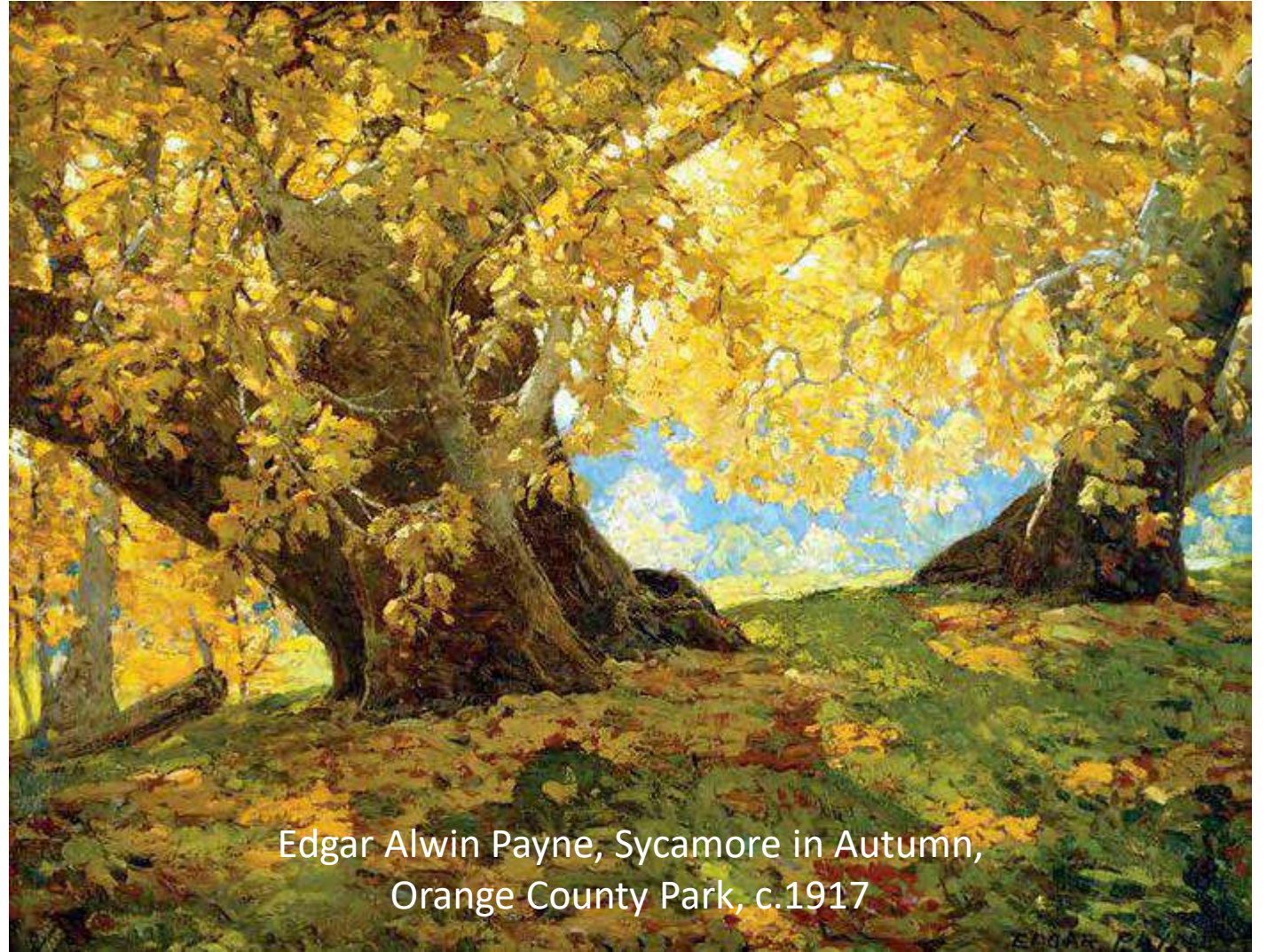


# Framing

Framing involves arranging shapes and other elements in a way that “frames” a particular area.

The idea behind it is much the same as why we physically frame our paintings.

It helps focus and contain our attention.



Edgar Alwin Payne, Sycamore in Autumn,  
Orange County Park, c.1917

# Leading Lines

**Leading lines** are suggestive lines that direct attention around a painting.

They can be actual lines or **implied lines** that don't physically exist but are merely implied or suggested.

