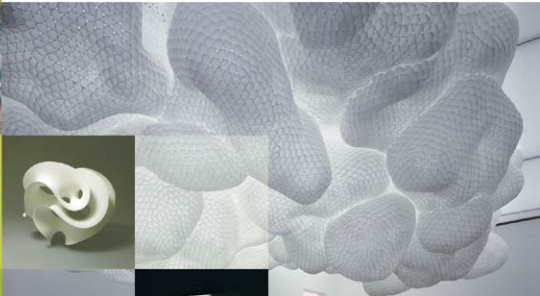MARY STEWART
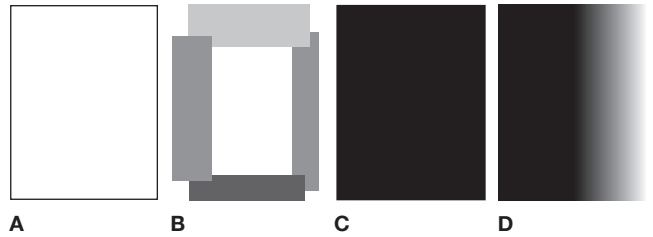
Launching the Imagination

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO BASIC DESIGN

When orientation, direction, continuity, and medium are effectively employed, line can be used to create compositions that are both sophisticated and thoughtful.
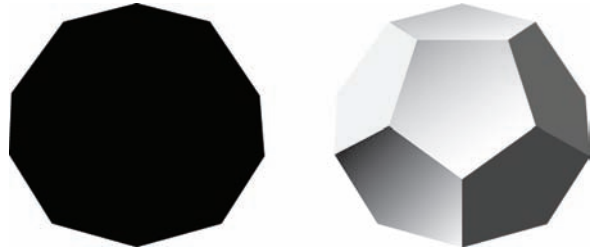

1.22A–D Any form of enclosure can create a shape.

1.23 Variations in lighting can transform a shape into an illusory volume.

Key Questions

LINE

- What is the dominant orientation of the lines in your design—diagonal, vertical, or horizontal? What is the expressive effect?
- What happens when lines are repeated or when lines intersect?
- How would the composition change if one or more lines were removed?
- Consider using line to direct attention to areas of compositional importance.

SHAPE

Defining Shape

A **shape** is a flat, enclosed area (1.22A–D). Shapes can be created by

- Enclosing an area within a continuous line
- Surrounding an area by other shapes
- Filling an area with solid color or texture
- Filling an area with broken color or texture

A three-dimensional enclosure is called a **volume.** Thus, a square is a shape, while a cube is a volume. **Gradation,** or **shading,** can be used to make a two-dimensional shape appear three-dimensional, or volumetric. For example, in figure 1.23, a flat, circular shape becomes a faceted polyhedron when a series of gray tones is added.

Both flat and gradated shapes can be used to create an arresting image. In Aaron Douglas's *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction* (1.24), flat silhouettes combined with transparent targets create an energetic panorama. We can

1.24 Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 5 ft × 11 ft 7 in. (1.52 × 3.5 m).

1.25 Diego M. Rivera, *Detroit Industry, North Wall,* **1932–33.** Fresco, 17 ft 8½ in. × 45 ft (5.4 × 13.7 m).

1.26 Cover of *Ulysses,* **by James Joyce, 1986.** Designer: Carin Goldberg.

1.27 Cover image from *The Penguin Pool Murder,* **a Hildegarde Withers Mystery, by Stuart Palmer.** Art Director & Designer: Krystyna Skalski; Illustrator: John Jinks.

1.28 Gustav Klimt, *Salomé,* **1909.** Oil on canvas, 70⅛ × 18⅛ in. (178 × 46 cm).

almost hear the speaker in the center and feel the movement of the crowd. In Rivera's *Detroit Industry* (1.25), a combination of size variation and shading suggests volume and increases the illusion of space. One-point perspective (which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four) has been used to increase visual depth even further.

Graphic designers are equally aware of the expressive power of both flat and gradated shapes. In a cover for *Ulysses* (1.26), Carin Goldberg used crisp, simple shapes to create a design that evokes the modernism of Joyce's novel. Primary colors, combined with the slanted title block, immediately attract attention. Krystyna Skalski and John Jinks used a very different approach for their cover for a mystery novel (1.27). Here, the graduated, figurative shapes and swirling green bands suggest a complex and twisted plot.

