



▲ **FIGURE 9.1** This art object, a painted portable scroll, uses different kinds of balance. There is a border at the top of the scroll that is balanced by one at the bottom. Likewise, the four large circles are balanced side by side and top and bottom. Compare and contrast the balance used in the images within the four largest circles.

Central Tibet, Tsang (Ngor Monastery), Sakya order. *Four Mandalas of the Vajravali Series*. c. 1429–56. Thangka, gouache on cotton. 88.9 × 73.7 cm (35 × 29"). Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

Balance

Have you ever lost your balance, perhaps while skating or bicycling? Maintaining your balance in such situations is critical to your well-being. Balance is important, not only to life but also to art. It is used by artists to bring a sense of wholeness, or *unity*, to their works.

In this chapter, you will:

- Describe types of balance and why balance is important in a work of art.
- Compare and contrast the use of different types of balance in artworks.
- Create visual solutions using direct observation and imagination to explore the art principle balance.
- Analyze the expressive qualities of balance in artworks.

Focus On Culture

Figure 9.1 dates to the fifteenth century. It is a *thangka*, a portable scroll. It was used during the 1400s for meditation by followers of Vajrayana (**vahj**-ree-ah-na) Buddhism. Also known as the Diamond Path to spiritual knowledge, Vajrayana was the main Buddhist sect in the Asian country Tibet. The four large circles on this *thangka* are *mandalas*. In Hindu and Buddhist religion, a mandala is seen as a symbolic map of the spiritual universe. It is believed that worshippers actually entered this mystic realm during prayer.

Describe. Examine an art object from another culture and time in Figure 9.9 on page 232. Describe the general characteristics of the artworks in Figures 9.1 and 9.9.

Vocabulary

balance
 central axis
 formal balance
 symmetry
 radial balance

Visual Balance

A work of art must contain balance. **Balance** is *the principle of art concerned with equalizing visual forces, or elements, in a work of art*. Visual balance causes you to feel that the elements have been arranged well.

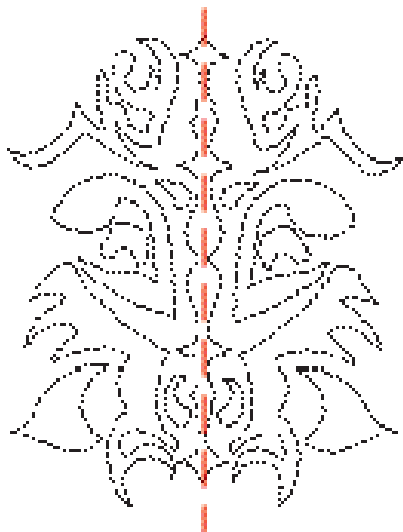
If visual balance creates a feeling that the elements have been arranged just right, visual imbalance creates the opposite feeling. It causes a feeling of uneasiness. It makes you feel that something is not quite right. The Leaning

Tower of Pisa (**Figure 9.2**) attracts attention because it is out of balance. It had tilted into a danger zone and was closed to the public in January 2000. Engineers corrected the tilt by 17¹/₂ inches. (See page 252 for more details.)

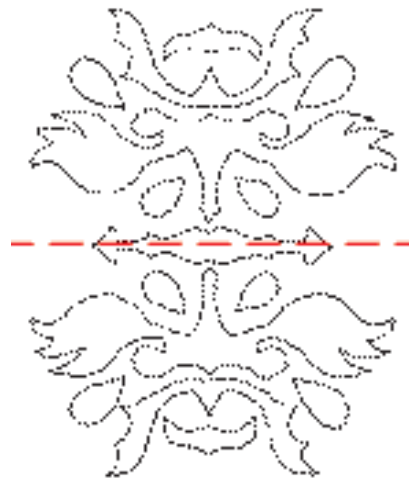
In order to know whether two objects are of equal weight—that is, if they balance—a balance scale can be used. In the visual arts, however, balance must be *seen* rather than weighed. The art elements become the visual forces, or weights, in an art object. A **central axis** is a *dividing line that works like the point of balance in the balance scale*. Many works of art have a central vertical axis (**Figure 9.3**) with equal visual weight on both sides of the dividing line. Works of art can also have a horizontal axis. In this case, the visual weight is balanced between top and bottom (**Figure 9.4**).

► **FIGURE 9.2**
 This building is known throughout the world, not because of its beauty or because the architect is well known, but because it leans—it is off balance. The many diagonal lines tell the viewer that this building must either straighten up or fall down.

