The Elements of Art

The elements of art — color, line, shape, and texture — are the basic building blocks for visually expressing ideas and feelings. They make up the language artists use to convey meaning on a two- or three-dimensional surface or form. This teacher resource presents a painting from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art’s permanent collection as the basis for exploring the intentions and effects of an artist’s use of color.

“What color is in a picture, enthusiasm is in life.” — Vincent van Gogh
What Is Color?

Color is composed of various wavelengths of light, without which it remains invisible to the human eye. An object appears a particular color when it absorbs all but the wavelength of that color. In other words, a color is produced when its wavelength is reflected off a given surface. As an element of art, color has three distinct properties: hue, intensity, and value.

The large spectrum of colors can be organized into a color wheel consisting of primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. Primary colors — red, yellow, and blue — are those that are mixed to create all other hues. Secondary colors — orange, green, and purple — are produced by mixing equal quantities of two primary colors. Tertiary colors — red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-purple, and red-purple — are made by mixing unequal amounts of two primary colors; they fall between primary and secondary colors on the color wheel.

Additional relationships exist across the color wheel. Complementary colors are positioned opposite one another: red and green, orange and blue, and yellow and purple. When placed side by side, these colors accentuate each other by appearing brighter and more intense.

Glossary

Abstract Art
Artwork whose style departs from realistic representation. Abstract art does not depict people, places, and things as they actually look; it often expresses feelings and ideas through colors, lines, shapes, and textures.

Color Wheel
A circular diagram of colors that illustrates the relationships between primary, secondary, and tertiary colors.

Composition
An artwork itself, or the arrangement or placement of objects within an artwork.

Conservator
An individual who pairs scientific and art-historical research with technical training to preserve and restore the condition of art objects.

Elements of Art
The basic building blocks for creating an artwork and expressing ideas and feelings through visual symbols, such as color, line, shape, and texture; the language of artists.

Color: An element of art produced when a particular wavelength of light reflects off a surface. Color has three distinct properties: hue, intensity, and value. As part of the language of artists, color communicates various messages to the viewer, including mood, emotion, and symbolic meaning. It also assists in arranging a composition, identifying key elements of an image, and creating movement and depth, among other roles.
How Do Artists Use Color?

Artists use color in a variety of ways, including:

— to identify a person, place, or thing
— to arrange a **composition**
— to develop **perspective** and a sense of depth
— to create **movement**
— to provide a **focal point**
— to present a sense of **harmony** or contrast

In addition, artists often use color to convey emotion or to build **mood** in an artwork. The chart below outlines the expressive qualities and **symbolic** meanings of various colored pigments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Symbolic Meanings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>aggression, anger, danger, desire, love, passion, violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>energy, enthusiasm, warmth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>cheerfulness, happiness, optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>envy, good luck, growth, health, hope, life, nature, renewal, youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>calm, coolness, melancholy, peace, relaxation, tranquility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>royalty, wealth, wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>evil, death, mourning, mystery, power, sadness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The color wheel also organizes colors based on their emotive qualities. **Warm** colors — red, orange, and yellow — often communicate a sense of excitement and energy, as well as a feeling of happiness. On canvas, warm colors appear to project from, or jump out of, the picture plane. Conversely, **cool** colors — green, blue, and purple — generate feelings that range from sadness and pessimism to peace and calm. They tend to recede into space, creating depth.

**Primary:** Colors that are mixed to create all other hues: red, yellow, and blue.

**Secondary:** Colors produced by mixing equal quantities of two primary colors: orange, green, and purple.

**Tertiary:** Colors produced by mixing unequal amounts of two primary colors: red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-purple, and red-purple. They are located between primary and secondary colors on the color wheel.

**Complementary:** Colors that are opposites on the color wheel: red and green, orange and blue, yellow and purple. When complementary colors are placed side by side, they accentuate one another by appearing brighter and more intense.

**Warm:** Colors reminiscent of warmth: red, orange, and yellow. These colors can communicate a sense of excitement and energy, as well as a feeling of happiness. Warm colors appear to jump out of the picture plane.

