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Proportion examples in art

I'm continuing with my Elements and Principles of art series on the blog today focusing on scale and one of the principles of design proportion. Scale and proportion in art are closely related and both deal with the size and the relationship of things to other things. Here are some artworks you can use to teach scale and proportion in art for your elements and principles of art lessons. I will add to this list when I find more, so this is a good one to pin or bookmark!
The horizontal images do not contain all of the examples. This pack of printables was designed to work in a variety of ways in your classroom when teaching the elements and principles of art. You can print and hang in your classroom as posters/anchor charts or you can cut each element and principle of art in its own individual card to use as a lesson manipulative.
Caravaggio, Still Life with Fruit, ca. 1603
Sir John Everett Millais, The Blind Girl, 1854-56
André Derain, Portrait of a Man with a Newspaper, 1911-1914
Songye people, Democratic Republic of Congo, Female Figure, late 1800s-early 1900s
Fernando Botero, Dancing in Colombia, 1980
Dorothea Tanning, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, 1943
Saul Steinberg, The Fisherman
Giacometti, Man Pointing, 1947
Prehistoric, Nude Woman (Venus of Willendorf), c. 28,000-25,000 B.C.E (On ACTK; 5 Artworks to Promote Introspection)
Parmigianino, Madonna with the Long Neck, 1535-4
Jeff Jordan, Curiosity, 2009
Francisco Goya, The Colossus, c. 1808
René Magritte, Les valeurs personnelles (Personal Values), 1952
Hans Eworth, Allegorical Portrait of Sir John Luttrell, 1550N.C. Wyeth, The Giant, 1923
Ancient Egypt, Nebamun Hunting in the Marshes, ca. 1350 B.C.E.
Tanjore style painting from the late 19th century showing the ten Sikh, Gurus, Bhai Bala, and Bhai Mardana
Sumer, the Standard of Ur, about 2600-2400 B.C.E.
Palette of King Narmer, from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E.
Benin Plaques, 16th-17th century
Ron Mueck, A Boy, 2005
Ron Mueck, A Girl, 2006
Georgia O’Keeffe, Oriental Poppies, 1928
The Colossus of Constantine, c. 312-15
Nazca Earth Drawings
Chuck Close, Mark, 1978-79
Henry Beacon and Daniel Chester French, Lincoln Memorial, 1914-22
Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty, 1970
Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Spoonbridge and Cherry, 1985-88
There you have it! The best scale and proportion in art examples for your elements and principles of art lessons. Want more elements and principles of art teacher resources? Check out the below posts.
We have all seen paintings that appear perfect in form and shape, everything is in proportion; the figures are in relation to each other and their surroundings, as well as their body parts, are in relation to their bodies. When there is proportion in art, there is a harmony or unity of the whole, but conversely, when things appear out of proportion a painting seems strange. In this article, we will discuss what is proportion in art and provide several accompanying examples.
What Is Proportion in Art?
If we look at the word “proportion”, according to the dictionary, it means a “harmonious relation of parts to each other or to the whole” and “proper or equal share”. What this definition tells us is that proportion works in ratios, where one part is in relation to the other. So, what does proportion mean in art? To answer this question, we would explore how different parts in a visual composition share “proper” size, so to say, with each other to create a “harmonious” relationship between them and ultimately a harmonious visual composition.
Still Life with Fruit (c. 1603) by Caravaggio; Caravaggio, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
However, sometimes the different parts in a visual composition do not share the “proper” size between one another and it appears out of proportion. In art, this can either be intentional or as a lack of skill or training. Proportion in art is one of the principles of art, of which there are several, namely, balance, unity, harmony, variety, rhythm, movement, repetition/pattern, scale, and proportion. The principles of art are used as guidelines with the elements of art, which make a visual composition. These are color, value, shape, form, line, texture, and space. The Difference Between Scale and Proportion in Art
You may have noticed that scale is also amongst the principles of art; scale and proportion in art can cause confusion if it is not understood properly. It is important to remember the differences between the two when creating artwork or analyzing an artwork. Additionally, scale and proportion in art also work together. The Hunters in the Snow (1565) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder; Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
We already have a basic understanding of what proportion means, which is the relationship between the size of parts within a composition, specifically in terms of their dimensions; these parts can be anything from an object to a person’s body parts or facial features. Scale refers to the size of objects and their relationship with each other in a composition. We can think of proportion as zooming in on or focusing more on the intricacies between the relationship of the sizes of parts in a visual composition, and scale provides a broader indication of the relationship of size between the parts when they appear as their whole.
Fukagawa Susaki and Jumantsubo (1857) by Utagawa Hiroshige, from the series One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, no. 107, part 4; Winter; Utagawa Hiroshige, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
The Types of Proportion in Art
There are several types of proportion in art, namely, altered, hierarchical, out of proportion, and standard proportion. Below we explain each one with accompanying examples.
