

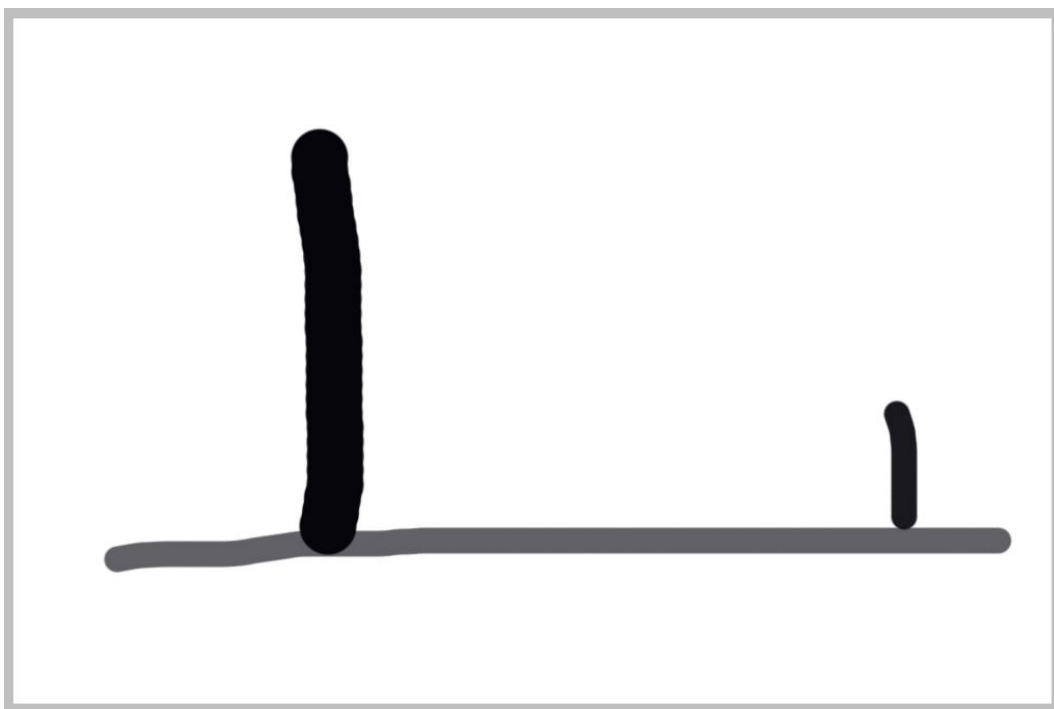
Compositional Structures

Introduction

Within my Patreon videos I have introduced a range of compositional structures that give balance, order and rhythm to paintings demonstrated. As I usually work in a very expressive way with lots of strong contrasts, dynamic marks and saturated colours I find these structures invaluable for holding my paintings together and preventing chaos. As I have now covered many of these designs over the past 3 years I thought it would be a good idea to collate them together for you in a PDF document. As with previous PDFs I have shared this is very much a working document that will be expanded over time.

1 The L Shape

The L shape composition is a favourite of mine and one I use regularly particularly within my landscape paintings. The L shape design is very simple and involves a large vertical line usually placed one third of the way from the side of a painting. A horizontal line positioned roughly one third from the bottom of the painting and a secondary focal point placed on the opposite side to the tall vertical to balance the composition.





Edward Wesson

An artist who used the L shape to beautiful effect was Edward Wesson. In the painting above the Elm tree on the left creates the tall vertical, the line of cows and distant trees the horizontal, and the small tree and shadow on the right provides balance.



Edward Wesson

In this incredibly simple painting by Edward Wesson the L shape design is again perfectly illustrated.



Autumn Tree

In this painting the L is inverted and placed on an angle to add a little movement and dynamism to the painting.



2 The C Shape

The C shape composition is perfect for seascapes where the curve of the coast line and shore naturally form the shape of the C. It's incredibly simple and can be used for landscapes as well with the curve of a field border defining the C shape.



Skinningrove Beach

In the expressive painting of Skinningrove beach above created for Patreon the C shape moves the eye in a curve to the headland positioned in the top right. The space inside the C is rendered extremely simply creating a passive area within the watercolour to contrast with the expressive marks that make up the coast and cliffs.



