

# THEORY & PRACTICE

## Giving Form to Experience: A Visual Meditation on Cows

**DRAWN TO THE PURITY** and precision of geometric shapes and committed to the synthesis of art, architecture, and design, Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) played a principal role in the dissemination of the style and theories of the Dutch group known as De Stijl. De Stijl, meaning “the style,” is also commonly referred to as

Neo-Plasticism after van Doesburg’s 1919 treatise on the De Stijl movement titled “Principles of Neo-Plastic Art.”

Van Doesburg observed that even in works of art with subjects that seem to mimic the visible world, an artist may “neglect the laws of nature in favor of those of artistic creation” and use “natural

Drawing A is naturalistic; it represents the actual appearance of a cow.



**1.7A** *Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)* (1917). Pencil on paper, 4 5/8" × 6 3/4".

Drawing C is characterized by the dominant contrast of black and white shapes.

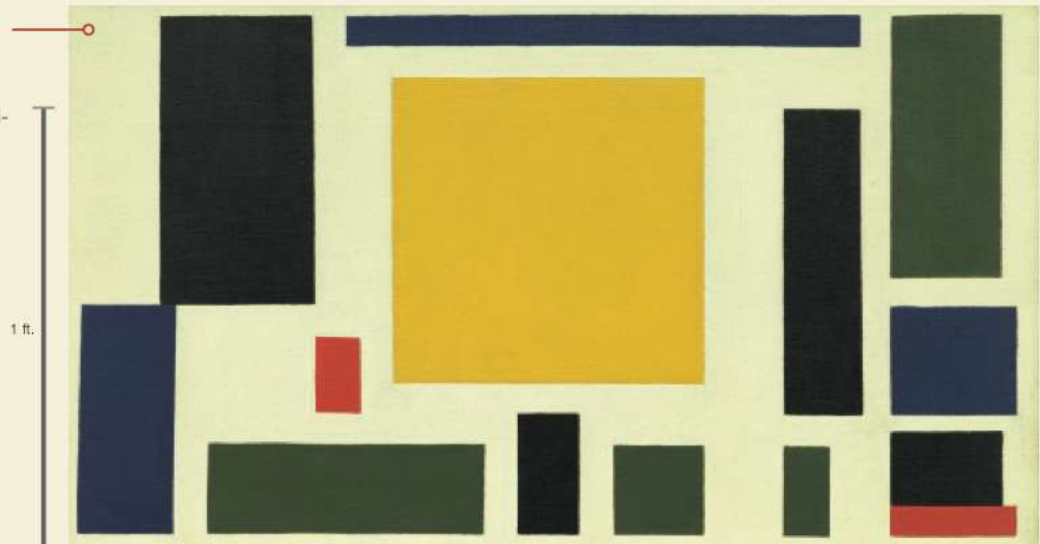


**1.7B** *Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)* (1917). Pencil on paper, 4 5/8" × 6 3/4".



**1.7C** *Study for Composition VIII (The Cow)* (c. 1917). Tempera, oil, and charcoal on paper, 15 5/8" × 22 3/4".

Drawing D depicts color and form in their purest state, creating a harmonious whole.



**1.7D** THEO VAN DOESBURG, *Composition VIII (The Cow)* (1917). Oil on canvas, 14 3/4" × 25". The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

forms only as a means of attaining [an] artistic aim"—a harmonious whole. In other words, conventional works of art purported to be naturalistic do not truly represent the visible reality of the natural world but, rather, are constructed to correspond to the artist's idea of an aesthetic composition.

From van Doesburg's perspective, "The visual artist can leave the repetition of stories, fairy-tales, etc., to poets and writers." Artists should aim, instead, "to give form to [their] aesthetic experience of reality, or one might also say, [the] creative experience of the fundamental essence of things." How would this "fundamental essence" be given form through artistic means? Van Doesburg said,

The only way in which visual art can be developed and deployed is by revaluing and purifying the formative means. Arms, legs, trees, and landscapes are not unequivocally painterly means. Painterly means are: colors, forms, lines, and planes.

Figure 1.7 shows the artist's series of four drawings together called *Study for Composition (The Cow)*. The style of drawing A would be described as naturalistic. That is, the artist's aim was to represent the appearance of a cow in nature. In drawing B, van Doesburg did not approach his subject "purely from the point of view of natural objective legibility." Rather, his aesthetic purpose superseded his concern for natural forms. Drawing C offers an interesting illustration of the principle that an artist should aim to "give form to his [or her] aesthetic experience of reality"—in this case, the dominant contrast of black and white shapes (aestheticized form) that signifies the breed (reality). Drawing D represents the culmination of the abstraction process and full realization of the principle of color and form in their purest state combining to create a harmonious whole.

< 1.7 THEO VAN DOESBURG, Studies for *The Cow* (1917).

Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–2000* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 282.

**CONNECTIONS** Make a short list of attributes that you would include in a portrait of yourself. Do you think that these would more fully represent who you are than would your facial features alone? How important would it be to you that a viewer be able to interpret these symbols?

an hourglass on his shoulder. Although these figures take center stage with their prominent placement and rosy-white flesh, the painting is packed with many more objects (a dove, a cluster of rose petals, theatrical masks) and characters whose features and actions invite speculation even as they defy conclusive interpretation. Can we enjoy the painting without being able to interpret the symbolism? Of course. But attempting to unlock it may lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the work.

The subject, form, and content of works of art become evident through the artist's use of the elements of art, design principles, mediums, techniques, and style. These are the basic ingredients, or components, of art.

## VISUAL ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

Line, shape, value, color, texture, space, and time and motion are the **visual elements** of art.

- **Line** is a basic—and perhaps the most essential—element of art. Line is the shortest distance between two points and is the thing created by the connection of these points. Line can also be perceived when many points are placed in proximity and adjacent to one another; it also can be implied in the space between two points even if they are not literally connected.
- **Shape**, in a two-dimensional work of art, is a flat area created when two ends of a line are connected and an area is enclosed. Shape can also describe an area of a composition that is created by other shapes surrounding it. Shapes are often made more distinguishable by adding color, pattern, or texture. In much three-dimensional art, such as sculpture or architecture, *shape* is the fundamental visual component.
- **Value** describes the relative lightness or darkness of an image. In terms of how an artist would use pigment, value refers to the broad and nuanced spectrum of grays between black and white.
- **Color** is the most complex element of art to define. Scientifically speaking, color is the thing that the human eye and brain perceive that is associated with descriptive words like *red*, or *blue*, or *yellow*. In the visual arts, *color theory* is a body of knowledge for artists that describes and categorizes color, its properties, behavior, and effects.



# PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

## The Visual Elements: *The Arnolfini Portrait*

**Line:** Intersections of vertical and horizontal lines provide a basic structure to the composition. Juxtapositions of straight, jagged, and curving lines create visual interest.

**Style:** Describing objects as the eye would (theoretically) see them in reality is called *realism*.

**Value:** The painting shows differences in darkness and light—in value. Light coming through the window illuminates the faces of the couple but, away from direct light, Arnolfini's legs are in shadow. Van Eyck adds white to create luminosity and black to suggest areas of relative darkness.

**Texture:** Contrasts in texture—fur, velvet, lace—are rendered in meticulous detail. You can touch them with your eyes.

1 ft.



▲ 1.8 JAN VAN EYCK, *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). Oil on wood, 32" × 23½". National Gallery, London, England.

**Shape:** The shape of Arnolfini's hat is distinct and memorable.

**Space:** The space or area of the room is so convincingly portrayed that it seems easily measurable.

**Technique:** Detail is rendered meticulously using very fine brushes.

**Time and motion:** The figures appear motionless, but time is recorded in the soft glow of evening light and in the moment when the couple join hands.

**Color:** The vivid contrast of red and green—complementary colors on the color wheel—keeps the eye from resting on one area of the composition for too long.

The medium is oil on wood.

