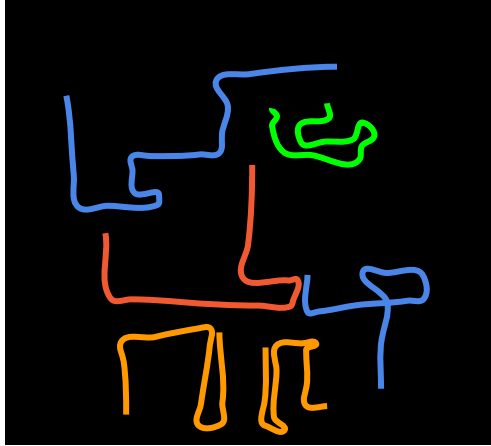# The Elements and Principles of Design

Examples in Art | Princeton Tran

Elements of Design
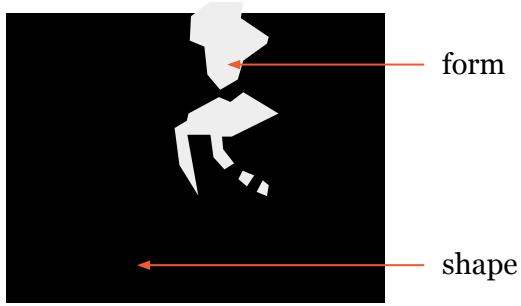
Elements of Design

LINE

Picasso, *Three Musicians*

Lines dominate the piece, creating the jumbled forms of the titualar musicians. The lines vary in their style, from angular straight lines to wavy beards, all creating different textures and a sense of rhythm.

Elements of Design

SHAPE

Klimt, *Adele Bloch-bauer*

Klimt uses a juxtaposition of shape and form to create visual interest and draw focus in this piece. Whereas the figure is softly shaded, her clothes are rendered in stark geometric shapes. This contrast enhances the graphic nature of the flat elements while focusing attention on the more realistically rendered skin tones.

Elements of Design

FORM

Dali, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*

Dali uses a strong directional light to cast shadows on his organic subjects, creating an easy-to-read sense of form on the undulating hills, valleys, bulges, and wrinkles of the grotesque figures. The shadows help the viewer see the three-dimensionality of the various elements, dreamlike as they are.

Elements of Design

SIZE
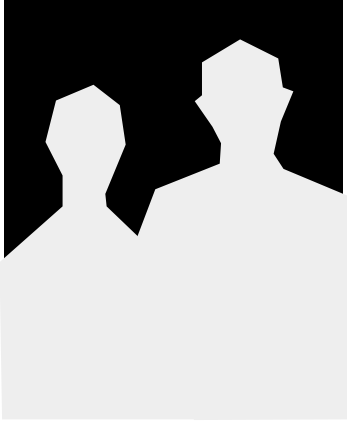
Wood, *American Gothic*

The size of the two figures dominates the canvas, showing that they are the clear subjects of the piece. Their large size also allows the viewer to see the intricacies of their expressions and better connect to the emotions being conveyed.

SPACE

Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

In this composition, there is nothing but the singular subject. Everything else is empty space. This creates an extreme focus on the girl – the viewer is given no option to look anywhere else.

VALUE

Botticelli, *Allegoria della Primavera*

This piece employs a severe contrast in value between the light figures (in the middle ground) and the dark trees (in the background) to create a strong sense of depth.
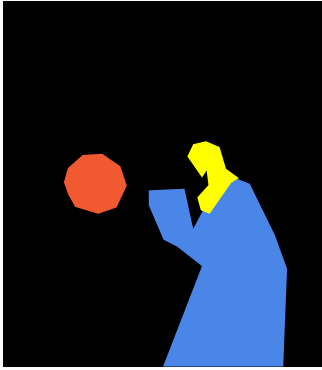
COLOR

