The Elements of Art: Texture

The elements of art—color, line, shape, and texture—are the basic building blocks for creating a visual expression of ideas and feelings. Considered the language of artists, these elements, when strategically combined on a two- or three-dimensional surface or form, convey a specific meaning to the viewer, much as a writer’s thoughtful sequencing of words creates evocative prose for the reader. This teacher resource explores one of the foundational principles that governs the construction of artworks by highlighting a painting from the Wadsworth Atheneum’s permanent collection that demonstrates the effects of the artist’s use of texture.
What Is Texture in Art?

Texture can be represented in two distinct ways. **Tactile texture** is how an artwork’s surface would actually feel if you could touch it. **Implied texture** is how an object looks like it would feel if it were real; it is an illusion created on the surface of a work of art by employing such visual tools as color, light, and brushstroke. Textures allow viewers to connect with a work of art on a personal level by triggering memories of familiar objects one might have handled in the past. Drawing upon these common sensory experiences, texture is just one of many methods used by artists to engage viewers.

**Common Textures**

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Artwork in Focus

Jasper Geeraers
d Flemish, active in Holland, 1620–1654

Still Life with Lobster, c. 1645
Oil on canvas
34 1/4 x 43 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Merrill by exchange, and Gift of Samuel P. Avery by exchange, 2012.3.1

Still-Life Painting in Seventeenth-Century Northern Europe

A still life portrays an assemblage of objects—inanimate and/or living—selected and arranged on the basis of aesthetics as well as personal or symbolic meanings sought by the artist. A subcategory of the still-life genre known as vanitas, which flourished among Northern European painters in the seventeenth century, consists of a carefully constructed group of objects that symbolizes the brevity of life, the transience of temporal pleasures and earthly achievements, and the inevitability of death. While seeming to celebrate worldly riches through a display of valuable or luscious objects, vanitas paintings often warn against overindulgence and pride as vices that lead to earthly temptations. At a time in history when art was heavily influenced by religion, Northern European paintings in the vanitas style take a slightly different course, relying upon the symbolism of objects rather than traditional portrayals of biblical narratives to convey moralistic messages.

Common vanitas symbols include:
Pronkstilleven
Popularized in Antwerp during the 1630s and 1640s by the artist Jan Davidsz. de Heem, banquet still lifes known as pronkstilleven combine earlier still-life traditions in one large, elaborate format featuring ornate coloring and complex compositional arrangements. Incorporating such diverse items as flowers, fruits, vanitas objects, rare and precious articles, and decorative tableware, pronkstilleven give the visual impression and emotional sensation of overwhelming abundance and wealth. These opulent and realistically rendered compositions seek to deliver a more complexly drawn commentary on the unrelenting lure of earthly pleasures and the sinful nature of humankind. Continuing to focus on the symbolic qualities of objects, Dutch and Flemish pronkstilleven artists emphasized the implied texture of each item, hoping to draw the viewer’s senses into their constructed visual manifestos concerning life, personal possessions and ambition, and, of course, the sin of vanity itself.

About the Painting: Still Life with Lobster, c. 1645
Exposed by a drawn tasseled velvet curtain is a textural playground of valuable metal objects and rare food in a striking diagonal arrangement on a banquet table. Covered by a deep green cloth, partially overlaid with a delicate white napkin, the table bears a thoughtfully composed display of lavish goods, including pewter plates, an elaborately decorated porcelain bowl, a peeled lemon with sinuous curves, ripe dangling oranges, plump bunches of green grapes, a half-eaten round loaf of bread, two pale pink roses, a half-filled drinking vessel with beaded molding, a tipped-over silver tazza, a large blush pink conch shell, a sizeable gem casket lined with green silk and bordered with gold and silver thread, and a tall gilt goblet with complex ornamentation and knobby body. The arresting details of the implied textures of each element imbue the canvas with a tantalizing sensuality and an impression of luxury that is further exaggerated by the blurred reflections that seem to radiate from one mirrored surface to another.

