

# Student Tool Kit

This short section is designed to introduce the over-arching themes and aims of *A World of Art* as well as provide you with a guide to the basic elements of art that you can easily access whenever you interact with works of art—in these pages, in museums, and anywhere else you encounter them. The topics covered here are developed much more fully in later chapters, but this overview brings all this material together in a convenient, quick-reference format.

## Why Study the World of Art?

We study art because it is among the highest expressions of culture, embodying its ideals and aspirations, challenging its assumptions and beliefs, and creating new visions and possibilities for it to pursue. That said, “culture” is itself a complex phenomenon, constantly changing and vastly diverse. The “world of art” is composed of objects from many, many cultures—as many cultures as there are and have been. In fact, from culture to culture, and from cultural era to cultural era, the very idea of what “art” even *is* has changed. It was not until the Renaissance, for instance, that the concept of **fine art**, as we think of it today, arose in Europe. Until then, the Italian word *arte* meant “guild”—any one of the associations of craftspeople that dominated medieval commerce—and *artista* referred to any student of the liberal arts, particularly grammarians.

But, since the Renaissance, we have tended to see the world of art through the lens of “fine art.” We differentiate those one-of-a-kind expressions of individual creativity that we normally associate with **fine art**—painting, sculpture, and architecture—from **craft**, works of the **applied** or **practical arts** like textiles, glass, ceramics, furniture, metalwork, and jewelry. When we refer to “African art,” or “Aboriginal art,” we are speaking of objects that, in the cultures in which they were produced were almost always thought of as applied or practical. They served, that is, ritual or religious purposes that far outweighed whatever purely artistic skill they might evidence. Only in most recent times, as these cultures have responded to the West’s ever more

expansive appetite for the exotic and original, have individual artists in these cultures begun to produce works intended for sale in the Western “fine arts” market.

To whatever degree a given object is more or less “fine art” or “craft,” we study it in order to understand more about the culture that produced it. The object gives us insight into what the culture values—religious ritual, aesthetic pleasure, or functional utility, to name just a few possibilities.

## The Critical Process

Studying these objects engages us in a **critical process** that is analogous, in many ways, to the **creative process** that artists engage in. One of the major features of this text is a series of spreads called *Works in Progress*, eleven of them accompanied by half-hour videos. These videos follow individual artists as they create a work from start to finish. They are meant to demonstrate that art, like most things, is the result of both hard work and, especially, a process of **critical thinking** that involves questioning, exploration, trial and error, revision, and discovery.

One of the greatest benefits of studying art is that it teaches you to think critically. Art objects are generally “mute.” They cannot explain themselves to you, but that does not mean that their meaning is “hidden” or elusive. They contain information—all kinds of information—that can help you explain and understand them if you approach them through the critical thinking process outlined on the next page.

# SEVEN STEPS TO THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT ART

## 1. Identify the artist's decisions and choices.

Begin by recognizing that, in making works of art, artists inevitably make certain decisions and choices—What color should I make this area? Should my line be wide or narrow? straight or curved? Will I look up at my subject or down on it? Will I depict it realistically or not? What medium should I use to make this object? And so on. Identify these choices. Then ask yourself why these choices were made. Remember, though most artists work somewhat intuitively, every artist has the opportunity to revise or redo each work, each gesture. You can be sure that what you are seeing in a work of art is an intentional effect.

## 2. Ask questions. Be curious.

Asking yourself why the artist's choices were made is the just the first set of questions to pose. You need to consider the work's title: what does it tell you about the piece? Is there any written material accompanying the work? Is the work informed by the context in which you encounter it—by other works around it, or, in the case of sculpture for instance, by its location? Is there anything you learn about the artist that is helpful?

## 3. Describe the object.

By carefully describing the object—both its subject matter and how its subject matter is formally realized—you can discover much about the artist's intentions. Play careful attention to how one part of the work relates to the others.

## 4. Question your assumptions.

Question, particularly, any initial dislike you might have for a given work of art.