Gustav Klimt combined flat and volumetric shapes to create *Salomé* (1.28). In this horrific tale

from the biblical New Testament, John the Baptist has been imprisoned for his criticism of the royal family. Salomé, the king's niece, performs a stunning dance and the delighted king grants her a single wish. In revenge, Salomé asks for John's head. The tall, vertical shape of the painting is similar to the size and shape of a standing viewer. Flat patterns and color surround the volumetric figures, while two curving lines add a sinuous energy to the center of the design.
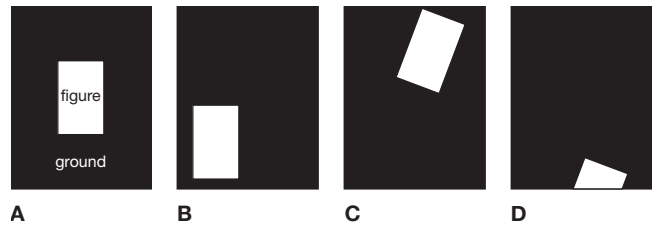
Types of Shape

The size and shape of a soccer field are very different from the size and shape of a tennis court. In each case, the playing area defines the game to be played. It is impossible to play soccer on a tennis court or to play tennis on a soccer field.

Similarly, the outer edge of a two-dimensional design provides the playing field for our compositional games. The long, horizontal rectangles used by Douglas and Rivera create an expansive panorama, while the vertical rectangle used for Salomé compresses the sordid drama into a

1.29A–D Various figure/ground relationships. When centered, the figure tends to be static. As it moves to the bottom left, it becomes more dynamic, and becomes even more so when it is diagonally positioned near the top or bottom edge.

narrow, claustrophobic column. Thus, creating a dialogue between compositional shapes and the surrounding format is our first concern.

Figure and Ground, Positive and Negative

As shown in figure 1.29A, a shape that is distinguished from the background is called a **positive shape,** or **figure.** The surrounding is called the **negative shape,** or **ground.** Depending on its location relative to the ground, the figure can become dynamic or static, leaden or buoyant (1.29B–D).

In traditional paintings such as Caravaggio's *The Deposition*, the entire composition is treated like a window into an imaginary world. To increase this illusion, the canvas texture is sanded down before the paint is applied, and heavy brushstrokes are kept at a minimum. We are invited to see *into* the painting, rather than focusing on its surface.

When a shaped format is used, we become more aware of the artwork's physicality. The 9-foot-tall teacup in Elizabeth Murray's *Just in Time* (1.30) is monumental in size and loaded with implication. The painted shapes connect directly to the shaped edge, emphasizing the crack running down the center of the composition. This is no ordinary teacup. For Murray, this crack in everyday reality invites us to enter an alternative world.