**Cool:** Colors reminiscent of coolness: green, blue, and purple. These colors can communicate a range of feelings, from sadness and pessimism to peace and calm. Cool colors tend to recede into space, creating depth.

**Line:** The path of a dot as it moves through space. The outer edge of a shape is a line. Lines can be vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curvy, or jagged.
Artwork in Focus

Vincent van Gogh
Dutch, 1853–1890
Self-Portrait, c. 1887
Oil on canvas; 15 5/8 x 13 1/4 in.
Gift of Philip L. Goodwin in memory of his mother, Josephine S. Goodwin, 1954.189

Post-Impressionism

Hard on the heels of the Impressionists emerged a group of young painters eager to displace the short-term visual effects of their predecessors with an aesthetic of greater structure, expression, symbolism, and spirituality. Working independently and in disparate personal styles, artists such as Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat (1859–1891) developed more abstract means of conveying emotion through the exploitation of the formal elements of art. Employing simplified forms and pure colors, these innovators of the late nineteenth century dramatically influenced generations of artists and laid the foundation for the advent of modern art. Their formal categorization as “Post-Impressionists” came in 1910, when art critic Roger Fry (1866–1934) coined the term in an act of sheer historical convenience.

About the Artist — Vincent van Gogh
(Dutch, 1853–1890)

THE PARISIAN YEARS (1886–88)

After several years of formal training in the Netherlands and Belgium, Vincent van Gogh departed in 1886 for a two-year stay in Paris. This sojourn marked a period of intense introspection for the artist, who began

Shape: A two-dimensional area made by beginning and ending a line at the same point. Common geometric shapes include circles, triangles, squares, rectangles, and ovals. Organic shapes are reminiscent of things found in nature, like a puddle on the ground or a cloud in the sky.

Texture: In a two-dimensional artwork, an artist suggests texture (implied)—how an object might feel if it were real. In a three-dimensional work, texture refers to the way the surface actually feels. Common textures include rough or smooth, wet or dry, hard or soft, and bumpy or slippery.

Focal Point

The area or object in an artwork that attracts the viewer’s attention. Artists often use a focal point to draw the viewer’s eyes to an important part of the canvas, perhaps to deliver a message. Focal points can be created through the use of light, color, contrast, size, or location to make one element more noticeable than those around it. In this portrait, van Gogh employs complementary colors, visible brushstrokes, and implied light to center the viewer’s attention on his face.

Form

A shape that exists in three dimensions. For example, a circle is a flat shape with two dimensions (height and width), but a sphere is a form with three dimensions (height, width, and depth).
using portraiture as a means of self-examination. He soon presented himself in a variety of personae, ranging from peasant to artist, and sought to paint likenesses that would “appear as revelations to people in a hundred years’ time.” While self-exploration and artistic experimentation drove his obsession with creating self-portraits during the late 1880s, van Gogh’s lack of access to models and funds to secure resources undoubtedly increased his devotion to the genre.

Van Gogh’s paintings also underwent a significant stylistic transformation during his years in Paris. Having been inspired by French color theory through his exposure to avant-garde artists of the day — most notably the Impressionists — he began to incorporate newly observed techniques into his portraits. Departing from the characteristic somber earth tones of the Netherlandish manner, the artist adopted a lighter palette of vibrant colors that allowed him to showcase the visual power of complementary color contrasts. This shift toward vivid coloration, combined with his experimentation with broken brushstrokes and pointillist markings, formed a bolder, more expressive style for van Gogh that added a greater emotional intensity to his work and ultimately helped to redefine the modern portrait.

**About the Painting — Self-Portrait, c. 1887**

This is one in a series of roughly two dozen self-portraits van Gogh produced during his brief time in Paris. The short, varied, and highly visible brushstrokes, applied chiefly in the construction of the artist’s likeness, suggest the heavy influence of Impressionism on his technique and serve to fill the otherwise still canvas with a sense of spontaneity and motion. The contrasting smooth, dark background visually references the artistic tendencies of the Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), whom van Gogh greatly admired for his work in the genre of portraiture. Evolving from the heavy, dark tones of van Gogh’s Dutch period, this work exemplifies the artist’s movement toward a brighter, less-restrained manner of painting, in which brilliant color contrasts and the

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**Genre**

A category of subject matter in the traditional academic hierarchy of the arts, which includes history paintings (scenes of history, mythology, or religion), portraits, genre paintings (scenes of everyday life), landscapes, and still lifes.

