

**Rhythm in Painting**Jasmine Rajbhandari^{#*}[#]Lecturer (Painting) at Lalitkala Campus, Tribhuvan University.^{*}Corresponding Author: byakhyaa@gmail.com**Citation:** Rajbhandari, J. (2024). Rhythm in Painting. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 6(2), 21-28.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v6i2.84560>**Abstract**

Rhythm is a vital aspect of painting. It creates a pictorial language. Form, line, and color can establish rhythm, which imparts kinetic energy to the artwork. Many writers draw parallels between moods, sounds, and music with rhythm, believing that the rhythmic power of painting engages the viewer's mind, yielding aesthetic pleasure. This rhythm is fashioned by the artist's imagination, which transforms into the pictorial elements of the artwork and travels from the painting to the viewer. It makes the painting dynamic and exciting. Western artists implement rhythm in subjective paintings, while Nepali artists regard rhythm as an essential compositional tool to enhance their work. They experiment with techniques such as Random rhythm, Regular rhythm, Flowing rhythm, and Progressive rhythm. These approaches successfully communicate rhythmic movements to the viewer and bring joy. Rhythms hold both aesthetic and technical value in painting. Rhythm can be recognized not only by repetition and sequence but also flows through everything in the world, integrating into one's mental or spiritual being. I explored the topic using secondary sources and a qualitative method. This paper addresses the types of rhythm and investigates its applications in the artworks of various artists.

Keywords: flowing rhythm, progressive rhythm, random rhythm, regular rhythm, painting, rhythm.

Introduction

Rhythm in painting and design refers to the relationship between elements that creates a sense of harmony. Rhythm can be observed in patterns, relationships between colors and shapes, and the repetition of lines and forms. Rhythms guide the viewer's eye around a piece instead of allowing it to settle on a particular focal point. Rhythm is established when one or more design elements are used repeatedly to evoke a feeling of organized movement. Rhythm generates a mood similar to that of music or dance in painting. To keep rhythm engaging and dynamic, variety is essential. We can also create rhythm through the repetition of a pattern. A single moving brushstroke can establish rhythm. We can find rhythm in nature, as artists often draw inspiration and characters from it. This inspiration aids them in creating rhythm in their artwork. If we observe nature intently, we will discover rhythm in all things, from the branches of trees to the murmur of rivers and waterfalls. Rhythm can also be seen in the flight of birds in the sky and across the mountain ranges. Even human beings' heartbeats possess rhythm. Rhythm creates a beat that invites the viewer to embark on a journey through the artist's soul displayed on the canvas, helping the eye travel to its point of focus. The rhythmic repetition of color in painting elicits mood or emotion. Rhythmic lines used in artwork resemble music or dance, providing aesthetic pleasure. Artists utilize organized geometric elements or organic shapes that are evenly spaced and slightly altered each time they are used, guiding our eyes from the bottom of the



canvas to the top and from the foreground to the background, translating the nervous energy conveyed by the artist into the work. This produces the overall energy of a piece of art. “Plato (427–347 BC) gives new meaning to the notion of rhythm when he applies ‘rhythmos’ to the motion of the body while dancing: he speaks of rhythm as ‘organized motion’ (Lilja and Hopsch 2007 p.362). Xie He, a 6th-century art critic from China, stated that without Spirit Resonance, there was no need to look further. Spirit Resonance is an important aesthetic term used in the Chinese six principles of painting, referring to the life motion. Painting derives its life from the artist conveying a sense of movement through their energy. They assert that life in painting can only be achieved through movement created by rhythm. Bose (1999) states:

Rhythm, which emerges from the initial aesthetic impulse, may be called life-rhythm; it holds within it the specific features and attributes necessary to give body to that impulse. In a painting, its presence can be sensed in a dynamic line, through which you sense its primal pulse-beats. By virtue of this line, the painting gains an integral unity and distinction (p.31).

He talks about life rhythm created by an artist’s inner feelings, which can be transformed to the viewer through elements used in art by him, like dynamic line or form. Rhythm is an important principle of art that helps to create organic unity in art. The perfect use of rhythm provides aesthetic pleasure to the viewers. Minissale (2020) writes, “Rhythm is an essential way in which the brain and body are connected to the world, and this is particularly so in the world of abstract art” (p.2). Psychologists Becher (2011) studied and tested that our speech and our body motions exhibit wave-like characteristics that are both personal and cultural ... (qtd in Minissale, 2020, p.3). Paintings do not move or make a sound, intervals and changes in volume and tempo may be felt as rhythmic shifts in time and place. A well-known perceptual principle, the ‘law of Common fate’, holds that two or more lines with similar features placed next to each other will suggest that they are moving together, when compared to other details in time and place (pp. 2-6).