When the figure and ground are equally well designed, every square inch of the composition becomes supercharged. In Bill Brandt's photograph (1.31), the brightly lit arm, face, and breast dramatically divide the black ground, creating three strong, triangular shapes. These triangles energize the design and heighten our awareness of the compositional edge.
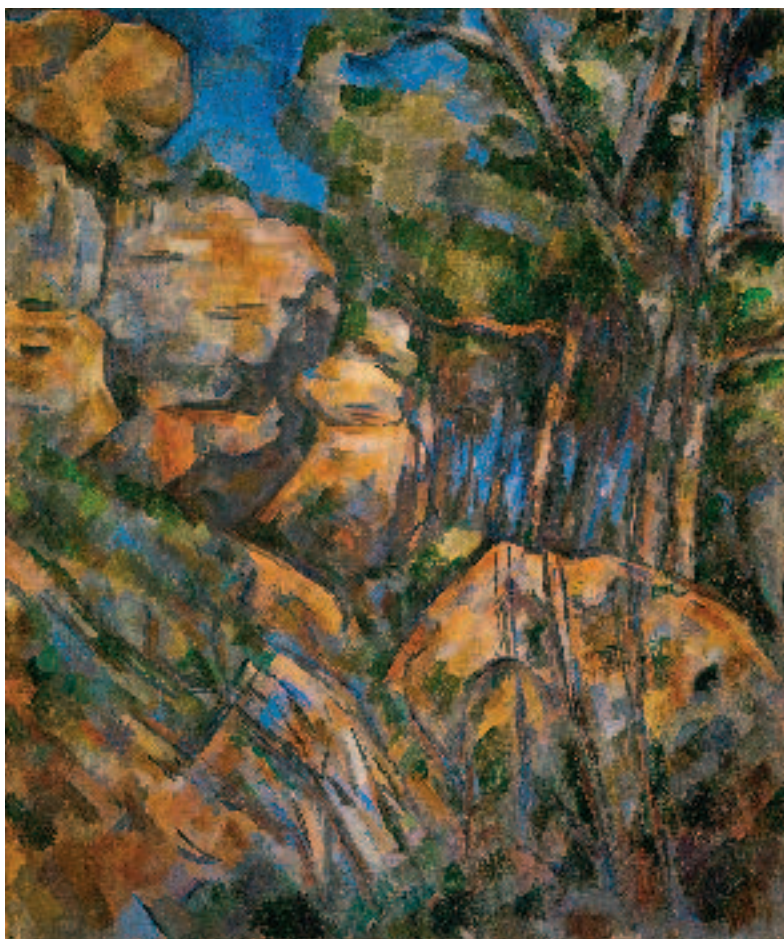
1.30 Elizabeth Murray, *Just in Time*, **1981.** Oil on canvas in two sections, 106 × 97 in. (269.24 × 246.38 cm).

1.31 Bill Brandt, *Nude,* 1952. Gelatin silver print.

1.32 Paul Cézanne, *Rocks Near the Caves above the Chateau Noir,* 1904. Oil on canvas, 21.3 × 25.6 in. (54 × 65 cm).

An ambiguous relationship between figure and ground can add surprising energy and power to a design. In Paul Cézanne's *Rocks Near the Caves above the Chateau Noir* (1.32), the trees and cliffs begin to break apart, creating a shifting pattern of planes and spaces. Completed just one year before Einstein published his special theory of relativity, this painting served as a springboard into a new art movement known as Cubism.

Figure/ground reversal pushes this effect even further. **Figure/ground reversal** occurs when first the positive then the negative shapes command our attention. As shown in a fragment from *Metamorphosis II* (1.33), M. C. Escher was a master of figure/ground reversal. The organic shapes on the left become an interlocking mass of black and white lizards. The lizards then evolve into a network of hexagons. Combined with the figure/ground reversal, this type of metamorphosis animates the entire 13-foot-long composition.

Figure/ground reversal requires a carefully balanced dialogue between opposing forces. Escher generally achieved this balance by using light and dark shapes of similar size. In figure 1.34, Sam Francis achieved a similar balance
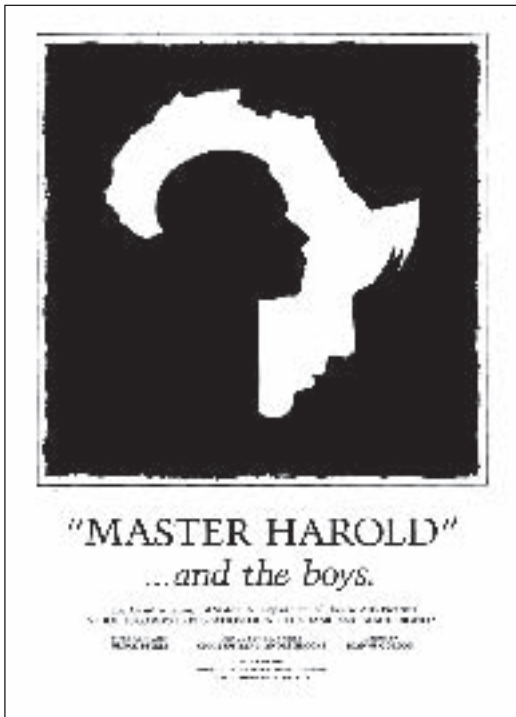

1.33 M. C. Escher, part of *Metamorphosis II,* 1939–40. Woodcut in black, green, and brown, printed from 20 blocks on three combined sheets, 7½ × 153⅜ in. (19 × 390 cm).

