

ART BY DESIGN: 11 ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL IMAGES



A round-up of eleven crucial elements of design you can bring to your work to create lasting, successful images as a fine artist or photographer.

Part of being a successful artist is being good at constructing moving and memorable images to display and knowing how to identify and work with weaker areas of images in order to strengthen artistic quality.

In this article, I'll share some of the elements of design to consider when creating and evaluating potential images for display or competition.

I've borrowed extensively from the judging criteria of the Professional Photographers of America, broadening the focus to include paintings and other styles of wall art media. The Professional Photographers of America has taken great care in producing a good compilation of common elements most great images share.

The image samples for this article are not all PPA qualified images due to their members' individual copyrights, but I chose images to illustrate each of the points.

1. IMPACT

First and foremost, great images have impact.

Impact is the sense or feeling the viewer gets when viewing an image for the first time.

Images that evoke a strong emotional response, like wonder, love, anger, laughter or sadness make them memorable. When you visit an art show or museum, it's likely that only a few images will remain in the forefront of your mind – those that you strongly liked, and those that you strongly disliked.

In either instance, impact implanted the vision in the mind.



This image, “Final Embrace”, received a silver award from the SWPP image competition in the UK. You might not like the subject matter, but once you see it, it’s not easily forgotten.

It was hard to photograph the moment without rescuing the little mouse, but it is a well-documented moment of nature when one animal must kill another to survive. The graceful pose of the little mouse – even it’s little paw – makes it particularly memorable.

2. TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE

Whether it’s paint or pixels, demonstrating technical control over your art is important on selling an audience on your talent.

No matter the subject matter or level of abstraction, a painting should have good mastery of value, form, color and brush technique. Similarly, a photograph should be well-exposed, well-balanced, well-retouched, and in focus.



Hibiscus is a PPA Loan Collection award winner. One of the strengths the judges felt this image has is a beautiful tonal range from black to white in a value key that is emotionally complimentary to the subject, soft dove grays.

It scored 99 in Florida, a great compliment and show of appreciation for a well-done image. In spite of the image's simplicity, a lot of thought and sweat went into producing the best possible product, and a sense of technical excellence is clearly visible.

3. CREATIVITY

Creativity will always get you noticed. Everyone loves a fresh, new idea and showing that you are able to create tangible manifestations from the feelings and ideas generated by your imagination, expressed through artistic media is a sign of a competent artist.



The Peter Pan Portrait pictured above was never entered in a competition – I created it for one of my clients who wanted a portrait of her children reflecting the magic of childhood.

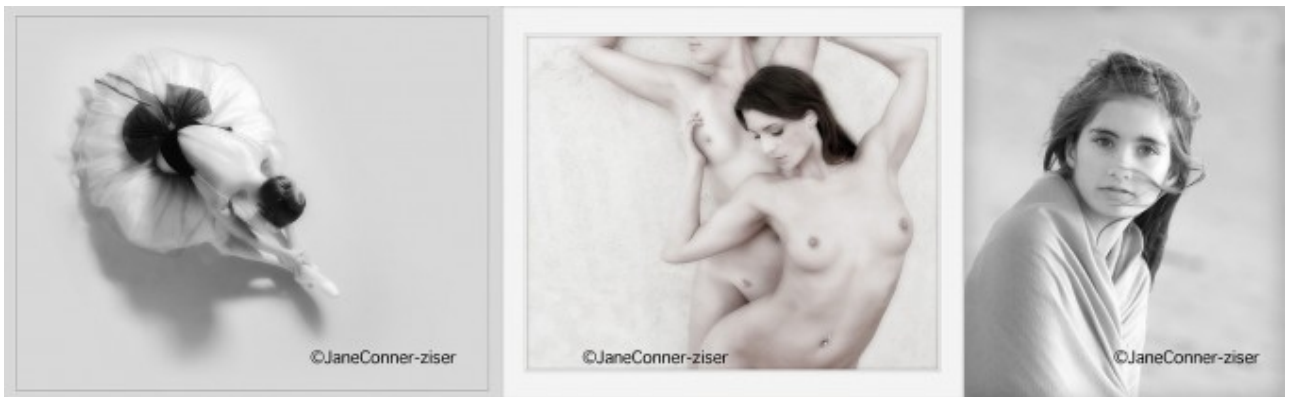
Her twins were growing into their pre-teen years and she wanted a fun and beautiful memory of the times they had when they were very young. Lucky for me, they were participating in a school play, Peter Pan – a perfect window for my imagination.

I saw them flying over the English countryside, and through photography, software and my imagination, we have them doing just that.

4. STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Style is the manner in which something is expressed, separate from the components of the piece.

In music, the same notes can be played in different ways producing very different emotional appeal – good or bad. In art, the way something is lit, costumed, colored or presented makes it distinctive to a particular artist's style.



Though these three images are of very different subjects, the style in which they were created is the same.

