Dynamic Symmetry Art
Tips and Techniques for Artists and Photographers
# Table of Contents

5 Myths About Composition (Video)
15 Myths About Composition in Art and Photography
About This Website
A Closer Look at the Rule of Thirds
Aerial Perspective
A Master's Ideology on Camera Grids and Composition
An Email Addressing the Practical Use of Dynamic Symmetry in Art and Photography
Arabesque
Are Camera Design Grids Necessary for Photography?
Armature of the Rectangle (Video)
Art Can't Be Taught?
Artist Robert Florczak: Classical Ideals Give Culture Depth
A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry (Examples)
Aspective View
Balance by Isolation
Balance in Composition
Breathing Room
Bringing the 1.5 Rectangle Into the Golden Section System of Design
Camera Gear - Why I Shoot With a Leica
Camera Grids for the Beginner
Camera Grids - Not a Tool for the Skilled Photographer
Circular Composition
Classical Balance
Coincidences
Composite Photography vs. Straight Photography
Creating the Root Rectangles Within a Square
Determining Grid Structure
Determining Proportion
Dutch Angle
Dynamic Symmetry and Henri Cartier-Bresson
Dynamic Symmetry for Photographers
Dynamic Symmetry: Wildlife and Landscape Photography
Echoing
Edge Distractions
Edge Elements That Work
Ellipses
Enclosures
Entrance Into a Composition
Exiting out of a Composition
Figure-Ground Relationship
Framing Within a Frame
Gamut
Gamut in Composition (Video)
Gazing Direction
Greatest Area of Contrast
Greatest Area of Contrast (Video)
Henri Cartier-Bresson and the 1.5 Rectangle
Henri Cartier-Bresson (Etching the Dynamic Symmetry Grid)
Henri Cartier-Bresson - Setting the Scene
Hierarchy
Horizontal vs. Vertical
How Many Photographs to Take of a Scene
How to Create a Design That Has Theme, Variation, and Harmony
How to Create a Root Phi Rectangle
Intuition in Composition (Master Artists)
Intuitive Knowledge in Composition (Master Photographers)
Is Photography Art?
Juxtaposition
Kenyon Cox on Modern Art and Composition
Learning How to Analyze Drawings, Paintings, and Photographs
Learning the Rules of Composition and Then Breaking Them
My Thoughts on Creativity and Camera Grids for the Professional Photographer
Negative Shapes
Notional Space
Overlapping
Placing One Eye Center
Pointing Devices
Points of Interest in a Design Grid
Rabatment in Composition
Radiating Lines
Separating Elements
Simultaneous Contrast
Steelyard Principle
Subdivision of Root Rectangles
Suggested Books and Videos for the Photographer
The 14 Line Armature and the Rule of Thirds Grid
The 14 Line Armature (Video)
The Art of Composition (Introduction)
The Baroque, Sinister, and Reciprocal Diagonal Lines
The Charles Bouleau Armature vs. The Root Rectangle Armature
The Decisive Moment - by Henri Cartier-Bresson
The Golden Section and the Phi Ratio (1.618)
The Importance of a Thumbnail Image
The Importance of the Armature of the Rectangle
The Painter's Secret Geometry
The Phi Rectangle (1.618) vs. The 1.5 Rectangle
The Place of Photography in Fine Art
The Problem With the Rule of Odds
The Root 2 Dynamic Symmetry Rectangle vs. The 1.5 Rectangle
The Use of Straight Lines
The Vertical, Horizontal, and Diagonal Line
Two Methods of Design
Using Dynamic Symmetry to Crop Photographs
Vertical and Horizontal Balance
What is Atelier Training?
What Is Classical Skill-Based Design?
Why Compose?
Why Design Grids Are Important for Learning Composition
90 Degree Angles
Start Here to Learn More About Dynamic Symmetry

For all artists and photographers new to Dynamic Symmetry, I highly recommend first reading Michel Jacobs' book The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry. This book is easy to understand and will lay the foundation for all future studies. There are two versions of Jacobs' book available - one printed in 1926 and another in 1956. Both editions are identical in content. You can download a PDF copy here.

Painting above by Michel Jacobs demonstrating the simple application of Dynamic Symmetry
About Me

I've been a photographer for 36 years and a graphic artist since 1994. I started with film and a traditional wet darkroom setup. Studying Ansel Adams' darkroom techniques, I developed skills on how to produce a fine art black and white print and won several photo competitions in high school. After high school, I studied at The College of St. Rose and received my B.A. in Public Communications. I did an internship at Channel 10, in Albany, NY, producing several television spots.

