

ROSALIND RAGANS

ARTTALK



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ROSALIND RAGANS


ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
MARVIN PITTMAN LABORATORY SCHOOL
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
GEORGIA SOUTHERN COLLEGE



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With the exception of the photographs listed below, all photographs of student works and studio techniques were taken by Patricia Meisel.

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Larry Hughston, pages 104, 141, 276, 283, 285 and 286.

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Art educators have paid a great deal of lip service to the ideal of teaching art history, criticism and aesthetics along with artistic performance. For a long time we have claimed that studio *activities* and art appreciation *subject matter* are combined in our classrooms. And sometimes they are. Usually, however, we concentrate on making art while dropping a few artists' names and titles of works as a bow in the direction of art appreciation. Finally, in *Art-Talk*, we have a book that puts it all together. Rosalind Ragans makes good on our educational claims and demonstrates conclusively that art appreciation and art skills can be taught effectively in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Dr. Ragans is an experienced classroom teacher—she knows young students and knows how to talk to them. The lessons in this book are based on years of classroom practice, plus a long career in the training of art teachers. At the same time, she is fully conversant with the theory and techniques of art criticism and knows how to present her material in a form that makes sense to students. The linguistic model that she has chosen for her book reflects a sure grasp of what students can understand, what administrators can learn (if they try), and what teachers need.

Readers of this book will feel that they are in the hands of a professional—one who speaks in concrete terms, offers no advice unless it has been tested first, and has a realistic idea of what can be accomplished within the constraints of today's schools. Her teaching practices are designed to be used by beginners and more advanced students, and by the artistically and academically gifted, as well as those whose skills and aptitudes are less developed. I think users of this book will be helped, too, by the abundance of reproductions of art works by students and by major artists. These are meant to stimulate artistic growth as well as to provide images for the practice of art criticism.

I must confess to a strong sense of pride in seeing Rosalind Ragans' book come before the public. She was my graduate student some years ago, and, as this text testifies, she went on to do what we hope all our doctoral advisees will do: write an important book. She has done this under often trying circumstances, and with unfailing courage and good humor. This book was not easily conceived nor instantly written and published: it has gone through the crucible of much personal and professional struggle. For these and other reasons, *ArtTalk* deserves the attention of teachers. Rosalind Ragans is above all a teacher. As you read on I think you will agree.

Edmund Burke Feldman

ALUMNI FOUNDATION PROFESSOR OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

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Appreciating the Visual Arts

In *ArtTalk* you will be learning about the **visual arts**. These are the arts that produce beautiful objects to look at. The visual arts include all objects created for visual appeal—including those that serve a useful purpose.

When they think of visual arts, most people first think of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Some people might add photography and filmmaking to the list. But today, the world of visual art also includes the crafts; industrial, fashion, and interior design; landscape architecture; television production; and the new computer arts.

Why should you read about and learn how to make visual art? Because the visual arts serve the same purposes today that they've served since the early history of humanity. They satisfy human needs—both personal needs and group needs. They satisfy our needs for display and celebration. They also satisfy our physical needs for useful objects and shelter.

Among the strongest needs satisfied by the visual arts are our needs for personal expression and communication. We use the visual arts to express our innermost feelings and to communicate our ideas. Whether we create a painting to hang on the wall or a decorated food container, we are communicating our feelings and ideas to others, through the visual arts.

In this first part of *ArtTalk* you will learn about the language of visual art. You will begin to learn how to look at art in new ways. You will also learn about the many different kinds of art created through history and the career opportunities in art today. After completing Part One, you will be ready to begin creating your own art. You will also be on your way toward developing a fuller appreciation for the visual arts.

Figure 1.1 This painting tells more than a simple story of a hero rescuing a helpless maiden. How is the scene in the painting different from a modern movie about monsters, heroes, and helpless victims?

Raphael. *Saint George and the Dragon*. c. 1506. Oil on wood. 28.5 × 21.5 cm (11⅛ × 8⅜"). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.



The Language of Art

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- understand the purpose of this book.
- realize there is a language of art that can be learned and practiced.
- name and describe the parts of a work of art.
- name the elements of art and the principles of design.

