

The Language of Art

Throughout our lifetimes we learn step-by-step the elements of language expression in order to communicate with others. We begin learning how to hear and say basic words from the time we are born. Then, when we learn how to read, we begin with our ABCs, the alphabet of the English language, amongst others. After learning the alphabet and its sounds, we begin to learn how to read words, constantly accumulating vocabulary. Our training in grammar and writing helps us to put those words to use. Reading literature allows us to analyze further meanings in our verbal modes of expression.

In discussing the elements of art, we will return again and again to our language metaphor. We must begin just as we did when we were young, learning our ABCs before we can really talk about meaning and interpretation.

The Vocabulary of Art: Naming and Describing the Visual Facts

In our efforts to be responsible viewers, we like newspaper reporters, must **gather our facts**. In this case, let us consider the actual physical components of the work of art – **how we can name and describe the visual facts**. In order to do this, we must acquire something like an alphabet and word vocabulary. Below are some explanations of basic vocabulary for art, which can be applied to looking at all visual arts, whether painting, or sculpture, textile or photograph.

Medium

The **medium** is the **material** used in the work of art. Medium also refers to dimension as well. Is it two-dimensional or three-dimensional? Is it a painting on canvas or a sculpture in clay? What sort of paints are used, acrylic, oil, watercolor? In creating outlines and shadings, are charcoals or pencils used? These factors all contribute to the effect of the creation of other elements and other utilized design principles.

Line

One of the first axioms of geometry is the line. A line can be defined as **the identifiable path of a point moving through space**. Take a sharp pencil and place the tip on a sheet of paper. There is your point in space. Now drag the pencil across the page as if you were dragging that point in space in a particular direction. What you see on the paper is a line.

In looking at art, line also has another definition: **the direction in which the eye is drawn by the elements contained in the work of art**. Lines also mark **separations of space** and are the basic “building blocks” of shape and form.

There is much to be said about physical line itself, however. There are two main types of lines: straight or curved. Straight and curved lines can have these qualities:

- Width: thick, thin
- Length: long, short
- Direction: horizontal, vertical, diagonal, inward
- Continuous: without interruption
- Broken: interrupted by other elements
- Focus: smooth, rough, soft or fuzzy, blurred, sharp
- Boundary: outline, edge, marking shape and form in its creation of space

Color

Color is all around us. Everything that we see from nature to fashion impacts our visual cortex with the exciting myriad of color available from our world. Color affects our emotions in both subtle and overt ways. Without it, our daily life experiences would be far more dull. Think of how much more our eyes are drawn to a colorful magazine than to its black and white counterpart, the newspaper. The artist is particularly sensitive to these issues and takes the use of color seriously, making deliberate choices for an intended effect. Below are some ways of distinguishing those effects in talking about color. It may be helpful to use a color wheel when studying these principles.

- **Hue:** name of the color, i.e. red, blue, yellow, etc.
- **Value:** darkness or lightness of the color, based upon its nearness to white or to black. It helps to squint the eyes and compare the color to white or black to determine darkness or lightness.
- **Intensity:** brightness or dullness of a color, based upon its saturation or purity. Full intensity appears bright, pure color. Mixed with other colors, depending on the amount of whiteness or blackness, the color becomes less intense, looking slightly “greyed” or more dull, more subdued. For example, bright yellow has more “pure color” – reflecting more white light – and is higher in intensity than mustard yellow, which has more “greyness” and thus reflects less white light.
- **Primary colors:** red, yellow, blue – cannot be created from any other colors
- **Secondary colors:** green, violet, orange – mixed from any two primary colors
- **Tertiary colors:** hues occurring between primary and secondary hues, i.e. red-orange, blue-violet, yellow-green, telling us more about the qualities of the particular hue.
- **Complementary colors:** hues that occur as directly opposite each other on the color wheel. The two complementary colors always include all three primary colors. For example, red and green are complementary to each other, where green is a mixture of blue and yellow, so all three primary colors are represented.

Light

As we have seen from our discussion of color, light creates a certain effects in art. Without light, we see no color nor shape nor form. Light reflects from the surfaces of works of art and our eyes respond to that light while perceiving images, colors, and textures. The opposite of light is darkness or “shadow.” The creation of shadows in artwork can also have the effect of creating light. In describing the effects of light and shadow, we may use the following terms:

- **Transparent:** rays of light pass through the object allowing us to see through to what lies on the other side of the object. Clear glass and plastic are transparent.
- **Translucent:** Light is admitted through, but is diffused so we cannot see clearly through the object. Frosted glass and sheer fabrics are translucent.
- **Opaque:** Light is not admitted through the object at all. Many common objects are made of opaque materials, i.e., wood, metal, colored plastics, etc.

Paints can also evoke these various qualities. Watercolor, applied thinly, allows the paper to be reflected through it, and is, thus, translucent. Oil paints are heavy, covering the surface of the canvas, and are thus opaque. Glazes and shellacs are transparent.