Tosaki (2017) discusses the Neo-Plastic theory of rhythm written in the essay ‘The New Plastic in Painting’ (1917) by Mondrian. Mondrian, according to Tosaki, formally puts an end to the naturalistic rhythm. Mondrian says rhythm is ‘interiorized’ by opposition, which means it is part of one’s own mental or spiritual being. It’s not that rhythm can be created just by repetition or by placing it in a sequence. According to Mondrian’s plastic theory, rhythm can be created in a painting according to plastic unity. There is rhythm throughout all time and space, and the entire cosmic system. In ancient cities, modern cities, and all human activities, he found a rhythm that he called the fluid of life or cosmic rhythm.

Gaiger (2019), in the chapter “Pictorial Experience and the Perception of Rhythm,” gives a view on how a painting may have rhythm. He compares the rhythmic temporal pattern of sounds with rhythmic spatial patterns of colours and says that time is an important aspect of art, as it creates rhythm between the work of art and human experience (p. 311). “Kandinsky, in his book *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), explores the expressive quality of line, form, and colour as independent factors, and rhythm began to acquire special importance as a means of designating the formal properties of an artwork, often in contradiction to its represented content” (qtd in “The philosophy of rhythm” p309). This concept about rhythm is supported by English critic Roger Fry, as well as by comparing the rhythm created by such elements of painting with music. Gaiger (2018) writes that Roger Fry said that particular rhythm of line and particular harmonies of colour have their spiritual correspondences, and tend to arouse now one set of feelings, now

another. The artist plays upon us by the rhythm of line, by colour, by abstract form, and by the quality of the matter he employs (p.4). Many writers compare the rhythm created by lines, forms, and colours of painting with music. In the context of Indian painting, linear Beauty is created by rhythmic and graceful lines in all Rajasthani paintings. The thin lines are full of softness, which are used in plants, flowers, animals, and human figures to create rhythm. Sharma (2021) prioritizes rhythm by quoting that walking is different from dancing because of rhythm. A poem differs from everyday speech because of rhythm. Without rhythm, both art and life appear to be dry, discordant, and lifeless (p.13).

There are four different kinds of rhythms in painting. These include progressive, flowing, regular, and random rhythms. Random rhythm is created by repeating elements with no specific regular interval. The spacing could be a millimeter here, a centimeter there, while the elements could be all over the place (Sok, 2023). Random rhythms can be seen in the motion of vehicles, falling snow, and stones on a beach. Regular rhythm is similar to a heartbeat in that it repeatedly occurs at the same intervals. A flowing rhythm shows the repeated elements following bends, curves, and undulations. In nature, you can see this in the waves on a beach or dunes. As artists, we can mimic nature by making wonderful patterns of elements with flowing rhythm. We can make a progressive rhythm simply by changing one characteristic of a motif as we repeat it. We could draw a series of circles, one above the other, making each lower one larger. Various artists in both Western and Eastern art use such rhythms to develop their styles.

Research Methodology

The research area of this paper is rhythm in art, which has been explored, giving special emphasis on rhythmic features and their connection to the art of some well-known artists. How artists develop their unique style by using rhythm as an important tool is discussed in this paper. Books and articles are the secondary sources that have been used to create a background for the study. Works of art are primary sources that have been analyzed and interpreted. The exploration is based on qualitative research since the interpretation of artworks can be plural and multiple.

Interpretation and Discussion

Rhythm in painting is an important aspect. Feelings, experiences, forms, colours, tensions gain aesthetic value only when they get into rhythmic movement. Rhythm is the harmonious expression of aesthetic sensibility. When a creative work's aim, technique, and tool work unitedly within a single rhythm, its energy never goes to waste (Bose, 1999, p. 35).

