

How Artists Use Proportion and Distortion

Vocabulary

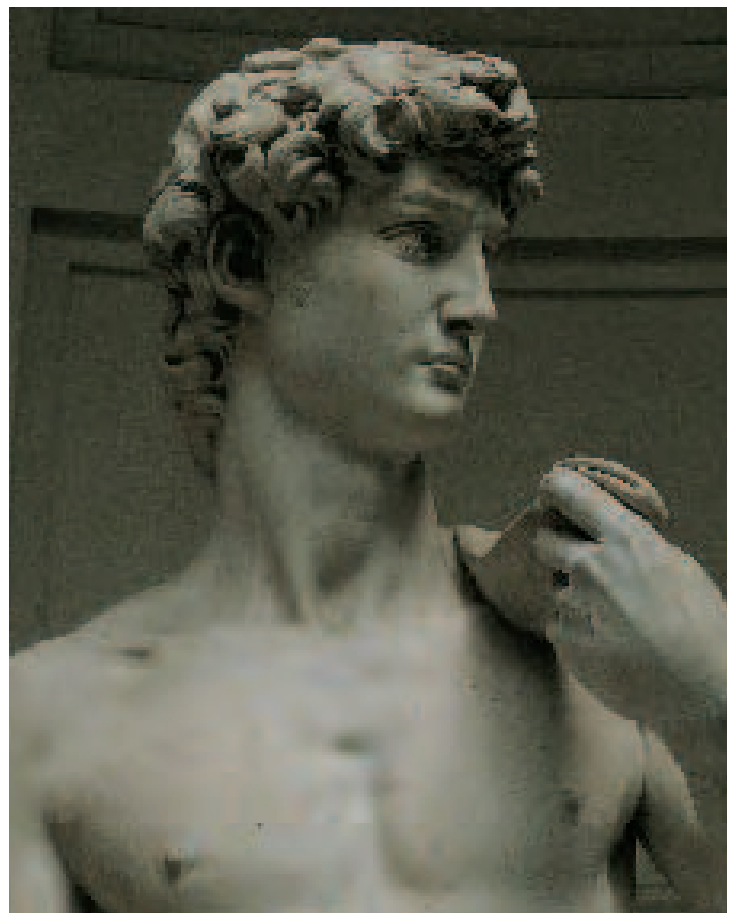
exaggeration
distortion

Many artists use correct proportions in their work. They want every viewer to recognize the person, place, or thing being shown. These artists use correct proportion to create illusions of reality. This ability to show objects as though they were real seems magical to many viewers. Other artists choose exaggeration and distortion to create works with unusual expressive qualities.

Realistic Proportion

During the Renaissance in Italy, there was a renewed interest in art and literature. Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures were discovered, and artists were inspired to create works with the realistic proportions of the ancient masters. To better understand the human body, the artists Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti dissected cadavers in secret because dissection was illegal at that time.

Michelangelo's statue of *David* is an outstanding example of Renaissance proportional accuracy. The artist was asked to create a bigger than life size figure of *David* (**Figure 10.19**) for the façade of the Cathedral in Florence. When it was finished, the people decided that it was too important to be placed high up on the cathedral. Instead, it was placed in the main square and became a symbol of the city of Florence.



▲ **FIGURE 10.19** One unusual feature of Michelangelo's *David* is the fiery intensity of the young man's facial expression. He is staring at an enemy, the giant Goliath. What do you think David is thinking?

Michelangelo. *David (detail)*. 1501–1504. Marble. Galleria dell' Accademia, Florence, Italy.

Before the invention of photography, artists were hired to paint portraits to record accurate information about real people (**Figure 10.20**). A contemporary American artist, Marisol, painted in the Pop style in the 1960s. In **Figure 10.21**, she has used an unusual combination of materials, yet she still uses accurate proportions for all of the figures.

Exaggeration and Distortion

Some artists use exaggeration and distortion rather than realistic proportion to convey their ideas and feelings. **Exaggeration** and **distortion** are *deviations from expected, normal proportions*. They are powerful means of expression. Artists can lengthen, enlarge, bend, warp, twist, or deform parts or all of the human body. By making these changes, they can show moods and feelings that are easily understood by viewers. The exaggeration used by the artist in **Figure 10.22** lets us know how the woman feels.



