

Formal Analysis of Visual Art

Every artist and craftsperson uses some or all of these elements and principles as they create their works of art. As we look at art to see how the artist used these tools, it helps us focus on the work, to see more details and to discover themes. We also have common terms to discuss the artwork with others.

I. Elements of Design

A. Line

1. Outline – edge, silhouette, lines that define the shape and space
2. Variations – more than one type of line: straight, curved, thin, thick, solid, sketchy, horizontal, vertical

B. Color

1. Hue – primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and secondary colors (orange, green, purple), cool colors (blue, green, purple) and warm colors (red, yellow, orange)
2. Value – relative lightness or darkness; tints are light colors (mixed with white), shades are dark colors (mixed with black)
3. Saturation – intensity of the colors, they are bright or dull

C. Shapes

1. Geometric shapes – those made of lines, angles and measured curves
2. Organic shapes – those following the natural curves of animals, plant forms, clouds and water

D. Texture

4. Real textures – those which can be felt to be smooth or rough
5. Implied textures – those painted or drawn to look soft or hard

E. Space

1. Two dimensional – having height and width, as in a drawing, painting, print or photograph
2. Pictorial depth – different ways of showing depth in a two dimensional artwork, from overlapping to perspective; some objects look close and others look far away.
3. Three-dimensional – having height, width and depth, such as in a relief, sculpture or architecture.

II. Principles of Design

A. Repetition

1. Repeating one or more elements - line, color, texture or shape in two or more parts of the artwork.

2. Pattern is repetition of the same elements to create an overall design.
- B. Emphasis – making one part of the artwork stand out by it being the largest, brightest or darkest.
- C. Balance
1. Symmetrical or formal – if you draw an imaginary line down the middle, the right side of the artwork is the same as the left side
 2. Asymmetrical or informal –it is unequal or not the same on each side of an imaginary middle line.
- D. Unity
1. Proportion – the pleasing relationship of all parts to each other and to the whole of the design.
 2. Variety – there are differences in size, surface, line, value and shape that give interest to a composition.
- E. Contrast – shows differences between selected elements of the design, such as thick versus thin lines, bright versus dull colors or smooth versus rough texture

III. Elements of Content

- A. Subject Matter
1. Representational – we can clearly identify the person, place or thing in the artwork.
 2. Abstract – the artwork is made of lines, forms and shapes that do not represent actual people, places or things.
- B. Intention of the artist
1. Record beautiful people, places or things
 2. Honor a person or religious figure
 3. Record history or refer to tradition or legend
 4. Protest a condition in society
 5. Experiment with materials, colors, forms or subjects
- C. Ideas contained in the work
1. Political
 2. Religious
 3. Economic
 4. Social
 5. Artistic: continue traditions or experimenting
- D. Symbols and symbolism
1. Myths and legends, based on a culture's history
 2. Religious signs or ways of representing God, gods or goddesses

IV. Elements of Composition

A. Framing

1. The subject is shown whole or parts are shown – cropping
2. The viewer is looking up, down or straight at the subject; from the front or side – point of view.

B. Pose – the position of a living subject

1. Standing or sitting, quietly or in motion
2. The facial expression

C. Placement

1. Grouping – if there is more than one person or object, how are they arranged – in a line, within a triangle, circular, etc.
2. Proximity – how close or far away are persons or objects to each other
3. Sight lines – primary orientation of lines and shapes in the artwork
 - a. Horizontal lines – calming
 - b. Vertical lines – formal
 - c. Diagonal lines – movement

D. Background or setting

1. General setting – could be anywhere
2. Specific or historical – shows a very definite place and/or time
3. No background or setting is shown

E. Lighting

1. Flat light – the colors are soft and blended; there are no highlights and shadows
2. Contrasting light – there are many highlights and shadows throughout the artwork.
3. Dramatic focus – the main subject appears to be in a spotlight

V. Elements of Style

The distinctive way that an artist or group of artists uses the elements and principles of design in their artworks and often their choice of subject(s) for their artworks.

A. Use of Color

1. Monochromatic – the artist uses only one color with different tints and shades.
2. Multi-color – the artist uses many colors
3. High Key – the artist uses primarily light colors, often with many tints
4. Low Key – the artist uses primarily dark colors, often with many shades

B. Use of shapes

1. Distortion – the size of a person or object is larger or smaller, compared to others in the artwork
2. Angular – shapes are primarily angular or outlined in straight lines.
3. Rounded – shapes are primarily rounded and full or outlines are curved lines.

C. Use of Details

1. Simple, geometric shapes; there are no folds or complex shapes in clothing; abstract.
2. There are some details shown in clothing and objects; soft focus.
3. Highly detailed – showing every small fold of clothing, edge of leaf, change in color in a person or object

D. Use of Perspective

1. Linear – lines of buildings, roads, and other objects appear to come together (converge) at a single point on the horizon.
2. Atmospheric – the artist uses color changes to show what is near to the viewer (darker colors) and what is far away (lighter colors).
3. Visual – the artist uses the size of the object to show what is near (large) and what is far away (small) or overlaps people or objects, showing what is in front and what is behind.
4. No perspective – there is no sense of depth; everything looks flat