

The Language of Art

People throughout the world speak many different languages. Spanish, Swahili, Japanese, Hindi, French, English, and Apache are just a few of the 3,000 different languages that are spoken. Each language has its own system of words and rules of grammar. To learn a new language, you need to learn new words and a new set of rules for putting those words together.

The language of visual art has its own system. All that you see in a work of art is made up of certain common elements. They are arranged according to basic principles. As you learn these basic elements and principles, you will learn the language of art. Being able to use the language of visual art will help you in many ways. It will increase your ability to understand, appreciate, and enjoy art. It will increase your ability to express yourself clearly when discussing art. It will even help you improve your ability to produce artworks.

The Elements of Art

A **symbol** is something that stands for, or represents, something else. In a spoken language, words are symbols. The word chair stands for a piece of furniture that has a seat, a back, legs, and sometimes arms. In the language of art, we use visual symbols to communicate ideas.

The *basic visual symbols in the language of art* are known as the **elements of art**. Just as there are basic kinds of words—such as nouns and verbs—there are basic kinds of art elements. These are *line, shape and form, space, color, value, and texture*. The elements are the visual building blocks that the artist puts together to create a work of art. No matter how a work is made, it will contain some or all of these elements.

When you look at a visual image, it is difficult to separate one element from another. For example, when you look at **Figure 1.16**, you see a shiny, round bowl outlined with a thin yellow line

Activity

Create a Symbol

Applying Your Skills. In visual art, symbols can be concrete representations of abstract ideas, such as a heart standing for love. Create a visual symbol that represents something important to you, such as an activity you participate in or an organization you belong to. Share your symbol with your classmates. Can they identify what it represents?

Computer Option. Design a visual symbol using a computer application. Choose from the tools and menus to represent this idea with line, shape, or color. Hold down the Shift key when making straight lines or restricting shapes to circles or squares. Title, save, print, and display your best example. Include a short explanation about your symbol.



◀ **FIGURE 1.16**
 Notice how the artist has used color and texture to direct the viewer's eye through this artwork. Look at the number of different surfaces she depicts. How many different textures can you identify? Although the shiny surfaces catch your attention, notice the matte, or dull, surfaces as well.

Janet I. Fish. *Raspberries and Goldfish*. 1981. Oil on canvas. 182.9 × 162.6 cm (72 × 64"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Purchase. The Cape Branch Foundation and Lila Acheson Wallace gifts, 1983. (1983.171) © Janet Fish/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

filled with bumpy, red raspberries. However, rather than seeing the elements of texture (shiny and bumpy), color (red), shape (round), and line (thin and yellow) separately, you see the bowl of raspberries as a whole. You visually "read" the elements together.

Sometimes the differences between the elements are not clear-cut. A line may be so wide that it looks like a shape, or an artist may manipulate light and dark values to indicate different surface textures. Look at the variety of textures Janet Fish has created in *Raspberries and Goldfish* (Figure 1.16).

When you first learned to read, you did not begin with a full-length novel. You learned by reading one word at a time. That is how you will start to read the language of art: one art element at a time.

The Principles of Art

After you have learned to recognize the elements of art, you will learn the ways in which the elements can be organized for different effects. When you learn a language, you learn the rules of grammar by which words are

organized into sentences. Without these rules, people would find it difficult to communicate.

Visual images are also organized according to rules. The *rules that govern how artists organize the elements of art* are called the **principles of art**. They also help artists organize the art elements for specific effects. The principles you will learn about are *rhythm, movement, balance, proportion, variety, emphasis, harmony, and unity*.

The Work of Art

In art, it is important to understand the three basic properties, or features, of an artwork. These are *subject, composition, and content*.

The Subject

The **subject** is *the image viewers can easily identify in a work of art*. The subject may be one person or many people. It may be a thing, such as a boat. It may be an event, such as a dance. What are the subjects in Gabriele Münter's painting, *Breakfast of the Birds* (**Figure 1.17**)?

Some artists choose to create nonobjective artwork. **Nonobjective art** is *art that has no recognizable subject matter* (Figure 1.13, page 14). In these types of works, the elements of art themselves become the subject matter.

The Composition

The second property of a work of art is the composition of the work. The



▲ **FIGURE 1.17** Gabriele Münter was one of the founders of modern German Abstract Expressionism. In 1911 she joined with other radical artists to form the group known as Der Blaue Reiter ("The Blue Rider") group. She stayed in Germany through World War II but was forced to work in secret during the Nazi era, when German Expressionism was outlawed. Since this was painted in 1934, it is one of her "secret" paintings.

Gabriele Münter. *Breakfast of the Birds*. 1934. Oil on board, 45.7 × 55.2 cm (18 × 21¾"). The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay.

composition is the way the principles of art are used to organize the elements of art. Notice how Münter has used the reds to separate indoors from outdoors, yet she ties the woman to the birds by using related colors. The woman is placed with her back toward the viewer, so that the viewer looks in the same direction as the woman, toward the birds. As you learn more about the elements and principles of art, you will discover how to control the composition of your artwork.

The Content

The third property of a work of art is the content. The **content** is the message the work communicates. The message may be an idea or a theme, such as patriotism or family togetherness. It may be an emotion, such as pride, love, or loneliness. Sometimes you know what the intention of an artist might have been when he or she created the work, therefore the meaning of the work may be clear. However, at other times, you may not be certain of what the work might mean, and you have to consider all possibilities. Many artists can paint the same subject, a woman looking out a window, but each painting may have a different message. What do you think is the content of Münter's painting?

The Credit Line

Look at Figure 1.17. The credit line appears beneath the caption. A **credit line** is a list of important facts about a work of art. Every artwork in this book has a credit line.

Most credit lines contain at list six facts. They are as follows:

- **Name** of the artist.
- **Title** of the work. This always appears in italics.

- **Year** the work was created. Sometimes, in the case of older works, "c." appears before the year. This is an abbreviation for *circa*, a Latin word meaning "about" or "around."
- **Medium** used by the artist. This is the material used to make art. If more than one medium is used, the credit line may read "mixed media."
- **Size** of the work. The first number is always the height, the second number is the width, and if the work is three-dimensional, the third number indicates the depth.
- **Location** of the work. The location names the gallery, museum, or collection in which the work is housed and the city, state, and country. The names of the donors may also be included.

Activity

Using Credit Line Information

Applying Your Skills. Who is the artist of the work in Figure 1.9 on page 11? What is the title of the painting by Vincent van Gogh (Figure 1.1, page 4)? Which work in this chapter was completed most recently? Which is the largest work in this chapter? Which works in this chapter are not housed in the United States?



Check Your Understanding

1. List the elements of art.
2. Name the principles of art.
3. How do subject and composition differ?
4. Name the six facts most credit lines include.