

Proem

MAGISTER: Draw me a circle.

Wonderful as it is, a circle is not a design (Fig. 1.1a). It has every angle and no angle. It is not right-side-up or upside-down. It is not aslant, so it cannot be put straight. It is zero to infinity in its angles, with none being set with which to build a proportion useful in design.

MAGISTER: Draw me a straight line.

True as it may be, a line is not a design either (Fig. 1.1b). It has an equal angle on either of its sides—a straight angle. There is nothing other than the-same-again, undifferentiated. It is like zero-to-infinity again, but in halves, and still not capable of yielding proportion good for design.

MAGISTER: Draw me two straight lines.

Unless they intersect, or at least touch, they will not be good for making a design either (Fig. 1.1c). But two straight lines can produce design, and in fact can hardly fail to produce design when they do intersect. At various lengths, and at various angles relative to each other, they set relations in both angles and lengths.

MAGISTER: Draw me two straight lines intersecting at right angles.

The simplest design will feature two straight lines, when they intersect and when the angles of their intersection are all equal (Fig. 1.1d). One straight line bisecting another at right angles makes a cross-shape design.

MAGISTER: Draw me a circle with its centre at the intersection of two straight lines at right angles to one another.

Not a lot by way of design lies in that, as it stands (Fig. 1.1e). But from the ratios and the proportions implicit in cross and circle can be constructed designs of brooches and discs, many of them good, a few of them excellent.

MAGISTER: Draw me a square around that circle and cross, with sides equal in measure to the diameter of the circle.

Within this figure (Fig. 1.1f) lie ready to hand all the ratios and proportions needed for devising forms for standing crosses cut from stone, forms of ‘carpet-page’ illuminations in early Insular Gospel manuscripts, and models of the sectional divisions in manuscript texts of long religious poems in tenth-century English.

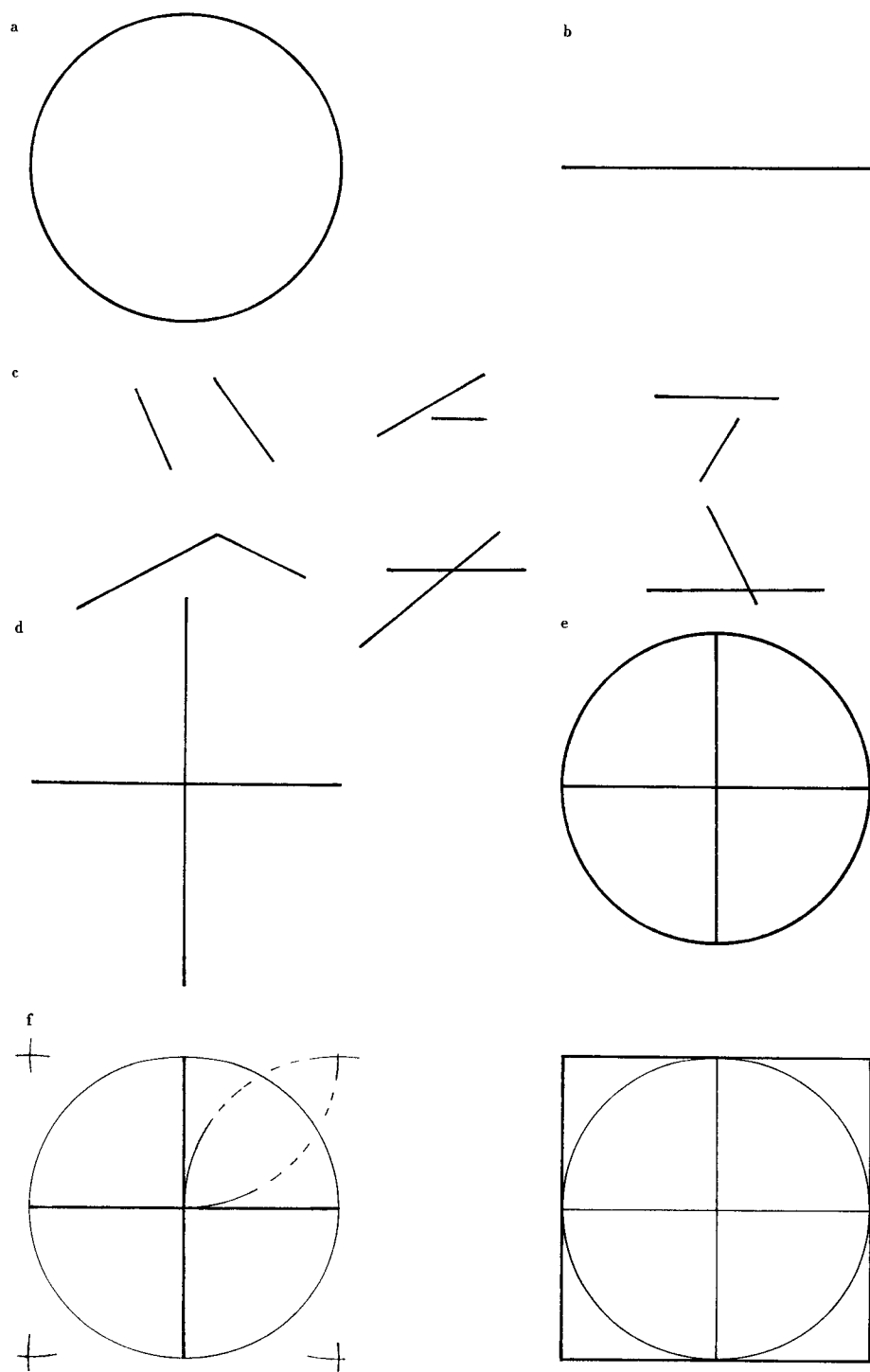


Fig. 1.1. Cross, circle, square as underlying design.