WORDS TO LEARN

In this chapter you will learn the meanings of the words listed below.

content
elements of art
form
media
medium
principles of design
subject
symbol

When you talk to someone or write a letter, you *communicate*. You share your ideas and feelings with someone. You use words—either spoken or written—to communicate a message.

You can also communicate through the arts. The arts offer you a very special type of communication. They are languages for expressing ideas and feelings that everyday words cannot explain. The arts talk in ways that go beyond simply describing something or telling a story.

The arts can cross the language barriers of different countries. You do not need to speak French to understand a painting by Renoir. You don't need to speak German to appreciate a Beethoven symphony. Mikhail Baryshnikov may speak English with a Russian accent, but when he dances, the language of his movement is understood all around the world.

The arts may even help us communicate with beings from other planets. For example, in 1972 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officials attached a special plaque to Pioneer 10, the first rocket sent beyond our solar system. On the plaque were drawings of earthlings and a diagram of our solar system. NASA thought that these objects of visual art had the greatest possibility of successfully communicating with whatever beings the rocket probe might encounter.

The Elements and Principles

You know that there are many different languages. English, Spanish, and French are just a few.

Each language has its own system of words, phrases, and rules. To learn a new language you need to learn a whole new set of words and a new set of rules for putting those words together.

It is the same with the language of visual art. All of the objects we look at are made up of certain common elements. They are arranged according to certain basic principles. As you learn these basic elements and principles, you will learn the language of art.

Being able to speak the language of visual art will help you in many ways. It will increase your appreciation and enjoyment of art. It will help you talk about art with other people. It will even help you produce more beautiful and meaningful works of your own.

The Elements of Art

Symbols are visual images that stand for, or represent, something else. In the English language we use words, which are symbols, to communicate with others. In the language of art we communicate through visual symbols other than words.

The basic visual symbols in the language of art are known as the **elements of art**. Just as there

Figure 1.2 Using a variety of lines, Dürer created shiny, fuzzy, and smooth textures. Can you find them? He also controlled the lines to create the impression of different fabric weights. Can you guess what kinds of fabrics were used to make the woman's clothes?

Albrecht Dürer. *Young Woman in Netherlandish Dress*. 1521. Brush drawing in water and body color. 28.3 × 21 cm (11 1/8 × 8 1/4"). Syma Busiel Fund.



are basic kinds of words—such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on—there are basic kinds of art elements. These are *line*, *shape* and *form*, *space*, *value*, *color*, and *texture*. These elements are the visual “pieces” that artists put together to build a work of art. No matter how a visual image is made, it will contain some or all of these elements.

It is difficult to separate one element from another when you are looking at a visual image. When you look at a painting, for instance, you may see a rough, red square outlined with a dark black line. But rather than seeing the elements of texture (rough), color (red), shape (square), and line (dark black) separately, you see them all at once. You see the object as a whole. You will visually “read” the elements together.

Sometimes, however, the differences are not clear-cut. A line may be so wide that it looks like a shape. Or a line may be placed so close to the other lines that, together, they create a texture, such as you see in Figure 1-2.

When you first learned to read, you did not begin with a full-length novel. You started to read one word at a time. That is how you will start to read the language of art: one element at a time.

Because the elements of art are so important, several chapters of *ArtTalk* are devoted to them. After you have studied them in depth, you will have learned a large share of the art language vocabulary.

Principles of Design

After you have learned to recognize the elements of art, you will learn the ways in which the elements can be put together. When you learn a language, you learn the rules of grammar by which words are organized into sentences. Without these rules people would find it very difficult to communicate.

Visual images are also organized by means of rules. These rules are called the **principles of design**. These rules are guides that artists developed as they saw how people reacted to visual images.

The principles of design help artists organize the elements of art for certain effects. The principles are closely related to the way art communicates, and they are the subject of several chapters in *ArtTalk*. The principles you will learn about are *rhythm*, *movement*, *balance*, *proportion*, *variety*, *emphasis*, and *unity* (Figure 1-3).

The Media of Art

The material used to make an art object is called the **medium**. The medium can be something such as paint, glass, metal, or fibers. If a sculptor takes copper and welds it into a piece of sculpture, the copper is the medium. What was the medium used in the sculpture shown in Figure 1-9 (page 10)?

