

Name _____ Date _____

Objective

In this lesson, you will build an understanding of and identify art vocabulary and the art evaluation process.

Links

Diego and I

<http://redirect.platoweb.com/337456>

Smithsonian American Art Museum

<http://redirect.platoweb.com/337457>

Introduction

What picture runs through your mind when you hear the word *art*? Do you think of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*? Or the vase over the fireplace? Or the photo you took of the Grand Canyon? Or the video you watched on your MP3 player? Well, if you answered yes to any of those questions, you were right! Art comes in all of those forms. A lot of us think of art as only the paintings or sculptures that we see in art exhibits, but art is so much more than that. Art is the expression of a thought, idea, or experience using some kind of a medium. That medium can be canvas, clay, film, or even nature.

What makes art interesting is interpreting the thought, idea, or experience the artist is trying to convey. Interpreting art is a very interesting and exciting process. You can see the beauty in a piece of art as you discover more about the artist, including when and where he or she lived and what experiences the artist had.



Mona Lisa
Leonardo da Vinci
1506

For example, when you first look at the painting *Mona Lisa*, you may just see it as a picture of an attractive woman. But it becomes more interesting when you know the story behind the painting. Did you know that Leonardo da Vinci took more than ten years to paint the *Mona Lisa*? Or that her seated pose was inspired by the image of the seated Virgin Mary, which was very popular at the time? Also, what do you think da Vinci tried to convey with *Mona Lisa*'s expression? Look at her eyes and her smile. She seems to be looking directly at you and saying something to you. Over the five centuries since da Vinci painted *Mona Lisa*, many historians and psychologists have offered theories on what her smile means. Some say it is a sign of innocence. Others say it is a sign of tranquility. In fact, some historians used a computer program to analyze the smile and concluded that *Mona Lisa* was 83 percent happy!

Think about the diverse interpretations people have of the same work of art. That's the beauty of art. It inspires so many different reactions from different viewers. You may have your own interpretation of *Mona Lisa*'s smile. And as a viewer of *Mona Lisa*, your interpretation will be completely acceptable! So, the next time someone asks for your interpretation of a work of art, you shouldn't be afraid to share your opinion.

While there is no one correct way to interpret a work of art, it helps to be familiar with some standard elements that relate to all art. Knowing about these elements helps you to pay attention to the key aspects of a piece of art. Also, if you know the words or vocabulary used to describe these elements, you can share your interpretation with your friends. When interpreting or evaluating art, you need to go beyond your immediate reaction to it. For example, your first reaction to a piece of sculpture may simply be "It's beautiful!" or "It's ugly!" However, to properly evaluate the sculpture, you need to think deeper. What is it about the sculpture that evokes that positive or negative feeling? Is it the subject or the shape? More importantly, you need to consider whether you know enough about the artist to pass such

quick judgment on the sculpture. You may often find that a thorough evaluation of a piece of art will lead you to change your opinion.

Section 1: Art Vocabulary

Knowing the right art vocabulary can help you better understand and experience a work of art. When you use appropriate words, you also may be able to better communicate your reaction to a piece of art with others. You could have interesting discussions with your classmates and friends. You could even go online and read what art critics are saying about a piece and compare their opinions to yours.

Perception and Subject

Perception is an important word when it comes to art. You may have been asked, “What is your perception of this painting?” Perception is a complete awareness and experience of something. It involves an analysis that is deeper than just your immediate reaction to an object. Perception is the difference between looking at and seeing something. When you look at an object, you are doing something in a mechanical way. But, when you see the object, you are studying it very carefully, becoming consciously aware of it, and experiencing it with your senses of sight, hearing, or touch. When you interpret the object based on study, awareness, and sensation, you have formed a perception.



