

The Visual Vocabulary

One of the most important things to look for in works of art is the way they have been designed or planned. This involves knowing the elements and principles of art and how they are used to create art objects.

The elements of art are *the basic components, or building blocks, used to create works of art: line, shape, form, value, texture, space, and color*. Artists use the elements of art to express their ideas. These elements can be referred to as the visual vocabulary. Just as a writer uses words to create a mental picture, an artist uses the elements of art to communicate a visual picture. The principles of



▲ **Figure 1.4** Describe the different kinds of line in this drawing. Do you think that the different lines are more interesting than the fact that they are used to depict a figure? Why or why not?

Paul Klee. *Geringer Ausserordentlicher Bildnis*. 1927. Brush and blue grey watercolor on off-white laid paper. 20.6 × 31.1 cm (8 1/8 × 12 1/4"). The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. Nelson and Juanita Greif Cutman Collection. BMA 1963.144. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

art are *the different ways the elements of art can be used in a work of art: balance, emphasis, harmony, variety, gradation, movement, rhythm, and proportion*.

The elements and principles of art make up the visual vocabulary. We can make a comparison with writers. The elements of art can be compared to words. How writers organize words is similar to how an artist uses the principles of art.

The Elements of Art

Now let's examine each of the elements of art individually. Keep in mind, however, that these elements are not used independently in a drawing. They work together in all successful works of art.

Line

To draw, an artist moves a pointed instrument, such as a pen, pencil, crayon, or brush, over a smooth surface, leaving marks. The generally accepted name for these marks is *line*. Line is the main element of drawing.

Lines can be used in many different ways, depending on the intent and style of the artist, the instrument used to create them, and the surface on which they are made. Rapidly drawn lines can quickly capture a person's actions and attitude. An artist can use a more unhurried, controlled line to draw an exact likeness of a carefully posed model.

Paul Klee (**clay**) wasn't interested in capturing action or in making an exact likeness in his drawing shown in **Figure 1.4**. He used a few continuous lines, varying in width, that scurry, turn, and twist across the page playfully.

