

# THE VISUAL ELEMENTS AND COMPOSITION: THE BASIC VOCABULARY OF FORM

## ■ INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with some terms and expressions frequently used to describe how artists apply the most basic vocabulary of art. We will begin with the **visual elements** followed by how artists employ **composition** to put those elements together and create unique and wonderful works of art. The two areas of visual elements and composition comprise one aspect of the range of concepts you can explore about **form** (the surface or visible factors of visual art).

A reassuring aspect of most of the art terms you will encounter in this chapter is that they are words most of you have heard before. They are neither complex nor technical. We will explore their meanings and definitions so you have a greater grasp of their meanings when referenced later in this book and when you're discussing art in general. These terms and concepts are an important addition to your knowledge about art. They will help you pick up on things you may not have noticed before. Learning their meanings will allow you to talk more clearly and intelligently about what you see in works of art. In short, you will become more educated and isn't this why you are all here?

Successful artists use their "art vocabulary" so the viewer can "read" what the artist is trying to convey in the first place. As we go along, you will be able to combine the terms you learn with your personal interpretations. Two questions to keep in mind and ask yourself as we progress through this textbook whenever you first encounter any work of art are: **(1) What does the artist want me to look at?** and: **(2) How do they get me to do that?**

The answers to these two questions come chiefly from an artist's effective use of the concepts introduced in this chapter. This doesn't mean that you as the viewer don't have to make any effort to "get" the work. A viewer who hasn't become skilled in using the most basic tools of art may miss the artist's main message or goal entirely. Just like literature, some pieces are easier to read than others, but that doesn't make the more difficult selections inferior, just more challenging.

This holds true in the visual arts as well, especially with some contemporary styles that you may not have encountered yet. Our tendency is to dismiss those things that don't "fit" our views (our sense of reality) and quickly move on to something else. This book will ask you to give new works of art a chance; to give them a second, more thoughtful look. After this chapter introduces the visual



elements, a section follows that will show you how artists put those elements together to create a composition. Think of the visual elements as the visual language's equivalent of letters in an alphabet. When writing, we combine letters in myriad ways to form different words, sentences, and paragraphs. The visual elements are combined to form a visual composition.

## ■ THE VISUAL ELEMENTS

The **visual elements** are the “alphabet,” or “basic building blocks,” that an artist uses to create a piece of art. Every visual creation ever made utilizes them. An artist's skill with the visual elements may be one of the reasons why art historians, critics or the admiring public consider a particular work exceptional. One artist can use the visual elements to depict a given subject in a way completely different from another artist, by simply knowing how to manipulate these elements. Consider the two paintings in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, for example. Both are flowers in a blue vase, yet they appear visually dissimilar, don't they? A significant factor in those differences is the use of the visual elements.

Familiarity with the visual elements will enable you to judge when an artist really knows their stuff or is a bit awkward. You will also learn to articulate just how artists such as Breughel and Cezanne utilize the elements in their own unique style.



**Figure 2.1** Jan Breughel the Elder, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Blue Vase*, c. 1608. oil on panel. 27  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19" Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy. Image © Corel.



**Figure 2.2** Paul Cezanne, *The Blue Vase*, 1883–87, oil on canvas. 24" x 19  $\frac{5}{8}$ ". Louvre, Paris. Image © Corel.

The visual elements we will focus on are **line**, **shape/mass**, **color**, **light & value**, **texture**, and **space**. You have no doubt heard these words before, but now you will learn more specific ways they're used to describe works of art.

## LINE

Where would an artist be without the **line**? Lines accomplish many things. See what you can do with them by drawing as many different types of lines as possible in the space provided. Using your pencil, see if you can come up with at least seven different kinds of lines.

### Start here

How did you do? Were some of the lines thick, thin, or dark? Or were they wavy, jagged, straight, or broken? What other types of lines did you draw? All these variations are also adjectives you could use to describe lines you see in a work of art. For instance, turn back to Chapter 1 and review the drawing you made of your “significant event.” What do you notice now, about the various lines you used in the drawing? Is it apparent that you made use of line as a **means to define form**, to create an **outline**? If you look at objects in nature, you will realize there are no actual lines between things, but artists make use of line as an effective means of separating objects in their work.

Using a variety of lines gives an artist options to play with and provides the viewer with multiple talking points when discussing artwork. What comments could you make about Dürer's watercolor painting in Figure 2.3, limiting your remarks to *just* how the artist used line?

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**Figure 2.3** Albrecht Dürer, *The Great Piece of Turf*, 1503. Watercolor. Albertina, Vienna, Austria. Image © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



**Figure 2.4** Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*. c. 1480. Tempera on canvas, 6' 7" x 9' 2". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Image © Corel.

Artists can also make you “see” a line by creating an **implied** one. There are many ways they do this. Look at the image in Figure 2.4 and try to figure out several of those ways. Start by asking yourself those two questions: (1) What does the artist want me to look at? and (2) How does the artist get me to look there? Write your responses in the space provided.

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Botticelli did not want you to miss the nude woman in the middle of the painting, so he used implied line extensively. Note that the “people” to the left, (personifications of the zephyrs, or winds) and the woman on the right, (who represents spring) are all gazing at Venus. Their looking toward Venus creates what is called an **implied line of sight**. Humans are naturally curious to know what someone else is looking at and tend to direct their gaze in the same direction that others are. An example of this: imagine walking past someone who is looking up into a tree or at a building. Would you find that you couldn’t help yourself; you would just have to look in the same direction to see what they were looking at? Artists are well aware of this tendency and use it to guide the viewer’s attention.