I graduated college in 1991 and started working at Albany Medical Center as a darkroom technician and graphic artist. Working at Albany Medical Center helped me to grow as a graphic artist by working on projects that included the O.J. Simpson trial, creating graphics for published medical journals, and photographing case studies for slide presentations.

I left Albany Medical Center in 1996, and I've been working with General Electric as a contractor ever since. Through the years, I kept up with my photography and the transition from film to digital. I spent five years learning digital lightroom techniques which include image manipulation in Adobe Photoshop/Lightroom, scanning all formats of film, and producing fine art prints on archival inkjet printers.

Along the way, I have met some great photographers. I have taken workshops in Woodstock, NY with Mary Ellen Mark and Magnum photographer Constantine Manos. In 2008, I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to photograph a Leonard Nimoy exhibit in Massachusetts. Currently, most of my time is spent studying skill-based art training as well as helping to restore design skills that have been lost over the past 100 years due to the 20th century Modern Art movement.

Camera Recommendations

I've been shooting with Leica cameras since 1994. Over the years, I've used the Leica R4, R5, R7, R8, M6, M7, M8, M9, M240, and MP240. The camera bodies are beautifully crafted, and the lenses are phenomenal. For those interested in street or documentary photography, I recommend the Leica M9, Leica M240, or the Leica MP240. If you're shooting film, the M6 is a robust camera. For those interested in purchasing used Leica cameras, I highly recommend KEH.com. I've been buying cameras from KEH for over 24 years.

Views on Post-Processing

When I shoot film, I expose for the shadows and develop for the highlights. For digital, it's the opposite - expose for the highlights and bring up the shadows in Lightroom or Photoshop. While I have nothing against cropping images, it's not a practice that I perform on any of my photos. I find shooting full-frame allows me complete control over my designs.
Technical Information

I photograph with a Leica M240 digital, Leica MP240 digital, Leica M6, and a Leica M7. When I shoot film, I use Ilford XP-2 black and white C-41 and scan with a Nikon Coolscan 5000-ED. I print my images using an Epson 3800 archival ink-jet printer.

Photograph above taken at the New York State Museum with a Leica M240

Design Studies

I'm currently in my tenth year of studying design. Starting out with the Barnstone Studios DVD drawing series, I continued my search for the most reliable information available on the art of composition. My website, Dynamic Symmetry Art, is a reflection of my passion for design and a vessel for me to share classical skill-based art techniques with other artists and photographers.

Most Recent Project

As of 2017, I've been working on a series of photographs that represent simple studies in design. By focusing on everyday, ordinary landscapes and subject matter, much in the spirit of William Eggleston, it allows me to continue my practice of applying Dynamic Symmetry principles to my images. This project will last another three years.
Free Dynamic Symmetry Grid Pack

Download a free Dynamic Symmetry grid pack for Lightroom and Photoshop plus an additional set of camera grids for the beginner student. Perfect for analyzing, editing, or experimenting with your favorite artwork and photographs. To learn more, click here.

Photograph above taken in Maine with a Leica M6 and Ilford XP2 film
Two Methods of Design for Artists and Photographers

The 14 Line Armature of the Rectangle

The 14 line armature of the rectangle is a method of composition that is mainly used by artists that draw and paint. Because of its complexity, photographers will not find this approach to design useful for applying it to their images. However, photographers that wish to increase their visual literacy skills should at least take the time to understand the concept and learn how master artists apply it to their work. Artists that want to learn more about the 14 line armature of the rectangle after reading this user's guide should explore the books The Painter’s Secret Geometry: A Study of Composition in Art by Charles Bouleau and Classical Painting Atelier: A Contemporary Guide to Traditional Studio Practice by Juliette Aristides.

Root Rectangles - (Dynamic Symmetry)

Artists, photographers, and graphic designers can easily incorporate the use of root rectangles (also known as Dynamic Symmetry) in all of their compositions regardless if it’s a drawing, painting, or photograph. Photographers that want to apply Dynamic Symmetry principles to their pictures will find the basic armature of the rectangle more than adequate for most of their design needs. However, for those ambitious photography students that have a desire to study other master photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Martine Franck, Elliott Erwitt, Eve Arnold, etc. they will discover that these artists employed the use of overlapping root 4 Dynamic Symmetry rectangles in a 1.5 frame.

Painting above by Dot Bunn - applying Dynamic Symmetry in a composition
About Dynamic Symmetry Art

Dynamicsymmetryart.com is a comprehensive skill-based art learning resource for the serious artist, photographer, and graphic designer that wants to learn the art of composition and improve their visual literacy skills. Unlike so many other art and photography websites that offer the same tips, tricks, and rules, dynamicsymmetryart.com is about separating fact from fiction, revealing the painter's secret geometry, and providing easy-to-apply design techniques for anyone that has a strong desire to create masterful work.

