

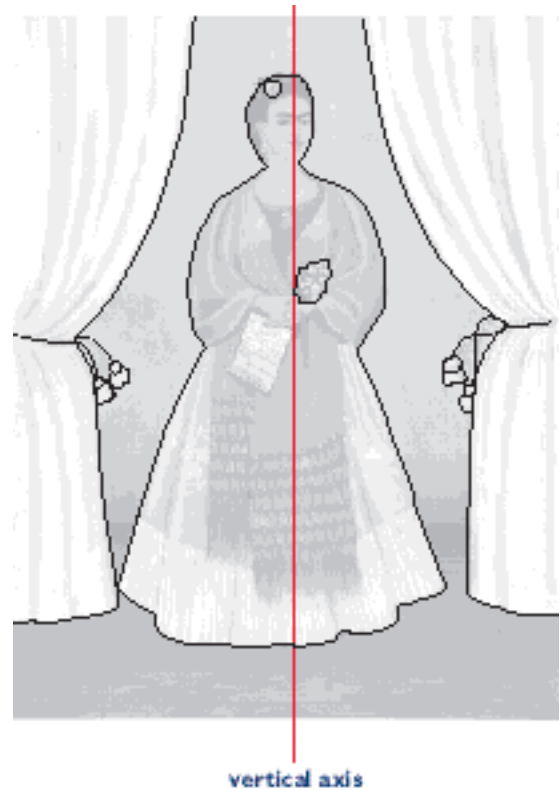
The Expressive Qualities of Balance

The type of balance an artist uses to organize a work of art affects the feeling expressed by that work. Artists choose balance based on the feeling they wish to convey. An artist who wants to present a calm arrangement will use formal balance. Formal balance can be used to present a person in a dignified portrait (**Figure 9.19**).

LOOKING CLOSELY

Using Formal Balance To Organize A Composition

Frida Kahlo has used formal balance to organize this painting to give it a sense of dignity and importance. In the diagram you can see that if the painting were folded in half along the vertical axis the shapes would match. Notice, however, that there are a few small variations. They would not match perfectly because she has used approximate symmetry. Can you find any matching shapes that were not included in the diagram?



◀ **FIGURE 9.19**

Frida Kahlo. *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky*. 1937. Oil on Masonite. 76.2 × 61 cm (30 × 24"). National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Honorable Clare Boothe Luce.



◀ **FIGURE 9.20** Ferdinand Hodler used formal balance to create a stiff, stable portrait of his friend. The line from the sculptor's nose through the line in his shirt divides the portrait vertically into almost perfectly matching halves.

Ferdinand Hodler. *James Vilbert, Sculptor*. 1907. Oil on canvas. 65.4 × 66.4 cm (25³/₄ × 26¹/₈"). The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.212

Formal balance can also be used in religious paintings to evoke feelings of dignity and endurance. In the past, paintings used as altarpieces in churches were designed to fit in with the formal balance of the church altar. The artist Ferdinand Hodler developed a personal aesthetic theory called Parallelism that relied on symmetry and repetition to create images that expressed stability (**Figure 9.20**).

Many government buildings, hospitals, and office buildings are designed using formal balance. One purpose of this type of balance is to imply that the business conducted in these buildings is serious and solemn.

With approximate symmetry, artists express the same sense of calm stability, but they avoid the rigid formality of pure symmetry. Georgia O'Keeffe used approximate symmetry in her paintings of large close-ups of flowers. This impresses the viewer with feelings about the importance of the natural world. The use of approximate symmetry lends dignity to the flowing curves and alternating pastel colors of her painting, *White Rose with Larkspur, No. 2* (**Figure 9.21**).

Radial design, on the other hand, is almost purely decorative. It appears in architecture, jewelry, pottery, weaving,



◀ **FIGURE 9.21** How has O'Keeffe arranged the shapes in this painting to create approximate, not absolute, symmetry? Would you like the painting more if it were perfectly symmetrical? Why or why not?

Georgia O'Keeffe. *White Rose with Larkspur, No. 2*. 1927. Oil on canvas. 101.6 × 76.2 cm (40 × 30"). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts. Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund, 1980.207. © 2003 The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

► **FIGURE 9.22** Notice how Carr has used informal balance by placing most of the raven to the right of center in this landscape. She made many trips to the Northwest Coast of Alaska to record images of the Native American villages. This work was made in her studio based on sketches she had done on her trip to Queen Charlotte Island. The Haida village had been deserted and the large carving of the raven remained. She has balanced the raven, flowers, and trees near the foreground against the blue mountain in the distance.

Emily Carr. *Cumshewa*. c. 1912. Watercolor over graphite on wove paper. 52 × 75.3 cm (20½ × 29⅝"). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.



and textile design. It is not often used by painters in its pure form. You can, however, find loose arrangements of radiating lines in many paintings. Artists use this technique to focus attention on an important part of an artwork.

Informal balance has a more natural look. When you look around your natural environment, you seldom find objects arranged with formal balance. To capture this natural quality in their works, artists use informal balance in arranging landscapes or groups of people (**Figure 9.22**).

Architects are using informal balance in many modern structures (see Figure 14.16, page 399). Single-family suburban homes have become the symbol of casual living. These houses are often designed using informal balance.



Check Your Understanding

1. What feeling does formal balance convey?
2. What kind of buildings use formal balance? Why?
3. Why might an artist prefer approximate symmetry over pure symmetry?

Activity

Identifying Balance

Applying Your Skills. Look around your neighborhood for buildings that have been constructed using formal or informal balance. Make a rough sketch of one building and describe the feeling it gives you. If you live in a city and the buildings are too tall to sketch, look at the entrances to the buildings and sketch one of them. The entrance includes the door and all the decorative shapes around the doorway.

Computer Option. Use the tools of your choice to create a complex design illustrating one of the following: formal balance, informal balance, symmetry, approximate symmetry, radial balance. Save your work and then print it. If your printer is black and white, use colored pencils to add color. Evaluate your design. Does it meet the criteria for the kind of balance you chose to illustrate?