Figure1 *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*



Note. By Katsushika Hokusai, ca.1830-32, Woodblock print in the colour woodcut print

'The Great Wave' (figure 1) of the great Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), collected in many museums, shows the power of the wave through the rhythmic line created by the artist. In this linear work, a wave was created by outlines. White and blue colour shapes representing water create a random and flowing rhythm. These rhythmic waves are shown as bigger than Mount Fuji in the background. I think through rhythmic waves, he wants to show the power of ocean waves more

than the mountain. The whole wave occupies the upper left side of the picture surface to the bottom part of the right side. The boat's repetition in the same space interval creates a spiral

composition, creating both perspective and regular rhythm. In oriental philosophy, the artist shows human beings are inferior to nature, so humans in rafting boats are shown very tiny by the artist. They look like the same figure is repeated by the artist, creating a design-like effect. Although the elements and colours are very few in the work, the rhythmic power of waves successfully creates a spirit resonance.

When we talk about rhythm in painting, we cannot forget Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, *Cornfield*, *Cypress Tree*, and the *Starry Night*. In the painting *Starry Night* (Figure 2), Van Gogh created swirls, the horizontal rhythm in the sky, by repeating juxtaposed of broken brush strokes.

Figure 2 *Starry Night*, Van Gogh



Note. By Van Gogh, 1889, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Figure 3 *The dance*



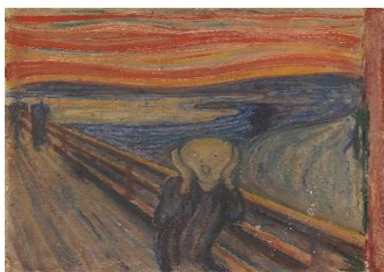
Note. By Henry Matisse, 1909, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg

He creates a moving circular form around the star and moon. This balanced regular rhythm in brush stroke and complementary colour used in the sky creates textural

vibration. Although he used the brushstroke in the same interval of time, he creates irregular rhythm in circular form around the star and moon, as they are different in size. We can find expertise of Van Gogh in balancing his eye-striking swirls of sky as he broke down it by the vertical rhythm of a moving dark cypress tree in the left foreground of the painting. This single dark rhythmic form of the tree plays an important part in the whole composition of the painting. It opposes the whole swirl of the sky and breaks the monotonous movement.

The Dance (Figure 3) (1909), painted by Matisse, becomes a memorable painting to the viewer because of the rhythm created by simplified nude figures. In this painting, the whole canvas is occupied by five distorted nudes holding each other's hands. They create a circular grid and make viewers feel like they are also dancing. The essence of joy is created by the rhythmic, flat-coloured figure. Although only three colours are used in this

Figure 4 *The Scream*



Note. By Edward Munch, 1893, oil, tempera, pastel, and crayon on cardboard, National Museum of Oslo, Norway

painting, dynamism is brought only by the repetition of irregular rhythm created through the human figure.

The Scream (Figure 4) (1893) by Edward Munch is famous for creating

Figure 5 *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2*



Note. By Marcel Duchamp, 1912, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

an illusion of noise to the viewer experiencing synesthesia. The work becomes more expressive through its rhythmic lines of colour used in the sky, which come to reach the figure in the front part of the painting. Viewers' eyes go to the top part of the painting, where the clouds are coloured blood red and

come down slowly towards the screaming figure because of the rhythmic purple form. The screaming human figure is not anatomically correct, but it is expressed powerfully as it is distorted rhythmically. The psychological condition of the human mind, which we call anxiety after seeing the setting sun in the evening, was captured by the artist through rhythmic forms.

When talking about the illusion of kinetic moment created by rhythmic painting, it is important to mention the futurist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No.2* (Figure 5). He repeated multiple fragmented planes to create a sense of motion. It is a distorted figure in analytical cubistic style. The fragments, which look like fragments of a ladder, start from the right of the image and go diagonally to the left, ending at the bottom right side of the image. To create rhythm, he used arc lines to show pelvic motion. Inspired by the rhythm of stroboscopic motion photography, he created motion. Even though the title says nude, the entire painting is an abstract composition, which makes the viewer feel a rhythmic form.

