

THE WEB DESIGNER'S ROADMAP

BY GIOVANNI DIFETERICI



YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS FOR WEB DESIGN SUCCESS

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About Giovanni DiFeterici

Giovanni is an illustrator, designer, and front-end developer at Period Three (<http://www.period-three.com/>), a web design firm in South Carolina. He's also the content and style editor for Unmatched Style (<http://unmatchedstyle.com/>), a design gallery and blog dedicated to documenting and curating all things both *badass* and web design-related. Giovanni regularly speaks at conferences about creativity, interface design, and art. Before becoming a designer, he was a fine artist for many years, which continues to inform his web design process and aesthetic. In addition, Giovanni's favorite comic book is Akira, he is the proud owner of a large red mohawk, and he believes Francis Bacon is the greatest painter ever.

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Preface

Welcome to another book about web design! Well, actually, this one's different. This book will also delve into the creative side of designing for the Web, including a look at art history and some sources of inspiration for the intrepid web designer. In the main, we'll be discussing the phases of the design process and how to incorporate them into your workflow. Some of these stages are tried-and-true, industry-strength sweet magic that the majority of designers use, even if they fail to realize it. We'll talk about these stages in great detail because they're going to be your bread and butter as a web designer. Much of what a web designer does is industry-specific and requires a great deal of technical knowledge (so you'll need to know some HTML), but the process is far more important as the vehicle that allows us to complete complex tasks without pulling out our hair. Each step of the design process laid out in this book is something that you can adopt, change, or ignore. I personally believe that designers should work in whatever way best suits their skills. Some prefer to work in the browser with HTML and CSS. Others use Fireworks and create their wireframes and designs in the same project document. Some designers sketch thumbnails, while others don't. I want you to be able to communicate your ideas, so that you can interact effectively with clients and the rest of your team. What I don't want is for you to treat this book as a step-by-step guide for how to be an "awesome-sauce" designer. You already have the awesome sauce. I'm just here to talk about the details. I hope you enjoy the book, that you learn something new, and that you continue to grow as a designer. Many people have helped me reach this point. My only desire is to give something back.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is for web designers who seek a structured way to be creative when designing websites. It's ideal for designers who are just starting out, but is also useful for anyone looking for a different perspective. Furthermore, if you've found yourself in any one of these scenarios, this book is for you:

- You're stuck on a design.
- You've been misinterpreting a client's needs.
- You want to learn some new techniques that all the cool kids are into.
- You've never considered your design process before, but want to get a handle on it.

If you picked up this book, chances are that you're curious about what you could change in your design process, and how to handle such change. So, this one's for you.

What's in This Book

This book comprises the following seven chapters.

[Chapter 1: *Beauty, Creativity, and Inspiration*](#)

By way of an introduction, I'll explain the book's broader concepts and establish the general

terminology we'll be using. The book's ongoing project, Spectrumagic, is presented, where I'll set expectations about what you'll be learning. We'll also look at the relevance of the study of aesthetics, creative processes, and where to find inspiration.

[Chapter 2: *It Ain't Over Till It's Over: A Bit of Design History*](#)

Here, I'll present a brief history of design and show how the design process has changed over the years. In particular, I'll focus on the Modernist and Postmodernist eras to provide a context for the chapters that follow, as well as lay the groundwork for common design patterns.

[Chapter 3: *Gathering Resources: That Rucksack Has a Lot of Pockets*](#)

This chapter covers some practical lessons when deciding on the look of your design. It will include the discovery process, which involves learning from other disciplines, and resource gathering, which encompasses mood boards, color palettes, and storyboards.

[Chapter 4: *Form and Function*](#)

Now we'll learn about assessing the structural and technical needs of a website and its design. We'll look at the design's purpose, and how to best communicate interaction and hierarchy. Areas covered are designing for multiple form factors including mobile sites, responsive design wireframes, strategy, and content grayboxing.

[Chapter 5: *Design Patterns: Tried and Trusted Solutions*](#)

Programming design patterns are proven solutions to problems that arise while developing applications. Web design also has its share of issues. In this chapter, we'll look at the most common design patterns, and possible use cases for when and how they should be implemented.

