

The Language of Art

When discussing art, one often concentrates on content and form. Content refers the subject matter, story, or information that the artwork seeks to communicate to the viewer. Form is the purely visual aspect, the manipulation of the various elements and principles of design. Content is what the artists want to say, form is how they say it. In order to completely understand and discuss a work of art, it is advisable to thoroughly study the concepts involved in producing a final composition. These important concepts are the art elements and principles of design.

ART ELEMENTS

The art elements are the basic components used by the artist when producing works of art. They include color, line, shape, form, texture, and space.

Color

Colors are produced when light strikes an object and is reflected back to the eyes. Color has three properties: *hue*, *intensity*, and *value*.

Hue: The name of a color. One hue can be varied to produce an infinite number of colors. Colors are organized through the use of a *color wheel* (see color wheel chart).

- The *primary* colors (red, blue, and yellow) are mixed to form all other colors.
- The *secondary* colors (violet, orange, and green) are created when two primaries are mixed (red+blue=violet, blue+yellow=green, yellow+red=orange).
- The *intermediate* colors (sometimes referred to as *tertiary*) are created by mixing a primary and an adjacent secondary (blue+violet=blue-violet, red+violet=red-violet, red+orange=red-orange, and so on).
- Mixing all three primaries or secondaries, two complements, or all the colors on the color wheel creates *neutral* colors (gray and/or brown).
- *Complementary* colors lie across from each other on the color wheel and are considered to have the most extreme *contrast* to each other. The three primary complements are:
 - a) Blue—Orange
 - b) Red—Green
 - c) Yellow—Violet

When complementary colors are placed next to each other, they intensify each other's brightness (referred to as *simultaneous contrast*).

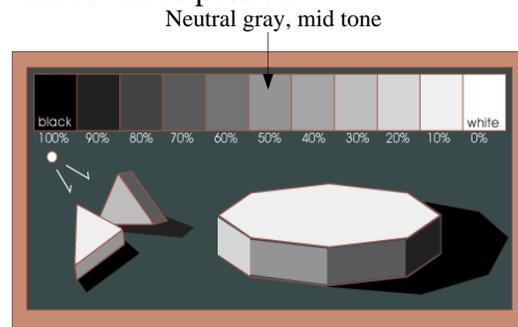
- *Warm* colors are those in which red or yellow are dominant. *Cool* colors are those in which blue is dominant and includes greens and violets. Warm and cool colors each take-up one-half of the color wheel (see chart). Grays and neutral colors may also be referred to as warm or cool depending on the amount of blue, red or yellow added to the hue.
- In general, warm colors tend to advance, while cool colors seem to recede.

Intensity: The brightness (*saturation*) of a color. A color is at full intensity only when pure and unmixed. Intensity may easily be confused with value being that adding black or white to a color can alter both its value and intensity.

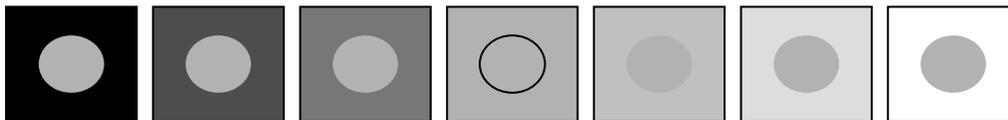
- There are two ways to change the intensity of a color without changing its value:
 - a) Mix the color with gray.
 - b) Mix the color with its complement.

Both of these methods will dull the original color, but leave its value intact.

Value: The *lightness* or *darkness* of a color. Value is particularly important in works of art when color is absent. The chart below demonstrates a *value-scale*, in which *tints* and *shades* have been added to one color to demonstrate the various values possible.



- Tints are created by adding white to a color. The more white you add, the higher the color appears on a value-scale, making the color considered *high key*.
- Shades are created by adding black to a color. The more black you add, the lower the color appears on a value-scale, making the color considered *low-key*.
- The value of a color often depends on the color that surrounds it.



In the diagram above, each circle is the same 50% gray. Notice how the color which surround the circles change the appearance of the mid-tone gray.