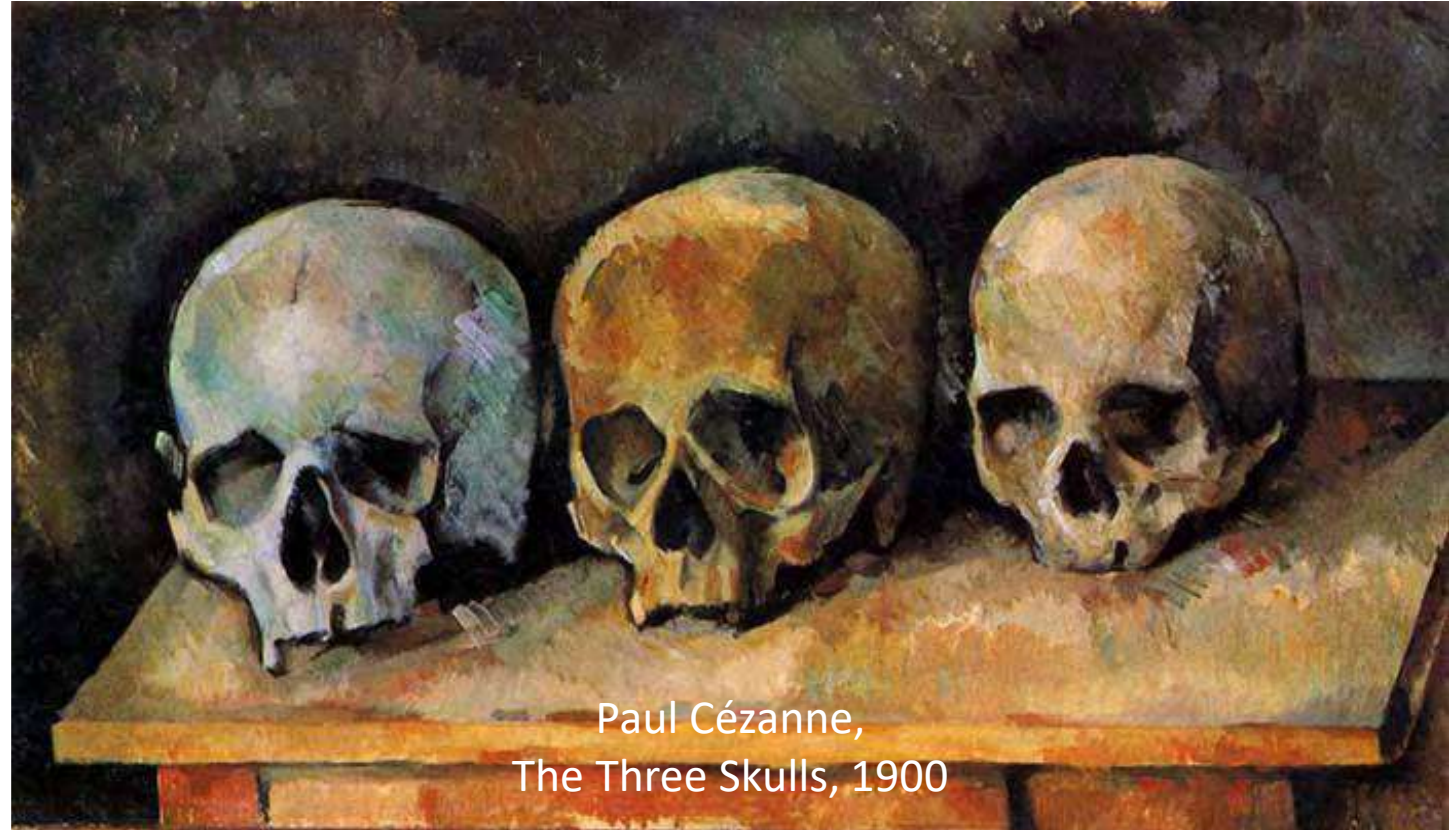
A line of vision is an implied line.



John Singer Sargent, Paul Helleu  
Sketching His Wife, 1889

# Rule of Odds

The rule of odds is an idea that, objects in odd numbers appear more interesting and natural than objects in even numbers.



Paul Cézanne,  
The Three Skulls, 1900



A group of three birds usually appears more interesting than a group of two or four birds.

One of the reasons for this is that even numbers can appear overly symmetrical.