[Chapter 6: *Conceptual Design and Our Color Project*](#)

First, we'll address conceptual design and how we arrive at a theme that informs the design process. We'll look at a real-life example and cover topics such as designing the interface, art direction, and creative association. Then, we'll delve into our Spectrumagic project, implementing what we've learned. Along the way, we'll introduce the modern marvel that is style tiles and the notion of intuitive design.

[Chapter 7: *Designing in the Wild*](#)

Understanding the limitations of web-based technologies and how to overcome them is a necessary part of implementing designs. Often, a little knowledge ahead of time can help to shape a design and make front-end development easier. We'll also examine progressive enhancement and look at some fancy tools and apps that should make your designing life easier.

Where to Find Help

Design is an evolving subject, so chances are good that by the time you read this, some minor detail or other of these technologies has changed from what's described in this book. Thankfully, SitePoint has a thriving community of designers ready and waiting to help you out if you run into trouble, and we also maintain a list of known errata for this book you can consult for the latest updates.

The SitePoint Forums

The [SitePoint Forums](#) are discussion forums where you can ask questions about anything related to web development. You may, of course, answer questions, too. That's how a discussion forum site works—some people ask, some people answer and most people do a bit of both. Sharing your knowledge benefits others and strengthens the community. A lot of fun and experienced web designers and developers hang out there. It's a good way to learn new stuff, have questions answered in a hurry and just have fun. In particular, check out the design thread.

The Book's Website

Located at <http://www.sitepoint.com/books/process1/>, the website that supports this book will give you access to the following facilities:

Video Interviews

As you progress through this book, you'll note a number of quotes from interviews. See the book's website to see these interviews in full.

Updates and Errata

No book is perfect, and we expect that alert readers will be able to spot at least one or two mistakes before the end of this one. The Errata page on the book's website will always have the latest information about known typographical and code errors.

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In addition to books like this one, SitePoint publishes free email newsletters such as the *SitePoint* newsletter, *PHPMaster*, *CloudSpring*, *RubySource*, *DesignFestival*, and *BuildMobile*. In them you'll read about the latest news, product releases, trends, tips, and techniques for all aspects of web development. Sign up to one or more of these newsletters at <http://www.sitepoint.com/newsletter/>.

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If you're unable to find an answer through the forums, or if you wish to contact us for any other reason, the best place to write is books@sitepoint.com. We have a well-staffed email support system set up to track your inquiries, and if our support team members are unable to answer your question, they'll send it straight to us. Suggestions for improvements, as well as notices of any mistakes you may find, are especially welcome.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the folks who contributed their time and words to this book. Here be titans! Dr. Donald Norman (<http://www.jnd.org/>) is an industry legend in the field of user-centered design. His books and words have influenced generations of UX designers. I can't say enough about Don. He is amazingly intelligent and insightful in his evaluation of what it really means to be a designer. His ideas about product design and user experience are way beyond what most designers know. I can't

thank him enough for giving me two hours of his life. Meagan Fisher (<http://owltastic.com/>) is a wonderful designer with a lavish and beautiful style. I love her work and have nothing but respect for her. Meagan went into great detail about her process and how she interacts with clients, so you'll see her quotes all over the place. Dan Rubin (<http://about.me/danrubin>) is a candid and thoughtful designer. I found my discussion with Dan to be amazingly thought-provoking. His mix of strong opinions and flexibility was refreshing, and helped me to see a variety of approaches that can lead to great design. Dave Rupert (<http://daverupert.com/>) makes the "tiny jQuerys." He and his ilk at Paravel are the minds behind <http://thefacesof.com>, lettering.js, fittext.js, and many other sweet little web designer treats. He's also funny as hell. Sarah Parmenter (<http://www.sazzy.co.uk/>) has been running her own design shop for ten years, where she has made a major impression on the niche market of iOS design. She has a wealth of experience and was incredibly candid with me about her process, its shortcomings, and the changes she's made to be a better designer. Shaun Inman (<http://shauninman.com/pendium/>) is a man apart. After working in the web industry and creating his own startup, Shaun decided to dedicate himself to game design, where he has authored a number of great casual games for iOS and desktop. He has a solid style and singular approach that I don't think could match on my best day. Daniel Burka (<http://www.deltatango.bravo.com/>) is a man possessed. He's all over the map: Digg, Glitch, Milk, and now Google. I have nothing but respect for his quiet and thoughtful approach to the craft of design. More than any other person I've interviewed, Daniel has had the greatest effect on how I think about what I do. Thanks and good luck in all your present and future ventures! Jessica Hische (<http://jessicahische.is/>) is an amazing lettering artist working out of San Francisco. She's worked with some incredible clients, and has a unique approach to her work and business that have made her an excellent influence on the industry. Samantha Warren (<http://badassideas.com/>) is the lovely person behind Style Tiles. She unveiled this marvel of modern web design while I was writing this book, so I was unable to cover it in as much depth as I'd have liked. She has made a major contribution to web design with her approach to system design. The Twitter monster has just bitten Samantha, but I hope she'll still have time for the rest of us! Gene Crawford (<http://unmatchedstyle.com>) is my homie. Gene and I have worked together for the last three years and have done some great things together. He's a true friend and listened to all my ideas and gripes while writing this book. He is my mentor, my partner, and my friend. Jay Barry (<http://petridisc.com/>) taught me everything I know. Jay has been my art director for the last few years and is the third arm on the strange monster that is Period Three. He taught me web design, HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and a smattering of PHP. He's opinionated, gruff, and good-hearted. I hope he knows how much I appreciate his leadership and tutelage.

