Elements & Principles of Art

Exploring the Visual Arts of Non-Western Cultures

Just as a carpenter has tools to build a house, artists have tools to build their paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, decorative arts and architectural designs.

Airborne Angel with a Rosary, 1565, Unknown Artist, Central Asia
San Diego Museum of Art

An artist may use some or all of these tools to communicate their beliefs, values, thoughts and feelings.

Seated Buddha, 1550, Unknown Artist, Thailand
The Walters Art Museum

When we do a formal analysis of an artwork, we look for these tools to help us see details and ideas that we may have missed the first time we viewed the artwork.

Equestrian Figure, 16th century, Unknown Artist, Nigeria, Africa
Detroit Institute of Arts

Through formal analysis, we can more fully enjoy the lines, colors, patterns and subject. We can also get a better understanding of the artist and the culture in which the art was created.

Woman’s Coat (Munisak), 1850, Unknown Artist, Uzbekistan
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This presentation illustrates your handout, “Formal Analysis of Visual Art.” Please refer to it as you explore these wonderful artworks.

Fabric Panel, 20th century, Unknown Artist, Ghana, Africa
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Art teachers and historians have grouped the artist’s tools into categories. In this presentation we will study:
- Elements of Design
- Principles of Design
- Elements of Content

In another presentation, we will explore the second half of formal analysis:
- Composition
- Style

The Elements of Design are the basic building blocks of art:
- Line
- Color
- Shape
- Texture
- Space

The Principles of Design describe how an artist combines the Elements:
- Repetition
- Emphasis
- Balance
- Unity
- Contrast

The Elements of Content are what the artwork is about:
- Subject matter
- Intention of the artist
- Ideas in the work
- Symbols and symbolism

Let’s see how artists from many times and cultures have used the elements and principles of design and content.

Artists combine the elements and principles of design and content to communicate their ideas. We’ll look at the same artworks a couple of times, but we will focus on one tool at a time. You’ll see how artists combine tools to create their artworks.
All the artworks used in this presentation are in the Gallery at the end of the lesson. They are arranged by their geographic area.

The Festival of Lanterns, 1827, Katsushika Hokusai, Japan
Minneapolis Institute of Art

First we will look at the Elements of Design. Examples from our gallery show us how artists use each one.

Elements of Design:
- Line
- Color
- Shape
- Texture
- Space

Artists can use lines as the major element of their artwork. The weaver who created this Kente cloth used variations of lines both short and long parallel lines of many different colors. They are placed both vertically and horizontally. This took great skills and would have been worn only by royalty.

Lines

Fabric Panel, 20th century, Unknown Artist, Ghana, Africa, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Lines can be built up to show images such as the jaguar head on the right and the two condor birds on the left. Notice also how black lines outline each religious symbol to make it stand out from the background.

Small Bowl, 800 AD, Unknown Artist, Huari Peoples, Peru

Nym Bandak effectively used white outlines to highlight the trees, flowers and river and also divide the heavens and the stars in this diagram of the Aborigine universe.

Nym Bandak, 1958, National Gallery of Art, Australia

Hokusai used a variety of straight and curved lines as well as a black outlines to make each of the festival boats, lanterns and parade participants clearly stand out in his print. He wanted to praise the Oboon Festival, the great Buddhist community celebration for the dead.

The Festival of Lanterns, 1827, Katsushika Hokusai, Japan
Minneapolis Institute of Art
The primary colors are made from pure color, not mixed:
- Red
- Yellow
- Blue

When they are mixed, they create the secondary colors:
- Green
- Purple
- Orange

Colors can appear to us as warm or cool. Warm colors are red, yellow, and orange. They seem to move forward, towards the viewer.

Cool colors are blue, green, and purple. Cool colors seem to move away from the viewer.

Artists often combine both warm and cool colors to create special effects. Here the red (warm) angel’s wings rise above the blue (cool) background. The artist wanted to show that the angel is above the pain and suffering of this world.

Colors change in value as they are mixed with black or white. White is added to make a tint, a lighter color. Notice the light pink, light blue, and tan (light brown).
- **Black** is added to make a shade, a darker color. Notice all the different shades of dark blue in this painting.

  [Image](image1.png)

  "Blueberries, 1986, Jim Schoppert, United States, National Museum of the American Indian"

- **Saturated** describes the intensity of the colors. The bright blue and gold on the horse are highly saturated colors. They make the horse look rich and luxurious, a status symbol for its owner.

