



# More about Inquiry about an Artwork



What Can I See in the Artwork?

What Choices Will I Make in My Artwork?

## Introduction

How well you understand or appreciate an artwork can depend on how well you've looked at it. Some parts of artworks jump out at you at first glance. You discover other parts only by looking very carefully. Sharing your responses with a friend, family member, or classmate can make you more aware of differences in perceptions. Your first impressions of the meaning or value of an artwork can cause you to focus more on some features than others.

Take the time to really look carefully and thoroughly at one artwork. Some important things to look for are subject matter details, if there are any; elements of design and how they are organized; and evidence of the tools and materials the artist used to make the artwork. If you are looking at a reproduction, look for a listing of its dimensions and materials. Especially for three-dimensional artworks, see if you can find photographs shot at different angles. Close-up shots are helpful with any artwork.

The artworks you make look as they do because of choices you make about whether and what subject matter to include; about what elements of design to feature and how to organize those elements; and what tools, materials, and processes you use to achieve the look you want. After you have completed your work, if you want to share it with others, you may consider how you might reproduce it, for example, through photography or scanning.

## Subject Matter

**LOOK: What people, places, or things, if any, are shown in this artwork?**

**CHOOSE: Will my artwork have subject matter?**

Some artworks have subject matter and others do not. Content or meaning can be expressed in different ways, not only through subject matter, but also through the selection and use of materials or through visual features, such as color or lines. "Subject matter" is not synonymous with "content" or "meaning." Subject matter can certainly be important in understanding meaning, but it is not the same thing. You can have identified all the subject matter in an artwork and still not have developed an interpretation of the artwork.

The term "subject matter" is used here quite narrowly. Subject matter imitates the appearance of something. It refers to any person, place, or thing (real or imaginary) that is depicted (shown or represented) in an artwork. Virtually anyone familiar with people, places, or things depicted in an artwork can recognize that subject matter immediately when details are pointed out.

## Elements of Design

**LOOK: What one or two elements of design (line, shape, light & dark, color, texture, mass, space, or other) are most important to this artwork? Why?**

**CHOOSE: What one or two elements of design is most important for the success of my artwork?**

There is no single, traditional, visual vocabulary used in art across the world. However, in recent centuries in the West (cultures with their roots in Europe) many artists and experienced viewers of art have used similar terms to describe and analyze the visual features of artworks. Many art teachers teach these terms in beginning art courses. They are commonly called the "Elements of Design" and usually include two-dimensional elements (line, shape, value [light and dark], color) and three-dimensional elements [form or mass, space, and texture], and sometimes also the four-dimensional element of time. Recently, text and sounds are sometimes included as art elements. Text can be an element in both two and three-dimensional art. Sound is an element that involves the fourth dimension of time.

All artifacts have at least three dimensions. Small or large, they all have height, width, and depth. Some objects, such as paper, foil, and painted canvases are so thin that we call them two-dimensional, even though they all have some depth. Otherwise, they could not exist in space. Artifacts that change as we experience them, like movies, television, and computer animation, can be called four-dimensional. In addition to the dimensions of height, width, and depth, these things have the fourth dimension of time.

## Design Principles

**LOOK: How did the artist use design principles to organize elements within this work?**

**CHOOSE: What design principles can I use to organize the elements into an interesting and unified composition?**

"Design Principles" is a term commonly used to identify ways artists organize elements of design to create interesting and unified compositions. Though art specialists sometimes use different terms and though principles sometimes overlap, the following are often identified among the principles of design: balance, harmony, emphasis, focal point, movement, direction, pattern, variation, repetition, rhythm, transition, contrast, and proportion.

Olivia Gude (2004) found traditional elements and principles of design inadequate for contemporary art. She identifies the following eight “important postmodern artmaking practices:” (O. Gude. (2004). Postmodern principles: A search for 21<sup>st</sup> century art education. *Art Education*, 57 (1). 6-14.)

APPROPRIATION – recycling of images

JUXTAPOSITION – “intentional clashes and random happenings”

RECONTEXTUALIZATION – “positioning a familiar image in relationship to pictures, symbols, or texts with which it is not usually associated”

LAYERING – literally piling images on top of each other

INTERACTION OF TEXT & IMAGE – exploring “disjuncture between [words & images] as a source of meaning and pleasure”

HYBRIDITY – multi-media works of art and cross-cultural blending

GAZING – considering “who is being looked at and who is doing the looking ... associated with issues of knowledge and pleasure [and as] a form of power and of controlling perceptions of what is ‘real’ and ‘natural.’”

REPRESENTIN’ – locating one’s artistic voice within one’s own personal history and culture of origin.”

## Technical Features

**LOOK: What can I see in the artwork that shows the tools, materials, or process the artist used to make it?**

**CHOOSE: What tools, materials, and processes am I considering?**

Many people use the term “technical” to refer to anything an expert would know about. However the term is used here in a narrow way, limited to the physical art making process. Just a few of the many technical processes artists use are watercolor, woodcarving, and weaving.

Careful observation and analysis of objects can reveal how they were formed by human hands or tools. The technical features of an artwork are the results of how it was made. You can usually find a list of materials or the process used to make an artwork listed on the label of an artwork in an exhibition or in the caption of a print or online image. If you have had experience working with the same or similar tools or materials, sometimes you can see evidence of the making process when you look very carefully at an original artwork, or even at a very good reproduction. For example, you may be able to see wide or narrow brush strokes, chisel grooves, pen or chalk lines produced with heavy or light pressure, joints where parts are put together, surfaces left bare or altered, diluted paint, sharply cut lines in a linocut, layers of ink on a silkscreen print, or tools or finger marks in a ceramic piece.

## Reproduction Vs Original

**LOOK: What might I be missing if I’m not looking at the actual artwork but at this work as a reproduction? (For example, surface texture, luminosity, or views from different angles or with different lighting)**

**CHOOSE: What qualities in my artwork work might be difficult to capture in a reproduction (for example, if it were reproduced online or in a photograph or a scan)?**

Some people have original artworks in their homes, schools, or workplaces. Some people see the real thing installed in public places. A great many original artworks are stored and exhibited in museums. Most of the art we see is not the original but some kind of photographic, electronic, or print reproduction. Reproductions, posters, and three-dimensional replicas are commercially made in large numbers. Some reproductions can look pretty different from the originals. Size is seldom the same. Colors are often distorted. Texture and luminosity are often completely lost in reproductions. Angle of view and lighting can affect the quality of reproductions, especially of three-dimensional artworks. Even though they are not originals, reproductions in the form of posters, postcards, books, and Internet images allow us to see a tremendous range of artworks that we could never hope to see in person.

Some artists using processes like printmaking, casting, photography, and computer graphics produce **multiple original artworks**. When numerous originals are made, the set of originals is called an edition.

## Care

**LOOK: Does the artwork look different today than when it was first made, due to deterioration of some sort? How is it being cared for?**

**CHOOSE: What can you do as you create your artwork or as your store or exhibit it to ensure that it stays in good condition?**

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