

Symmetry

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Artists often use symmetry and asymmetry in works of art. In this lesson, you will learn about symmetry and how it's used, or not used, by artists in a composition. This lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

An artist uses the properties of symmetry and asymmetry to create visual balance and dynamism in a composition.

1. Symmetry and Bilateral Symmetry

Symmetry can be quite complex. At its most basic, **symmetry** means equal across an **axis**, or the imaginary line of division. In contrast, **asymmetry** means unequal across an axis, and **bilateral symmetry** means identical across an axis.

IN CONTEXT

Two of Leonardo da Vinci's works, *The Last Supper* and *The Vitruvian Man*, illustrate the difference between symmetry and bilateral symmetry.

Take a look below at an image of *The Last Supper*.

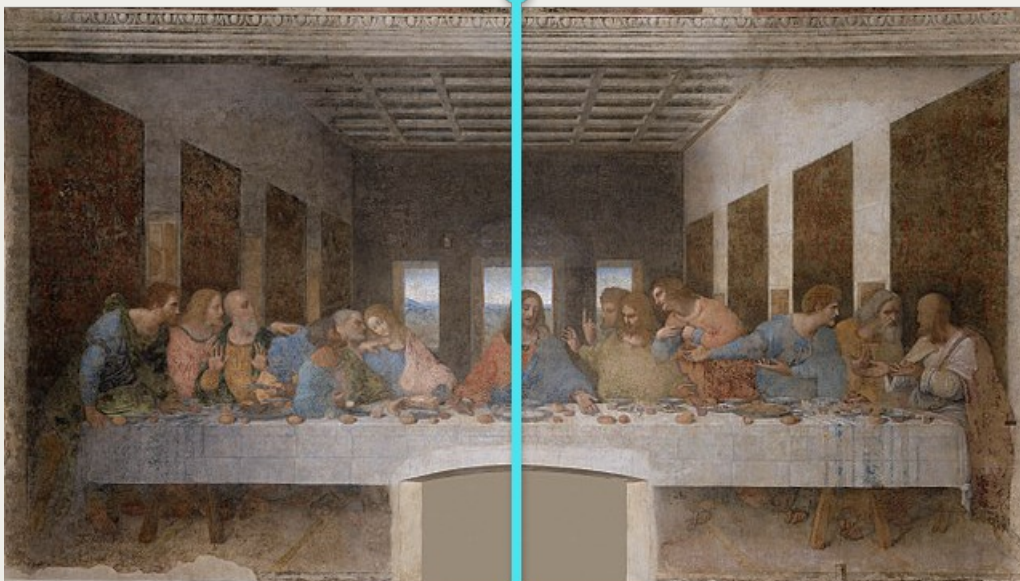


The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci

Symmetry, like that in the above image, is more a description of equivocal weight between two halves rather than identical halves. In *The Last Supper*, we can use a vertical axis to split the fresco evenly down the middle. This fresco is symmetrical because the distribution of elements are the same in both halves.

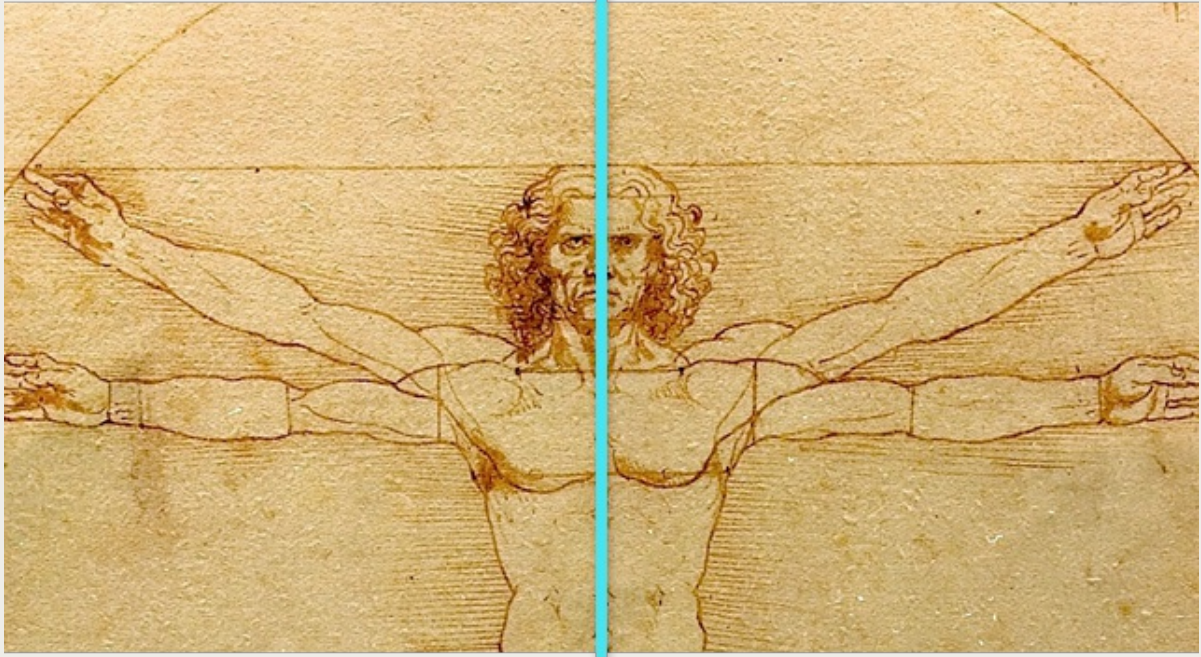
So, for example, in this next image, you will see that there are six disciples per side, four recesses in the wall per side, half of the table per side, etc. Even though the halves aren't mirror images of each other, it is still a symmetrical piece.