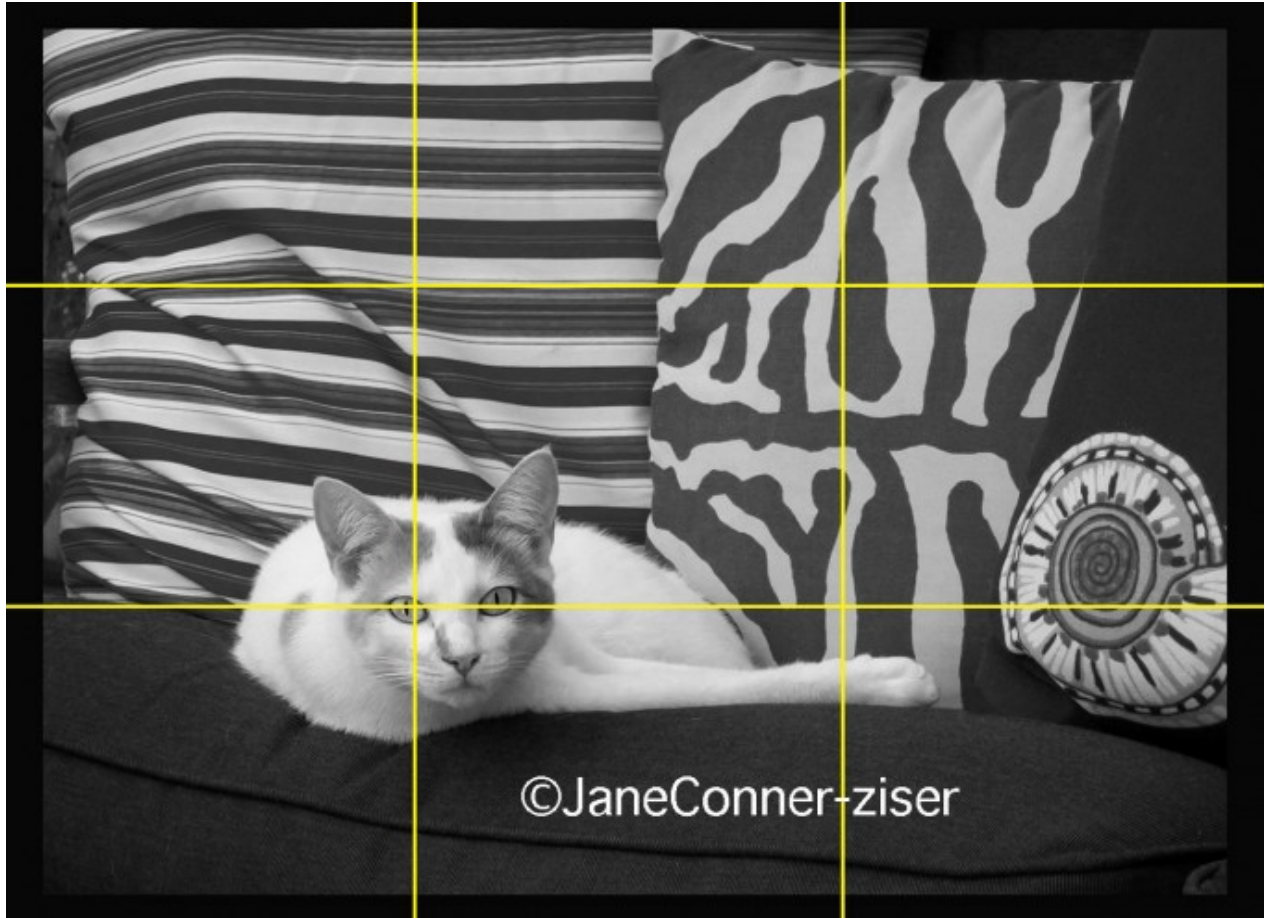
All are of medium value, all are done in soft gray tones, all are lit with soft light and all are softly diffused. Each of them projects the same emotional impact of delicacy and gracefulness, the style of this particular artist.

5. COMPOSITION

You can perfect your composition by paying close attention to the arrangement and placement of visual elements in your art. It's the way the piece is constructed or put together.

In most great works of art the elements are arranged to lend balance within the frame and support the story and centers of interest within the piece. Compositions can also help create emotions.

Those based upon horizontal lines are peaceful, those based upon vertical lines are strong and steadfast, and those utilizing diagonal lines emote action and movement.



Painters create compositions by sketching the basic elements and photographers create them by cropping either in the camera (preferred) or post capture.

This example shows how the maker positioned the camera to place the subject's eye in the lower left focal area in accordance to the Rule of Thirds.

The lower positioning accentuates the small size of the subject in comparison to his environment and choosing to place him on the left gives him plenty of room to stretch out his arm.

6. PRESENTATION

I think of the presentation of a piece of art as the exclamation point.

If it is coordinated with the piece it accentuates the feeling and meaning of the image. Conversely, if it is at odds with the image or fights it for attention, it detracts from the impact and the piece becomes less important. Here are two examples of presentation to consider:



I think I found two very different ways of presenting images to illustrate this point! I loved the bizarre-ness of the rooster image with the yellow, green and purple door, the aggressiveness of the bird's red comb and the hostile expression of the bird.