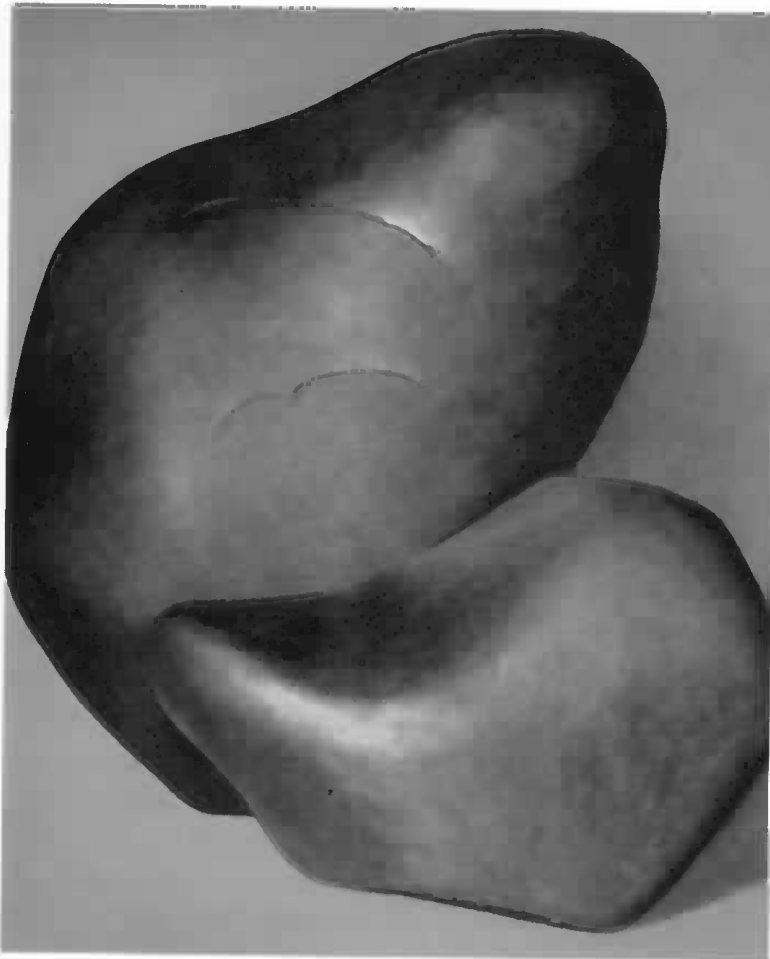
Shape and Form

The term shape refers to a two-dimensional area clearly set off by one or more of the other visual elements, such as color, value, line, texture, and space. Shapes are flat. They are limited to only two dimensions: length and width. Sometimes a shape may have exact, easily recognized boundaries or edges. At other times its boundaries aren't clear. Like lines, shapes have expression. They can be static, full of movement, angular, or free-flowing.

In art, a shape or form is called a *positive shape*, or **figure**. The empty spaces between the shapes or forms are called

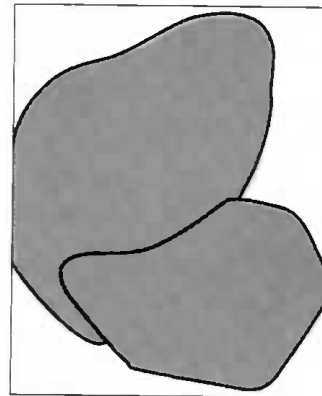
negative shapes, or **ground**. The negative shapes often contribute as much to the effect of a finished composition, or artwork, as the positive shapes.

When creating the drawing in **Figure 1.5**, Georgia O'Keeffe didn't think only about how to draw the dark positive shapes. She also directed attention to the empty, or negative, shapes that were created by placing the positive shapes on the paper (**Figure 1.6**). What if O'Keeffe had decided to place the large positive shapes in the center of the page (**Figure 1.7**)? The resulting negative shapes would be quite different. The overall effect of the drawing would be less satisfying.

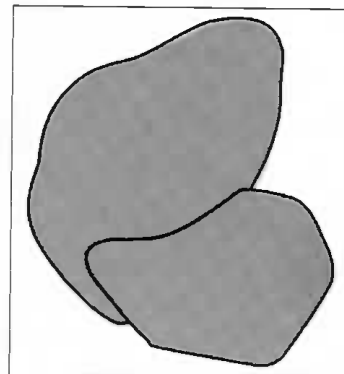


▲ **Figure 1.5** O'Keeffe's unusual subject for this artwork was her own heart. Why would you describe the objects in this drawing as forms rather than shapes? How is a shape drawn to look like a form?

Georgia O'Keeffe. *Untitled (formerly My Heart)*. 1944. Pastel on paper. 69.9 × 54.6 cm (27½ × 21¾"). The Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. Collection of the Museum of Texas Tech University Association. © 2001 The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York.



▲ **Figure 1.6** The shaded areas are referred to as positive shapes, or figures. The unshaded areas are known as negative shapes, or ground.



▲ **Figure 1.7** Notice how the placement of positive shapes in a drawing determines the size and configuration of the negative shapes. It also affects the overall design.



▲ Figure 1.8 This seventeenth-century artist is admired for his large-scale paintings of exciting events. He prepared for these by completing sketches like this one. What has he done to indicate that these people are round and solid and exist in real space?

Peter Paul Rubens. *The Garden of Love* (right side). c. Late 1500s to early 1600s. Pen and brown ink, brown and gray-green wash, heightened with light blue paint, over black chalk, on paper. 47.7 × 70.7 cm (18¾ × 27¾"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Fletcher Fund, 1958. Photograph by Schecter Lee. Photograph © 1986 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In some drawings, shapes appear solid and three-dimensional even though they are limited to two dimensions, length and width. The flat, two-dimensional appearance of shape sets it apart from form. In drawings and paintings, form has an implied third dimension, depth, in addition to length and width. Depth is usually created using shading.

Artists most often suggest form on paper or canvas by using value gradation. This means that the artist uses a gradual change from dark to light areas to create the illusion of roundness and solidity. This technique is clearly illustrated in Figure 1.5 on page 9.