The End of the Season
William Merritt Chase
1885

For example, when you look at the painting *The End of the Season*, you may just notice the various elements in it—a woman, five tables, and several tipped chairs. But if you let your mind rest on the painting, you may find that it makes you feel a little sad. Why is that? Well, to begin with, most of the colors used by the artist are dull. Also, notice the way the woman is seated. She’s leaning forward, slightly hunched over, and staring into the distance. Was she waiting for someone who didn’t show up? That may be, since the empty chair next to her hasn’t been tipped.

What you’re doing now is seeing different aspects of the painting that have left you with a feeling of sadness. Your perception may be that this painting depicts loneliness, longing, and disappointment. This perception is greatly influenced by the woman who is the subject of the work. Identifying the subject in a work of art helps you answer this question: who or what is this work of art about? And that is the beginning of the evaluation process.



Betrothal Still Life
Henri Fantin-Latour
1869



Celebes
Max Ernst
1921



Painting A

Different types of art handle subjects differently. In representational art, as illustrated with *Betrothal Still Life* (above left), the artist depicts the subject in a manner that is almost identical to the way the subject appears in everyday life. You can immediately recognize the subject. In abstract art, the artist likely depicts the subject in a distorted or exaggerated manner. This may seem strange, but changing the natural appearance of the subject is the abstract artist’s way of making one quality or characteristic of the subject stand out. It’s the artist’s way of making some form of statement about the subject.

Whether you are studying representational or abstract art, as illustrated with *Celebes*, you should pay attention to how the artist interprets the subject. Often, this interpretation is more important than the actual subject. How has the subject been depicted? What aspect of the subject is emphasized? Is there any aspect that has been left out? What are the objects placed beside the subject? These types of questions become the basis for your evaluation of the work of art.

Sometimes, a work of art may have no visible subject at all! An example of this is nonrepresentational art, as illustrated with *Painting A*. So, can you interpret a piece of art that seems to have no subject? Of course! The objects and colors in the piece can evoke some kind of feeling in you. You can then base your interpretation on this feeling.

Visual Elements

Regardless of the art type, all works of art contain certain visual elements, including lines, shapes, textures, space, and perspective. Artists use these elements in different ways to create works of art that convey their messages.

A line is an extension of a point. The creation of all paintings begins with the formation of lines. In fact, think about your own drawings. You may have started every drawing by creating lines to outline the shapes of figures or objects. Lines can be straight, curved, or rough brush strokes. Artists can use lines for different purposes and effects. For example, they can outline shapes, indicate direction, and even suggest motion. Artists can also bunch lines together to depict light and shadow or to form patterns and textures. Look at the different ways artists used lines in the works pictured here.



Water Lilies
Claude Monet
1914



A key function of a line is to outline a shape, especially in paintings. Like lines, shapes have different purposes and effects in art. In addition to lines, colors can help separate one shape from another. Artists can use shapes to create people and objects or even to frame people and objects. In art, you can generally see two types of shapes: geometric and organic.



Greek column

Geometric shapes are precise. These shapes include circles, triangles, and squares. In these pictures, you can see different uses for geometric shapes. The Greek column on the left is a geometric shape in itself. In the Egyptian painting on the right, the artist used rectangular geometric shapes to frame different scenes within the painting.



Goddess Maat and Isis



The Thinker
Auguste Rodin
1902

Organic shapes are not precise and are often curved or rounded. Most natural shapes in our world are organic. Take a look at the organic shapes the artist used in the works pictured here.



When an artist creates a shape in a painting, he or she automatically creates another shape in the background. The main shapes or subjects are called positive shapes. The background areas are called negative shapes. Your perception of a painting is greatly influenced by the relationship between the positive and negative shapes. You will find that your eyes naturally detect positive shapes. Sometimes, you may have to make a great effort to see negative shapes. But an artist needs to keep both positive and negative shapes in mind when creating a work of art because the shapes work together to give the artist the effect he or she needs. In fact, some artists make it difficult for you to tell the difference between the positive and negative shapes, which can have a very interesting effect on your perception.

