

# Perspective

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Often, artists use techniques that serve specific functions in their artwork. Perspective is commonly used by artists to give the viewer certain illusions, such as the illusion of three dimensions. In this lesson, you will explore pre-Renaissance attempts at realistic perspective. This lesson covers:



### BIG IDEA

Linear and atmospheric perspective are methods of depicting the illusion of three dimensions in a two-dimensional composition.

## 1. Early Attempts at Linear Perspective

Before artist and architect Brunelleschi, who designed the dome of the Florence Cathedral, defined it mathematically in the early 15th century, few artists were successful at mastering linear perspective. The majority of the attempts were not perfect, and perspective in general was explored and attempted with a great range of success.



### DID YOU KNOW

Certain elements of perspective are important to understand. Artists use elements such as overlapping, where the image in front suggests closer proximity to the viewer. The scale of the artwork is also important. It can be used to depict distance in two dimensions—the more distant object is smaller in scale. Yet another element of perspective is positioning, where images that are higher tend to suggest that they exist further into the picture plane.

### IN CONTEXT

Take a look at the image below. Here is an example of a late Gothic annunciation painting from 1399. This date is roughly 10 years or so before Brunelleschi's work with linear perspective. It contains other methods used by artists to depict perspective. What elements of perspective do you see?



Melchior Broederlam  
*Annunciation and Visitation*

Take note of the following elements of perspective in the image above:

- Overlapping
- Scale
- Positioning
- Diagonal positioning—the red angel in the lower left-hand corner is closer to the viewer, where the Virgin Mary's position suggests that she is further back in the painting.



The attempts at accurate linear perspective are evident here. But something about it isn't quite right, and the brain quickly identifies when something appears unnatural.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Overlapping

A technique used to depict space in 2D artworks in which the closer object covers up, or overlaps, the more distant object.

##### Scale

Size relative to another object; scale can be used to depict distance in two dimensions—the more distant object is smaller in scale.

##### Positioning

A technique used to depict the illusion of distance in 2D artworks. The more distant object is shown through positioning over or on a diagonal with the closer object. Even though both may appear the same size, the eye reads the object that is positioned higher as more distant.

## 2. Linear Perspective, Vanishing Point, and Atmospheric Perspective

The vanishing point and atmospheric perspective are two techniques that artists can use to bring perspective to its full potential in artwork. With linear perspective, the lines of man-made objects in the painting exist at right angles to the picture plane and converge into an imaginary spot in the painting, called the vanishing point. The gradual fading of objects in the background is called atmospheric perspective, and this is used to suggest depth.

Take a look below at this late 15th-century fresco by the Italian artist Perugino. Note how refined the application of linear perspective had become. The lines on the ground create a grid. If you were viewing this scene from overhead, this would be obvious. From the point of view depicted in the work, the lines of the grid that are perpendicular to the picture plane appear to converge on a single point, the vanishing point. This technique uses the straight lines found in architecture to create an illusion of depth that is also very rational. If you knew the measurements of one of the squares, you could determine the dimensions of the space depicted in this image.



Perugino

*The Delivery of the Keys*

The fresco below, by the famous High Renaissance artist and student of Perugino, Raphael, uses a similar technique. Titled *The School of Athens*, it also uses the straight lines found in architecture to create an illusion of depth. Notice how the arches in the top of the image line up perfectly so that their lines converge on a single vanishing point.





Raphael  
*The School of Athens*

Now take another look at da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and notice how all the lines of perspective converge on a vanishing point that corresponds to Christ's head. This was designed intentionally to subconsciously draw the viewer's focus to the figure of Christ, who was the most important figure in the composition. This just shows that you can use perspective as a way of drawing the viewer's attention to certain points in the painting.



Leonardo da Vinci  
*The Last Supper*

Perspective was not a concept limited only to Western art. The ink drawing below is a landscape by the 14th-century Chinese artist Dai Jin. Notice how he uses atmospheric perspective by gradually fading the objects in the background to suggest depth. This type of perspective uses the appearance of mist or fog in between the foreground and the background to create an illusion of depth. Often this implies that the object in the background, a mountain, is massive in size and dwarfs the people, buildings, and any other objects in the foreground.





Dai Jin

*Landscape in the Style of Yan Wengui*

#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Linear Perspective

A form of perspective in which the lines of man-made objects (roads, buildings) are at right angles to the picture plane and converge toward a vanishing point.

##### Vanishing Point

The point on the horizon where the straight lines of linear perspective converge; the two sides of a road appear to come together at the vanishing point.

##### Atmospheric Perspective

A form of perspective in which the more distant objects are depicted in a grayish or bluish haze.

#### SUMMARY

Early attempts at linear perspective show us that artists have come a long way in understanding elements of perspective. In this lesson, you explored a late Gothic annunciation painting from 1399. Certain elements of perspective are evident in this piece, such as overlapping, where the image in front suggests closer proximity to the viewer.

Scale, which can be used to depict distance in two dimensions, and positioning, where images that are higher tend to suggest that they exist further into the picture plane, were also observed.

Finally, you learned about linear perspective, vanishing point, and atmospheric perspective. Remember, the vanishing point is where the straight lines of linear

perspective converge at the horizon, forming a point where two things come together. Atmospheric perspective involves more distant objects being depicted in a grayish or bluish haze.

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [The Annunciation and the Visitation](#) | Author: Melchior Broederlam | License: Public Domain
- [The Delivery of the Keys](#) | Author: Pietro Perugino | License: Public Domain
- [The School of Athens](#) | Author: Raphael | License: Public Domain
- [Jin Landscape in the Style of Yan Wengui](#) | Author: Dai Jin | License: Public Domain



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