**Harmony**

The effect of combining elements in an artwork to accentuate similarities and bind various compositional elements into a whole.

**Hue**

The name of a color, such as orange or blue.

**Impressionism**

An artistic movement prominent in France from 1867 to 1886 that sought to capture the realities of modern life and nature through the transient effects of light and color. Radically departing from the accepted subject matter and artistic styles of academic painting—including realistic depictions of mythological, religious, or historical themes—Impressionists painted glimpses or “impressions” of everyday subjects through visible, often loose, brushwork. Although van Gogh had been intrigued by French color theory, it was not until his arrival in Paris in February 1886 that he began to be influenced by the Impressionist movement.

**Intensity**

The brightness or dullness of a hue; the purity and strength of a color.
visibility of the artist’s hand symbolically speak to both the emotional and psychological states of the sitter.

**QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY**

Although this portrait appeared in the groundbreaking *International Exhibition of Modern Art* (commonly known as the Armory Show) in New York in 1913, its *provenance* came into question by the late twentieth century. The Wadsworth Atheneum relied upon *X-radiograph technology* to prove its authenticity. This effort revealed a series of brushstrokes that did not correspond with those on the surface of the portrait. Upon inverting the x-ray, a secondary image of a woman wearing a Dutch peasant cap seated behind a spinning wheel emerged from the incongruous brushstrokes. This image was consistent with works van Gogh had created the previous year (1886) using similar subject matter, which the artist referenced in a letter to his brother Theo dated July 1884.

Scholars long had known that van Gogh frequently reused his canvases by painting over existing pieces or, as in the case of this work, painting on the reverse of earlier canvases — a practice that stemmed from the artist’s limited financial resources and his dissatisfaction with many of his compositions. Such art-historical understandings, coupled with the newfound scientific and technological findings, led experts to confirm the painting’s authenticity.

**International Exhibition of Modern Art**

The first large exhibition of modern art in the United States, held at the 69th Regiment Armory building in New York City in 1913; commonly known as the Armory Show. Despite drawing significant criticism from the press and public alike for its lack of realistic paintings, the exhibition had a profound effect on American artists, who were heavily influenced by the experimental works of modern European artists on display.

**Modern Art**

A term associated with art produced from roughly the 1860s to the 1970s. Modern art favored abstraction and experimentation with the materials and functions of art, and it rejected academic painting, such as realistic narrative compositions. Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is credited with being the founder of modern art.

**Mood**

The feeling or emotion conveyed by an artwork. Artists can create mood in portraits through the use of specific colors, lines, shapes, textures, and brushstrokes, as well as by depicting certain facial expressions and body language. Van Gogh was known to create mood in his compositions through the strategic combination of vibrant colors, color contrasts, and energetic brushstrokes.

**Movement**

A sense of motion created by the arrangement of the elements of art or objects in an artwork.
Classroom Activities

Questions for Guided Looking

Investigate this artwork through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit objective and descriptive observations, then move toward more subjective and abstract questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the painting. Be sure that students cite visual evidence for their responses. Encourage them to explore the painting visually before you reveal any information about it.

Adapt the following questions, as needed, to your students’ level of comprehension:

- What do you notice about this self-portrait? Look specifically at how the artist uses the following elements of art: color, line, and texture.

- How does van Gogh present himself in this self-portrait? What does he want you to know about him? How do you think the artist felt about himself as he created his self-portrait?

- What does the artist’s use of color and line suggest about his mood and/or personality? What do they tell us about what he might be thinking or feeling?

- Describe the artist’s brushwork. How many different shapes and sizes of brushstrokes can you find? How do they change across the painting, and to what effect? What does their appearance indicate about the artist’s state of mind?

- How would you feel if you met this individual? How would you approach him? If he were to speak, what would he say? What would you say in return?

