

## Why is the Sky Yellow? Artists' Choices

### Tour Description

How does an artist's choice of color affect the work created? See how artists use colors, lines, textures, or shapes in countless variations to create unique works of art. Focus on one or more elements while exploring a wide range of media, cultures, and time periods.

### Tour Objective

The purpose of this tour is to guide visitors to **see** how different artists have used the same visual elements in countless variations to create unique works of art. It examines how the artist's choices affect the viewer's experience of the work.

### Means

The emphasis of this tour is on visual elements rather than cultural context; however, artists' choices may be influenced in some ways by the culture. Depending on the group, include an age-appropriate range of media, cultures, and time periods.

Point out that visual elements are not just present in a museum. They are all around us in nature and in our homes. Like artists, we all think about the visual elements everyday as we select our clothes or decorate our rooms.

As you view specific visual elements cross-culturally, **be sensitive to the aesthetic of a culture**. In other words, don't view everything through a western aesthetic. For example, explain that color may represent different things in the art of a Lakota, Nigerian, or French artist, as well as in different time periods.

The object choices for this tour are unlimited. What follows addresses more specifically how to approach the tour for different age groups.

### Grades 1-2

Choose pictures filled with storytelling potential and details that the children will see as relevant to their lives. They will be most familiar with looking for shapes and colors based on what they are learning in school. You may ask them to look for lines that are obvious (for example, Klee's *Howling Dog*, 1928, 56.42). They will not usually see implied lines and edges of objects as lines.

### Grades 3-4

Expand the tour to discuss the expressive properties of the visual elements. Explore art works that show how artists often use the visual elements to express feelings and other intangible or abstract aspects of our world. Include objects that use colors that are expressive rather than descriptive (for example, Kirchner's *View of Dresden*, 1926, 64.23). Show how abstract shapes can help us think differently about a subject.

**Grades 5-6**

Students of this age group love to figure things out for themselves.

**Why does it look like that?**

Before creating a work of art, an artist must decide which materials to use—stone, clay, metal, paint, etc. The choice of material dramatically affects how the finished object looks and how we respond to it. As artists give form to the material, they make choices regarding color, shape, size, line, texture, and other compositional principles. Think about the following aspects:

- How does the artist's choice of material affect the way the object looks?
- What process was involved in making the object? Was it carved, painted, cast, stitched, or put together?
- Which of the visual elements is most important in the object? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How would the piece appear differently if the artist's choices were different?
  - What if Brancusi's *Yellow Bird* (1919, 55.39) were made of wood or marble?
  - What if Stella had used only two colors of paint for Variation II (1969, 69.132)?
  - What if Calder's mobile, *Ahab* (1953, 83.77), didn't move?
  - What if Nick Cave used other materials for his *Soundsuit* (2010, 2011.12a,b)? Then show examples of some other *Soundsuits* and discuss the impact of the different materials.

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**Middle School/  
High School**

An interesting approach for this age group is to look at **style**. The manner in which an artist uses the visual elements creates a **style**. In groups of students, you will see distinct styles from those with designer jeans to green hair, tattoos, and nose rings. Have them think about how style relates to one's experiences (music, current events, social activities, sports, etc.).

**Creating a Style**

Begin with a discussion of the students' styles:

- How do individuals show their style? (Clothes, hair, speech, behavior.)  
What is your individual style?
- How did you decide what to wear today?
- How do you think style can identify someone as an individual or as part of a group?

Now examine works of art to determine how individual artists use visual elements to create their own styles:

- What characterizes a work by Matisse or Picasso?
- What are their "styles"?

The Modernism gallery (379) is a good place to look at various design styles and discuss elements such as shape and texture or principles such as balance and rhythm/pattern.

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**Adults**

Many adults may not have gone beyond the subject matter to investigate the visual elements in a work of art. You could explore the elements through themes such as:

**Artist's Vocabulary**

Just as a writer uses words to create a story, the artist has a visual vocabulary through which he/she creates a work of art.

**Time and Place: Changing Attitudes toward Art**

How does time affect how artists employ the visual elements and the way we see them? For example, you might explore the use of space over several time periods.

In any tour, consider a few to several of the following visual elements and principles of design. The younger the group, the fewer the concepts to explore. These lists will vary slightly among various textbooks.

**Visual Elements**

Color  
Value  
Line  
Texture  
Shape and form  
Space

**Principles**

Balance  
Emphasis/Contrast  
Harmony/Unity  
Variety  
Gradation  
Movement  
Rhythm/Pattern  
Proportion

A good source for more information:

Duane Preble, Sarah Preble, and Patrick L. Frank. *Prebles' Artforms* (several editions exist)