VISUAL ELEMENTS

The elements of design with which artists work are the observable properties of matter: line, shape and form, space, texture, value [lights and darks] and lighting, color, and time. Although these elements are unified in effective works of art, we will isolate and deal with one at a time to train our eye to see them and to understand how artists use them.

LINE

A mark or area that is significantly longer than it is wide may be perceived as a line. There are lines all around us in the natural world. A tree bare of its leaves, for instance, can be perceived as a medley of lines, as Mondrian noted in his tree abstractions (1.25–1.27). The sections that follow will develop the ability to discern lines in artworks and to understand the aesthetic functions they serve.

SEEING LINES

It is easiest to see lines in works that are primarily linear and two-dimensional, such as the lovely piece of calligraphy shown in Figure 2.1. Calligraphy is the art of fine writing, so highly developed in Arabic cultures, Japan, and China that some pieces are meant first as art and only secondarily as figures to be read. (Most non-Arabs will see the lines in this piece as purely abstract anyway, because they don’t know how to read them as words.) Arabic characters are usually set down in straight lines, but the master calligrapher Sami Efendi worked the strokes into a flowing circular pattern to enhance their beauty and the unity of the design. When lines are made with a flat-pointed instrument, such as the reed pen used here, their thickness grows and diminishes as the lines swing through curves. Note the careful attention paid to the ends of each stroke.

2.1 Sami Efendi, Lezha in Celi 5010s, 1872.
Private collection, London.
Lines may be seen in unworked as well as worked areas of a design. In John Alcorn's drawing to represent Hawthorne's novel The Scarlet Letter for television audiences [2.2] we can see not only black lines on white but also white lines defined by black-inked areas. Notice how gracefully Alcorn handles the rapid transitions from the white of the background to the white lines defining the hair, leading us to see the former as negative, or unfilled, space, and the latter as positive, or filled space.

Even more subtly, we perceive lines along spaces where two areas treated differently meet. Along the left side of Hester Prynne's face, as we see it, there is a strong white line belonging to and describing her profile; the black of her hair shadows is pushed behind it in space. On the right side of her face there is a strong edge belonging to the black of her hair, with her face appearing to be behind it in space.

In three-dimensional works, we may find lines that are incised, raised, or applied to forms. On the Maori ancestor figure [2.3] rows of small lines are used to create textured effects and slow the eye. These occur within larger patterns of curving lines that define the figure in a highly stylized, dynamic fashion. This symphony of lines is set off and brought to our attention by contrast with the large unworked club in the center.

Edges may be "read," or interpreted, as lines in three-dimensional work as well as in two-dimensional works. Part of the effectiveness of Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk [2.4] lies in the sharp edges where flat planes meet, creating visual lines that emphasize the form and define its three-dimensionality [2.5]. If the top and bottom segments were rounded, without the lines of the edges, the effect would be quite different.
two weeks in 1976, Christo and a large crew of engineers and lawyers spent three years threading their way through public hearings and legal battles, including a 265-page environmental impact statement they were required to produce. These struggles with a disbelieving society are part of Christo’s art form, the temporary end product is not the only goal. Neither was the line of the fence: the only visual element in the design, its existence also called attention to the contours and features of the land. Speaking of the ranchers who gave their support to Christo in obtaining the permits and who were sorry when, as intended, it was taken down and all traces of it removed, Christo was pleased that “they can find that a part of Running Fence is their cows, and the sky, and the hills and the barns and the people.”

In some three-dimensional pieces, entire areas are so thin in relation to their length that they are seen as lines. The human figure is sometimes handled as abstract lines in space, a perception that is carried to an extreme in the attenuated figures of Alberto Giacometti, such as Walking Man (2.6). This reduction of a human to something less than a skeleton can be seen as a statement about the isolation and loneliness of the individual in modern civilization. Giacometti himself insisted that his focus lay not so much on the gaunt figure as on the vast, empty space that surrounds and presides in on it. It is hard to grasp this perspective when looking at a photograph, but in actuality, the small scale of the battered figure—only 27 inches (69 cm) high—does make the space surrounding it seem even greater.