- Why might artists choose to paint themselves? Why do you think van Gogh painted this self-portrait?

Palette
A range of colors used in a particular painting or characteristic of a specific artist. Also, a board or other surface on which an artist mixes paints.

Perspective
A technique used by artists to create the illusion of space on a two-dimensional surface.

Pointillism
A method of painting developed in France during the 1880s in which a multitude of tiny, colored dots are applied strategically to a canvas so that from a distance they blend together to form other hues. Artist Georges Seurat (1859–1891) developed this technique in 1886.

Portraiture
A visual representation of a person. Artists use the elements of art combined with body language, facial expressions, costumes, props, and setting to convey the identity and personality of the sitter, whether real or fabricated.

Provenance
The source or ownership history of an artwork, which often confirms the work’s authenticity.

Realistic Art
Artwork that depicts people, places, and things as they look in real life. Realistic art is the opposite of abstract art and if often referred to as representational.
**Excerpts from Vincent van Gogh's Letters**

Van Gogh's extensive correspondence — estimated to comprise more than 800 letters — gives the contemporary reader valuable access to the artist's creative process and his prophetic art theories. Primarily addressed to his younger brother Theo, an art dealer with whom he had a very close relationship, these letters shed light on Van Gogh's artistic achievements, while underscoring his need to maintain good relations with the man who supported him financially throughout his life.

Ask students to think about how the following excerpts from van Gogh's letters relate to what they see in the painting. The excerpted texts also can function as essay prompts for older students.

“I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams . . . I want to put my appreciation, the love I have for him, into the picture . . . But the picture is not yet finished. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I even get to orange tones, chromes, and pale citron-yellow. Behind the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall . . . I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest intense blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky.” (1888)

“The painted portrait is a thing which is felt.” (1889)

“How much expression and passion there is in our present-day head in comparison with the old calm portraits, and how much longing and crying out. Sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent, that is how many portraits ought to be done.” (1890)

“What impassions me most is the portrait, the modern portrait . . . I should like to do portraits which will appear as revelations to people in a hundred years’ time . . . I am trying to achieve this not by photographic likeness but by rendering our impassioned expressions, by using our modern knowledge of and appreciation of color as a means of rendering and exalting character.” (1890)

**Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669)**

A Dutch painter considered by many to be one of Europe's greatest artists, and the most important in the history of his native country. Rembrandt's creative triumphs are exemplified in his portraits of his contemporaries, as well as in his self-portraits, where he was known to create a sense of empathy for the human condition. Van Gogh particularly admired Rembrandt's work, and also sought to portray himself without vanity and with utmost sincerity.

**Saturation**

A color's purity of hue.

**Self-Portrait**

A portrait in which an artist uses herself or himself as the subject. Van Gogh produced more than two dozen self-portraits during his two-year stay in Paris from 1886 to 1888.

**Sitter**

The person depicted in a portrait.

**Symbol**

A form, image, subject, or basic compositional element whose meaning extends beyond its usual association. For example, the Post-Impressionists often used the symbolic properties of color to convey specific messages or feelings to their audiences.

**Three-dimensional**

Having height, width, and depth. Sculptures are examples of three-dimensional artworks.
Writing Activities

Many of the skills acquired through the process of carefully looking at artworks are those needed by thoughtful writers. In fact, observation forms the foundation of good writing. Before beginning these activities, be sure to take time to look at the painting with the students. Then use the exercises below to explore how art can serve as a catalyst for the development of students’ writing skills.

INTERNAL MONOLOGUE

An internal monologue is a passage of writing that presents a character’s inner thoughts and feelings, often taking on a reflective or philosophical tone. Depending on the state of mind of the individual, this prose may be profound and insightful, complex and calculated, or fragmented and superficial. Ask each student to write an internal monologue for van Gogh that reflects his emotional and psychological states as portrayed in the portrait. The students should consider the artist’s use of color, his brushwork, and the sitter’s facial expression. To challenge older students, review key episodes in the artist’s life — particularly his time spent in Paris — prior to writing, and prompt them to consider these experiences when crafting their responses (see About the Artist).