Standard Proportion
Standard proportion in art means that accurate or correct proportions are utilized for the subject matter. This applies to facial and body features as well as the general congruency of proportion between parts in the art composition that would suggest normal proportion. Paris Street, Rainy Day (1877) by Gustave Caillebotte; Gustave Caillebotte, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
However, according to some art sources, it is important to note the questions around this in terms of standardizing facial and bodily features, which would be an impossible task as no body would measure the same. We will find these attempts from Renaissance artists in particular, who studied human anatomy, like Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo. One standard proportion in art example includes the famous marble sculpture by Michelangelo titled David (1501-1504). Here, we see a 17-foot sculpture of the Biblical figure David, however, regardless of his large scale, he is in seemingly perfect proportion. David (1501-1504) by Michelangelo, Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia; Jörg Bittner Unna, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons
Altered Proportion
Altered proportion in art refers to an artwork where the proportion has been changed, distorted, or altered for specific reasons; this is also called “exaggerated” proportion by some. This type of proportion is utilized to tell a story, have a specific meaning or message, or emphasize certain aspects to create an effect. Altered proportion can come in all different shapes and sizes. Some of the altered proportion in art examples include those from Cubist Pablo Picasso and his Mother and Child (1921). Here, we see the exaggerated features in the mother’s figure; not only are her arms quite large and her head smaller, but her facial features have an angularity. Some describe this painting as having a “solidity” and “sculptural” quality, which emphasizes the mother’s role as a safe and stable figure for the child. This also ties in with the altered proportion of the female figure throughout art history, where female body parts are exaggerated to emphasize the idea of fertility or motherhood. A famous example of this is the Venus of Willendorf (c. 25,000 BCE) limestone figurine. Venus of Willendorf figurine (c. 25,000 BCE), seen from all four sides; Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons
Hierarchical Proportion
Hierarchical proportion in art focuses on the importance of the subject matter, in other words, the hierarchy of figures in a composition to denote their status or level of power or importance in a monarchy or social structure. This is common in art from ancient cultures like Egypt, Sumer, India, and others. A hierarchical proportion in art example includes the Egyptian Palette of King Narmer (c. 3000-2920 BCE), which depicts the larger-sized figure of the pharaoh in the center, surrounded by smaller objects and figures. Both sides of the Narmer Palette (c. 3100 BC), Egyptian Museum, Cairo, Unknown, perhaps more than one, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Another example, also Egyptian, includes Nebamun fowling in the marshes (c. 1350), which depicts the figure of Nebamun standing on a boat with his wife and daughter, who are depicted as smaller figures. This is from the Nebamun Tomb-chapel, which depicts the dead figure in the afterlife as happy and vibrant. His larger figure presides over the composition emphasizing his stature. Nebamun fowling in the marshes (c. 1350); British Museum, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Out of Proportion
Out of proportion in art simply refers to the subject matter, be it figures or objects, that are not in proper proportional relation to one another. For example, a figure’s head could be the size of an apple in relation to the rest of the body, which appears larger. Out of proportion in art can be interpreted in two ways. Namely, it can result from an artwork that is intentionally meant to be out of proportion to emphasize an idea, like the altered proportion we discussed above, or it is done by “accident”, which means that the artist did not convey the correct measured proportions in the composition. Madonna and Child with Angels, known as the “Madonna with the Long Neck” (1534-1540) by Parmigianino; Parmigianino, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
Some of the out-of-proportion in art examples include the Surrealist work by René Magritte, Personal Values (1952). Here we see a room with everyday objects like a comb, a wine glass, matchstick, shaving cream foaming brush, soap, a bed, a cupboard, and rugs. Magritte changes our perspectives of these items by depicting them disproportionately, mostly too large for how we know them to be. Another Surrealist artwork includes The Elephants (1949) by Salvador Dalí, which depicts two elephants with elongated legs that appear wholly out of proportion to their bodies. This painting is believed to symbolize ideas of weight and power, as is characteristic of elephants, and weightlessness due to their thin and gangling legs. Summary of Proportion in Art
Type of proportion in Art
Characteristic Art Example
Standard proportion
Normal or accurate proportion of parts in a visual composition. This will be visually evident when viewing an artwork.
David (1501 - 1504) by Michelangelo
Altered proportion
To emphasize an idea or meaning, parts of the subject matter will intentionally be altered in size or shape.
Mother and Child (1921) by Pablo Picasso
Hierarchical proportion
To visually indicate the importance of some figures or objects, otherwise, the hierarchy, whether it is familial, social, or in a monarchy, in an art composition.
Nebamun fowling in the marshes (c. 1350)
Out of proportion
When the subject matter of a visual composition is not in proportional relation to one another. Usually done accidentally or purposefully.