▲ **FIGURE 10.20** Vigée-Lebrun painted this wealthy princess without indications of her material wealth so that she could emphasize her subject's beauty. Do the facial and body proportions of the princess seem realistic?

Marie-Louise-Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. *Portrait of Princess Belozersky*. 1798. Oil on canvas. 81.3 × 66.7 cm (32 × 26¹/₄"). National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.



▲ **FIGURE 10.21** This mixed-media work is based on a photograph that Marisol found among waste papers near her studio. She uses realistic painting on the flat surfaces of rectangular solids and recycled doors, and combines it with carved wooden forms to create a realistic portrait of the unknown family. Notice the different accurate proportions in this work. Use a ruler and you will see that the head-to-body ratio is appropriate for each figure.

Marisol. *The Family*. 1962. Painted wood and other materials in three sections. 209.6 × 166.4 × 39.4 cm (82¹/₂ × 65¹/₂ × 15¹/₂"). Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Advisory Committee Fund. © Marisol Escobar/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



◀ **FIGURE 10.22**
The proud anxiety of the mother is expressed through the exaggerated stretch of her arms and body. She encourages her daughter to walk, yet she is ready to catch her if she falls.

Napachie Pootoogook. *My Daughter's First Steps*. 1990. Lithograph. 55.8 × 85.8 cm (22 × 33³/₄"). Permission courtesy of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Limited.

In the past, movie stars of the silent screen had to exaggerate facial expressions and body language to convey meaning without words. If you have ever seen an old silent movie, you have probably laughed at the exaggerated eyelid movements used to express meaning.

It takes study and skill to use exaggeration and distortion effectively. Before an artist can distort a person or an object, he or she must study perception drawing and anatomy of the human figure. It takes knowledge to know what to exaggerate and how to distort images effectively.

In *Single Family Blues* (Figure 10.23), Twigg has used exaggeration to express the feeling of “the blues” that engulf this family. Notice that the hand is twice the size of the child’s blue head or the mother’s blue-purple, or violet, face. This distortion allows the viewer to see how dominant “the blues” are in this family.



▲ **FIGURE 10.23** Twigg uses exaggeration to emphasize the hand playing the blues for this family.

Leo Twigg. *Single Family Blues*. 1996. Batik on cotton. 26.7 × 34.3 cm (10¹/₂ × 13¹/₂"). Courtesy of the artist.

MEET THE ARTIST

PABLO PICASSO



Spanish 1881–1973

Pablo Picasso (**pah-bloh pee-cah-so**) was born in Malaga, Spain, in 1881. One day his father, a painter and teacher, came home to a surprise. His son had finished a portrait. After examining the work, Pablo's father gave the boy all his art materials. So great was Picasso's work that his father vowed never to paint again. Picasso was just eight years old.

He went to Paris in 1904. There he met other artists and writers. The creative climate encouraged him to develop a new style, which he called Cubism. Combining his appreciation of African art with his interest in geometrical forms, he created a unique and innovative form. His aim was to shock viewers into visual awareness. His intensity drove him to experiment with all media, discovering new forms and new ideas. He painted Cubist works as well as realistic representations of people. He also created prints and collages throughout his long and full life.



► **FIGURE 10.24** Picasso exaggerates the thinness of this old man, elongates his limbs, and places him in an impossibly angular position to create a painting that expresses sympathy for his condition. How does the contrast between the thin, angular man painted in blue and the warm brown, rounded guitar affect the meaning of this work?

Pablo Picasso. *The Old Guitarist*. 1903. Oil on panel. 122.9 × 82.6 cm (48³/₈ × 32¹/₂”). The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Picasso was also a master of distorting proportion to express an idea or feeling. The works he painted during the early twentieth century are known as his “Blue Period.” During this time he painted poor and tragic people. Despite the sorrowful condition of the figures,

there seems to be a sense of optimism in the works. In *The Old Guitarist* (**Figure 10.24**), the grotesquely thin old man seems unaware of his condition. His head is bent toward the instrument as if nothing matters but the beautiful sound of his music.