SYMMETRY



Now look at this image of *The Vitruvian Man*.

BILATERAL SYMMETRY



The Vitruvian Man by Leonardo da Vinci

Bilateral symmetry means that the two halves of something are identical or mirror images of each other. Even though you could make the argument that *The Vitruvian Man* isn't exactly symmetrical bilaterally, it's extremely close. You can see this in the image above.



DID YOU KNOW

If you were to fold the image across the imaginary vertical axis, the two halves would match up well. This is an example of bilateral symmetry.



TERMS TO KNOW

Symmetry

The quality of having exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis

Axis

An imaginary line that divides an object

Asymmetry

Lack of equivalence or similarity between parts

Bilateral Symmetry

When two halves of something are exactly the same or mirror images of each other

2. Asymmetry, Balance, and Dynamism

The Descent from the Cross by Peter Paul Rubens is an asymmetrical painting, meaning that the image is not symmetrical across a specific axis. Rather than compose this image across a vertical axis like da Vinci did in his *The Last Supper*, Rubens employs the use of a diagonal axis. This draws the viewer's eye up from the bottom left to the top right. In doing so, he creates the sensation of movement, or **dynamism**, in how the viewer is really panning across the image.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look at the image below of *The Descent from the Cross*. This is the central panel of the triptych, which is a three-panel display.



The Descent from the Cross by Peter Paul Rubens

Asymmetry doesn't necessarily mean unbalanced. **Balance** is when elements of a composition carry equal weight, or create harmony. A composition can be asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.

Balance and dynamism are achieved by a careful distribution of elements through the composition. We can get a better sense of this by breaking the image into quadrants, as in this next image.



Notice how the two quadrants identified by the arrows hold the majority of the visual weight in this image. These same two quadrants hold a roughly equal amount of weight in each quadrant, and are diagonally opposed to each other. The other diagonally opposed composing quadrants have an equal distribution of empty space—empty of people, at least—which forces the eye, again, toward the diagonal axis and up to the right, creating the sense of dynamism. It can still be balanced even though it's asymmetrical.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dynamism

The illusion of movement in a composition

Balance

When elements of a composition carry equal weight, or create harmony; a composition can be

asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.



SUMMARY

Symmetry and asymmetry are used by artists in works of art for varying reasons, sometimes to create visual balance and dynamism in a composition. In this lesson, you explored **symmetry and bilateral symmetry**. Remember that symmetry is when you see exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis, or line of division. Bilateral symmetry is when you see two halves of something that are exactly the same, or mirror images on each part.

Finally, you learned about **asymmetry, balance, and dynamism**. Asymmetry doesn't necessarily mean unbalanced but instead is when there is a lack of equivalence or similarity between parts. Balance and dynamism, which is the illusion of movement, are achieved by a careful distribution of elements through the composition.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Asymmetry

Lack of equivalence or similarity between parts.

Axis

An imaginary line that divides an object.

Balance

When elements of a composition carry equal weight, or create harmony. A composition can be asymmetrical and balanced at the same time.

Bilateral symmetry

When two halves of something are exactly the same.

Dynamism

The illusion of movement in a composition.

Symmetry

The quality of having exactly similar parts facing each other across an axis.