The Elephants (1949) by Salvador Dalí
Principles of Art - Further Readings
In this article, we explored that proportion is part of the several principles of art that work alongside the elements of art. Additionally, as one of the principles of art, proportion has different types that can be used as techniques for different artistic purposes. Proportion in art has significant versatility and can be applied in numerous ways to make artwork appear either out of this world or proportionally precise. Proportion enables artists to visually portray and convey messages or ideas and emphasize the primary subject matter. Take a look at our proportion art webstory here!
Frequently Asked Questions
What Does Proportion Mean in Art?
As one of the principles of art, proportion refers to how parts of an artistic composition, whether it’s a human figure or a face, or other objects that make up the subject matter, relate to each other in size, referring to its dimensions. What Are the Types of Proportion in Art?
There are four primary types of proportion in art, namely, standard proportion, which is the accurate or normal proportion between parts; the altered proportion in which the proportion is altered or changed for different reasons; the hierarchical proportion is when the primary figure or object is usually larger than the rest to indicate its hierarchical status, lastly, out of proportion, which refers to figures or object that are visibly not in proportional relation, this is also usually intentional or accidental. What Is the Difference Between Scale and Proportion in Art?
The difference between scale and proportion in art is that proportion refers to the relation between parts of a whole, and scale refers to the size of figures or objects in a composition. These figures or objects could be small or large in scale, but still be in proportion. Alicia du Plessis is a multidisciplinary writer. She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Art History and Classical Civilization, as well as two Honors, namely, in Art History and Education and Development, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. For her main Honors project in Art History, she explored perceptions of the San Bushmen’s identity and the concept of the “Other”. She has also looked at the use of photography in art and how it has been used to portray people’s lives. Alicia’s other areas of interest in Art History include the process of writing about Art History and how to analyze paintings. Some of her favorite art movements include Impressionism and German Expressionism. She is yet to complete her Masters in Art History (she would like to do this abroad in Europe) having given it some time to first develop more professional experience with the interest to one day lecture it too. Alicia has been working for artincontext.com since 2021 as an author and art history expert. She has specialized in painting analysis and is covering most of our painting analysis. Learn more about Alicia du Plessis and the Art in Context Team. Proportion is often confused with other principles of art. To distinguish it from other art principles, let’s take a look at the proportion definition in art. In art, proportion refers to the relationship between the different sized components within one whole composition. Proportion can be used to make a composition appear more realistic or more stylized depending on the type of proportion used. Proportion does not refer to the overall size of a composition (scale), but rather the size of elements within the composition in relation to each other. Standard Proportion
Altered Proportion
Hierarchical Proportion
Out of Proportion
In art, scale refers to the size of one whole object in relation to another whole object. Artists use large scale art and small scale art to create different effects on a viewer through their perception of size. Scale, while often confused with proportion, is different. Human beings have an innate perception of size. Because human beings often use themselves as a baseline of comparison, artists use scale to create different effects through their art. Proportion, on the other hand, is the relationship of size between various components within one whole object. Here’s a video that explains these concepts nicely. A great example of this is Mount Rushmore. While all of the heads within the composition of the sculpture are in standard proportion to each other, the scale of the sculpture is large when compared to the viewer. Scale and proportion often work together within a work of art. However, it’s important to understand the differences between the two. Proportion meaning in art cannot be distinguished by one type. It can be used purposely to create specific effects within a work art. However, it can also be used incorrectly and lead to unintentional effects. Let’s dive into the different types of proportions that exist within art. Standard Proportion
Standard proportion refers to proportions that are created correctly when compared to proportions that exist within reality. Standard proportion is important for artists looking to create realistic compositions. Take, for example, the “Vitruvian Man” by Leonard Da Vinci. Da Vinci’s focus on standard proportion within the illustration is based on anatomical proportions from physical reality. Altered proportion artwork refers to the manipulation of proportion to achieve a specific visual effect. Altered proportion is often used intentionally, typically to create more stylized and expressive compositions. Hierarchical proportion is the intentional use of proportion to depict a hierarchy within a composition. Hierarchical proportion denotes levels of power, status, or importance based on the proportions the artist chooses. The hierarchy created through proportions can be used to depict social classes, tell a story, or document historical facts visually. Out of proportion entails one or more elements of a subject to be too large or too small in proportion to the rest of the subject. The extent to which something is out of proportion depends on the artist’s choices. Sometimes artists create a severely out of proportion subject as a means of stylistic exaggeration. An artist has many tools at their disposal that they utilize in a way that contributes to their own style. Proportion is one of these tools that can be used in various ways to shape how their art is perceived by a viewer and the story or emotion it creates within them. Up Next
What is Scale in Art?
Like proportion, scale utilizes the manipulation of size within art to create a specific composition. While we briefly touched on scale in this article, we take a deeper dive into the compositional technique in our next article. Up Next: Scale in Art –