



Falling Leaves

Objective

Practice using the principle of balance by introducing informal balance and practice using the principle of focal point.

Supplies

- ✓ examples of paintings to show informal balance (for demonstration, Painting References follow, page 50)
- ✓ pressed leaves: oak or maple
- ✓ construction paper, white: 12" x 18"
- ✓ black ink pen

Vocabulary

focal point
formal balance
informal balance
rule of thirds

Introduction

You have learned about bilateral and radial symmetry, and that a symmetrical object has formal balance. In symmetry and formal balance both sides are exactly alike as they reflect each other.

A beautiful picture needs balance, otherwise the picture will seem lopsided. But not all good and pleasing pictures are symmetrical and formally balanced. Not all beautiful pictures have two sides that exactly match. Yet, the pictures can still seem balanced. How can this be? Because there are more kinds of balance. A picture can also have informal balance.

Informal balance means that although two sides do not exactly match, the visual weight of both sides is nevertheless balanced. Think of an old-fashioned scale. On one side may be a very tiny object, but if that object is made out of lead so that it is very heavy, it can still balance with a much larger object made out of lighter material that is on the other side of the scale. They are not exactly the same, but their weights still match and balance.

So it can be in art. A small object can be on one side of a picture, but if that object is darkly or brightly colored, it can seem to have as much visual weight or importance

as a larger, light, or dull-colored shape on the other side of the picture, thus making the picture appear balanced.

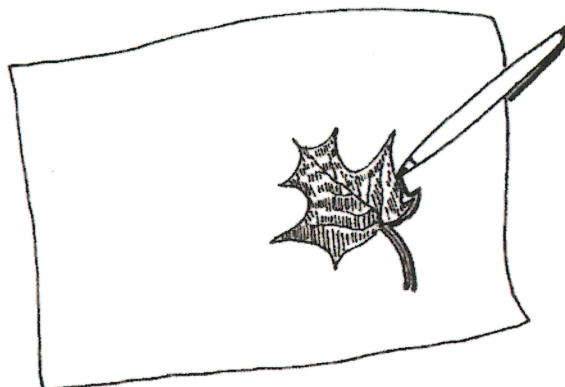
A teeter-totter can illustrate informal balance too. Two children can still balance together on a teeter-totter, even if one is younger and smaller, and one is older and heavier. If they adjust their positions on the teeter-totter, they can balance. This can work in art as well. The position of a shape or color in a picture can also affect the balance of the picture.

You will make a picture of falling leaves that will show informal balance. Although the leaves will seem to be randomly positioned on your paper as they might fall from a tree, you will need to carefully position them so that the arrangement will look balanced. To give your picture focus, you will also make one of the leaves in a special way so that it will stand out as the focal point in your picture. The focal point in a picture that has informal balance should be somewhere near the center of the picture, but not in the very center.

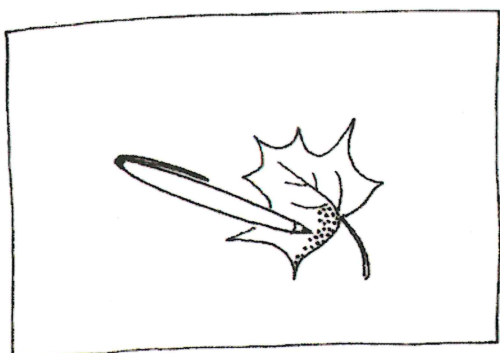
Teacher: Display various paintings to help explain and illustrate how artists use informal balance. Painting References follow.

Directions

1. Take a pressed leaf and arrange it somewhere on your paper to be the focal point of your picture. It should be placed somewhere near the center of your picture, but not in the very center. However, it ought not be too close to the edge of the paper either. About one third of the way in from the edges of the paper is a common and



