3: THE VISUAL ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF COMPOSITION

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: The Visual Elements and Principles of Composition

In This Chapter

3.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Toolkit for Looking

A muscular man stands stiffly on an elegantly-curved boat, a long staff in his left hand. Around him, much smaller figures, some of them holding harpoons, crouch and lunge, driving their boats forward and aiming their weapons. In the background a series of repeating vertical lines suggests that they are traveling through a marsh of towering papyrus stems, and below their boats, the water teems with fish, hippopotamus, and crocodile.

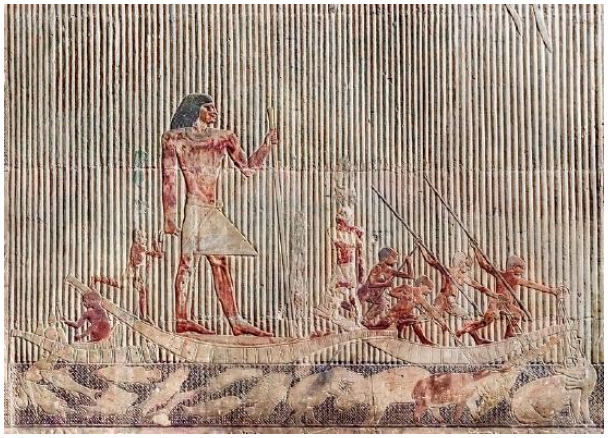

Figure 3.0.1: Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt (detail), c. 2494-2345 BCE. Old Kingdom Egypt. Painted limestone, 4’ tall. Tomb of Ti, Saqqara, Egypt. (Photo: kairoinfo4u, CC BY-NC-SA)

This scene is known as “Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt,” and adorns one wall of the tomb of an Egyptian official named Ti. Even without that title to give context, though, and without any knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture, there are certain elements of this scene that are immediately recognizable. This artwork is representational, meaning that it reflects things that exist in the real world, and so its content, or what it is about, is that recognizable story: the men hunting, their boats, the bountiful environment. This chapter is about giving you the tools and vocabulary to carefully look at, and describe, *any* image you see, representational or not, and without any other background or context. This applies not just to famous artworks and artifacts, but to imagery and visual culture in the world around you every day.

Formal Elements & Principles of Composition

Formal elements are things that can be recognized without other context or knowledge about the image; formal elements are separate from content, subject matter, or story. These include the visual elements discussed individually later in this chapter, such as line, shape, color, and texture. They also include the way those elements come together as a whole, or an artwork’s composition—things like balance, movement, and scale. Artists can use these elements to communicate or reinforce a certain mood, meaning, or message.

Turning back to “Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt,” there is plenty to notice separate from the content of the hunting scene. First, this is not a flat painting, but stands out slightly from the stone; it is a shallow relief carving, which means the image does not project out very far and does not detach from the background. It has been painted: colored using pigments in a liquid binder. Because the image included here is a photograph of the three-dimensional original object, it is the shadows cast by the artificial light that reveal its depth. The light also highlights the actual texture of the limestone surface: the pits and rough edges one would feel by touching it. This artwork contains not just actual texture, but simulated texture: lines in Ti’s wig suggest individual strands of hair, which is distinct from the smoother surface of his skin or shendjet (traditional kilt-like skirt). Line is visible elsewhere, as well: in addition to the vertical lines of the background and zigzag water pattern, contour lines define the edges of every figure here, from the men and animals to the boats and weapons. There are even implied lines, which are not carved or painted, but which a viewer can still recognize, such as between the harpooners’ eyes and their prey below the surface. Color is another easily-identifiable visual element—notably here, the rich reddish brown of the figures’ skin.

Figure 3.0.2: Statues of Rahotep and Nofret, 2575-25551 BCE. Old Kingdom Egypt. Painted limestone, 121-122 cm tall. Egypt Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

This color is not necessarily naturalistic, or true to optical reality (what the eyes see), but instead represents a convention, or system of representation, of Egyptian art in which color indicates a figure's gender. This is clear in the slightly later Egyptian statues of Rahotep and Nofret, in which her skin is ivory while his is a darker ochre. Coloration is just one way in which figures might be stylized, or conform to particular conventions rather than recording a strict observation of the natural world. Ti is much larger than the less-important figures around him, a convention known as hierarchical or hieratic scale. He is also shown in twisted perspective, with his head, arms, and legs in profile, while his shoulders, torso, and eye are seen head-on. Finally, his image, like those of Rahotep and Nofret, has been idealized, conforming to Egyptian standards of beauty for that time. Regardless of the subjects' actual ages or looks, their depictions here are youthful and physically fit, with regular, symmetrical features.

Individual visual elements are important, but so is the way they are organized, or the artwork's composition. Ti, as noted earlier, is much larger than the men around him, drawing the attention, or emphasis, to him. This also brings balance to the scene, as his larger figure feels similar in visual weight to the several smaller figures across from him. Ti's rigid, almost frozen posture contrasts with the energetic movement of his servants, whose nudity, in addition to their size and relative naturalism, indicate that they are nowhere near as important as Ti himself.

Historiography (Writing History)

Chapters 1 and 2 introduced the concept of historiography, and the importance of taking into account how history is written and who is writing it. Subsequent chapters will continue introducing concepts, events, and developments that shape our understanding of the objects presented and the history surrounding them.

