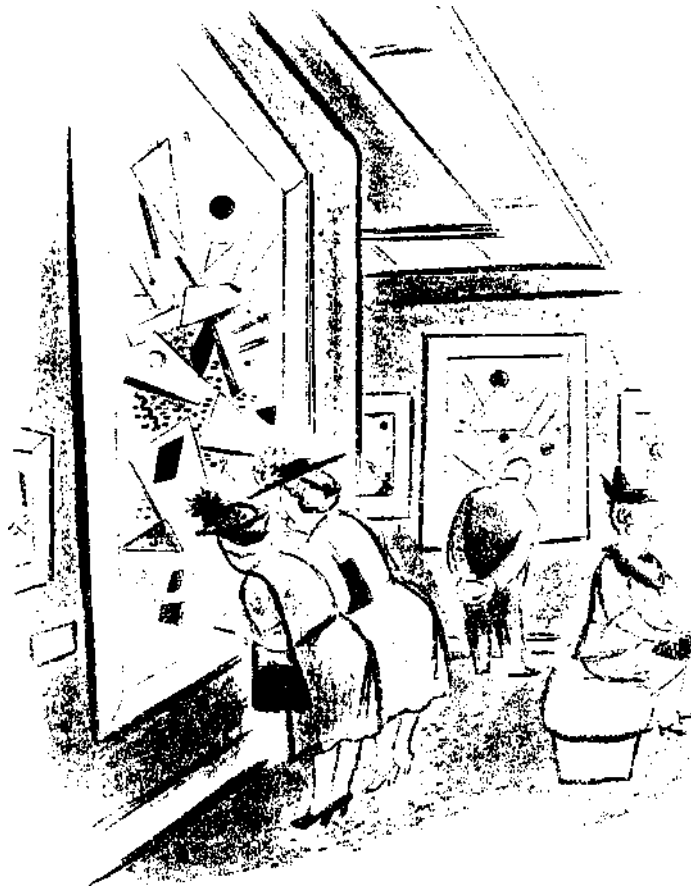


EMPHASIS AND FOCAL POINT



"Oh, look! I think I see a little bimny."

Whitney Darrow Jr., 1946. © *The New Yorker* Collection from cartoonbank.com.
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INTRODUCTION

Attracting Attention 50

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS

Emphasis by Contrast 52

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS

Emphasis by Isolation 54

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS

Emphasis by Placement 56

DEGREE OF EMPHASIS

One Element 58

ABSENCE OF FOCAL POINT

Emphasizing the Whole over the Parts 60

INTRODUCTION

ATTRACTING ATTENTION

There are very few artists or designers who do not want people to look at their work. In past centuries, when pictures were rare, almost any image was guaranteed attention. Today, with photography and an abundance of books, magazines, newspapers, signs, and so on, all of us are confronted daily with hundreds of pictures. We take this abundance for granted, but it makes the artist's job more difficult. Without an audience's attention, any message, any artistic or aesthetic values, are lost.

How does a designer catch a viewer's attention? How does the artist provide a pattern that attracts the eye? Nothing will guarantee success, but one device that can help is a point of emphasis or **focal point**. This emphasized element initially can attract attention and encourage the viewer to look closer.