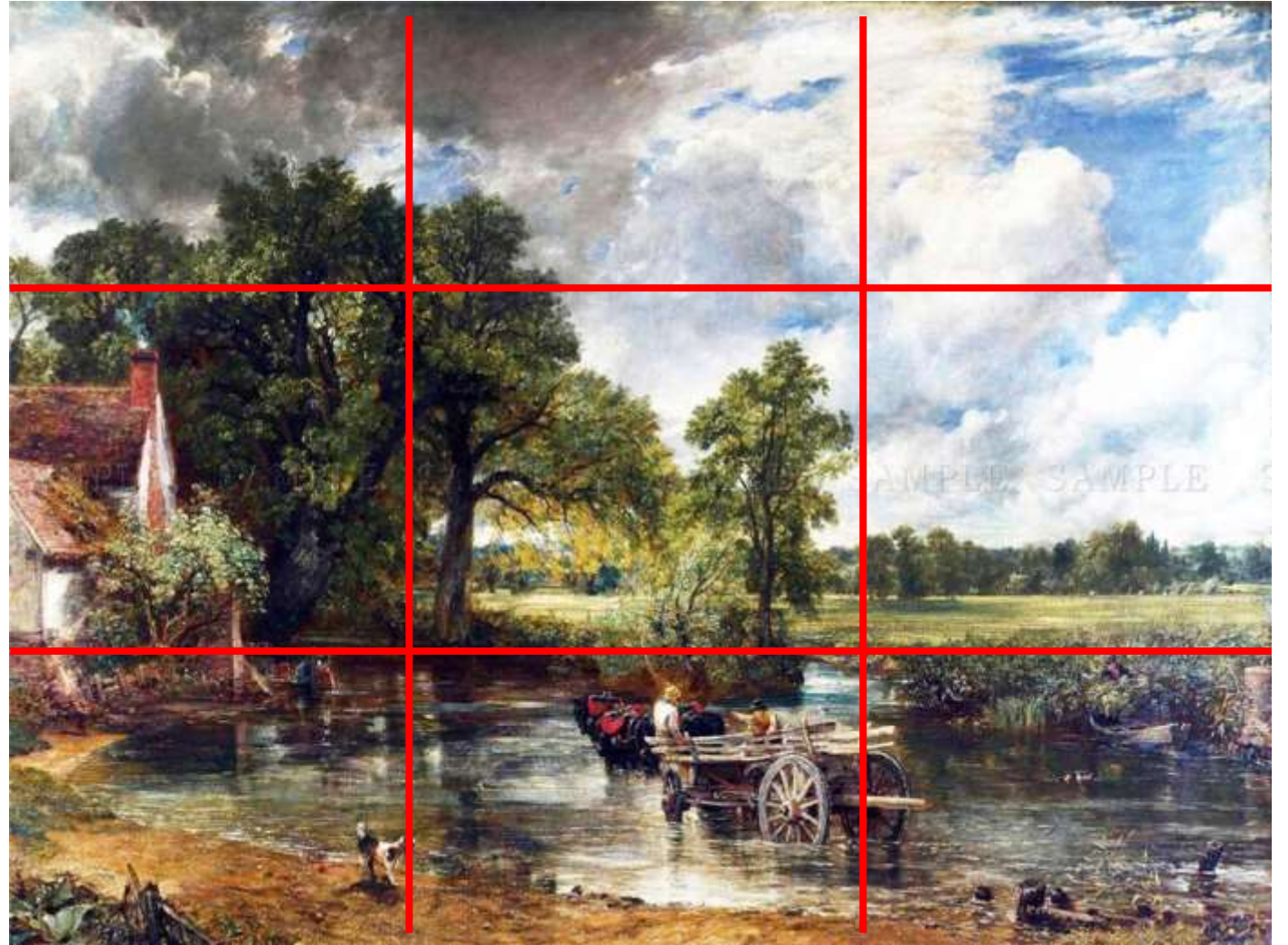
# Rule of Thirds

The **rule of thirds** involves placing a three-by-three grid over the subject, using it to assist in the composition design.

The gridlines and intersections are “safe” spots to position key features.

For example, you could position your focal point at one of the intersections, or the horizon line along the top horizontal.

As a good example, we have The Hay Wain by John Constable.



John Constable – The Hay Wain

You can see in this Chardin painting how there are numerous examples of aligning objects within the rule of thirds:

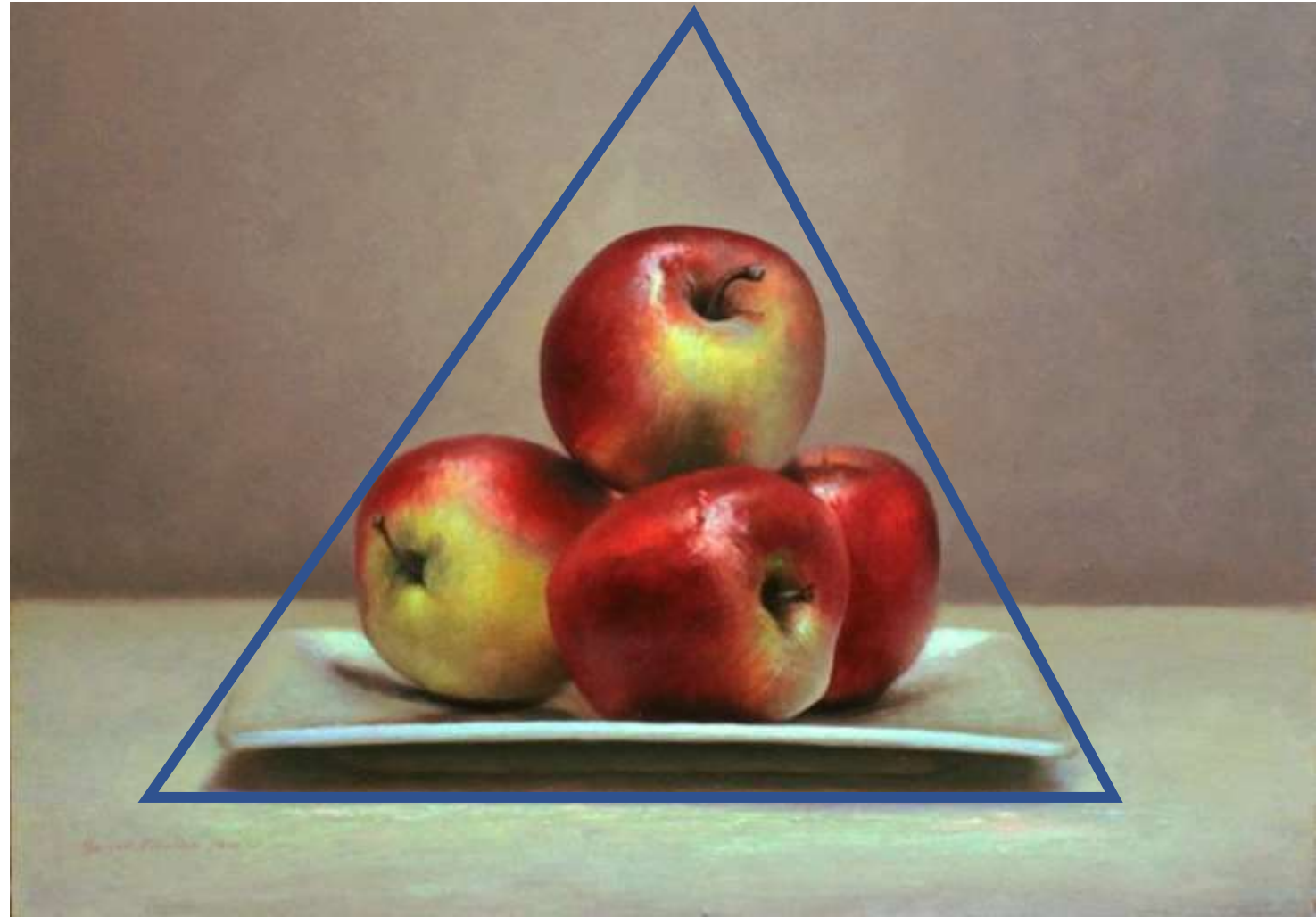
- the top of the jug aligns with top horizontal line and sits butted up to the vertical line.
- even the top of the funny little pot on the far-left side sits on the bottom horizontal line, to name a few.