Other color characteristics:

- Color schemes:
 - a) Analogous: Combination of several hues which sit next to each other on a color wheel (blue, blue-green, green, and yellow-green is an analogous color scheme).
 - b) Monochromatic: Use of only one hue that varies in value.
 - c) Triadic: Use of three hues equally spaced on a color wheel.
- Color can represent emotions (“I was green with envy.”) or symbols (“A good friend is true blue.”).
- Colors can be purely subjective or objective depending on how they are used.
- Artists can use color arbitrarily.
- Colors can be visually mixed. The artist places two pure colors side by side in small areas so the viewer’s eye will do the mixing.
- Color can be used as *emphasis*, to guide the viewer to one specific part of a painting.
- Color can produce visual *balance*.
- Colors can produce a sense of depth. In terms of spatial illusion, dust in the earth’s atmosphere breaks up the color rays from distant objects and makes them appear bluish. As objects recede, colors become more neutral and bluish. Color can have advancing or receding qualities (due to slight muscular reactions in our eyes as we focus on different colors). Objects that are closer have more contrasting colors than those that are farther away. Artists regularly employ this phenomenon in landscape paintings.
- Color discord is when two colors are used together in an attempt to make the viewer feel uneasy.

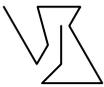
Line

Line refers to the continuous mark made on some surface by a moving point. Lines can be *actual* or *implied*.

Types of actual lines:

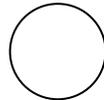
- | | | |
|--|----------|----------|
| Vertical | Wavy | Bent |
| Horizontal | Straight | Thin |
| Zigzag | Curved | Thick |
| Spiraling | Jagged | Parallel |
| Interrupted (dotted, broken, dashed, etc.) | Blurred | |

Angular



Freehand

Controlled



Hatching

Meandering

Types of implied lines:



There is an implied line from the arrow to the dot.



Implied lines create a complete circle.



There is an implied line from the woman in the hat to the lady reclining on the deck.

- Regardless of the medium, when line is the main element of an image, the result is called a drawing. There are two general types of drawings, contour and gesture.
 - When line is used to follow the edges of forms, to describe their outlines, the result is called a contour drawing.
 - Gesture drawings are quick and spontaneous. Generally artists are more interested in capturing movement rather than definite shapes.



Gesture



Contour

Other characteristics of line:

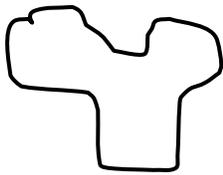
- *Horizontal* lines imply rest and repose. A *vertical* line implies potential for activity and sturdiness. A *diagonal* line most strongly suggests movement.
- Lines can define a shape or have the illusion of *mass*.
- Lines can create a texture or pattern.
- Lines can be used to create value.
- Lines can be two dimensional (drawing) or three-dimensional (wire sculpture).



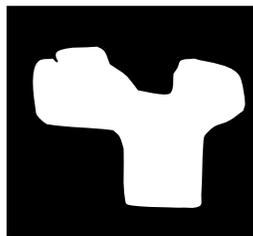
This sumi drawing uses lines to create shapes, describe textures, and give the illusion of mass.

Shape

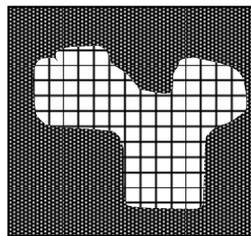
A shape is a visually perceived area created by another art element such as line, color, value, and texture. *Composition* is basically the arrangement of various shapes.



A shape defined line



A shape defined by color

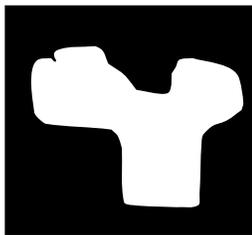


A shape defined by texture



A shape defined by value

- Shapes can be *geometric* or *freeform*.
 - (a) Geometric shapes are based on math.
 - (b) Freeform shapes are generally based on natural forms, even though some geometric shapes can be found in nature (honeycombs, snowflakes, crystal formations, etc.).
- Shapes can be *rectilinear* (composed of sharp angles or lines) or *curvilinear*.
- A shape may be *positive* or *negative*. The positive shape is the main figure, while the negative shape is the empty space surrounding it. The terms *figure* and *ground* may also be used.



In this case, the positive shape (figure) is white, the negative (ground) is black.

- Sometimes positive and negative shapes are integrated to such an extent that there is truly no visual distinction. Such is the case with many of M.C. Escher's works.

Form

The term form is often used as a synonym for shape, although many consider forms to be *three-dimensional* (having length, width, and depth), while shapes are *two-dimensional*. Thus forms may have *value* or *mass*.

- As with shape, a form may be geometric or freeform. A triangle is a shape while a pyramid is a form. Cubes, spheres, cones, and cylinders are also forms.

- A form may be *opened* or *closed*.

Closed form: A self-contained or explicitly limited form; having a resolved balance of tensions, a sense of calm completeness implying a totality within itself.

Open form: A form whose contour is irregular or broken, having a sense of growth, change, or unresolved tension; form in a state of becoming.

Texture

Texture is the surface quality or feel of an object. Even when we might not actually feel a texture, our memory provides a sensory reaction or sensation of touch. Objects may be rough, smooth, sticky, bumpy, scratchy, prickly, soft, etc.

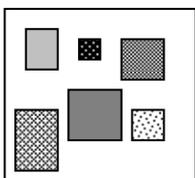
- Textures may be *implied* or *actual*.
 - a) Actual (or *tactile*) textures can be felt with the fingers.
 - b) Implied (or *visual*) textures are suggested and purely visual.
- Many works of art, such as collage, sculpture, and paintings (*impasto*) possess an actual texture.
- *Trompe L'Oeil* paintings simulate visual texture in an attempt to fool the eye.
- Pattern is defined as a repetitive design with the same *motif* appearing again and again. Texture can also repeat, but its variations usually do not involve such perfect regularity. The essential difference between texture and pattern seems to be whether the surface arouses our sense of touch or merely provides designs appealing to the eye.

Space

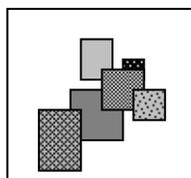
The element space refers to the distance or area between, around, above, below, or within things. Forms physically occupy space. In two-dimensional art forms, such as drawings, paintings, and prints, the artist often wants to convey a feeling of space or *depth*. Here space is an illusion and is completely optional.

Ways to create the illusion of space (depth):

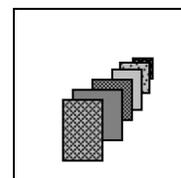
- **Size**—The easiest way to create the illusion of space. Objects farther away will appear smaller. In some art, size is used to show importance rather than space (referred to as *hieratic scaling*).
- **Vertical location**—Items that are farther away may appear higher on the picture plane.
- **Overlapping**—Items that are closer to the viewer may overlap those that are farther away.



These shapes appear to be on the same plane.

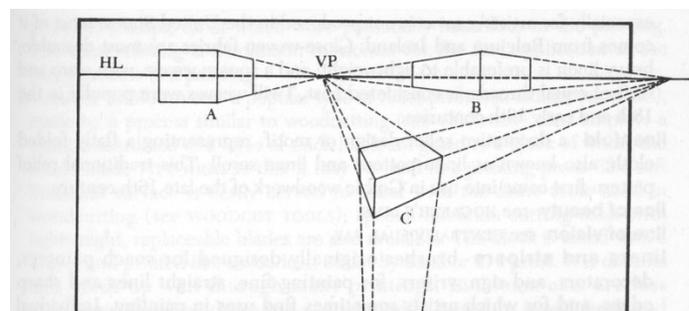


Overlapping the shapes gives them a sense of depth.



Depth is further achieved by ordering the shapes from larger to smaller.

- **Aerial/atmospheric perspective**—The use of color and/or value to show depth. This effect is achieved by making distance items less distinct and bluish in color.
- **Linear perspective**—A complex spatial system based on the fact that parallel lines recede and appear to converge and to meet on an imaginary line called the *horizon*, or eye level. Artists had long noted this convergence of



Linear perspective. (HL) Horizon line; (VP) vanishing points; (A) rectangular solid shown in parallel, or one-point, perspective; (B) solid in angular, or two-point, perspective; (C) solid in oblique, or three-point, perspective. Note in oblique perspective the convergence of a third set of lines to a third vanishing point not on the horizon line. Here, in a bird's-eye view, the convergence is downward. If the page is viewed upside down, figure C is seen in a worm's-eye view, with an upward convergence of its vertical lines.

receding parallel lines, but not until the Renaissance was the idea introduced that parallel lines on parallel planes all converge at the same place, the *vanishing point*.

- Types of linear perspective—
 - a) One point perspective: A single point has been placed on the horizon line, and all the lines of objects at right angles to the plane of the canvas angle off toward that point.
 - b) Two point perspective: None of the objects are parallel to the picture plane thus all edges recede to two points on the horizon. Because two point perspective approximates visual experience, it is used a great deal in interior and architectural renderings of design proposals.
 - c) Multi-point perspective: Different objects will have separate sets of vanishing points.
- Limitations of linear perspectives—Although linear perspective approximates what our eyes see, it tends to constrict the artist's compositional freedom. The scene often suggests frozen time and lacks movement.
- Amplified perspective—This technique involves projecting one or more elements directly at the viewer. The artist often employs a *foreshortening* effect causing the protruding part to appear closer.
- Isometric perspective—Often used in Oriental art, planes recede on the diagonal, but the lines remain parallel instead of drawing closer together.



An example of amplified perspective.

An example of isometric perspective. The parallel lines remain parallel.

Other characteristics of space:

- Space can appear flat if devices to show depth are not used.
- Space can be positive or negative (this property is similar to positive or negative shapes).

THE PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

The principles of design direct the way the art elements are used in a final composition. Artists design their works, either consciously or unconsciously, by controlling, ordering, and/or combining the elements of art. The principles of design are balance, emphasis, movement, pattern, proportion, rhythm, unity, and variety.

Balance

Balance refers to the way the elements in a work are arranged to create a feeling of stability.

- Balance can be *symmetrical (formal)*, *asymmetrical (informal)*, *near symmetrical*, *radial*, or *crystallographic*.
 - a) Symmetrical balance occurs when forms on either side of a central axis are arranged in a way that one side mirrors the other. While pleasing to the eye in architecture, the use of symmetrical balance in art may appear *static*.



Symmetrical Balance

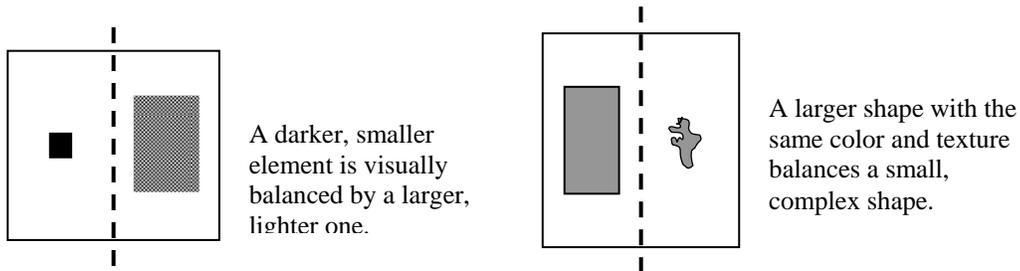


Symmetrical Balance



Asymmetrical Balance ⁶

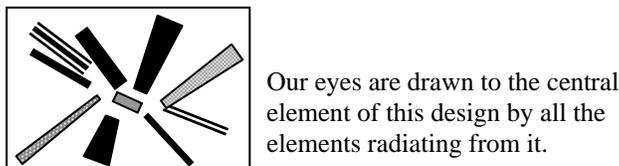
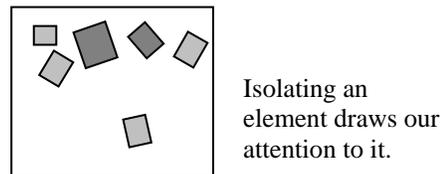
- b) Asymmetrical balance occurs when the parts of a design are organized so that one side differs from the other without destroying the overall *harmony*. Balance is achieved with dissimilar objects that have equal *visual weight* or equal eye attraction. This type of balance is casual and not contrived.
 - c) Near symmetrical balance describes the use of elements that may not be identical but being so nearly alike do not change the initial overall impression of symmetrical balance.
 - d) Radial balance is based on a circle with its design extending from its center. A wheel with spokes is an example of radial balance.
 - e) Crystallographic balance occurs when the same weight or eye attraction is used over the entire composition. This is often referred to as *allover pattern*.
- Balance may be achieved through the use of value, color, shape, texture, position, and/or eye direction.