Because of the 20th century Modern Art movement in America, far too many artists and photographers have relied solely on their "feelings" and "instinct" to create compositions instead of developing real design skills through intellectual studies and careful application. As can be expected, this "creative" approach to design in art has caused disastrous results. For without the much-needed knowledge on Dynamic Symmetry and the armature of the rectangle, as discussed in Charles Bouleau's book The Painter's Secret Geometry, the contemporary artist and photographer will find it difficult, if not impossible, to reach their full artistic potential regardless of how much time they invest in their craft.

Photograph above, Splashes of Hope, taken with a Leica M24
About the Analyzed Images on Dynamic Symmetry Art

The analyzed images presented on my website dynamicsymmetryart.com are meant to give the student a starting point for learning how to deconstruct chosen works of art. By no means are they intended to offer final validation as to how one particular artist applied the use of Dynamic Symmetry or the 14 line armature of the rectangle - there are far too many variables. Additionally, some of the images have been reconstructed from other books to help the reader further understand and clarify the process of building a composition based on specific design techniques.

In the early days of my studies, there was a lot of trial and error. Because every master artist approaches design differently to match their own visual appetite, the modern artist or photographer who wants to get the most out of this website should proceed with patience. Furthermore, I highly recommend reading additional books by artists or writers that have looked at art with an analytical, finely tuned eye.

Photograph above by Martine Franck
My Experience With Myron Barnstone

Artists and photographers that want to continue their studies after reading this user's guide will find it beneficial to invest in the Barnstone Studios series of DVDs and Instant Downloads. I've been watching these videos religiously for the past 10 years and continue to watch them daily. To say they are filled with an endless amount of valuable information on art and design would be an understatement.

In 2009, I was fortunate enough to have spent three days with Myron in his studio in Coplay, Pennsylvania. We talked about art and design, and he showed me how to analyze photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson using the basic armature of the rectangle and overlapping root 4 Dynamic Symmetry rectangles. I was also able to shadow a few of his classes on the golden section. It was the most exciting and productive experience I've ever spent with an art instructor.

Unfortunately, on October 29, 2016, Myron Barnstone passed away. Looking back at the time I spent with him in his studio and studying his DVD lessons on art and design, I realized how much his teachings had made an impact on my life. The art world has lost a great teacher, a mentor, and a real artist.

Painting above by Myron Barnstone - Self Portrait
My Experience With Adam Marelli

I met Adam Marelli in New York City after introducing him to the Barnstone Studios drawing DVD series in 2009. Over the years, I have followed Adam’s career and find his lectures on art and photography to be incredibly insightful and historically relevant. His free online videos on classical art for the photographer (sponsored by B&H Photo) focus on many of the same design concepts Myron Barnstone discusses in his lectures on the golden section. These include figure-ground relationship, aerial perspective, perspective, overlapping elements, pointing devices, arabesques, enclosures, etc.

For those who have followed Adam’s more recent training video series on YouTube or Udemy, you will notice that he doesn’t thoroughly discuss Dynamic Symmetry (the armature of the rectangle) and how it relates to design. This lack of discussion, of course, is not a direct reflection on his knowledge of design, but rather a professional choice (and his ideology) on how he wants to teach his students. Adam is well versed in all of the techniques of Dynamic Symmetry and how it’s applied to art and photography.

To see more work by Adam Marelli, please visit the website AMworkshops.com

Photograph above by Adam Marelli demonstrating the application of Dynamic Symmetry using the 1.5 armature of the rectangle
For the photographer to be productive in applying Dynamic Symmetry principles to their images, it's important to understand that they can't approach design in the same manner as the artist. Because the artist has no restriction on time to create a work of art, they can spend days, weeks, months, and even years on a composition. In contrast, photographers only have a fraction of a second to compose their photos. Due to the obvious differences between these two artistic practices, the professional photographer will find that Dynamic Symmetry is best used as an analytical tool - not one of direct application.

At the beginning stages of learning Dynamic Symmetry, it's critical for the photographer to acknowledge the difference between the intuitive act of photographing and intuition in composition. These two concepts are not the same and shouldn't be viewed as such. As I repeatedly mention throughout my website, composition in art is not intuitive (in the magical sense), and it's a skill that must be learned, mastered, and applied if the artist or photographer expects to create a consistent and masterful body of work in their lifetime.

In the book The Decisive Moment, Henri Cartier-Bresson states “Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move.” While many photographers assume Henri Cartier-Bresson is stating composition in
photography is intuitive, this assumption would be incorrect. What Bresson is actually referring to is the brief moment in time when a trained photographer can recognize visual order in a scene and have the skills and insight to be able to capture a successful photograph based on solid design principles.

