Two-Dimensional Design
Basic Element Line

Line

Launching the Imagination: A Guide to Two-Dimensional Design
by Mary Stewart
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Line is one of the simplest and most versatile elements of design. Line may be defined as:

The inherent dynamism of line is embodied in the first definition (1. A point in motion).

The remaining three definitions (2. A series of adjacent points; 3. A connection between points; 4. An implied connection between points.) emphasize the connective power of line. Lighter and more fluid than any of the other visual elements, line can add a special energy to a design. Simply by drawing a line, we can activate a space, define a shape, or create a compositional bridge.
Line Quality: Orientation, Direction, Continuity, Media

A Diagonal  B Horizontal  C Vertical  D Continuous curve

Line orientation and continuity.
As simple as line may seem, it can convey entire concepts when used effectively.

Expressive lines depend on line quality, which is determined by its Orientation:

**Diagonal** (the most dynamic),

**Horizontal** (the most stable or static),

**Vertical** (potential change, static or dynamic).
**Direction**: the implied movement of a line (swelling suggests forward or outward movement, shrinking suggests inward movement).

**Continuity**: linear flow (continuous line generates stronger sense of direction than a broken or jagged line).
Media: each material produces its own range of distinctive lines types, line thickness, continuity and darkness.

Graphite can produce modulating lines of varying thickness.

Ink pens produce a crisp, clean, emphatic line.

Charcoal is black, often soft, and highly responsive to each change in pressure and direction.

Brush and ink offer even wider variation in line width, continuity, and darkness.

By experimenting with the range of marks each instrument can produce, you can use each material more expressively.
The network of agitated lines Giacometti used suggests anxiety, tension.

The fluid lines of Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston’s original sketch (1938) of Mickey Mouse express movement and energy.
Barnett Newman used to very different lines in *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani, The First Station*. The solid black line gains stability through its parallel position along the edge of the painting. In contrast, the line on the right is agitated and exposed, surrounded by open space. In this painting, Newman used just two lines to express both spiritual strength and human fragility.
Line

*Actual lines can describe complex forms simply and eloquently.*

**Actual Lines:** Contour (interior & exterior edges)
Gesture drawing (action and posture)
Volume summary (basic forms)
Calligraphic (“beautiful writing”, movement)
Organizational (skeleton or framework)
Eleanor Dickinson used pen and ink **contour lines** to define both the inner and outer edges of a woman’s hands. Through contour drawing, the complex anatomy was distilled down to a few simple lines.
Rico Lebrun’s **gesture drawing** of a hand captures essential action rather than describing anatomical detail. We focus on what the hand is **doing** rather than on what the hand **is**.

Sarah Simblet, Hands
Rembrandt often used economical lines to describe the spheres and cylindrical volumes from which figures are made. Because it communicates information using basic volumes, this type of line drawing is often called a volume summary.

Calligraphic ("beautiful writing", movement)

Calligraphic lines can add even more energy to a drawing or a design. The word calligraphy is derived from two Greek words: kalus, meaning “beautiful,” and graphein, meaning “to write.” Like handwriting, the calligraphic line is both personal and highly expressive. In *Flying Cranes and Poetry*, words and images are combined in a celebration of flight. Painter Tawaraya Sotatsu and calligrapher Hon’ami Koetsu used variations in line weight and continuity to suggest the graceful motion of birds.

This exploration of movement is pushed even further in *Pine Spirit*, by Wu Guanzhong. Fluid ink lines record the movement of the artist’s hand while simultaneously creating an abstract landscape. There is wonderful economy in this drawing. Like poetry, a rich story is told using minimal means.
Organizational lines are often used to create the loose linear “skeleton” on which a composition can be built. Ideas can be developed quickly through line, and compositional changes can be made easily.

The following examples are schematic drawing for figure drawing of the human body. The schematic sketch plots or diagrams the configuration of the pose and the body’s underlying geometric structure.
A schematic drawing often has the appearance of an architectural framework or scaffolding, with one line buttressing or tying into another.
As shone in the Giacometti drawing these skeletal drawings have great energy and may be presented as artworks in themselves.