This chapter concentrates not on a particular region or time period, as following chapters will, but instead on the language of description. Formal elements are just one way of writing about art—and frequently simply a starting point. Careful looking is the basis of recognizing the medium, historical period, and even date of an artwork. It is also essential to iconography, or the study of the meanings of particular elements, or symbols, in an artwork. (In Egypt, the hippopotami being hunted on the wall of Ti's tomb aren't just a source of food, for example, but are associated with forces of chaos, and may represent the god Seth.) As you learn more about a particular region, culture, and the way its history has been written, you will add layers of understanding to the skills of description that are our focus here.

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on vocabulary you can use to describe images, even if you do not have additional information about them. It gives you a toolkit of terms that will enable you not only to look closely at artworks, but also to understand and describe what you see. It begins with a discussion of the visual elements: line, shape and form, color, space, surface and depth, texture, and light and shadow. It concludes with the principles of composition: balance, symmetry, and emphasis; movement; proportion and scale; pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity.

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the visual elements and principles of composition, you should be able to:

- Name and identify different kinds of line in artwork
- Identify and discuss the effects of light, color, texture, and pattern in a work of art
- Use the art-historical terms shape, mass, and ground when discussing art
- Identify various techniques artists used to represent three-dimensional space in two-dimensional art
- Recognize and describe texture and pattern
- Identify basic principles of design: unity and variety, balance, emphasis and subordination, scale and proportion, and rhythm
- Identify principles of design at work in specific visual imagery
- Experiment with your art historical toolkit and vocabulary by observing and describing works of art

Want to know more?

Here are some optional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the concepts discussed in this chapter.

- Dr. Beth Harris & Dr. Steven Zucker, “How to do Visual (Formal) Analysis”
- The Getty Museum, “Elements of Art”
- The Toledo Museum “The Art of Seeing Art”
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Power: Comparisons and Connections"
- Dr. Cerise Myers, “Describing Art, Part I” [video]
- Dr. Cerise Myers, “Describing Art, Part II” [video]

3.1: The Visual Elements

Line

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Figure 3.1.1: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen*, from *The Apocalypse*, 1498. Woodcut, 38.7 x 27.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Line is the most basic visual element. Lines can be used to define shapes and figures, but also to indicate motion, emotion, and other elements.

Figure 3.1.2: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen*, from *The Apocalypse* (detail). (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Contour lines and hatching

In a woodblock print of *The Four Horsemen* from *The Apocalypse* by Albrecht Dürer, contour lines—lines that define shapes—are used to mark the outside of all of the elements of the image.

The outline of the hat on one of the horsemen, for example, is clearly made by a few black contour lines. This simple device is so effective that it is hard to remember that there is no hat here, only a few black marks on a white page.

Note, though, that lines are also used to show shading—the shadows caused when light hits one side of an object, leaving the other in shadow. On the hat, for example, the closely spaced lines, called hatching, show that the left side of his hat is in a shadow. This also helps the hat to look more three-dimensional, giving it a sense of form.

Figure 3.1.3: Roy Lichtenstein, *In the Car*, 1963. Oil and magna on canvas, 172.00 x 203.50 cm. National Galleries, Scotland. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein/DACS 2018. (Photo: National Galleries of Scotland, via Smarthistory)

Contour lines outline all the figures and forms in the image, creating the illusion of shading and form. In addition, there are horizontal lines in the background. While these create shading, they also help create the sense that the riders are moving rapidly from left to right. Motion lines may be familiar to you from comic strips, but they appear in all sorts of work.

Organic and inorganic (geometric) lines

In the Dürer print, we can also divide the lines into organic and inorganic (or geometric) lines (see the section on shape for more on organic and inorganic). Organic lines are loose, curving lines like those found in nature. In the Dürer print, the lines of the horses' manes and tails, the figures' hair, and the ruffled clouds are all organic. Inorganic lines are generally straight or perfectly curving lines, like those found in geometry. In this image, most of the lines are organic, but the horizontal lines in the background are inorganic.

Figure 3.1.4: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, c. 1483-86. Oil on panel, 199 x 122 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, France. (Photo: Louvre Museum, public domain)

Implied lines

We can also look for implied lines. These are not actually drawn, but we can connect the dots (literally or figuratively) to create the lines in our minds. Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* contains wonderful examples of implied lines.

Here, the implied lines are sight lines, which guide us throughout the image. These help us know where to look, and show us what is important in the painting. Follow the gazes of the figures as they look and point at one another. The angel in the red cape to the right looks out at us, and then points at the infant John the Baptist, at the left. He looks at the infant Jesus, who in turn looks back again at him. Above, Mary looks down at Jesus, and also gestures toward him with her hand.

Figure 3.1.5: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, (detail with implied lines). (Photo: Louvre Museum, public domain)

Basically, once we make it into the space of the painting by meeting the gaze of the angel, we become locked in a cycle of movement between the holy figures, guided by their sight lines.

Shape and Form

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Shape builds on line and color, as it has to be made of one or both of these. Shape is the property of a two-dimensional form, usually defined by a line around it or by a change in color.

There are two main types of shapes, geometric and organic. While most works of art contain both geometric and organic shapes, looking at those that are more completely divided can serve to clarify these qualities.

Geometric shapes

Piet Mondrian is an excellent example of an artist who used geometric shapes almost exclusively. In his *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red* (1937-42), Mondrian, uses straight vertical and horizontal black lines to divide his canvas into rectangles of primary colors.