Using *Focal Point* for Emphasis

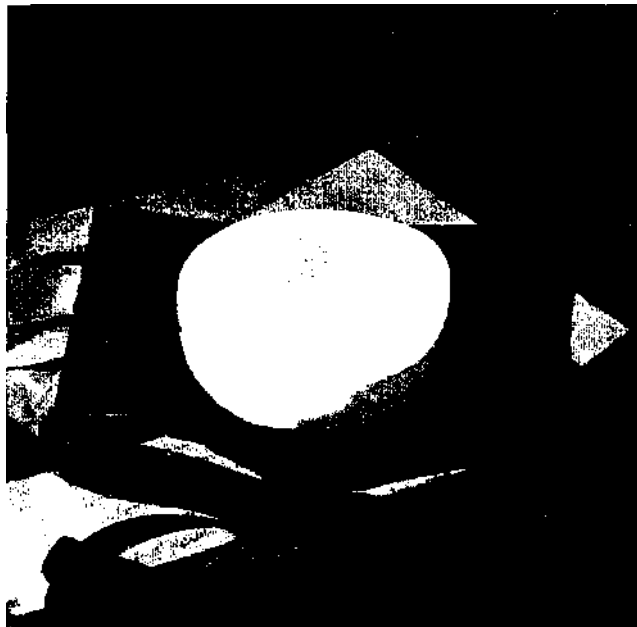
Every aspect of the composition in A emphasizes the grapefruit at center stage. The grapefruit shape is large, centered, light and yellow (compared with darker gray surroundings), and even the lines of the sections point to the center. All of these elements bring our focus to the main character or subject. This is the concept of a focal point.

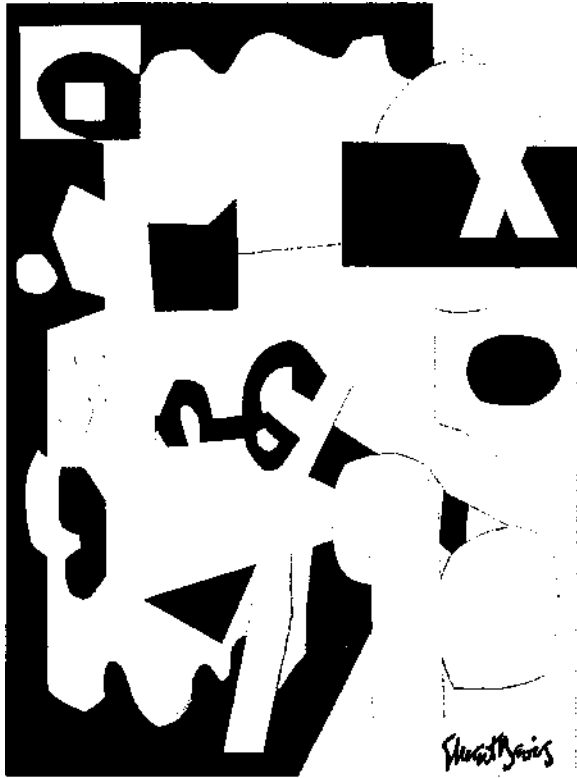
Even in purely abstract or nonobjective patterns, a focal point will attract the viewer's eye and give some contrast and visual emphasis. The painting by Stuart Davis (B) is a pattern of simple, bold forms in bright, flat colors. The more complicated curving black shape near the center provides a change and becomes the focal point.

The photograph in C is a view of an ordinary street scene. The large pine tree might go unnoticed in a stroll through the neighborhood. Several things contribute to the emphasis on this tree in the photograph: placement near the center, large size, irregular shape, and dark value against the light sky.

There can be more than one focal point. Sometimes an artwork contains secondary points of emphasis that have less attention value than the focal point. These are called accents. However, the designer must be careful. Several focal points of equal emphasis can turn the design into a three-ring circus in which the viewer does not know where to look first. Interest is replaced by confusion: When everything is emphasized, nothing is emphasized.

Susan Jane Walp. *Grapefruit with Black Ribbons*, 2000. Oil on linen, 8 X 8 W. Tibor de Na^v Gallery, New York.





B

Stuart Davis. *Ready-to-Wear*. 1955. Oil on canvas, 56 X 42" (142.9 X 106,7 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago (gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sigmund Kunstadter and Goodman Fund, 1956.137).



Jeff Wall. *The Pine on the Corner*. 1990. 3' 10³/₄" X 3' 10¹/₄" (1.19 X 1.48 m). Edition of 3. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS

EMPHASIS BY CONTRAST

Very often in art the pictorial emphasis is clear, and in simple compositions (such as a portrait) the focal point is obvious. But the more complicated the pattern, the more necessary or helpful a focal point may become in organizing the design.

