

Elements & Principles of Design

When you do a drawing or painting on paper and when you do a drawing or painting on the computer, the elements and principles of design are the same. Mastering them will help you become a better designer.

A design is an arrangement, a way of organizing something. In arts and crafts, even though we use many different materials, the visual appearance (that is what our eye sees and our brain decodes) can be reduced to six elements of design. They are line, shape, form, space, color, and texture. They are what we organize. They are the tools.

The principles of design are how we organize or use the tools. The principles of design are balance, emphasis, movement, pattern, proportion, repetition, rhythm, variety, and unity.



6 Elements

LINE

is a mark with greater length than width. Lines can be horizontal, vertical or diagonal, straight or curved, thick or thin.

SHAPE

is a closed line. Shapes can be geometric, like squares and circles, or organic, like free formed shapes or natural shapes. Shapes are flat and can express length and width.

FORM

three dimensional shapes, expressing length, width, and depth. Balls, cylinders, boxes and triangles are forms.

SPACE

is the area between and around objects. The space around objects is often called negative space; negative space has shape. Space can also refer to the feeling of depth. Real space is three-dimensional; in visual art when we can create the feeling or illusion of depth we call it space.

COLOR

is light reflected of objects. Color has three main characteristics; hue or its name (red, green, blue, etc), value (how light or dark it is), saturation (intensity or amount of the hue).

TEXTURE

is the surface quality that can be seen and/or felt. Textures can be rough or smooth, soft or hard. Textures do not always feel the way they look; for example, a drawing of a porcupine may look prickly, but if you touch the drawing, the paper is still smooth.



9 Principles

BALANCE

is the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space. If the design was a scale these elements should be balanced to make a design feel stable. In symmetrical balance, the elements used on one side of the design are similar to those on the other side; in asymmetrical balance, the sides are different but still look balanced. In radial balance, the elements are arranged around a central point and may be similar.

EMPHASIS

is the part of the design that catches the viewer's attention. Usually the designer will make one area stand out by contrasting it with other areas. The area will be different in size, color, texture, shape, etc.

MOVEMENT

is the path the viewer's eye takes through the artwork, often to focal areas. Such movement can be directed along lines edges, shape and color within the artwork.

PATTERN

is the repeating of an object or symbol all over the artwork.

REPETITION

works with pattern to make the artwork seem active. The repetition of elements of design creates unity within the artwork

PROPORTION

is the feeling of unity created when all parts (sizes, amounts, or number) relate well with each other. When drawing the human figure, proportion can refer to the size of the head compared to the rest of the body.

RHYTHM

is created when one or more elements of design are used repeatedly to create a feeling of organized movement. Variety is essential to keep rhythm exciting and active, and moving the viewer around the artwork. Rhythm creates a mood like music or dancing.

VARIETY

is the use of several elements of design to hold the viewer's attention and to guide the viewer's eye through the artwork or design.

UNITY

is the feeling of harmony between all parts of the artwork creating a sense of completeness.