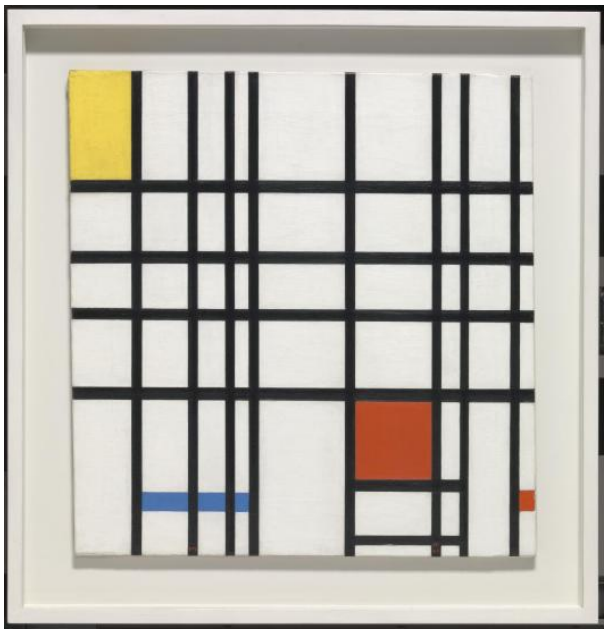

Figure 3.1.6: Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, 1937–42. Oil on canvas, 72.7 x 69.2 cm. Tate Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Nothing here gives the impression of the natural world. On the other hand, Maori facial tattooing, known as *moko*, uses primarily organic shapes. They are still, like Mondrian's shapes, generally abstract — they do not depict any clear images — but the shapes are like those found in nature, curving, twisting, and spiraling across their wearers' faces. The edges of the lines and shapes are crisp, but the forms are curving and sensuous.

Figure 3.1.7: Early Maori were highly skilled in Ta Moko, the process of tattooing. Location: Te Kuiti, Waikato. (Photo: James Heremaia, WorldWide licence)

Figure 3.1.8: Cueva de las Manos, Perito Moreno, Argentina, c. 7300 BCE. Mineral pigments (iron oxides, kaolin, natrojarosite, and manganese oxide) on cave wall. (Photo: Mariano, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Editors' Note

Shape can be either positive or negative. In this photograph from the Cueva de las Manos, we can see both positive shapes (handprints created by dipping the hand in pigment and then placing it on the stone) and negative shapes (formed by applying pigment over the hand, with the resulting shape defined by the absence of pigment).

Figure 3.1.9: Negative space in the photograph below of the Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*). (Illustration by Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

We can also speak of negative space, which refers to the area around and between the figure and ground. The illustration above shows the negative space around the Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*) as shown in the photograph below. In a painting or drawing, artists often consider both positive and negative space in balancing their composition, as is discussed in the following chapter.

Figure 3.1.10: Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*), Indonesia, Papua Province (Irian Jaya), Cenderawasih Bay region, in northwest New Guinea, late 19th–early 20th century. Wood and glass beads, 26 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Form

Form is actual, three-dimensional shape, though it is often used to describe the illusion of three-dimensionality, as well. Like shape, form can be geometric or organic.

A small *korwar* — a representation of an ancestor — from Irian Jaya, New Guinea, mixes these form types well. While the figure is predominantly geometric, with the head shaped like a cube and the nose an arrow pointing downward, the curving organic lines around the eyes soften this effect a bit.

Color

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Hue

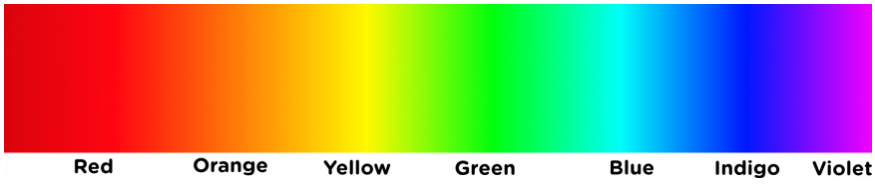

Figure 3.1.11: Colors of the visible light spectrum. (Image: **Meganbeckett27**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Artists can use colors for many reasons other than to simply duplicate reality including setting moods and highlighting importance.

The colors of the world can be divided in different ways. When we use the term “color” casually, what we usually mean is hue. Hues appear on the visible spectrum. On the spectrum, we see the pure hues. These can be divided into primary, secondary and tertiary colors, as on this color wheel.

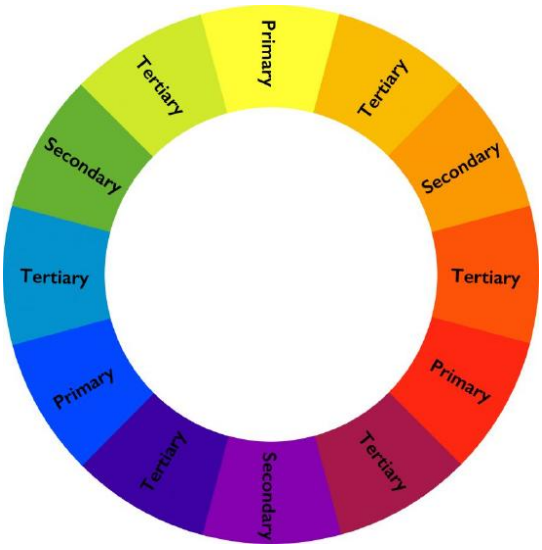

Figure 3.1.12: Color wheel. (Image: public domain)

Primary, secondary and tertiary colors

Primary colors are, for most art media, red, yellow and blue (the exception is the additive color system, which is used in computer screens, theater lighting and the like, and has red, green, and blue as its primary colors). All the rest of the colors can be made from these.

