

Art Vocabulary Words: Elements of Art/ Principles of Design

(The J. Paul Getty Museum/ Education)

Elements of Art

The elements of art are the building blocks used by artists to create a work of art.

Line is a mark with greater length than width. Lines can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal; straight or curved; thick or thin.

Shape is a closed line. Shapes can be **geometric**, like squares and circles; or **organic**, like free form or natural shapes. Shapes are flat and can express length and width.

Forms are three-dimensional shapes expressing length, width, and depth. Balls, cylinders, boxes, and pyramids are forms.

Space is the area between and around objects. The space around objects is often called negative space; negative space has shape. Space can also refer to the feeling of depth. Real space is three-dimensional; in visual art, when we create the feeling or illusion of depth, we call it space.

Color is light reflected off objects. Color has three main characteristics: **hue** (the name of the color, such as red, green, blue, etc.), **value** (how light or dark it is), and **intensity** (how bright or dull it is).

- White is pure light; black is the absence of light
- Primary colors are the only true colors (red, blue, and yellow). All other colors are mixes of primary colors.
- Secondary colors are two primary colors mixed together (green, orange, violet).
- Intermediate colors, sometimes called tertiary colors, are made by mixing a primary and secondary color together. Some examples of intermediate colors are yellow green, blue green, and blue violet.
- Complementary colors are located directly across from each other on the **color wheel** (an arrangement of colors along a circular diagram to show how they are related to one another). Complementary pairs contrast because they share no common colors. For example, red and green are complements, because green is made of blue and yellow. When complementary colors are mixed together, they neutralize each other to make brown.

Texture is the surface quality that can be seen and felt. Texture can be rough or smooth, soft or hard. Textures do not always feel the way they look; for example, a drawing of a porcupine may look prickly, but if you touch the drawing, the paper is still smooth.

Principles of Design

The principles of design describe the way that artists use the elements of art in a work of art.

Balance is the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space. If the design was a scale, these elements should be balanced to make a design feel stable. In **symmetrical** balance, the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side; in **asymmetrical** balance, the sides are different but still looked balanced. In **radial** balance, the elements are arranged around a central point and may be similar.

Emphasis is the part of the design that catches the viewer's attention. Usually the artist will make one area stand out by contrasting it with other areas. The area could be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.

Movement is the path the viewer's eye takes through the work of art, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines, edges, shape, and color within the work of art.

Pattern is the repeating of an object or symbol all over the work of art.

Repetition works with pattern to make the work of art seem active. The repetition of elements of design creates unity within the work of art.

Proportion is the feeling of unity created when all parts (sizes, amounts, or number) relate well with each other. When drawing the human figure, proportion can refer to the size of the head compared to the rest of the body.

Rhythm is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement. Rhythm creates a mood like music or dancing. To keep rhythm exciting and active, variety is essential.

Variety is the use of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and to guide the viewer's eye through and around the work of art.

Unity is the feeling of harmony between all parts of the work of art, which creates a sense of completeness.