1.34 Sam Francis, *Flash Point,* **1975.** Acrylic on paper, 32¼ × 22⅞ in. (82 × 59 cm).

1.35 David McNutt, *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys,* **1985.** Poster.
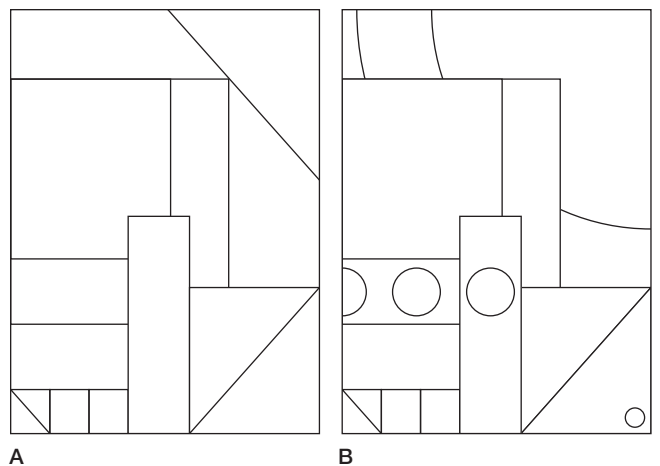
between a very small white square and a much larger red rectangle. The crisp boundary and central location strengthen the square. Despite its small size, it holds its own against the larger mass of swirling red paint.

Graphic designers often use figure/ground reversal to create multiple interpretations from minimal shapes. In figure 1.35, David McNutt used a single white shape on a black ground to create the head of a master and a servant within the outline of Africa. Used to advertise a South African play, the poster immediately communicates a dramatic human relationship within a specific cultural context.

Rectilinear and Curvilinear Shapes

Rectilinear shapes are composed from straight lines and angular corners. **Curvilinear shapes** are dominated by curves and flowing edges. Simple rectilinear shapes, such as squares and rectangles, are generally cooperative. When placed within a rectangular format, they easily connect to other shapes and can run parallel to the compositional edge (1.36A). Curvilinear shapes, especially circles, are generally less cooperative. They retain their individuality even when they are partially concealed by other shapes (1.36B). As a result, curvilinear shapes can be used as targets that emphasize areas of special importance in a design.

Aubrey Beardsley (1.37) combined rectilinear and curvilinear shapes to create another interpretation of the Salomé story, described on pages 11–12.

A   B

1.36A and B Rectilinear and curvilinear shapes. Rectilinear shapes can easily be fit together to create a unified design. Curvilinear shapes tend to be more individualistic.

1.37 Aubrey Beardsley, *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, **1894.** Line block print, 11 × 6 in. (27.9 × 15.2 cm).

players is surrounded by layered rectangles to the right, left, and bottom. A solid line extends from the catcher to the top edge. Vigorous brushstrokes add power to the painting. Occupying only a small fraction of the composition and surrounded by vigorously painted shapes, the circle *still* dominates the design: we *have* to keep our eyes on the ball!

Geometric and Organic Shapes

Geometric shapes are distinguished by their crisp, precise edges and mathematically consistent curves. They dominate the technological world of architecture and industry, and they appear in nature as crystalline structures and growth patterns. In Valerie Jaudon's *Tallahatchee* (1.39), geometric shapes provide a clarity, harmony, and universality comparable to a musical composition. **Organic shapes** are more commonly found in the natural world of plants and animals, sea and sky. As shown in Helen Frankenthaler's *Interior Landscape* (1.40), organic shapes can add unpredictable energy, even when the composition as a whole is based on rectangular shapes.

Using an internal boundary line, he emphasized the composition's rectangular shape. Within this boundary, curving black and white shapes create a series of complex visual relationships. A bubble pattern dominates the upper-left corner. In the upper-right corner, Salomé clutches Saint John's head. Extending from the head down to the flower, a white line follows the transformation of the dead saint's blood into a living plant. This line creates a conceptual and compositional connection between the top and bottom edges.