A large cooked lobster serves as the centerpiece of Geeraerds’s design. Prominently placed amid sumptuous objects and highlighted by the color and glow of its shell, the lobster is one of many elements in the still life that symbolizes mankind’s tendency toward indulgence in earthly luxuries. Unlike crabs and shrimp from the North Sea, lobsters were not easy to catch off the Dutch coast during the seventeenth century, making them an extremely valuable commodity. The pink conch shell, which rests atop the fancy jeweled box, was also a costly rarity available only from Dutch sailors who brought them home following their travels to the Caribbean. Additional luxury items of this period include the grapes, oranges, lemons, and array of metal wares depicted across the composition. The subtle form of the modestly fading rose petals at right suggests Geeraerds’s overarching message: man’s preoccupation with vanity will inevitably lead to his moral and physical decay.

About the Artist: Jasper Geeraerds (Flemish, 1620–1654)
Although little is known about his short life, Jasper Geeraerds [yah-sper gayr-ahrds]—commonly found in historical records and scholarly publications under the names “Geeraerts” or “Gerards”—was born in Antwerp and was accepted as an apprentice at a local guild at the age of fourteen. Within the next ten years, Geeraerds was promoted to the position of master, a clear indication of his emerging artistic aptitude. The artist subsequently migrated to Holland, where the influence of Dutch artists, particularly Jan Davidsz. de Heem (see Still-Life Painting in Seventeenth-Century Northern Europe), is evident in his canvases. Geeraerds died in Amsterdam.
Classroom Activities

Questions for Guided Looking
Investigate this work of art through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit objective and descriptive observations. Move toward more subjective and abstract questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the painting. Be sure that students cite visual evidence for their responses. Always encourage them to explore the painting visually before you reveal any information about it.

Adapt the following questions to your students’ level of comprehension.

CONVERSATION STARTERS
• Invite the class to view the painting quietly and thoughtfully for thirty seconds. As part of their visual investigation, prompt them to look at the objects to which their eyes naturally travel first. Then push students’ observations further by asking them to focus their gaze on a portion of the canvas to which they were not initially drawn. Follow with these questions: What do you see? Where did your eyes wander to first? Where did they not? What do you think is the focal point of the composition? What is noticeably absent from the scene?
• Ask students to describe the textures they see. How many different objects can you “feel” with your eyes? Take an oral classroom inventory of the items depicted on the canvas that have a distinct textural quality. Collect students’ responses on a board for all to see and then ask them to contribute one adjective per object that best describes its appearance based on their observations. In order to further foster students’ elaboration skills, do not allow duplicate answers.
• Select two items in the composition. Are the surface qualities of these objects similar or different and in what ways? Repeat as desired.
• How are the objects arranged on the canvas? Does there appear to be a specific order in which the elements are positioned? Consider the deliberate placement of various textures across the canvas.

DIGGING DEEPER
• Why do you think the artist chose to portray these specific objects? What might they symbolize? What does the selection and arrangement of these items tell us about the meaning of the painting? How does the element of texture assist in conveying this meaning?
• Painters of pronkstilleven often depicted the remnants of elaborate banquets. What evidence is there that a person or group of people has visited this table? How does the artist’s omission of the human figure inform your interpretation of the still life?
• Seventeenth-century Northern European painters created realistic compositions through the precise and strategic use of such artistic tools as color, light, and texture. If Geeraerds had chosen a more abstract, or non-representational, color scheme and employed looser brushstrokes, do you think he would have been more or less effective in allowing the viewer to “feel” textures and emotive qualities?

Oral Language Exercises
Adjectives may be considered the most evocative instruments in the writer’s toolbox. Students’ oral selection of the precise words or phrases that illustrate what they see or feel about a work of art hones their descriptive writing abilities. They develop the skills needed to engage readers by eliciting emotions and the five senses through words that illuminate the image being presented. Experiment with the activities below and watch your students’ oral presentation and descriptive skills grow.
WORD ASSOCIATION
Distribute a different adjective to each student in the class. Select adjectives that represent the visual appearance, specifically texture, of the objects in the painting. Possible descriptive words include bumpy, silky, slimy, velvety, and shiny. Students will then hunt for the object that best corresponds to their adjective. Allow ample time for students to look closely at the painting, taking in all the textural variations found on the canvas. When everyone is ready, go around the room and ask students to identify which element in the painting they have determined best represents their given word. Students must provide visual evidence to support their claims.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Bring on the debate! During this exercise, you may find that students disagree with their classmates’ conclusions. Some may think that a certain adjective describes a particular object more accurately than what a peer has argued. Let students contribute their alternate suggestions by referencing supporting details from the painting.