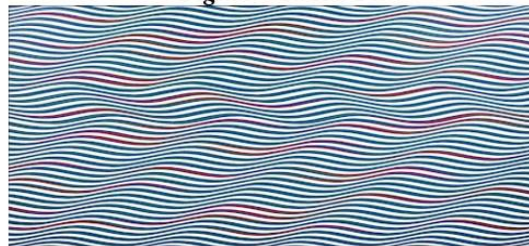
When we talk about progressive rhythm, we cannot forget to discuss Kandinsky's geometrical abstract painting, 'Several Circles'

Figure 6 *Several Circles*



Note. By Vassily Kandinsky, 1926, oil on canvas, Guggenheim, Museum of New York

Figure 7 *Streak 2*



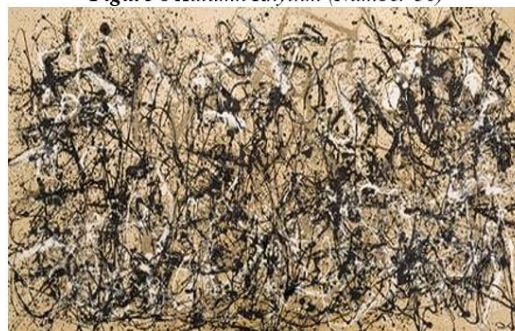
Note. By Bridget Riley, 1979, Acrylic on canvas, located at the Monsoon Art Collection in London

(Figure 6). To develop his own pictorial vocabulary, he used several sizes of circles on a black background; these shrinking and expanding circles bring rhythm and repetition of the same form but in many sizes and colours; viewers' feelings go up and down.

In the history of art, kinetic energy in painting is successfully crafted by the Op artist. They create rhythm through optical illusion by repetition and arranging certain lines and geometric forms on the surface of the painting. Bridget Riley is another famous artist who creates a sensation of speed by repeating the same kind of flowing line in her work, *Streak 2* (Figure 7). The illusion of a wave-like rhythm is created by long, coloured, thin lines that occupy the whole canvas and give the feeling of a flowing rhythm. She is always successful in creating optical illusions of movement through her formal device, which consists of rhythmic, straight or curved, vertical or horizontal lines.

Jackson Pollock pioneered the technique of rhythm in his poured painting style. In his painting *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* (Figure 8), he fills rhythmic lines with black, brown, and white colours by using psychomotor energy, an automatic technique of surrealism. By using dripping and pouring from all sides of the unprimed canvas, he creates a variety of lines. This spontaneous expression of emotion creates rhythm in chance.

Figure 8 *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*



Note. By Jackson Pollock, 1950, Enamel paint on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

We have discussed some of the Western arts mentioned above with rhythm; now we will discuss their use in our Nepali art.

Rhythm is used in every form of traditional Nepali Pauwa painting. The contour of figurines of deities, subsidiary deities, asanas, mudras, motifs, and design in the background, and the devotee's depiction in the lower part of the composition, has rhythm. In the Pauwa painting *Vasudhara* (Figure 9) of the 14th century, the main central figure of Vasudhara in yellow, subsidiary gods, and yakshas are distorted to create rhythmic, elegant figures. The floral motifs, lotus, and even the posture of Rajlilashan of the main deity have a linear rhythm. Buddhas in the top part and devotees in the lower part are a repeated figure that creates a regular rhythm. Multi-tasking six hand gestures of the main deities also gives the rhythmic vibes of the flower, creating a circular grid. By using hierarchical proportion according to the rules of Nepali traditional painting, the artist creates a rhythmic grid of composition, as the main deity is bigger than the two figures on the two sides of the deity, which are depicted in smaller sizes. Therefore, the viewer's eyes get the feeling of going up and down, like looking at a mountain, as they move from the left side of the figure to the right side while perceiving it.



Figure 9 *Vasudhara*

Note. 14th C, Ground Mineral Pigments on Cloth, Jucker Collection of Himalayan Paintings

Nepali artist Radheshyam Mulmi is famous for using flowing rhythm in his paintings. Movement is the main essence of his work. He has used repetition and a pattern of an object that creates the movement or the visual flow within a certain piece. In some of his works, we can find a regular rhythm. In his work *Confusion* (Figure 10), we find flowing rhythm movement. It is suggested by repeating the organic shapes of fish and water. Fish flow from the left corner to the downward diagonal. Through irregular repetition of fish, he was able to create a flowing rhythm.

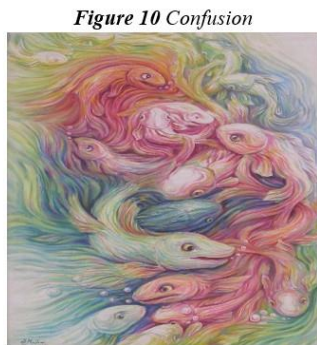


Figure 10 *Confusion*
Note. By Radheshyam Mulmi, 2000, oil on canvas, Kathmandu



Figure 11 *Untitled*
Note. By Birendra Pratap, 2014, Acrylic, pen, and Ink on paper, Kathmandu

It is also supported by harmonious and melting lines and colours of water.

We can find the evidence of rhythm in Birendra Pratap's painting, *Untitled* (figure 11). The small creatures that come from his imagination look like insects. They are created by the process, which he says is pure psychic automatism. Using pen and ink on paper, he produces whatever forms his brain desires. Pande (2015) writes that

Singh's skill in his preferred medium of pen and ink is apparent in conveying forms, animate or inanimate, with just a few strokes of the pen, making the sureness of his hand and the alertness of his eyes apparent in his diverse drawings. These bizarre forms create a rhythmic line around the sun-like form on the right side of the painting. The repetition of abstract black forms draws attention to the orange-coloured sun-like form.

Dhumrabinayak (Figure 12) is a beautiful painting painted by Shashikala Tiwari. She explores the religious image of Lord Ganesha in a pansy flower. To achieve harmony, she synthesizes the religious subject with nature. Several layers of colour hues create a transparent effect that merges with Ganesha's central figure. The use of white in the head and trunk of Ganesha against green creates a tranquil rhythmic movement. This rhythm attracts the viewer's attention towards the centre of the canvas.

Figure 12 *Dhumrabinayak*



Note. By Shashi Kala Tiwari, 1998, Acrylic, Kathmandu

Figure 13 *Horses on a line*



Note. By Shashi Shah, 2016, Acrylic, Kathmandu

Shashi Shah is famous for his horse painting, which he equated with

the Kalki avatar of lord Vishnu, Buddha, and Narsimha. *Horse on a Line* (Figure 13) is a painting in which he explored rhythm. He stated that artwork should communicate with viewers through its visual power and form. So, he was successful in communicating rhythm and speed in this painting. The red line starts from one side of the canvas and

ends on another part, giving the feeling of rhythm, so the viewer's eyes move from one corner to another corner and end. Aristotle once said that every work of art should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The same kind of perfection we can find in Shah's painting, in which there is a depiction of dynamic horses created by the rhythmic distortion of white horses in a spiral composition. The red rhythmic line emphasizes and makes the figure of the horses more vivid. Despite the use of non-colours like white, black, and grey, the composition is based on a rhythmic line that resembles a large red cloth-like form floating in the air; this infuses the painting with a kinetic energy, making the painting look powerful.

In the painting *Tolerance of the river* (Figure 14), Ragini is rhythmically showing river goddesses who are unhappy because the water is polluted by human beings. Here she personified the river as a female whose hands and legs are covered with gloves and float in rhythm, and the black contour and several rhythmic lines outside the figure give it linear beauty. She rhythmically distorted the goddess figure and also used lines outside the figure just to create the feeling of water. The red colour of the third eye on the head of the main figure is also

Figure 14 *Tolerance of the river*



Note. By Ragini Upadhyaya Grela, 2011, Acrylic, Kathmandu

elongated towards the lower right corner. These lines create texture around the figure, and to intensify it, she used flat blue colour all over the canvas, which symbolizes water. Through the single figure, she is successful in composing the whole surface, which makes the viewers' eyes flow from one part to another. The organic simplicity of the figure has powerful expression.



Conclusion

Rhythm creates movement in painting. Rhythm can be created in painting by repeating elements in variable sizes. Rhythm can be controlled by an experienced artist by balanced colour, flowing line and form, and proportionate division of space. It helps to guide the viewer's eye around a piece rather than allowing the eye to settle on a particular focal point. It creates a mood like music or dancing. It connects the viewer with the painting and generates vibration. It is a state in which opposing forces or actions are balanced so that one is not stronger or greater than the other. Rhythm can be observed not only by repetition and sequence; it flows in everything in this world, which becomes part of one's own mental or spiritual being. The rhythm in painting creates interpersonal relationships. This type of spiritual rhythm is practiced by both Western painters and Eastern painters. Nepali artists practiced rhythm in painting so that they could connect their spirit, inner value, and meaning with the viewers.

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