A very different combination of rectilinear and curvilinear shapes activates Robert Rauschenberg's *Brace* (1.38). The central image of three baseball

1.38 Robert Rauschenberg, *Brace*, **1962.** Oil and silkscreen on canvas, 60 × 60 in. (152.4 × 152.4 cm).

1.39 Valerie Jaudon, *Tallahatchee,* **1984.** Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 6 ft 8 in. × 8 ft (2 × 2.4 m).

1.40 Helen Frankenthaler, *Interior Landscape,* **1964.** Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft 8⅝ in. × 7 ft 8⅝ in. (266 × 235 cm).

Degrees of Representation

Nonobjective or **nonrepresentational shapes,** such as circles, rectangles, and squares, are **pure forms.** Pure forms are shapes created without direct reference to reality. Artists often use pure form to embody elusive emotions or express universal meaning. For example, in *Several Circles* (1.41), Wassily Kandinsky sought to express his complex spiritual feelings. For him, the simple circular shapes were as poignant and expressive as music.

Representational shapes are derived from specific subject matter and strongly based on direct observation. Most photographs are representational and highly descriptive. For example, in Ansel Adams's *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley* (1.42), each variation in the cliff's surface is clearly defined.
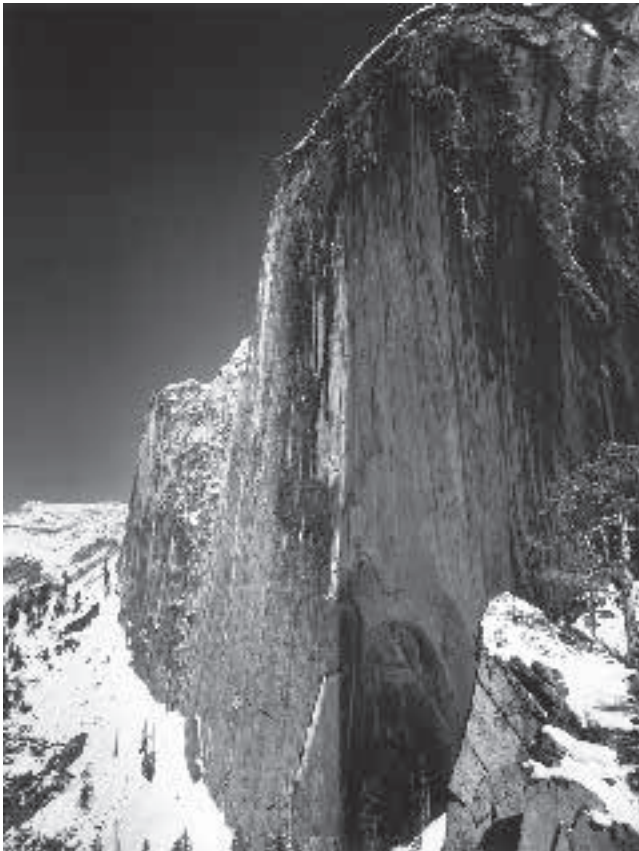
Between these two extremes, **abstract shapes** are derived from visual reality but are distilled or transformed, reducing their resemblance to the original source. In *Seventh Sister* (1.43), Robert Moskowitz deleted surface details from the rocky mountain. His abstracted cliff is a general representation of a vertical surface rather than a descriptive painting of a specific cliff.

Reference to reality is a traditional way to increase meaning in an artwork. Drawing on their experience in the physical world, viewers can connect to the illusion of reality presented in the painting. In a nonobjective image, lines, shapes, textures, and colors must generate all of the meaning. Because there is no explicit subject matter, some viewers find it more difficult to understand nonobjective images.

By contrast, abstract images can combine the power of association with the power of pure form. Charles Demuth's *. . . And the Home of the Brave* (1.44) demonstrates this. A factory has been turned into a series of lines and geometric shapes. Variations on red, white, and blue add a symbolic connection to the American flag. Painted during a period of nationwide unemployment, the factory is dark and

1.41 Wassily Kandinsky, *Several Circles,* **1926.** Oil on canvas, 55¼ × 55⅝ in. (140.3 × 140.7 cm).

1.42 Ansel Adams, *Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite Valley,* **1927.** Photograph.

1.43 Robert Moskowitz, *Seventh Sister,* **1982.** Oil on canvas, 108 × 39 in. (274.3 × 99 cm).

1.44 Charles Demuth, . . . *And the Home of the Brave,* 1931. Oil on composition board, 29½ × 23⅝ in. (74.8 × 59.7 cm).

1.45 William Klein, *Gun 1, New York,* 1955. Gelatin silver print, 15¾ × 11¾ in. (40 × 29.8 cm).

forbidding. The ironic title (which is based on a line from the American national anthem) adds a subtle political statement.