Tansey, *Forward Retreat*

The entire composition is a monochromatic red. This bold use of a single color creates a sense of heightened emotion and intense focus on the frantic situation depicted.
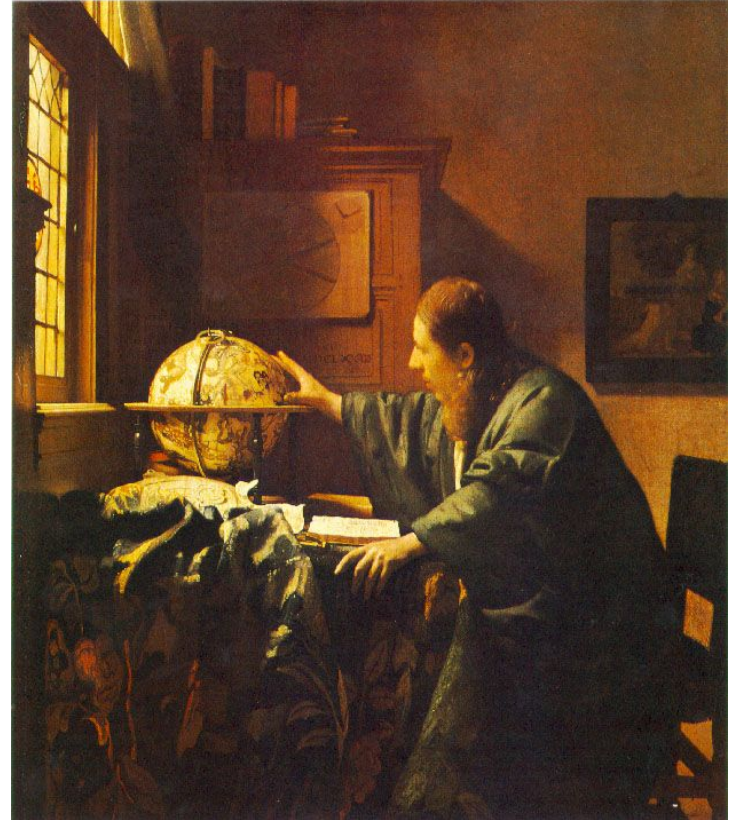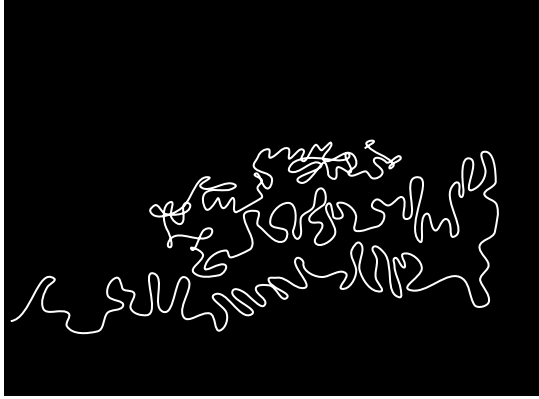
TEXTURE

Vermeer, *The Astronomer*

Vermeer expertly creates a variety of visual textures in this piece, from the soft glow of the subject's curly hair to the shiny reflective smoothness of his globe to the thick fabric texture of his robes. A multitude of materials is represented through the simulation of their texture.
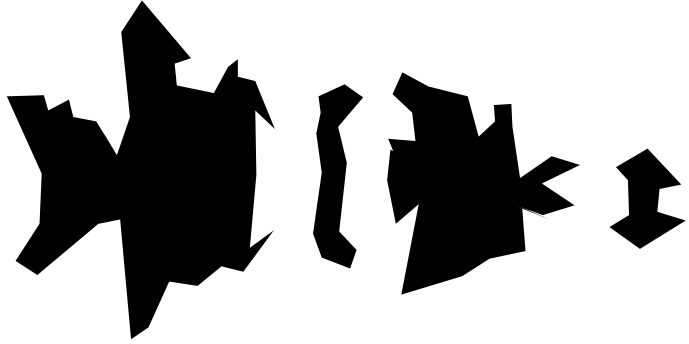
Principles of Design

REPETITION

Bruegel, *Massacre of the Innocents*

Bruegel's repetition of figures in the center of the piece creates an atmosphere of chaos and disorder. It's difficult for the eye to visually parse the picture immediately due to the jumbled crowd of repeated people, lending the piece its frenetic energy.

