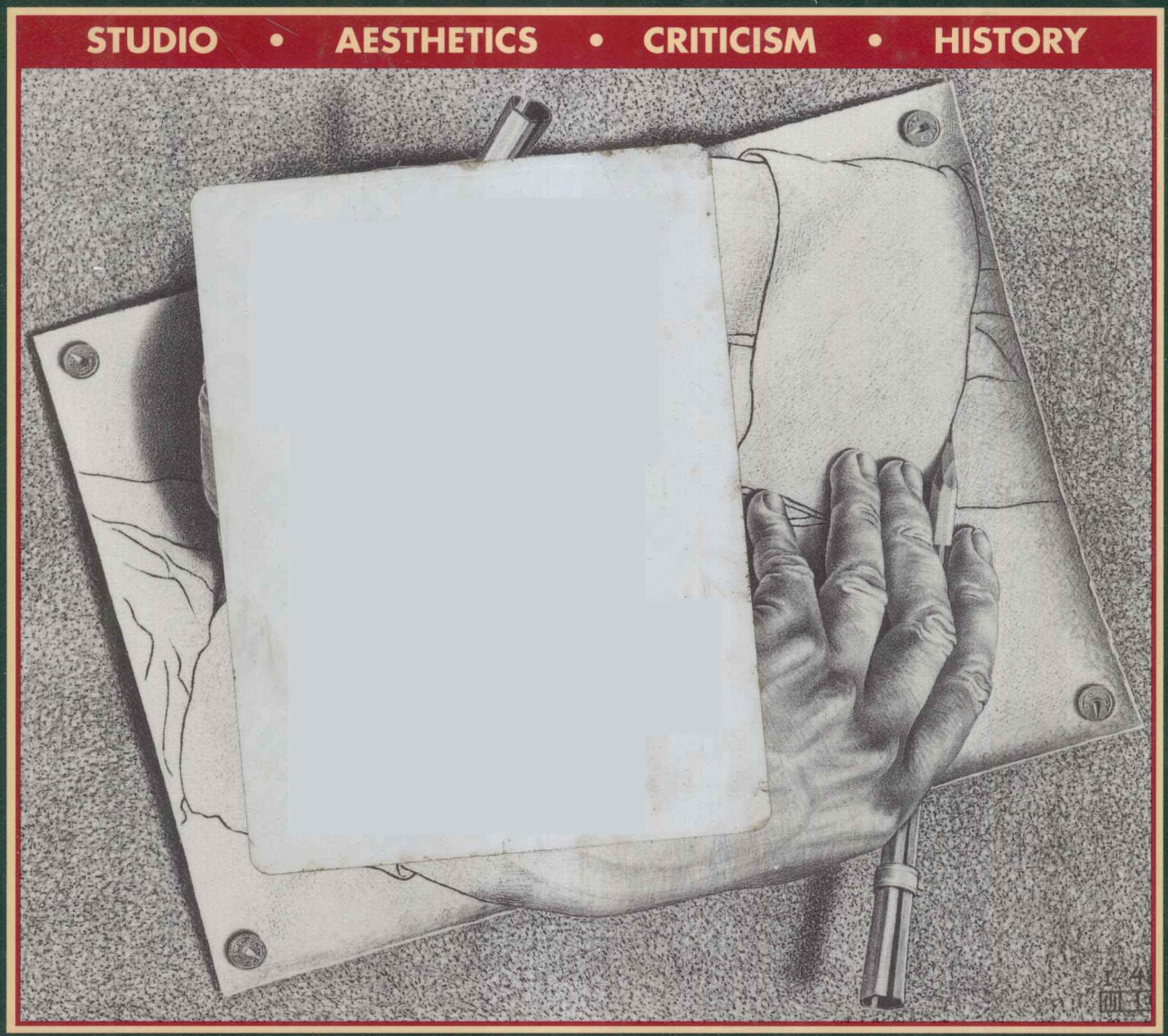
Creating & Understanding Drawings

STUDIO • AESTHETICS • CRITICISM • HISTORY



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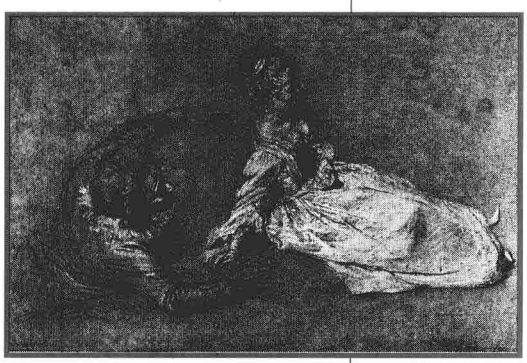
UNIT 1

An Introduction to Drawing



▲ **Study this composition closely, then explain how the artist has tied the two figures together without having them touch each other. To which figure is your eye attracted?**

Antoine Watteau. *Couple Seated on a Bank.* c. 1716. Red, black, and white chalk on buff paper. 24.1 x 35.7 cm (9½ x 14⅛"). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The Armand Hammer Collection (detail at left).