Earthworks—large-scale environment-altering projects in which the surface of the earth becomes the artist’s canvas—sometimes create immense lines that can best be seen from a distance. Up close, Christo’s Running Fence (2.7) appeared as a great fabric curtain, 18 feet (5.5 m) high. Its even more memorable aspect was the beautiful line it created over 244 miles (400 km) of northern California countryside, ultimately disappearing into the Pacific Ocean. To erect this temporary structure for only

**IMPLIED LINE**

Some lines are not physically created; they are merely suggested by the artist. Our mind, with its penchant for trying to read order into the messages from the senses, does the rest, perceiving lines where there are none. Part of the visual excitement of the ad for Harper’s Magazine (2.8) by The Beggarsstaffs [a farsighted but short-lived British design studio around the turn of the century] is the filling in of lines that have been left out. Just enough information is given for us to see the famous figure of a beekeeper in his distinctive uniform. The illusion works particularly well along the right side of his lower tunic, where an edge is suggested by very slight upward swigs of the dark bands.

2.7 Christo, Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California, 1972–76, erected 1976. Nylon fabric, steel poles, cable, 184 × 244 miles (5.5 × 40 km).


In many two-dimensional works the artist asks us to make assumptions about what “happens” beyond the edges of the picture. To do so, we need to be given enough information for us to draw inferences based on our experiences of the physical world. Geometric figures are especially effective to this end. Shown part of a square or a circle, we may automatically fill in the rest with our imagination. In *Fox Trot* A (2.9), Piet Mondrian shows us a cropped segment of a linear image that by implication extends beyond the picture area. The challenge he sets for us is to determine how much larger the uncropped “original” would be. We automatically assume that the left vertical and the horizontal will continue as straight lines and intersect just beyond the picture. But what about the two verticals? Will they be joined by a crosstie above the top? The only clue that the cropped segment shown may be part of a hypothetical series of rectangles—like a multi-paned window—is the crossing of the two lines at lower right. The suggestion that the figure doesn’t end here leads the mind outward to imagine a much larger series of lines that it cannot see at all.

In addition to drawing the viewer into participating in a work, implied lines are often used for compositional ends. *Exuviae*—the implied lines along which a subject’s eyes appear to be looking—are a common device for directing the viewer’s eye or pulling a composition together. Usually eyelines occur between figures, as in Bouguereau’s *Nymphs and Satyr* (1.55), in which each person in the circle is looking at someone who is looking at someone else, so tying them all together. But in the Hellenistic bronze *Thorn Puller* (2.10), we follow the “line” between the youth’s eyes and his own foot, for his concentration is so clearly fixed on his foot that our eyes go in the same direction. His limbs are also arranged to form lines that lead our eye toward the foot. Our attention is often drawn to points where many lines intersect. If our eye then strays to examining the figure as a whole, the lines of the body carry us around in a circle to arrive back at the same point.
Whereas the narcissus drawing is quite flat in space, lines are often used to describe three-dimensional form. *Head of an Apostle* by the great German artist Albrecht Dürer (2.12) appears to have continually varying contours and to be fully rounded in space. Dürer achieved this extremely detailed depiction of a venerable, beetle-browed head largely by highly skilful use of line. Drawn close together, dark parallel lines (hatching) and crossed parallel lines (cross-hatching) suggest shadows where contours curve away from the light. Where the lines seem to loop in visually incomplete ovals around an axis, a technique known as bracelet modelling, they imply the contours of the unseen back side of the form.

Many small lines placed close together may also be used to suggest texture. In Arnold Böcklin's *Martyn's Flowers* (2.13) we readily perceive textural effects even though we cannot be sure what forms are being described. The title refers to flowers, yet in places the textures appear feathery, wing-like. These are not hastily scribbled strokes; each line was placed with great care. Where many are juxtaposed, dark areas develop that create a mysterious undulation in and out in space. Note that variations in thickness and spacing of the lines creates a range of degrees of darkness, or value, with many shades of gray.
EXPRESSIVE QUALITIES OF LINE

By its character—its size, movement, and the way it is laid down—line may express certain emotional qualities. Sharply angled lines may suggest excitement, anger, danger, or chaos; a relatively flat line suggests calmness; a wide, fast line suggests bold strength, directness; a gently curving line may suggest unhurried pleasure. Such expressive qualities may set the tone for works of art.

