Shape and Form

Categories of Shape & Form
Shape and Form
Key Vocabulary

✓ shape
✓ form
✓ geometric shape
✓ organic shape
✓ static
✓ dynamic
WHEN A LINE CURVES AROUND and crosses itself or intersects other lines to enclose a space, it creates a shape.
Similar to a silhouette or an outline, a shape is two-dimensional.

It has height and width, but no depth. It has one boundary and a single surface.
We can easily identify many objects from guitars to light bulbs, by their shape alone.
The word *form* describes something with three dimensions: length, width, and depth. Forms usually have weight and solidity.
They may have only one continuous surface, like a Bingo ball. Or they may have many surfaces, like a fish tank or a pinecone.
Sculptors, architects, and product designers generally work with forms. They create, solid structures, which have actual volume. Cartoonists, painters, photographers, and collage artists, on the other hand, usually work in two dimensions, even when they are depicting forms. When an artist paints an apple; for example, he or she may use the apple's shape and shading to create the illusion of three-dimensionality, or form. But the image itself has only two dimensions.
Think about the variety of shapes and forms that can be found on a single tree.

*Trees.* Photo by A. W. Porter.
The artist has allowed the familiar shape of an octopus to surround this jar.

The figure is created from a series of well-defined and precisely cut forms.

Pre-columbian (Zapotec, AD 200-900), *Urn in the form of Cocijo, God of Lightning and Rain*, from Monte Alban IIa, AD 400-500. Fired clay, 28 1/2" x 21" x 18" (72.4 x 53.3 x 45.7 cm). Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Photo by Michael Bodycomb, 1987.
Categories of Shapes

Artists and designers use various types of shapes and forms to create their finished products. As an artist, you will explore these types and how they affect you as both artist and viewer. Shapes and forms can be described using the same terms in many cases.
Geometric and Organic Shapes

Shapes fit easily into two basic categories: geometric and organic. Geometric shapes are precise and sharply defined. Many of them are easy to recognize, such as circles, squares, and triangles. We often see such shapes in architecture. Also, many manufactured and hand-made products are based on geometric shapes. Nature shows us some geometric shapes and forms too. Honeybees make combs whose cells are in the shape of a hexagon, and an orange resembles the form of a sphere.
Although you may recognize certain geometric shapes in nature, most natural objects have organic shapes. Organic shapes reflect the free-flowing aspects of growth. They are curved or rounded and appear in a variety of informal and irregular shapes. The form of a pear is organic. So too is the shape of a maple leaf.
Old Maple, Lake George 1926
by Georgia O'keeffe
Organic Shapes created by nature

These rock formations have been shaped by natural forces such as wind and water.

*Rock*. Photo by A. W. Porter.
David Smith sculpted many similar works, which he also called *Cubi*. In all of them, he explored design problems dealing with simple geometric forms in space.


**Geometric shapes in sculpture**
Geometric and organic shapes may be either curved or angular. Shapes that are curved are graceful, and because the eye rapidly sweeps along them without interruption, they tend to imply movement.

Construction 8
Creator: José De Rivera
(1904-1985)
Angular shapes, on the other hand, are straight-edged. They suggest strength and regularity. When you look at angular shapes, your eyes move along the shape and stop momentarily where one shape connects with another. These meeting or opposing shapes may add a sense of tension to a design. If an angular shape, for instance, leans to one side, it might suggest movement.

geometric shapes
  rigid
  severe
  confining

organic shapes
  fluid
  free
  natural
Every design - whether it is a painting, sculpture, building, or photograph - is made of positive and negative shapes. Positive shapes are the tangible, actual aspects of a design. In painting or drawing, they often represent solid forms, such as a bowl of fruit in a still life. In sculpture, the positive shapes are the solid forms of the sculpture itself.
Negative shapes are the areas that either surround the positive shapes or exist between them. In a still-life painting, they are the spaces around the bowl of fruit, between fruit forms, or in the background. In sculpture, the negative shapes are the empty spaces around and between the solid forms.

Positive and negative shapes are equally important. A successful design is one that carefully balances both.
Look at the pre-Columbian *Pendant figure*. Notice that the artist placed two curved openings above the figure's arms. These negative shapes echo both the curves of the figure's headdress above and those of the blade below. Together, the positive and negative shapes create a unified whole.
How has Jacob Lawrence unified the negative areas of this painting?
