

Part 3 Composition 'Rules'

Negative Space, Focal Points, the Rule of Thirds and Power Points.

Now that you have tried different arrangements for a simple composition using thumbnails and a viewfinder. I want you to choose a few that you think are your best and worst compositions from this exercise.

Exercise 1.

Choose a couple of your best thumbnails and a couple of the ones that you think don't work. Think about why they work or don't work.

Points to consider:

There are some basic 'rules' in composition. However, like most things it's not quite that simple, yet again you will find that *some* of these rules don't apply in botanical art and there are numerous examples that **break the rules**. We will look at the rules more as guidelines but sometime rules are useful. Bear in mind the following statement:

In order to break the rules you must first learn the rules!

Negative Space

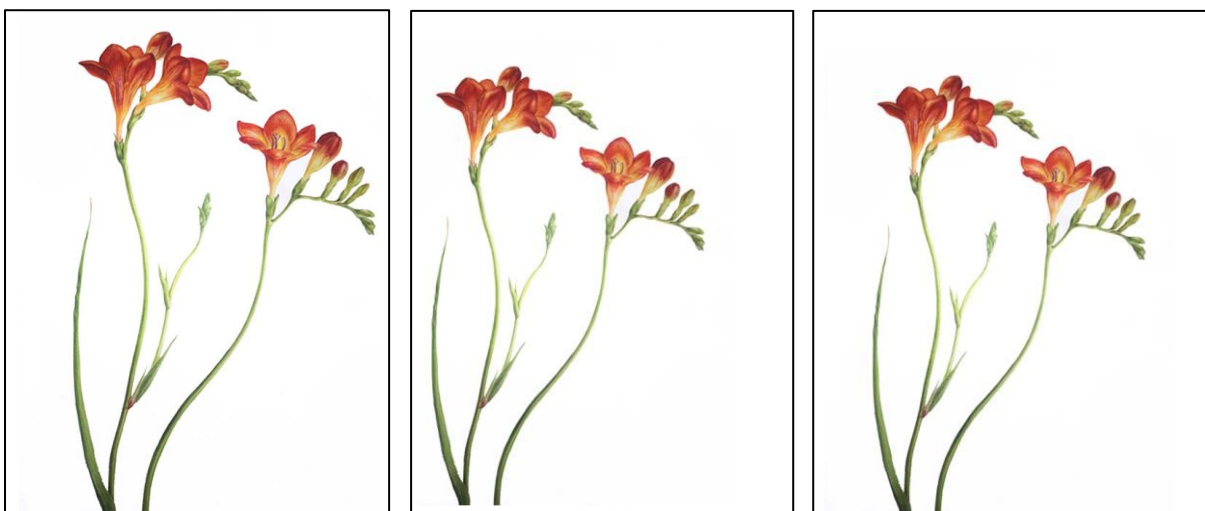
Before we look at the composition rules, we need to think about negative space. This is the white space that surrounds your subject but also the space in-between the components within the composition. This first part to think about is the space that surrounds the subject, this probably sounds obvious but it's important to make sure that you position your subject so that it has

sufficient surrounding white space around it. This is a crucial consideration at the outset, both for the purpose of framing but also to ensure that the subject is not cramped, bear in mind that the space around the image is important too and should look 'comfortable' i.e. Too much space = a 'lost in space' look, or too little space = cramping.

When considering the mounting of work under a mat, allowing enough space will give you some flexibility in final positioning. Always measure an equal distance from the outer points of the image to the outer edge of the paper (for both left and right sides and top and bottom). At the top the distance should be no less than the distance at the sides, preferably slightly more. The exception to this is when an image disappears beneath the mount (we will discuss this later).

The amount of paper that goes under the mat or mountboard is dependent on the size of the work so adjust it accordingly. Ideally the paper should be a little less than the outer size of the mat. The idea is to make sure that you have enough room and that the image sits comfortably under the window. The hole in the mat is called the aperture.

Below are three different arrangements for the aperture: Left: the image is cramped at the top. Centre: better but the left-hand positioning creates an overly wide white space on the right and is cramped on the left. Right: Image still maintains that 'left – hand' positioning in terms of weight but provides better space, distance between the outer points to edge is equal and the distance above equal.



The **negative space that falls in-between component parts should also be considered**, we will discuss this in more detail later but **it is important that the negative space does not form shapes**

that draw attention away from the focus of your work, this can happen if there are large white areas in the centre of a composition, **e.g. where plant parts meet or cross over**. Always check the white spaces to make sure that they are not dominating the composition. **Check in particular for areas where plant parts a touching, known as 'kissing parts' as a general rule they should either miss each other completely or overlap**



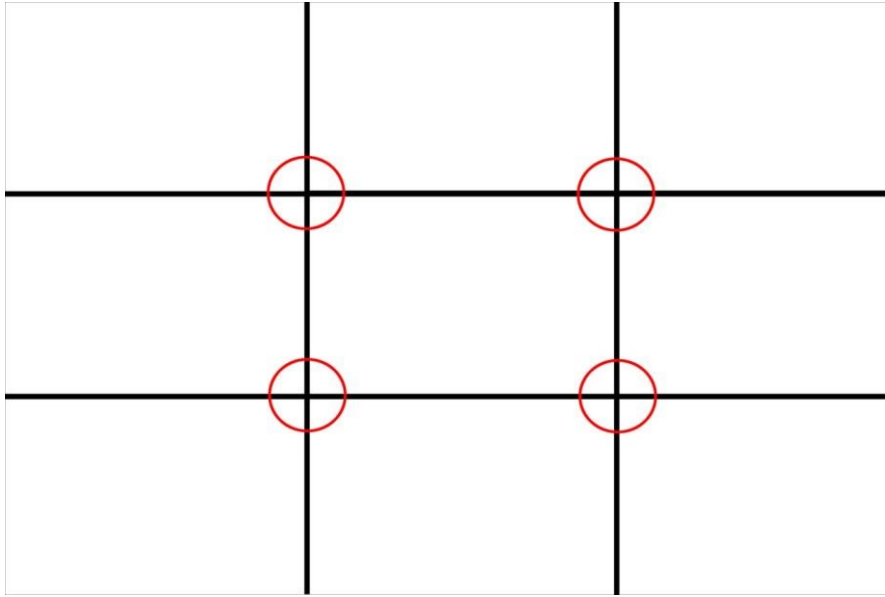
sufficiently so as not to make an awkward white space. Here this leaf is almost touching the flower, it needs to be moved behind the flower or moved further away.