# Triangles

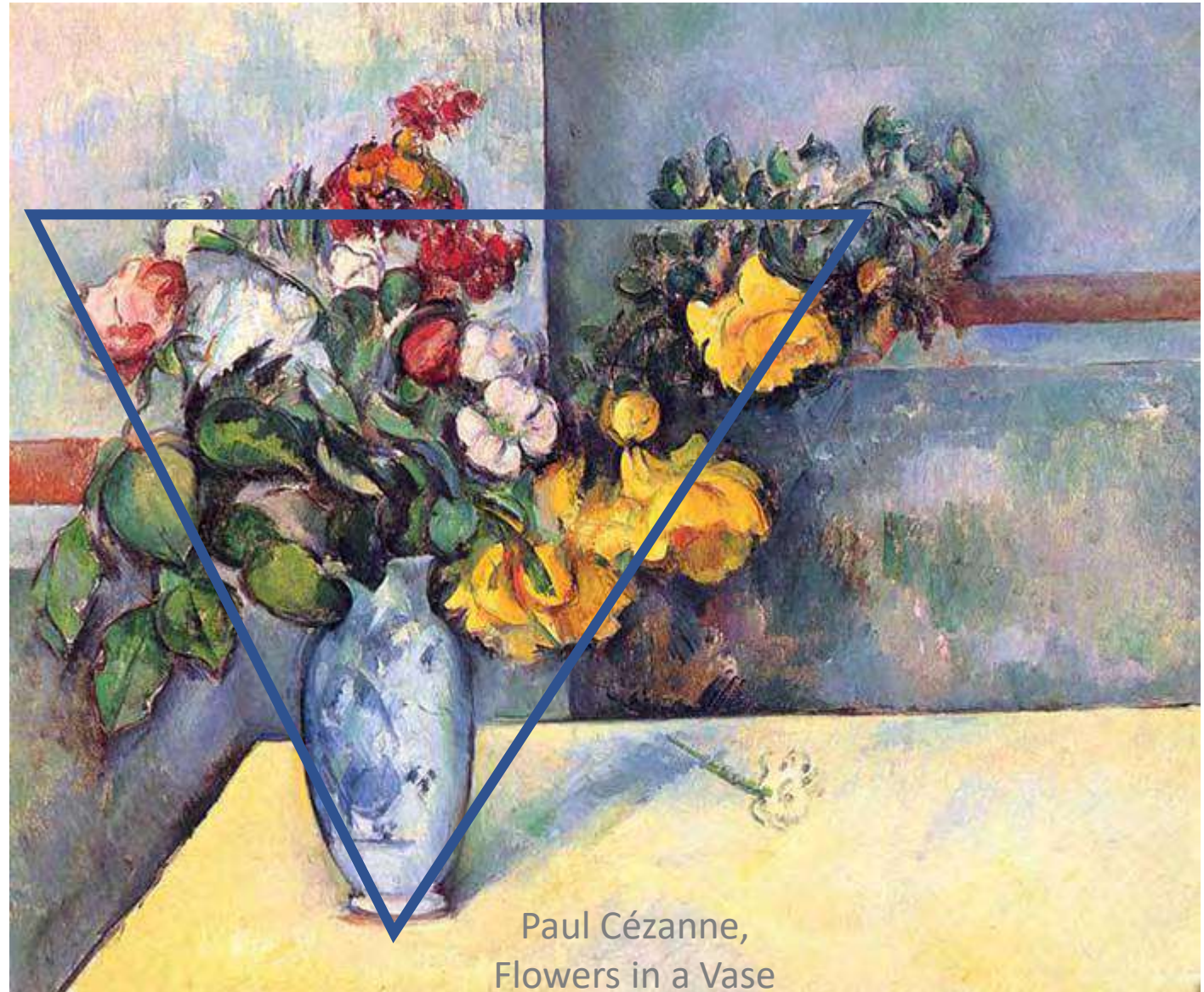
Perhaps due to its natural asymmetry, or the relationship to the rule of odds, triangular arrangements are considered to be aesthetically pleasing.

And if the triangle is upright, there's a powerful sense of structure and stability. Think about the Egyptian pyramids.



In Cézanne's still life "Flowers in a Vase", notice the triangular shape of the flowers and vase.

This helps to illustrate that you can arrange different objects into a vague, triangular shape.



Paul Cézanne,  
Flowers in a Vase

# Simplification

Simplification is perhaps the most important composition concept.

It involves taking all the “noise” and detail and simplifying it into something more coherent.

By simplifying the unimportant, you focus attention on the important.



# The Hierarchy of Composition

Composition can make or break your photograph, painting, drawing etc.  
The following table shows what makes up a great composition.

<b>FOCAL POINT :</b>	What is the point of interest in your composition? Don't leave your viewers wanting and lost.
<b>SIMPLIFICATION :</b>	Too much going on? Simplify it. Compositions with clutter can make it difficult to identify the focal point.
<b>RULE OF ODDS :</b>	An odd number of elements can be perceived as being more natural than an even number of elements.
<b>RULE OF THIRDS :</b>	Separate your composition into thirds both way. Your focal point should be at one of the intersections. Also, each segment should be different.
<b>TRIANGLES :</b>	Triangular compositions are thought to be aesthetically pleasing. This is similar to the Rule of Odds.
<b>CREATE MOVEMENT :</b>	A stagnant composition is boring. Create movement and use it to guide your viewer's eye around the picture.
<b>DON'T CUT IN TWO :</b>	Avoid dissecting your composition, for example, with the horizon in the middle of the picture.



# Breaking the Composition Rules

The “rules” of composition are anything but that.

They exist for a reason in that they make sense *most of the time*, but there will be times when you should ignore them and follow your gut.

Further, if everyone followed the composition rules to the T, we would all paint the same.

And what would be the fun in that?

