

Artistic Building Blocks

The elements of design are the building blocks used to create a work of art. Line, shape, form, texture, color, value, and space are elements that can be used to make any type of design. A finished work of art usually contains many elements that work together to create a complex composition.

The principles of design describe the ways artists use and arrange these elements to create a work of art. Balance, emphasis, movement, proportion, harmony, variety, and contrast work together to create a certain characteristic or quality to a finished piece. A work of art generally uses more than one of these main principles.

Design: a plan or arrangement of lines, shapes or other elements.

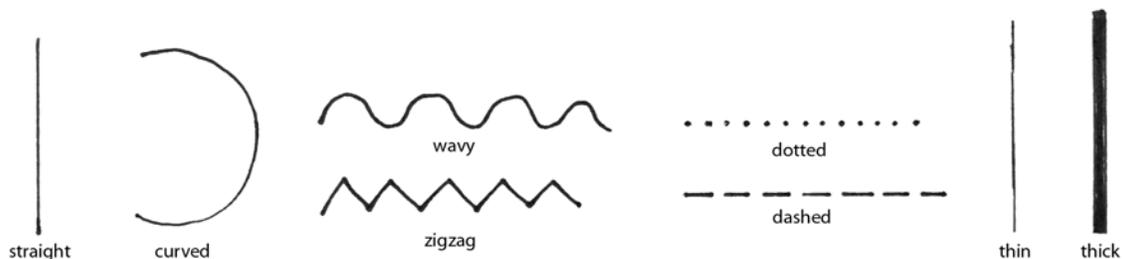
Element: one of the parts of a complex whole.

Elements of Design

Line

Definition: The distance between two points. A narrow elongated mark. The boundary of an area.

Line refers to the continuous movement of a point along a surface, such as by a pencil or brush. The edges of shapes and forms also create lines. Lines and curves are the basic building blocks of two dimensional shapes. Every line has length, thickness, and direction.



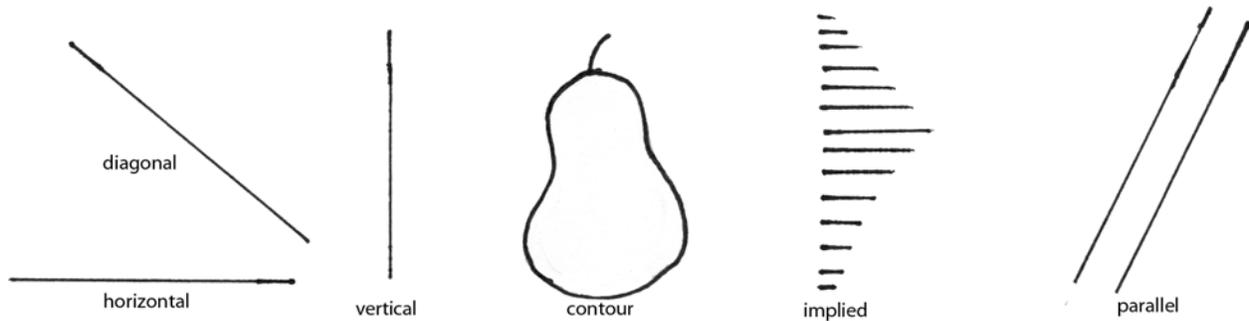
How do we use lines?

Outside edges or contours of an object can be shown with lines. Lines can be used to show direction. They can also be used to show emotion or movement.

Direction:

All lines have direction; horizontal, vertical, or diagonal. Horizontal suggests calmness, stability and tranquility. Vertical gives a feeling of balance, formality and alertness. Diagonal suggests movement, action or tension.

- Diagonal line: a directional line that causes our eyes to move through a composition at an angle. Slanting, or cutting across a shape from one corner to another one.
- Horizontal line: a directional line that guides our eyes straight across a composition. Level or flat; not going up or down, running from side to side.
- Vertical line: a directional line that causes our eyes to move up and down a composition. Straight up and down.
- Contour line: a line that follows the outside edge of an object.
- Implied line: a line created by boundaries where colors change, or are created by edges of shapes etc.
- Parallel: lines that are the same distance apart along their whole width.