- **Texture** is the surface character of materials as experienced by the senses of touch and sight. Texture can be inherent in the materials that an artist chooses or can be created through the manipulation of surfaces. It can also be implied in a work of art through the illusionistic rendering of the physical aspects of material (for example, a meticulous rendering of smooth silk fabric or the rough bark of a tree).
- **Space** describes the area around or within the components of a work of art—what Frank Lloyd Wright called “the breath of art.” In the visual arts we speak of open and closed space; shallow (two-dimensional) space; the actual (three-dimensional) space in which a piece exists; and the illusion of three-dimensional space on two-dimensional surfaces.
- **Time and motion** in art are connected: motion occurs over time and distance. Motion can be actual (components of a work of art actually change position) or implied (illusory).

**Principles of design** refer to the visual strategies that, along with the elements of art, are used to construct a work of art. They include unity and variety, emphasis and focal point, balance and rhythm, and scale and proportion.

- **Unity** is defined as a sense of oneness or cohesiveness. It has the effect of gathering the elements of a composition into a harmonious whole.
- **Variety** can be described as contrast and diversity. It is the counterpoint of unity. Juxtaposing various or contradictory elements in a composition adds interest, spontaneity, and the element of surprise.
- **Emphasis** in a composition describes an attention-grabbing aspect that directs the viewer's eye to a particular area, giving it visual or conceptual dominance.
- **Focal point** describes the main point of interest in a work of art—one that captures and holds a viewer's attention.
- **Balance** is the distribution of weight—actual or visual—in a work of art. It results in physical stability (as in a sculpture) or a sense of equilibrium among the visual units of a composition.
- **Rhythm** in art is the equivalent of a beat in music. It describes recurrent visual motifs (like patterns) and compositional accents, movement, and flow.
- **Scale** is defined as the size of something relative to the human dimensions of a viewer.
- **Proportion** is comparative size, that is, the size of elements or images within a work of art in relation to each other or to the whole.





▲ 1.9 JANINE ANTONI, *Gnaw* (detail) (1992). Three-part art installation: 600 lb of chocolate gnawed by the artist; 600 lb of lard, gnawed by the artist; display with 130 lipsticks made with pigment, beeswax, and chewed lard removed from the lard cube, and 27 heart-shaped packages for chocolate removed from the chocolate cube. Each cube: 24" × 24" × 24"; overall dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

## MEDIUMS AND TECHNIQUES

The materials and tools that artists use to create a work of art comprise its **medium**. Conventional mediums—or media, both plural—include oil paint on canvas, charcoal on paper, marble or bronze, and gelatin prints, to name a few. But any physical substance can be used as a medium—and often is—in modern and contemporary art; from scraps of newsprint and other found objects to human hair and body fluids, anything—including chocolate—is fair game (Fig. 1.9).

Artistic **techniques** are methods—the specific ways in which mediums are handled, controlled, and applied. Technique also implies skill or facility with tools of the trade that enable an artist to achieve a desired effect.

## STYLE

**Style** is the distinctive mode of expression that results from

**CONNECTIONS** Pop artist Andy Warhol asked, “How can you say one style [of art] is better than another?” Do you think he had a point?

➤ Warhol's *Four Marilyns* (Fig. 9.15)



the way in which an artist handles materials and the elements and principles of art and design. It is the “signature look” of an artist’s work—that something that enables us to differentiate between a Rubens and a Rembrandt, a Picasso and a Pollock. Style can be consistent with some artists over the length of their careers, or it can mark one, specific direction or phase of an artist’s creative output. “How can you say one style is better than another?” asked Pop artist Andy Warhol. “You ought to be able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you’ve given up something.” Style more generally refers to distinctive characteristics of art and architecture that are common to a culture, era, or to a group of artists working at the same time or toward a common artistic goal. Pierre Auguste Renoir’s paintings are recognizable, for example, by the pastel-color palette and the feathery brushstrokes that the artist typically used (Fig. 1.10) as a French Impressionist artist working in the nineteenth century.



▲ 1.10 PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR, *Tamaris, France* (1885). Oil on canvas, 18" × 21 1/2". Private collection.