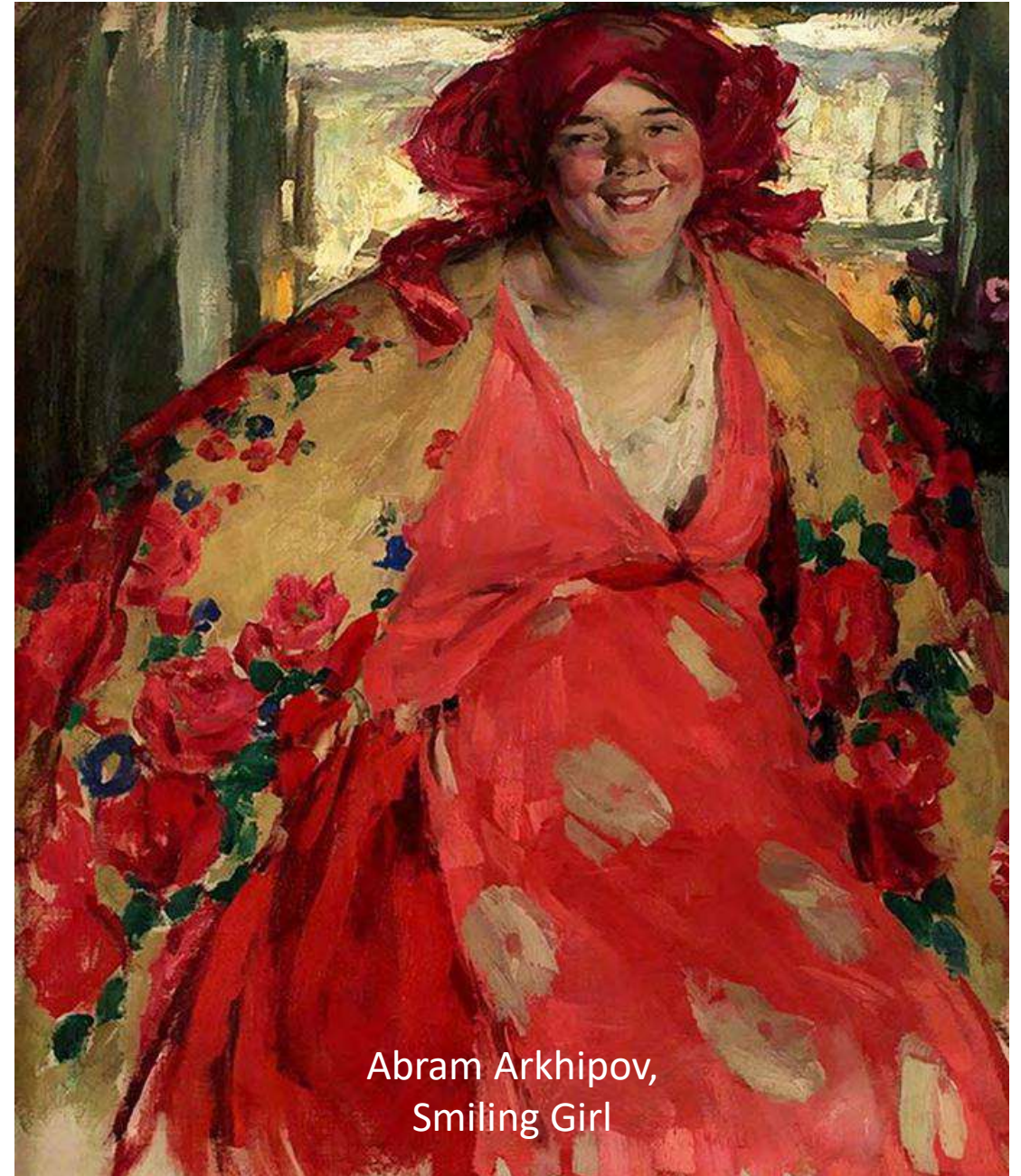


***For every rule, there's a brilliant painting that breaks it.***

This painting of a smiling girl, for example:

Where you would typically push the subject down and have some negative space at the top, the subject's head comes to the top edge of the painting.

But it works in this case as it plays into the painting's intimate feel.