TO LOOK OR NOT TO LOOK
Pair students in the class and position them back-to-back. Assign the student facing the reproduction of the painting to be the “elaborator” and the other to be the “listener.” The elaborator will look at the work of art and describe it to their partner, who should not be able to see it. The listener will then sketch the image—to the best of his or her abilities—based on the elaborator’s description. Once a complete description of the painting, or a certain section of its composition, has been given, the elaborator will assess the listener’s drawing. Partners should then discuss which words allowed the listener to depict the painting most accurately. Which words were the most graphic and useful? Which were the least? The importance of pinpointing the exact adjectives and descriptive phrases to convey the essence of an image will become evident to both participants.

Tactile Experience
RUMMAGING THROUGH A BAG OF MYSTERIES
Fill a paper bag with small objects representing the various textures found in the artwork. Consider including such items as textiles, flower petals, fruits, metal objects, and dull pieces of glass. Then ask a volunteer from the class to reach into the mystery bag without looking and select one object, leaving it hidden in the bag. The student should take a moment to feel its exterior then brainstorm words to describe the texture of its surface to the class. The remainder of the class should then choose an object (or objects) in the painting that they feel matches the description, providing visual evidence from the artwork for each claim. Be sure their responses include as many adjectives as possible. You may then reveal the mystery object! Repeat as desired.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
This hands-on experience provides the perfect opportunity to discuss with students the difference between tactile and implied textures. How do the textures experienced in the bag (tactile) differ from how they “feel,” or are represented (implied), in the painting? Which do you prefer and why? Do you believe that the artist was successful at producing convincing textures that engage your senses?
Writing Prompts

Many of the skills acquired through the process of carefully looking at works of art are those needed by thoughtful writers. In fact, observation forms the foundation of good writing. Before beginning these activities, be sure to take time to look at the painting with the students. Then use the prompts below to explore how art can serve as a catalyst for the development of students' writing skills in the areas of word choice, description, exposition (including comparing and contrasting), analysis, inference, prediction, and creative expression.

ENHANCING ADJECTIVES AND CRAFTING PHRASES

Students will begin this writing exercise by selecting one object from the painting and composing a list of adjectives that describes their item. Encourage students to employ all their senses, including the sensation of touch, when developing their lists. Explain to the class that their chosen words should “paint a picture” of the object if they were read aloud to their peers. Students will then refine their selection of adjectives by narrowing their list to five key words. Follow by asking students to use the best words to create an evocative phrase that most accurately describes their object. They should consider how the words sound in sequence and how clearly the phrase illustrates the image. Examples are:

Step 1: the lemon peel—circular, crisp, winding, uncoiling, and bumpy
Step 2: the crisp, uncoiling lemon peel

VARIATION

Shorten this activity by asking students to create concise, descriptive phrases for a select number of objects in the painting. Examples for this image include slick shell, fuzzy velvet, and porous peel. When the phrase is read aloud, does it match the object and its texture as seen in the painting? Colors can also be given expressive phrases (i.e., coral pink, milky white) to add another dimension to students’ elaboration skills.

CLEARING THE TABLE

You have recently been hired as a waiter for an extravagant banquet. Now that the meal is over and the guests have gone home, it is time for you and the other wait staff to clear the table in preparation for tomorrow’s feast. Which object would you pick up first? What about its visual characteristics drew you to it? Now that it is in your grasp, what does the object feel like? Is it different than you anticipated based on its appearance? Select the next item you would clear from the crowded table. How does its texture compare to that of the first object you chose? Is it similar or different? Explore the remaining contents of the table. Are there any objects that you do not care to touch? Why not? Be sure all your responses are derived from the visual elements of the painting.