Remember that if you are seeing the work in a book, museum or gallery, then someone likes it. Ask yourself why. Often you'll talk yourself into liking it too. But also examine the work itself to see if it contains any biases or prejudices. It matters, for instance, in Renaissance church architecture, whether the church is designed for Protestants or Catholics.

## 5. Avoid an emotional response.

Art objects are supposed to stir up your feelings, but your emotions can sometimes get in the way of clear thinking. Analyze your own emotions. Determine what about the work set them off, and ask yourself if this wasn't the artist's very intention.

## 6. Don't oversimplify or misrepresent the art object.

Art objects are complex by their nature. To think critically about an art object is to look beyond the obvious. Thinking critically about the work of art always involves walking the line between the work's susceptibility to interpretation and its integrity, or its resistance to arbitrary and capricious readings. Be sure your reading of a work of art is complete enough (that it recognizes the full range of possible meanings the work might possess), and, at the same time, that it doesn't violate or misrepresent the work.

## 7. Tolerate uncertainty.

Remember that the critical process is an exercise in discovery, that it is designed to uncover possibilities, not necessarily certain truths. Critical thinking is a process of questioning; asking good questions is sometimes more important than arriving at "right" answers. There may, in fact, be no "right" answers.

At the end of each chapter in this book, you will find a section called *The Critical Process*, which poses a series of questions about a work or works of art related to the material in that chapter. These questions are designed both to help you learn to ask similar questions of other works of art and to test your understanding of the chapter materials. Short answers to the questions can be found at the back of the book, but you should try to answer them for yourself before you consult the answers.

Critical thinking is really a matter of putting yourself in a *questioning* frame of mind. Our culture is increasingly dominated by images, and all students today must learn to see and interpret the visual world around them. As you question what you see, as you actively engage the world of art—and not just passively “receive” its images, like some television set—you will find that you are at once critical and self-critical. You will see better and understand more—about both the work of art and yourself.

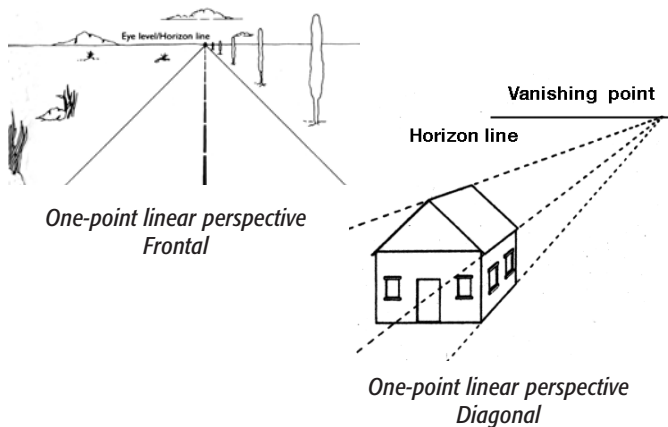
## A QUICK-REFERENCE GUIDE TO THE ELEMENTS OF ART

### Basic Terms

Three basic principles define all works of art, whether **two-dimensional** (painting, drawing, printmaking, and photography) or **three-dimensional** (sculpture and architecture):

- **FORM** - the overall structure of the work;
- **SUBJECT MATTER** - what is literally depicted;
- **CONTENT** - what it means.

If the subject matter is recognizable the work is said to be **representational**. Representational works that attempt to depict objects as they are in actual, visible reality are called **realistic**. The less a work resembles real things in the real world, the more **abstract** it is. Abstract art does not try to duplicate the world, but instead reduces the world to its essential qualities. If the subject matter of the work is not recognizable at all, the work is said to be **nonrepresentational**, also called **nonobjective**.



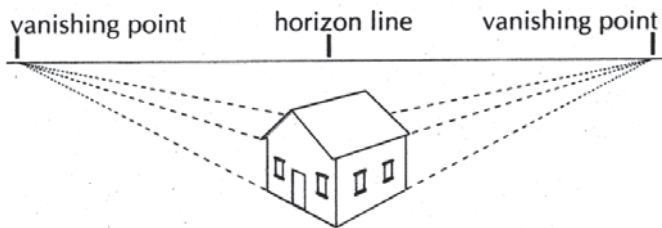
### The Formal Elements

The term **form** refers to the purely visual aspects of art and architecture. **Line, space, levels of light and dark, color, and texture** are among the elements that contribute to a work’s form.