Secondary colors are made by mixing two primary colors: Red and yellow make orange, and so on.

Tertiary colors are made by mixing a primary color with a secondary color.

Complementary and analogous colors

The colors opposite one another (like red and green or blue and orange) are complementary colors, which tend to stand out boldly next to one another. These are therefore often used for university colors and sport team logos. Colors next to one another (like red and orange or blue and green) are analogous colors, and these tend to blend together more smoothly.

Warm and cool colors

The colors on the left of this wheel are called cool colors and those to the right are warm colors. Using cool or warm colors in an image can create moods. Pierre Auguste Renoir used warm colors for his *Mother and Child*, 1886, creating a warm, cheerful, inviting scene. The oranges, pinks and yellows dominate the image.

Figure 3.1.13: Left: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Mother and Child*, 1886. Pastel, 79.1 x 63.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Right: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Peasant Mother*, 1962. Oil on burlap, 249 x 180 cm. Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. (© David Alfaro Siqueiros) (Photos via Smarthistory)

Diego Alfaro Siqueiros presents a similar subject in his *Peasant Mother* (1929), but through the use of cool colors, instead creates a sad, cold scene dominated by figures of blues and greens. Neither of these artists was worried about portraying the world as it really looked. Instead, they used color to inspire feelings in the viewer.

Value (tint and shade)

Color can also be considered in terms of value, which is the degree of lightness or darkness of a color. If we add white to a hue, we get a tint. If we add black, we get a shade. As we might expect, tints tend to be more cheerful—pastel colors are all tints. Shades tend to be gloomier. Indeed, our terms for moods are based on these properties, so that we say that we are lighthearted, or in a dark temper. There are many tints in the Renoir's *Mother and Child*, and many shades in Siqueiros' *Peasant Mother*.

Figure 3.1.14: Henri Matisse, *Red Room (Harmony in Red)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 180.5 x 221 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Figure 3.1.15: Zhou Chen, *Peach Blossom Spring*, 102.5 x 161.5 cm. Suzhou Museum, China. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Saturation

Finally, intensity or saturation is how bright or dull a color is. Henri Matisse tended to use very saturated colors, as in *Red Room (Harmony in Red)* (1908), whereas in *Peach Blossom Spring* (1533), Zhou Chen relied on a much more muted palette with very little saturation of colors.

The landscape is almost entirely in shades of brown and beige. The grey-green of the trees is low in saturation, leaving the single splash of red on the child's clothes the only moment of high saturation in the image. Therefore, we notice this tiny detail within this large painting. The Matisse painting, on the other hand, is a blaze of colors. The vibrant red of the wall and tablecloth dominates

the image, in sharp contrast with the green grass showing through the window and the blues and purples curving throughout the image.

Contrast

Contrast is the amount of variation between the highest and lowest values in a work. This is perhaps most commonly used to talk about photography, but can be applied to any work. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Cliffs of Moher* (1989) has very low contrast. There are no dark blacks, no stark whites; everything is in very similar shades of gray.

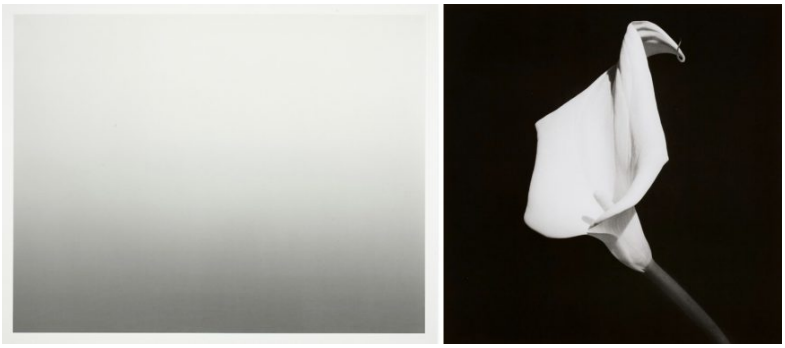

Figure 3.1.16: Left: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Atlantic Ocean, Cliffs of Moher*, 1989. Offset lithograph, 24 x 31 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois. (© Hiroshi Sugimoto); Right: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla Lily*, 1987. Gelatin silver print, 17.94 × 17.78 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota (© Robert Mapplethorpe / The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation) (Photos via Smarthistory)

Figure 3.1.17: Kara Walker, *Untitled (from Testimony)*, 2004. Cut black paper with pencil, pressure-sensitive tape, metal fasteners, and synthetic polymer film on paperboard, 52.7 x 38.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The low contrast conveys the soft and gentle feeling of a heavy mist over quiet water. On the other hand, Robert Mapplethorpe photograph, *Calla Lily* (1987) has much higher contrast, meaning that the difference in the whites and blacks is much greater. The effect is much sharper and crisper, making this simple flower appear grand and impressive.

Moving yet further, in Kara Walker's silhouette image, *Untitled (from Testimony)*, the contrast is absolute. We see only black and white (and here, some red).

In this case, the artist is using the power of this contrast to draw the viewer's attention to some of the problems in American race relations, and their origins in the institution of chattel slavery. Therefore, while visual elements produce visual effects, their implications can extend well beyond the purely visual.