Conventions Used in This Book

You'll notice that we've used certain typographic and layout styles throughout this book to signify different types of information. Look out for the following items.

Tips, Notes, and Warnings

Tip: Hey, You!

Tips will give you helpful little pointers.

Note: Ahem, Excuse Me ...

Notes are useful asides that are related—but not critical—to the topic at hand. Think of them as extra tidbits of information.

Important: Make Sure You Always ...

... pay attention to these important points.

Warning: Watch Out!

Warnings will highlight any gotchas that are likely to trip you up along the way.

Beauty, Creativity, and Inspiration

Every journey begins with a first step. In this book, we're going to talk about creativity and design. I'll paint a picture of how you can improve your designs by evaluating every stage of the production pipeline. As designers, it's important to understand the design process so that we can better control our end results. This begs the question: What are we controlling? I'd say that we're trying to control the perceptions of our users. We want them to connect with our designs emotionally, to find an aspect of our designs worth admiring and liking. We want them to have the motivation and inclination to explore our designs and discover everything that they have to offer. We want them to love our designs. To achieve this, we have to understand how users actually perceive designs. By learning about the design elements and user perceptions that we're attempting to control, we're more likely to invent creative designs that speak to our users and solve our clients' problems. This is the first step on our journey. In this chapter, we'll discuss beauty, creativity, and inspiration. My intention is to make the concepts easier to grasp while laying out some simple strategies for applying them to the design process. We'll also look at the design project we'll be creating together throughout the book.

Aesthetics: It's More than a Pretty Picture

“Beauty is rare in all nature's works, and in all works of art.”

--Voltaire

Okay, so Voltaire takes a fairly bleak view on the existence of beauty—but you have to admit, he has a point. I mean, how many truly gorgeous things have you come across over your lifetime? And of those, how many are the result of human activity? Lots of things are pretty or impressive, but that's not the same as true beauty. Still, I'm less convinced that beauty is *rare*; perhaps it just takes a keen eye to see it. So let's be a little more positive and aim to find all the diamonds in the rough.

Aesthetics is the study of beauty in all its forms. As you can see in [Figure 1.1](#), “beauty” can be applied to many areas: everything from garden flowers to mathematics. But while different items can be perceived as beautiful for various reasons, there's a link between the perception of beauty and our reasons for feeling connected to it. Most people would agree on the beauty of a starry night sky. And it's hard not to be in awe of the vast expanse that is the Grand Canyon. I live in South Carolina, which has lovely mountains. Sometimes, those massive slabs of granite look like mirrors when the sun hits them at the right angle. Magnificent.