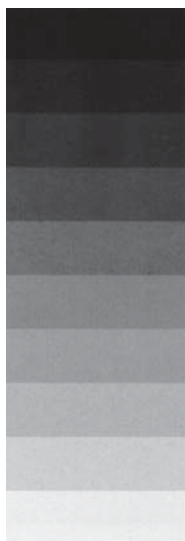
**LINE** is the most fundamental formal element. It delineates **shape** (a flat two-dimensional area) and **mass** (a solid form that occupies a three-dimensional volume) by means of **outline** (in which the edge of a form or shape is indicated directly with a more or less continuous mark) or **contour** (which is the perceived edge of a volume as it curves away from the viewer). Lines can be **implied**—as in your line of sight. Line also possesses certain emotional, expressive, or intellectual qualities. **Expressive** line is loose and free, gestural and quick. When line is precise, controlled, mathematically and rationally organized, it is said to be **analytical** or **classical**:



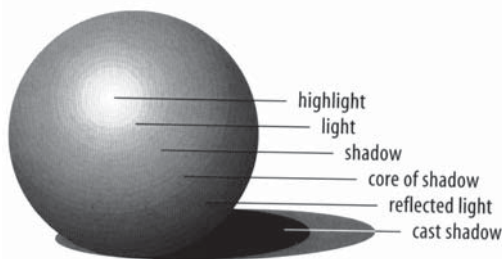
Line is also fundamental to the creation of a sense of deep, three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, the system known as **linear perspective**. In **one-point linear perspective**, lines are drawn on the picture plane in such a way as to represent parallel lines receding to a single point on the viewer’s horizon, called the **vanishing point**. When the vanishing point is directly across from the viewer’s **vantage point**, the recession is **frontal**. When the vanishing point is to one side or the other, the recession is **diagonal**.



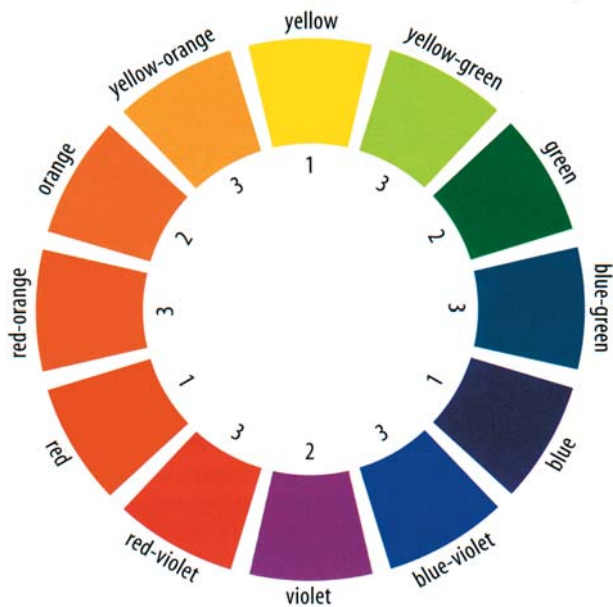
Two-point linear perspective



Gray scale



A sphere represented by means of modeling



Conventional color wheel

In two-point linear perspective, more than one vanishing point occurs, as, for instance, when you look at the corner of a building.

**LIGHT AND DARK** are also employed by artists to create the illusion of deep space on a two-dimensional surface. In **atmospheric perspective**—also called **aerial perspective**—objects further away from the viewer appear less distinct as the contrast between light and dark is reduced by the effects of atmosphere. Artists depict the gradual transition from light to dark around a curved surface by means of **modeling**. **Value** is the relative degree of lightness or darkness in the range from white to black created by the amount of light reflected from an object's surface (see the **gray scale**).