Space

by Dr. Simon Mittman

Figure 3.1.18: Left: Raphael, *La Donna Velata*, 1514-15. Oil on canvas, 82 x 60.5 cm. Palazzi Pitti, Florence; Right: St. John the Evangelist in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D IV, f. 209v. (Photos via Smarthistory)

A convincing illusion of space

Space is used to refer both to depth—real or represented—and also to the general surface area within a work of art. Some periods of art history show a great deal of interest in creating convincing illusions of three-dimensional space in two-dimensional media. Perhaps the most iconic (though certainly not the only) example of this is the Italian Renaissance (c. 1400-1600), when artists very deliberately worked to created convincing illusions of depth.

Look at how Raphael creates an illusion of three-dimensional form in *La Donna Velata*. Through careful variations in value, particularly in shading—the use of darker colors to create the illusion of shadows—Raphael convinces us that the woman in the painting is really there in three dimensions.

Light seems to strike her from her left, casting her right side in shadow. The folds of her voluminous sleeve are a particularly splendid example of the illusion of space. Even examining a small detail of it, it is hard to believe that there is no depth, at all, just thin layers of paint on flat canvas.

Figure 3.1.19: Details of the sleeve, Left: Raphael, *La Donna Velata*; Right: St. John the Evangelist in the *Lindisfarne Gospels.* (Photos via Smarthistory)

For sharp contrast, we can examine a detail of a page of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* . Both images show a person in voluminous robes, looking out at us, but here, the similarities end. Raphael's figure is lit softly, creating highlights and shadows that create a sense of roundness and weight to her body and clothes. The figure of John the Evangelist from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* , on the other hand, is almost totally flat. There is virtually no shading to his body and the folds on his clothes are purely schematic patterns.

If we isolate a small detail of John's sleeve, as we did with La Donna Velata's, it is difficult to even recall that this series of lines and colors is intended to be seen as a three-dimensional form, at all.

Figure 3.1.20: Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter*, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83. Fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet. Vatican, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Figure 3.1.21: Wolf Vostell, *No: Life as a Picture—A Picture as Life* series, 1963. Photograph. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Linear and atmospheric perspective

There are various methods used by artists to create the illusion that their figures exist in three-dimensional space. Among the more effective are linear and atmospheric perspective. Another work from the Italian Renaissance will serve to demonstrate both. Pietro Perugino's *Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter*, uses both linear and atmospheric perspective to create a very convincing illusion of depth.

Linear perspective is based on the optical illusion that parallel lines seem to converge as they recede into the distance. Railroad tracks are the classic example, as in, Wolf Vostell's photograph from his *No: Life as a Picture—A Picture as Life* series from 1963. If we overlay the lines used on Perugino's painting, we can see how he used this effect. The lines are called orthogonal lines or orthogonals and they meet on the horizon line, at the vanishing point. Note that as all the orthogonals converge, the forms also get smaller.

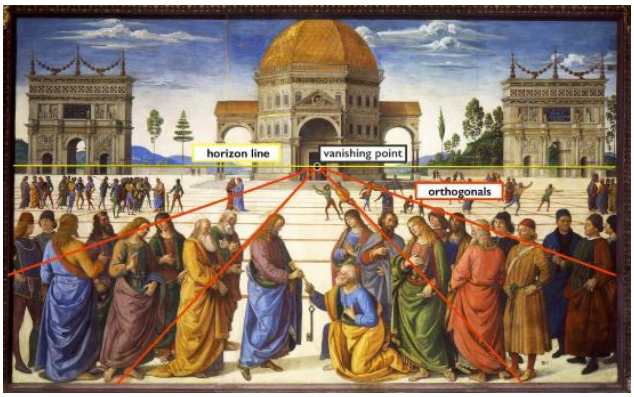

Figure 3.1.22: Perspective diagram, Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Figure 3.1.23: Tobias Verhaecht, *The Clivus Scauri in Rome*. Chalk, graphite and ink on paper, 22 x 17.1 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Perugino also uses atmospheric perspective. This is based on the optical effect that makes objects in the distance appear paler, bluer, and less detailed that objects that are close to us. Returning to Perugino's painting, we can see that he has replicated this effect, carefully making the figures in the foreground (the portion of the image that appears to be closest to the viewer) bolder in color, the smaller figures in the middle ground paler, and the hills in the background (the portion of the image that appears to be in the far distance) fading off into pale blues.The tool of one-point linear perspective is very simple, and artists can use it to create a convincing illusion of depth with only a few pencil strokes and without the careful measuring and use of a straightedge, as in Tobias Verhaecht's sketch of a Roman ruin. Two- and three-point linear perspective are slightly more complicated, but operate on the same general principles and produce similar results.

An important note

It is important to note, though, that the use of various techniques to create a convincing illusion of depth does not make Raphael or Perugino "better" artists than the anonymous medieval monk who painted the page of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, nor does it make their works any "better" or more sophisticated. The illusion of depth is one of the many tools in the artist's toolbox, and it is serves some purposes very well, but it is not always the most powerful or effective way to convey an idea and, indeed, can sometimes be in direct conflict with the intentions of an artist.

Surface and Depth

by Art Institute of Chicago

What makes paintings feel as deep as the view from a window or as flat as a wall?

Online Resource: Surface and Depth

Paintings have both a literal surface and a conceptual surface called the picture plane. The picture plane can act like a transparent window, opening onto what feels like deep, three-dimensional space, or—especially in modern art—may emphasize its own flatness as a surface for paint. In a *trompe l'oeil* painting (from the French, meaning to deceive the eye), the space might not be especially deep, but the objects looks real enough to touch and may even break the picture plane. This video examines how artists can achieve these various effects of depth, and their results.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Art Explainer 2: Surface and Depth

The following works from the Art Institute of Chicago appear in this video:

- Poussin, *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*
- Harnett, *For Sunday's Dinner*
- Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray*

Texture

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Texture is the feeling of a surface, real or represented. This might refer to the roughness or smoothness of actual objects and art media, or to the illusion of these properties.

