

The Expressive Qualities of Line

Vocabulary

contour line
gesture
calligraphy

Depending on its direction, a line can express different ideas or feelings. This is why line is an important element in the language of art. Vertical lines can make certain objects look taller. For example, vertical lines on wall-paper can make low ceilings seem higher. Clothing designers use vertical lines to make short people look taller and heavy people look thinner.

Line Movement

Vertical lines are static, or inactive. They appear to be at rest. For this reason, they express stability. Artists use them to show dignity, poise, stiffness, and formality, as in Figure 4.14 on page 75.

Horizontal lines are also static. They express feelings of peace, rest, quiet, and stability, as in **Figure 4.16**. They give a feeling of permanence or solidarity. Because we stand on solid horizontal ground, horizontal lines make us feel content, relaxed, and calm.



▲ **FIGURE 4.16** Strong horizontal lines—such as the bands of black clouds, the horizon, and the railroad tracks—create a feeling of calm in this sunset scene. How do the verticals in this scene affect the meaning of the work?

Edward Hopper. *Railroad Sunset*. 1929. Oil on canvas. 71.8 × 121.3 cm (28¹/₄ × 47³/₄”). Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York. Josephine N. Hopper Bequest.



▲ **FIGURE 4.17** Notice the many different kinds of curves the artist used to create this luxurious gateway. Identify any straight lines. Follow them through the work. Do they stay straight? Can you think of adjectives to describe the many types of curves used in the artwork?

Albert Raymond Paley. *Portal Gates*. 1974. Forged steel, brass, copper, and bronze. 230.5 × 182.9 × 10.2 cm (90³/₄ × 72 × 4"). Renwick Gallery, The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Because curved lines change direction, they express activity. How much activity they express depends on the type and direction of the curve. The less active the curve, the calmer the feeling. Spiral curves wind around a central point. They are hypnotic and draw the eye to their center. Curved lines are often used in decorative arts to suggest a feeling of luxury, as in **Figure 4.17**.

Diagonal lines express instability, tension, activity, and excitement, as shown in **Figure 4.18**. Since they can appear to be either falling or rising, they sometimes make a viewer feel uncomfortable. Artists use them to add tension or to create an exciting mood. However, when two diagonals meet and seem to support each other, as in the roof of a house, they appear more stable.

Zigzag lines create confusion. They are extremely active and may evoke feelings of excitement (**Figure 4.19**, page 80) and nervousness. The degree of intensity is indicated by the direction of the zigzag. Zigzags that move horizontally, such as those across the top of a picket fence, are less active than the irregular zigzags of a streak of lightning.

Activity

Using Imagination to Draw Lines Expressively

Applying Your Skills. Choose two words from the following list:

swimming	burning	praying
rocking	flowing	jumping
marching	running	growing
dancing	crawling	laughing
wagging	writing	flying

On separate sheets of paper, illustrate the words you have chosen by using line movement only. Do not draw objects.

Choose the medium you think will work best. When you are finished, write the words on the back of each paper. Ask your classmates to look at the lines and guess which words you have illustrated.

Computer Option. Use the Line tool to make two drawings using lines. Let one drawing illustrate quiet, calm piano music, and let the other illustrate loud rock music.



▲ **FIGURE 4.18** In this painting, every line that should be static is diagonal. Look at the window, the lamp, the rug, the floor planks, and the fiddler's bench. The diagonal lines fill the work with a sense of excitement. Not only the people but also every corner of the room seems to be alive and dancing to the music of the fiddler.

Thomas Hart Benton. *Country Dance*. 1929. Oil on gessoed canvas. 76.2 × 63.5 cm (30 × 25"). Private collection. © T. H. Benton and R. P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

MEET THE ARTIST

JACOB LAWRENCE



American, 1917–2000

Jacob Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1917. When he was 12, his family moved to Harlem in New York City. The move would have a great impact on his growth as an artist.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had attracted many talented minority artists from all over the world, and many still remained in Harlem during the 1930s. These artists served as Lawrence's inspiration.

Lawrence sought every opportunity he could to learn about art. He listened to the Harlem artists as they talked in their studios. The 135th Street Public Library, which he visited often, always had pieces of African sculpture on display. His many trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art gave him a strong background in art history.

Lawrence became fascinated with black history and its heroic figures. He took as his subjects such important people as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass. Lawrence often found he could not express all he wanted to say in just a single picture. Therefore, he often made series of paintings to tell the whole story. In this way, he used his art to convey his ideas about the heritage of African Americans.



▲ **FIGURE 4.19** The artist has used line to show the movement of the children. Look at their arms, legs, and feet. What kinds of lines do you see? How has Lawrence used line to create a feeling of movement and excitement?

Jacob Lawrence. *Children at Play*. 1947. Tempera on Masonite panel. 50.8 × 60.9 cm (20 × 24"). Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia. Eva Underhill Holbrook Memorial Collection of American Art, Gift of Alfred H. Holbrook.

Contour Drawing

A **contour line** defines the edges and surface ridges of an object. A contour line also creates a boundary separating one area from another. Learning how to contour draw will add to your drawing skills as well as to your ability to observe and understand objects. See the examples in **Figure 4.20** and **Figure 4.21**.