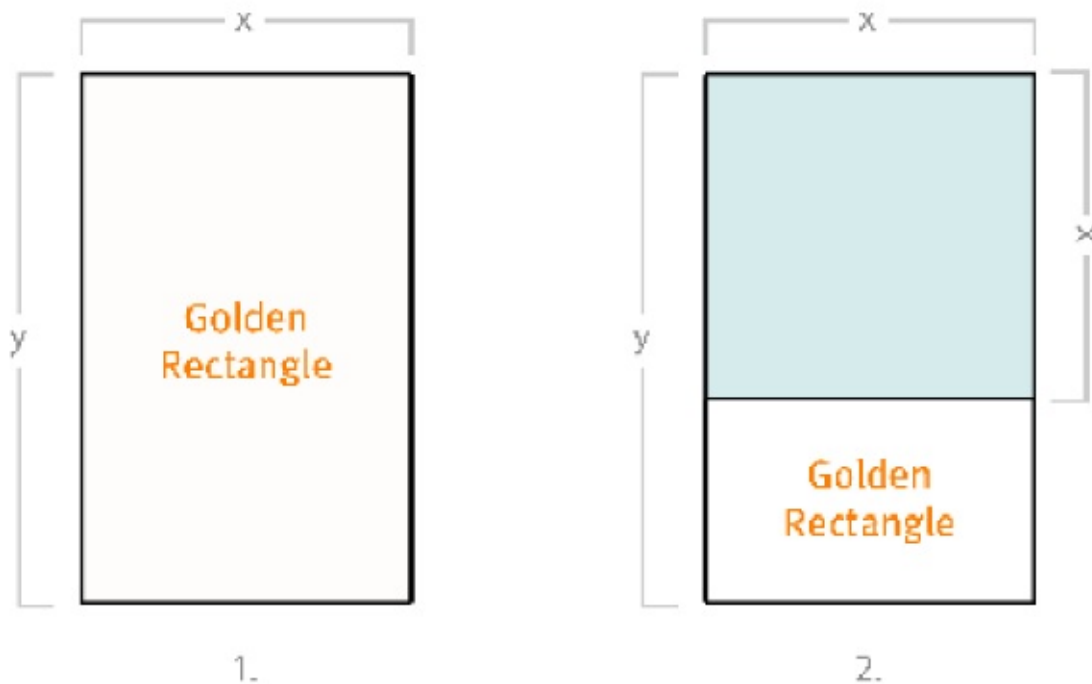


Figure 1.1. Aesthetics can incorporate everything from culture, fashion, and education to personal experience

Often, we're unsure *why* it is we find these objects beautiful. Why is the Grand Canyon awe-inspiring? Why do some people get all choked up by a sunset? Why are we floored by some designs and not by others? What's the difference between pretty and beautiful, or good and great? It's safe to say we all want to make designs that are intuitive and encourage interaction, but what is intuition and how do we foster it for our target audience? We want our designs to be creative and inspiring, but what makes a design creative? And if a design is creative, does it naturally follow that it's inspiring? How do we shape a user's initial reaction to our design and generate the interest and trust that will make them want to use our site? We'll cover this shortly. First, we need to try to understand perception. Too often we seek the quick answer to everything. Quick solutions fail to promote understanding, which is what's needed to form your own answers. A deeper understanding of any subject is helpful. When I first started working as a front-end developer, I knew very little about JavaScript. All I could do to power complex interactions in my applications was to implement other developers' jQuery plugins. After months of being frustrated by my inability to make significant changes to those plugins, I took the plunge and really learned about JavaScript. Now, not only do I edit plugins, I write my own. I truly understand what I'm looking at when I write and read JavaScript. Perhaps many of you have had similar experiences. Eventually, most of us reach a point in our careers where we want a deeper understanding of why and how we perform tasks. It's more than just knowing what the best practices are; it's about *why* they exist. For design, that means learning about the theory and process of design. Voltaire may have seen little beauty in the world, but we know better. A keen eye and an informed mind can find all the beauty that the world has to offer. And if we're unable to find beauty, we can create it ourselves.

What is beauty?

Beauty is mostly subjective, so it's hard to define accurately and objectively. *The Oxford English Dictionary* has a fairly good definition of beauty: [“a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight.”](#) Really, this is fancy talk for saying something looks good, but it still stops short of identifying the actual characteristics that result in “beauty.” Traditionally, qualities like symmetry and harmony are cited as in the formation of beauty, and certain proportions do seem to effect a pleasing shape. Pythagoras' **golden ratio** is the mathematical example often cited to formulate an object of beautiful proportions. Numerically, the golden ratio is $1 : 1.61803398874989 \dots$ (a recurring number), and it works like this: if a rectangle is formed using this ratio, where $x=1$ and $y=1.61803398874989 \dots$, and a square is placed inside the rectangle, the left-over rectangle's measurements are set to the golden ratio, as illustrated in [Figure 1.2](#).



