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*The Virtual Art Academy® Apprentice Program*



*Focal Point And Focal Area*

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**PRINCIPLE:****FOCAL POINT AND FOCAL AREA**

Focus the viewer's attention on one part of the painting by making one part of the painting (the *focal point* or *focal area*) more interesting and by directing the viewer's eye to that point or area. You only need one primary center of interest. For example, when painting marine scenes, if you are interested primarily in the ocean, tone the sky down and simplify it so it does not detract from the ocean. Conversely, if you are primarily interested in the sky, tone down the sea.

**Staccato focal point**

A staccato focal point is a small point (or line) that the viewer's eye gravitates towards in painting.

**Focal area**

You can also have a specific area of color or value that the eye gravitates towards. This is called a focal area.

**Techniques: Directing the eye to focal areas**

There are several ways you can direct the viewer's eye to focal points and focal areas:

- ◆ directing lines
- ◆ isolation
- ◆ space division
- ◆ *contrast*

**Note**

*Contrast* is such a major topic that it is covered in its own course unit.

**Do this:**

In this example, there is one area of the painting that is more interesting than the other.



There is a clear focus in this painting on the figure.

**Avoid this:**

In this example, there are three focal areas of equal interest.



Here there are four areas of light. It would be preferable to focus on the area of light behind the rushes and subdue the streaks of light in the foreground and sky.

**Example: Staccato focal point**

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Cat. 213.

In this painting, there is a *staccato focal point* in the two figures.

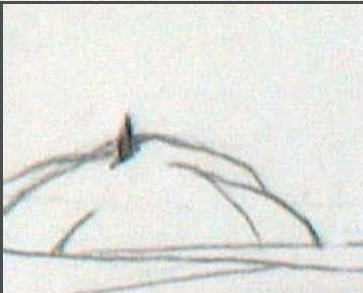
**PRINCIPLE:  
FOCAL POINT AND FOCAL AREA  
(CONTINUED)**

**Combination**

You can also have a combination of a staccato focal point and a focal area.



Here the mountain formation attracts your eye and is the focal area.



In this example, although the tree is very small compared to the mountain in the previous example, it has taken your attention away from the mountain. Thus a staccato focal point can take over from and dominate a focal area.

**Example: Focal area**



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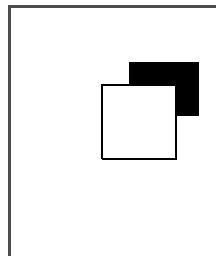
Cat. 571.

In this painting, there is no focal point but there is a focal area that consists of the more complex areas of the gothic cathedral around its dome.

**Tips**

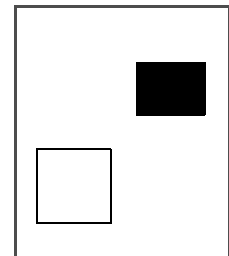
- ◆ Make the focus an area or a thing (point).
- ◆ Make the focal area lighter than its surroundings if possible, since the eye is attracted to light.
- ◆ The upper right hand quadrant is a strong position for a focal area. (Note: I have not verified this suggestion, but it has been recommended by some artists).
- ◆ Make the focal area between an eighth and a quarter of the painting's total area.
- ◆ Support a light focal area with a dark behind it.
- ◆ Choose something interesting for the focal area.

**Do this:**



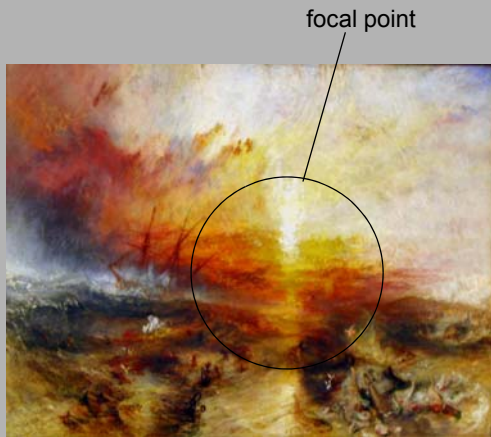
Keep the lightest light and the darkest dark together.

**Avoid this:**



Do not separate the lightest light and the darkest dark.

**PRINCIPLE:  
FOCAL POINT AND FOCAL AREA  
(CONTINUED)**



JMW Turner

Cat. 8023.



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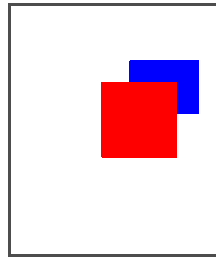
Cat. 691.

**Counterpoint**

The tips on this and on the following page fall into the category of ideas to consider – they are not hard and fast rules. Feel free to ignore them if the composition still works. In many cases you will still be able to find a good composition even if the tip is not followed.

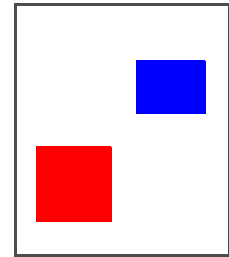
**Tips (continued)**

**Do this:**

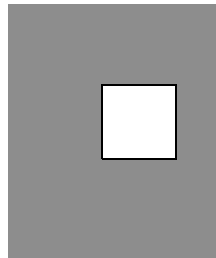


Keep the warmest color spot near the coolest color spot.