RHYTHM


Tansey, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*

There is a very clear sense of rhythm contained in this piece's left-to-right movement of the figures. The people are placed with a deliberate rhythmic spacing and their postures flow from one to the other almost as if in a row of frame-by-frame animation. The reflection in the water serves to amplify this effect, causing them to appear like an audio waveform.
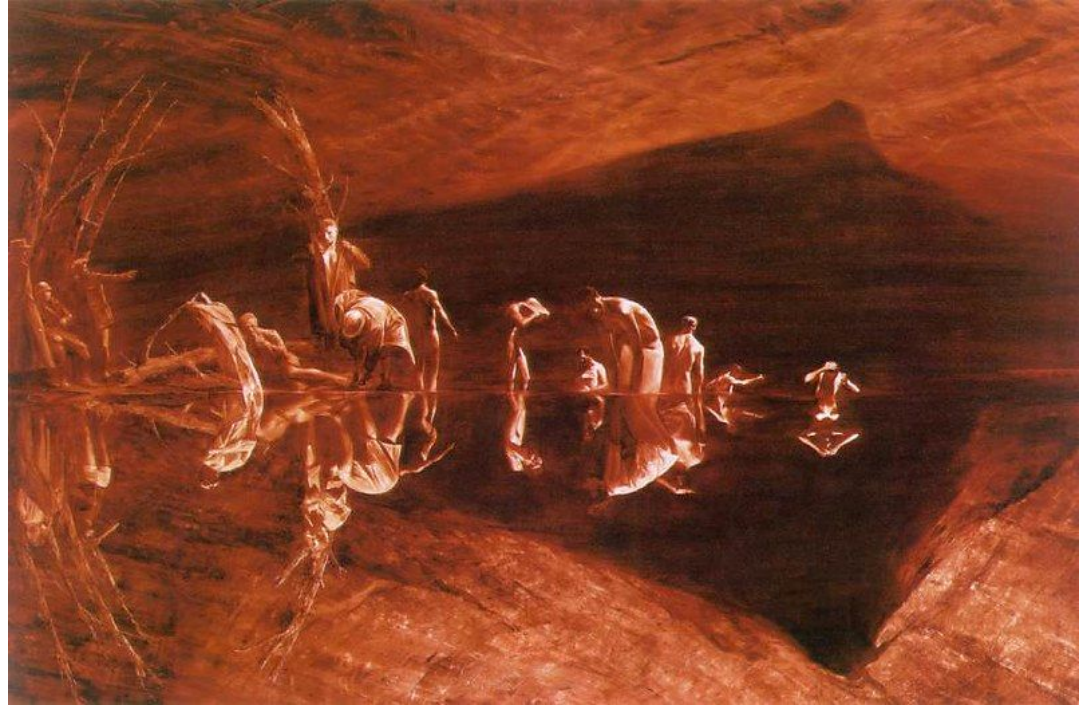
MOVEMENT
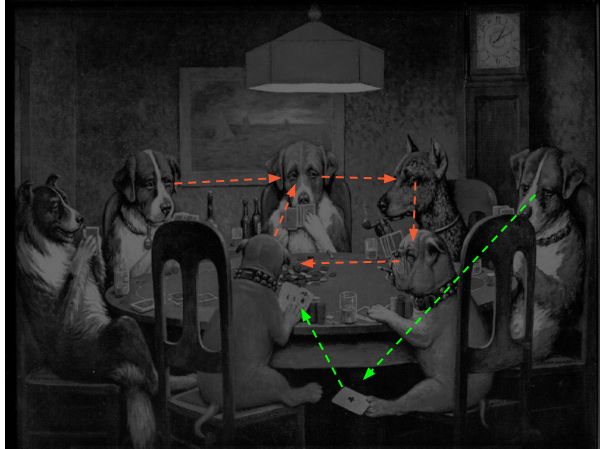
Coolidge, *Dogs Playing Poker*

Coolidge uses the dogs' eyelines in this painting to create a shifty sense of movement around the table. The viewer's eye follows the dogs' gaze from player to player, creating the sense of suspicion and circular motion that is integral to an exciting poker game.

BALANCE

Van Gogh, *Starry Night*

Van Gogh's *Starry Night* has a strong sense of balance between the different elements on the left and right sides of the piece. A large crescent moon dominates the composition on the right side, and the dark cypress tree adds visual weight to the left side in the foreground. While the two shapes differ in size, their visual weights match and lead to an optically balanced arrangement.

Principles of Design

PROPORTION

Picasso, *Guernica*

This piece distorts the viewer's sense of realistic proportion – between body parts, between animals, people, and architecture – to create a jumbled and chaotic depiction of the horrors of war. Engorged limbs flail and anguished faces with impossibly large mouths scream out in pain while buildings and animals crowd and fill the rest of the space. All elements are crushed together proportionally to almost equal importance despite their actual relative sizes, giving none of them visual precedence over another. This adds to the piece's confusion and deliberate difficulty to read.
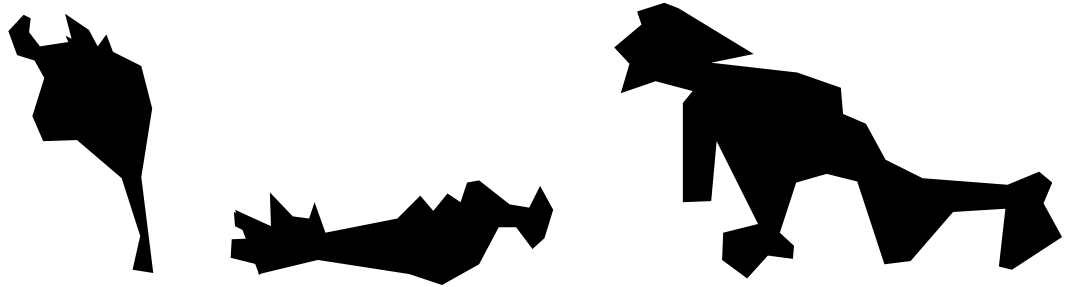
NEGATIVE SPACE
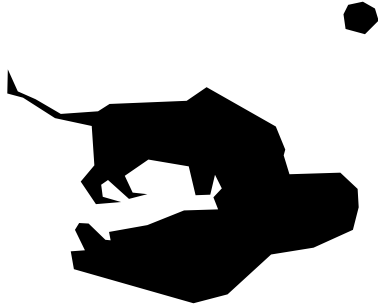
Rousseau, *Sleeping Gypsy*

Sleeping Gypsy is dominated by negative space. The select objects in the scene are deliberately chosen by Rousseau to tell a simple yet mysterious story. By framing his subjects in so much negative space (in the flat planes of the sky and ground) Rousseau allows the viewer to focus on the questions that arise from his scenario – Why isn't the lion eating the woman? How does the woman sleep so peacefully in a seemingly dangerous environment?

