

Notan

Studies in Contrast



Notan is the term used by the Japanese to express the principle of “dark-light” as an element of design. This concept illustrates the interaction of positive and negative space, emphasizing that one can not exist without the other.

A common symbol that illustrates this concept of “dark-light” is the yin-yang symbol, consisting of a balanced mirror image of black and white.

But the principle of Notan can be found in art from around the world; the graphic designs of Pueblo pottery in New Mexico, molas (appliqué fabric collages) from Chile and Peru, and paper cutouts from Poland and China are but a few examples.

We can also see this principle at work in the everyday objects we use in our classroom. For example, scissors are designed with spaces to fit our fingers, using negative space for utility. It is this union of opposites, where negative space is not seen as empty, but essential, that defines the principle of Notan.

Student Notan Studies

I adapted an exercise from *Notan: The Dark-Light Principle of Design* by Dorr Bothwell and Marlys Mayfield, for use in the classroom using black-and-white construction paper to illustrate the principles of negative and

positive space. Students start with a 6" square sheet of black construction paper and a larger square of white paper at least 14" square.

Using X-Acto knives or scissors, students cut into the center of the paper using simple shapes. Once the shape is cut out and removed from the black construction paper square, students flip it out into space to mirror

the negative space. They continue to cut out all the shapes before gluing these on the white paper to complete the composition.

Materials

- 6" (15 cm) square black construction paper
- 14" (35.5 cm) or larger square of white drawing paper
- X-Acto knife or scissors
- glue stick

Creating a Notan Composition

1. Place black construction paper square in center of white square page. Do not glue.
2. Draw organic or geometric shapes on the black construction paper prior to cutting the design. I recommend not cutting designs on the corners; only cut along the straight edge for ease.
3. Once the design has been drawn,

cut out the shapes using the X-Acto knife or scissors.

4. After the entire design has been cut out, center and glue the large black square in the center of the white paper.
5. Continue by gluing the cut-out black shapes onto the white paper, flipping the designs so they mirror the negative cut-out space. Make sure to have the “flipped” images align with the edge of the larger black square.
6. Continue until all cut-out shapes are glued on to the white drawing paper. 🌀

Resources

Bothwell, Dorr and Marlys Mayfield. *Notan: The Dark-Light Principle of Design*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1991.

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students generalize about the effects of visual structures and functions and reflect upon these effects in their own work.

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