LETTER TO A FRIEND

Van Gogh frequently analyzed his paintings in letters to his brother Theo, using rich and compelling details (see Excerpts from Vincent van Gogh’s Letters). Ask each student to follow van Gogh’s example by creating a self-portrait and then writing a letter to a friend or close family member that accurately describes their likeness. Students should ponder the following questions when drafting their letters:

- How have I used the elements of art to portray myself?
- What does this self-portrait reveal about my identity?
- Does my self-portrait best capture how I view myself?
- What aspects of the artwork would I change to represent myself more truthfully?

Tone

The quality of color based on its intensity, temperature [use of warm and cool colors], and saturation.

Two-dimensional

Flat; having height and width but no depth. Paintings and photographs are examples of two-dimensional artworks.

Value

The lightness or darkness of a hue. The more white added to a color, the lighter the value (tint). Darker values are created by the addition of black (shade).

X-radiograph Technology

A tool often used by museum conservators to expose brushstrokes hidden beneath the visible image. The x-ray image can reveal preliminary lines and figures or, as in the case of van Gogh’s portrait, entirely different paintings. This form of x-ray technology is similar to that used in the medical field. A piece of film is placed behind a painting, and x-rays are projected through the painting onto the film. Pigments made of dense elements, such as lead white, block the rays from reaching the film, creating a white-on-black image. Since dark pigments tend to be less dense than lead white, the X-radiograph is darker where they occur. The x-rays of van Gogh’s portrait revealed highlights more prominently than shadows.
The Artist’s Hand

The writing exercises have asked students to explore van Gogh’s painting primarily with their eyes. Now is their chance to respond with their hands.

EMOTIVE SELF-PORTRAITS

“It’s . . . color that suggests ardor, temperament, any kind of emotion.” Vincent van Gogh, 1888

A hallmark of van Gogh's body of work is his use of color as a form of expression. Through careful selection of specific hues, his portraits visually communicated the sitter's state of mind in order to evoke certain feelings in viewers. Begin this activity by reviewing the chart of expressive qualities and symbolic meanings of colors (see How Do Artists Use Color?). Then ask each student to think of a word or phrase that best describes his or her current mood. Using mirrors, students will draw self-portraits, being mindful of their clothing, postures, body language, setting, and facial expressions. Next, ask them to overlay their drawings with colors that express their moods as previously defined. While finalizing their artistic choices, students should consider what unique message(s) and/or feelings their uses of color convey to the viewer. To extend this experience, provide students with examples of van Gogh's self-portraits in a range of hues to compare with their own work, or have several students compare self-portraits with each other.

Resources for Deeper Exploration

BOOK

Select books are in the museum’s library and available for reference. Call (860) 838-4115 for more information.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON COLOR


COLOR


POST-IMPRESSIONISM


THE ELEMENTS OF ART


VINCENT VAN GOGH

The Elements of Art: Color

Web
COLOR
http://thevirtualinstructor.com/Color.html
http://www.artyfactory.com/color_theory/color_theory.htm
http://www.colormatters.com/color-and-design/basic-color-theory
http://www.incredibleart.org/lessons/middle/color2.htm

POST-IMPRESSIONISM
http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Impressionism/index
http://www.artyfactory.com/art_appreciation/art_movements/post_impressionism.htm
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/poim/hd_poim.htm

THE ELEMENTS OF ART
http://art.pppst.com/elements.html
http://www.artsconnected.org/toolkit/explore.cfm
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/elements_art.pdf
http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html
http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/teachers/lessons-activities/elements-of-art.html

VINCENT VAN GOGH
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gogh/hd_gogh.htm
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/arts/30iht-vangogh30.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/arts/international/becoming-vincent-van-gogh-the-paris-years.html
http://www.vangoghgallery.com/
http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/
http://www.vangoghgallery.nl/vgm/index.jsp

References

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Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853–1890

Self-Portrait, c. 1887

Oil on canvas; 15 5/8 x 13 3/4 in. Gift of Philip L. Goodwin in memory of his mother, Josephine S. Goodwin, 1954.189

From the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT