

Gestalt and Visual Unity¹

Gestalt psychology was a movement in experimental psychology that originated in the early 1900s, and it made significant contributions to the study of perception and visual problem solving. German researchers such as Kurt Koffka, Wolfgang Kohler, and Max Wertheimer began studying the ways in which perceptions are formed. It postulates the existence of discrete elements and the ability to identify, order, and group them that make the synthesis of larger, meaningful wholes possible. Gestalt is a German word that means "configuration," and is commonly referred to with the phrase; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In image 1, a viewer's attention can be effectively captured by the offer of dramatic visual information. Why has this design, or arrangement, attracted your attention? How is this achieved? The particular subject matter, medium, or artist should be irrelevant—what you are looking for are basic visual concepts.



Image 1—This image utilizes a device of design where major elements are abruptly cut off by the format edges. Attention is called on this rather unusual placement, which is different from what is expected to be seen, and is achieved by simply finding a new point of view. With this visual technique, known as closure, the viewer easily completes missing parts with their intuition, and information obtained from living in the culture—viewers already know the basic shape of a tall building.

Composition

Another word for composition is design, which implies order and organization. Just as the word *composition*, in any language's grammar, is not a random collection of words and punctuation; photographic composition is not a careless scattering of random items in a chosen format—horizontal, vertical, square, panoramic, etc.

Figure and Ground

This is the relationship between subject and background. It also refers to positive-negative spatial relationships in the composition [image 2.1 & 2.2]. If the figure and ground are too similar, then perception is difficult, and viewers will have difficulty in determining what is important in the image. If there is no ground, figures have the tendency to float and feel incomplete. A strong figure-ground relationship strengthens perception and conveys clear communication of ideas, because that's how the human brain normally experiences vision.



Image 2.1

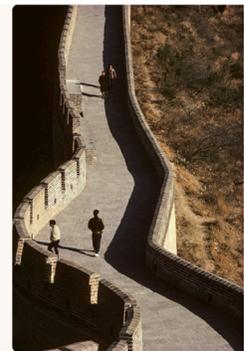


Image 2.2

¹ Lauer, David A. *Design Basics* 3rd edition, (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1990), main ideas adapted from pages 17-28.

Four Principles of Gestalt

Proximity—An easy way to gain unity, this device is used to make separate elements look as if they belong together, simply by arranging elements close together. It's a common unifying factor. Viewers tend to *group* objects close to each other into a larger unit, and relate objects of a similar shape.

Similarity—A widely used device for achieving visual unity is repeating various objects, shapes, colors, texture, directions, or angles in the composition so a viewer can correlate the parts. When objects look similar to one another, viewers often perceive them as a group or pattern. Unity occurs in this composition [image 3] because the windows offer similar size squares. Similarity is also occurring in the seven, silhouette human forms, yet emphasis is called to the figures wearing red. This dissimilarity of form, or anomaly, offers the viewer focal point because they offer extreme activity of color in figure, against a ground of extreme neutrality.



Image 3

Continuation—This is a more-subtle device than the previous two, and directs viewer eye-flow to imply something continuous—usually a line, an edge, or a direction from one form to another. The viewer's eye is carried smoothly from one form to the next [image 4].

Closure—As mentioned earlier, if an object is incomplete or if a space is not completely enclosed, then closure can be made in the mind of the viewer. A substantial part of an object can be left out, thereby allowing the viewer to perceive the whole by filling in the missing information. When perception completes a shape, then closure occurs [image 5]. Closure also speaks to how images need a visual point of ending just as critically as they need a beginning. Without closure a viewer tends to stand idle, wondering what to do next, and leaves without any memory of the image. An image without closure can simply be deemed as a *study*. An image with closure establishes the idea that you might have something to say, and can be categorized as a *photograph*.



Image 4



Image 5

Other Principles of Designs

Focal point—As a general rule focal point results when one element differs from another. Whatever interrupts an overall feeling or pattern automatically attracts the eye by this difference, therefore, try to design in odd number quantities like three's & five's.

Isolation—When one item is isolated from the other elements, or group of elements, it becomes a focal point. Just by its separation, an element takes on visual importance.

Separation of Value—As objects and planes of space interact in the composition, tonal value relationships become important. Light values appearing in front of dark values (and vice-versa) provide separation, creating the illusion of depth that photographs usually need.

Gesture—It is important to consider the use of fingers, arms, legs, or body language. In a nude-figure drawing course, one-minute gesture drawings are made to describe movement, not so much details of objects, yet even an inanimate object (a broom) can have gesture.

Color—Unification of a composition by means of color is another effective way to offer a viewer greater order and conceptual flow. If a color that appears in the foreground is re-introduced in other areas of a composition, then a greater sense of unification is perceived.

Simplicity & Structural Economy

An important aspect of gestalt and visual unity is that the whole predominates over the parts: the brain sees whole patterns before noticing individual elements. Each item may have meaning, and add to the total effect, but the humans first see patterns as a whole, rather than a collection of bits and pieces. Humans instinctively look for simple order, and something to unify the various elements: not confusion or unrelated chaos. If the artist can provide visual clues to start with, and control eye-flow with various formal elements, then the viewer has a much better opportunity to find coherency, and meaning. Providing a sense of closure effectively completes the statement, signaling the viewer to pause and think. If unity and closure cannot be found, then viewers tend to ignore an image.

Image Foundation

This pre-visualization technique [image 6] allows the artist to see the foundation of an image as it turns into pure light, shape, and color. By deliberately throwing the image out-of-focus in the viewfinder, only the dominant shapes, their values of light, and their color properties appear. The underlying structure of the composition suddenly becomes more relevant, and this foundation is what determines a viewer's eye-flow. The viewer intuitively responds to the brightest value in the composition first, regardless of how important, or not, the object is considered to be.



Image 6