THE UNATTENDED TABLE

After a brief stint as a waiter, you have now been offered a job as a junior detective in your town—your life’s ambition! Your first assignment is to examine a banquet hall with a mysterious half-consumed table spread. It may seem harmless enough, but there is an eerie feeling in the air. Although no people are to be found, their presence is insinuated. Your task is to write a report to your supervisor detailing the evidence that supports the claim that a person or group of people was present at this feast. For each piece of evidence, students must provide a detailed textual description of the object’s appearance, citing visual references from the painting. Do these clues hint at what kinds of people may
have been feasting here? What might the motive have been to leave the banquet early in such a state of disarray? Will these individuals return to partake of what remains of the feast? Complete this activity by submitting your final investigative report to your district supervisor (your classroom teacher).

**The Artist’s Hand: Creating Your Own Textural Still Life**
*You have just explored this painting with your eyes. Take a moment to respond with your hands.*

Students will begin this art-making activity by taking a nature walk with their classmates to observe the large variety of textures found in the environment. Just as Northern European still life painters sought objects from nature for their compositions, students will search for and collect outdoor objects in an assortment of shapes, sizes, colors, and textures to bring back to their classroom.

Upon returning, students will then explore their classroom for ordinary items representing an array of surface qualities. Using a combination of manmade and natural objects, they will assemble a three-dimensional still-life composition. Students’ arrangements should hint at a story or an important message they wish to convey, much as the vanitas and pronkstilleven artists sought to do through the artistic tool of symbolism. They should consider how the placement of these objects in a particular sequence assists in communicating their intended message. Once the exercise has been completed, the teacher may opt to have students photograph their arrangements of objects or use various media to compose their own still-life compositions with textural accuracy.

**Just Jargon**

**Abstract Art**: An artistic style that departs from realistic representation. Abstract art often expresses feelings and ideas through the basic elements of art rather than showing people, places, and things as they appear in real life.

**Aesthetics**: A philosophical approach relating to the pleasing visual qualities of a work of fine art.

**Alloy**: A combination of two or more metals often created to produce a more resilient material (though not in the case of pewter).

**Apprentice**: An artist-in-training who, for a specified amount of time as determined by a legal agreement, studies an art form or a craft under a master. Throughout Europe during the seventeenth century, apprenticeships were the most common way to learn a trade.

**Body**: The main section of a three-dimensional work of art or object.

**Casket**: A large decorated box, often covered in leather and lined with satin, which held important documents, prized jewels, and other valuables.

**Composition**: The arrangement or placement of objects within a work of art or the work of art itself.

**Elements of Art**: The basic building blocks for creating a work of art and expressing ideas and feelings through visual symbols such as color, line, shape, and texture; the language of artists.
COLOR: The name of a color is a hue.

Primary: Colors that are mixed to create all other hues: red, yellow, and blue.

Secondary: Colors that are created by mixing equally two primary colors: orange, green, and purple. Together with the primary colors, secondary colors complete the color wheel.

Complementary: Colors that are opposites on the color wheel: red and green, orange and blue, yellow and purple. When complementary colors are placed side by side, they accentuate one another.

Warm: Colors that remind you of warmth: red, orange, and yellow. These colors appear to jump out of the picture plane.

Cool: Colors that remind you of coolness: green, blue, and purple. These colors tend to recede into space, creating depth.

Monochromatic: Having only one color.

LINE: The path of a dot as it moves through space. The outer edge of a shape is a line. Lines can be straight, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curvy, or jagged.

SHAPE: A two-dimensional (flat) area that is made by beginning and ending a line at the same point. Common geometric shapes include circles, triangles, rectangles, squares, and trapezoids. Organic shapes are irregular and mimic what is found in nature rather than being mathematically based like geometric shapes.

TEXTURE (adj. textural): How a surface feels (tactile) or looks like it would feel (implied). Common textures include smooth, rough, wet, dry, hard, soft, jagged, and slippery.