Degrees of Definition

Definition is the degree to which a shape is distinguished from both the ground area and the positive shapes within the design. **High definition** creates strong contrast between shapes and tends to increase clarity and immediacy of communication. For this reason, the diagrams used in this book generally feature black figures on a white ground. **Low-definition** shapes, including soft-edged shapes, gradations, and transparencies, can increase the complexity of the design and encourage multiple interpretations.

Definition is an inherent aspect of photography. In addition to variations in focus, the photographer can choose finer-grained film and slick paper to create a crisper image, and coarser-grained film and textured paper to create a softer image.

Variations in photographic definition can substantially affect meaning. We normally expect to see high definition in the foreground and low definition in the background. In *Gun 1, New York* (1.45), William Klein reversed this expectation. Pointed directly at the viewer's face, the gun itself is blurred, menacing, and monstrously large. Even more disturbing, however, is the scowling face of the boy holding the gun. Fierce and sharply focused, his face epitomizes both fear and rage.

Definition also plays an important role in drawing. Many mediums, including graphite and charcoal, can be used to create strong, clear lines as well as soft, fuzzy shapes. In Sidney Goodman's *Man Waiting* (1.46), charcoal was used to create a mysterious figure in a threatening space. The darker, more clearly defined shapes in the upper torso seem to push toward us, while the legs, hips, and chair dissolve into the background. Similarly, in Juan Muñoz's *Raincoat Drawing* (1.47), simple white lines create a frame above the couch, suggesting an unexpected interior space. The shading used in the staircase increases the illusion of space. Encouraged to fill in the details, the viewer becomes actively involved in both drawings.

Key Questions

- Which will best express your idea: representation, nonrepresentation, or abstraction?

- Variations in definition can increase the illusion of space. Will your design benefit from greater depth?

- Definition can also direct the viewer's attention to specific areas in the design. How can definition enhance meaning in your design?

1.46 Sidney Goodman, *Man Waiting,* **1961.** Charcoal on paper, 25⅝ × 19⅛ in. (65.1 × 48.7 cm).

1.47 Juan Muñoz, *Raincoat Drawing,* **1992–93.** Mixed media on fabric, 49³⁄₁₆ × 40⅛ in. (124.94 × 101.92 cm).

Using Shape

Simple shapes are often used when clear, direct communication is needed. Gary Goldsmith used just two shapes in an ad for an antidrug campaign (1.48). The text on the left reads "The average high induced by cocaine lasts thirty minutes." The text in the black shape on the right reads "The average death induced by cocaine lasts slightly longer." When these two sentences are compositionally combined, the narrow white band and the large black rectangle suggest the division between life and death.

More complex shapes are often used when the message is subtle or contradictory. **Collage** is one method for creating such complex shapes. Constructed from visual fragments initially designed for another purpose, a collage combines two kinds of shapes: the shape of each piece of cut paper and the shapes created by the information printed on the paper.

