How Pictures Are Made

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How Pictures Are Made

by Donna Spooner, former Extension home furnishings specialist

INTRODUCTION:

Art, like personality, is an individual thing . . . each painting, drawing or photograph inspires a slightly different emotional response in each individual. Though sometimes we may be at a loss to explain why we like or dislike or even ignore an artist’s creation, we are aware that a definite reaction has taken place, because this is the nature of art.

Through experience, we know it is possible to derive great enduring pleasure from a good picture hanging in our home. To know why you have chosen a painting or other work of art perhaps may provide you with even more satisfaction. The following information is presented to give you a broad look at the media the artist uses—oils, water colors, tempera, drawings, pastels, photographs, etc. You will also obtain a glimpse of how art is produced and explore some of the qualities inherent in good art. A careful study of the mechanics of art may help you select a better choice of pictures to hang and enjoy in your home.

ORIGINALS AND PRINTS

Original works of art by outstanding artists can cost from a few dollars to thousands of dollars. Some artists do commendable work which they are willing to sell at reasonable prices. These are available at art fairs and exhibitions, art museums and galleries, art and book stores, picture framing companies, large department stores, as well as through the mail from some magazines and mail order houses.

Prints are reproductions made from photographing original works of art and then reproducing through the process of color separation. It includes impressions taken from etchings, dry points, engravings, lithographs, wood cuts, silk screens and photographs. Also included are prints of tempera, oil paintings, water colors, drawings, pastels and collage pictures. These are all reproductions and may be available for little cost. Prices range from $1 and up.

Good prints of worthwhile oil paintings, tempera paintings, etc., are much better than poor originals. Faithful reproductions show every detail of the original, such as brush strokes and follow the true colors exactly. Some contemporary processes reproduce the exact texture of the original. Be sure that your reproductions have good clear lines and do not have faded or raw, harsh or crude colors. A good yet inexpensive print can give you real enjoyment if carefully selected. Judge it on its accuracy of reproduction, since this factor may vary greatly in quality of color and pattern.

Even good reproductions never give the full impact of the original nor the satisfaction and pride of ownership. Poor reproductions lack the full range and brilliance of color and texture. Colors too often bear little relationship to the original.

When selecting a picture, try several. Put one up and live with it for awhile if possible. In this way, the one you and your family will enjoy the most can be selected. A few libraries loan pictures ready to hang for specified periods of time. Inquire locally. Many galleries rent originals for low fees which can be applied to the purchase price.

PICTURE COMPOSITION

A composition is the planned arrangement of all its parts. These include line, shape, size, color, texture and value or light. All of these must work together to achieve order and make the composition complete. It is very difficult to decide whether a picture has character and good design.

Color appeals to us immediately. Some colors may be bright and intense, others grayed and dull or light and dark. Some colors are warm, others cool. Light, cool colors of blue and green, for example, give a feeling of space, peace and gentleness. Usually the strong bright colors are used for accent and the center of interest, whereas the dull, subtle colors are used for backgrounds.

Color and value can’t be considered without texture. Interest is added by use of rough or smooth, gleaming or dull, fine or coarse textures. In a well-organized picture, there is a rhythmic flow of colors, light and dark tones, textures, line, shape and size, which leads the eye to a center of interest.

A well-chosen picture often is the source of the color scheme for an entire room. If a picture is selected after the other furnishings are chosen, then it is wise to select a picture which repeats the colors already in the room.
Guides by which the artist creates good design:
1. Proportion refers to interesting relationships of parts to each other. It is the amount and size of lines, shapes, colors, textures, and values used in pleasing relationships.

Figure 1. Shapes used to show pleasing proportions to each other and the spaces they occupy.

2. Balance refers to equilibrium of lines, shapes, colors, textures, and values. When balance is achieved, one has a sense or feeling of security. This may be achieved through symmetrical, asymmetrical or radial balance.

Figure 2. Lines used in a radial arrangement create a feeling of balance.

3. Rhythm refers to the directional flow or movement which carries the eye throughout a composition and builds up attention at a center of interest. Repetition, progression, gradation and alternation of parts create movement to give life to a composition.

Figure 3. Shapes used in progression to create rhythm in an arrangement.

4. Emphasis refers to the focal point or center of interest in a composition. It is the most expressive and dominant part. Other parts support or contrast it. Emphasis is usually achieved through color and value.

Figure 4. Lines and shapes lead the eye to the center of interest to create emphasis.

5. Harmony refers to the similarity of ideas and parts as they actually relate to each other. A composition must “tie” and hold together to create an impression of unity.

Figure 5. All parts in a pleasing arrangement create harmony.
When selecting a picture, consider the various media by which pictures are made. By discovering how a picture is made, you will increase your appreciation of it. Careful study of pictures will help you identify hand and photoengraving processes.

1. **Oil paintings** are painted on canvas with pigments mixed with oil or other materials. The paint may be applied with brush, roller, palette knife, spray gun or dribbled. They may be quite smooth to very coarse in texture, small or very large in size. They are relatively more expensive in comparison to other pictures since they require more time to execute and materials are more costly.

2. **Water colors** are painted on special paper with brush and water soluble pigment. They may be opaque or transparent. The transparent have a fresh, light and airy look to them. Watercolorists work rapidly and finish a picture in a comparatively short time. Original works in water color are less expensive than oils, although the cost of all works of art is influenced by prestige of the artist and the demand for his work.