Lines and shapes influence your perception through your sense of sight. But did you know that a piece of art can also use texture to affect your perception through your sense of touch? Texture is how a surface feels to the touch. Touch can have powerful effects on your perception. As a child you probably explored your surroundings through touch. By touching objects, you learned to make the connection between how they felt and how they looked.

Artists play with your perception by experimenting with textures. In art, textures can be actual or simulated. Actual textures are those you can feel by touching. They include marble, wood, clay, and sand. With three-dimensional art forms, such as sculptures, you can experience the actual texture of the work by picking it up and exploring it with your hands. The smooth or

rough surfaces of a sculpture cause different sensations. Simulated textures are those created by visual suggestion. Two-dimensional art forms, such as paintings, rely on simulated textures. For example, say an artist painted trees. If you actually touched the canvas, you would feel nothing but smooth paint. But the textures that the painter creates through his or her choice of lines, shapes, and colors suggests how the trunks would feel. Also, the painter relies on our own real-world experiences to recall how these objects would feel.

Space is another visual element that can affect your perception. Space is the distance between different shapes. With three-dimensional art pieces, such as sculpture and architecture, you can move around the pieces to experience the space around them. But with two-dimensional works, such as paintings and photographs, you see the shapes and spaces all at the same time. In these works, space is defined by the edges of shapes.

Space can be interesting to convey in a two-dimensional work of art. And so can perspective. Perspective refers to the artist's point of view. It is especially important in paintings that depict scenes such as landscapes. When you look at a painting, you have to imagine that the artist is seeing the scene from a fixed position, which is called the vantage point. Perspective determines how the artist conveys the distance between him- or herself and the various subjects in the scene.



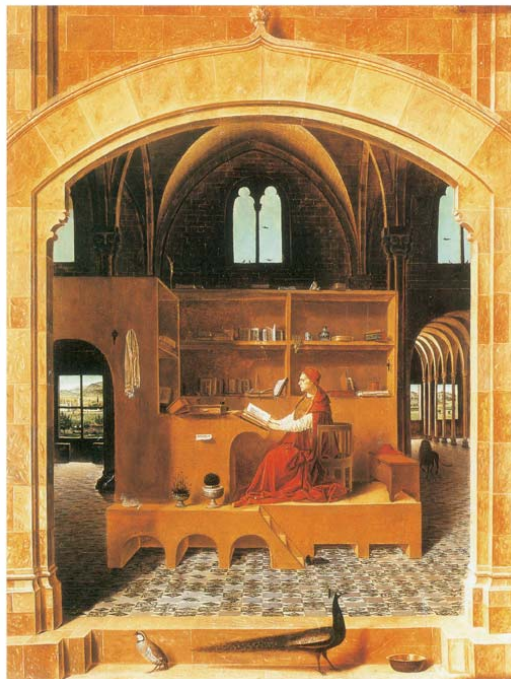
When you look at the above painting, you immediately know which trees are closer to the artist and which trees are farther away. How do you know this? Because objects appear smaller when seen at a distance than when seen close up. Artists use this idea to convey distance in a scene. When you are trying to determine the perspective in a painting, it also helps to identify the vanishing point. The spaces between objects appear smaller when seen from a distance. So parallel lines, such as the sides of the path in this painting, appear to meet, or converge, as they move into the distance. The point at which they converge is called the vanishing point. At this point, it appears as if the land and the sky meet. The artist relies on your real-world experience to understand that the vanishing point is the point farthest away from the artist and not the point where land and sky actually meet!

Principles of Design

You have just read about the various visual elements in art. How an artist puts these elements together depends on his or her sense of design.

We are all designers. We design all the time. In fact, when you arrange the furniture in your room, what you are doing is designing. Designing is simply the process of selecting and arranging elements to create a desired effect. That is precisely what artists do. They arrange visual elements, such as lines, shapes, and space, to create meaningful messages. There are no rules for good design. But there are principles of design, which artists generally follow for effective visual communication. Some key principles of design are unity, variety, and contrast.