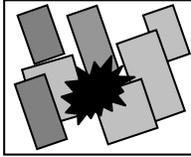
Emphasis

Emphasis is the part of a composition that attracts initial attention and encourages the viewer to look further.

- Emphasis can be achieved through the use of a *focal point*, the most important character or element in a composition.
- There can be more than one focal point. Secondary points of emphasis have less impact and value than the main focal point, but provide the viewer with a means to move around the composition.
- Too many focal points may confuse the viewer. If every element is emphasized, then nothing is emphasized.
- Ways to achieve emphasis:
 - a) Contrast—Any item that differs from the dominant figures in a composition. The element that contrasts with, rather than continues, the prevailing design scheme becomes the focal point. Color is an element often used in emphasis by contrast. A change in color or value can immediately attract attention.
 - b) Isolation—When one item is isolated from the other elements or group of elements, it becomes the focal point. Do not confuse isolation with contrast. Isolation is the contrast of placement, not form. In this case, the element does not need to be any different from the others.
 - c) Placement—If many elements point to one item, attention is directed towards that element and a focal point results. This often occurs in a radial design.



- In some works, there is no focal point. A focal point is not a necessity in creating a design.
- Enlarging a figure or element that is used as the dominant feature in a composition may create emphasis. Emphasis is also placed on items that are singled out for *aesthetic* impact.
- Emphasizing an unrelated element may overwhelm a design and destroy the overall composition.

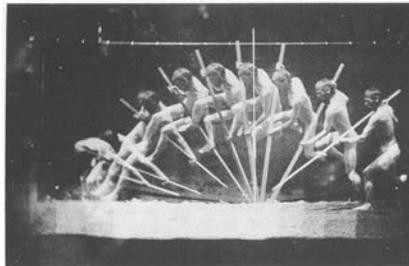


The black shape is too strong and unrelated in comparison to the other elements.

Movement

When there is not actual movement, which is the case with most art objects, movement refers to the *arrangement* of a composition's parts to create a sense of motion or action through the use of different art elements.

- Much of the implied movement present in art is caused by our memories and past experiences. We recognize temporary, unstable body positions and realize that change must be imminent.
- Ways to achieve movement—
 - a) Repetition: Figures are repeated in such a manner to suggest *sequential* moments in time (such as in a comic strip). Often the repeated figure, rather than being shown in a sequence of small pictures, merely reappears in one unified composition.
 - b) Fuzzy outlines: The outlines of a figure or element are blurred in an attempt to capture a moment in time. This technique is similar to what happens when a slow shutter speed is used to photograph movement.
 - c) Multiple images: When one figure in an overlapping sequence of poses is slightly changed in each successive position.

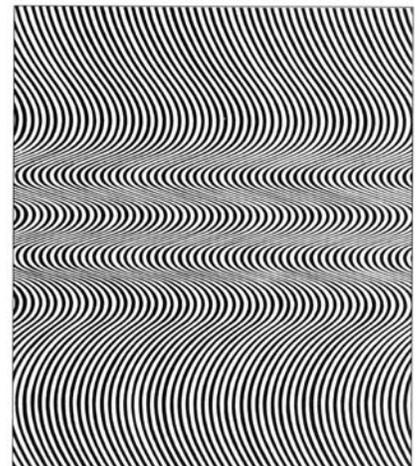


Both of these examples to the left use multiple images to suggest motion.

- d) Lines of force: Lines added to show the pathways of movement (again, this technique is often used in comic strips).

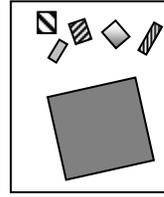
- Some works of art actually move. These are termed kinetic.
- Op art consists of works that give the optical illusion of movement in static images.

An example of op art. Notice how the lines appear to move or vibrate.



Proportion/Scale

Proportion refers to the relative size of an object when compared against other elements or a mental norm or standard. Although scale and proportion are relative terms, scale is essentially another word for “size” (large-scale, small-scale, etc.). Terms that refer to size, such as big or small, are meaningless unless we have a standard or reference for comparison. This is where proportion comes in.