Saul Cathcart

This very loose mixed media plein air painting by Saul Cathcart is another great example of the C shape composition in action. The expressive strokes of paint that define the coast move the viewer's eye from the bottom right in a curve towards the distant headland in the top right. The golden section is again used within the composition with the headland disappearing into the distance roughly one third from the right and top of the painting.



Moorland

In the moorland painting above the C is reversed and used to define the border of a field.

3 Converging Lines / Radiating Lines

As the name suggests converging lines compositions use multiple lines that radiate from a single point directing the viewer's eye like an arrow. These lines could be created by perspective of tracks, roads or fields converging towards a vanishing point or as illustrated below by the furrows of a ploughed field.





Ploughed Field

I have again tried to converge the lines here within the golden section towards the top right hand corner of the painting.

4 Horizontal Lines

Another extremely simple compositional structure and one that is incredibly versatile and capable of endless variations. It can be used for both landscapes and seascapes alike and tends to work best when contrast and variety is added to the horizontals using tone, colour, size or texture etc.



Paul Fowler



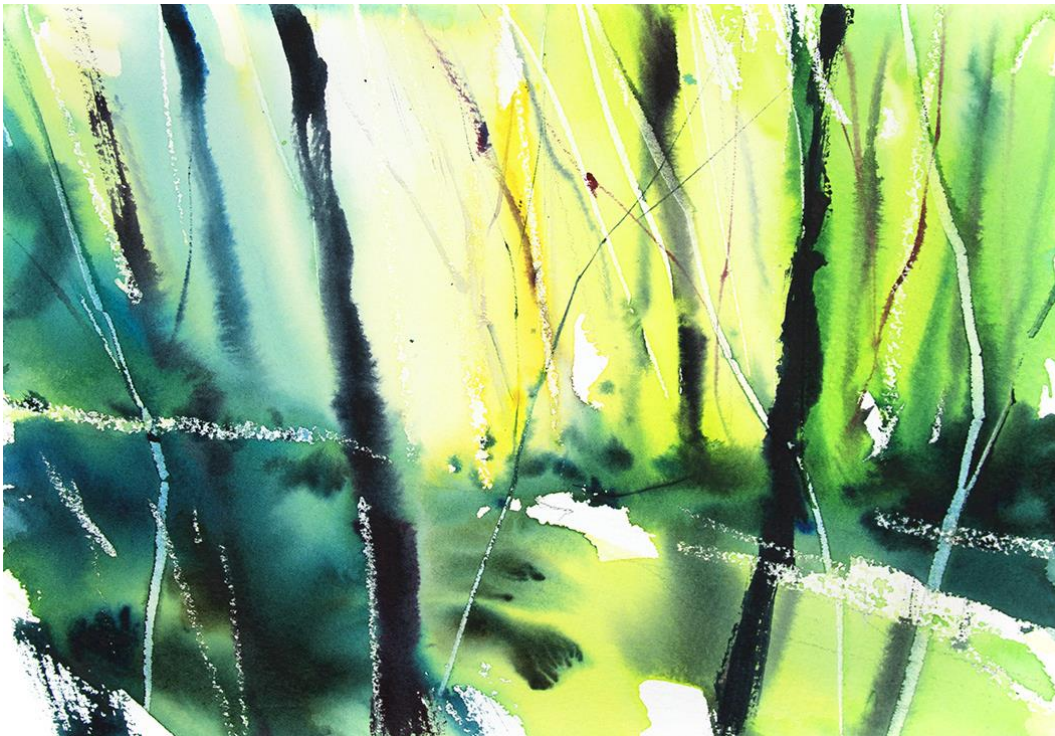
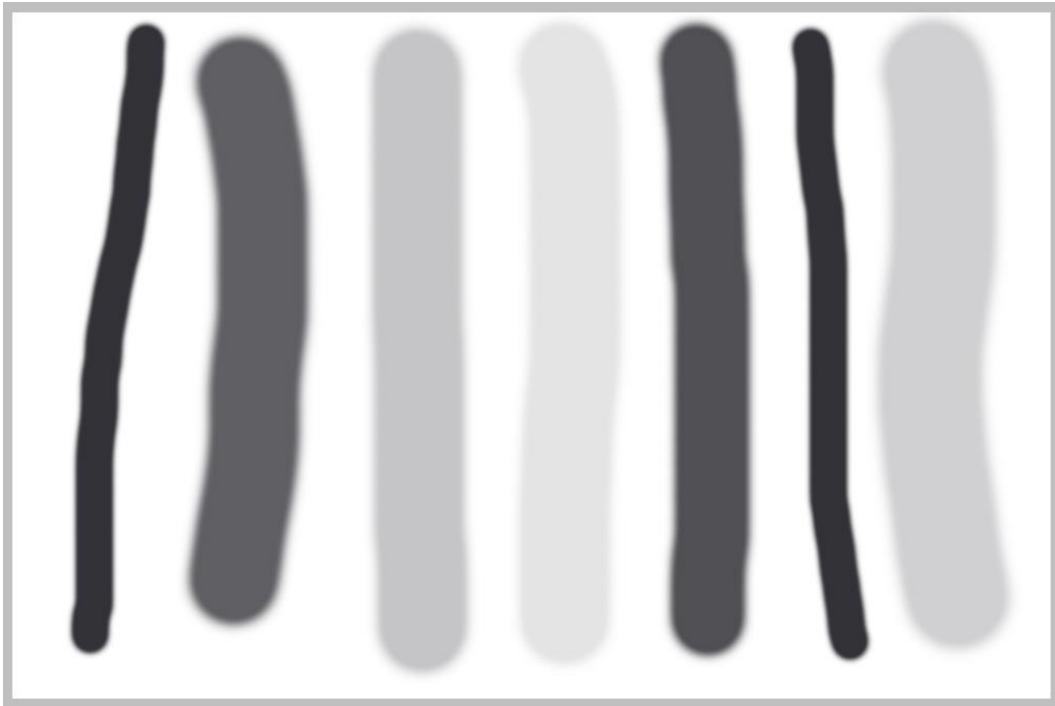
Hannah Woodman