Figure 3.1.24: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2001. Transparent color coating, stainless steel, 320 x 380 x 120 cm. (Photo: Kim, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Surface texture

Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* has a perfectly smooth, mirrored surface it is difficult to resist touching (though we must). It is this surface texture that turns these replicas of commonplace, short-lived and disposable items (balloon animals) into precious objects.

In contrast, the coarse, bristly surface of an ancient Shang Dynasty Fang-Ding—a ritual vessel used in worshipping dead ancestors—grants the work a vibrant energy, but does not invite our touch.

Figure 3.1.25: Fangding Ritual Food Vessel with Abstract Decor, Shang dynasty, China, 14th-11th century BCE. Cast bronze, 21.7 x 17.1 x 15.2 cm. Harvard Art Museums. (Photo: Harvard Art Museums, via Smarthistory)

The illusion of texture

The illusion of texture is no less important to our experience of works of art.

Dutch still life paintings are justly famous for their careful, illusionistic replication of objects. The smooth silver plates and glass goblet of Pieter Claesz's *Still Life* seem to tease us, as do the rougher cookies and breads, and the crumbly pie. The knife handle, pointing out of the image toward us, seems just beyond our grasp, and therefore makes this magnificent spread all the more tantalizing.

Figure 3.1.26: Pieter Claesz, *Still Life*, c. 1625. Oil on panel, 48 × 76.9 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Light and Shadow

by Art Institute of Chicago

Online Resource: Light and Shadow

Artists use the contrast between light and shadow to create the sense of three-dimensional form on a flat surface—and to shape viewers' perceptions. They may use light strategically to direct attention, create a particular mood, or communicate a message with an artwork. This video examines how three artists, using painting, printmaking, and installation, have used light to particular effect in their work.

Art Institute of Chicago, "Art Explainer 3: Light and Shadow"

The following works from the Art Institute of Chicago appear in this video:

- *Tanner, The Two Disciples at the Tomb*
- Kollwitz, Battlefield
- Flavin, “monument” for V. Tatlin

Articles in this chapter:

- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Line,” in *Smarthistory*, June 23, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Shape and Form,” in *Smarthistory*, July 11, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Color,” in *Smarthistory*, June 24, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Space,” in *Smarthistory*, July 9, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Texture,” in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Art Institute of Chicago, “Surface and Depth,” in *Smarthistory*, January 26, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Art Institute of Chicago, “Light and shadow,” in *Smarthistory*, February 7, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)

3.2: Principles of Composition

Editors' Note

Elements of art, as described earlier in this chapter, include line, shape and form, color, space, surface and depth, texture, and light and shadow. Design is the way the elements that comprise an artwork fit together as a whole, its composition: how individual components might be organized, and how we can interpret the results of those organizational decisions.

Artists consider how all of these elements interact and work with (or against) one another to produce an end result. These elements can complement one another, as when an artist places cool colors together (such as green, blue, and turquoise) to create a calm feeling. Artists can also pair elements to create interesting juxtapositions, such as contrasting rough and smooth textures, for example, or by pairing complementary colors (those opposite each other on the color wheel) such as yellow and purple. The way an artist organizes the objects or formal elements in an artwork is known as its composition. A formal analysis, which involves looking carefully at an artwork's visual elements independent of its content ("story") or historical context, generally includes both discussion of individual artistic elements and how they are arranged.

Balance, symmetry, and emphasis

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Balance and symmetry

Balance is an even use of elements throughout a work of art. Symmetry is a very formal type of balance consisting of a mirroring of portions of an image. Bilateral symmetry, that is, two- sided symmetry, is the most common, in which two halves of a work of art mirror each other, as in Perugino's painting, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter* (Figure 3.1.20). In this painting, the symmetry gives the painting not only a sense of balance, but also a sense of calm, stability, and formality. Notice in particular the way that the building and arches in the background are painted to make the work symmetrical.

Figure 3.2.1: Temple of Artemis, Corfu, Greece, c. 600-580 BCE. (Image via Smarthistory)

Just as the structures, themselves, are symmetrical in Perugino's painting, symmetry is also common in major works of architecture, where it lends buildings a tone of stability and power. Classical Greek temples like the Temple of Artemis at Corfu are rigidly symmetrical.

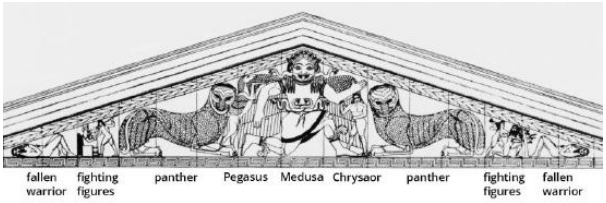

Figure 3.2.2: Pediment detail, Temple of Artemis, Corfu, Greece, c. 600-580 BCE. (Image via Smarthistory)

In this diagram (the temple is now a ruin), even the sculpture on the façade—the front of a building—is nearly perfectly symmetrical. At the outer corners are a mirrored pair of fallen warriors, then two pairs (one now fragmentary) of fighting figures, then two mirrored panthers, and then, in the center, Medusa, with two of her children beside her (Pegasus and Chrysaor).

