

SKETCHBOOK ADVENTURES

Chapter 2: The Elements of Design

I've loved design and making artful things pretty much my whole life. In junior high I dabbled in "interior decorating" by rearranging my bedroom furniture on an almost-weekly basis. At my all-girls Catholic high school, some of my drawings made into the student art show (despite the fact that the subject matter of nude women wasn't very Catholic). In college, I combined stuff I found around my house like empty pills bottles and receipts with discarded things I encountered on the streets of San Francisco to create found object sculptures. Then in graduate school, I fell deeply and madly in love with creating mixed media paintings under the tutelage of my friend Paige, who was an art student.

The "curriculum" involved pushing Paige's Murphy bed into the wall, putting down a paint splattered sheet in the middle of the room and making art until the streets got quiet except for the occasional yelling from people hailing taxis when the bars and restaurants closed. That was our signal to shake the pins and needles from our sleepy petrified legs and walk downstairs to the corner market for a \$5 rotisserie chicken. We'd eat the chicken right out of the plastic box, wash it down with gulps of cold beer in tin cans and she'd critique the evenings' canvases, teaching me about negative space, composition and the color wheel.

Before Paige's late-night lectures, I hadn't really thought about the elements of design while I was making art or arranging things. I just followed my instincts and put whatever I wanted together to create something and then I called it art. Even though I'm still fond of some of my early pieces of art, what Paige taught me about balance, theme, color and shape not only improved my work but it made me look at what I was making differently.

You can create something that has all the right ingredients, but if the elements of design are off, something doesn't feel right. For some people composition, color, shape and theme come naturally. For me, color is a no-brainer. I have a natural sense of what colors complement each other. However I had to learn balance through using a technique that Paige taught me that I'll explain below. In this chapter we'll focus on the four design elements that I think are essential: color, composition, shape and theme.



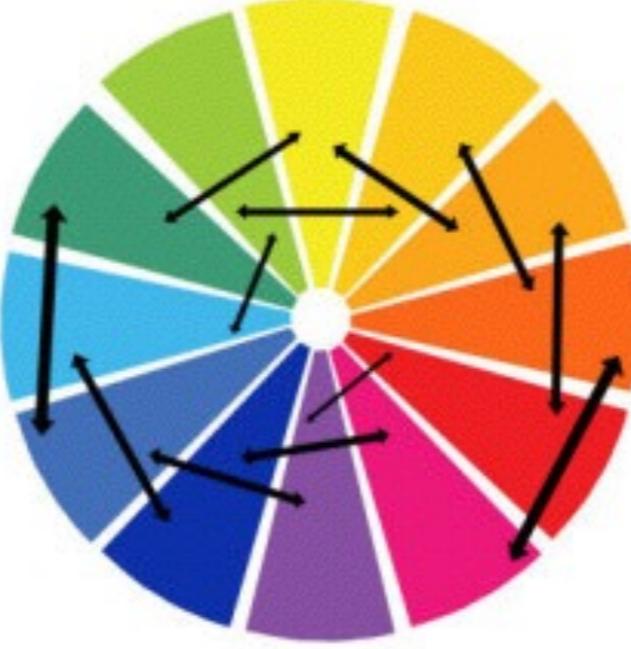
COLOR

Even though color balance comes naturally to me, choosing the "right" color combinations isn't easy for everyone. Luckily, there are some pretty basic tools and theories that can help color-challenged people become confident when choosing and pairing colors.

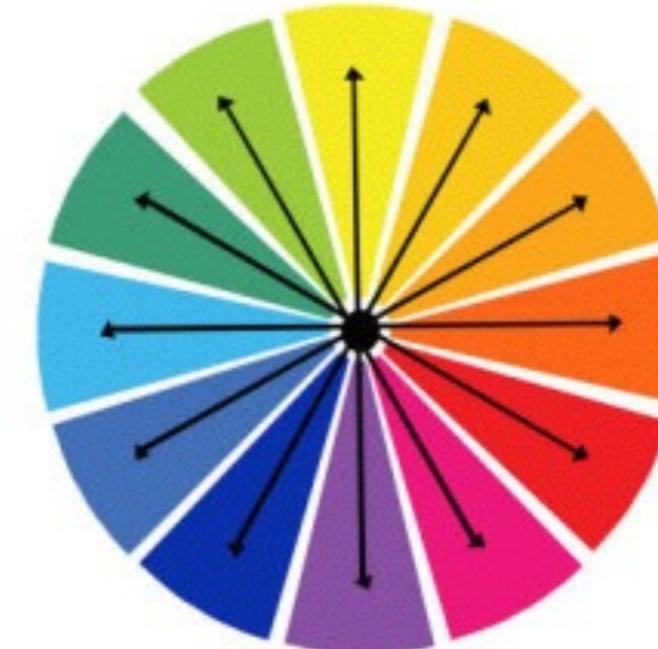
The main tool you'll need to become a master of color is a color wheel. A color wheel is a circle divided into equal segments that illustrates the relationship between colors. You can also download a color wheel and some color mixing tips at the end of this chapter.



Color Wheel



Color Wheel
(showing analogous colors)



Color Wheel
(showing complementary colors)

To use the color wheel to pick harmonious colors, you'll need to understand two terms.

Analogous colors: These are the three colors that are next to each other starting from any spot on the wheel and they look good together. In the analogous color wheel pictured here, follow any arrow to find analogous colors.