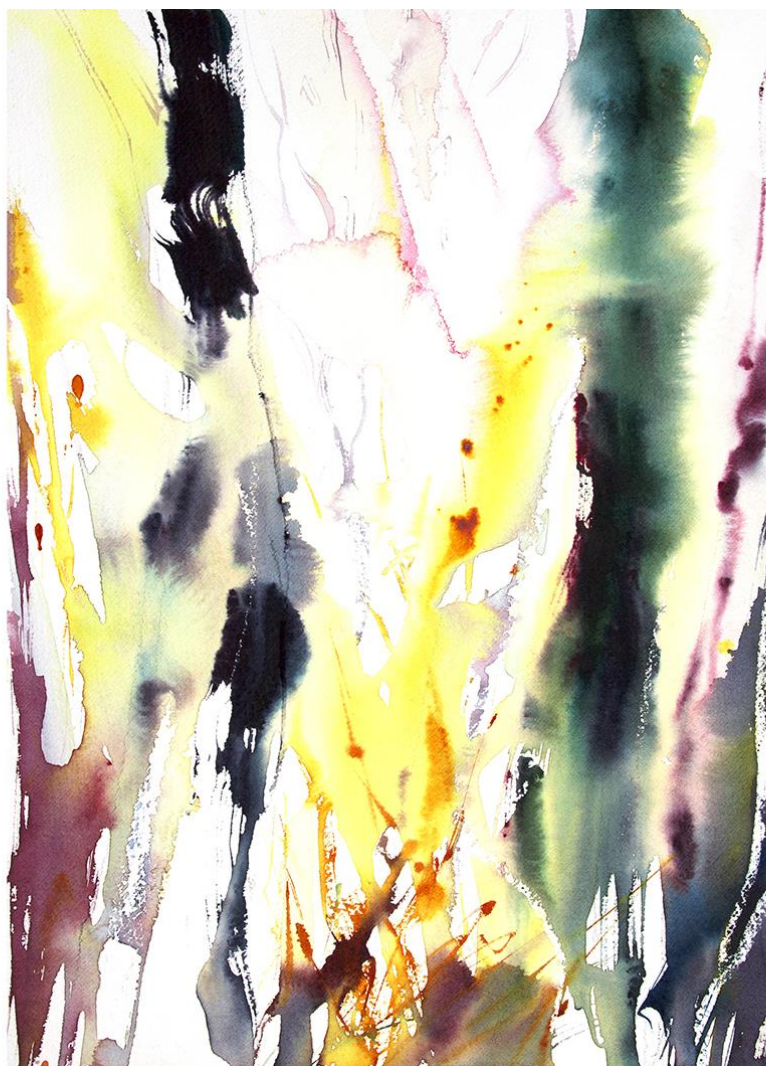
Moorland

5 Vertical lines

Like horizontal lines another extremely simple and versatile composition that is capable of infinite variations. This composition is a particular favourite of mine and one I use a lot particularly when depicting groups of trees.



Woodland Walk



Winter Woodland



Woodland

The Vertical lines composition also lends its self perfectly to abstraction as can be seen in the examples below:



Joan Mitchell Trees



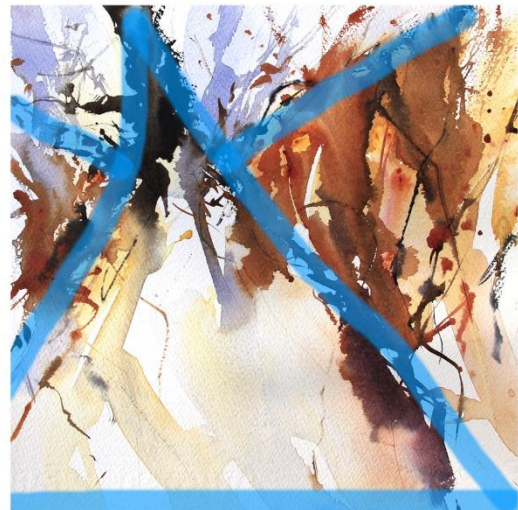
Scott Bergey

6 The Triangle

The beauty of creating a triangle within a rectangle is that it instantly creates further triangles which then give rhythm and harmony to the painting.



In the semi abstract painting below inspired by autumn undergrowth a large triangle is created from the tree roots in the top left down to the bottom of the paper. The rest of the composition then neatly divides up into smaller triangles.