All artists use the same basic components to communicate visually with viewers. These visual symbols are explained in Chapter 1, "Drawing and the Visual Vocabulary." After you have learned the language necessary to talk about drawings, you need to know what makes them successful. Chapter 2, "Aesthetic Qualities and Art Criticism," introduces and explains three theories of art that will serve as your guides to aesthetic qualities found in visual art.

Chapter 3, "Drawings and the History of Art," provides a chronological outline with information about developments in drawing for each period of history. Chapter 4, "The Media of Drawing," introduces the media and the tools you will need to create works of your own. Chapter 5, "Entering the Studio," provides experiences with the basic drawing materials and techniques.

▲ This artist's work illustrates her skills in making use of the visual vocabulary. Identify the elements of art used here. Note the lines, shapes, values, and textures. What principles are employed? (Include emphasis, variety, and movement.)

FIGURE 1.1 Elizabeth Catlett. *Sharecropper*. 1970. Linoleum cut on paper. 45.2 x 43 cm (17 13/16 x 16 15/16"). National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

CHAPTER 1

Drawing and the Visual Vocabulary

Imagine that you are standing in a gallery with a friend, looking at the drawing in Figure 1.1. Several minutes go by before your friend asks, "What do you think of it?"

How would you answer that question? You might begin by saying, "I like it." This is a common answer. Many conversations about art begin with expressions of like or dislike. Unfortunately, many of these same conversations also stop there.

However, suppose your friend, who hasn't had the benefit of an art education, asks another question: "Well, I like it, too, but is it a good drawing? I mean, do you think it is well done?"

Many students have difficulty with questions of this kind. Much of that difficulty occurs because they are not familiar with the language of art. This is especially true in discussions about the way a work is organized or put together. In these discussions, a knowledge of the elements and principles of art—the visual vocabulary—becomes essential.

Objectives

After reading this chapter and doing the activities, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of knowing the visual vocabulary.
- List the elements of art and identify them in drawings.
- List the principles of art and describe the ways artists use the principles to organize the elements of art in their drawings.
- Determine whether or not the elements and principles used have been blended to achieve an overall sense of unity.

Terms to Know

cross-hatching
elements of art
figure
ground
picture plane
principles of art
sketch
vanishing point
visual vocabulary

The Visual Vocabulary

The **elements of art** are *the "building blocks" the artist has to work with to express ideas.* The elements are:

- *line*
- *shape*
- *form*
- *value*
- *texture*
- *space*
- *color*

The **principles of art** represent *the various ways the artist can use each of the elements.* These principles include:

- *balance*
- *emphasis*
- *harmony*
- *variety*
- *gradation*
- *movement*
- *rhythm*
- *proportion*
- *space (can be both an element and a principle)*

The elements and principles of art make up the **visual vocabulary**.

The visual vocabulary is as vital to the artist as the written vocabulary is to the poet. Without words, rhyme, and rhythm, there would be no poetry. Without colors, values, shapes, lines, textures, and spaces, there would be no drawing. Also, without a complete understanding of the various ways these elements and principles can be used in creating art, there would be few good drawings to enrich our lives.

You may be skeptical about the importance attached to this visual vocabulary. As one student put it, "I want to learn how to draw, not learn how to *talk about* drawing." That student failed to understand that learning how to talk about drawing is an aid to learning how to draw. Speech, after all, is our primary means of communication. How can you ask questions—or answer anyone else's questions—about your drawings if you don't know what words to use? Without a vocabulary, the dialogue between you and your teacher, for instance, may be limited to those like-dislike statements mentioned earlier. Statements of that kind have little value in learning or teaching.

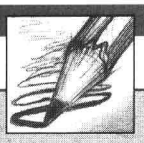
Understanding the language of art is also important when you want to learn from the drawings of master artists. A knowledge of the visual vocabulary helps you understand how those artists composed their works. Look at Figure 1.2. What could you tell your friend about the lines, shapes, forms, values, textures, and spaces in this drawing? Would you refer to terms like balance, emphasis, harmony, variety, gradation, movement, rhythm, proportion, and space to explain how those elements have been used? Having a visual vocabulary of art would help you explain this drawing to your friend. However, your friend would also have to know something about this visual vocabulary in order to understand your explanation.

▲ **If you were trying to describe this drawing to a friend during a telephone conversation, what element of art would you mention first? What would you say about it?**

FIGURE 1.2 Vincent van Gogh. *Café Terrace at Night.* 1888. Reed pen and ink over pencil. 62.5 x 47.6 cm (24⅝ x 18¾"). The Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas. The Wendy and Emery Reves Collection.

Do you think a knowledge of how the artist used the elements and principles to design this drawing could help you make your own drawings? If your answer is "Yes," then you realize that you can't learn in a vacuum. Your drawings now and in the future will build upon what has already been done by other artists. If you ignore everything that can be learned from past and present art, you will hinder your development as an artist.

SHARPENING YOUR SKILLS



Play a Visual Vocabulary Game

Cut a colored illustration of a familiar object from a catalog or Sunday newspaper ad. (Good examples include an automobile tire, a fork, a shoe, or a pair of scissors.) Bring the illustration to class, but do not show it to other students. Prepare as many descriptive statements about the object pictured as you can, making certain that each of these statements includes a reference to an element and/or a principle of art. For example, in describing a book, you might write such statements as:

- **It is a symmetrically balanced rectangular form.**
- **Three sides are white and are made up of repetitious parallel lines.**
- **The remaining three sides are brown and have a smooth texture.**

Make certain that none of your statements name the object you are attempting to identify. Where possible, try to link elements and principles in the same statement.

Read your statements slowly to the class. Are they able to identify the object you are describing? If so, you win. You have demonstrated that you have a good grasp of the elements and principles of art.

Listen closely as other members of the class read their statements. Are you able to name the objects they are describing?

Numerous variations of this "Visual Vocabulary Game" can and should be tried. You will find that they will help make you more conscious of the elements and principles—and contribute to the ease with which you talk about them when discussing your artworks or the artworks created by others.

The rest of this chapter explains the elements and principles of art—the visual vocabulary. This information is essential to students who want to understand artworks created by others and to develop their own drawing skills.

The Elements of Art

In the months prior to his death, Vincent van Gogh painted and drew a variety of scenes observed in and around the city of Arles in southern France. Two of his best-known paintings from this period are café scenes. One of these shows the exterior of the Grand Café at night. Van Gogh wrote that it amused him to be able to paint an outdoor scene after dark. The work you have been looking at (Figure 1.2) is a drawing of that same café. (Figure 1 in Color Section I shows this drawing in color.)

It isn't known whether van Gogh produced this drawing before or after completing his painting of the same subject. A close examination, however, reveals that the drawing isn't a **sketch**, which *is a drawing done quickly in preparation for a painting.* It is instead a carefully designed, finished work of art. You can learn many things from it because of the way the artist used the visual vocabulary.

Did you notice how van Gogh made several kinds of lines in his drawing? He often used several pens with a variety of tips to achieve the results you see here. Working rapidly, as if he somehow knew his time was limited—he was to commit suicide in less than two years—he filled his paper to the edges with an eye appealing pattern of contrasting lines. He created short and long, heavy and thin, straight and curved lines with powerful, confident strokes.

Van Gogh used those lines to define space and the different objects within that space. These lines were also used to create a rich variety of textures that added visual interest to buildings, pavement, and sky. Observe how the placement of those lines adds an exciting sense of rhythm or movement to the drawing. Now, direct your attention to the different light and dark values in this work. Do you see how the light values used to identify the shapes of the café, terrace, and awning contrast with the darker

values used to define the pavement, surrounding buildings, and sky? In this way, van Gogh suggests a bright, artificial light that attracts the viewer's eye to the most important parts of his composition.

Clearly he wanted to emphasize the café, illuminated by a huge lantern and surrounded by the shadows of night. The pattern of contrasting lines and carefully balanced light and dark values result in a unified, appealing drawing that expressed what van Gogh saw and felt.

Did You Know?