In Romare Bearden's *The Dove* (1.49A), the outer edges of each cut fragment create a lively pattern of curvilinear and rectilinear shapes. The lines and textures printed on these photographic fragments create a second set of shapes. A linear diagram of this artwork demonstrates the complexity of the resulting composition (1.49B). Combining his perceptions of contemporary Harlem with childhood memories, Bearden used this interplay of the cut edges and printed textures to create a rich composition from the shifting shapes.
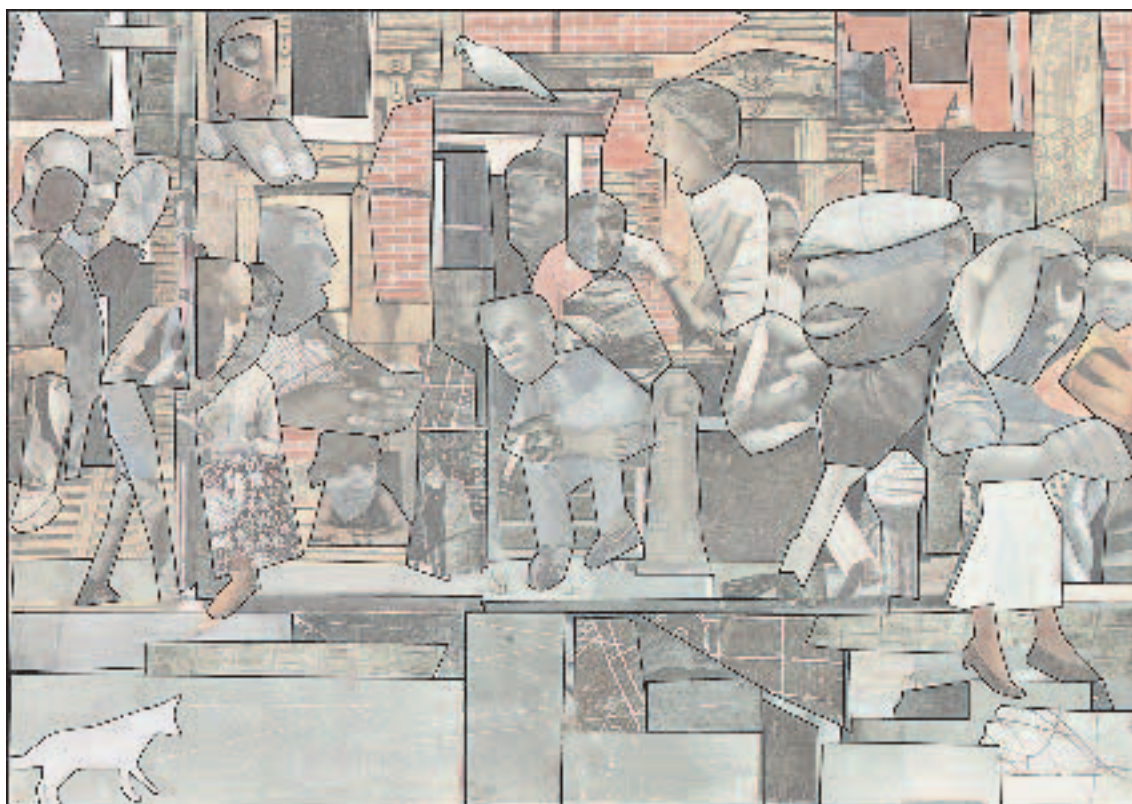
In *Target with Plaster Casts* (1.50), Jasper Johns combined simple shapes with sculptural objects to create an equally complex composition. A series of concentric circles creates a clearly defined target at the center of the painting. Nine sculptural fragments of a human figure line the upper edge—an ear, a hand, a mouth, and so forth. To add further complexity, scraps of newspaper were embedded in the colored wax from which the painting was constructed. Equally attracted to the representational body parts above and the symbolic target below, we must reconcile two very different forms of visual information.
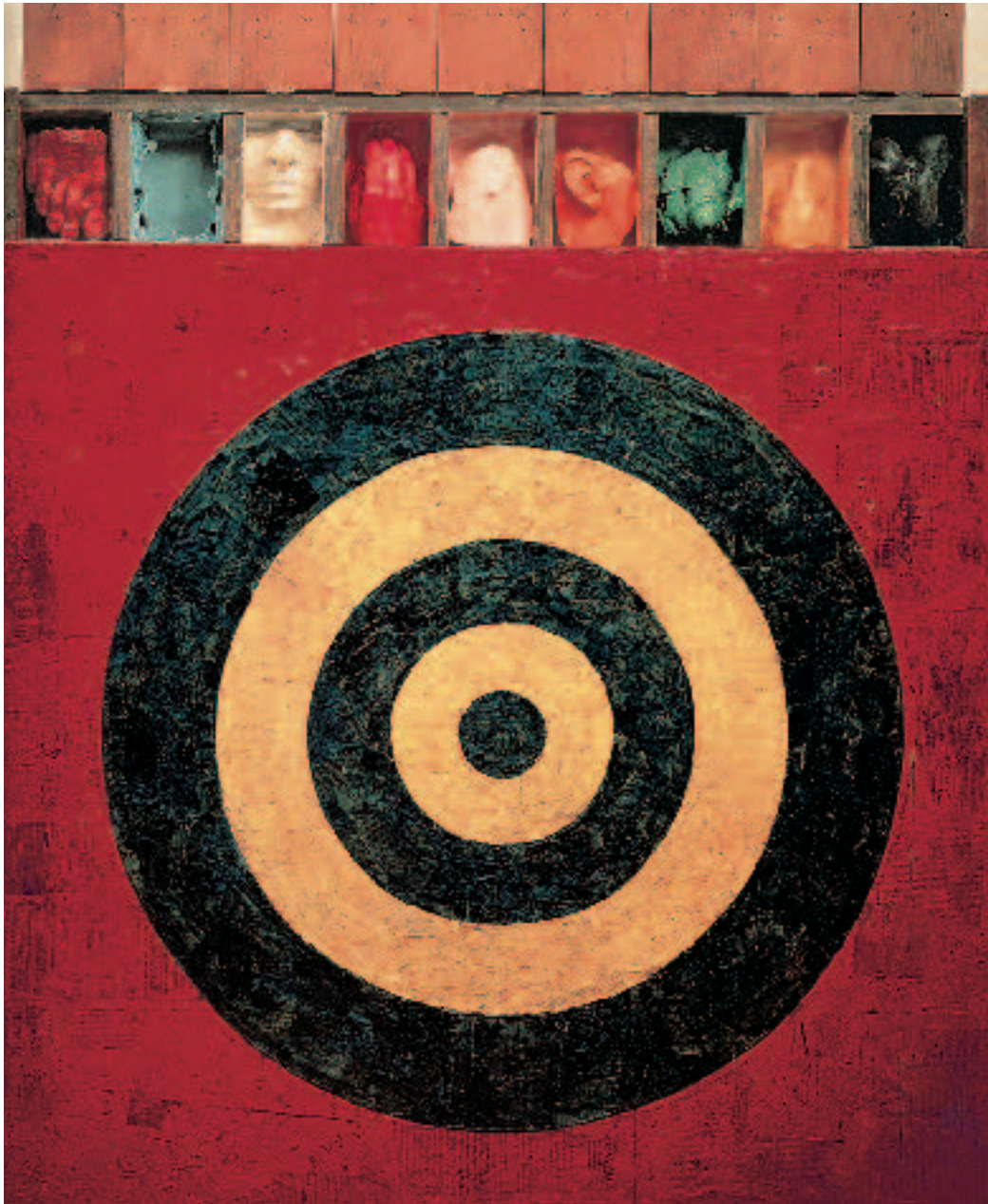