  [Image](image2.png)

  "Horse from a Tomb Retinue, Unknown Artist, 8th century, China, Minneapolis Institute of Art"

- **Less saturated** colors are dull or often shades or tints of a color. The bronze of this Buddha has aged to dull colors, varied unsaturated tints and shades of green. The simple colors reinforce Buddha’s message that a simple life leads to enlightenment.

  [Image](image3.png)

  "Seated Buddha, 1350, Unknown Artist, Thailand, The Walters Art Museum"

- **Shapes**
  - There are two types of shapes:
    - **Geometric**: those made with straight lines and angles, often mechanical.
    - **Organic**: those using the curved lines of natural, living objects.

- **Geometric** shapes include squares, rectangles and circles. Their crisp, straight lines can show organization and order, the hand of man shaping the world, taking control, bringing order to chaos.

  [Image](image4.png)

- **Organic** shapes follow the natural curves of living forms – people, plants, animals, water and land. They show movement and growth, the rhythms of weather and time. They bring realism to the human figure and animals.

  [Image](image5.png)
Texture

- **Texture** is how the surface of a thing feels to our fingers – soft, hard, slick. In sculpture you can actually feel the real texture. The chief’s headdress has many spikes that would feel rough to our hands.

**Equestrian Figure**, 16th century, Unknown Artist, Nigeria, Africa
Detroit Institute of Arts

This clay sculpture is covered with glazes which are made of the same materials as colored glass. If you could touch the horse, the real texture would feel smooth and slick, like glass.

**Horse from a Tomb Retinue**, Unknown Artist, 8th century, China
Minneapolis Institute of Art

In paintings, there are implied textures. The surface of the painting is smooth, but the artist makes each surface look real – like the smoothness of swirling clouds, the jagged feathers of the angel’s wing or her silky clothes and wispy hair.

**Airborne Angel with a Rosary**, 1565, Unknown Artist, Central Asia
San Diego Museum of Art

Here the artist implies textures in the rough brick walls of the fort, the smooth domes on top of the towers, and the soft clothes that hang in folds on the guards and workers. Do you see the snake with the slick skin?

**Umar In Disguise**, 1570, Unknown Artist, India
Freer & Sackler Galleries

A painting, print or drawing has two dimensions: Height – the measurement from top to bottom, and Width – the measurement from side to side.

**All The World**, 1958, Nyen Bandak
National Gallery of Art, Australia

A sculpture or building has a third dimension: Depth – the measurement from front to back. A person can walk around from the front to the back and view all angles of a sculpture or building.

**Bell (Bo Zhong)**, Unknown Artist, 12th century BC, China
Freer & Sackler Galleries

Space
Artists can show depth in a painting by using perspective. The scene looks as if we can walk into it, we understand that the people are closer and the small buildings across the river are farther away.

The Festival of Lanterns, 1827, Katsushika Hokusai, Japan
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Many non-western cultures do not use perspective - everything is the same size. Things at the top of the painting are meant to be farther away from the viewer. People in the culture understood this tradition.

Umar In Disguise, 1570, Unknown
Mahesh Artist, India
Freer & Sackler Galleries

Buildings also have:
- Mass – the physical bulk of a solid body
- Volume – the space enclosed by the building.

The towers of the Taj Mahal have a large amount of mass, but little volume.

The Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan, 1630-1653, India
Great Buildings Online

The main building of the Taj Mahal has both a lot of mass and it surrounds a large volume of space.

The Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan, 1630-1653, India, Great Buildings Online

Principles of Design

Next we’ll look at the Principles of Design. Examples from our gallery show us how artists used each one.

Principles of Design:
- Repetition
- Emphasis
- Balance
- Unity
- Contrast

Repetition

Artists use repetition, repeating the same element, such as a shape or color in different parts of the artwork. The Shang Dynasty artist repeated the circles and wing shapes. The sacred dragon’s face is repeated on both sides of the bell.

Bell (Bo Zhong), Unknown Artist, 12th century BC, China
Freer & Sackler Galleries
The artist from the ancient Incan Empire used repetition two ways:
- the shapes – condors, eyes and stripes - are repeated.
- the colors – black, cream, red and gold – are repeated.

Pattern is the repetition of the same elements to create an overall design. The Native American Navaho artist created a pattern of geometric shapes and bold colors to create the pattern on this blanket. In many cultures, the shapes in patterns are symbols or refer to legends.

Pattern

Emphasis

An artist may emphasize one element by making it the largest, brightest or darkest. The Central Asian artist emphasized the central pattern by surrounding it with black, making it stand out as the brightest part of the design.

