

Elements & Principles of Design

The elements and principles of design are the building blocks used to create a work of art. The elements of design can be thought of as the things that make up a painting, drawing, design etc. good or bad – all paintings will contain most of if not all, the seven elements of design.

The Principles of design can be thought of as what we do to the elements of design. How we apply the Principles of design determines how successful we are in creating a work of art.

Elements of Design



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 formed shapes 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 triangles 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 can create the feeling or illusion of depth we call it space.



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



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.



Value is the lightness or darkness of a color.

Principles of Design



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 look 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 will be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.



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



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



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



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. Variety is essential to keep rhythm exciting and active, and moving the viewer around the artwork. Rhythm creates a mood like music or dancing.



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



Unity is the feeling of harmony between all parts of the artwork creating a sense of completeness.