Creating a Focal Point through Contrast

As a general rule, a focal point results when one element differs from the others. Whatever interrupts an overall feeling or pattern automatically attracts the eye by this difference. The possibilities are almost endless:

When most of the elements are dark, a light form breaks the pattern and becomes a focal point.

When most of the elements are muted or soft-edged, a bold contrasting pattern will become a focal point (A).

In an overall design of distorted expressionistic forms, the sudden introduction of a naturalistic image (B) will draw the eye for its very different style.

Text or graphic symbols will be a focal point (in this case the number 16) (C).

When the majority of shapes are rectilinear and angular, parallelograms, round shapes stand out (D).

This list could go on and on; many other possibilities will occur to you. Sometimes this idea is called emphasis by contrast. The element that contrasts with, rather than continues, the prevailing design scheme becomes the focal point.

Color is an element often used to achieve emphasis by contrast. A change in color or a change in brightness can immediately attract our attention.

See also: *Devices to Show Depth: Size*, page 180; *Value as Emphasis*, page 228; *Color as Emphasis*, page 252.

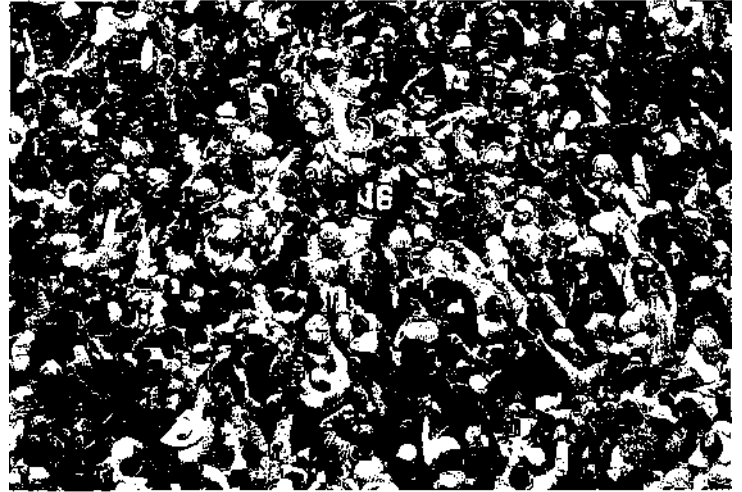


A

George Stubbs. *Zebra*. 1763. Oil on canvas, 40 1/2" x 50 1/4"
Vale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



B James Ensor. *Self-Portrait Surrounded by Masks*. 1899. Oil, 47½ × 31½" (121 × 80 cm). Sammlung Cieomir Jussiant, Antwerp.



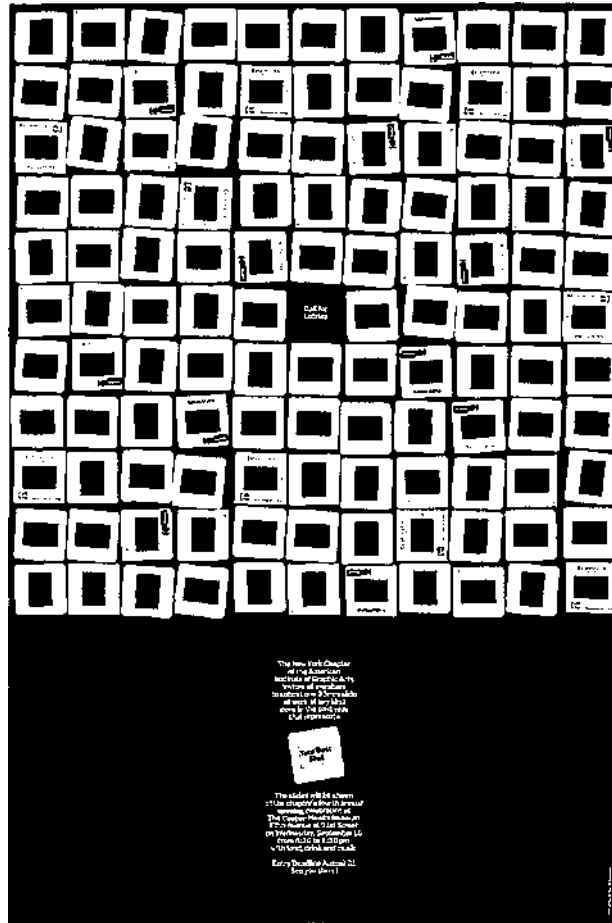
C Karl Kuntz (photographer). *Columbus Dispatch* Sunday, November 24, 2002



Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. *A 77*. 1924. Oil on canvas, 45⁵/₈ X 53⁵/₈" (1.16 X 1.36 m). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS

Call for entries for AIGA/New York show, "Take Your Best Shot." Designer: Michael Beirut, Vignelli Associates, New York.



EMPHASIS BY ISOLATION

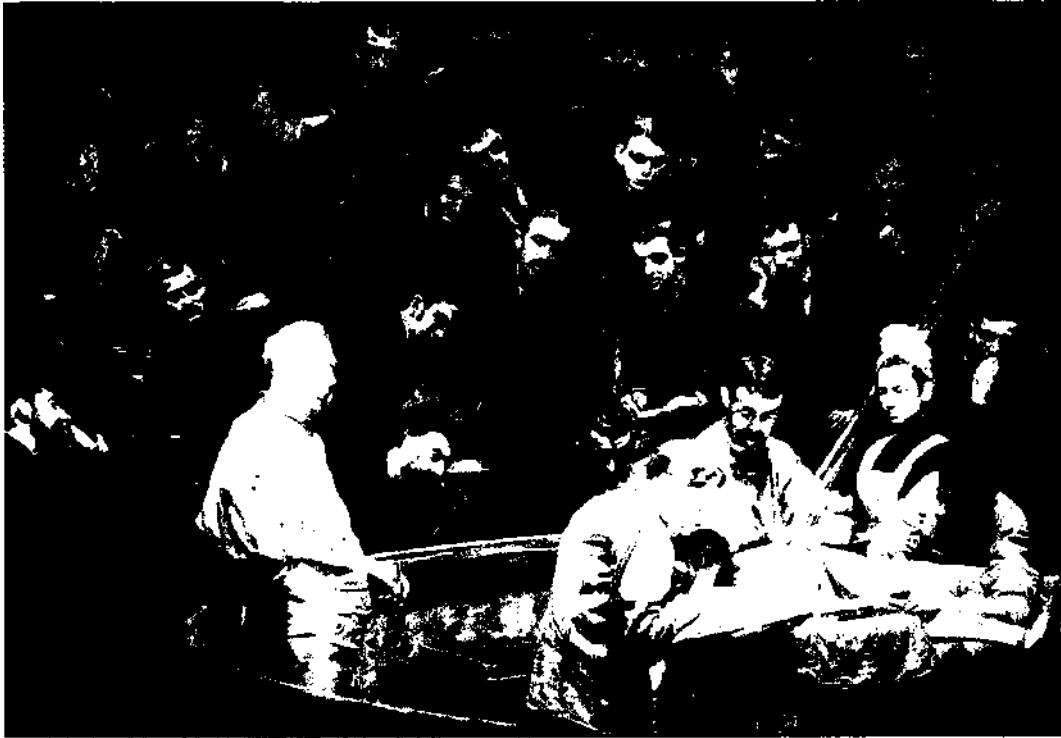
A variation on the device of emphasis by contrast is the useful technique of emphasis by isolation. There is no way we can look at the design in A and not focus our attention on that element at the bottom. It is absolutely identical with all the elements above. But simply by being set off by itself, it grabs our attention. This is contrast, of course, but it is contrast of placement, not form. In such a case, the element, as here, need not be any different from the other elements in the work.