Unity is the appearance of oneness, or uniformity. The unity of elements creates harmony in a work of art. To complement unity, artists introduce variety, or the appearance of diversity. Most artists try to hit a balance between unity and variety. This brings interest and life to their works.



Saint Jerome in his Study
Antonello da Messina
1475–76

In the painting *Saint Jerome in his Study*, the artist introduced unity across the composition by inserting various arches throughout the work. To counter that unity, he introduced variety in the types of arches or in the scenes that they frame. Just as variety introduces interest in art, so does contrast. Contrast involves placing dissimilar elements together. Contrast can be created by placing bright colors against dull colors, dark against light, and large objects against small objects. In the painting, notice the powerful effect the artist created by setting the shadows of the top arch against the brightness of the main study area.

Activity A: Identifying Art Vocabulary



Marizy Sainte-Genevieve
Maurice Utrillo
1910

Directions

Study the above painting, *Marizy Sainte-Genevieve*, carefully. Based on your analysis, answer the following questions. Write your answers in the boxes provided below the questions.

1. What types of lines has the artist used in the painting?

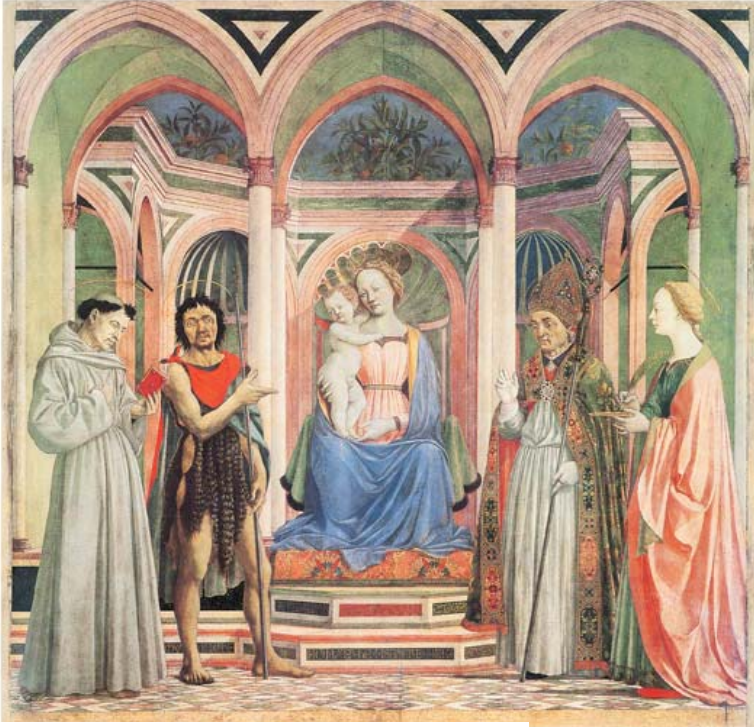
2. What are the positive shapes in the painting?

3. What is the negative shape in the painting?

4. What is the vantage point in the painting?

5. What is the vanishing point in the painting?

Activity B: Identifying Principles of Design



***Madonna and Child with Saints
(Saint Lucy Altarpiece)***
Domenico Veneziano
1445

Directions

Study the painting above, *Madonna and Child with Saints (Saint Lucy Altarpiece)*, carefully. Based on your analysis, describe how the artist has created both unity and variety in the painting. Write your answer in the box provided below.

Section 2: Evaluating Art

Now that you know important vocabulary associated with art, you can identify the visual elements in a piece. But how would you analyze the elements and then consider the work as a whole? How would you evaluate a work of art to determine its quality?

How a work of art is evaluated varies from person to person. So, quality is subjective. But you can follow a simple process to evaluate a work of art effectively. This process can help you arrive at an educated analysis.

Here are the steps:

- Keep an open mind.
- Describe what you see.
- Analyze the work.
- Judge the work and its artist.