Focal Point and the Rule of Thirds

The Rule of Thirds is a useful compositional technique. The rule states that focal points or points of interest should fall at particular lines in a composition. This will create more interest and tension but will not look awkward either.

What does this mean?

If you take the window from a viewfinder (or any aperture over an image) and divide it into 9 equal parts, with two equally positioned horizontal and vertical lines you create something like this grid below (the black lines) .

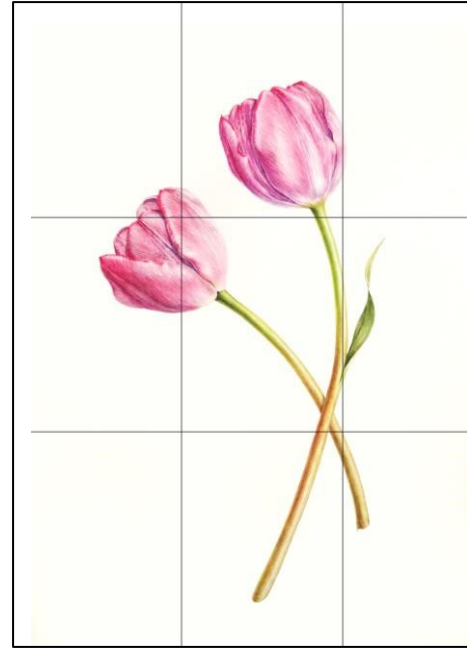
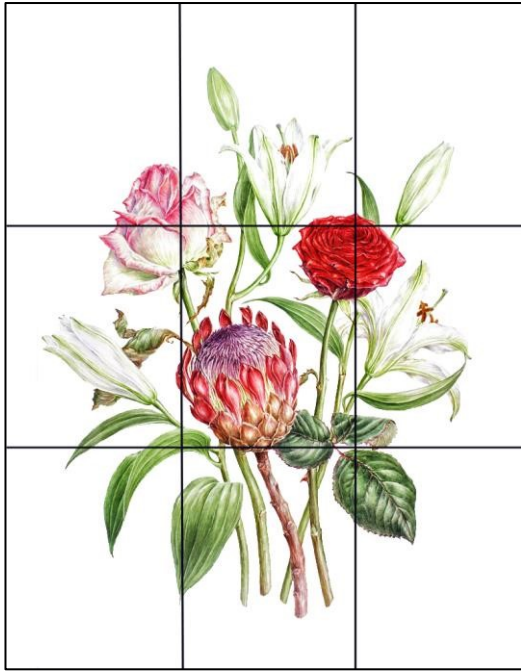


The Rule of Thirds **prevents central placement**, it **avoids a composition that is split in two or one that has a central subject like a bulls-eye!** It suggests that **features of interest or focal points should fall somewhere on these lines.** However, in botanical art we do often utilise central placement so this really only comes into play for 'off -centre' compositions and mixed compositions, but it is surprising to discover that some central looking compositions do still obey the general Rule of Thirds. **Bear in mind though that this it is not an absolute rule but is most certainly worth considering. There are many examples of this rule in famous paintings, try a Google search.**

Power Points

In addition to the Rule of Thirds, there are **'Power points' or 'Hot spots', indicated by the red circles on the grid above, this is where the lines intersect.** These can be used for positioning focal points, and are particularly useful in an 'off centre' composition.

In the mixed floral on the left it appears initially that the positioning is central, while overall that is true, you can see that the three dominant features, the protea, pink rose and red rose all fall roughly lines. The points don't need to fall directly on the subjects but near to the points. If the protea was instead placed dead centre, it would create too much of a focal point and the composition would lose interest. The three main subjects also form a triangle as do the paler three lilies, we'll cover the rule of odds in part 4.



Above right: You can see that the two tulips fall roughly on the lines and power points, also the cross-over stems fall on the bottom line and point. Note that cross-overs should be used with caution; they should **never** fall in the centre of the painting as they create a very dominant focal point.

Making adjustments

Check list

- **Is the surrounding negative space sufficient and balanced?**
- **Are there any awkward or dominant negative spaces between component parts or any kissing parts that need to be changed?**
- **Could the focal points or points of interest be better positioned according to the Rule of Thirds?**

When making adjustments, take care not to alter anything that is not typical of the plant. However, it is usually possible to make fine adjustments by repositioning the subject to look for different aspects.

Exercise 2

Now that you have explored some compositional rules, take another look at your original thumbnails. Have you made any observations regarding the position of the subjects? Try the following activity:

1. Draw a grid for each of your selected thumbnails on tracing paper or to divide the window into 9 equal spaces, as shown on page 3. Draw two horizontal and two vertical lines and mark the power points where the lines cross.
2. Place the grid over your image; do the components fit the Rule of odds or the points where the lines cross?
3. Check whether you allowed sufficient white space around the subject?
4. Can you make any adjustments to the composition?

You may find that this helps you to fine tune your composition, don't worry though if it doesn't quite work, it is still useful to know.

Once you have completed this exercise, draw out a final composition at life size.