Creating a Focal Point through Isolation

In the painting by Eakins (B) the doctor at left repeats the light value of the other figures in the operating arena. All of the figures in this oval stand out in contrast to the darker figures in the background. Isolation gives extra emphasis to this doctor at the left.

Sanctuary (C) is a rather haunting painting and could even be said to have isolation as its subject. A reclining figure lies adjacent to and almost part of a wall. Together they form a unit isolated within a large space. In the space to the right of the wall sit two severe chairs, also set apart from the figure. Tension is created between two isolated focal points.

In neither of these examples is the focal point directly in the center of the composition. This placement could appear too obvious and contrived. However, it is wise to remember that a focal point placed too close to an edge will tend to pull the viewer's eye right out of the picture. Notice in Eakins's painting (B) how the curve of the oval on the left side and the doctor looking toward the action at right keep the isolated figure from directing our gaze out of the picture. In C a repetition of the large light squares of window space connect the two sides of the picture and the two focal points.

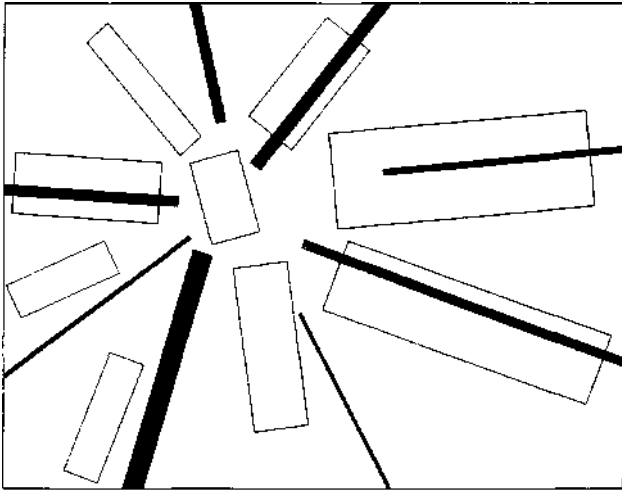


B
Thomas Eakins. *The Agnew Clinic*. 1889. Oil on canvas, 6' 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " X 10' 10" W (1.9 X 3.3 m).
University of Pennsylvania Art Collection, Philadelphia.



Scott Siedman. *Sanctuary*. 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 6 X
Courtesy of the artist.

WAYS TO ACHIEVE EMPHASIS



Our eyes are drawn to the central element of this design by all the elements radiating from it.



B

Jan Vermeer. *A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman (The Music Lesson)*. 1662-64. Oil on canvas, 29 X 25". The Royal Collection, London.

EMPHASIS BY PLACEMENT

The placement of elements in a design may function in another way to create emphasis. If many elements point to one item, our attention is directed there, and a focal point results. A radial design is a perfect example of this device. Just as all forms radiate from the convergent focus, so they also repeatedly lead our eyes back to this central element. As A illustrates, this central element may be like other forms in the design; the emphasis results from the placement, not from any difference in character of the form itself.

Creating a Focal Point through Placement

Radial designs are more common in architecture or the craft areas than in two-dimensional art. In pictures perspective lines can lead to a point of emphasis and the result can be a radial

design. In Vermeer's painting (B) the girl is the focal point, and the perspective lines of the interior all direct our eyes back to the figure. It is a mark of the subtlety and complexity of Vermeer's work that the painting is not simply constructed to point to the main figure but also unfolds other areas of interest and keeps our attention and interest.

The placement of the most famous apple of all time is also near the center of C. This is a busy, crowded painting, and the passing of the apple takes place at the intersection of the tree trunk and the lines formed by the arms of Adam and Eve. The composition has an equal balance to the left and right of this focal point and the key element is emphasized.