You should know that the word medium has an unusual plural form. It is **media**. You should also know that some people confuse different types of art with art media. Sculpture, for example, is a type of art. The metal used by the sculptor is the medium. Architecture is a type of art; concrete is a medium used by the architect.



Figure 1.3 The ancient Greek artist who created this vase used the principles of design. The artist organized the elements of line, shape, value, color, and texture to create a design that complements the basic form of the vase.

The Pan Painter. *Young Hunter with Dog* (Attic Red Figure Lekythos). 5th century B.C. 0.392 m (1'3½") high. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts. The Francis Bartlett Fund.



Figures 1.4 and 1.5 The images you see in these two works by Winslow Homer are almost exactly alike. The difference is that one is painted with thin, wet, flowing watercolor paint, while the other is painted with thick, creamy oil paint. Can you describe the different effects these two materials have on the same subject?

Figure 1.4 (above) Winslow Homer. *Sketch for Hound and Hunter*. 1892. Watercolor. 35.4 × 50.3 cm (13⁷/₈ × 19⁷/₈"). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel.

Figure 1.5 (below) Winslow Homer. *Hound and Hunter*. 1892. Oil on canvas. 71.8 × 122.3 cm (28¹/₄ × 48¹/₈"). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Stephen C. Clark.

The Work of Art

Every work of art, whether it is a painting to hang on the wall or a chair to sit in, has three main parts. These parts are the *subject*, the *form*, and the *content*.

Subject

The **subject** of a work of art is the part of the work that the viewer can easily recognize. The subject might be a person, a tree, or a house. In some paintings nothing is really recognizable. The subjects of these paintings will be discussed later. The subject of a work of art that has a function, such as a chair, is the chair itself.

What is the subject of the painting in Figure 1-6?

Form

The second part of a work of art is the **form** of the work. The form is the artist's unique way of using the elements, principles, and media. For example, suppose that an architect designs a house

so that the bottom part only is to be covered in brick. The architect's decisions about the material—brick—and how it is to be used—on the bottom only—have to do with the form the architect has chosen.

Content

The third, and most important, part of a work of art is the **content**. The content is the message that the artist is trying to communicate using the language of art. The content may be an idea or

Figure 1.6 This large historical painting records one event in the siege of Gibraltar, when the British defended the huge rock from the Spaniards in 1784. Everyone in the scene is carefully posed to create a scene of dignity. You have probably seen real war on the evening news. Did the people in the news stories have immaculate uniforms and pose in such pleasing arrangements?

John Trumbull. *The Sortie Made by the Garrison of Gibraltar*. 1789. Oil on canvas. 180.3 × 271.8 cm (71 × 107"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Purchase.

