

FOCUS and BUTTONS

by Barbara Barrans

Artists are definitely tuned in to the concept of focus. The focal point—also called the "dominant visual" or where the viewer's eye is drawn first—is determined by many factors.

One intuitive principle is that a larger area of something will overpower a smaller area (the 50/50 split). But the eye can be tricked. Here are some overriding factors:

- A. A small area of strong color in a sea of dull color.
- B. A pictorial design in a sea of non-pictorial.
- C. Centered placement in the field.
- D. Object is placed off-center when everything else is centered.
- E. Circles are more dominant than any other shape (the target effect).
- F. A skewed object in a sea of 90-degree angles.
- G. A curvilinear object in a sea of linear, or vice-versa.
- H. Any color in a sea of contrasting color (or metal mounting).

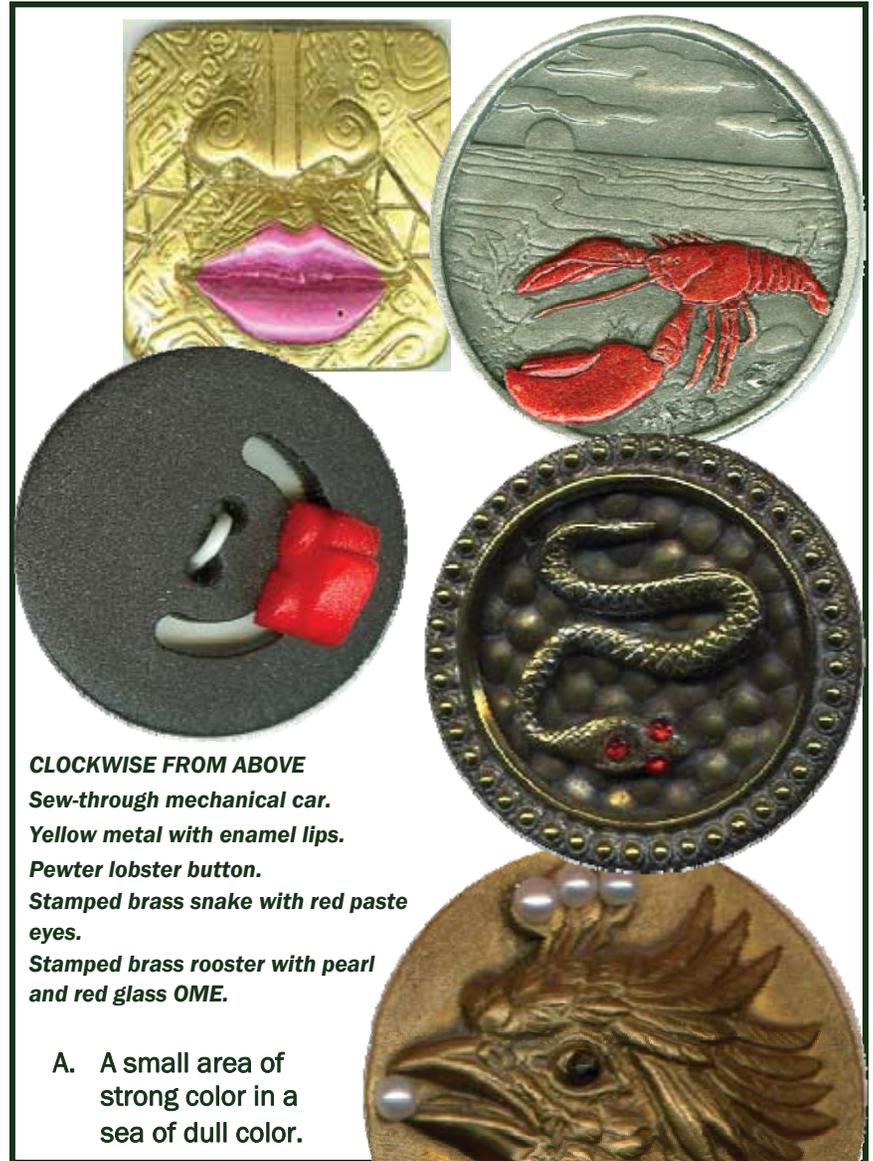
In other words, anything odd in a sea of sameness.

It is pretty easy to see how a focal point may be created through various means, often simply by pairing contrasting elements. Let's examine some buttons to illustrate these artistic principles.

The "more than 50%" rule has been employed by collectors for years and still works in many instances, but newer thinking now recognizes the impact of "the dominant visual."

This button can qualify under three of the "focus" factors:

- A. A small area of strong color in a sea of dull color.
- D. Object is placed Off-center when everything else is centered.
- H. Any color in a sea of contrasting color (or metal mounting).