Autumn Undergrowth

7 The Cross or Cruciform

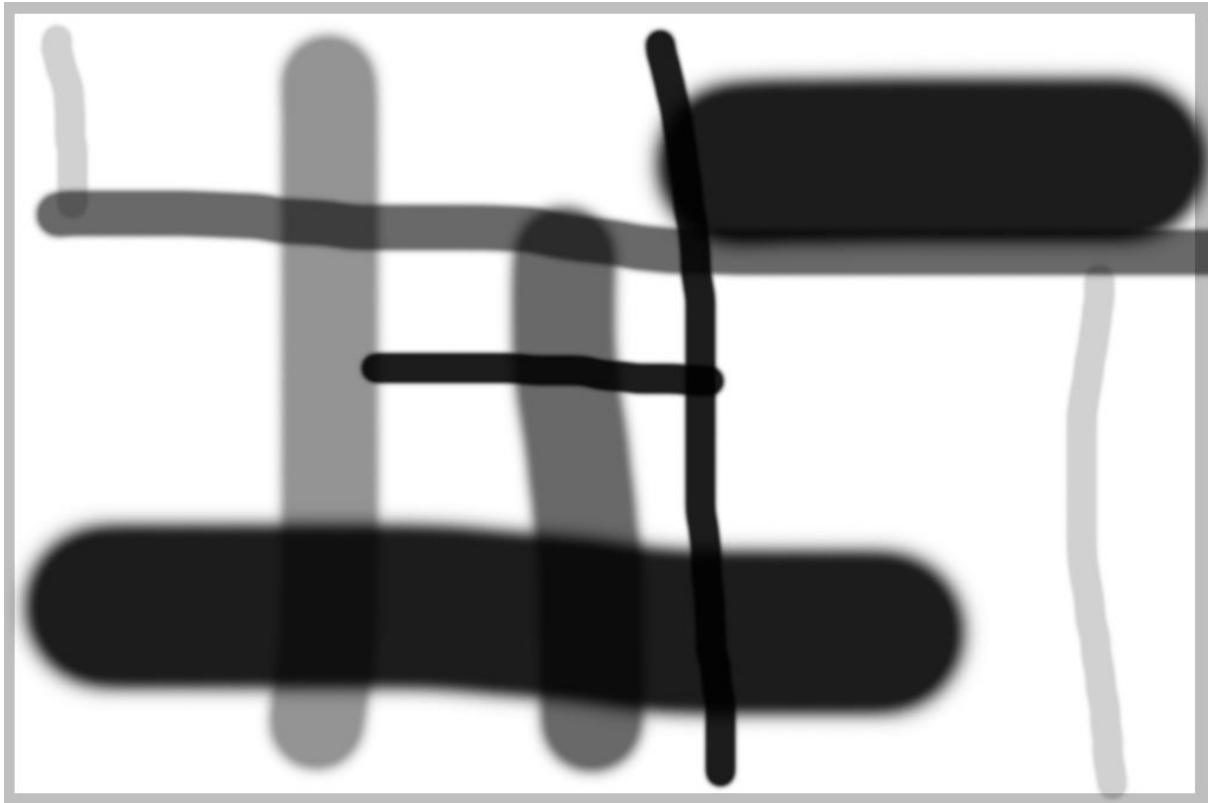
The cross or cruciform composition uses a strong horizontal dissected by a vertical. The vertical can flow directly up through the horizontal as with a traditional cross shape, or be split with the vertical above the horizontal moved slightly to one side or the other.



Sophie Knight

8 The Grid

Loved by abstract artists the grid divides the picture plane up into a series of rectangular