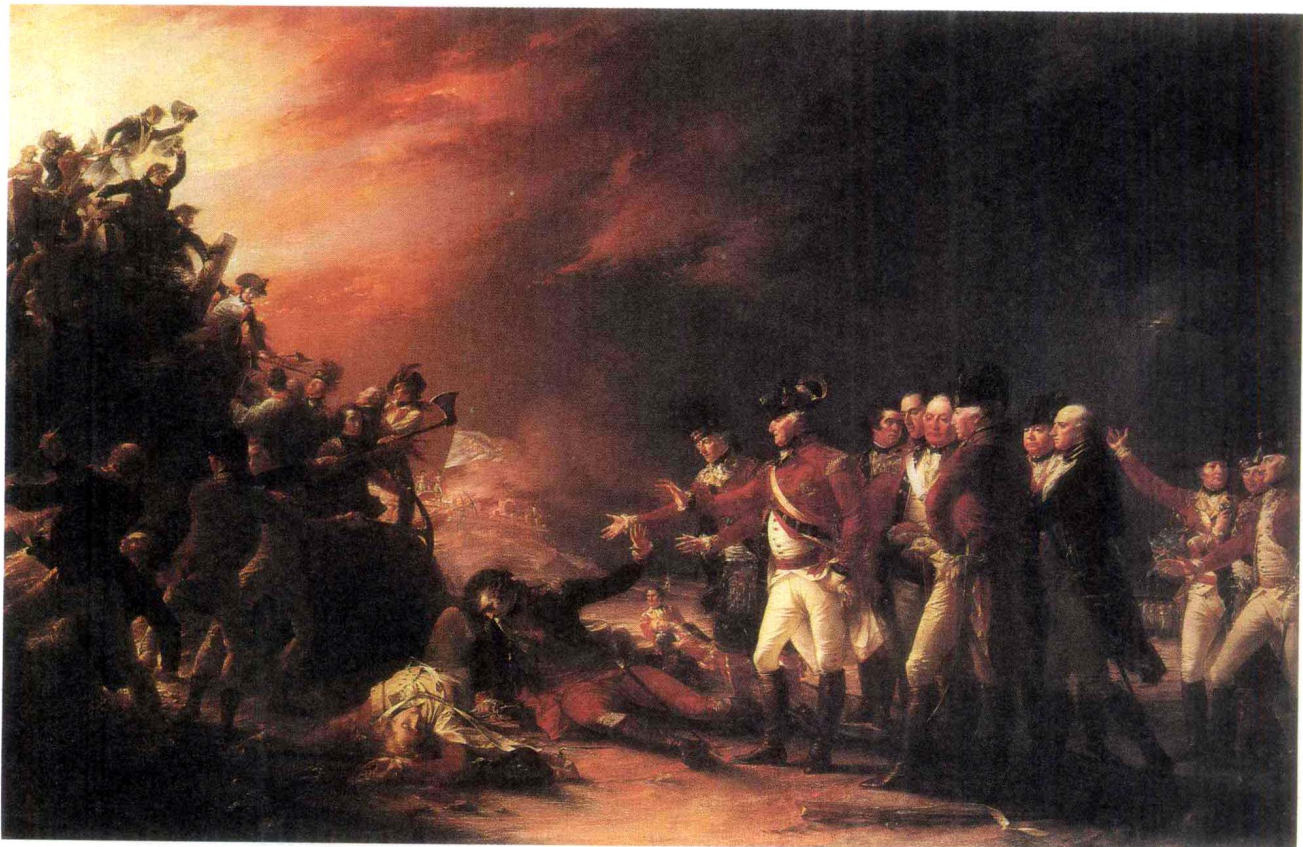


Figure 1.7 These paintings are from the NASA space art collection. Each artist painted the same subject: a Saturn rocket with its service tower and gantry. Yet each artist has created an individual statement by using different arrangements of elements, principles, and media.

Figure 1.7A Kingman interpreted the subject in terms of his Oriental heritage. He transformed the rocket into a pagoda form. Why do you think he included the birds, hot air balloon, and single-engine plane? Notice the many areas of clear white paper.

Dong Kingman. *Higher, Faster, and Farther*. 1969. Watercolor on paper. 71.1 × 91.4 cm (28 × 36"). Courtesy of NASA.