Crosshatching is another *drawing technique of using sets of crisscrossing, parallel, and overlapping lines to create areas of differing degrees of darkness*. When parallel lines are built on top of each other, a dense

pattern or dark area is created. By gradually reducing the density of these areas (or closeness of the lines), an artist can add a sense of roundness or depth to the forms (see Figure 7.8 on page 138).

Value

Light and dark areas in a drawing or painting are referred to as values. Abrupt or gradual changes in value add greatly to the visual effect of art. Abrupt value changes can suggest planes, or flat surfaces at various angles to each other. Gradual value changes can show curved or rounded surfaces. By adjusting values, artists can show time of day or express moods in a composition.

Value can be used in many ways. Notice how Peter Paul Rubens used a change of values, from the dark figures in the foreground, or front, to the progres-

sively lighter figures in the background, or back, to create the illusion of space or distance on a flat, two-dimensional surface (Figure 1.8).

Texture

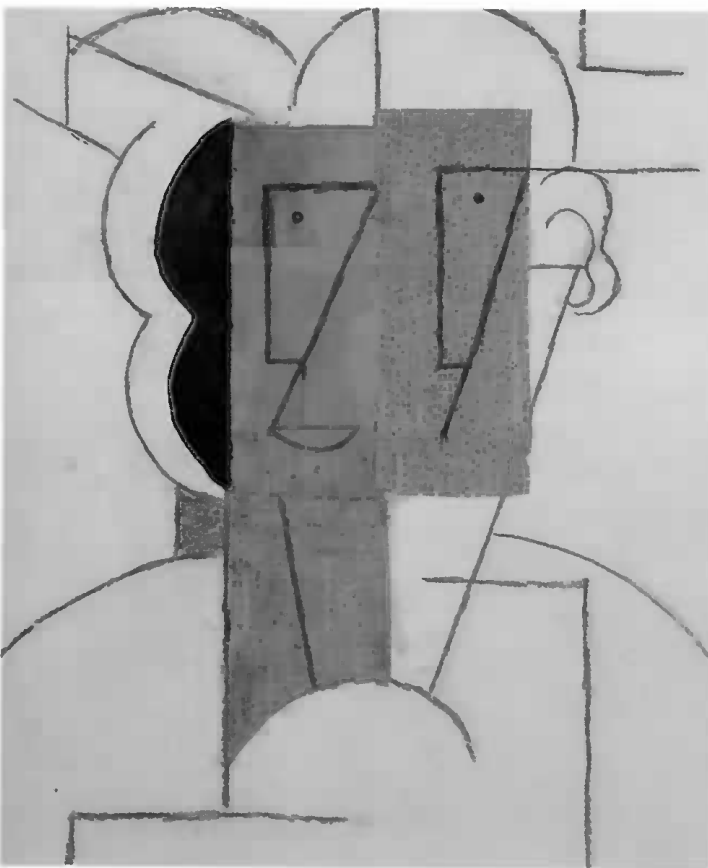
Whenever people talk about an object as being rough or coarse or smooth, they are referring to its texture. Texture is the element of art that refers to the way things feel, or look as if they might feel if touched.

In paintings, some works have an overall smooth surface on which even

the marks of the paintbrush have been carefully concealed. Other paintings have a more uneven surface. This is the case when a heavy application of paint produces a rough texture that you sense with your eyes and feel with your fingers.

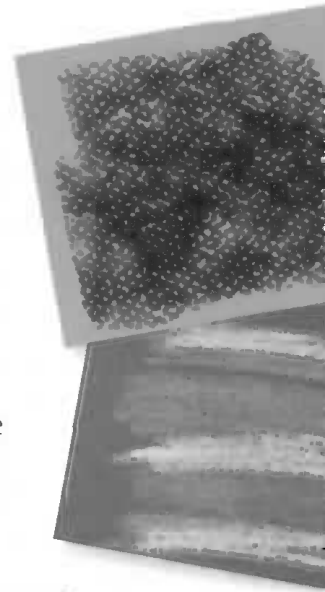
The desire for a rich, textured surface has caused artists to go beyond applying thick layers of color. Some have added sand, plaster, and other materials to paint to change its texture. Others have pasted paper, cloth, and other items to their works to create another kind of actual or real texture

(Figure 1.9). Actual texture is the kind that the viewer can touch. Some paintings and drawings that are smooth to the touch can still suggest texture. A suggested or implied texture is known as simulated or visual texture.