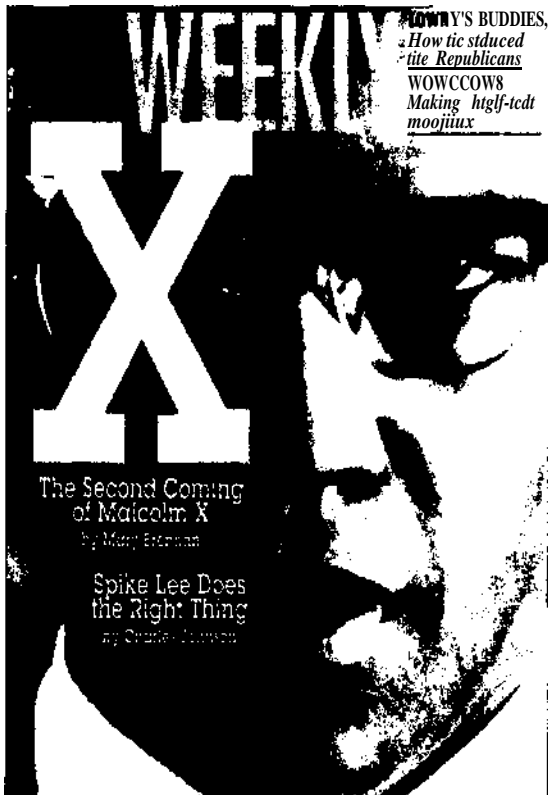
Both B and C succeed because the focal point for each does not have to compete with other elements for prominence.

See also: *Symmetrical Balance*, page 86; *Radial Balance*, page 100.



Lucas Cranach the Elder. *Adam and Eve*. 1526. Oil on panel, 46 Vs X 31³/₄" (117 X
Courtauld Gallery, Courtauld Institute, London.

DEGREE OF EMPHASIS



Cover of *Seattle Weekly* newspaper. November 18, 1992. Designer: Fred Andrews, Quickfish Media, Inc. Photographer: David Lee, Warner Bros.

ONE ELEMENT

A specific theme may, at times, call for a dominant, even visually overwhelming focal point. The use of a strong visual emphasis on one element is not unusual.

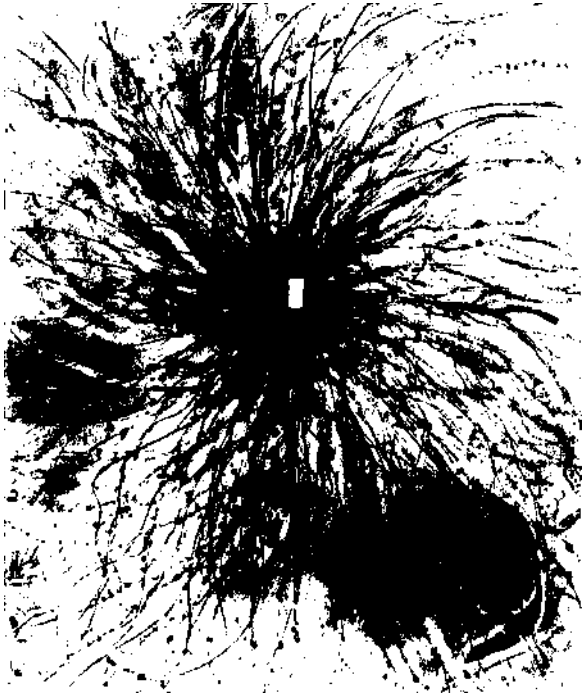
In the graphic design of newspaper advertisements, billboards, magazine covers, and so on, we often see an obvious emphasis on one element. This can be necessary to attract the viewer's eye and present the theme (or product) in the few seconds most people look casually at such material. The very large-scale "X" in A is also a bright orange against the black-and-white background photograph. It is an immediate focal point, attracts our attention to the page, and also conveys an idea of the theme of the article.