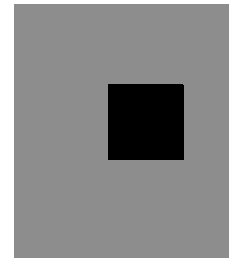
**Avoid this:**



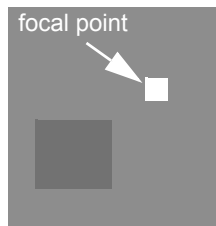
Do not separate the coolest and warmest color spots.



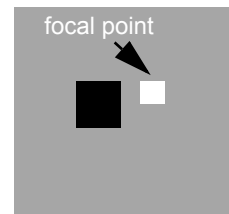
Make the focal area lighter than the background.



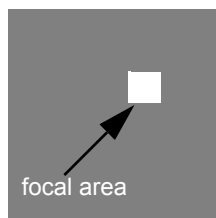
Do not make the focal area darker than the background.



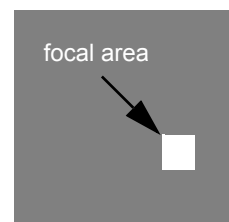
To make an object come forward but not detract from the center of interest, place it in the middle value area.



A large dark object next to the focal area may detract from the focal area.



Have more negative space below the focal area.



Do not have more negative space above the focal area.

**PRINCIPLE:  
FOCAL POINT AND FOCAL AREA  
(CONTINUED)**



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**Paintings without focal areas**



Monet Cat. 8053.

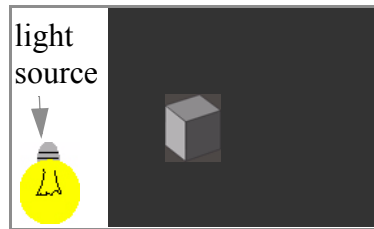


Pollock Cat. 8086.



Picasso Cat. 8893.

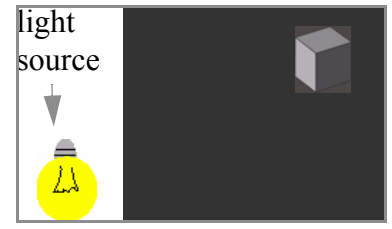
**Tips (continued)**



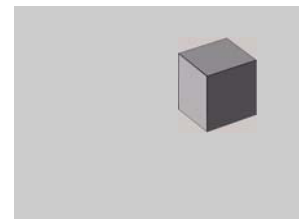
Place the light plane of the focal area closest to the light source. Here the light source is on the lower left.



Use a dark to set off the light plane of the focal area.



Avoid placing the light plane of the focal area furthest away from the light source.



There is too little contrast between the light plane of the focal area and the background.

**Counterpoint**

Every painting does not have to have a focal point or focal area. As with other design principles, you can choose to ignore them in certain circumstances. Many contemporary works of art do not have focal points, or they have a larger focal area in which it is not so obvious where the viewer's eye is directed. These paintings may have a more decorative quality to them and may rely more on a general mood for their effect.

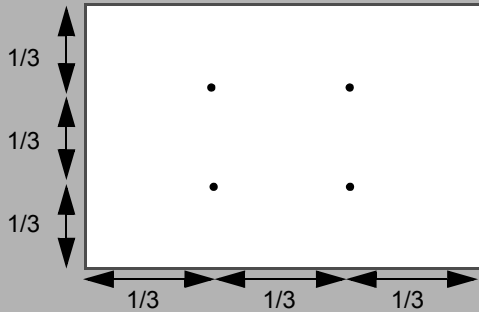
- Con: Without any planned eye movement, paintings without focal points or focal areas may not capture the viewer's attention for very long.



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**PRINCIPLE:  
ONE-THIRDS**

Position focal points and focal areas approximately one-third across the painting, or at the *golden section*, or at the *rabatment of the rectangle*.



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Cat. 517.

**Do this:**



In this example, the focal point is placed approximately one third from the bottom and side of the picture.

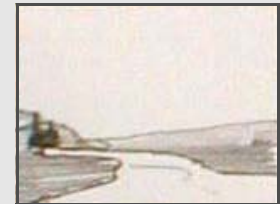
**Avoid this:**



This is poor composition because the center of interest or focal point is right in the middle of the painting – a dead area in a painting.

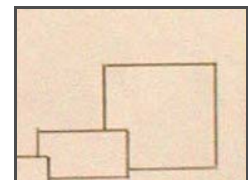


In this example, the focal point is better positioned a third of the way in from the left.



In this example, the focal point is placed too close to the edge of the painting — another dead area.

This arrangement of shapes appears to exert pressure on the shape in the lower left hand corner, forcing the eye out of the painting.



This arrangement also puts pressure on the boundaries of the picture plane which may make the viewer uncomfortable.