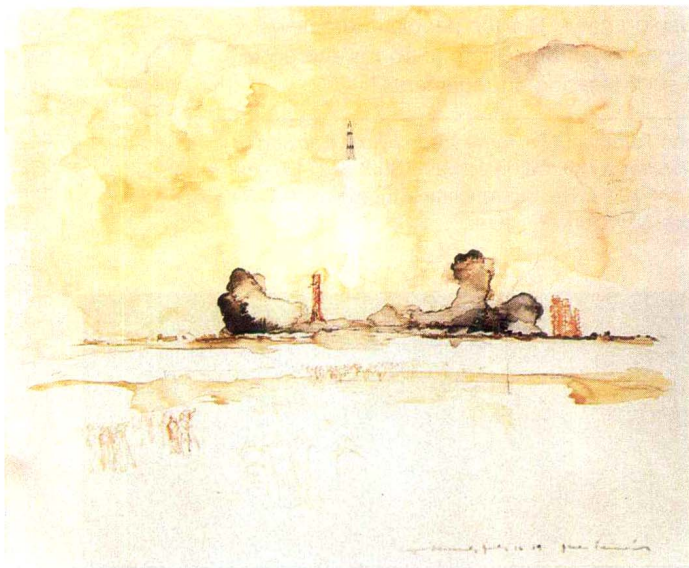
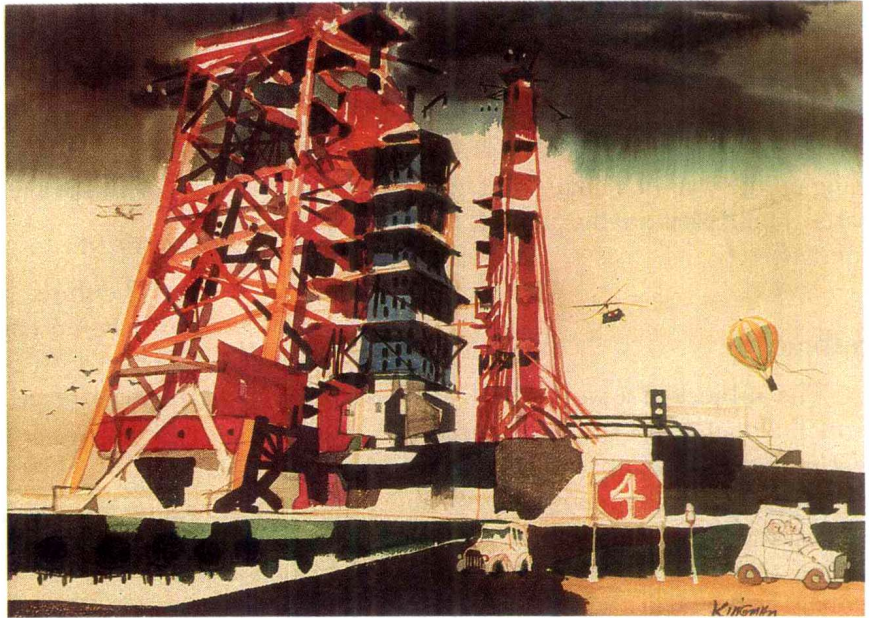


Figure 1.7B Fernandez saw the launch as a graceful leap from the earth's surface. He bathed his work in the glowing colors of the morning sun. If you look closely, you can see the audience along the bank of the Banana River, almost hidden in the brilliance of the light.

Julio Fernandes. *Apollo 11*. 1969. Watercolor on paper. 34.3 × 40.6 cm (13½ × 16"). Courtesy of NASA.

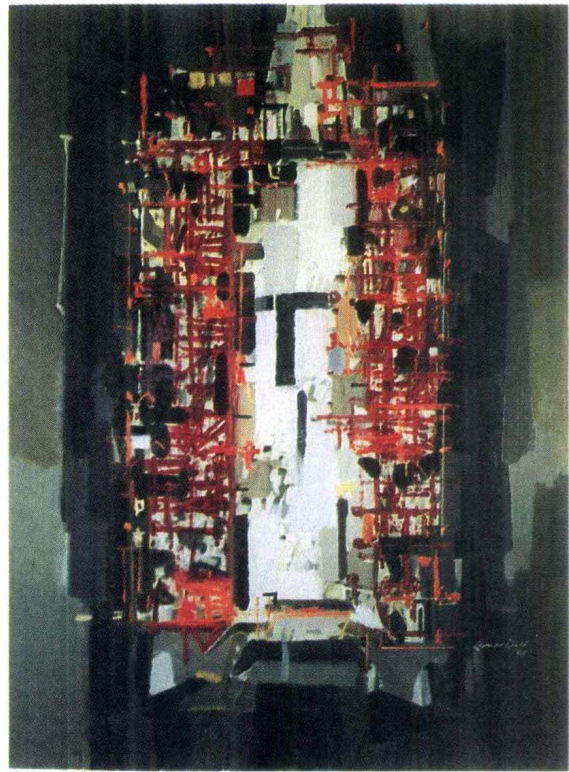


Figure 1.7C Dodd captures the glowing Saturn rocket encased in its web of red supports. He sees beyond the mechanical forms to portray for us the effect it has on his emotions.

Lamar Dodd. *Night Before Launch*. 1969. Oil on canvas. 127.5 × 91.4 cm (50 × 36"). Courtesy of NASA.