Bell Tower of the Cathedral at Pisa (The Leaning Tower of Pisa). Begun in 1174.



◄ **FIGURE 9.3**
 With a vertical axis, there is equal visual weight on both sides.



◄ **FIGURE 9.4**
 With a horizontal axis, there is equal visual weight above and below.

MEET THE ARTIST

DIEGO RIVERA



Mexican, 1886–1957

Diego Rivera. *Self-Portrait*. 1941. Oil on canvas. 61 × 43.2 cm (24 × 17"). Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts.

► **FIGURE 9.5** Rivera used his art to show his serious concern for the Mexican working people. Many of his works depicted the labors of the Mexican peasants. His work reflects the style of the solid-looking, pre-Columbian artwork of the Mayans.

Diego Rivera. *Flower Day*. 1925. Oil on canvas. 147.3 × 120.7 cm (58 × 47½"). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. Los Angeles County Fund. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura.



Formal Balance

One type of balance is called formal balance. **Formal balance** occurs *when equal, or very similar, elements are placed on opposite sides of a central axis*. The axis can be vertical or horizontal. It may be a real

part of the design, or it may be an imaginary line, as in Figures 9.3 and 9.4. Formal balance is the easiest type of balance to recognize and to create (**Figure 9.5**). After you find the axis, all you have to do is place similar objects on each side, equally distant from the center.



Symmetry

Symmetry is a special type of formal balance in which two halves of a balanced composition are identical, mirror images of each other. Another term for this is *bilateral symmetry* (**Figure 9.6**).

Symmetry appeals strongly to us, probably because of the bilateral symmetry of the human body. Objects closely associated with our bodies, such as clothing and furniture, are usually symmetrical. Most traditional architecture, especially public architecture, is symmetrical (**Figure 9.7**).

◀ **FIGURE 9.6** This urn shows a young man wearing a headdress depicting his guardian spirit, the goddess Quetzal, an unforgettably beautiful bird. The artist who created this urn used symmetry to emphasize the seriousness of this work.

Mexican, Zapotec (from Monte Alban). *Figural Urn*. A.D. 500–700. Painted earthenware. 63.5 × 63.5 × 31.8 cm (25 × 25 × 12½"). Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust 61-16.



▲ **FIGURE 9.7** This view of the White House expresses the dignity and importance of the home of the president of the United States. The use of symmetry makes the building appear secure and stable.

James H. Cromartie. *View of the White House, South Portico*. 1980. Acrylic on canvas. 50.8 × 76.2 cm (20 × 30"). Private Collection.

**Creating Visual Solutions
Using Direct Observation.**

Arrange a symmetrical still life. Carefully observe the arrangement before making a pencil drawing on a small sheet of paper. Then rearrange or change the objects slightly to create approximate symmetry. Make a drawing of the second arrangement. Mount the drawings side by side on a sheet of construction paper and label each drawing. Which one do you prefer? Survey your friends to find out their preferences.

Computer Option. If available, use the Symmetry menu and Brush or Pencil tool to create a symmetrical landscape. Vary the Brush shape, thickness, pattern, and color. If the Symmetry menu is not available, determine the central axis or line of symmetry. Draw half of the scene. Use the Select tool and Copy, Paste, and Flip commands to make the matching second half. Title and save the work. Try rearranging the shapes in your scene so that it is not perfectly symmetrical. Compare the two drawings. Which do you prefer?



▲ **FIGURE 9.8** Van Eyck used approximate symmetry to depict this wedding portrait. The halves of the picture are not quite the same. However, the work still has the dignity of perfect symmetry, only the composition is more interesting and less monotonous than if he had used perfect symmetry.

Jan van Eyck. *The Arnolfini Wedding*. 1434. Oil on panel. 83.8 × 57.2 cm (33 × 22.5"). National Gallery, London, England.

Symmetry can be very stiff and formal. Artists use it to express dignity, endurance, and stability. Because formal balance is so predictable, however, it can be dull. Many artists avoid boring the viewer by using approximate symmetry, which is *almost* symmetrical.

Approximate symmetry has the stability of formal balance (**Figure 9.8**). Some small differences make it more interesting than perfect symmetry. If you look carefully in a mirror, you may discover that your face has approximate symmetry. The two sides do not match perfectly.



▲ **FIGURE 9.9** The use of radial balance adds to the decorative quality of this design. This print is based on the stained-glass dome found in the main synagogue of Szeged, Hungary.

