# **Visual Elements & Principles of Design**

## **Design & Utility**

These days, it isn't enough for an item to simply exist. It has to have a purpose. For example, would you have a dresser, if it didn't organize your clothes and keep them off of the floor? The fact is, if an item didn't serve a useful purpose, you wouldn't have it. But it goes farther than that. Items must be visually appealing, in addition to their utility, and that's where design comes in.

## **Design Definition**

**Design** is the process of creating, or using and balancing, the elements of art. For example, architects design buildings, electronic engineers design circuits, and chefs design meals. Every item we see and use has an associated design. Some are very simple, like that of a pencil, and others are extremely complex, like that of the largest building in your city. Design takes into account every aspect of the item in question, including color, shape, size, texture, and weight. Good design optimizes each of these characteristics for utility or use and visual appeal.

## **Visual Elements**

A **visual element** is any aspect of something that we can see. This includes a number of the following characteristics:

* A **line** is a mark made by a brush, pen, or pencil, or the divider between two areas. In a drawing of a city street, a line would represent the edge of a building, or the edge of the curb on the street.
* A **shape** is an enclosed area that can be geometric or organic. In an image of an orange, the shape would basically be a circle, filled with an orange color.
* **Direction** is an attribute of a line, such as horizontal, vertical, or skewed. In a drawing of a city street, the building edges would be vertical, while the curb edges would be horizontal and skewed.
* **Size** is the area occupied by a shape. In a drawing of a city street, you'd have small buildings and large buildings where the area occupied by each would indicate their size.
* **Texture** is the visual description of a surface, or the tactile sensation something presents. In an image, texture would represent the surface qualities of a shape, such as dull or shiny, while in a physical item it would be how the object feels to the touch, such as rough or smooth.
* **Color** is the hue from the visible spectrum an object shows or projects. For a stop sign, the color would be red.
* **Value** is the shade of a color, or how light or dark it is. On a sunny day, the sky is light blue, or the leaves on the trees various shades of green.

## **Design Principles**

There are a number of **design principles** for using visual elements. Think of them as suggestions that lead to easier understanding and/or visual appeal. They can vary in their relative effects depending on the design effort underway. These principles include:

* **Balance**, or the relative amount of something and its opposite. Think of the position or location of items relative to the center, or the relative amount of light and dark.
* **Gradation** is the use of progressive tones or color values. Uniform tones indicate solidity and permanence, while gradation indicates movement or change.
* **Repetition** is the use of copies of the same element. Multiple items that don't change are boring, while multiple items that vary slightly are interesting.
* **Contrast** refers to opposites placed close together. For example, large beside small, dark beside light, and square beside round will make both elements stand out.
* **Harmony** is how well the elements work together. The whole will be more pleasing than the individual parts.
* **Dominance** means giving an element or elements significance so they stand out, such as a unique color, shape, or size. This could mean placing one big circle in the middle of small circles, or one dark square in the middle of some light squares.
* **Unity** refers to how all of the elements relate to a purpose or theme. The driver's seat of a car, for example, shouldn't have a movie screen.

## **Lesson Summary**

To recap, **design** is the process of creating, or using and balancing, the elements of art. A **visual element** is any characteristic that we can see, including line, shape, direction, size, texture, color, and value. The **design principles** for using these elements include balance, gradation, repetition, contrast, harmony, dominance, and unity. Good design optimizes all of these elements and principles for utility or use and visual appeal.