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Sew-through mechanical car.

Yellow metal with enamel lips.

Pewter lobster button.

Stamped brass snake with red paste eyes.

Stamped brass rooster with pearl and red glass OME.

- A. A small area of strong color in a sea of dull color.

Focus comes into play frequently in the classification of our buttons. There are at least three places in the NBS Blue Book that specifically mention it.

The Blue Book states on Page 7, under a Q on Pictorials, "Unless specified by the award, buttons with multiple subjects are



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
 Stamped brass flowers in a sea
 of riveted cut steels.
 Stamped brass over bright
 cut pewter.
 Horses in a non-pictorial field.
 Stamped brass on a sea of
 Riveted cut steels.
 Horse over a lattice.

B. A pictorial design in a sea of non-pictorial.



*A square of white glass inset into
 black glass marbled with a white
 glass overlay.*

**C. Centered placement in the
 field.**



*Stamped floral brass
 with cut steel
 OME above an
 off-center
 circular disc
 enhanced
 with engraved
 lines.*

BOTTOM:
 Two moonglow
 buttons with
 gold luster,
 depicting
 a lizard and
 an anchor
 above
 waves.

**D. Object is placed off-center
 when everything else is centered.**



COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
 Stamped brass with cut steel OME depicting a lovely interrupted border of ivy.
 Pearl button with engraved disc.
 Cut steel OME off center with gold-filled lines.
 Tinned brass.
 Pearl center on a pearl button.
 Wood button with cut steel central OME and a border of fabulous animals and vines.

E. Circles are more dominant than any other shape (the target effect).



CENTER: Steel cheese with mice on a stamped brass button.
BELOW: Stamped & engraved brass with Mephisto skewed on the button axis.

BELOW: The bucket draws attention as it sways to the left.

F. A skewed object in a

used in the class of the predominant subject. For example, predominant flowers shown with small insects or birds are appropriate in Sec 19 (Plants), not in Sec 17 (Animals)."

So in this instance, the focus determines the pictorial class of a button.

Because focus is always in the eye of the beholder, as any competitor or judge can tell you, a caveat allows for "pictorial crossovers" in certain instances. The Blue Book continues with

"However, buttons that focus equally on more than one pictorial element are acceptable in all sections represented."

Thus a basket with flowers can be used as either an Object or Plants. Of course, this rule will never take all the gray area out of button classification, but it is a strong affirmation for ample benefit of the doubt (BOD) on the part of judges.

The principle of focus is also at play when determining the base material of a button, particularly materials mounted in metal and enameled metals. Enamel buttons are actually enamel (in the form of glass) fired onto metal. The amount of enameling covering the surface,

or how predominant the enameling appears in relationship to the visible metal, affects whether we class the button as “enamel” or metal. In the Appendix for Section 4 Enamels, the introduction states (it is underlined for emphasis) “In this section the enamel is the focus. Buttons with metal as the focus with enamel finish or borders are appropriate in Secs 10 (Metals) and/or 23 (Borders), but not in Sec 4.”

For this section, there is no crossover territory; either the button is viewed as a metal button with a minor amount of enamel decorative finish (DF,) or it is considered to be an enamel button. It can’t be both. It is up to the entrants (and judges) to make that determination before classing the button properly. Obviously, liberal BOD is called for because of that pesky “eye of the beholder” concept.

Another material section dominated by the focus principle is Section 8, Glass Mounted in Metal. The operative (underlined) rule is “Glass should be the focus of the button.” The introduction further states “Buttons with equal emphasis on glass and metal are acceptable here as well as in Sec 10 [Metals].” Thus, BOD is embedded into the definition for this type of button.

Of course, focus is pertinent for any material that is mounted in





metal. The same principle applies. Is the material dominant so that the button is a metal-mounted version of that base or is the button better classed as a metal button with some other material embellishment (OME)? Fortunately, BOD is built into the definition of OME. In the glossary for this term, it states *“When the focus of metal and embellishment is equal or not readily apparent, the button may represent both the metal class and the class of the embellishing material mounted in/on metal. A predominant material mounted in/on metal is not considered embellishment.”*

We love buttons mainly because of their diverse artistry. Have fun with these focus principles as they apply to your buttons, whether you are into competition or not. If you do compete, be aware of the “eye of the beholder” effect. Focus can be different for different people (especially judges). Be thoughtful about your competition tray choices. If the class is fairly specific, don’t choose a button that clearly fits into another category, even if it has some elements of the class you are covering. When there is any doubt, best to leave it out.

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