shapes. These can be defined with geometric precision as with the work of Mondrian or be rendered much more loosely. This is not a composition I have used so far on my Patreon demonstrations but I will certainly endeavour to include it in an exercise at some point over the coming year.





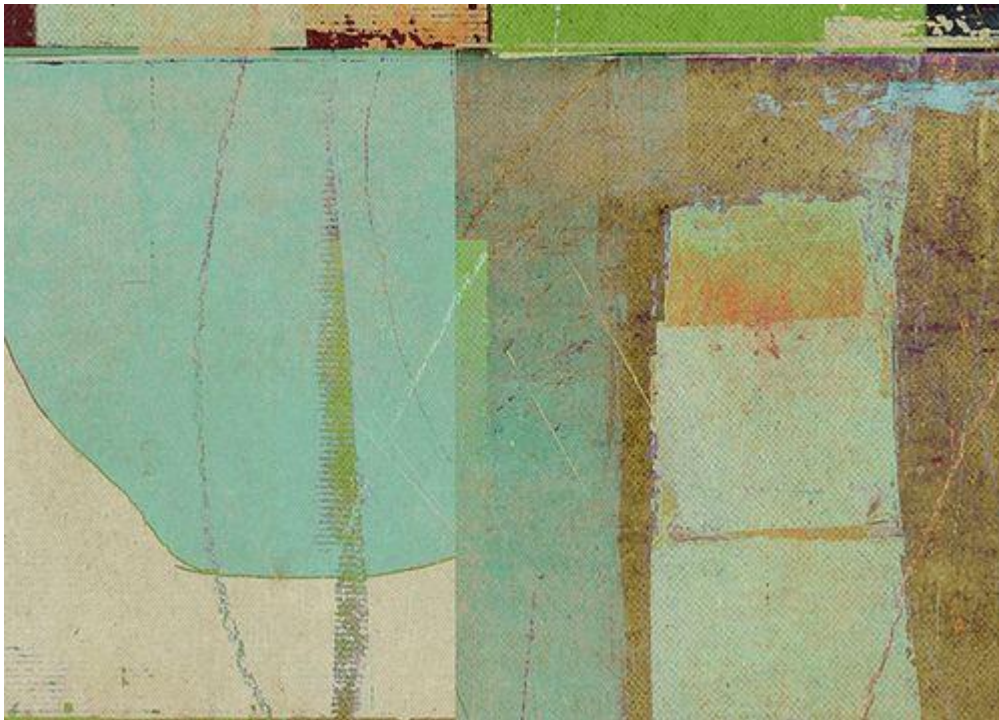
Peter Pharoah

I love the use of small rectangles here floating inside larger shapes along with the sheer variety of the proportions of the rectangles used.



