

What are Art Fundamentals and Why Study Them?

Art Principle Postulate: There are concepts that are foundational to our understanding and experience of making and viewing art. I learned in high school—and still see the same list shared today—that there are primary elements of art: line, shape, form, value, space, texture, color. Plus, there are elements of design that describe how those art elements are composed: unity, balance, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, pattern, proportion. And there are important themes explaining how we create and perceive, like composition, color theory, historical and cultural context, and storytelling basics; each with many component concepts.

These concepts are tools to for analyzing the art and images you see around you, giving you the framework to think through why you do or don't like a piece of art and to form ideas about what the artist was trying to convey. And just as importantly, they provide the key for improving your own work. Without a system and tools for evaluating what we see, how can someone know if their own artwork is complete or will have the effect they want it to? Without a study of essential concepts, it's difficult to examine and express why art makes one feel the way it does, which is key for being able to create impactful, powerful work.

Even artists that don't consciously scrutinize each choice in terms of executing on these fundamentals, are likely still using these principles intuitively. Similar to when one finds they have driven their car home, but can't remember every stop and turn along the way.

Familiarity with these first principles, structures, tropes, and significant concepts can take away the barriers that lead people to feel confused or isolated by art, the belief that they "just don't get it" and never will. This knowledge and these skills are critical for being able to interpret and deeply engage in art. Having a common language allows you to communicate about and critique works of art made by you and other artists. Critique is an incredibly powerful way to push your art forward if you know how to receive, digest, and participate in it.

Obviously, art can resonate with us, evoke an emotional response or a feeling in the gut, even if we haven't read about compositional framing, color interaction, and line quality. And, the answers to "what is art" and "is this art good" remain subjective, regardless of education. But there are a (large!) set of concepts that are inherently important for how we perceive, discuss, and make art.