Emphasis

Balance

There are two types of balance. Symmetrical artworks have formal balance – the right side is a mirror of the left side. It is the same on both sides of an imaginary line. It can be calming, reassuring worshippers who used this in a ritual.

Balance

Asymmetrical artworks have informal balance, the shapes are not the same on either side of an imaginary line. It gives energy and movement to an artwork or can be unsettling.

Balance
When all parts of the composition work together, there is unity, either through proportion or variety.

Proportion is the pleasing relationship of all parts to each other and the whole of the design. The domes of the Taj Mahal are in proportion to the main part of the building – they do not look too big or too small.

Artists use variety to give interest – different shapes, lines and colors. Nym Bandak’s painting has a wide variety of shapes and lines.

Contrast is when the artist uses opposites of the same element. The Tang artist contrasted the dark blue color with the white and gold which are light colors. Contrast can be very eye-catching.

The African Ewe tribe artist contrasted long vertical lines with short horizontal lines. In many places he also used contrasting colors – black/white and blue/yellow. This helps create a pleasing rhythm in the fabric.

Now we will look at the Elements of Content. Examples from our gallery show us how artists use each one.
Subject

Representational subjects are people, places and things that we can clearly identify. You can easily see that this is a person on a horse with a crown or helmet and a shield. The people of the Benin culture would have also recognized the symbols of power and kingship in it.

Equestrian Figure, 16th century, Unknown Artist, Nigeria, Africa
Detroit Institute of Arts

Non-representational art is created with lines, shapes and forms that do not show real people, places or things. Schoppert used only shapes to create Blueberries, abstracted from clan animals found on the totem poles of his tribe.

Blueberries, 1986, Jim Schoppert, United States, National Museum of the American Indian

Intention

Intention is the artist’s purpose – why they created their art. The artist may want to record a beautiful person, place or event, as Hokusai did for the Festival of Lanterns in Osaka, Japan. People could enjoy the scene all year, remembering the ancestors honored during the festival.

The Festival of Lanterns, 1827, Katsushika Hokusai, Japan
Minneapolis Institute of Art

The artist might also want to honor someone. There are no written records, but African scholars believe that this could be a Benin chief or king because horses were a rare luxury reserved for royalty. Figures like this were placed on family altars by sons to honor their fathers.

Equestrian Figure, 16th century, Unknown Artist, Nigeria, Africa
Detroit Institute of Arts

Ideas

Artists frequently promote ideas in their art – a moral that they want to teach people who see their art, or something that is important to them.

Seated Buddha, 1350, Unknown Artist, Thailand
The Walters Art Museum

Artists create religious art that promotes the beliefs of the religion. Here his closed eyes communicate the belief that Buddha listens intently to the prayers of his followers. The hand pointing down is the “reassuring gesture,” belief in Buddha will bring salvation.

Seated Buddha, 1350, Unknown Artist, Thailand
The Walters Art Museum
Jim Schoppert believed that the traditional forms of his tribe were important, but he experimented with them, breaking them into pieces and putting them back together in new ways. If you study totem animals, you will see the eye of the eagle, the fluke of a whale.

Blueberries, 1986, Jim Schoppert, Unusual States, National Museum of the American Indian

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Symbols

Symbols are images that represent abstract ideas such as love or spirituality. Most cultures have religious symbols for their gods, representing their primary characteristics. The Incan jaguar god represented strength and power, shown by his bared teeth, large eye and strong jaw.

Small Bowl, 400 AD, Unknown Artist, Huari Peoples, Peru

Australian Aboriginal artists have used many symbols in their art for at least 30,000 years. Nym Bandak explained his tribe’s relationship with the earth, the sky and their gods to an anthropologist through this painting. Notice how the sky forms a protective shield around the earth.

All The World, 1958, Nym Bandak, National Gallery of Art, Australia

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All The World, 1958, Nym Bandak, National Gallery of Art, Australia

Many cultures have epic legends that combine symbolic myths and history. This illustration is from the Hamzanama, an heroic tale of the exploits of Amir Hanza, the uncle of the prophet of Islam. The Hamzanama was traditionally told in dastan performances and originated more than 1,000 years ago, probably in Persia, then spread throughout the Islamic world in oral and written forms.

Umar In Disguise, 1570, Unknown Mahesh Artist, India

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Umar In Disguise, 1570, Unknown Mahesh Artist, India

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The Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan, 1630–1653, India, Great Buildings Online

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Seated Buddha, 1350, Unknown Artist, Thailand
The Walters Art Museum

Your Glossary of Terms can also help you to use the correct vocabulary for all analysis and assignments.

