

# Eye For Design



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# The Program

## Summary

*Eye For Design* is a course in everyday aesthetics. Its lessons go beyond mere “decorating” or “picking a wardrobe” and into the basics of perception and a look at how lines and shapes influence feelings.

Viewers meet an animated line who boasts he “can control your eyeballs.” They learn that lines and shapes lead the eye and influence feelings.

Viewers learn:

- How to create visual rhythm.
- How to use patterns and repeating motifs.
- The message of angles and curves and how to balance the two.
- The emotional difference between a vertical and horizontal line.
- Why rectangles are more interesting than squares.
- How to achieve visual balance and the difference between symmetry and informal balance.
- The importance of scale, proportion, and the Golden Mean.

# What Do Lines And Shapes Mean?

## **VERTICAL LINES**

A vertical line is strong, uplifting, even inspiring. Monuments and religious shrines often use long vertical lines to suggest awe. A pinstripe suit is a “power look.” Vertical lines move eyes up and down so emphasize height.

## **HORIZONTAL LINES**

A horizontal is at rest, peaceful, stable. Long lines without interruption send a stronger message. A horizontal line cannot fall down — it is the line of the horizon, a person at rest. Horizontal lines lead the eye across an object and emphasize width.

## **DIAGONAL LINES**

A diagonal line is uncertain, unstable, dynamic. It is about movement and hints at danger.

## **ANGLES**

An angle is a line with change. The eye stops ever so briefly at an angle and moves in a different direction. Think of driving a car along a right angle — you change direction. Angles are about change, interruption, slowing down.

A sharp angle requires nearly a complete stop to make the turn — right angles can be uncomfortable, too sharp. A right angle is easy to understand, predictable.

## **CURVES**

A straight line is the shortest distance between two points — a curve is not. Curves take the eye on a pleasant ride. Curves offer infinite variety over the boring predictability of vertical or horizontal lines. We find curves delicate and graceful.

Curves are more comforting than sharp angles. The curve of a sandy beach...the petals of a flower ....or a meandering river. Nature does not use straight lines and right angles to make beauty. Curves are organic while straight lines and right angles suggest human intervention and artifice.

## **TRANSITIONAL CURVES**

Since a right angle is a rather abrupt change in direction, a transitional curve is often introduced to cushion the change, to act as a kind of eyeball ramp like an expressway exit.

Crown molding softens the right angle of a wall meeting a ceiling, landscaping softens the right angle of a house foundation meeting the ground. Shoulder pads create a pleasing curve in a suit, and draperies soften the right angles of windows.

## **SQUARE**

A square is solid, stable, predictable, static. All its lines are the same length. It is easy to grasp visually. Its very boringness makes it a useful design element. We perceive one shape, not four lines.

## **RECTANGLE**

Also a stable shape, but with more variety than a square. A rectangle has vertical and horizontal lines of differing lengths. So a rectangle is more interesting than a square, it is slightly more complex.

Your eye is attracted to differences, so a rectangle is “more interesting” than a square. After all, we don’t call dull people “rectangles.”

### **CIRCLE**

A circle is static, like a square. It’s so easily recognized that the eye needs not travel the line. We see a single shape – just like a square. Circles and squares are visually stable.

The eye does not travel around a circle or a square. Instead it sees them as a shape, a unit. That’s why they are stable and do not add movement.

Why are stop signs octagonal shaped? Because the eye is drawn to differences, and a circle offers none. An octagon offers more visual variety so attracts the eye. And painting it red helps too.

### **OVAL**

An oval is to a circle like a rectangle to a square. It adds variety so is visually more interesting but less stable.

### **TRIANGLE**

A triangle offers a base to suggest stability and a point to which the eye is drawn. Triangles use angles and diagonals to create visual movement.

Triangles of any shape still suggest predictability since the sum of their angles always equals 180°. We might not remember that from geometry class, but our eyes know.

### **RHYTHM**

You understand rhythm in sound—it’s a beat, a sound you can dance to. Rhythm in sound is repetition with some variety. So a good rhythm means predictability with a little variety. In fact, that’s a recipe for good visual design – predictability with variety. Instead of sound, visual rhythm uses repeating lines, colors, patterns, or shapes to create its own “beat.”

Visual rhythm is all around you. It’s the tiny dots in men’s ties, the lines in a pleated skirt, the overlapping boards in the siding of a house, the pattern in wallpaper, the recurring designs in an Oriental carpet, the red checks on a tablecloth, or the petals of a flower.

### **MOTIF**

A shape or a color combination that is repeated throughout a room, a house, or an outfit is called a motif. Motifs can also be established using shapes, lines, patterns, or musical notes.

### **BALANCE**

Visual weight depends on eye attraction. The more something “pulls” your eye to it, the “heavier” its visual weight.

There are two types of balance – symmetrical and asymmetrical. Symmetrical (or formal) balance means equal objects placed equal distances from the center. Formal balance is easy to design and logical, but can be static and boring.

Asymmetrical (or informal) balance is difficult to define but means a sense of balance without objects located equal distances from the center line.

## **SCALE AND PROPORTION**

Scale is about comparative size, about how things fit together. A dining room the size of a cathedral would be “out of scale.”

Proportion is a pleasing relationship in sizes between objects. A universally pleasing proportion in a rectangle is to have the length 1.618 times the width. This is close to a ratio of two to three or three to five. The human face has this proportion.