Even the fearsome Gorgon in the center is presented facing directly outward at us, so that her face can be presented in hideous symmetry, with her great, bulging eyes, grimacing mouth, plaited hair, and even the snakes that emerge from the back of her head carved in perfect symmetry. This work should serve to counter the frequently made statement that symmetry makes works beautiful. While many cultures associate symmetry with beauty, and this temple as a whole might be described as such, a grotesque figure remains grotesque even when perfectly symmetrical.

Radial symmetry

Figure 3.2.3: Garbhadhatu (Taizokai) Mandala (Womb World), mandala of Innate Reason and Original Enlightenment, Japan, Heian period (Tantric Buddhism), late 9th century. Colors on silk. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Radial symmetry is created when an image is symmetrical around a central point or axis, like a sunflower viewed head-on. Radial symmetry creates a strong sense of unity in a work of art, and is common in sacred images.

In a Shingon Tantric Buddhist World Womb Mandala, all points seem to radiate outward from the central figure of the Buddha. The numerous figures around him are bodhisattvas, individuals who have chosen out of compassion to delay their entry into Nirvana in order to help others who are suffering. It is fitting that they are shown as if emanating out of the Buddha, himself, as his enlightenment and compassion are the source and model for theirs. The image also gives a sense that the universe itself is highly ordered.

Asymmetrical balance

Figure 3.2.4: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*, ancient Roman marble copy found in Pompeii of the lost bronze original, c. 450-40 BCE. Marble, 211 cm. Archaeological Museum, Naples, Italy. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

However, perfect symmetry is not necessary to create a sense of balance in an image. Asymmetrical balance is created when two sides of an image do not mirror each other, but still have approximately the same visual weight, the same amount of detail or shapes or color, and so on. The Classical Greek sculpture *Doryphoros (The Spearbearer)* by Polykleitos provides a clear example of asymmetrical balance. The figure does not stand in a symmetrical way, but overall, seems even, calm, balanced. In this case, the figure has his weight on his right leg, so this leg is tensed. The left leg is relaxed and bent. Balancing this out, the right arm hangs loosely, but the left arm is tensed. In this way, the body — which itself is symmetrical, or would be if he were posed with his feet side by side, looking straight ahead, with his arms hanging down — is balanced. This pose is called contrapposto, and is often used to give standing human figures a sense of life and animation.

Emphasis

Emphasis consists of drawing attention to one or more points in a work. This can be accomplished through any of the visual elements. In the World Womb Mandala, the Buddha is emphasized through location (he is centered in the image), color (the vivid red petals around him draw the eye), line (all of the rows of figures essentially guide the eye inward to the center through implied lines, and the lines dividing the red petals direct us inward, as well), symmetry (the radial symmetry focuses us inward to the center), and so on. In essence, we cannot help but return, again and again, to the Buddha, the focus of the image and also the focus of Buddhist devotion.

Movement

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

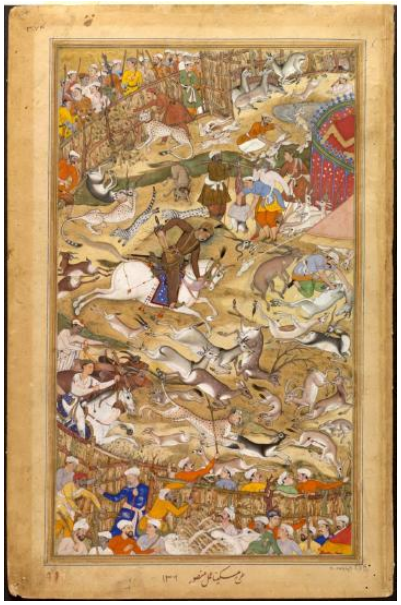

Figure 3.2.5: Akbar on horseback, hunting animals within an enclosure, illustration from the *Akbarnama*, Mughal Empire, India, c. 1590-95. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 32.1 x 18.8 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Movement refers to a sense of motion as the eye is guided through a work of art. This can be accomplished by showing figures in motion, or simply through the visual elements.

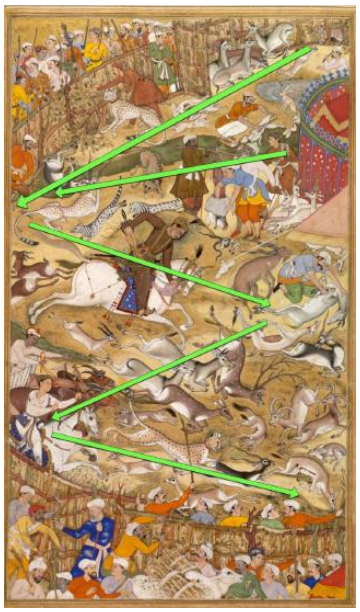

Figure 3.2.6: Akbar on horseback, hunting animals within an enclosure, illustration from the *Akbarnama*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

An Indian illumination—that is, a painting in a handmade book—from the *Akbarnama* showing Akbar hunting in an enclosure demonstrates both types. As with the Dürer woodcut, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the rider on his horse charges rapidly from left to right across the image. The smaller animals scatter, darting in all directions and also hunting one another. Their movements create a strong sense of movement throughout the image. However, there are formal elements that intensify this.

Diagonals

Just as the horizontal lines behind the riders in the Dürer woodcut suggested their movement forward, so here, lines and colors help convey the motion of people and animals. There is a strong zigzag that brings us from top to bottom, or bottom to top.