Abram Arkhipov,  
Smiling Girl

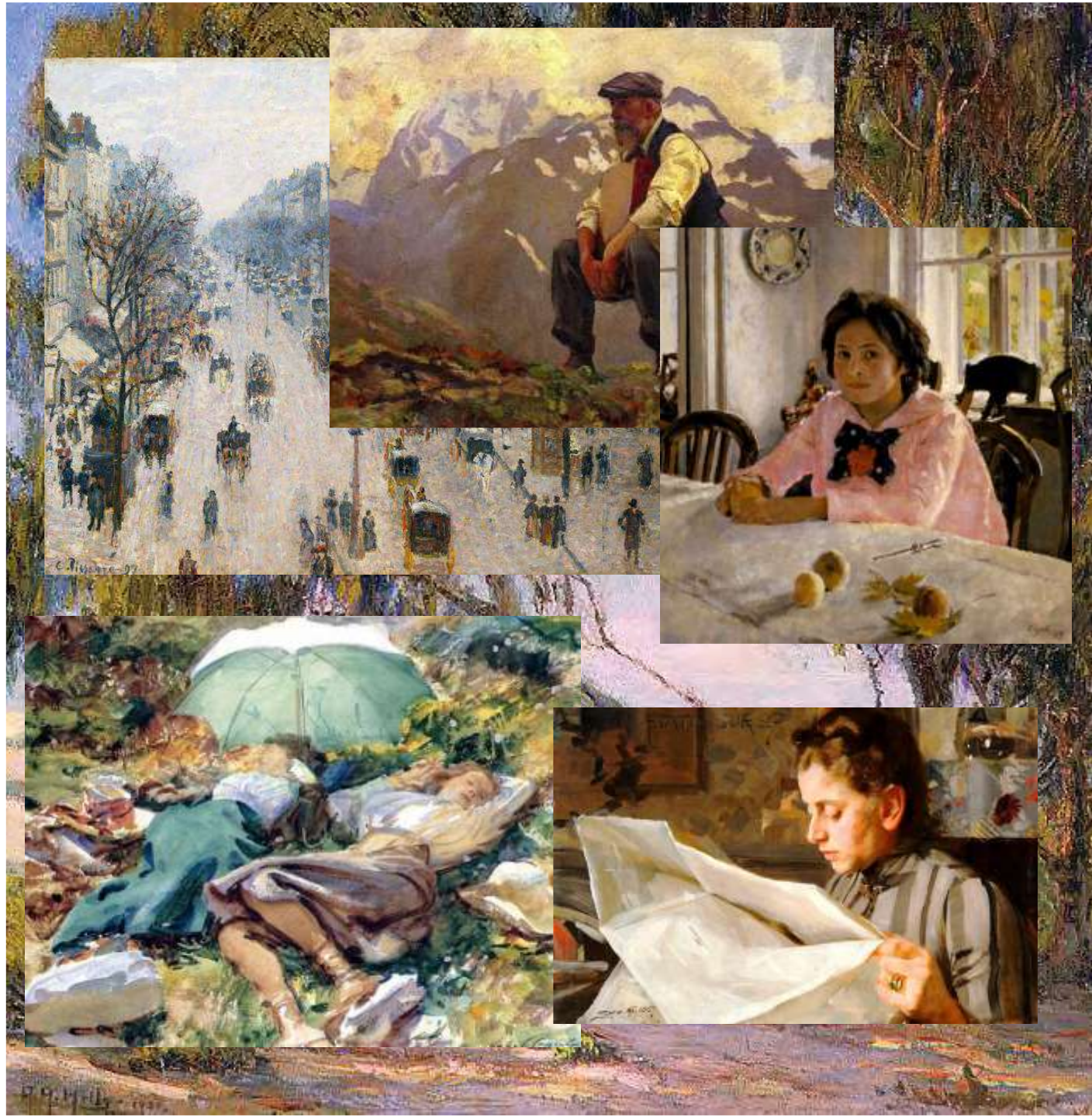
# Master Painting

## Examples

The best way to learn composition is to analyse master paintings and observe why they work and what you might do better.

This will help you learn the language of composition.

Let's run through some master painting examples plus some key observations in terms of composition.

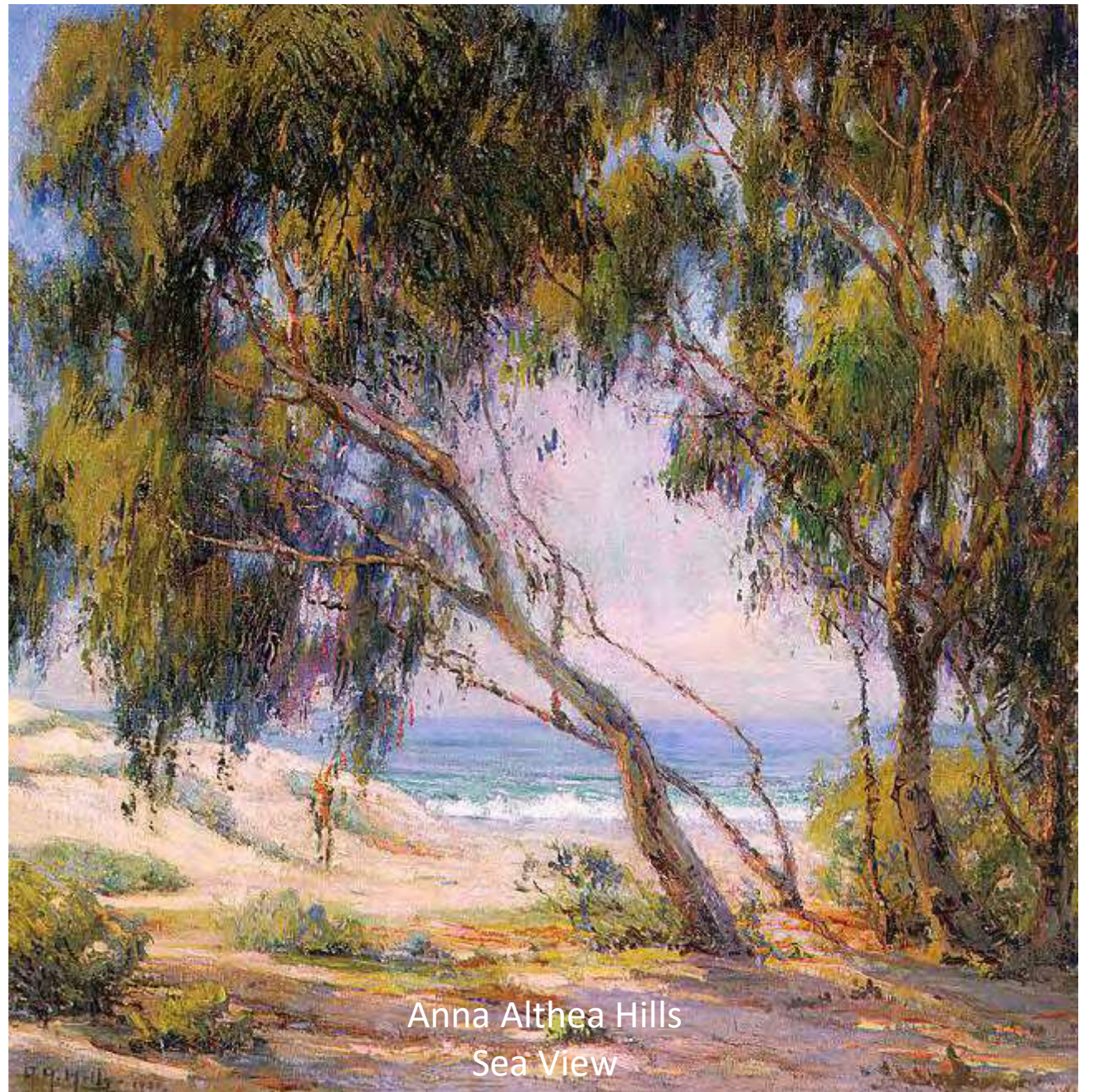


Depth is the focus of this painting. Notice the tight foreground at the bottom and the colour gradation as everything recedes into the distance.