Light can also be described by its imagined source:

- Day/night
- Clear/shadowy
- Frontal/ lateral
- Focused/hazy
- Natural/artificial
- Weak/bright
- Glaring/dim

Shape and Form

All objects taking up space have shape and/or form. Shape refers to the two-dimensional outline of an object. Form refers to three-dimensional objects having height, breadth, and depth. The shape of a ball is a circle, while its form is a sphere. Shapes and forms can have the following qualities:

- **Size:** large or small in area or volume; long or short in length; wide or narrow in width; thick or thin in depth; tall or short in height.
- **Mass:** light or heavy in optical weight
- **Open:** Can be looked into or through; broken lines creating the shape, or other elements interrupting the formation of the shape (whether the interruption comes from another line, shape or space).

- **Closed:** Lines are continuous and joined around the shape or form, with no openings into space or protrusions.
- **Geometric** (inorganic): circle, square, rectangle, triangle, pentagon, octagon, etc; shape or form created on the basis of geometric shapes or having rigid, ordered construction
- **Organic** (freeform): non geometric, having random construction.

Other words for describing shape/form:

- Round/angular
- Triangular/conical
- Solid/broken
- Concave/convex
- Loose/dense
- Stable/unstable
- Cubical/cylindrical
- Flat/stout
- Measured/irregular
- Symmetric/asymmetric
- Positive/negative

Texture

How something feels or the way it looks as if it would feel is considered its texture. Whether the work of art actually feels a certain way or merely appears to feel a certain way, it possesses a particular texture that may be smooth, rough, grainy and scratchy, or steely. Often, textures are described as comparisons to materials or objects found in nature or the manmade world. “Smooth as silk,” “grainy like sand,” “scratchy like wool,” or “cold as steel” are helpful ways of describing texture. Tree barks have one kind of roughness, while a gravel road has a different one. Porcupines are prickly and rose stems are thorny, differentiating the “feel” of sharp protrusions.

Other examples of describing texture are:

- Hard/soft
- Coarse/fine
- Wrinkled/even
- Porous/sealed
- Dry/wet
- Glossy/matte
- Grainy/filmy

Space

Intuitively, we know that space is all around us and exists wherever there are no objects filling it. But in art all the elements described above can “create” space by enclosing it, filling it (whatever is not filled is space), or even coloring it. All objects are perceived as figures against a background. The figures are considered **positive** and the background **negative**. Consider a bagel, the bagel itself is the positive space and the whole in the middle is the negative space.

In two-dimensional art, a sense of the third dimension may be created by effective usage of line, lighting, and color, thus creating space in the third dimension, as it may seem in a room in the world we live in. Space may also be defined as the working space on the canvas, or the created empty space in a sculpture with closed lines, or the space inside an open form, such as two cupped hands.

The use of space also refers to the location for the other elements:

- Right/left
- Tangent/adjacent
- Close/distant
- Limited/boundless
- First/last
- High/low
- Overlapping/intersecting
- Empty/full
- Above/beneath
- Shallow/deep

Elements of Art

“A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Describing art is no easy task. In this section we will explore ways of talking about what we see when we look at art. When one is looking at and experiencing a work of art, keep in mind that the work can be broken down into its components, or its **visual facts**, and judgments made about those components at a very basic level. What we are learning to do is make **observations**. In this way, learning to look at art is also learning to make observations about the world around us. Scientists, engineers, teachers, politicians, mechanics, and construction foremen all rely upon their powers of observation in order to make **qualitative judgments** to apply to **problem-solving techniques** in their particular kind of work.

Keep in mind that articulation of the **creative process** is more important than the final judgment that comes with the viewer’s **interpretation/reaction**. We are looking to understand how the artist came to create work as well as how we as the viewers came to our understanding of it. We must suspend final interpretation in order to accomplish this aim and thus become more responsible viewers.

Principles of Design: Analyzing the Facts

The principles of design, or the formal qualities in works of art, are the guidelines that govern the way elements are put together. Using our language metaphor now that we have some vocabulary, we must learn some grammar and syntax in order to formulate our sentences and ideas. Looking at how the elements of art function, whether as a “noun” or “verb,” “direct object,” “preposition”, etc., we will analyze visual facts by analyzing the relationships of these components to each other. The following are ways of describing these functions and relationships.

Composition: When the artist creates a work, consciously or unconsciously, the elements are placed in a particular order that make up the work’s composition. All of the principles discussed in this section directly refer to a work’s composition, and also influence the qualities of the elements of art described above.

Balance: When considering the overall composition of a piece, the implied weight of the objects used in the work produce a sense of visual balance or imbalance, just as if one were to weight the objects on a scale. For example, shapes produce weight by their size, while colors do so by their intensity, neutrality, etc. Balance is also related to movement. All the elements of the artwork may lead the eye toward the center, creating a sense of being centered, or they may display “imbalance” by attracting the eye off to one side or in many different directions.