Emotion:

By using thick, thin, disorganized or playful lines, an artist can convey the overall emotion of an object or a piece of art.

- Character line: a line that shows emotion or creates moods.

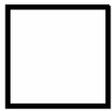


Shape

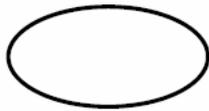
Definition: The form or outline (contour) of something; especially a two-dimensional shape.

A shape is an area that stands out from the space next to or around it due to a defined or implied boundary, or because of differences of value, color, or texture. A shape can be a simple outline or it can be filled in with color. Shapes can be geometric or organic.

- Outline: the edge of a shape; the boundary or line that defines a two-dimensional shape.
- Two-dimensional: having length and width but not thickness; having only one surface, not volume; flat.



Square



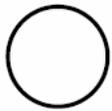
Oval



Triangle



Star



Circle



Diamond

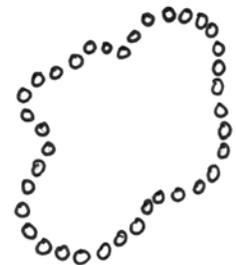
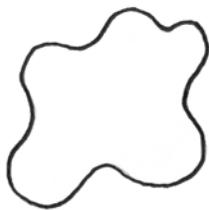


Rectangle



Heart

The shape of an object can be created by contour lines, use of color, texture, or even smaller shapes.



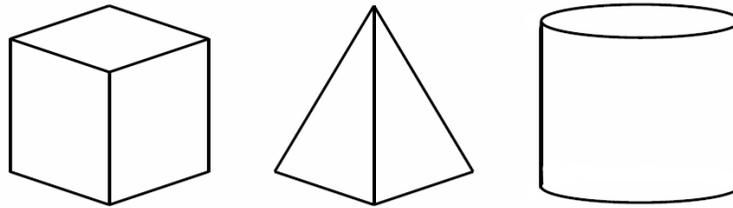
Form

Definition: Shape, especially a three-dimensional object.

Form is any three-dimensional object. Form can be measured, from top to bottom (height), side to side (width), and from back to front (depth). Form is also defined by light and dark. It may be enhanced by tone, texture and color. It can be illustrated or constructed.

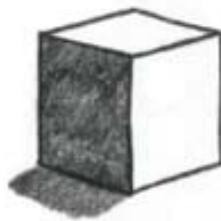
- Volume: the amount of space that a solid or hollow object takes up.

- Three-dimensional: having length, width, and thickness (depth); having volume or bulk.

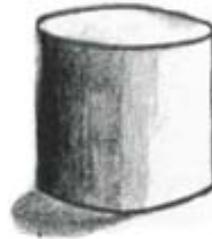


Three-dimensional shapes

Because drawings and paintings are two-dimensional artists must create the illusion of three-dimensional forms. Adding shadows, shading, cross contour lines and vanishing points all help to give flat objects the illusion of three-dimensional shape. Adding value (darkness and light) to color also helps give shapes dimension and depth.