The reclining rocking chair by the Austrian firm of Thonet (2.15) suggests, by its long, flowing lines, the restful feeling that one expects to experience when lying in the chair. As the lines flow through lengthened curves, it is difficult to follow a single line; rather, we are visually drawn into the abstract expressive quality of the lines: the sense of languid movement. In the mid-nineteenth century, Michael Thonet had perfected a process of steaming and bending wood that allowed the creation of these plant-like lines and greatly reduced the need for structural joints in furniture. The graceful bentwood furniture designs became so popular that many have continued in production to this day.

Expressive lines in two-dimensional art often have a sculptural quality. That is, they directly reveal the artist's arm at work, transferring expressive gestures into marks on a surface. In Eliza Schulte's Alphabet (2.16) two very different kinds of calligraphic gestures are contrasted. The wide lines spelling ALPHABET have a powerful, carved-in-stone-forever feeling; we can picture the artist with feet firmly planted, making exaggerated vertical strokes with her brush. The thin letters seem to dance lightly and gracefully around them, one imagines their being made with large, flowing gestures with no breaks in the arm movement.

For another example of the expressive possibilities of pure line, consider John Crocker's album cover for Schubert's violin music (2.17). A blank set of staves goes through a gradual, comically plausible metamorphosis into a visual equivalent of Schubert's romantic music, with flourishes and embellishments. Such lines can quite literally be called lyrical, a term used in describing art that is the visual equivalent of melodies that express intimate emotions.

2.15 Gebrüder Thonet, Reclining rocking chair with adjustable back, c. 1880. Steam-bent beechwood and cane, 30% × 27% × 68% ins [77.5 × 70 × 174 cm]. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Phyllis B. Lambert fund and gift of the four sisters.

2.16 Eliza Schulte, Alphabet, Gouache on paper, 11% × 7% ins [29.2 × 19 cm]. Courtesy of the artist.

CHAPTER TWO

CHEMIN DE FER DU NORD

AMCASSANDRE

SOCIETE NATIONALE DES CHEMINS DE FER BELGES

ÉTOILE DU NORD

PULLMAN AU DINER

PARIS - BRUXELLES - AMSTERDAM

COMPAGNIE DES WAGONS-LITS


DIRECTIONAL LINE

Lines may be used in art to tell us which way to look. In the poster for a luxury train by the great French poster designer A. M. Cassandre (2.18), we are placed squarely on top of the rail that is perpendicular to the bottom edge of the poster. Our eye races along the rail to the point where all the rails converge and disappear on the horizon. The immediate impression is that of speed and elegance in covering great distances. These directional lines lead us effortlessly to our destination—and beyond, to a star.

SHAPE AND FORM

Throughout this book we will be using the word shape to refer to defined two-dimensional areas. As we use the term, a shape is flat. We will reserve the word form for three-dimensional areas, also called "volume" or "mass." But flat shapes may appear on the surface of three-dimensional forms, and twodimensional works may create on a flat surface the illusion of forms.

ACTUAL THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORMS

To understand the many ways in which three-dimensional forms work aesthetically, we can set up some overlapping categories of features. These include exterior and interior contours, open versus closed forms, and static versus dynamic forms. The surfaces of a three-dimensional work are sometimes called its contours. They may project outward (convex) or inward (concave) relative to the general body of the form.

Some three-dimensional works have both exterior and interior contours that can be examined. In architecture, the exterior form of a building gives quite a different impression from its interior structure. In some works, we are invited to look at both exterior and interior contours simultaneously. The lovely flask shown in Figure 2.19 is made of clear crystal, revealing the concave pear-shaped contour within a similar but convex exterior contour. The interior contour is emphasized and elaborated by the bubbles surrounding it.


A more subtle kind of interior form can only be sensed, rather than seen. Barbara Hepworth, whose work is shown in Figure 2.33, had a highly refined awareness of unseen interior forms. In her autobiography, published in 1970, she wrote:

There is an inside and an outside to every form. When they are in special accord, as for instance a nut in its shell or a child in the womb, or in the structure of shells or crystals, or when one senses the architecture of bones in the human figure, then I am most drawn to the effect of light. Every shadow cast by the sun from an ever-changing angle reveals the harmony of the inside and the outside.²

Many early Western sculptures were closed forms that reflected the block from which they had been carved. The block of stone from which the early Egyptian sculpture of Senmut with Princess Neferu (2.20) has been carved is drawn in only slightly at the