When you first look at a work of art, you cannot help but have some kind of immediate emotional response to it. You may either like it or hate it. But the key to evaluating art is to think beyond your immediate emotional response. So, the first thing you should do is keep an open mind. You should give yourself time to get acquainted with the work. Remember the discussion on the difference between looking and seeing. Seeing the work requires you to carefully consider it on the basis of various factors. Only then will you have a good perception and evaluation of it. Now, with an open mind, you can begin your evaluation.



Starry Night
Vincent van Gogh
1888

Start by describing what you see. For example, take a look at the above painting, *Starry Night*. What physical qualities do you notice in the painting? The night sky, stars, moon, hills, small town, church steeple, and maybe a mountain or a tall bush in the left corner?

Next, study the details of these physical qualities. What visual elements are used to depict them? For example, let's take a look at the lines, shapes, and perspective. What types of lines has van Gogh used and why?

He used swirling lines for the clouds. Perhaps this was to depict the hazy, slow movement of clouds across the night sky. And how about the shapes? Which shapes take up most of the space in the painting? Do they help you identify the subject? Here, the sky and stars appear to dominate the painting. So perhaps they are the object of the artist's attention and subject of his painting. But the subject of a painting is not always the largest shape in the painting. In these cases, the title of a painting can often inform you of its subject. For example, the title *Starry Night* confirms that van Gogh's subject is the night sky.

You should also study the nature of the various shapes. What are their sizes and colors? Notice the exaggerated shapes of the stars and the blazing yellow in which they have been painted. It is almost as if lamps have been perched up in the sky. Remember your study of abstract art. When an artist exaggerates the appearance of a shape, he or she is deliberately trying to convey some kind of message. What was van Gogh conveying with his powerfully lit stars? Here, it helps to know more about the artist and the times he lived in. Van Gogh painted this at a time when streetlights were extremely rare. Perhaps he is suggesting that these wonderfully luminous stars are lighting up the whole town.

Now think about perspective and vantage point. What is the vantage point here? The artist is likely looking down at the town from an elevated position. We can tell because the painting shows the rooftops of all the buildings in town.

After you have studied the visual elements in the painting, think about how the artist designed the painting. How did he achieve unity? Was it through the use of curved lines throughout the painting? Or was it through the primary use of the color blue? Is there any element of contrast? Maybe the use of the cool blue against the fiery yellow?

The way the artist has used visual elements and designed his work should have a tremendous impact on your perception and interpretation. Now, what is your analysis of the painting? How does the painting make you feel? Is it a peaceful or sad scene? How does it make you feel?

Knowing more about the artist can help you analyze, interpret, and appreciate his or her work. Therefore, in your evaluation process, you should ask yourself whether you know enough about the artist. For example, when you read more about van Gogh, you will discover that *Starry Night* was just one in a series of paintings he created of night scenes. To do this, he would hang candles around his hat and canvas for light. When you know information like this, you can look at a piece of art in a new way. Your entire experience of the piece becomes richer and more meaningful.



When analyzing a piece of art, you should always place it within its historical context: Who created it? When was it created? What was the nature of the time when it was created? How does it compare with other works by the same artist? How does it compare with works by other artists at the same time?

Finally, you should determine your judgment of the piece and the artist. What was the artist trying to say? Was he able to communicate his message effectively? Is it an interesting message in your view?

Always reserve your judgment for the end of the evaluation process. You will find the process itself is an exciting discovery, not just of wonderful art but also of yourself.

Activity C: Evaluating a Painting

Directions

Evaluate Frida Kahlo's painting [Diego and I](#). Then answer the following questions. Write your answer in the box.

1. What do you think is the subject of the painting? What made you arrive at that conclusion?

2. Is there any physical quality in the painting that has been distorted or exaggerated? If so, what is the artist trying to imply?

3. Is there any aspect of Frida Kahlo's life that helped you interpret this painting in a more meaningful way?



Activity D: On Your Own

Directions

Visit the [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#) website and listen to how other students interpret different pieces of art. This activity is optional.