Cape Light I - Öcollage auf Holz - 2001 - 72x92cm - wvz 1291

Christian Heinrich



Linda Vachon

The grid can also be used in more figurative paintings as can be seen below in this beautiful light filled painting by Mary Potter.



Mary Potter

9 The S Shape

The S shape extends the C into a curving line that flows the viewer's eye across the picture plane.



The S shape design is another compositional structure that lends itself perfectly to the shapes and character of the coast.



Abstract Seascape

10 The O Shape or Circle

The elegance and simplicity of the circle makes it a great favourite with abstract artists. There is something innately attractive about the circle drawn from our experience of human faces the sun and the moon. Circular compositions also have a beautiful balance to them along with a gentle flow and grace.





Agustin Castillo

This painting by Agustin Castillo combines the circle structure with a grid.

The abstract watercolour below by Ana Zanic uses overlapping washes and bleeds of translucent colour to create a beautiful light filled painting. What I particularly like here is the use of smaller shapes and very fine marks to contrast with the larger flows of paint.



Ana Zanic Flow Earth

The O Shape composition can also be used with more figurative paintings where the circle is created as a negative shape surrounded more tonally concentrated marks. In the painting below by Paul Fowler a rough negative circular shape of light is created in the top left surrounded by the textures and tones of winter trees.



Paul Fowler

11 Portrait

While the portrait composition is as the name suggests closely associated with human or animal portraits the portrait design can be used for any subject from a tree or building to a cloud or still life. The basic premise is to create a single dominant shape surrounded by more passive areas. The dominant shape could be placed centrally or to the side of the picture plane or even flow out of the edge of the image as seen below.



The portrait design is also great for still life work as can be seen in this beautiful painting by the Swedish Artist Lars Eje Larsson



Lars Eje Larsson



Light Frost

In this painting created as a Patreon demonstration the subject of the portrait is the winter oak tree set against a pale sky and a frosty field.

12 Diagonal Line

Diagonal line compositions involve a strong diagonal line or shape that cuts across the picture plane. This composition works very well in landscape subjects featuring cliffs or mountain sides but is again highly adaptable and can be used for any type of subject.





Summer Grasses

In the painting above inspired by summer grasses the diagonal line is created by the shapes and colours of the grass heads flowing down from the top left to the bottom right. Diagonal lines like this are a great way of injecting movement and drama into your paintings.



Cow Bar Nab at Staithes

This painting featuring Cow Bar Nab at Staithes North Yorkshire again uses a diagonal line running from the top left to the bottom right this time created by the silhouetted cliffs and foreground rocks.

13 The Fulcrum

The idea behind the Fulcrum design is to create dynamic balance. The best way to imagine this composition is to think of a seesaw where a large weight is placed on one side and a smaller one on the other. In order to balance the seesaw the larger weight must be placed towards the centre near the fulcrum and the smaller weight to the outside near the edge of the seesaw.



Jean-François Provost

This feeling of dynamic balance is created above in this still life by the artist Jean-François Provost. The dark shape and bright yellow mark are created just left of centre and are balanced by more muted colours and outlined shapes that flow all the way to the right hand side of the painting.

I hope you find these notes useful, as I mentioned in my introduction this is a working document and one I will continue to add too over time introducing further illustrations and design ideas. A full list of all the structures included in the PDF is listed below:

Compositional Structures

1. The L Shape
2. The C Shape
3. Converging Lines / Radiating Lines
4. Horizontal Lines
5. Vertical Lines
6. The Triangle
7. The Cross or Cruciform
8. The Grid
9. The S Shape
10. The O Shape or Circle
11. Portrait
12. Diagonal Line
13. The Fulcrum