I went out on a limb and created a rather bizarre and aggressive presentation for the piece. Admittedly, it's a love it or hate it image. The woman on the stone wall has a vintage look, in spite of the latex, that is projected via her hair and makeup, her pose and the classic scene in which she is photographed. I went with the time period of the 1930's and made it black and white.

The presentation is a simple white border, common in that time period with corners that were also common when placing photographs in

picture albums. The deco style of the corners just adds a bit of leather and lace fantasy to accentuate her glamour.

7. COLOR BALANCE & PALETTE

One of the most visible ways an artist can show mastery of their medium is through their use of color.

Color is a powerful tool for creating emotion in imagery and it's important to choose colors that will support the message that the piece is designed to convey. Colors can be used in harmonious or disharmonious ways in order to support the message of the piece.



Here's that rooster again! Notice how the disharmonious colors enhance feelings of chaos and add to the aggressiveness of the image.

In comparison, the soft blues and pinks used in the painting of the little girl by the sea are in keeping with the delicacy of her clothing, pose and mood.

8. CENTER OF INTEREST

An image's center of interest is the "important" part of the image that attracts the mind and to which all other elements support, but do not distract from.

This demonstrates the degree of command that an artist has over the medium in which the piece is created. In photography, the center of interest is developed through subject placement, lighting, color and elimination of any distracting objects.

Painters develop the center of interest via subject placement, background lines and perspective, color, value and detail.



The portrait of the woman drinking wine in the wine barn has two centers of interest, the woman's face and the glass of wine. Her face is first and the wine glass is second. The image has been controlled with light.

The lightest parts of the image are on the subject's face. The highlights on the glass have been toned down in order to support but not compete with the face. The center of interest in the sunset is the scene itself so no individual element has been detailed more than another.

This allows the viewer to wander throughout the image without “landing on” a specific element of the scene.

9. VALUE RANGE & LIGHTING

Artists use lighting to create depth, emotion, and shape in their creations, but the value range of that lighting can also be of great importance.

High contrast lighting is stark and dramatic. Low contrast lighting is soft and peaceful. Dark imagery is mysterious and heavy. Light imagery is uplifting and more innocent.

There’s certainly a place for mid-value imagery, too – these images are admittedly neutral but also open for experiences – bright colors and sharp lighting make it lively, pastel colors and soft lighting make the image more delicate.

Structural elements look three dimensional by using highlights, diffused highlights, shaded sides, reflected light and shadows (see: [The Five Lights of Nature](#)).

The placement of the lighting should support the subject matter and the emotion that the artist wishes to convey.



I used super high contrast to give the nude with the hat a hard graphic look.

It was created in hot sunlight – not the most flattering for standard outdoor photography of people, but striking in the high contrast black and white when combined with the other graphic elements in the composition.

The painting of the woman with feathers and wind contains my friend Clay Blackmore's professional portrait lighting executed to perfection.

10. TELL A STORY

Images that tell a story encourage the viewer's imagination and create an interaction between the viewer and the image. This is one of the best ways to make your images more memorable.

One person might draw a portrait of a dog's face while another may draw a picture of the dog chasing down a pheasant in a field of grass. Another artist may draw a close up picture of the dog catching the pheasant that shows the expressions on both the dog and bird's faces.

Each of these mental images tells a story; which is most interesting to you? Which one might you remember most?



One of the things I try to do when painting a portrait is help it tell a story.

This darling photograph by my friend Kamran Zohoori came to me for a painting. The first thing I did was imagine where I might see her sitting other than in a studio and I decided upon an Italian villa so I painted a window beyond which the countryside can be seen.

Next, I imagined why she might be sitting in the posture in which she is posed and I thought perhaps she might be disappointed that she could not go out to play.

I made the most of her little pout. I also took some creative liberty with her dress in order to bring a little more fantasy into the painting. I added the grape vine on the wall for a bit of interior atmosphere and placed a little bunch of grapes on the couch beside the little girl thinking her mother likely gave them to her for a little snack.

11. OUTPUT MEDIA

Once you have composed and executed the perfect image, it's time to take it into the physical world.

Use the right output media (like the variety offered by Breathing Color) to present your works of art in the best ways possible. Consider how the type of photo paper or canvas you use will change how your image appears, and try to find an output solution that fits in with the other elements of design being showcased in the piece.

Great works of art are designed from concept to wall so it's important to be aware of the many options you have for finishing your work with quality and style.

That's it, nearly a dozen helpful elements of design to consider when creating your art.

You can get more information about the Professional Photographers of America by going to [their website](#) and you can reach me for more info via the link in my bio below. Thank you!



Jane Conner-ziser is an award winning photographer, digital artist, premier educator and independent consultant. With over 25 years of experience, 19 of them in digital imaging and evolving technologies, the techniques Jane developed for facial retouching and enhancement and portrait painting from photographs are widely emulated by photographers and digital artists worldwide through her classes, online training and educational products. You can learn more on [her website](#).