Principles of Design

CONTRAST

Rembrandt, *Night Watch*

Night Watch is a classic example of *chiaroscuro,* the famous technique of dramatic contrast between light and shadow to create a three-dimensional effect. Here, the contrast between the main subjects – who appear to be spotlighted – and the background puts them into relief and almost punches them out of the canvas.
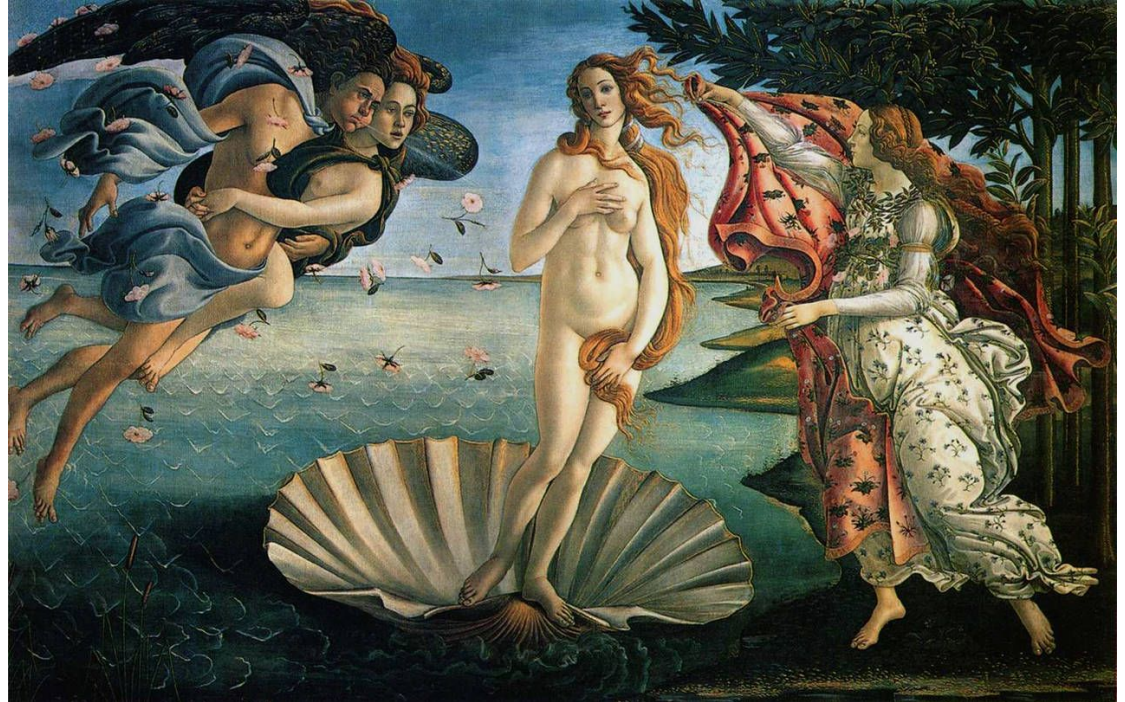
EMPHASIS

Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*

Botticelli places strong emphasis on the central figure of the piece by pointing all the supporting elements of the piece towards her, from the other figures' eyelines to the branches of the trees.

VARIETY

Bruegel, *Triumph of Death*

A 16th century *Where's Waldo?,* Bruegel's *Triumph of Death* offers a feast of gruesome variety for the viewer to gaze upon. All throughout the piece, different scenarios are presented where people are picked apart by all manner of strange creatures. No one death is shown twice, breaking up any sense of monotony that may have been remotely possible.

Principles of Design

UNITY

Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*

While the entire piece is full of activity and variety, Seurat's consistent use of pointillism as well as a soft color palette throughout brings the whole painting together in a strong sense of unity. The repetition of umbrellas throughout every layer of the piece also contributes to this harmonious effect.

HIERARCHY

Leonardo, *The Last Supper*

Leonardo employs many elements throughout the piece to create a clear hierarchy among the figures depicted in his *Last Supper*. Perspective is used to emphasize the central figure first and foremost with the vanishing point placed directly behind his head and all lines converging on him. Then, figures are placed in order of importance radiating out, giving them a clear ranking.