Even shading



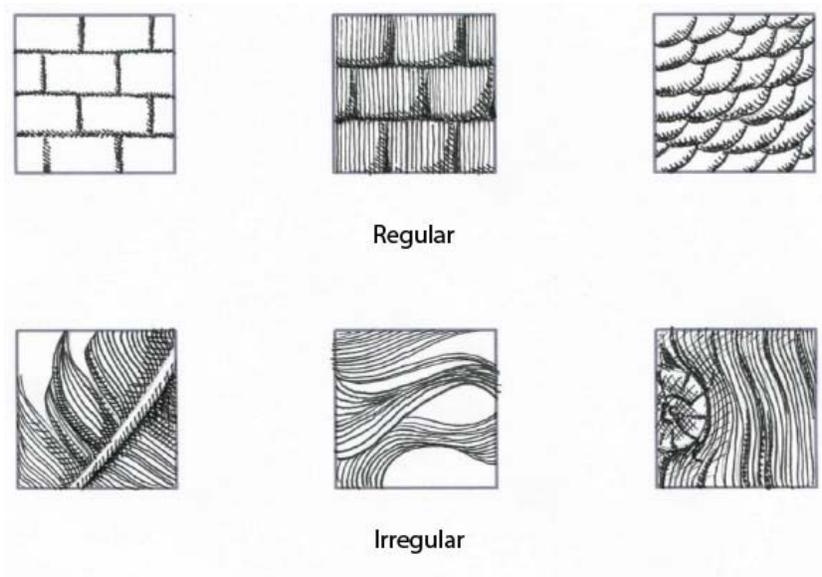
Blended shading

Texture

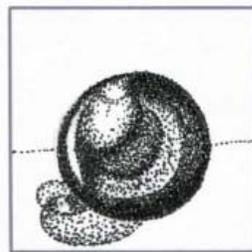
Definition: The surface quality of anything. The feel of the surface of an object or the appearance of the surface of an object.

Texture is the surface quality of a shape; rough, smooth, soft, hard, etc. Texture can be physical (tactile) or visual. Texture can be real or implied by different uses of media. Texture can be felt on sculptures, oil paintings, cut out illustrations, collages, etc. In most paintings and drawings texture must be implied.

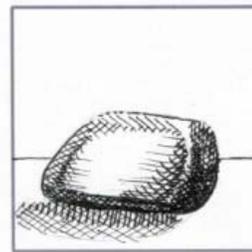
Textures can be regular and form a pattern like scales on a fish. They can also be irregular to show a disorganized texture such as hair.



You can also guess the texture of an object by the way light reflects off of its surface. Something with a very smooth surface will be shiny because it reflects the light so well. Objects with a rough or bumpy surface will look dull because they do not reflect as much light. An artist can use shadows and light to help create the illusion of texture in a drawing or painting.



Smooth and shiny



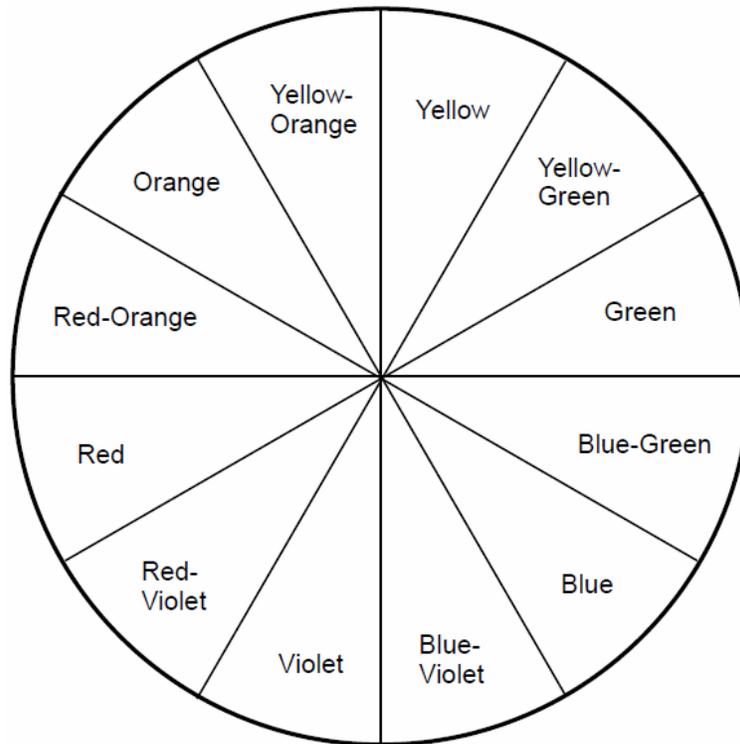
Rough and dull

Color

Definition: a single reflected wavelength or multiple wavelengths of light. Color can be described in terms of hue, value, and intensity.