Symmetry/Asymmetry: Just as with geometric shapes, a work of art can have symmetry or be asymmetrical to produce a desired effect. If an imaginary line is drawn down the center of a work, if it has the same elements on both sides, it is called symmetrical, if not, it is asymmetrical. Symmetry can create a feeling of balance making the work seem completely static, lacking any movement. Asymmetric works may not be equal on both sides but may still feel balanced due to the overall placement of the elements, the creation of varied textures and random details, but showing the “weight” of the objects evenly spread throughout the space.

Theme and Variation: Artists often turn to this principle in their creative process. They will take one idea and find the different ways that it can be represented. This can be shown as a design principle or in the subject of the artwork.

Rhythm: The flow or continuity of design patterns may suggest a visual rhythm similar to musical rhythms. Is there multiple repetition of the elements or is it sporadic? Are the elements very small, close together, and brightly colored? This may suggest a fast, staccato-like rhythm. Are there wide, curvy, neutral-colored lines? This may suggest a slower, rolling rhythm.

Interpretation

What is beauty? Is it in the eye of the beholder, or is it in the object itself? What is “good taste?” What is art? These are questions that belong to a subfield of philosophy called aesthetics. Aesthetic value has been the subject of great debate throughout the ages by philosophers, art critics, and religious and political leaders, alike.

How do we know when something is “good” or “bad” in art? Ultimately, we do not, and cannot. What art critics and other vocal viewers bring to their opinions is mostly experience. They have spent many years trying to be “responsible viewers” as we discussed in the introduction. They apply those years of experience in shaping an opinion that compares one particular work of art to the works of others. In this way, they are able to render an interpretation and judge its quality.

But that does not mean that those of us who are not professional art critics are barred from forming an opinion. Once again, however, we must try to make those opinions as responsible as possible. In this section, by putting to use those words we have learned in the previous sections, we will consider the foundation of interpretation, that is, the things that influence us in forming an opinion about art.

The Foundation of Our Interpretations

When we consider the “meaning” of a particular work of art, we are asking several things:

1. Analysis of its components and design principles,
2. Our personal reaction to the work
3. The artist’s intended communication
4. The meaning of the work in a larger sociocultural framework

Remember that “right” and “wrong” are not relevant judgments. What is relevant is that each opinion is founded on something, that we know how and why we think something is true. These four steps serve as that foundation for our interpretations.

The principles of design serve as guidelines for piecing together the elements of a work and analyzing their relationships, but they do not necessarily govern the work’s meaning, just as grammar rules, syntax and formal writing skills influence but do not govern the meaning of a work of fiction.

Now we can ask ourselves about that initial personal reaction. Without doubt, art can evoke strong emotions. Understanding how art makes us feel and why we react to it in a certain way is vital to understanding our own cultural values and personal tastes.

Color, for example, is rich with various symbolic meanings. It has been postulated that red evokes an emotion of anger, yet it is also symbolically the color of love. The expression “Green with envy” is counter to the suggestion that green, being the color of so much in nature, offers a soothing effect. Individuals may have different reactions to a particular intended meaning based on their personal background or given mood at the time of viewing the work. Maybe you just don’t like purples and

blues and therefore do not find Van Gogh's *Iris* beautiful to you. As for the artist's intent, we can certainly do more than guess at what an artist "means" by the work he/she produces. There may be images of literal or common figurative meanings that imply certain ideas. Don't forget to look at the title. Sometimes, the artist wants to convey something very direct through the title and/or the work, hoping to move the viewer with a particular sentiment.

When was the work produced? Was there a major event occurring at the time which is represented in the work? Do we know anything about the artist's own life? What about the nature of the colors or the lines? Are they stark, black and white? Or vividly bright and multicolored? What do you sense or feel from these choices? These are questions we can ask in order to better understand the artist's intent.

Another important consideration is the artist's intended audience. Who were they talking to? Who did they think we, the viewer's would be? Who did they want us to be? Usually despite what the artist initially intended, the work is open to many different interpretations, which is the quality that gives it the most life.

Consider a larger **socio-cultural framework**. Instead of asking, "Is it beautiful?" or "Do I like it?" it may be better to ask, "Does it work? Or "What does it say?" art is vital to cultural representation. As we have already mentioned about the different symbolic meanings that color can have, they also reflect these different cultural representations. Consider the color of traditional wedding costumes for women: in Western European and American cultures, women wear white. In China, women wear red.

The point is that it may not be beautiful to you, but it may communicate something important to you in terms of telling you about someone else and the world you live in. African art can show you images of what people living in another part of the world may value. Art by patients with terminal illnesses may show you the kind of pain they experience. Photographs of war-torn peoples may seem visually atrocious, but they convey profound tragedy and despondence. Children's art from Japan or the Ukraine may reveal to you the similarities of childhood experiences regardless of country and culture.

With your knowledge of the vocabulary of art, keen observation skills and your ability to ask questions, you now have all the necessary tools to talk about a work of art.