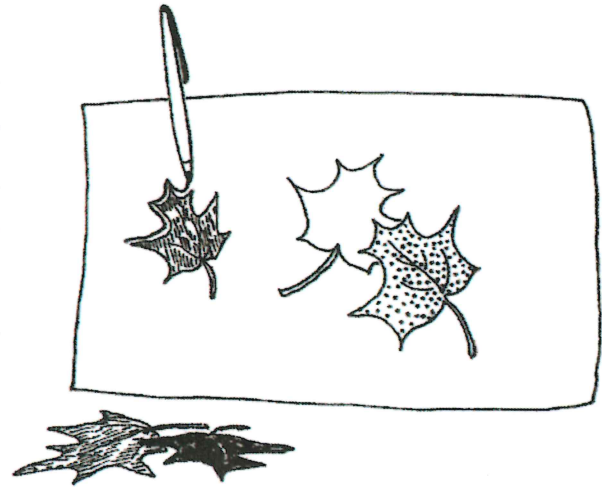
helpful rule for the placement of a focal point. This is sometimes called the “rule of thirds.” Trace around this leaf with a black ink pen.



2. Observe the veins in this pressed leaf very closely. With the black ink pen, draw the veins inside the traced outline as realistically and as detailed as possible. Then fill in the spaces

between the veins with some type of pattern. Use dots, stripes, or any other pattern you can think of. This is the only leaf you will fill in this manner, so it will stand out as the focal point.

3. Think of informal balance as you arrange and trace other pressed leaves in other places on your paper. Fill up the paper with falling leaves, also making some to overlap others. To think of informal balance as you arrange the leaves, think of a scale or a teeter-totter. Does one side of the picture seem lopsided or too heavy? Does one side seem too light or empty? Also consider how your focal point leaf might affect the overall balance of your picture. Note that when drawing leaves that overlap, do not draw over the lines of the leaf that is supposed to appear to be on top.



4. Look at your picture. Is there clearly a focal point in the picture? Does the whole design of the picture seem balanced?

Variations

- Instead of tracing leaves, draw each leaf freehand, using the contour drawing technique (see 2nd grade, lesson 6). This option is highly recommended.
- Make a simple mobile out of twigs, cut-out colored paper leaves, and thread. If the mobile is balanced, the design will be balanced.
- Make a collage of leaves by gluing pressed leaves onto a 12" x 18" piece of construction paper. Arrange leaves so that the design is balanced, and so that one of the leaves stands out as the focal point not only by its placement, but also by its color or size.

Painting References

The Arnolfini Marriage (1434) by Jan van Eyck.

The balance in this painting is so strong it can almost seem to have a symmetrical, formal balance. Yet there are important differences between the right and left sections of the painting. The bright white veil of the bride on the right makes a striking contrast with the red drapery behind her, but this contrast is also echoed and balanced by the strong contrast that exists in the window on the left. Both figures (the bride and groom) also carry a fairly evenly balanced visual weight. The dark color that clothes the groom is comparable to the rich green color that clothes the bride. Each garment demands a similar amount of the eye's attention, though for different reasons: one, because of its dark value; the other, because of its deep color.

Symbolism is an important element in this painting as well, seen in the carefully chosen objects and colors included in the painting. Red conveys the passion of love, and green the hope for a growing family, even as green trees and grass grow and flourish. The orange as well as the other luxuries in the painting show the wealth of the couple, and the little broom hanging from the bed also has a typical seventeenth-century Dutch message: cleanliness is extremely important. The mirror reflects the legal witnesses of the marriage.

The Vanities of Human Life (c. 1645) by Harmen Steenwyck.

Compare this painting by Steenwyck to *The Arnolfini Marriage*. Here in *The Vanities of Life* is a composition that has no hint of formal balance at all, but is, nevertheless, carefully and expertly balanced. A whole set of objects rests on the right side of the painting, while one small shell lies on the table on the left. Most of the space on the left consists of a bare wall. It's empty! But is it? If we consider the composition closely, we see that the wall is really not so bare. A light is shining through that space, and that light carries important visual weight. So does the small, bright, white shell on the left. It is enough to balance with the pile of objects on the right.

Note the clearly intended message of the painting as well. Both the empty shell and the skull remind us that death must come to all, whether one has amassed riches (shells were expensive, prized possessions at this time in Europe), or power (seen in the sword handle), or knowledge (seen in the books). The artist almost certainly had the book of Ecclesiastes in mind when he painted this still life, as the Bible was well known in the Netherlands at this time in history. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2).