1.48 Ad by Citizens Against Cocaine Abuse: "The average high induced by cocaine lasts thirty minutes. The average death induced by cocaine lasts slightly longer." Art Director & Designer: Gary Goldsmith; Copywriter: Neal Gomberg; Agency: Goldsmith/Jeffrey; Client: Citizens Against Cocaine Abuse.

1.49A Romare Bearden, *The Dove,* **1964.** Cut-and-pasted paper, gouache, pencil, and colored pencil on cardboard. 13⅜ × 18¾ in. (34 × 47.5 cm).

1.49B Romare Bearden (compositional diagram). Printed and cut shapes work together to create a complex composition.

1.50 Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 51 × 44 × 2½ in. (129.5 × 111.8 × 6.4 cm).

Key Questions

SHAPE

- Experiment with rectilinear, curvilinear, geometric, and organic shapes. Which shape type will best express your idea?

- What happens when you combine flat, solid shapes with gradated shapes? Or fuse negative and positive?

- Contrast adds interest. What happens when two or more shape types are used in a composition?

TEXTURE

The surface quality of a two-dimensional shape or a three-dimensional volume is called **texture.** Texture engages our sense of touch as well as our vision, and it can enhance the visual surface and conceptual meaning of a design.

Types of Texture

Physical texture creates actual variations in a surface. The woven texture of canvas, the bumpy texture of thickly applied paint, and the rough texture