

COMPOSITION: NEGATIVE SHAPE

With the Malevich and Miro copies, we have been looking at examples of positive composition, drawing shapes of objects we have in mind and placing them to create an effect. A different way of understanding shape is to draw the space around the positive. This is called the negative space, and is a very effective way of creating relationships between objects in a drawing.

SUNFLOWERS AFTER VAN GOGH

When analysing the drawing of sunflowers after Van Gogh I can see quite clearly how important the element of shape is to this piece of work. The negative shape, or the shape around the flowers in this composition is just as important as the flowers or the positive shape, and it is integral in holding the composition together. The negative shape underpins the composition and helps the sense of harmony, balance, proportion, and rhythm that gives the picture its wholeness. Through the negative space, the subject becomes locked into its context.

Here we have in these two drawings the first two layers of negative shape, which establish the subject in its environment or context.

Set up a still life of flowers on a table that is put against a wall. Then set up as if to draw, with your pencil, paper and an eraser. Now take a viewfinder or what we know as a window mount and frame the composition of the flowers. We are going to copy the composition in the window mount and place it on our paper, by mapping the composition using the negative space.

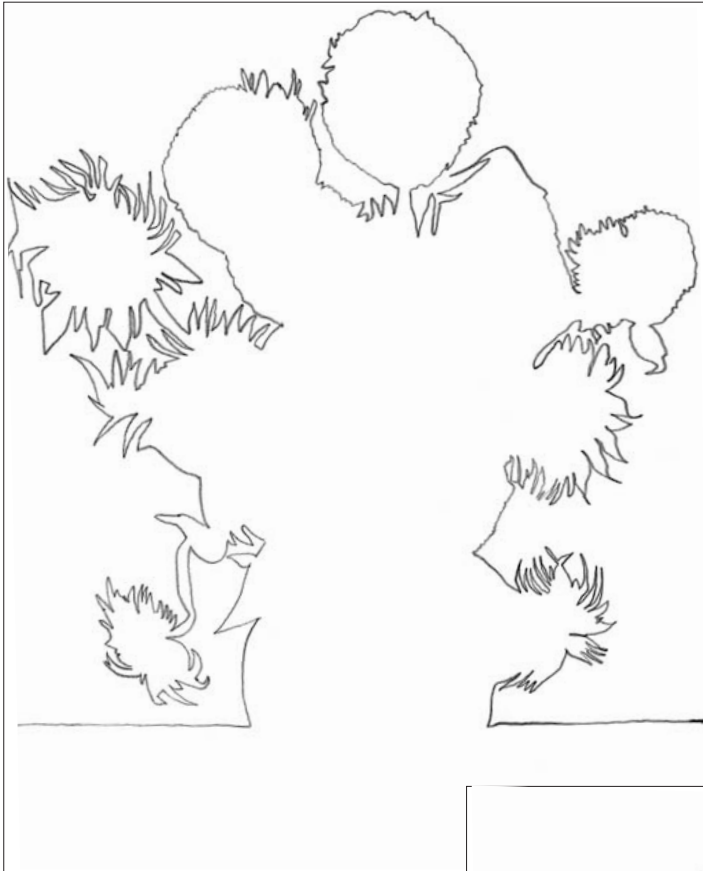
HOW TO START

In the first example you will see that what we have drawn what appears to be a silhouette over the top of the flowers. Do this by starting at the paper's edge on the left hand side, as it is important to make your first connection with your drawing at this point. Start to progress the line towards the centre of the paper following what would be the line that

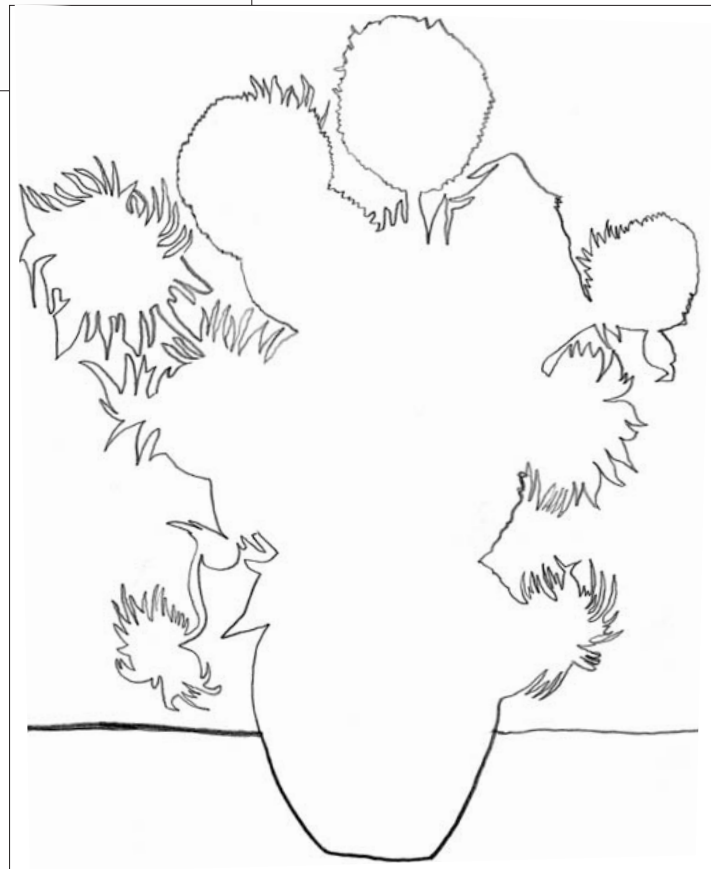
would indicate the back edge of the table where it touches the wall. It is now important to try to assess how far that line goes into the paper before it encounters the vase that holds the flowers. Do this by looking through your window mount again, remembering to look through it in exactly the same position every time. The window mount should be proportionally marked as showing halves quarters, and eighths as seen in the example on window mounts. One should mark ones drawing off in the same way, as we can use these as guides to indicate where objects are situated in the composition.

One can now begin to make an assessment as to how far that line travels into the picture by using these proportions. Let's say for this instance it is about a quarter of the way in. We would then translate that observation from our window mount to our drawing allowing the line that we first started with to travel into the drawing a quarter of the way, where it would then engage with the vase. Now the line would start its journey around the vase being monitored for proportion in the same way, firstly observing and making your proportional calculations through the window mount and then transferring these observations to your drawing. Eventually the line will complete its journey to the other side of the paper, splitting the paper in two as you can see in example 1.

In example 2 you will restart the drawing in exactly the same place over the top of your first line. However, when it engages the vase this time the line will detour around the bottom edge of the vase, and it will progress following the outline of the vase until it reaches the other side of the paper. This part of the drawing should be easier to accomplish as the first part of the drawing will help you in your understanding of the second part of the drawing and so on. The drawing as in example 2 will now contain three sections to it rather like a simple jigsaw construction. The first being the top half of the silhouette, the second being the bottom part of the silhouette, and finally the overall shape of the objects that are contained in the composition i.e. the vase and the flowers.



1.



2.

The next stage in the drawing as shown in example 3 is when you begin to draw in the smaller or secondary areas of negative space. These exist as small holes that appear through the objects that we are drawing. This part of the drawing completes the drawing of the negative space, and at this point we can now see how important this concept is as it holds the whole composition together in a spatial context. In other words the objects appear to be anchored in a real space, rather than floating in the picture plane

In the final drawing we have now filled in the rest of the visual story by defining the objects first, and then adding the tone and the texture (see tone and texture examples for further references). Now we have a complete work that pulls on a number of visual elements to make it work. There is also an example in the charcoal section that illustrates how a negative space drawing can be constructed.

3.