▲ Figure 1.9 The newspaper section over the figure's chest discusses a treatment for tuberculosis, while the section over the mouth and nose comments on tooth cavities and nasal problems. How does the addition of contrasting sheets of paper add to this drawing's visual interest?

Pablo Picasso. *Man With a Hat*. 1912–13. Pasted paper, charcoal, and ink on paper. 62.2 × 47.3 cm (24 1/4 × 18 3/4"). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Purchase. Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. © 2001 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Activity Experimenting with Texture

SUPPLIES

- One large (12 × 18") section cut from a cardboard box
- Smaller sections of cardboard
- Scissors
- Found objects with interesting textures (sandpaper, toothpicks, beans, straws, etc.)
- Glue

Cut a number of large and small angular shapes out of the small sections of cardboard. On each shape, create an interesting pattern by gluing the textured objects in place. Glue these shapes onto the large piece of cardboard. Vary the height of the shapes by cutting and stacking small pieces of cardboard beneath each one before gluing them down. This exercise can be repeated by drawing simulated textures on each cardboard shape.

Space

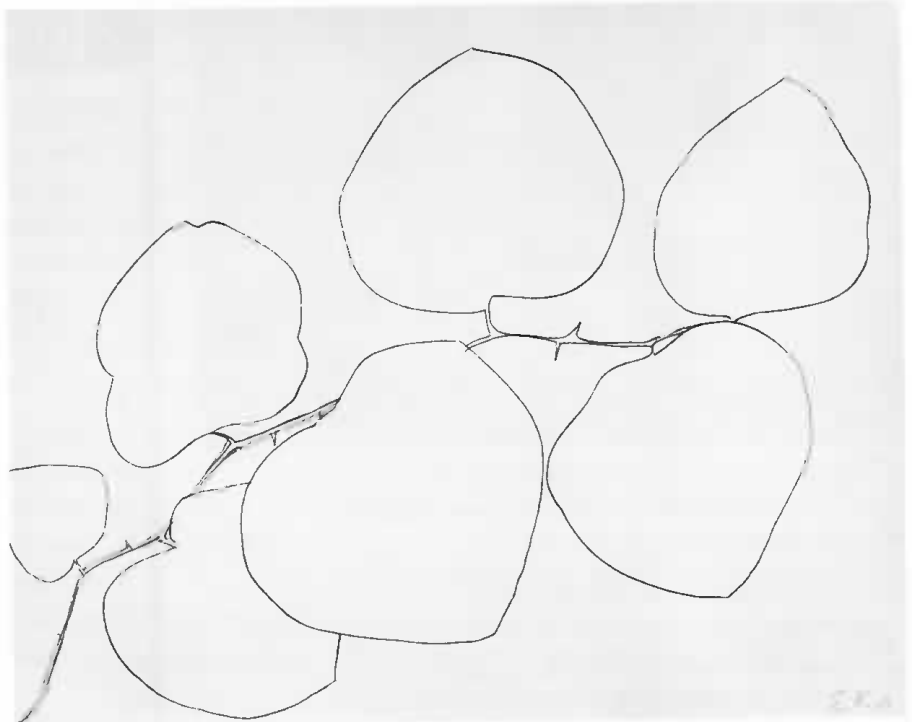
The distance around, between, above, below, and within an object is called space. In **Figure 1.10**, a drawing by Canaletto (kahn-ah-lay-toh), several techniques were used to create the illusion of space on the two-dimensional surface of the paper. These include:

