



Talk the Talk! Glossary of Art Terms

These are some words you might hear at the Museum or use to describe an artwork.

Elements of Art

These are the sensory components used to create works of art—the ingredients, you might say. The elements of art are what artworks are made of.

Line The continuous mark made on a surface by a moving point. It may be two-dimensional (a pencil mark on paper), or it may be three-dimensional (wire). It may also be implied by the edge of a shape or form; often it is an outline, contour, or silhouette.

Some **line** words: curved, straight, zigzag, horizontal, vertical, parallel, intersecting

Color An element of art described by three properties: hue (name of the color), intensity (brightness or dullness), and value (lightness or darkness)

Some **color** words: primary (red, yellow, and blue), secondary (green, orange, and purple), complementary (opposite on the color wheel), tint (lightened by adding white), shade (darkened by adding black), monochromatic, warm, cool

Shape An enclosed space defined by other elements (like lines). Shapes may appear to be two- or three-dimensional.

Some **shape** words: geometric (circle, square, triangle, etc.), organic (free-form)

Form A three-dimensional element that encloses volume, such as a cube, sphere, or cylinder.

Texture The surface quality or “feel” of an object, such as roughness, smoothness, or softness. Actual texture can be felt, while simulated textures are implied by the way the artist renders areas of the picture.

Some **texture** words: bumpy, smooth, soft, uneven, coarse

Value Describes the lightness or darkness of a color. Value is needed to express volume.

Some **value** words: light, dark, shade, highlight

Space The distance or area between, around, above, or within things. It can be a description for both two- and three-dimensional portrayals.

Some **space** words: foreground, middle ground, background, horizon, overlapping, depth, perspective, vanishing point, positive space, negative space

Principles of Design

These are the ways the elements of art are arranged or organized in an artwork. The principles of design put the elements to work.

Emphasis Refers to points of interest intended to pull the viewer's eye to important parts of the artwork.

Balance A sense of visual stability in an artwork. It can be created by repeating some shapes and by creating a feeling of equal weight. **Formal balance** is achieved with equal or similar elements appearing on opposite sides of a central axis; with **informal balance**, unlike elements or objects have equal visual weight and give a sense of evenness.

Some **balance** words: symmetry (mirror images), asymmetry (another name for informal balance), radial (arranged around a central element)

Harmony A state achieved by using similar elements throughout an artwork, providing cohesion to the work.

Variety The differences found in an artwork, achieved by using different shapes, textures, and other elements.

Contrast Arranging very different examples of an element to call attention to their differences and add visual interest (light and dark colors, large and small shapes, or rough and smooth textures, for example).

Movement A sense of dynamics achieved by showing action and directing the viewer's eye around the artwork.

Rhythm A type of visual movement in drawing and painting. It is seen in the repetition of shapes, colors, and other elements. Alternating lights and darks also give a sense of rhythm.

Proportion Refers to the relationships of the size of objects in a body of work, giving a sense of size. Also called "scale".

Unity Seen when all the parts of an artwork equal a whole. The artwork should not appear disjointed or confusing.

Composition The arrangement of elements in a work of art.

Some **composition** terms: The Rule of Thirds, Nine-Zone Grid

Other Art Terms

Here are a few more terms that may come in handy when you visit the Museum with students. The list is by no means comprehensive—you will certainly be able to think of others!

Abstract art Art that has no recognizable subject matter but focuses on shapes, colors, lines, etc. Also called “nonobjective”.

Architecture A building or structure; the art of designing and constructing buildings

Cityscape An artwork depicting an urban scene

Collage A two-dimensional artwork composed of pieces of paper, fabric, photos, etc.

Collection An accumulation of objects

Docent A volunteer tour guide

Exhibit A collection of objects on public display in a museum (also known as an exhibition)

Gallery A room or building for the display (or sale) of art

Label A small sign that gives information about an artwork

Landscape An artwork depicting the countryside

Medium A material, such as paint or pastel, used to create art. (Media is the plural form.)

Mood An overall feeling or emotion, often equated with expression

Portrait An artistic depiction of a real person

Sculpture A three-dimensional artwork. It could be made of wood, stone, metal, clay, or another material, and could be carved, cast, modeled, etc.

Seascape An artwork depicting the sea and/or shore

Still life An artwork depicting an arrangement of common inanimate objects such as flowers, fruit, bowls, etc.