

# The Language of Art

## I. Elements of Design

**Line:** Can be drawn or implied (e.g. between two adjacent colors). Lines help to define space and shapes, can be expressive, and can form patterns and textures.

Drawing or drafting (the use of lines) is often one of the first things that an artist would learn.

**Shape/Form:** A shape is the two-dimensional (height and width) representation on a flat surface; form is three-dimensional (height, width and depth) as in sculpture. A shape or form takes up *positive space* and is surrounded by *negative space*. Form can also apply to the total design of an art work.

**Color:** 1. *Hue* - the name of a color. *Primary colors* - red, yellow, blue. *Secondary colors* - orange, green, violet (purple). Colors are arranged according to the *spectrum* and are often displayed as a *color wheel* (developed in the 19th century) in the following order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo/violet. *Complementary colors* are located across from each other on the wheel. When mixed they create grey. When used next to each other they create a resonance. *Analogous colors* are located next to each other on the wheel. 2. *Value* - how light or dark a color is. A *tint* is achieved by adding white, a *shade* by adding black. 3. *Intensity* is how bright a color appears and is altered by adding grey or complementary color until grey is reached. *Monochrome* - tones of a single color.

*Simultaneous contrast* - the effect achieved by placing one color next to another, especially its complement.

Color is extremely expressive, and often is associated with certain ideas or emotions. Color symbolism may be very important in a work of art!

**Texture:** The surface quality of an object as we see it or feel it. Visual texture is simulated, although the media may have a texture of its own. Tactile texture is three dimensional, and can be felt. Dull or matte textures absorb light, while shiny surfaces reflect light. Smooth surfaces reflect light evenly, while rough surfaces reflect light unevenly.

Since we can't touch art in the museum, we have to discover texture by sight and relating the work to things we can touch with similar textures. We have to imagine how it would feel.

## II. Composition

A painter chooses the above elements to express what he/she wants to communicate to the viewer. An understanding of them helps us organize visual composition and provides criteria for appreciation and evaluation (aesthetics).

**Repetition:** Repetition of elements can be used to create *rhythm* and *movement*.

Rhythm - movement or action characterized by a regularly recurring element. Following rhythm in an artwork can help you visually move through a work of art.

**Variety/Contrast:** of elements (e.g. color) and between positive and negative space can be used to achieve *emphasis* and *focus* (what your eye notices first).

Contrast in color intensity or value is one way to create emphasis. Chiaroscuro - the contrast between light and dark, is a common method of focusing the viewer. We might also notice the break in a rhythm pattern, or a unique shape. Movement in a work might also lead us to the object the artist wants us to focus on.

**Balance:** The arrangement of the elements within a work to create equilibrium. Can be *symmetrical* (same on both sides) *asymmetrical* (seems balanced) or *radial* (focus on the center with work radiating around).

### ASSYMETRICAL BALANCE

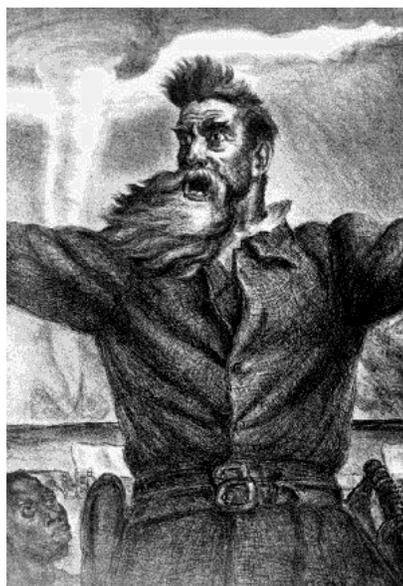
1. A large object can be balanced with a smaller object if the smaller object is more complex - perhaps it has a heavier texture or more pieces. We call this balance by interest, because the more complex object attracts our attention.
2. Balance by weight - a heavier object can be balanced by a lighter object located at a greater distance from the center - like a seesaw
3. In general warm colors are heavier than cool colors, those of stronger intensity heavier than those of weaker intensity.
4. Perspective can also play a role - if we know an object is further back in the picture frame, but weighs the same as an object in front, it appears balanced.

**Proportion:** The size of one part of a work in relation to other parts; can be used to denote space/perspective. When we have something "in proportion" it means that we have achieved a balanced relationship of the parts to the whole. Classical proportion is determined by using the Golden Mean.

*Artists manipulate proportions to achieve desired effects: for example, the use of caricature or enlarging of the natural environment to imply grandeur. The German Expressionist painters elongated their figures to express emotion. Closer to home, Thomas Hart Benton used exaggerated proportions similar to those of El Greco. Rather than following the proportions of Leonardo Da Vinci's "Universal Man" of height being equal to the length of 8 heads, he has height equal to the length of 12 heads.*

**Perspective or the Illusion of Space:** An artist can achieve the illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface by using one or more of the techniques listed below.

1. **Baseline Perspective** - The relationship of the objects to the baseline of the work determines whether the objects are in the foreground or background - objects above the baseline are in the distance, below the baseline are in the foreground.
2. **Overlapping Objects** - Objects in front of other objects will appear to be in the foreground.
3. **Proportion** - Objects closer to the viewer will appear large than objects far away from the viewer. In this situation, a house in the background may be much smaller than the person in the foreground.
4. **Linear Perspective** - Often called train track perspective or scientific perspective, this is based on the fact that two parallel lines will converge on the horizon (in the background). This point on the horizon is called the vanishing point. Look for diagonals or the appearance of diagonal lines in the work.
5. **Contrast of Color** - Cool colors will recede and appear to be further back in the picture space.
6. **Aerial Perspective or Atmospheric Perspective** - Objects in the distance will be blurrier than objects in the foreground. In addition, objects in the front will be a darker color than those in the background.
7. **Foreshortening** - This applies the rules of perspective to a single object in the work. The parts of the object which are further away from the viewer will be smaller, making the object appear to go back in the picture plane.



This lithograph (*John Brown*, John Steuart Curry, 1939, BMA 1992.125) utilizes all of the above techniques except foreshortening.

**UNITY - THE RELATIONSHIP OF ALL THE ELEMENTS TO ACHIEVE WHOLENESS, COHERENCE AND CONSISTENCY.**

*III. Other Terms*

**Content:** The meaning of an artwork, as distinct from its subject matter (which is usually part of its meaning).

**Eclecticism:** The borrowing of visual ideas from earlier sources to recombine them in a harmonious whole.

**Equivalents:** Combinations of line and color woven into an arrangement, with an order that must be recognized before the subject can be perceived. There may be more than one equivalent for the same object in nature; the appearance may be affected by factors such as the artist's style; and it is impossible for an artist to express all the potential meanings of the subject matter simultaneously.

**Figurative:** Describes artworks that represent nature in some way as opposed to abstracting it. More specifically, art based on the human figure.

**Style:** The characteristics - in technique, subject matter, size and/or treatment - which distinguish the artworks by an individual artist, school, historical period, or place.