Few artists accomplished as much work in so little time as Vincent van Gogh. His artistic career spanned just ten years. During this time, he received only one favorable review and sold only one painting. He tried to sell a painting of dazzling yellow sunflowers for 125 dollars but no one was willing to buy it—until long after his death. Yet, in 1987 this same painting of sunflowers was sold at auction for almost forty million dollars!

This brief discussion of van Gogh's drawing shows how much you can learn from an artwork by focusing attention on the elements and principles. To emphasize this point, reread the previous three paragraphs and list the elements and principles discussed. You will find that reference was made to five elements (line, space, texture, value, and shape) and four principles (variety, rhythm, emphasis, and balance). You may have also discovered how the artist used these elements and principles to achieve an overall sense of unity or wholeness in the composition. This drawing demonstrates how the elements and principles of art can work together to produce a satisfying work of art.

Let's examine each of the elements and principles individually. Keep in mind, however, that these elements and principles are not used independently in a drawing. They work together in van Gogh's drawing just as they do in all successful works of art. Considering them separately here, however, will help you learn how each one functions in drawing.

LINE

To draw, an artist moves a pointed instrument such as a pen, pencil, crayon, or brush over a smooth surface, leaving marks. The generally accepted name for these marks is line. Line is probably the oldest, and certainly the most direct, means of visual communication. It is also the main element of drawing, although other elements—such as value, shape, and texture—are also important.

Lines can be used in many different ways, depending on the intent and the style of the artist, the instrument used to create them, and the surface on which they are made. Rapidly drawn lines can quickly capture a person's actions and attitude. An artist can use a more unhurried, controlled line to draw an exact likeness of a carefully posed model.

Paul Klee wasn't interested in capturing action or in making an exact likeness in *The Mocker Mocked* (Figure 1.3). He used a single, unbroken line to draw a portrait, although it is not a portrait of a particular person. His line scurries, turns, and twists across the page in a playful way before it finally comes to rest at the point where it started. Klee used what might be labeled a consistent line in his portrait. Notice that the line's thickness and value remain consistent along its entire length, although it twists and curves in many directions.

Lines can change from dark to light or from thick to thin. They can be curving or straight, unbroken or interrupted, long and short. How the artist uses the element of line expresses feelings or ideas about a subject.

SHAPE AND FORM

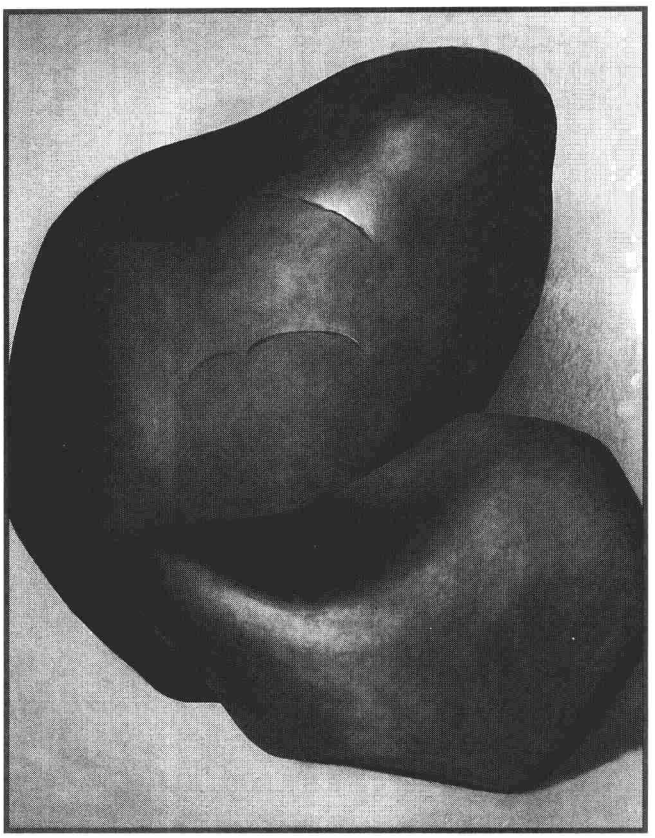
An area that is determined by line, value, texture, space, or any combination of these other elements is a shape. Sometimes a shape may have exact, easily recognized boundaries or edges. At other times its boundaries aren't clear.

When Georgia O'Keeffe was working on the drawing in Figure 1.4, she didn't think only about how to draw the dark positive shapes. She also directed attention to the empty or negative shapes that were created by placing the positive shapes on the paper (Figure 1.5, page 8). *A positive shape* is

▲ Find the beginning or end of the line used to draw this portrait. Do you agree with the statement that this line "actually seems to be moving"? Is this line movement more important than the fact that it is used to depict a head?