The Greeks called this proportion the Golden Mean and built their temples and monuments using it. And it's all around you yet today. A pleasing rectangle for a room, swimming pool, photograph, rug, painting, table, or other object is often based on the Golden Mean.

## **FOCAL POINT**

Designers take advantage of our visual habits. For example, our eyes seek a destination -- a place to rest. We call this place the focal point.

For example, symmetrical balance draws your eyes to the center as does a contrast in colors.

A well composed painting has a focal point – a point to which the eyes are drawn first. A well designed room also has a focal point; a reward for the eyes. A painting, a beautiful piece of furniture, a fireplace, or a special architectural detail can serve well as a focal point.

# Eye For Design Quiz

1. \_\_\_\_\_ One theme of *Eye For Design* is that lines, shapes, and colors have the power to influence  
(A) ideas (B) actions (C) feelings (D) leaders
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Pillars on the front of houses are usually there to  
(A) create strong vertical lines to make the house look more impressive (B) hold up a roof or entryway  
(C) create strong horizontal lines to make the house seem larger (D) suggest classical Greek design
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Both circles and squares are  
(A) solid but static shapes, (B) dynamic shapes that attract the eye, (C) made of lines that cause the eye to move, (D) all of the above
4. \_\_\_\_\_ What do the stripes in a pinstripe suit have in common with the pleats on a pleated skirt?  
(A) both add vertical lines to a design (B) both create a basic visual rhythm (C) neither of these  
(D) both of these
5. \_\_\_\_\_ A common quality of good visual design is that it has  
(A) stability (B) dynamic lines (C) proportion (D) predictability with variety
6. \_\_\_\_\_ A shape or color repeated throughout a design is called a  
(A) refrain (B) recur (C) motif (D) harmony
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The “basics” of good design are learned from  
(A) Classical Greek and Roman architecture (B) nature (C) designer texts (D) the study of art
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Which line leads the eye across an object and emphasizes width?  
(A) vertical line (B) diagonal line (C) horizontal line (D) curve
9. \_\_\_\_\_ The Golden Mean is an example of pleasing  
(A) symmetry (B) lines (C) focus (D) proportion
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Let’s say you own a beautiful piece of furniture hand made by your grandfather. Very likely you would place the piece in a room so it is  
(A) balanced (B) proportioned (C) the focal point (D) part of a recurring motif

# Eye for design scavenger hunt

Find \_\_\_\_\_ examples from the following list that show you understand the concept in question. You may use photographs, drawings, actual objects, or magazine cutouts. Your examples can be from fashion, architecture, graphic art, interior design, architecture, or nature.

1. A design in which vertical lines dominate.
2. A design in which horizontal lines dominate.
3. Visual rhythm created by lines.
4. Visual rhythm created by shapes.
5. A motif based on color.
6. A motif based on lines or shapes.
7. A design based on straight lines and right angles.
8. A design based on curves and circles.
9. A design lacking in pleasing proportions.
10. A design with pleasing proportions.
11. Two designs based on the Golden Mean.
12. Two examples of symmetry.
13. Two examples of asymmetrical balance.
14. A design that creates feelings of peace and rest.
15. A design which creates a feeling of movement and speed.
16. Two designs with a clear focal point.
17. An example of a designer using lines to direct the viewer's eye movements.
18. Automobile design illustrating horizontal lines, focal point, formal balance, informal balance.
19. Curves introduced to soften right angles.
20. The use of long lines to create feelings of awe or reverence.
21. A design in which diagonal lines create visual movement.
22. Three rectangles of pleasing proportions.
23. A design based on squares.
24. Objects (furniture, for example) out of scale for the space in which it is located.
25. Visual rhythm based on color.
26. A boring design that lacks surprise.
27. A design featuring predictability with surprise.
28. A wristwatch ad with the hands set at 10:10.
29. A focal point created by color contrast.
30. A focal point created by formal balance.
31. A design that lacks a focal point.
32. A design that is "too busy."
33. A background of neutral colors.
34. A magazine page showing informal balance.
35. The use of vertical lines to make a person look taller.
36. Two examples of furniture designed with curves to soften right angles.
37. Two examples of furniture designed without curves.
38. A design in which a triangle is used to show both a base and a point of interest.
39. A visual rhythm that lacks surprise.
40. A picture of landscaping for a house in which the trees or shrubs are "out of scale."

## Quiz Answers

1-C, 2-A, 3-A, 4-D, 5-D, 6-C, 7-B, 8-C, 9-D, 10-C

## Resources

**A Primer of Visual Literacy** by Donis Dondis (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1973). A well-illustrated classic on the meaning of visual design. For advanced high school or college level reading.

**Thinking Visually** by Robert H. McKim (Dale Seymour Publications, Palo Alto, CA, 1980). A source book for visual problem-solving. Includes over 100 exercises to challenge readers and seers.

**Seeing Is Believing: An Introduction To Visual Communication** by Arthur Asa Berger (Mayfield Publishing, Mountain View, CA, 1989). This small paperback textbook explores how images evoke feelings. Emphasis is on mass media.

**Open Your Eyes: 1,000 Simple Ways to Bring Beauty into Your Home and Life Each Day** by Alexandra Stoddard (William Morrow and Company, NY, 1998). Excellent sections on the Golden Mean, proportion, scale, and rhythm. Stoddard applies these visual design basics to residential interiors.