- Hue: the basic name of a color, such as red, yellow, blue, green etc.
- Primary colors: the three basic hues that can be mixed in various ways to make all the other hues on the color wheel. They are red, blue, and yellow. These basic colors cannot be created by mixing other colors.
- Secondary colors: a hue made by mixing two primary colors. They are orange, green, violet (purple).
- Cool colors: such as blue, green, or purple give a feeling of coolness, calm, or mystery.

- Warm colors: such as red, yellow, and orange give a feeling of warmth, energy, or happiness.
- Color wheel: a circular arrangement of colors that shows how different hues are related to each other.



Intensity means the brightness or dullness of a color; how *strong* the color is. Brightness is not the same as lightness. A pale yellow with a very high value (lightness) may not have as much intensity (brightness) as a darker yellow. High intensity colors are good for posters and signs where you want to catch people's attention. They also help draw a viewer's eye to the center of interest in a work of art.

- Intensity: the degree of purity; the brightness or dullness of a color; how concentrated a color is.

The way a color looks also depends on the amount of light, and what other colors are around it. Strong bright light will intensify a color and warm low light will mellow the look of a color. Complementary colors intensify or enhance each other whereas analogous colors create more of a sense of harmony.

- Complementary colors: pairs of colors that cancel each other out when mixed together, leaving gray. These colors are opposite each other on the color wheel. They are blue and orange, red and green, yellow and purple.
- Analogous colors: colors that are much alike in hue (next to each other on the color wheel). For example, blue-green is analogous to green and blue.
- Intermediate colors: the colors between the primary and secondary colors on a color wheel.

Red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, and red-violet.

- Tertiary colors: the colors formed when two secondary colors are combined. For example; green + orange = brown, violet + green = slate. They are not found on the color wheel.

Value

Definition: The amount of light or dark in a work of art. The lightness or darkness of color.

Value is the degree of lightness or darkness in a color or work of art. Value is also called *tone*. White is the lightest value and black is the darkest value with many shades of gray in between. Value is an important element in a work of art because it helps to provide contrast, balance, and emphasis. By adding dark areas of shadow or shading you can create the illusion of three-dimensional forms on a flat surface.

- Neutral: not having a hue. The three neutral colors are white, black, and gray.
- Tone: a color whose integrity has been reduced by adding its complementary color or gray.



Value scale

Color also has value. By adding white or black to a color you can create a wide variety of shades or tints for your palette. Creating a work of art in monochromatic tones or colors creates a sense of unity and harmony.

- Monochromatic colors: tints and shades of one color.
- Shade: a darkened color made by adding black.
- Tint: a lightened color made by adding white.

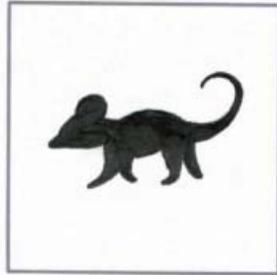
Space

Definition: the area or room that an object or design takes up. The area on a paper or canvas that separates one object from another. The space available to create a design.

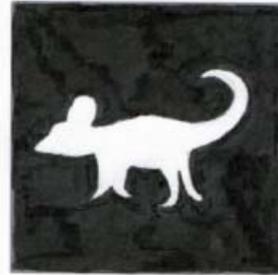
Space is the area provided for a particular purpose. It may have two dimensions (length and width), such as a piece of paper, or it may have three dimensions such as a piece of clay.

There are two types of space; positive and negative.

- Positive space: the part of a design that is filled in. The main objects in a painting; often in the foreground.
- Negative space: the part of a design that is not filled in. The space surrounding an object; often the background.