N. Anderson, Israel. *Blue Dome—House Blessing*. 1995. Etching. 43.2 × 43.2 cm (17 × 17"). Private Collection.

Radial Balance

Radial balance occurs when the forces or elements of a design come out (radiate) from a central point. The axis in a radial design is the center point. In almost all cases, the elements are spaced evenly around the axis to form circular patterns (**Figure 9.9**).

Radial balance is a complex variation of symmetry. While symmetry requires only two matching units, designs with radial balance usually involve four or more matching units. In **Figure 9.10**, notice that the center of the design is the family shield surrounded by a blue circle of zigzag lines. Four petal-like shapes and four bars radiate from the center of the bowl to its rim. On the rim, wide blue and thin gold lines continue to form a circular design. Notice how all the blue line designs resemble Arabic writing but do not form any real letters.

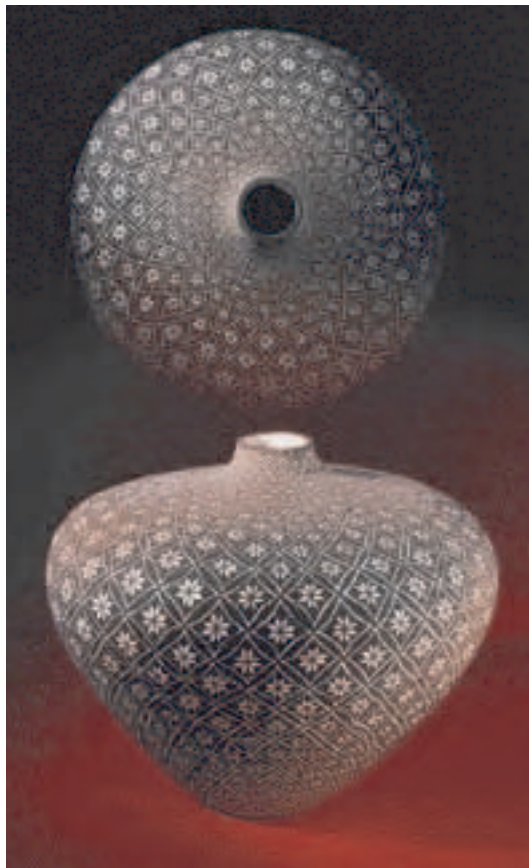


► **FIGURE 9.10** This dish was once used as a serving bowl. The center of the design is a replica of the family coat of arms. Notice how the thin gold lines decorate the empty spaces between the thick blue lines.

Valencia, Spain. Dish c. 1430. Tin-glazed earthenware painted in cobalt blue and lustre. Height: 6.7 cm (2⁵/₈"); diameter of mouth: 48.2 cm (19"). Hispanic Society of America, New York, New York.

Radial balance occurs frequently in nature. Most flower petals are arranged around a central axis and radiate outward. Many plants follow radial patterns of growth. For instance, if you cut an apple in half horizontally, you will see a radial star design. Cut an orange the same way and you will notice the radial pattern of segments.

You can find many examples of radial balance in architecture. Domes are designed on the principle of radial balance. Manufactured items such as gears, wheels, tires, dials, and clocks are also radial in structure. Radial designs are used by many potters to decorate the surfaces of their work because they adapt well to the rounded forms of pottery (**Figure 9.11**).



Activity

Creating Radial Balance

Creating Visual Solutions Using Imagination. Draw on your creativity to design five objects that exhibit radial balance. Make a drawing of each imaginary object, using pen or pencil. Emphasize the radial balance of each object, using line, form, and color.

Computer Option. Choose from a variety of Shape tools. Determine the center of the computer page. Use a dot, an X, an addition sign (+), or other shape to mark this spot. Copy and Paste a shape four times around the center point. Continue to add and arrange shapes to maintain radial balance. Try a variety of sizes to add interest but make sure each set of four shapes is identical. Title and save your work. Now explore a more complex radial design. Combine lines and shapes and use more than four repeated combinations to complete the design.

Check Your Understanding

1. What is a central axis?
2. What is the easiest type of balance to recognize and create?
3. Which type of balance can be found frequently in nature and in architecture?
4. Compare and contrast the use of balance in Figure 9.6 on page 230 and Figure 9.10 on page 232.

◀ **FIGURE 9.11** Torivio, a Native American potter, has developed her own style for decorating her pots. She repeats the designs in radial patterns. The motif starts out small at the top rim and then expands to the widest part of the vessel.

Dorothy Torivio. *Vase*. c. 1984. Clay. Height about 20.3 cm (8"). Heard Museum Collection, Phoenix, Arizona.