Next, in Botticelli’s piece, the lines of a **pyramidal**, triangular form are implied by the drapery of the zephyrs on the left, along with the garment spring is holding on the right. The lines of that implied pyramid lead our eyes to the face of Venus. But there is more! Botticelli wasn’t taking any chances that you’d miss Venus, the heart of his painting. Notice how he used the pointed landmasses on the right like arrows, once again directing our eyes to Venus.

When two edges of something meet, the line between them is not actually there—it is implied. The border between one thing and another in the natural world is a separation that looks like a line, even though one does not exist. The next time you venture outside look for examples of line implied by edges in nature. Make a list of several objects that are delineated by implied lines and another list noting places where you were certain an actual line existed.

Actual line list

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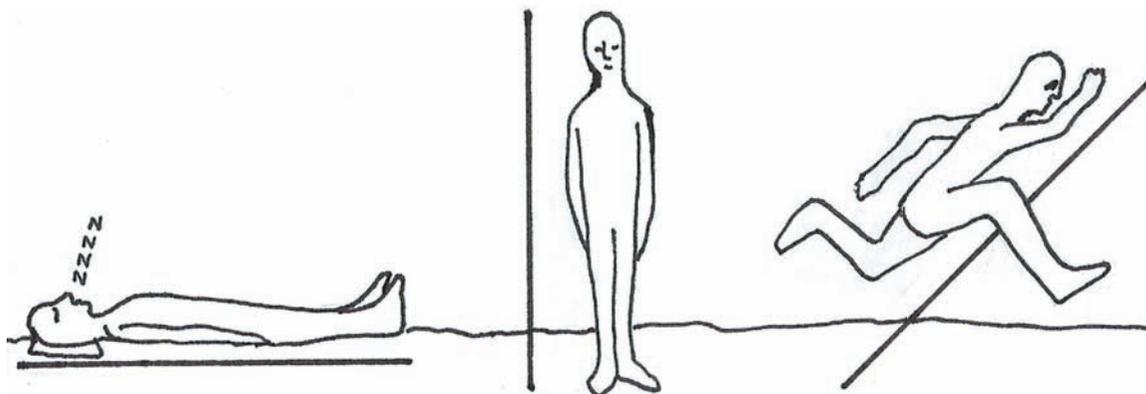
Implied line list

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If you prefer, you can sketch your examples in the space provided.



**Figure 2.5** Horizontal, Vertical and Diagonal Guys.

Although we have discussed varieties of actual lines and implied lines, there is even more you can learn about line. Artists also use types of line to suggest movement and to create emphasis. These lines fall into three basic categories: **horizontal**, **vertical**, and **diagonal**.

Horizontal lines give a strong sense of stability and are the most **static** of the three types. They have little movement, much like a sleeping person. Can you think of some reasons why an artist would choose a lot of horizontal lines? What might the mood or message be? What does the artist using horizontals want us to perceive?

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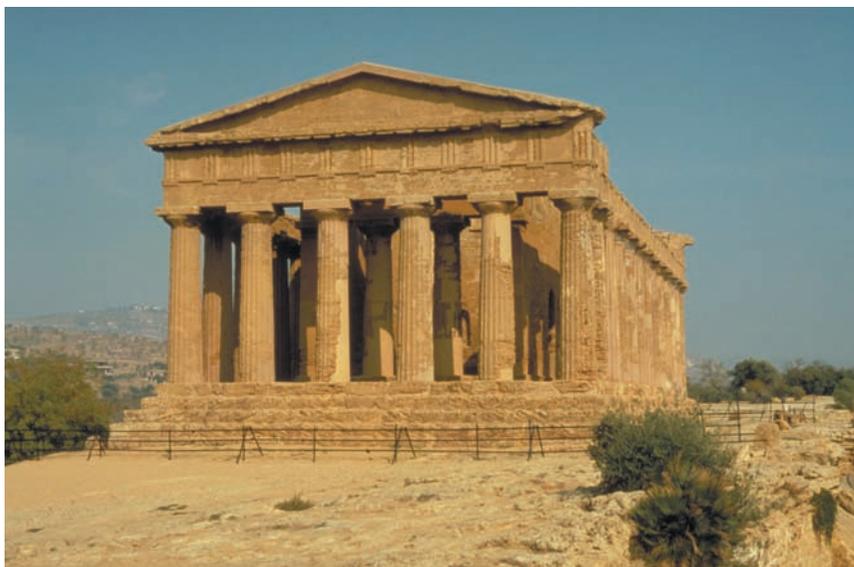
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Looking at some works of art that emphasize the horizontal line, what can you understand about what the artist was trying to communicate to you, the viewer? How did ample use of horizontal lines help them say that? This would be a good time to remember the question suggested earlier for understanding a work of art: **What does the artist want me to look at?** Nine times out of ten, you will be able to tell right away. Sometimes there is more than one place drawing your attention. This too, is probably a deliberate intention of the artist. Take a look at Monet's painting in Figure 2.6. He has used many horizontal lines. How do these horizontal lines direct your vision in the painting? Write some of your observations in the margin beside the image.

The second general type of line is **vertical**. Imagine a vertical line as a person standing up alert, as depicted in Figure 2.5. Vertical lines are not going anywhere, but they are standing up. A vertical line is static like a horizontal line, it does not move. But, vertical lines read as somewhat more active than their horizontal counterparts. Following are some examples that will begin to show you the differences in the two types of lines. The Greek temple at Agrigento in Figure 2.7 combines horizontal and vertical lines throughout its design. Using your pencil, mark directly on the picture some of the horizontal and vertical lines.



**Figure 2.6** Claude Monet, *Beach at Sainte-Adresse*, 1867. Art Institute, Chicago, Illinois. Image © Corel.



**Figure 2.7** *Temple of Concordia*, 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Agrigento, Sicily, Italy. Image © Corel.

How would you describe the interplay of vertical and horizontal lines in this building front, or **facade**?

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