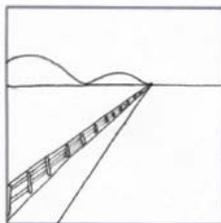
Positive space - black
Negative space - white



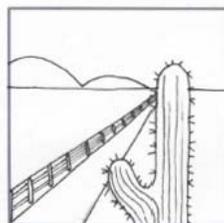
Positive space - white
Negative space - black

To create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface the artist can: overlap objects; create a foreground, mid-ground and background; and show parallel lines converging in a vanishing point. Perspective should always be used to draw the audience into a picture. Perspective is created by arranging objects in two-dimensional space to look as they would appear to the human eye.

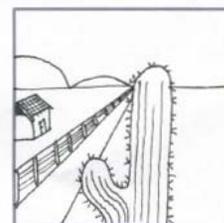
- Perspective: the appearance to the eye of objects in respect to their relative distance and position.
- Foreground: the part of a picture that seems closest to the viewer.
- Vanishing point: show parallel lines as converging and meeting at eye level.



Vanishing point



Foreground



Foreground
Midground
Background

The Principles of Design

Making a design means choosing the elements you want to use and arranging them in a way you like. You might use all of these elements in one design or maybe only a few of them. The principles of design; balance, emphasis, movement, proportion, harmony, variety and contrast are guidelines to help you decide how to arrange the different elements to create a successful piece of art.

Balance

Balance means keeping all parts of a design interesting. Giving equal weight to each side of a design.

- Symmetrical: having both sides be equal or with equal emphasis; divided evenly down the middle.
- Asymmetrical: one side or the other has more emphasis. Lack of symmetry.

Emphasis

Emphasis means anything that attracts attention to a point of interest in the design. Emphasis can be created with any of the elements of design. A bright spot of color or an interesting texture can draw the viewers' eye to a specific area of your artwork.

- Center of interest: the part of a design that attracts the most attention. Not all designs have a center of interest. If you do have a center of interest be sure to balance the other parts of your design around it.

Movement

Movement is the suggestion or illusion of motion in a painting, sculpture or design. Use of different elements of design can give the illusion of movement; such as ripples in the water, or wind blowing through trees. You can also use lines, shapes, colors or texture to lead one's attention from one part of a design to another. This is also referred to as movement.

Proportion

Proportion means that all parts of a design are the right size, compared to each other and to the whole design. If you are creating a realistic picture then proportions should be correct for what would be considered normal. If you are creating a cartoon or surreal image then proportions can be purposely distorted to create different effects.

Harmony

Harmony means that all the elements of a design go together. Every part of the design seems to belong with the others. Harmony is also referred to as unity. You should choose design elements that work with the idea being expressed in the work of art as a whole. A piece of art with angled lines, bold colors and strong texture will work together to create tension, just as muted colors, soft textures, and horizontal lines will create a more peaceful mood.

- Analogous colors: colors that are found side by side on the color wheel. These can be used to create harmony.

Using repetition or patterns in work of art can help create a sense of unity. It can help connect objects that otherwise seem unrelated.

- Repetition: using the same or similar things over and over again. Repetition works with pattern to make the artwork seem active. Repetition of elements helps to create harmony.
- Pattern: a design made by repeating a motif.
- Motif: a single unit, which may be repeated to form pattern.

Variety and Contrast

Contrast is the juxtaposition of opposing elements. Contrast can be created with color, value, directional line, size etc. Too much variety scattered throughout a painting can destroy unity and make a work of art seem disorganized. Artists must balance variety, contrast, and harmony. Contrast can be used to show emphasis in any part of a design.

- Variety: an assortment of different things; can make a work of art more interesting.
- Contrast: shows differences between elements or objects.

General Definitions

- Medium: a material used to make a work of art or craft work; for example, watercolor, clay or pencil.
- Creative: having your own ideas; doing and making things in a new way.
- Art: anything that is designed to be enjoyed by looking at it, sometimes touching it, or hearing it.

Recommended Authors:

Jack Hamm
Ruth Heller
Claudia Nice
Gary Simmons