▲ **FIGURE 10.25** This watercolor represents a design for a backdrop commissioned by a Moscow theatre. The backdrop was used as scenery for a play by the famous Russian nineteenth-century writer Gogol.

Marc Chagall. *Homage to Gogol*. 1917. Watercolor on paper. 39.4 × 50.2 cm (15½ × 19¾"). Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

In his painting *Homage to Gogol* (**Figure 10.25**), Chagall used exaggeration and distortion to emphasize his love of the theatre. Some say that the huge black figure who is stretched and twisted into an exaggerated bow is Chagall himself. He is holding a laurel wreath in one hand and balancing a church on his foot while bowing to Gogol. Chagall greatly admired Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol, a nineteenth-century author of plays, short stories, and novels

that stand out as masterpieces of Russian literature. A message in Russian, “To Gogol from Chagall,” is incorporated into the design.

Artists can create feelings of great stability and calm by placing a small head on a large body. A monumental, or large and imposing, quality results. The monumental quality of Gaston Lachaise’s *Walking Woman* (**Figure 10.26** on page 272) is created through exaggerated proportions rather than through large scale.



▲ **FIGURE 10.26** This sculpture is only $19\frac{1}{4}$ inches (48.8 cm) high and yet it has a monumental quality because Lachaise has made the head small in comparison to the body.

Gaston Lachaise. *Walking Woman*. 1922. Bronze. $48.8 \times 26.9 \times 18.9$ cm ($19\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{5}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ "). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

Another use of exaggeration can be seen in the features of a mask. Masks have been used in all societies, from early primitive tribes to our modern computer age (**Figure 10.27**). A mask allows a person to hide his or her real self and become someone, or something, else.

Masks are used in many cultures as part of religious ceremonies and rituals. In many cases the features of the mask are exaggerated for expressive purposes. Each culture has specific traditions and procedures that are followed for making and using masks. Sometimes the mask appears to the person in a dream. Sometimes the mask is part of a cultural tradition. In most cases the mask is intended to aid efforts in communicating with the spirit world.

Cartoons are another way in which exaggeration can be used. Editorial cartoonists use this technique to make caricatures of famous people. (See page 284 for more about how cartoonists use exaggeration.) The caricatures emphasize unusual facial features. Similarly, characters in comic strips are often made by using proportions that are larger than life. The most distorted comic-strip characters are often the funniest ones.

► **FIGURE 10.27** Imagine sitting in the dark around a fire when a mysterious figure jumps out of the dark into the dim flickering light wearing one of these masks. How would you feel? How does exaggeration and distortion affect the expressive qualities of these masks?

(right) George Walkus, Secret Society Mask. (Four Headed Cannibal Spirit) 1938. Wood; cedar bark, shredded; string. 53.3 × 129.5 cm (21 × 51"). Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado.

(bottom right) New Ireland, South Pacific Islands. Mask. c. 1920. Wood, paint, fiber, seashells. Height: 38.1 cm (15"). Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Activity

Distorting Proportions

Applying Your Skills. Cut two ovals about 9 inches long from any color of construction paper. Using parts cut from magazines, create one face using accurate proportions. On the second oval, create a distorted face.

Computer Option. Use the drawing tools of your choice to draw a human face using average facial proportions. Use the Select tool and the Copy and Paste options to make four or five copies of the head and face on the same screen. Use the Select tool to experiment with the whole head and with individual facial features. Resize, Distort, Rotate, and Bend are some options that may prove useful to you. If your software does not have these options, draw the changes with the drawing tools of your choice. Save your work. Compare the faces you have distorted and changed. How does the distortion affect the way you would use each face in a piece of artwork?



Check Your Understanding

1. How do exaggeration and distortion affect proportion?
2. Why do artists use distortion?
3. How can artists create monumental qualities without using a large scale?
4. Compare and contrast the proportion of the heads in Figure 10.19 on page 267 and Figure 10.26 on page 272.