

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 of 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. Textures 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.

Line

A **line** is an identifiable **path created by a point moving in space**. It is one-dimensional and can vary in **width, direction, and length**. Lines often define the edges of a form. Lines can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, straight or curved, thick or thin. **They lead your eye** around the composition and can **communicate information through their shape and direction**.



Horizontal lines suggest a feeling of **rest** because objects parallel to the earth are at rest. In this landscape, horizontal lines also help give a sense of **space**. The lines outline sections of the landscape, which retreat into space. They also imply continuation of the landscape beyond the picture to the left and right.

Vertical lines often communicate a sense of **height** because they are perpendicular to the earth, extending upwards toward the sky. In this church interior, vertical lines suggest **spirituality**, rising beyond human reach toward the heavens.



Saint Bavo, Haarlem, Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, 1634

Horizontal and vertical lines used in combination to communicate **stability** and **solidity**. Straight lines with 90-degree angles are structurally **stable**. This stability suggests **permanence** and **reliability**.

Diagonal lines convey a feeling of **movement**. Objects in a diagonal position are **unstable**.

Because they are neither vertical nor horizontal, they are **either about to fall or are already in motion**. The angles of the ship and the rocks on the shore convey a feeling of **movement or speed** in this stormy harbor scene.



A Storm on the Mediterranean Coast, Claude-Joseph Vernet, 1767

The curve of a line can convey energy. Soft, shallow curves recall the curves of the human body and often have a pleasing, sensual quality and a softening effect on the composition. The edge of the pool in this photograph gently leads the eye to the sculptures on the horizon.

Shape and Form

Shape and form define objects in space, and can create a tone that is **harsh** with **straight geometric lines**, or **soft** with **curved organic lines**.

Geometric shapes and forms include **mathematical shapes** such as squares, rectangles, circles, cubes, spheres, and cones. Geometric shapes and forms are often **man-made**. However, **many natural forms also have geometric shapes**. This cabinet is decorated with designs of geometric shapes. The straight lines of geometric shapes create **harsh boundaries**, and create a sense of **chaos, anger, or rigidity**.

Organic shapes and forms are typically **irregular or asymmetrical**. **Organic shapes are often found in nature**, but **man-made shapes can also imitate organic forms**. This wreath uses organic forms to simulate leaves and berries. The curved lines of organic shapes look natural, flowing, softer and calming, and can create a sense of fantasy.



Commode, Jean-François Oeben, about 1760



Cabinet, French, c. 1785



Pool, Saint-Cloud, Eugène Atget, 1915-1919



Gold Wreath, Greek, 300-100 B.C.



Space

Real space is three-dimensional. **Space** in a work of art refers to a **feeling of depth** or three dimensions. It can also refer to the artist's use of the **area** within the picture plane. In a work of art, the area that the primary objects occupy is **known as positive space**, whereas the area **around** the primary objects in a work of art is known as **negative space**.

Positive and negative space

The **relationship of positive to negative space** can greatly affect the impact of a work of art. In this drawing, the man and his shadow occupy the positive space, while the white space surrounding him is the negative space. The large amount of negative space highlights the figure's **vulnerability and isolation**.

Three-dimensional space

The perfect illusion of three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional work of art is something that many artists tried to achieve. The illusion of space is achieved through perspective drawing techniques and **shading**.

The more **three-dimensional** a work, the more **realistic**, and therefore **closer to life**, the more **two-dimensional**, the more **unrealistic, comic, or exaggerated** it is.

Color

Light reflects off objects. Color has three main characteristics: **hue** (red, green, blue, etc.), **value** (how **light** or **dark** it is), and **intensity** (how **bright** or **dull** it is). Colors can be described as **warm** (red, yellow) or **cool** (blue, gray), depending on which end of the color spectrum they fall.

Value describes the **brightness** of color. Artists use color value to **create different moods**. **Dark colors** in a composition suggest a **lack of light**, as in a night or interior scene. Dark colors can often convey a sense of **mystery or foreboding**.

Light colors often describe a **light source or light reflected** within the composition. In this painting, the artist used light colors to describe the light created by the candle flame, and the **sense of hope, comfort and warmth** it creates.



The Annunciation, Dieric Bouts, 1450–1455

Intensity describes the **purity or strength** of a color. **Bright colors** are **undiluted** and are often associated with **positive energy and heightened emotions**. **Dull colors** have been diluted by mixing with other colors and create a **sedate (calm) or serious mood**. In this image the artist captured both the **seriousness and the joy** of the scene with the **dull gray** stone interior and the **bright red** drapery.

Texture

The surface quality of an object that we sense through **touch**. All objects have a **physical texture**.

In a two-dimensional work of art, texture gives a **visual sense** of how an object depicted would **feel** in real life if touched: hard, soft, rough, smooth, hairy, leathery, sharp, etc. In three-dimensional works, artists use actual texture to add a tactile quality to the work.

Texture depicted in two-dimensions

Artists use color, line, and shading to imply textures. In this painting, the man's robe is painted to simulate silk. Such a texture would imply **richness or grandeur**. Textures such as **velvet or silk look inviting**. Texture that is **metallic or hard** conveys that the object is **functional**, but **cold, unyielding, and uninviting**.



Saint Bavo, Haarlem, Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, 1634



Christ Crowned with Thorns, Gerrit van Honthorst, about 1620



Portrait of Agostino Pallavicini, Anthony van Dyck, 1621–1623