3. **Tempera** is similar to water color but is opaque. Pictures are more forceful and therefore more suitable to large rooms and wall spaces.

4. **Drawings** may be made with crayon, chalk, pencil, pen and ink, or charcoal on paper. They vary in degrees of delicacy and are usually hung where they can be observed at close range.

5. **Pastels** are done with soft crayons and are similar in effect to colored chalk. They are sometimes sprayed with a fixative to prevent smudging as are other drawings such as crayon and charcoal. However, any treatment of this nature dims the color and is not considered desirable for pastels. They should be covered with glass. Non-glare glass is not recommended for water colors and pastels as some of the color quality is lost.

6. **Collage** pictures are made by pasting together a combination of various materials and papers such as colored torn paper, fabrics, etc. Pattern, color and texture give interest to the composition.

**Intaglio**

7. **Etchings** are made by scratching with a sharp tool through a waxy coating on a metal plate, then eating out the exposed metal with acid. The plate is submerged in an acid bath which eats into the exposed areas of metal. Where very light lines are desired, the plate is removed after a short time and these areas are “stopped out” or covered with an acid resisting solution. The plate is then returned and the biting proceeds. This process is repeated until the darkest lines are bitten. The plate then is cleaned and ready for printing on damp paper. First, ink is pressed down
into the etched lines. All surplus ink on the plate is removed. The plate is covered with damp paper and then run through the etching press. This forces the paper down into the etched lines and absorbs the ink. Lines appear soft and look like pencil drawings. They are raised, and their ends are square and blunt.

Any color ink may be used but black and brown are most frequently used. More than one color of ink may be used on one plate. Color is sometimes added by watercolor washes.

A limited number of prints is possible from one plate unless the plate is electronically coated, making an unlimited number of prints possible. An **aquatint** is a similar process but the plate is first covered with rosin dust to give it a grainy surface when exposed to the acid bath. Prints have a pebbly surface with black dots.

8. **Drypoints** are softer in quality than etchings. The artist draws directly on the plate with a sharp instrument which leaves a ruffle or “burr” on each side of the line. This catches and holds the ink and gives the print a soft rich effect. Lines appear velvety with ends pointed. Twenty-five to 50 prints are made from one plate after which the “burr” may break off with the loss of the soft quality.

9. **Engravings** are ink impressions taken from plates of copper or zinc. The design is incised with a “v” shaped cutting tool. Lines are made by pushing which creates clean, even lines with pointed ends. The effect is rather mechanical with no softness. A series of parallel lines cross over each other. A **mezzotint** is similar except that the plate is pricked, sometimes by passing a plate and sandpaper through the press. This gives a tonal effect rather than a linear one. Prints have a pebbly surface with white dots.

**Planographs**

10. **Lithographs** are drawn with a greasy crayon on a stone or plate. After treating the stone with acid, only the drawn areas will accept ink. Prints resemble crayon drawings and are known for their rich blacks and silver grays. Prints are flat and differ from those produced by other processes in that no imprint appears along the outside edge from the pressure of the plate.

**Relief**

11. **Wood cuts** and linoleum block prints are impressions taken from blocks of wood or linoleum into which the design is cut. The surface to be inked is raised. Areas are either black or white with limited detail creating strong and forceful prints. The raised part of the block is inked, and the block pressed down on the paper. The wood grain is usually seen on woodcuts. As many blocks are needed as there are colors in a picture. The number of prints is limited in linoleum, whereas wood is unlimited. The print number, the number of the edition, and the artist’s name appear in the lower corner.

**Seriographs** (stencil process)

12. **Silk screens** are made by applying colors through silk screen stencils. The fabric weave is seen on the print. Separate stencils are made for each color. Effects can be created similar to tempera painting. Thousands of prints are possible.

13. **Photographs** of good and unusual composition, color and value are often framed. Portraits of family and friends are best used in bedrooms or dens.

**GROUPING PICTURES OF VARIOUS MEDIA**

Avoid sameness as well as great differences of media in pictures for one room. All pictures in a room should be harmonious and coordinated in subject matter, texture and color. For example, oils and water colors may be hung in the same room if they have a spirit or quality that relate them to each other and to the furnishings. Etchings and drawings go well together, and drawings and water colors harmonize. However, black and white etchings and oil paintings are too far apart in tonal quality and feeling or spirit to combine well on the same wall.

Bold, vigorous pictures which can be seen for a long distance should be combined with similar pictures. For example, oil and tempera paintings are usually more forceful and suitable for larger rooms since they are easily seen. Water colors and drawings, on the other hand, are more suitable for smaller rooms. They usually have a light, airy, or fine quality which makes them difficult to see unless hung at close range.
REPRODUCTIONS AVAILABLE

Lists of available reproductions will be supplied by the following sources upon request:

1. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minn. 55404
2. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.
4. Nelson Gallery of Art, 4525 Oak St., Kansas City, Mo. 64111
5. City Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis, Mo. 63166
7. Artex Prints, Inc., Westport, Conn. 06880
9. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y. 10028
10. Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, N.Y. 10019
11. New York Graphic Society, 10 W. 33 St., New York, N.Y. 10001
12. The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich., 48202