Australia Felix,  
Arthur Streeton, 1907

Nature frames the high-key background.  
There's a powerful contrast between the  
foreground and background.  
Dark against light, rich against tinted,  
complex against simple.



Anna Althea Hills  
Sea View

An intimate composition with a narrow depth of field.

The subject doesn't appear to be aware of our presence.

It's a candid scene.

Value contrast is used to focus our attention on the subject.

Her line of vision is a powerful implied line.

*What is she reading about?*



Emma Zorn Reading,  
Anders Zorn, 1887

A relaxed composition with two people taking a siesta amongst nature.

The vantage point creates an interesting play in terms of perspective and depth.

This is also a great study of gesture and structure.



John Singer Sargent,  
*Siesta*.

A powerful focal point with an ambient background.

Hard edges separate the subject from the background, creating a sense of depth.

Contrast focuses our attention on the subject.

The rest of the painting is simplified in terms of value and detail.

His line of vision is an implied line.

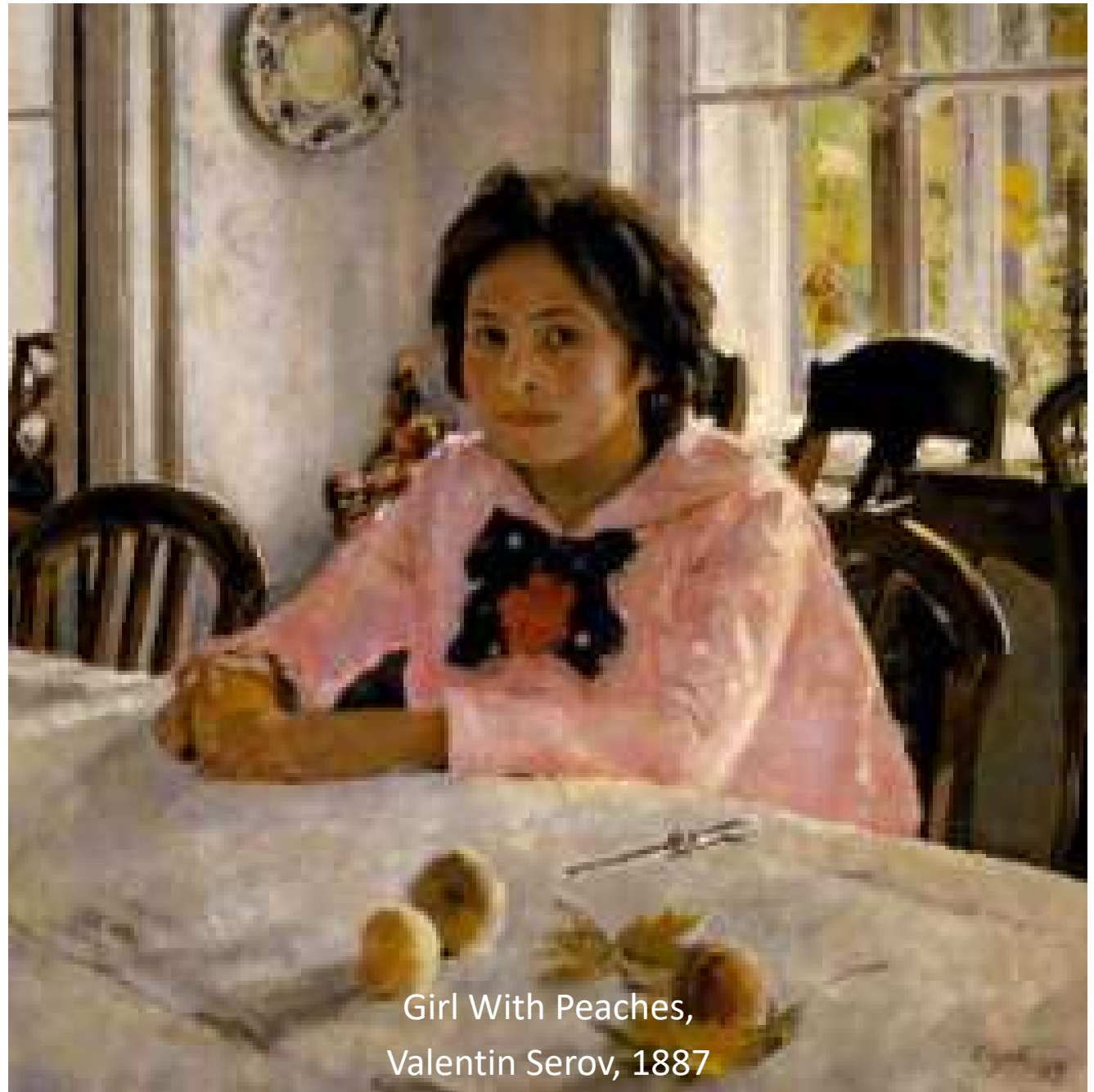
It doesn't lead us to anywhere in particular, which reiterates the idea of his distant stare.