$1 : 1.6180339887 \dots$

Figure 1.2. Placing a square in a golden ratio rectangle creates another golden ratio rectangle

This offsetting of squares within the so-called “golden rectangle” can go on forever, the result of which is a near-perfect logarithmic spiral, as seen in [Figure 1.3](#). Very cool.

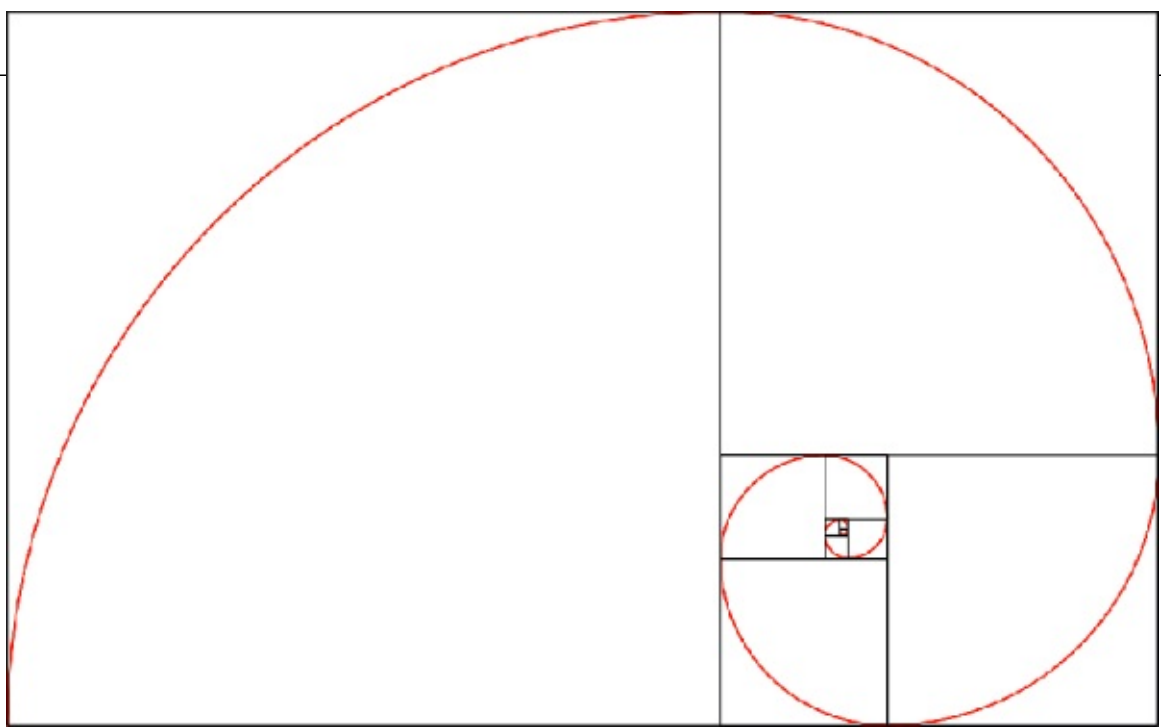


Figure 1.3. The golden ratio is considered inherently beautiful because of its apparent perfection

When I was taking figure-drawing classes in college, I was taught that the golden ratio can be frequently found in the human form. A perfectly proportioned face has many structures that can be measured with the golden ratio. Leonardo da Vinci's proportions for his famous Vitruvian Man—see in [Figure 1.4](#)—are built around the golden ratio. Maybe that's why we find the ratio so compelling: it's a mathematical reflection of ourselves.

