

Formal Elements of Art

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Not all elements apply to every work of art, but being aware of these elements will help you see the art in a more formal way and allow you to begin to think about it objectively. Remember that art is not necessarily auto-biographical, and one should look for the artist's meaning in an object not your own. Titles often help us understand what the object is truly about.

Line: *The descriptive element*

Lines do not exist in nature, but artists use them sometimes to translate the 3D world onto a 2D surface. Lines can be geometric or organic. Geometric lines are straight lines that create geometric shapes sometimes. The kinds of shapes one expects to see in geometry textbooks. Organic lines are often irregular and unpredictable – think of vines or human hair as examples of organic lines.

Color: *The emotive element*

Color is the expression of light.

Color can be used for symbolic reasons, but most often, color is used for optical enhancement. Warm colors are aggressive and seem to be coming at us, while cool colors are more recessive and seem to be moving away from us. This is because our visual acuity diminishes with space, and colors look like they are graying out in the background. Primary (like primero or first) colors in painting are red, blue, and yellow, and from these three colors all color (including black) can be made. Secondary (second) colors are made from combining two primaries: green from blue and yellow, orange from red and yellow, and violet from red and blue. Complementary colors are one primary and the secondary color it is not a part of, as follows – Red: Green, Blue: Orange, and Yellow: Violet.

Composition: *The organizing element*

The word compose is in composition, and composition is the one element that is relevant to all works of art. It is how the object comes together. Consider the following, when looking at an art object – is the composition vertical or horizontal, open or closed, static or dynamic?

Space: *The fictive element – implied or pictorial space*

Space can be broken into the following: 2D (flat/shape), 3D (volume/form), 4D (time, which is expressed through movement – this often applies to Cubism). 2D would be a circle, 3D would be a sphere, and 4D would be that sphere rolling across the floor.

Light: *The other fictive element in painting*

In painting, artists have often used the illusion of light through shading and highlights to create the illusion of space – this is also called *value*. There are two kinds of light to consider – radiant (where you can see the light source) and reflective (where you can see the result of light).

Subject: *What the object is about*

Subject is what the object is about and often found in the title and in art before the modern age, the subject was often easily seen and then reiterated in the title. However, since the modern age in art (c. 1840s), titles have become more important in allowing us to understand the subject matter.

Meaning: *What the **artist's** meaning is*

Meaning and subject have often been the same, but since the modern age and especially since contemporary art (1940 and later), we may sometimes recognize a subject, but the meaning may be added through context. The best example is Andy Warhol's portraits of Mao. Chairman Mao's portrait, represented to Westerners the face of communism. By Warhol doing several portraits of Mao in different sizes and colors, one has to consider who would be purchasing these portraits – wealthy capitalists, which are at odds w/communist ideals. So, while the subject is Mao, the meaning is more of a critique on capitalism.