*Reconnoitring,  
John Singer Sargent 1911*

This is similar to Zorn's Emma Zorn Reading, but in this case, the subject is looking right back at us.

Notice how this changes the composition. Her eyes are commanding our attention.



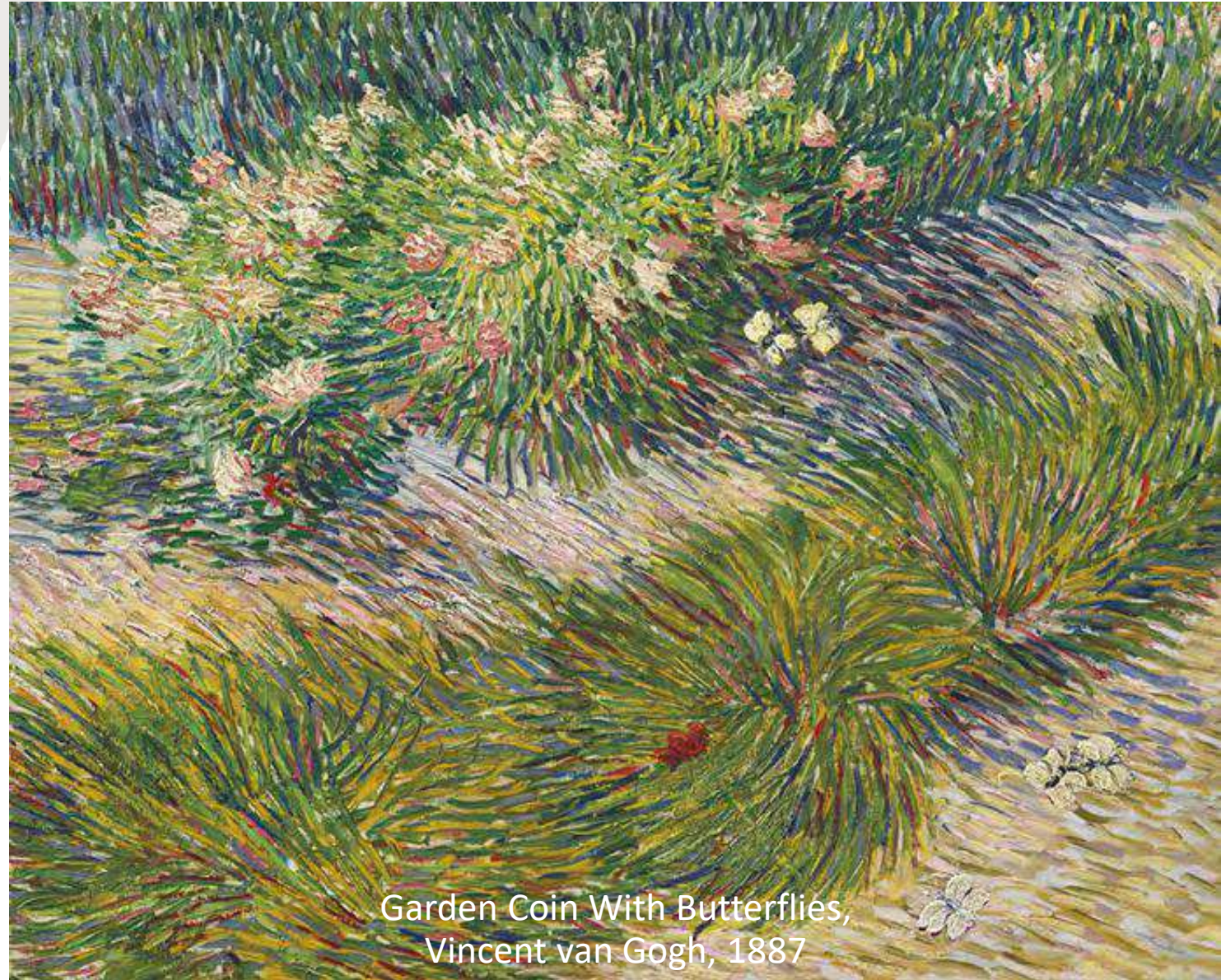
Girl With Peaches,  
Valentin Serov, 1887

Van Gogh was certainly not contained by rules and standards.

His compositions are diverse.

Look how he was able to inject life and movement into simple compositions.

Look at the energy in his strokes.





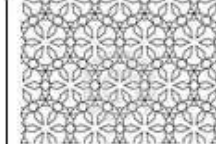








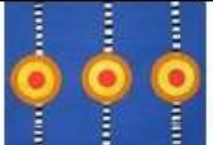











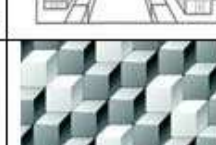
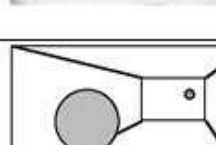

















Garden Coin With Butterflies,  
Vincent van Gogh, 1887

# *In Conclusion*

Here are some of the key points :

- “Good composition is like a suspension bridge - each line adds strength and takes none away.” Robert Henri
- It helps to distill all the rules and theories down to two simple questions:
  - What are you trying to say?
  - How are you going to say it?
- Composition is not the same as copying the reference.
- As the artist, you have the license to ignore, add or change the reference as needed.
- The visual elements are the building blocks of composition.
- The principles of art are the glue holding it all together.
- Be careful not to get caught up in all the composition terms.
- They merely help us articulate and understand composition.
- You don’t need to memorize all the terms in order to craft beautiful compositions.
- The techniques, rules, and theories exist for a reason in that they work most of the time.
- But do not follow them as rulebound law.

	Balance	Movement	Pattern	Contrast	Rhythm	Emphasis	Unity
Line							
Shape							
Space							
Form							
Color							
Value							
Texture	