Design Principles - Emphasis and Subordination

I. Terms: Emphasis and Subordination

II. Definition of the terms: Emphasis and Subordination are complimentary concepts.

- *Emphasis* is an area of focus. The art elements draw attention to this part of the work.
- *Subordination* is a term used to describe the surroundings that provide a context without distracting from the emphasis.

III. Examples of the terms: The Visual Elements are used to create regions of Emphasis and Subordination.

COLOR: Intense colors attract attention and can be used to create *emphasis*. Warm colors tend to stand out more than cool colors.

(Cezanne *Still Life* 1892-99)

- Cezanne placed *emphasis* on the center with bright primary and secondary colors.
- The warm orange, red, and yellow colors stand out more than the cool green pieces of fruit.
- The use of white accentuates the colors.
- The rest of the work is *subordinated* with muted colors such as brown, tan, gray, and dulled blue.

LIGHT: Visual contrast of light and dark (value) creates *emphasis*. If something is illuminated by light it will stand out against its dark surroundings.

Similarly, a dark spot in a predominately light work will attract attention.
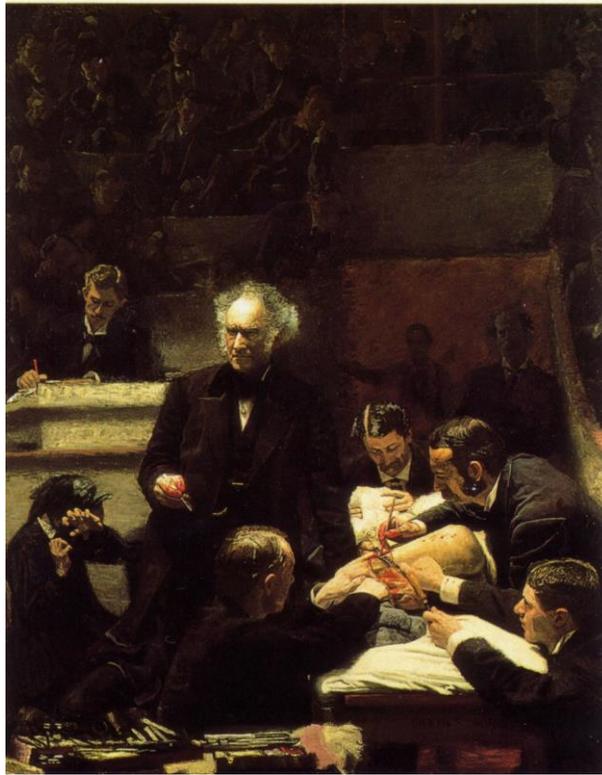
(Thomas Eakins *The Gross Clinic* 1875)

- The most important people in this painting are the patient and the head surgeon. The bright light emphasizes them. We can't see much of the patient but the white cloth creates a focal point in the darkened room. The doctor is also emphasized with light reflected by his shiny forehead and white hair.

LINE: Lines can be used as visual paths to guide your eyes to a focal point or emphasis.

(Kathe Kollwitz *Death Seizing a Woman* 1934)

- When I look at this drawing, the woman's face attracts my attention. Notice how most of the lines point to this focal point.

SPACE: We tend to pay more attention to the things nearest to us. An artist can create emphasis by simply placing something in the foreground (lower in the picture plane).

(Bill Brandt *Portrait of a Young Girl, Eaton Place, London* 1955)

- The girl's face is emphasized. She seems very close because her face dominates the lower half of the image.
- The other objects in the photograph are subordinated as a result of diminished scale, overlapping and higher placement on the picture plane.

TEXTURE: Interesting textures can attract attention and create emphasis.
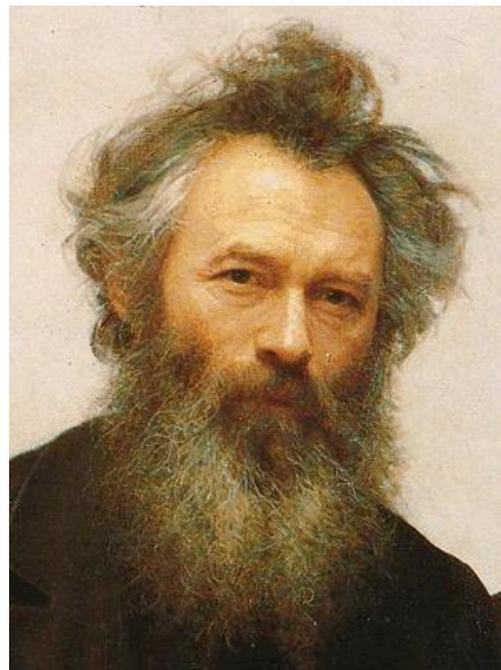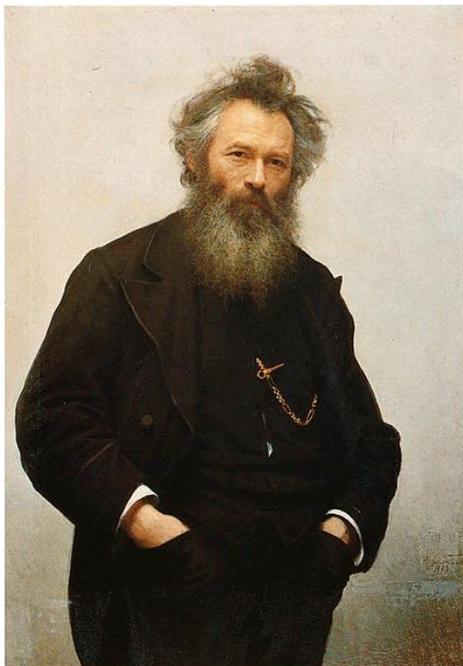
(Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy, Portrait of Ivan I. Shishkin 1880)

- When I look at this portrait, I am captivated by the texture in the man's face and hair. I may look at other details, but my gaze quickly moves back up to his head.

SHAPE/MASS: Emphasis can be created with a unique shape or mass.
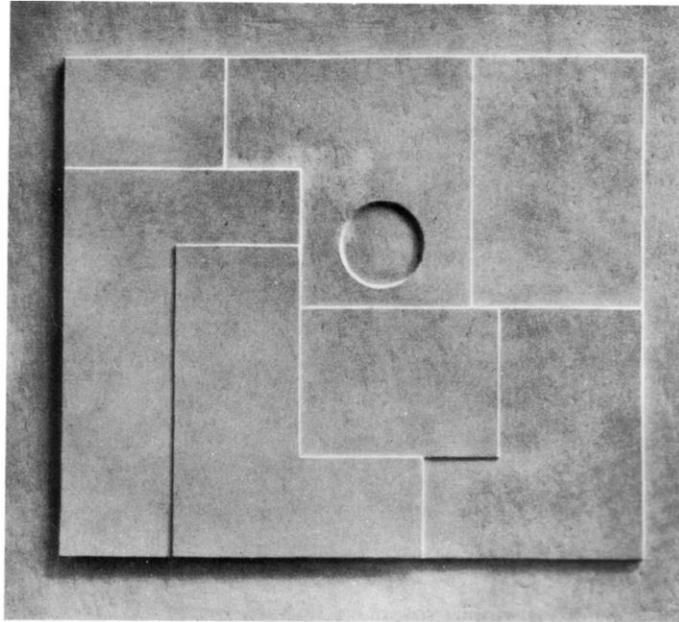
(Ben Nicholson *White Relief* 1936)

- In this sculptural relief a single circle is emphasized because the round shape is unusual in the design.
- Similarly, the emphasis would be on a single rectangle in a work dominated by circles.