- **Linear perspective.** The horizontal lines of buildings and other objects are slanted to make them appear to extend back into space. As the lines recede, or move away, they seem to meet on an imaginary line known as the horizon line or eye level line. *The point on the horizon line at which these lines converge, or meet, is referred to as the vanishing point.*
- **Size.** Objects in the background are smaller than those in the foreground.
- **Placement.** Objects placed higher in the picture appear to be farther away than those placed lower in the picture.
- **Overlapping.** Objects placed in front of other objects, partially concealing those behind, seem closer.
- **Value change.** Foreground objects appear darker in value than those in the background.
- **Detail.** Details of distant objects seem less clear and precise than those in the foreground. The edges of distant objects also seem to blur.
- **Atmospheric perspective.** This method of showing distance is often used in landscape drawings that are in color. In those cases, distant objects appear bluer and less intense, or less bright, than those in the foreground.

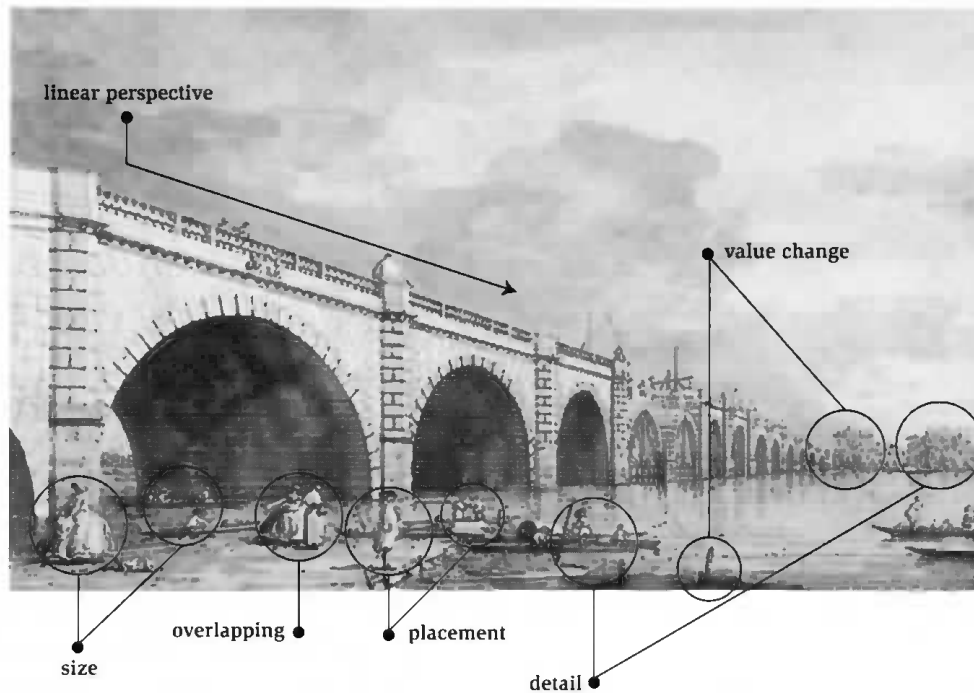
Artists don't always try to encourage the viewer to look deep into their compositions. Many works have little or no suggestion of depth. This is certainly the case in *Briar* (**Figure 1.11**). The picture consists of a flat pattern of shapes arranged on the **picture plane**, *the surface of the drawing*. The only suggestion of space is the single overlapping leaf.

► **Figure 1.11** This is an excellent example of a drawing that makes use of the same type of line throughout. What adjective would you use to describe this line?

Ellsworth Kelly. *Briar*. 1963. Pencil on paper. 56.8 × 72.1 cm (22½ × 28¾"). Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York. Purchase, with funds from the Neysa McMein Purchase Award.



Creating the Illusion of Three-Dimensional Space. You can create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface using several different drawing techniques. Examine some of the techniques used by Canaletto in his drawing *London: Westminster Bridge Under Construction*.



▲ Figure 1.10 Canaletto. *London: Westminster Bridge Under Construction*. 1749–1750. Black ink and gray wash over pencil. 29.3 × 48.4 cm (11½ × 19¼"). The Royal Collection Picture Library, Windsor Castle, Windsor, United Kingdom. © HM Queen Elizabeth II.