



## DONALEE DESIGNS

SEE Like An Artist

### Principles & Elements of Design

These Principles & Elements are crucial to good Composition. When Composition is done well; it's the invisible architecture behind every piece of good art. The medium doesn't matter, quilts, collage, prints, painting they all benefit from this structure. To make art that stands out in a crowd, Incorporate your favorites from this list into your next piece. Or, pick one and study it. Next week, pick another one, and so on, you get the idea. Once you start implementing these into your work, you'll never look at or make art the same again.

#### **Principles — how the elements are organized**

The principles of design are the essential building blocks that form the backbone of any creative work, it's how the elements are organized. They help creators make decisions about how to arrange, style and structure elements within their work. These principles of design don't exist in a vacuum. They operate as a cohesive system where each principle is interconnected, enhancing and supporting the others.

#### **Contrast** — *The difference that creates interest*

Contrast is the engine of visual interest. When two things are different — in value, color, size, texture, or direction — the eye notices. Without contrast, everything flattens into a monotone. Push contrast and your work comes alive. It's what separates a piece that holds attention from one that doesn't.

#### **Balance** — *The visual weight feels settled*

Balance is the sense that nothing in your composition is about to tip over. It doesn't mean everything is equal — symmetrical balance mirrors the two halves, while asymmetrical balance uses contrast, size, and placement to create equilibrium between unlike things. Radial balance extends out from a center point in all directions. The goal isn't sameness; it's stability.

#### **Emphasis** — *Where the eye goes first*

Emphasis is your focal point — the place you're telling the viewer to look. You create it through contrast, isolation, placement, or sheer size. Every piece needs at least one place where your eye can land and rest. Without emphasis, the viewer's eye wanders and the work feels directionless.

#### **Movement** — *How the eye travels through your work*

Movement is the path your eye takes as it moves through a composition. You direct it with line, shape, color, and value — guiding the viewer from one area to another in a sequence you control. A piece with good movement feels like it has energy, like something is happening even in stillness.

#### **Repetition** — *The same thing, used again and again*

Repetition is the recurrence of an element — a shape, a color, a mark, a texture — throughout a composition. It creates visual cohesion and begins to build rhythm. When you use the same stamp three times, the same color in four places, the same line weight throughout, you're using repetition to tie the whole piece together.

#### **Rhythm** — *Repetition with movement*

Rhythm is what happens when repetition gets directional. It's the beat of a composition — the pulsing pattern that pulls the eye along. Like music, it can be regular and predictable or syncopated and surprising. Rhythm is repetition in motion.

#### **Format / Unity** — *How you plan to start so the whole feels like one thing*

Format relates to how you plan your layout. Unity is the sense that all the parts of a composition belong together — that nothing feels out of place or randomly dropped in. It's achieved through consistency of color, form, texture, or concept. A unified piece feels resolved, intentional, complete. It's the difference between a collection of marks and an actual composition.

## **Variety** — *Difference that keeps the eye engaged*

Variety is the use of difference to keep the eye from getting bored. It's the counterpart to unity — where unity holds the piece together, variety keeps it interesting. Introduce variety through changes in size, shape, color, texture, or direction. The goal is enough difference to create visual interest, with enough unity to hold it all together.

## **Elements — the building blocks, what you see**

The elements of design are the fundamental aspects of any visual design which include, draw the eye in a certain direction, or evoke a number of feelings.

### **Line** — *A moving point — the most fundamental mark*

Line is a point in motion. It's the most fundamental visual element — directional, expressive, and almost impossible to make without it. Lines can be actual (drawn) or implied (the edge between two shapes). They carry emotional weight: horizontal lines feel calm, vertical lines feel stable, diagonal lines feel dynamic, and curved lines feel organic. A seam is a line — even when two fabrics are the same color, the seam creates a line the eye follows. In any medium — paint, stamp, stitch, seam, pencil — line is your first vocabulary.

### **Shape** — *A closed, flat area defined by edges*

Shape is two-dimensional — it has height and width, but no depth. Every shape is either geometric (precise, mathematical edges) or organic (irregular, free-flowing edges). Shapes can be positive (the object itself) or negative (the space around and between objects). Learning to see the negative shapes is one of the most powerful shifts in how an artist looks at the world.

### **Form** — *Shape with the illusion of depth*

Form is the three-dimensional counterpart to shape. A circle is a shape; a sphere is a form. You can create the illusion of form on a flat surface by using value — light and shadow — to make something appear to have volume. In actual 3D work like sculpture, form is literal. Understanding form is what makes your flat surfaces feel like they have weight and mass.

### **Value** — *The lightness or darkness of a color or tone*

Value is how light or dark something is — independent of its color. It's one of the most powerful elements because it creates contrast, defines form, establishes depth, and sets the mood of an entire piece. You can take all the color out of a strong composition and it still reads because of value. If a composition fails in value, color won't save it.

### **Space** — *The area around, between, and within elements*

Space is both what you include and what you leave empty. Positive space is occupied by your subject; negative space is everything else. The way you handle space determines breathing room, tension, balance, and depth. Crowding a composition can feel overwhelming or intentionally claustrophobic. Opening it up can feel serene or isolating. Space is always making a statement — you're just choosing which one.

### **Color** — *Light's wavelength made visible*

Color is the most emotionally loaded of all the elements. It has three properties: hue (the color itself — red, blue, yellow), value (how light or dark it is), and intensity or saturation (how bright or muted it is). Color creates mood, temperature, and energy. It can unify a composition or blow it apart. It's the element people respond to most viscerally — and the one that takes the most deliberate practice to control.

### **Texture** — *The surface quality — real or implied*

Texture is how a surface feels or appears to feel. Actual texture is physical — you can run your hand across it. Implied texture is visual — it looks like it has texture but the surface is smooth. In work that involves stamps, Gelli printing, and collage, texture is everywhere. It adds tactile richness, depth, and a sense of the hand of the maker.