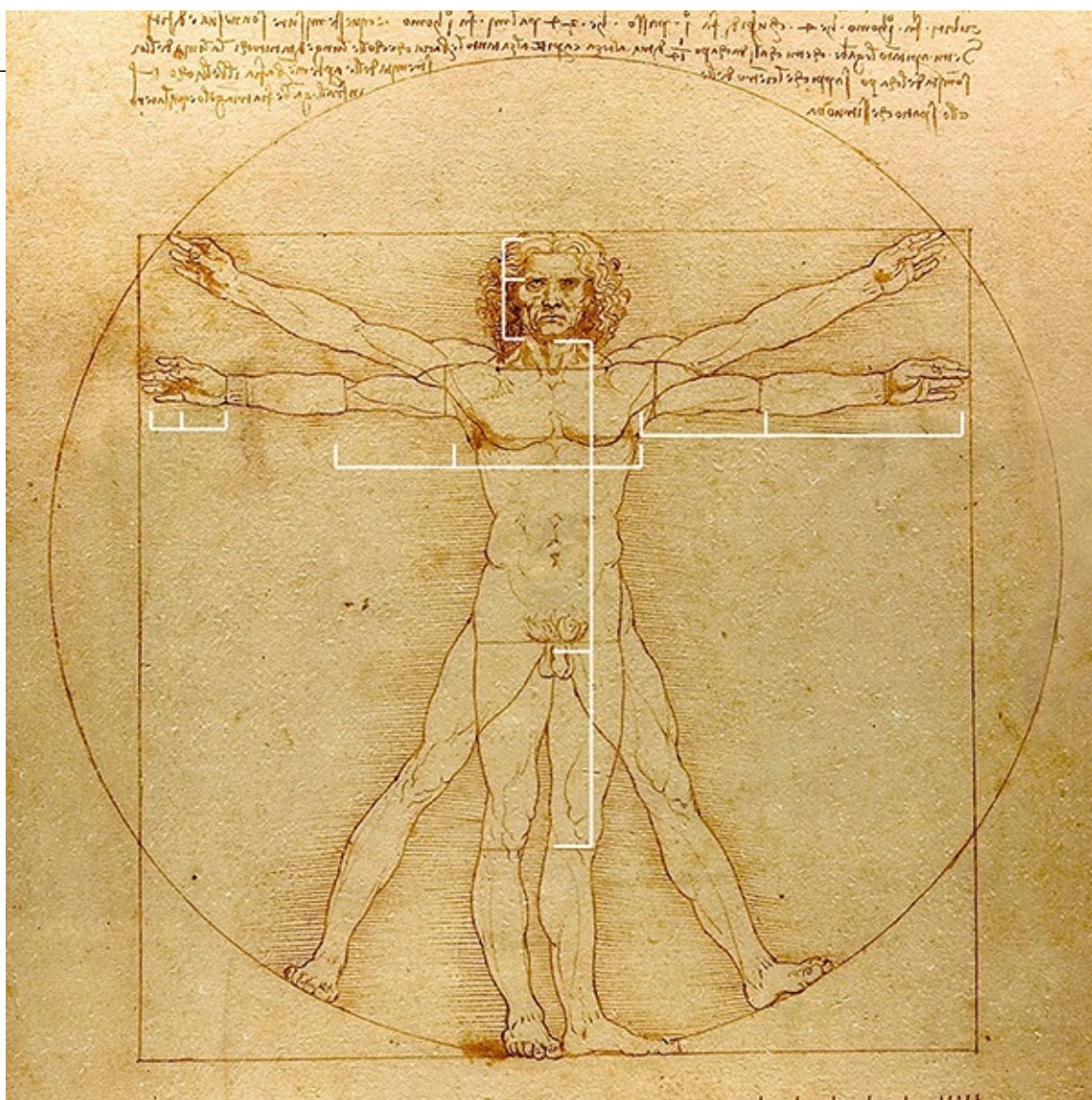


Figure 1.4. da Vinci's Vitruvian Man presents the golden ratio within the human form

The Eye of the Beholder

Let's face it, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? So, how do we reconcile our subjective impression of beauty with its objective qualities? Most of us can spy an object and think, "that's beautiful," but how many of us can give a purely objective reason why one item is beautiful and not another? We all have a unique view on what's beautiful, steeped in our individual opinions and perception. We're guided by our personal experiences, culture, and understanding of design. Music is a good example for how culture and personal experience shape our opinions about beauty. Western music is based around a 12-tone musical system that, while versatile, has a particular character. Some Eastern music uses a completely different system with notes and patterns that may sound dissonant and off-putting to Westerners. That's not to say that one musical system is more beautiful than another; they just have different criteria for beauty. Even within the same culture, beauty is subjective. Last year, on a cold winter morning, I took a picture of freshly fallen snow, seen in [Figure 1.5](#). The morning was quiet and still, and no one had walked through the field across the street just yet. I wanted to capture the beauty of that moment, so I took a photo with my iPhone. Later, I showed the picture to a friend who missed the snowfall, and all he had to say was "bleak." Because he hadn't undergone the same experience, he was unable to see the reasons why I still found the image lovely. Instead of a serene moment, he saw a gray, lifeless scene.