Wearing Blanket, 1860, Unknown Artist, Navaho Peoples, USA
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Title, Date created
- Artist, dates of birth and death (if known)
- Culture or country of origin
- Medium
- Size
- Interesting facts

Equestrian Figure, 16th century
- Artist Unknown
- Nigeria, Africa
- Bronze
- H: 18.5 inches, W: 5 inches, D: 7 inches
- This sculpture was an offering on a royal altar, probably by a son for his father.

Fabric Panel, 20th century
- Artist Unknown
- Ghana, W. Africa
- Cotton
- H: 72 inches, W: 45 inches
- Royal Kente cloth panels like this were often woven by men. There were many traditional designs that used specific colors and patterns.
**Umar In Disguise, 1570**
- **Artist:** Unknown
- **Dynasty:** Mughal Dynasty, India
- **Medium:** Opaque watercolor and gold on cotton cloth
- **Dimensions:** H:79.2 cm W:64 cm

This is an illustration from the Indian epic "Hamza nam," about the hero, Hamza, and his friends. It is meant to teach people the correct way for an individual to act.

**The Taj Mahal, 1630-1653**
- **Artist:** Shah Jahan (1592-1666)
- **Location:** Agra, India
- **Material:** Marble, sandstone and jewels
- **Dimensions:** Mausoleum and gardens cover many acres

This is the tomb of the Emperor’s beloved wife. When she died Shah Jahan spent years supervising the creation of this monument.

**Bell (Bo Zhong), 12th century BC**
- **Artist:** Unknown
- **Dynasty:** Shang Dynasty China
- **Medium:** Bronze
- **Dimensions:** H: 31 cm W: 25 cm D: 15 cm

3,200 years ago, this bell was probably used by a wealthy family in religious ceremonies to honor their ancestors.

**Horse from a Tomb Retinue, 8th century**
- **Artist:** Unknown
- **Dynasty:** T’ang Dynasty China
- **Medium:** Earthenware, glaze
- **Dimensions:** H: 20 inches W: 20 inches D:7 inches

Wealthy Chinese families competed to buy the most beautiful tomb figures. Long before a person died, they displayed these status symbols in their home.

**Airborne Angel with a Rosary, 1565**
- **Artist:** Unknown
- **Region:** Khurasan, Central Asia
- **Medium:** Opaque watercolor and gold on paper
- **Dimensions:** H: 7.4 inches W: 4.5 inches

The decorative style follows Persian traditions and illustrates the great influence of the Silk Road in transmitting artistic styles.

**Woman’s Coat (Munisak), 1850**
- **Artist:** Unknown
- **Region:** Uzbekistan, Central Asia
- **Material:** Silk, flat dyed
- **Dimensions:** H: 46.5 inches

The munisak was the most expensive item in a bride's dowry. The colors and designs are traditional to artworks made in the region.
The Festival of Lanterns, 1827
Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
Tokyo, Japan
Color woodblock print
H: 10 inches
W: 14 inches
Hokusai revolutionized the art of the woodblock print with the introduction of landscapes and depiction of commoners.

Seated Buddha, 1350
Artist Unknown
Sukhothal, Thailand
Bronze
H: 27 inches
W: 11 inches
D: 9 inches
This sculpture commemorates when Buddha started a flood that carried away evil forces. The flame above Buddha’s head is a style unique to Southeast Asian Buddhist art.

All The World, 1958
Nym Bandak (1904-1981)
Aborigine, Australia
Paint on board
Size not given
The artist painted this to explain his culture’s concept of the universe. They believe that each person is connected to their ancestors and to the spirits of the earth and animals.

Blueberries, 1986
Jim Schoppert (1947–1992)
Alaska, USA
Carved poplar panels and paint
H: 72 inches
W: 70 inches
Schoppert was a Native Alaskan who used traditional animal forms to create modern art. He wanted to base a new art on his tribal heritage.

Wearing Blanket, 1860
Artist Unknown
Navaho Peoples, USA
Wool
H: 69 inches
W: 48 inches
The horizontal, diamond and zigzag shapes follow ancient traditional patterns. The wool was dyed with organic materials such as roots, berries and minerals.

Small Bowl, 800 AD
Artist Unknown
Huari Peoples, Peru
Earthenware and paint
H: 3 inches
The Incan Empire prized pottery and helped artists export their artworks to other areas all over South America along the extensive road system developed by their government.
The ability to formally analyze artworks is an important skill for our Non-Western Art History course. It should help you enjoy your journey of exploration!