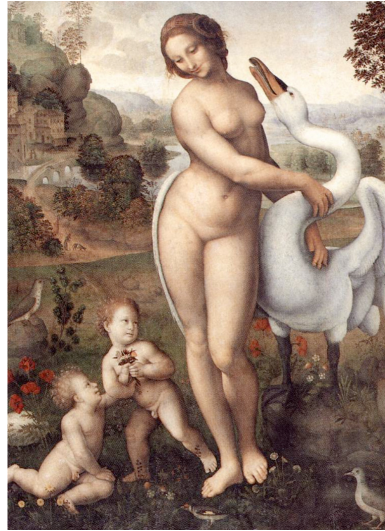


Contrapposto



Contrapposto. The first concept for posing is so important in art and art history that it has a name.

Contrapposto is a posture or pose, originated by the ancient Greeks, in which the standing human figure is posed such that the weight rests on one leg (called the *engaged leg*), freeing the other leg, which is bent at the knee. With the weight shift, the hips, shoulders, and head tilt, suggest relaxation with the subtle movement that denotes life.

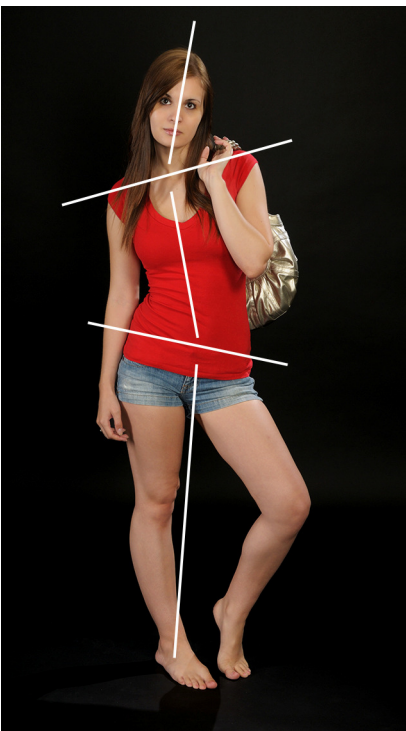


In the two images here, notice the almost identical position of the feet and legs. The first image is from Leonardo da Vinci's *Leda and the Swan*. The second is Bertel Thorvaldsen's *Venus*. There is no doubt about which leg is the *engaged leg*.

We are so used to *contrapposto* in images that we usually dismiss a non-*contrapposto* image as being amateur or even comic. (There are exceptions, of course.)

The simplest explanation for the effectiveness of a *contrapposto* pose is that the subject looks capable of normal, fluid human movement, and may even seem about to actually move.

A more complex explanation for the effectiveness of the pose is that it throws the body into a slight "S", giving the image some aesthetic interest. Note, the tilt of the shoulders and hips in the marked image, and note, too, how there is no direct vertical line from top to bottom.



Top: A less classical image, but, again, almost identical position of the legs.

Bottom: The hint of an "S" curve gives the image more visual interest.

The S Curve is also a traditional art concept in Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture where the figure's body and posture is depicted like a sinuous or serpentine "S". It is an extension of *contrapposto*.

A *contrapposto* posture seems to come naturally to the subject, once it is suggested. Indeed, it seems that young girls especially fall readily into *contrapposto*; they must be getting coaching for their soccer and team shots.

It's not necessary to always use the same posture, of course. The key detail is that the weight rests on the one leg. Often, if the knee is bent at all, it is only subtly bent.

When I am thinking about guiding the subject into a *contrapposto* posture, I usually check to see if I can see at least one heel. Notice how the subject is *showing heel* in every picture on this page.

An awareness of this basic artistic concept will change the quality of your images. Even when your family is standing in front of that museum or cathedral, the shot will become more compelling if you introduce this small touch of artistic fluidity.