Figure 1.5. Serene or lifeless, depending on your view

A Refined Sense of Beauty

There are designers who might believe they're more in tune with what looks good or is visually effective, as it's part of their job. Designers are certainly more familiar with the principles and elements of design, as most have had some formal design education and employ on a daily basis what they've learned. But that's not to say we have some innate sixth sense that allows us to assess beauty better than everyone else. Most designers have an intuitive approach to their work. Over time, we've made assumptions about good design based upon our tastes and personal experiences. Trends also play a big role in design choices. As I'm writing this book, condensed typefaces, ribbon headers, and vintage textures are popular. But while they all generally look nice as [Figure 1.6](#) shows, including any of these visual treatments in a design offers no certainty that a site will be effective or exceptional.



Figure 1.6. Following a trend is no guarantee of a good design

I've talked to many designers about how they go about their process, and the answers are mostly

similar. With a little variance, designers fall into the same camp: they are “pixel pushers.” It seems that most of us start our designs by slapping down a few elements and shifting them around. We build them slowly by responding to what feels right, working with little unexpected surprises that come out of intuitive exploration. The design process is essentially trial and error—plus gut reaction. Sometimes, we’re forced to work within the constraints of the project—such as brand guidelines, technical limitations, or client direction—but we tend to take a free hand with our designs. Eventually, the elements settle into place and a design is born. To a certain degree, we all employ this method. Most of the idea creation process is internal and unscripted. I’m sure that many intuitive designers start with wireframing and thumbnails—more on that in [Chapter 4](#)—but it’s often quick and dirty. The amount of time allocated to the predesign phase is only a small part of the total process.

“I generally start in Photoshop, just pushing pixels around and getting a feel for proportion and everything. I may chase down some dead ends and get stuck, and then I’ll switch over to actual production, like exploring code and seeing what’s possible. What I discover there will feed back into the design process and everything will start to inform everything else.”

--Shaun Inman

What’s interesting about this approach is that it differs very little from what nondesigners do when they evaluate beauty. Gut reactions happen, by definition, unconsciously. The only real difference is that designers are trying to shape something that resembles beauty, while everyone else is trying to recognize it when they see it. But there’s a problem in that purely intuitive design is mostly uncontrolled. Now, great work can come from a freewheeling process, but it has a tendency to keep us in our comfort zone and reinforce habits. We all do it. If we are short on time or have little to go on, the temptation is to pull something from our bag of tricks and slap a result together. This tends to happen because our process is so internal. And the more internal our design process, the more likely we are to put our designs on rails, forcing every project to accommodate our personal conventions.

Tip: Know Your Audience

Sometimes it’s okay to be completely subjective. When your audience’s tastes closely resemble your own, appealing to their sensibilities can help you communicate more effectively. They’ll appreciate your choice of imagery, language, and interaction between elements because their subjective experience closely resembles your own. Still, keep in mind that even great design—such as [Figure 1.7](#)—will fail if created for the wrong audience.



Figure 1.7. Designs that appeal to a narrow audience can be wonderful to some and off-putting to others

When most people think of the term “beauty,” they’re really thinking of “pretty.” This conception of beauty emphasized in education, design, and art is easy to understand because it comes naturally. Our appreciation of beauty, for the most part, is innate. We see an object and we have feelings about it. It is natural and automatic. Culture and environment might change the criteria we use to evaluate beauty, but if it’s there to see, we can’t help but see it. The seeing part is important. Most of our conscious and unconscious reactions to the world are a response to what we see. That our strongest sense of beauty should be created through vision, as represented in [Figure 1.8](#), is a natural extension of how we perceive most things in the world around us.

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