**COLOR** has several characteristics. **Hue** is the color itself. Colors also possess **value**. When we add white to a hue, thus lightening it, we have a **tint** of that color. When we add black to a hue, thus darkening it, we have **shade** of that color. The purer or brighter a hue, the greater its **intensity**. Different colors are the result of different wavelengths of light. The visible **spectrum**—that you see, for instance, in a rainbow—runs from red to orange to yellow (the so-called **warm hues**) to green, blue, and violet (the so-called **cool hues**). The spectrum can be rearranged in a conventional color wheel. The three **primary colors**—red, yellow, and blue (designated by the number 1 on the color wheel)—are those that cannot be made by any mixture of the other colors. Each of the **secondary colors**—orange, green, and violet (designated by the number 2)—is a mixture of the two primaries it lies between. The **intermediate colors** (designated by the number 3) are mixtures of a primary and a neighboring secondary. **Analogous color schemes** are those composed of hues that neighbor each other on the color wheel. **Complementary color schemes** are composed of hues that lie opposite each other on the color wheel. When the entire range of hues is used, the color scheme is said to be **polychromatic**.

**TEXTURE** is the tactile quality of a surface. It takes two forms, the **actual** surface quality—as marble is smooth, for instance—and a **visual** quality that is a representational illusion—as a marble nude sculpture is not soft like skin.

## Visiting Museums

Museums can be intimidating places, but you should remember that the museum is, in fact, dedicated to your visit. Its mission is to help you understand and appreciate its collections and exhibits.

One of the primary functions of museums is to provide a *context* for works of art—that is, works are grouped together in such a way that they inform one another. They might be grouped by artist (all the sculptures of Rodin might be in a single room), by school or group (the French Cubists in one room, for instance, the Italian Futurists in the next), by national and historical period (nineteenth-century British landscape), by some critical theory or theme. Curators—the people who organize museum collections and exhibits—also guarantee the continued movement of people through their galleries by limiting the number of important or

“star” works in any given room. The attention of the viewer is drawn to such works by positioning and lighting.

A good way to begin your visit to a museum is to quickly walk through the exhibit or exhibits that particularly interest you in order to gain an overall impression. Then return to the beginning and take your time. A set of worksheets that pose questions for you to consider as you look at the works in the museum can be found in the appendix to this book. Remember, this is your chance to look at the work close at hand, and especially in large paintings you will see details that are never visible in reproduction, everything from brushwork to the text of newsprint incorporated in a collage. Take the time to walk *around* sculptures and experience their full three-dimensional effects. You will quickly learn that there is no substitute for seeing works in person.

## A DOS-AND-DON'TS GUIDE TO VISITING MUSEUMS

**Do plan ahead.** Most museums have websites that can be very helpful in planning your visit. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for instance, or the Louvre in Paris are so large that their collections cannot be seen in a single visit. You should determine in advance what you want to see.

**Do help yourself to a museum guide** once you are at the museum. It will help you find your way around the exhibits.

**Do take advantage** of any information about the collections—brochures and the like—that the museum provides. Portable audio tours can be especially informative, as can museum staff and volunteers—called *docents*—who often conduct tours.

**Do look at the work *before* you read about it.** Give yourself a chance to experience the work in a direct, unmediated way.

**Do read the labels** that museums provide for the artworks they display after you've looked at the work for a while. Almost all labels give the name of the artist (if known), the name and date of the work, its materials and tech-

nique (oil on canvas, for instance), and some information about how the museum acquired the work. Sometimes additional information is provided in a *wall text*, which might analyze the work's formal qualities, or provide some anecdotal or historical background.

**Don't take photographs**, unless cameras are explicitly allowed in the museum. The light created by flashbulbs can be especially damaging to paintings.

**Don't touch the artwork.** The more texture a work possesses, the more tempting it will be, but the oils in your skin can be extremely damaging to even stone and metal.

**Do turn off your cell phone** out of courtesy to others.

**Don't talk loudly** and be aware that others may be looking at the same piece you are. Try to avoid blocking their line of sight.

**Do enjoy yourself**, don't be afraid to laugh (art can be funny), and if you get tired, take a break.