FIGURE 1.3 Paul Klee. *The Mocker Mocked.* 1930. Oil on canvas. 43.2 x 52.4 cm (17 x 20⅝"). Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York. Gift of J. B. Neumann.

often called a **figure**, and *negative shape or shapes* are referred to as a **ground**. The negative shapes contribute as much to the overall effect of a finished composition as the positive shapes. For example, what if O'Keeffe had decided to place the large positive shapes in the center of the page (Figure 1.6, page 8)? The resulting negative shapes would be quite different. The overall effect of the drawing would be less satisfying. (See Figure 2 in Color Section I.)



▲ Why would you describe the objects in this drawing as forms rather than shapes? How is a shape drawn to look like a form? Can you find a drawing in this chapter that emphasizes shape rather than form?

FIGURE 1.4 Georgia O'Keeffe. *My Heart.* 1944. Pastel on paper. 69.9 x 54.6 cm (27½ x 21½"). The Museum of Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. Collection of the West Texas Museum Association.

Traditional drawings and paintings clearly separate positive and negative shapes. More recent artists, however, for a variety of reasons, seem less concerned about separating the two. As a consequence, it is often difficult for the viewer to determine from the pattern of shapes which ones belong to the figure and which to the ground.

In some drawings, shapes appear solid and three-dimensional even though they are limited to two dimensions, length and width. The flat, two-dimensional appearance of shape sets it apart from form. In drawings and paintings, form has an implied third dimension, depth, in addition to length and width.

Artists usually suggest form on paper or canvas by using *value gradation*. This means that the artist uses a gradual change from dark to light areas to

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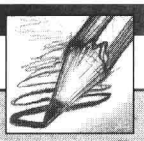
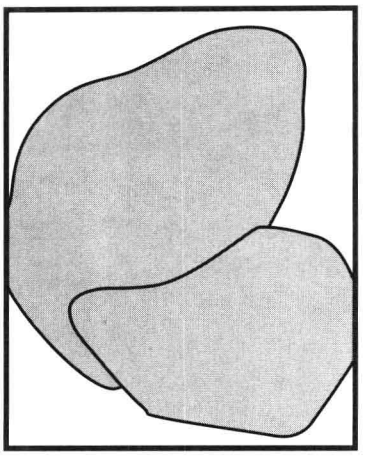
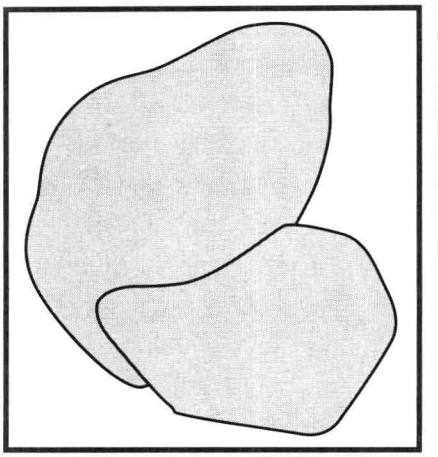


Identify Shape and Form

Examine the drawings illustrated in this book. Can you identify one with precise, easily discernible boundaries and one whose boundaries lack precision and clarity? How do these two different ways of creating shapes affect the overall appearance of the drawings?



▶ **FIGURE 1.5**
The shaded areas are referred to as positive shapes or figures. The unshaded areas are known as negative shapes or ground.



◀ **FIGURE 1.6**
The placement of positive shapes in a drawing determines the size and configuration of the negative shapes. It also affects the overall design.