Focal Point: The portion of an artwork on which the viewer’s interest centers. Artists often use focal points to direct attention to an important part of their composition. Focal points can be created through the use of light, color, contrast, size, and location.

Form: A shape that exists in three dimensions. For example, a circle is a flat shape and has two dimensions (height and weight), but a sphere is a form and has three dimensions (height, width, and depth).

Gilt: A coating of gold, often in the form of paper-thin gold leaf or gold pigment, applied to the surface of an object.

Guild: An association of craftsmen whose purpose was to train its members in a particular craft. By controlling the selling and marketing of its members’ artistic creations, it had considerable economic power. Guilds were popular across Europe from the Middle Ages until the Industrial Revolution.

Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606–1684): A contemporary of Jasper Geeraerd, de Heem became one of the most important still-life painters in the Netherlands due to his realistic representations of objects and brilliant use of color harmonies. Known for popularizing the genres of vanitas and pronkstilleven painting in Antwerp during the 1630s and 1640s, his work greatly influenced that of the younger Geeraerd.

Master: In the apprenticeship system, an individual of exemplary technical abilities who ran a workshop and employed pupils called apprentices.

Medium (pl. media): The material used by an artist to create an artwork. Common media include pen and ink, paint, stone, wood, and glass.
Pewter: A malleable, fragile alloy consisting primarily of tin; a common material used to make housewares during the seventeenth century.

Pronkstilleven (see Still Life): Opulent and compositionally complex banquet still lifes featuring diverse items such as flowers, fruits, vanitas objects, precious metal goods, rare sea life, and elaborate tableware, which give the visual and emotional impression of overwhelming abundance and wealth. These realistic compositions comment on the sinful nature of humankind and man’s inherent attraction to earthly pleasures through the symbolic and textural qualities of objects. Pronk refers to ostentation.

Realistic Art: A style of art using recognizable imagery to show things as they appear in real life. Realistic art is also known as representational and is the opposite of abstract art. Seventeenth-century Northern European artists, including pronkstilleven painters, approached their canvas with the intent of depicting every detail of their work with exactitude. They made every effort to simulate the true character and appearance of the objects they presented, particularly through the visual tools of texture, color, and light.

Still Life: An artistic depiction, often in painting, of a grouping of inanimate objects and at times, living things. Still-life objects are selected and positioned in a composition based on their visual qualities and symbolic meanings. The English term “still life” derives from the Dutch word stilleven—leven meaning “life” or “model.”

Symbol (adj. symbolic): An image, form, subject, or element of art that represents a meaning other than the one with which it is generally associated; an image used to stand for an idea. In vanitas paintings, skulls, extinguished candles, floating bubbles, and hourglasses symbolize the passage of time and life.

Tazza: A shallow saucerlike ornamental dish, often set on a high circular base or pedestal. Italian for “cup.”

Three-dimensional: Having height, width, and depth. Sculptures are three-dimensional artworks that frequently employ tactile, rather than implied, textures.

Two-dimensional: A space that is flat, having height and width but no depth. Paintings and photographs are examples of two-dimensional artworks. Although both implied and tactile textures can be employed on two-dimensional surfaces, artists more often utilize the former when creating paintings, drawings, and photographs.

Vanitas (see Symbol): A subcategory of the still-life genre in which the intention of the realistically rendered objects is to symbolize the transience of life. Popular in Northern Europe during the seventeenth century, vanitas compositions warn of the dangers associated with man’s overindulgence, pride, and dependence on earthly luxuries as well as the fleeting nature of temporal pleasures and the certainty of death. Latin for “vanity.”
Book Resources for Deeper Exploration

Select books are in the museum’s library and are available for reference. Call (860) 838-4115 for more information.

**Still Life**


**Texture**

**The Elements of Art**


**Web Resources for Deeper Exploration**
**Art and Writing**
https://www.philamuseum.org/booklets/12_70_160_1.html

**Still Life**

http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/arranging_nature/arranging_lesson_plan_index.html

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**Texture**
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References


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Jasper Geeraerds
Flemish, active in Holland, 1620–1654
*Still Life with Lobster*, c. 1645
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From the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.