It's well documented that Henri Cartier-Bresson was thoroughly trained in classical skill-based art techniques and executed this intuitive knowledge with precision in a massive body of work. Unlike most other photographers, Bresson had hundreds of images that were considered masterpieces, and he was able to accomplish this incredible feat because of his training in design.

*Henri Cartier-Bresson with his Leica M3*
Suggested Books and Videos for the Photographer

For all photographers new to classical skill-based art and design techniques, please see my recommendations below. These books and videos will lay the foundation for all future studies and will aid the photographer in expanding their visual literacy skills.

- The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry by Michel Jacob
- Classical Art Designed for Photographers by Adam Marelli (Video)
- Tips for Photographing People by Adam Marelli (Video)
- The Art of Seeing: Photography Training for the Artist in You by Adam Marelli (Video)

The Art of Composition: A Simple Application of Dynamic Symmetry by Michel Jacobs will give the photographer a simple overview of Dynamic Symmetry, the root rectangles, and how to apply it to their work. The videos, Classical Art Designed for Photographers and Tips for Photographing People by Adam Marelli cover additional design techniques like figure-ground relationship, aerial perspective, overlapping, compositional balance, etc. All of these techniques are mentioned in the “Tips and Techniques” section of my website. I also recommend the video The Art of Seeing: Photography Training for the Artist in You by Adam Marelli located on the Udemy website.
The Importance of the Armature of the Rectangle

Throughout my website, I repeatedly refer to the armature of the rectangle. For an artist to improve their visual literacy skills, they should never underestimate the importance of familiarizing themselves with this concept. The armature is, in effect, the foundation that supports an artist's content and ideas while arranging them in an organized manner so that the viewer can effectively read the presented work of art regardless if it's a drawing, painting, photograph, or piece of sculpture.

The below image by Johannes Vermeer, called “The Astronomer,” demonstrates the application of the basic 14 line armature that master painters use to create compositions. An artist that expects to achieve mastery in their craft should memorize the construction of this armature and employ it with regularity and consistency in their body of work. It’s also important to note that this armature directly relates to the musical scale of composition.
Prologue

Every artist has their own style. From da Vinci to Degas, to Rembrandt to Renoir, you can easily identify their work. If you're a photographer interested in learning more about the art of photography, you might want to study the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alex Webb, Constantine Manos, Elliott Erwitt, or Vivian Maier. And while most everyone would agree these well-known street photographers are masters of the same genre, their photos look nothing alike.

One should never disregard or minimize the importance of design in their art as a characteristic of personal "style." Nor should style be confused with pictorial structure. Style is highly personal whereas creating effective pictorial structure requires the knowledge and application of universal composition principles. Indeed, all master artists and photographers, of every period, have their own stylistic differences, yet they all follow the same respectable system of design - meaning Dynamic Symmetry and the armature of the rectangle. Not the Rule of Thirds.

Because the Rule of Thirds is the most widely acknowledged and accepted composition concept in mainstream art and photography, I address the rule in great detail throughout this document. However, my objective for writing about the Rule of Thirds is not to encourage its use, but rather to demonstrate unequivocally to the reader that master artists, highly skilled photographers, and advertisers don't apply it to their work. As Myron Barnstone once said, "To only know one little system like the Rule of Thirds and none of the other rich design procedures that artists have used is to be poverty-stricken." I couldn't agree more. The Rule of Thirds is not design.

Design is a visual language that must be learned, mastered, and applied if an artist expects their work to mature fully. And even though Modern Art ideology doesn't encourage skill-based art training, by no means should the contemporary artist assume that classical art techniques, which are thousands of years old, are outdated or invalid. In truth, the Modern Art philosophies of "personal expression" and "creativity," which are so prevalent in today's culture, only have significance if one's "personal expression" is executed with a certain amount of artistic proficiency. Only then can an artist or photographer be truly "creative."

Furthermore, despite the many misguided and romanticized claims that some people are born with the "gift" of understanding composition, while others are not, I can state with absolute certainty that these claims are erroneous. Composition in art is not intuitive, and nobody is born with the ability to grasp all the principles of classical skill-based art. Master artists take great strides to develop sophisticated designs, and it's highly unlikely, if not impossible, that anyone can create artwork with geometric precision or visual mastery based on intuition alone.

With design being one of the least understood and lost skills in art today, learning the art of composition is more important than ever. The purpose of this user's guide is to reintroduce those lost skills and help artists achieve the highest level of quality in their work. Whether you draw, paint, sculpt, or take photographs, understanding and applying effective design techniques to art is not a luxury - it's a necessity.