Complementary colors: These are the two colors on opposite sides of the wheel and they complement each other. In the complementary color wheel pictured here, follow the arrows to find complementary colors.

When choosing a color palette (a group of colors) for a page in your sketchbook, starting with two complementary colors or three analogous colors will help create harmony on your page.

If you're mixing your own colors, it's important to note that red, yellow and blue are primary colors. Primary colors are the base of all other colors (meaning that all other colors contain them) and they can't be made by mixing any other colors. This means that you can't create the color red from any other color combination and that if you want to make pink you'll need to have red (and of course white). At the end of this chapter you can download some color mixing tips.

COMPOSITION

One of my favorite lessons from my impromptu art critiques in Paige's apartment was on composition. Every hour or so during our painting process we'd put our paintings up against a white background, close our eyes for 10 seconds, open them and then talk about what we saw. What was the first thing we saw? Where did our eyes go next? Did anything stick out and keep our attention for too long?

It's amazing how many things you don't notice when you're constantly looking at something that you're making. Even though I rarely paint on canvas these days, I still use the close-your-eyes method of analyzing my in-progress creations. At the end of this chapter you can download a tutorial of this composition exercise with questions to ask about your piece.

If your eyes stay on one spot and don't move around the page, that means your composition is likely a bit off. If you have a huge white space that's bothering you, paint or draw some polka dots, collage some small shapes or write something in that space. I tend to love some white space in my work BUT only if it's intentional, adds to the piece and feels balanced as opposed to being an awkward place for my eyes to rest. If one area seems heavy, add some more interest through collage, painting or drawing to the area on the opposite side.

Color is also an important part of composition. If one part of your page is full of super vibrant color or dark hues, your eye will tend to stay there. The goal of good composition is to have the eye move around the space, resting and returning to certain spots for longer than others so that you get a comprehensive feel of the whole piece.



SHAPE

There are so many shapes around us every day that we have become almost immune to them and rarely think about how they make us feel or the emotions they're communicating. Even though I've been working with shapes in my art and design work for many years, I didn't give much thought to why I chose a square instead of a circle or what feelings those shapes may elicit in the person looking at what I'd made. Then when I was ordering postcards for our Patchwork Show, I noticed an option for rounded corners and without thinking much about it I went with it simply because most postcards had square corners and I thought round corners would make ours stand out.

But I realized later that my decision to go with rounded corners made our postcards not only stand out but also gave off an air of fun and sincerity. The shapes you choose in your artwork affect your viewer's reaction to your piece. The psychology behind shapes and emotion is vast but we'll concentrate on a few definitions that will assist you as you create pieces in your sketchbook. The psychology behind the meaning and connotations of shapes is interesting and valid, but I take it all with a grain of salt meaning that if I'm trying to balance a page and my instinct is to add a repeat pattern of circles in the background I usually follow my instinct and don't second guess myself. However if I'm unsure of what shapes to add I'll think about the overall feel of my piece and choose shapes that support that feel.

Organic, geometric and abstract shapes: Organic shapes tend have uneven edges and curves and are similar to the kinds of shapes you find in nature like rocks. Geometric shapes are usually symmetrical and include circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, etc. An abstract shape is a simplified version of the thing it represents, like the figures on a crosswalk sign. I took a walk to find some examples and within a block I found all examples of all three!

The meaning of basic geometric shapes:

Circles suggest femininity and fun and represent something that is fluid and has no start and no end. The hard edges and lines of squares and rectangles have a balanced and stable feel. Triangles are a bit tricky. If they're set on the base (the straight line) they elicit strength whereas, if they're tilted or set on a point they can be interpreted as being tense or uneasy. When pointed in a direction, triangles or versions of them like pendants or arrows can point the viewer towards a specific thing.

At the end of this chapter you can download a sheet with some shapes I like to use on my sketchbook pages. I always think about circles and squares for spaces that need something to add balance or backgrounds, but I like to keep this sheet on hand to remind myself of shapes that don't immediately come to mind.



Organic Shapes



Geometric Shapes



Abstract Shapes

THEME

Theme is the message that your piece is communicating. If you’re using the prompts in this workshop you’ll already have a theme when you start your sketchbook pages.

Choosing a theme helps you decide what to create in your sketchbook and keeps you focused. Themes can be very specific like some of the exercises in this workshop such as, “Spend 10 minutes a day creating a self portrait for seven days in a row,” or they can be general like home, red or pattern.

One of the themes for a prompt in this workshop is gratitude. Everything you do on that page should reflect gratitude. If you're like me, and ideas tend pop into your head that aren't related to what you're working on, I suggest dedicating a page in the back of your sketchbook to future ideas.

I find working within a theme particularly helpful if I'm collaborating with someone. For example, my husband and I did one of the collaboration prompts in this workshop where we each had 3 minutes to do whatever we wanted on a page and then we traded until the page was full. Before we started, we chose a theme (our trip to the river) as well as a color palette based on the colors we encountered on the trip. Even though we both have very different styles and skills, in the end the piece felt unified because we both only added things that fit within our theme and color palette.

Now that you know all the rules you're supposed to follow when you make art, feel free to break them! Sometimes breaking the rules is how we find our own artistic voice and unique style. If you know the rules you're breaking, you're making a decision to go against the grain instead of doing it out of ignorance. Having a sense of basic design will help you create cohesive harmonious pieces in your sketchbook whether you follow these rules or not.

Next we'll build our skills by learning some techniques.