The larger element is out of proportion when compared to the surrounding shapes.

- There are two ways to consider scale in art—
 - a) The scale of the work itself, its size in relation to other works. Often the scale of a work can add to the composition’s *visual impact*.
 - b) Scale is also used within artistic compositions. Artists sometimes use various sized elements to create a sense of *disproportion*, causing one or elements to become the emphasis.
- Scale can be used to draw our attention to the unexpected or exaggerated.
- Scale can be used to distract or confuse the viewer by providing an unreal sense of proportion.
- In ancient times, a hieratic scale was often employed by artists to isolate figures of greater symbolic importance in the subject matter being presented.

Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the artist’s attempt to move the viewer’s attention across recurrent motifs in a composition using the repetition inherent to the idea of a visual tempo or beat. Rhythm can be achieved through the repetition of colors or textures, but is most often attained with shapes and their arrangement.

- Rhythm can provide a sense of motion.
- Rhythm can be flowing or abrupt depending on which elements the artist has used and how he/she has arranged them on the canvas.
- Other types of rhythm—
 - a) Alternating: Successive patterns of the same elements reappear in a regular order.
 - b) Progressive: The rhythm involves repetition, but the repetition of a shape that changes in a regular manner. There is a feeling of a *sequential pattern*. This type of rhythm is most often achieved with a progressive variation of the size of a shape, though its color, value, or texture could be the varying element.



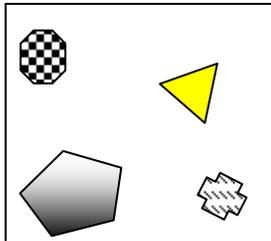
In this photo, the vertical lines formed by the trees seem to have a flowing rhythm.

Unity

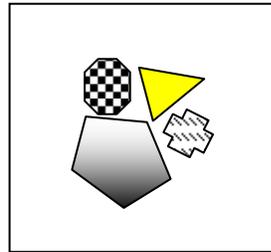
Unity is the congruity or agreement that exists among the elements in a design. It is realized through a deliberate or intuitive balancing of harmony and variety. If the various elements in a design are separate or unrelated (*unharmonious*), the composition will lack unity.

- When speaking of unity, the whole of a design must be predominant over the parts. The viewer must notice the whole pattern before they concentrate on individual elements.
- *Intellectual unity* is different from *visual unity*. Intellectual unity occurs when the viewer has previous knowledge of the subject and uses it to relate parts to the whole. A unifying idea, however, will not necessarily produce an unified image.

- *Gestalt* is a theory of visual psychology. It refers to a physical, psychological, or symbolic arrangement or pattern of parts so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts. Gestalt suggests the following concepts—
 - a) The viewer tends to group objects that are close to each other into a larger unit.
 - b) Negative (or empty) space will likewise be organized.
 - c) Our brain will tend to relate and group objects of a similar shape.
 - d) We will close the spaces between similar shapes to form a whole.
- Ways to achieve unity--
 - a) Proximity: Placing elements close together to create the illusion that they are part of a total repeated pattern.



If elements are isolated from one another, they appear unrelated.



Placing items close together makes us see them first appear as a group.

- b) Repetition: An item is simply repeated in different parts of a composition.
 - c) Continuation: This term basically means that something “continues”—a line, an edge, or a direction from one form to another. The viewer’s eye is carried smoothly from one to the next. Continuation is subtler than proximity or repetition. Continuation can also be the planned arrangement of various forms so that their edges line up (one example of this kind of continuation is the text found in newspapers or magazines).
- Unity can be achieved when an underlying theme is presented in several different ways as variations.
 - Good design implies unity, a harmonious pattern or order established among the various elements. However, it is possible to make a pattern so highly unified that the result, instead of being visual satisfaction, quickly becomes general boredom. Thus, the artist’s aim is to achieve unity, but a unity that branches out into variations that relieve boredom. This concept is termed *unity with variety* (or *theme and variations*).

Variety

Variety refers to the way elements are combined to achieve intricate and complex relationships. Artists who wish to increase the visual interest of their work often obtain variety through the use of diversity and change.

- Using different variations of the same shape, color, line, or texture can create variety.
- Unity and variety are often interwoven.
- An image with too much variety can intimidate and confuse the average viewer.