



PARRISH ART MUSEUM

Parrish Home Art Studios

ELEMENTS OF ART: SPACE AND COMPOSITION

Space and composition are elements of art which focus on the way a flat surface (like a canvas or paper), called the picture plane, is organized. An artist must make many different decisions about how each subject is arranged, or composed, within their image. Composition is used to decide whether objects will be placed towards the middle, top, bottom, left, or right within the picture plane. Space enhances this concept by adding the illusion of depth, making objects appear close or far away. All of these choices affect the way a viewer sees and understands an artwork. Space and composition can also be used to highlight the main focus of the image.

Let's take a close look at William Merritt Chase's (American, 1849-1916), painting titled "The Big Bayberry Bush", ca. 1895.



William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916)
The Big Bayberry Bush (The Bayberry Bush), ca. 1895
Oil on canvas
25 1/2 x 33 1/8 inches
Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, N.Y., Littlejohn Collection
1961.5.5

What do you see? What parts of the painting do you focus on? One of the first sections you may have noticed is the area with three girls in the field. Chase has placed the image of his daughters towards the lower section, or foreground, of the painting, making them appear closer to us. Artists use the size and placement of subjects to create the illusion of distance from the viewer. The larger the subject is, and the lower the placement on the picture plane, the closer they appear. Chase also creates the feeling of depth by placing the horizon line in the upper third of the canvas. The horizon line is used to indicate the separation between the land and sky. He placed the house at the horizon

line and knew if he made it smaller in scale, it would enhance that illusion. The higher and smaller the objects on the horizon line are, the farther they appear. You may also notice that the colors in the foreground of the painting are more vivid and have contrasts of lights and darks. We can see the use of texture and line more clearly, which adds to the feeling that we are nearby. The colors, textures and details in the background are more muted and not as clear, again, adding to that illusion of distance.

DAY 1

Let's make a paper collage inspired by the element of space and composition.

Materials

Any type of paper

Scissors

Glue or tape

Drawing materials



Look at the simple collage samples on the left. They are both landscapes which use the same shapes, but with different sizes. You can make this collage with any type of paper, but be sure to use the same paper for your shapes in each collage. Cut out 2 pieces of paper to cover the bottom of your paper to create a landscape. One should be wide and the other should be narrow. The narrow piece will be used to show the closer view, and the wider one will show a more distant view. These strips create your horizon lines. Glue them to the bottom edge of your paper. In our sample collage we used triangles, rectangles, circles, and free-form shapes of different sizes. Cut your shapes in the same fashion. Arrange the larger shapes on the paper with the narrow strip, and the smaller shapes on the paper with the wider strip, and glue them down. Have you created the illusion of distance and space?

DAY 2

Embellish your collages! Draw details and textures on your works of art. Remember to keep the idea of space in mind. Consider what objects will be close, and what objects will be farther away. Houses, trees, flowers, birds, people, animals, anything you want to add to your composition will enhance the illusion you've created. Have fun!