Maintaining Unity with a Focal Point

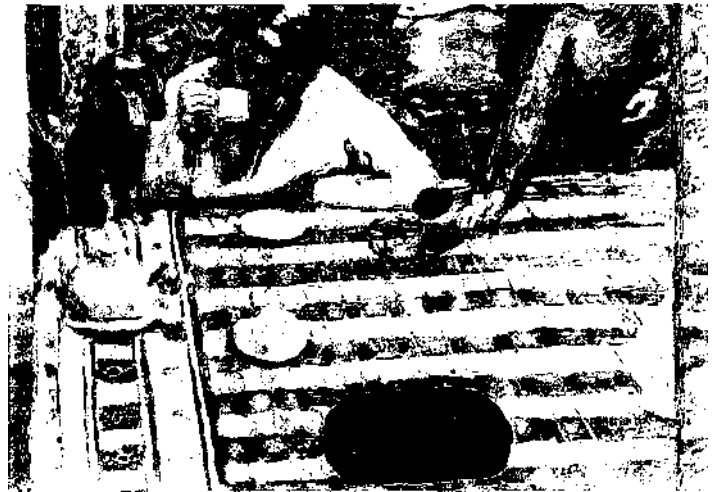
A focal point, however strong, should remain related to and a part of the overall design. The "X" in A is visually dominating, yet is related to other elements in placement and character.

Contrast the effect in A with that in B. In B the focal point is obvious again. But here the rectangular shape at the center is very different from the network of lines forming the rest of the design. To a lesser extent the same observation might apply to the painting by Bonnard (C). The isolated black oval tray in the center foreground is clearly a focal point. In this case it seems too dominant; this sudden dark spot seems out of keeping with the subtle value and color changes in the rest of the painting.

In general, the principle of unity and the creation of a harmonious pattern with related elements is more important than the inaction of a focal point if this point would jeopardize the design's unity. In Juan Gns's still life (D), the massed group of linear circles defining the bunch of grapes is a focal point. But the values of this element are repeated in several other places. Circular forms are seen elsewhere as well—the bottle top and glass bottom repeat the same small linear circle motif. The established focal point is not a completely unrelated element.



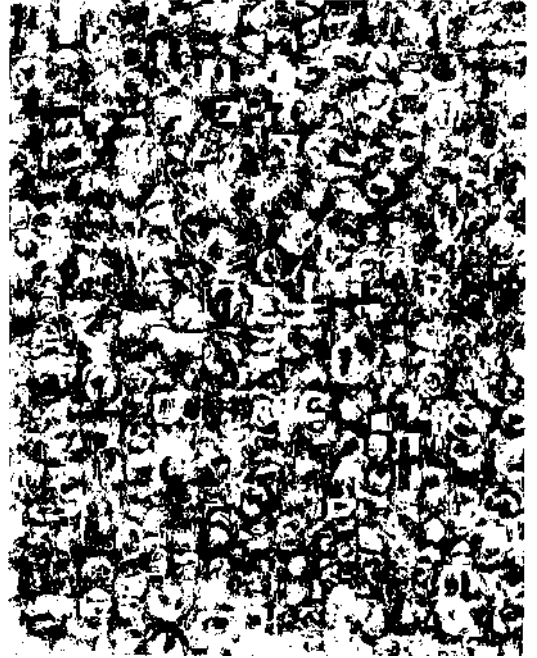
Anish Kapoor *Door* 1991. Spit bite aquatint, 28 × 24" on 36 × 30³/₄" sheet. Edition 20. Printed by Lawrence Hamlin.



Pierre Bonnard. *Coffee*, c. 1915. Oil on canvas, 28'8" X 41⁷/₈" (73 X 106.4 cm). Tate Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees.



Juan Gris. *The Grape Bottle, Glass and Fruit Dish*. 1921. Oil on canvas, 24 X 20" (61 X 50 cm). Kunstmuseum Basel (Emmanuel Hoffman Foundation, Permanent Loan to the Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel).