When drawing contours, let your eyes follow the contour of the object you are drawing. Move your pencil at the same speed as your eyes. Do not lift the pencil from the paper. The line should be continuous. Draw the line slowly and with care. Concentrate in order to draw accurately. See Technique Tip 1 on page 428 in the Handbook for help in making contour drawings.



▲ **FIGURE 4.20** Andrews has used a contour line to draw a memory of his past. His mother insisted that the children dress up for Sunday church services. How does he use line to emphasize the ill-fitting clothes?

Benny Andrews. *Mom and Us*. 1972. Pen and ink drawing. 45.7 × 30.5 cm (18 × 12"). Collection of the artist.



◀ **FIGURE 4.21** Student work. Notice how the line flows through this hospital scene. Look at the difference between the busy zigzag lines that describe the wrinkles in the sheet and the few lines that define the person's face.

Activity

Contour Line Drawings

Creating Visual Solutions Using Direct Observation. Set up a group of three shoes in an interesting, overlapping composition. Arrange them at different angles so you can observe them side-ways, head-on, from the top, and from the back. Use a black marker to do a contour line drawing of all the shoes. Use only line. Do not color or shade the drawing. Use line to add details such as laces, stitches, patches, and holes.

Computer Option. Sit at your computer, turn sideways, and look down. Use the Line tool to draw your feet, legs, and free hand. You may start at the feet and work your way up toward your lap, or vice versa. Use the mouse just as you would use a pencil. Be sure to start your drawing near the edge of your screen so you will have room for the entire picture.

► **FIGURE 4.22**
Andrews captures the excitement of the jazz sounds of Thelonious Monk with gesture lines. Compare and contrast Andrews's use of line in this work to the lines in Figure 4.20.

Benny Andrews.
Thelonious at The Five Spot. 1958. Pen and ink drawing. 27.3 × 20.6 (10³/₄ × 8¹/₈”).
Collection of the artist.



Gesture Drawing

A **gesture** is an expressive movement. The purpose of drawing gestures is to capture the feeling of motion. A gesture drawing uses very little detail. (See **Figures 4.22** and **4.23**).

Lines showing gestures are drawn quickly. They should be sketched freely and loosely—even recklessly—in order to capture movement. (See Technique Tip 2 on page 428 in the Handbook.) Unlike contours, they represent the interior of an object. Your gesture drawings may look like scribbles at first, but this is acceptable. Concentrate on showing position and movement.

► **FIGURE 4.23**
The artist used a brush and paint to create this gesture oil sketch. Compare and contrast the use of line in this sketch with Figure 4.22. Describe the similarities and differences between the two works of art. Does this painting have more detail?

Audrey Flack.
Self-Portrait: The Memory. 1958.
Oil on canvas. 127 × 86.4 cm (50 × 34”).
Miami University Art Museum, Oxford, Ohio. Gift of the artist.



Activity

Creating Gesture Drawings

Creating Visual Solutions Using Direct Observation. Make a series of gesture drawings. Classmates should take turns posing for one another. Start with thirty-second poses. Shorten the time by five seconds for each pose until the pose is held for only ten seconds. Have the model twist, turn, bend, and kick, trying to avoid doing the same thing twice.

Computer Option. Choose a round, medium-size Brush or Pencil tool. Sit at the computer station, turn sideways, and look at other students who are modeling for gesture drawing. They will be changing positions every 20 or 30 seconds. Try to capture the feeling of motion, not detail. Change color each time the model changes positions. Some of your drawings will overlap.

Calligraphic Drawing

The word **calligraphy** means *beautiful handwriting*. Calligraphy is often associated with Asian writing and art. In China and Japan, calligraphy is used to form *characters* that represent the language. However, characters are more than just a letter of the alphabet. They are like pictures. They can represent an idea, an object, or a verbal sound. The Chinese and Japanese use the same types of calligraphic lines and brushstrokes in their paintings (**Figure 4.24**). In fact, in the Chinese language, the words *writing* and *painting* are represented by the same character.

Calligraphic lines are usually made with brushstrokes that change from thin to thick in one stroke. To make a very thin line, use the tip of the brush. As you press on the brush and more of it touches the paper, the line becomes wider. (See Technique Tip 3 on page 428 in the Handbook.)



▲ **FIGURE 4.24** The long, flowing leaves of the orchid plant in the left corner of the painting are made with one flowing brushstroke. Where do you see other objects made with a single brushstroke?

Shitao. Qing Dynasty. c. 1700. *Orchids, Bamboo, and Rock*. Hanging scroll. Ink on paper. 72.4 × 51.1 cm (28½ × 20⅞"). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, S1987.206.

Activity

Calligraphic Lines

Applying Your Skills. Practice making calligraphic lines with ink or watercolor paint. Use round, pointed brushes, both thin and thick. Also, try bamboo brushes. Next, use a watercolor brush and ink or watercolor paint to make a series of five calligraphic studies of one natural object, such as a leaf or a vegetable.

Computer Option. Research either Egyptian hieroglyphics or Southwestern pictographs to gain information about “picture writing.” Create your own picture writing by making up symbols. Use any computer tools and options available. Remember that the Cut and Paste options are helpful when you want to repeat a symbol without redrawing it.



Check Your Understanding

1. Select and analyze artworks in this lesson to form a conclusion about the meanings of vertical and horizontal lines.
2. How are contour drawings and gesture drawings different?
3. What type of artwork is often associated with calligraphy?