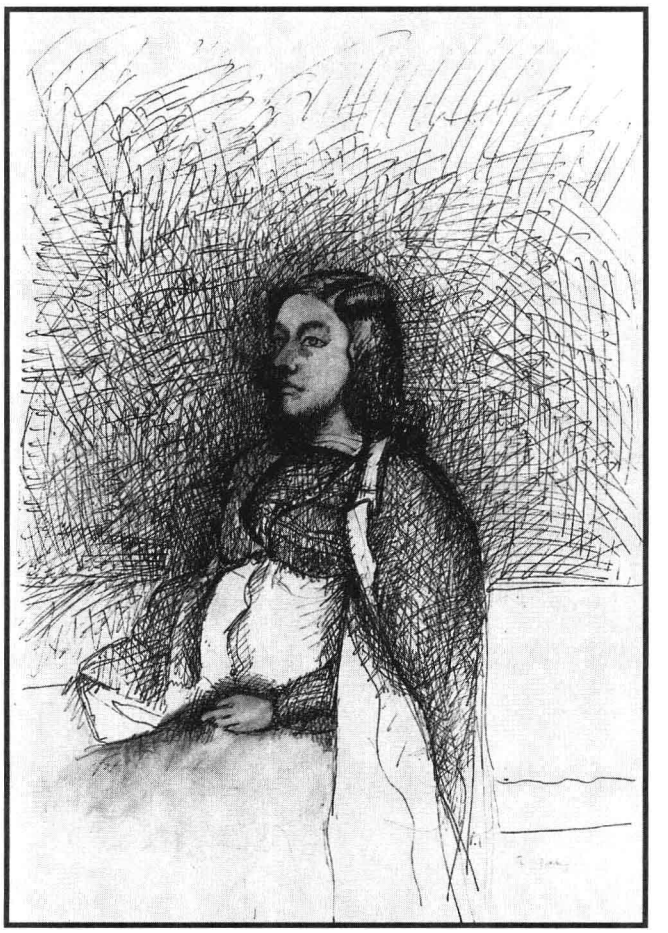
create the illusion of roundness and solidity. This technique is clearly illustrated in Figure 1.4, page 7.

Another technique, **cross-hatching**, or *sets of parallel overlapping lines* can also be used to create areas of differing degrees of darkness. When the parallel lines are built on top of each other, a dense pattern of dark area is created. By gradually reducing the density of these areas, an artist can add a sense of roundness to the forms. This is a type of value gradation noted in Gorky's portrait of his wife in Figure 1.7.

■ VALUE

The artist's use of light and dark areas in a drawing or painting is referred to as a *value*. As noted earlier, gradual value changes can suggest the roundness of three-dimensional forms shown on a two-dimensional surface. Abrupt changes of value, on the other hand, result in contrasts that can indicate planes at various angles to each other.

Value is an element that can be used in many different ways. Notice how Rubens used a change of values, from the dark figures in the foreground, or front, to the progressively lighter figures in the background, or back, to create the illusion of space in his drawing of a group of people celebrating a wedding (Figure 1.8). On the other hand, Goya used a sharp contrast of dark and light values to emphasize the figures in his work illustrating one of the disasters of war (Figure 2.4), page 23.



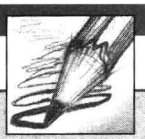
▲ **Although later in his career Gorky became noted for nonobjective art, he also executed literal works such as the one above.**

FIGURE 1.7 Arshile Gorky. *Portrait of the Artist's Wife, "Mougouch."* c. 1943. Pen and ink, brush and wash on wove paper. 35.3 x 23.8 cm (13¾ x 9⅜"). Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. Thomas E. Benesch Memorial Collection. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. I. W. Burnham II.

▲ **This seventeenth-century artist is admired for his large-scale paintings of exciting events. He prepared for these by completing sketches like this one. What has he done to indicate that these people are round and solid and exist in real space?**

FIGURE 1.8 Peter Paul Rubens. *The Garden of Love* (right portion). c. Late 1500s to early 1600s. Pen and brown ink, brown and gray-green wash, heightened with light blue paint, over black chalk, on paper. 47.7 x 70.7 cm (18¾ x 27¹³⁄₁₆"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Fletcher Fund.

SHARPENING YOUR SKILLS



Find Visual Texture

Vincent van Gogh used a variety of pens to simulate different textures in his drawing of the café (Figure 1.2, on page 4). Can you find other examples of simulated texture among the drawings illustrated in this book? In class discuss the techniques of the artists.

■ TEXTURE

"Be careful, the seat on that old bench is rough!"

"I really like the coarse feeling of this wool sweater."

"I'm going to sand the fender of that old car until it's as smooth as glass."

Whenever people talk about an object as being rough or coarse or smooth, they are referring to its *texture*. This is the element of art that appeals to the sense of touch.

When looking at paintings in a museum, you might have noticed that some are smooth and even. There is little to distract your eye as it glides over their glossy surfaces. In other paintings, however, artists have used heavy applications of paint that produced uneven surfaces of ridges and furrows. This technique adds to their tactile and visual impact. *Tactile* means appealing to the sense of touch.

The desire for a rich, tactile surface has caused artists to go beyond applying thick layers of color.