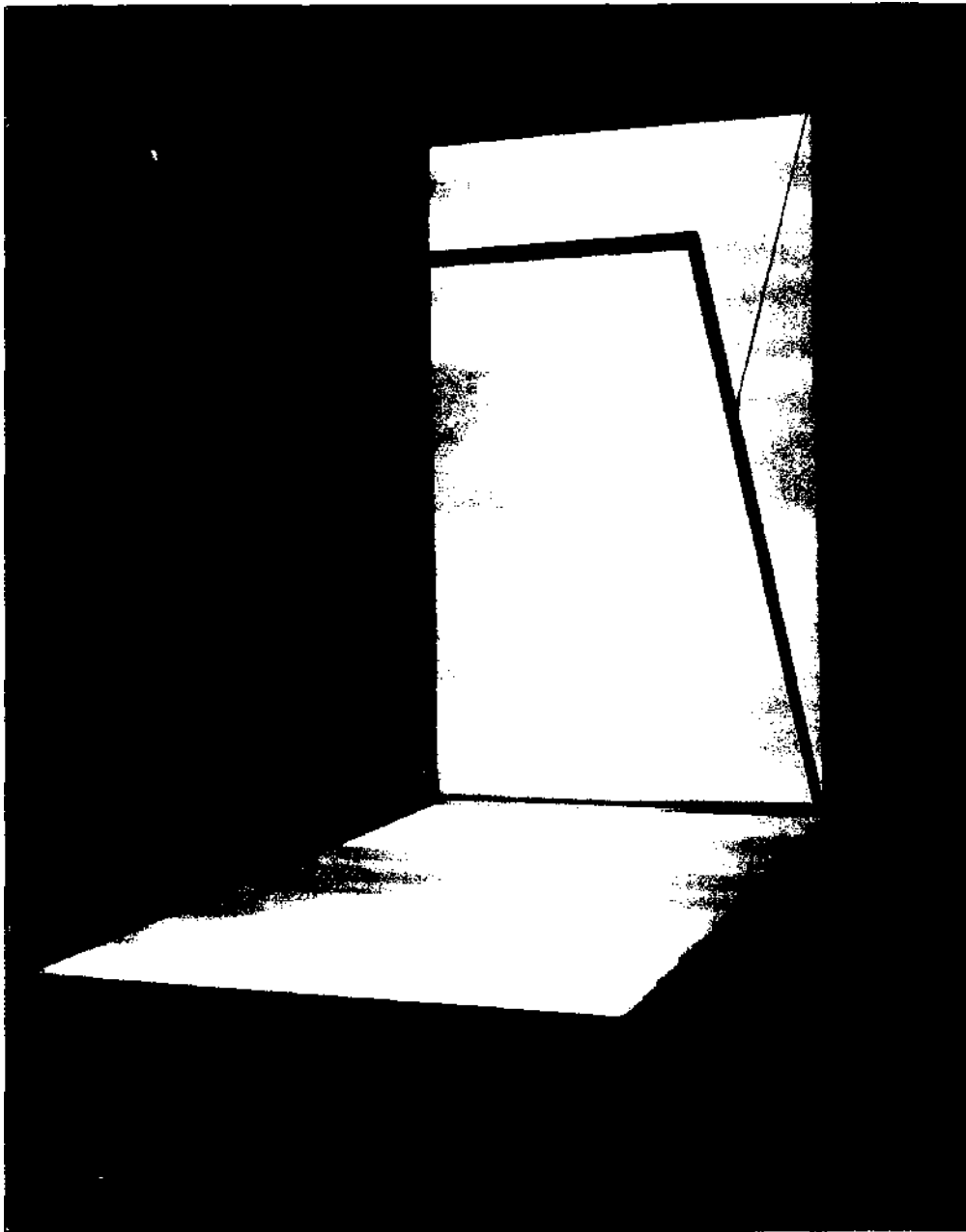
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© Gill Viola, *Light Through Windows*, 2009. Video (10:30) at James Cohan Gallery, New York