Starting at the top-right corner, the fences form a strong diagonal, accompanied by the slash of green representing a stream. These meet at the left edge, where the momentum then follows Akbar on his large white horse, also emphasized by the line of darker

earth that moves in a downward diagonal from the horse's mouth. This motion then again reverses direction, in a downward diagonal, back to the left edge, which in turn bounces back to the bottom right edge.

Our eyes therefore move throughout the image not only because the figures in it are depicted in motion, but also because of the manipulation of the visual elements.

Proportion and scale

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Proportion

Proportion refers to the relationship of parts of a body or form to one another and of the parts to the whole, for example, the size of the head of a figure in relation to the entire body.

Scale

Figure 3.2.7: Altar group with Oba Akenzura I, Benin, Nigeria, eighteenth century. Brass, 63 cm. Ethnological Museum, Berlin, Germany. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Scale is the relationship of parts of an image to the image as a whole, or to something in the world outside of the image, for example, the size of the figure of a king in an image as compared to the size of the figure of his servant in the same image, or the size of a statue of the king as compared to the size of an actual person. Beginning with proportion, we can look again at *Doryphoros*. We will compare his proportions to those of an *Altar Group from Benin with Oba (King) Akenzua I and Two Attendants*.

The proportions of *Doryphoros* (Figure 3.2.4) were laid out according to mathematical formulas in order to create an image that the sculptor believed presented the "ideal man." *Doryphoros* is about seven "heads" tall, so to speak, whereas the Akenzua is approximately two and a half "heads" tall. *Doryphoros*' limbs fit within the range of average human proportion, whereas Akenzua's legs are considerably shorter than his torso.

While their proportions are quite different, both present figures considered to be ideal by their cultures. *Doryphoros* embodies quite literally the focus on external beauty—according to the tastes of the day—that was prevalent in Classical Greece, whereas the image of Akenzua shows, with the intentional enlargement of the head, the greater importance of the intellect in the culture.

Hierarchical scale

Scale can refer to any relationship of parts to the whole, but one particular type is of great significance in many periods: hierarchical scale is scale based on relative importance. That is, the more important a figure, the larger he or she is in relation to the figures around him or her. This is quite different from the naturalistic scale found in works organized by linear perspective, like Perugino's painting.

Akenzua, for example, is considerably larger than the figures that flank him. These are not children, but adult male attendants. We are not supposed to therefore assume that Akenzua is a giant, but rather, that he is far more important than the other two men. Also note that the other two have rather different proportions: their heads are much smaller in relation to their bodies, and their arms and legs longer. This reminds us that Akenzua's proportions are absolutely deliberate, not the result of incompetence but of a conscious effort to convey a cultural meaning.

Before leaving this work, though, two more details should be mentioned. At their feet are small cats, but these are leopards—traditional symbols of the king—and so even the attendants are comparatively giant. And below the cats are fallen men, bound with their hands behind them, decapitated. The symbolism of decapitation as the ultimate, dehumanizing death highlights the importance of the scale of the head of the king who towers over them.

Pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Figure 3.2.8: Vairocana Buddha, China, 16th-17th century. Bronze, 99 cm. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, California. (Photo via Smarthistory)

When an image or object is repeated throughout a work of art, or a part of a work, this is called either pattern or repetition.

Repetition and pattern

Repetition can be less structured than pattern, which is more regular. Both can work to create a sense of rhythm, as discussed below. The large base of a Ming Dynasty Chinese Bronze statue of Vairochana Buddha is composed of literally thousands of tiny bodhisattvas (enlightened beings who have chosen to stay on earth to help others achieve enlightenment), which therefore seem to serve to support Buddha figuratively, as well as visually. Their repetition is very regular, establishing a clear pattern. This is also the case in the Buddhist mandala (Figure 3.2.3) from the 9th century. The pattern in both cases emphasizes the unity of purpose shared by these thousands of figures, each an embodiment of the ideal of compassion.

Rhythm

Figure 3.2.9: Hypostyle hall, Great Mosque at Cordoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries. (Photo: wsifrancis, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Rhythm is the visual tempo set by repeating elements in a work of art or architecture. The arches and columns of the Great Mosque of Cordoba provide a good example. They are spaced very evenly, setting up an even tone to the building. This is then enlivened by the rhythm created by the striped pattern on the arches.

For contrast, we could look at Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*. Pollock was a fan of jazz music, and tried to capture something of its loose, syncopated rhythms. The resulting drip-paintings (they were made with the large canvases lain on the floor of his studio) have similarly loose, improvisational compositions. Despite its lack of formal structure, there is a clear rhythm running horizontally across the painting, and Pollock uses the title of the work to draw our attention to it.

Figure 3.2.10: Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950. Enamel on canvas, 266.7 x 525.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Variety and Unity

Figure 3.2.11: Garbhadhatu (Taizokai) Mandala (Womb World) (detail). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Variety is the use of different visual elements throughout a work, whereas unity is a feeling that all the parts of a work fit together well. These do not have to be opposites, as a work filled with variety might also have unity. The World Womb Mandala is an excellent example. Unlike the Ming Dynasty Bronze statue of Buddha, where all of the bodhisattvas are more or less identical, the many bodhisattvas on the World Womb Mandala are each individualized. At a distance, they all become one, expressing great unity, but taken one at a time, each as an object of devotional contemplation, they contain more variety than it would at first appear.

Articles in this chapter:

- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Balance, symmetry, and emphasis," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Movement," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Proportion and scale," in *Smarthistory*, July 11, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