Organizational (skeleton or framework)

Organizational lines provide the framework for elaborate compositions. In the analysis of Alfred Leslie’s *The Killing Cycle*, there is underlying framework. A dead man on a diagonal board connects a single woman in the lower left corner to the four figures in the upper right. A horizontal line supports these four figures, while their bent arms and legs create even more diagonal lines. The diagonal lines add energy to the composition, while the horizontal line increases stability.
Alfred Leslie

Oil on canvas, 9 x 6 ft.
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
*The Entombment of Christ*, (1602-1603)
Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome
Implied Lines

Lines can play a major role in a design even when they are implied rather than actually being drawn. Because **implied lines** simply *suggest* connections, the viewer must become actively involved in compositions that are constructed using this type of line.
We have a natural inclination to seek visual unity. Given enough clues, we will connect separate visual parts by filling in the missing pieces. The visual clues may be quite obvious.

A series of dots can create an implied line.

We can easily link the circles to create a linear spiral.
In other cases, the clues are subtle. In Minor White’s *Sandblaster*, the white arrow implies a connection between the numbers in the foreground and the worker’s helmet.
Implied Lines: suggested through inclination for closure

Inclination to connect fragmentary information is called closure. “Lost and found” contours require an elegant form of closure. In a “lost and found” composition, the edges of some shapes are clearly defined, while other shapes appear to merge with the background. When presented with such an image, the viewer must create a mental bridge between the visual information given and not given.
Jan Le Witt  b. 1907

Self-Portrait

Oil on paper 324 x 242 (12 3/4 x 9)
Not inscribed
AN & R, 10 March 1951, vol.3, no. 3, text anon.


The Killing Cycle is an example of a lost and found composition. Three of the top four figures are clearly delineated, while the lower two figures and upper top figure begin to merge with the surrounding space.
This effect is even more pronounced in Caravaggio’s *The Deposition*, the painting from which Leslie derived his inspiration.

Caravaggio, *The Deposition*, 1604. Oil on canvas, 9 ft. 10 1/8 in. X 6 ft. 7 3/4 in.
A line drawing of this image has many gaps, as details are lost in the shadows. Used skillfully, this loss of definition becomes a strength rather than a weakness. Connections made through closure can stimulate the viewer's imagination and encourage a more personal interpretation.
Line Networks:

Hatching (straight parallel lines for range of grays)

Cross-hatching (wider range)

Cross contours (curving parallel lines)
Multiple lines can add detail to a design and create a convincing illusion of space.

**Hatching** produces a range of grays through straight parallel lines.

An even wider range of grays can be produced through **cross-hatching**, which creates a more complex network of lines.

**Cross-contours** can create an even more powerful illusion of three-dimensionality. Often created using curving parallel lines, cross-contours “map” surface variation across shapes or objects.

Hatching, cross-hatching, as well as cross-contour are often combined.
Hatching (parallel lines)

Alfred Hrdlicka  1928–
Running Man 1970. Ink 48 x 63 cm (18 7/8 x 24 3/4 in)
Collection of the artist
Cross Hatching:
hatching at right-angles to create a mesh-like pattern

multiple layers in varying directions can be used to create textures.

in cross hatching you crisscross several layers of hatching in order to darken your tones
Study for Nude with Cat
Balthus (Baltusz Klossowski de Rola) (French, 1908-2001)
"I WOULD LIKE TO THANK MY PARENTS FOR GIVING ME AN EXTRAORDINARY PACKAGE OF GENETICS." -- TINA LOCKWOOD

"BOY, I'LL SAY!" -- R. CRUMB, 1998

( Drawn from a photo)
Detail:

Creator: Robert Crumb, American, b. 1943
Title: Exhibition: Picturing the Modern Amazon
       Tina Lockwood
Work Type: Drawing
Date   Exhibition: 3/30/2000-6/25/2000
Work: 1998
Material: Ink on paper
Cross contours
(curving parallel lines)

In *Head of a Satyr*, Michelangelo used all of these techniques, hatching, cross-hatching, as well as cross-contour to visually carve out the curves and planes of the head.

Pen and ink over chalk
10 5/8 X 7 7/8 in.
Line networks play an equally important role in abstract and nonobjective art. Jackson Pollock dripped and spattered house paint to produce *White Light*. Seeking universal meaning rather than conventional representation, Pollock spontaneously generated many layers of lines on a large piece of canvas. He then trimmed the canvas, discarding the weaker sections of the design. The remain lines seem to flow in and out of the painting. Clusters of silvery enamel form swirling, textural masses that are punctuated by explosions of red and yellow.
Jackson Pollock
*White Light*, 1954.
Oil, enamel, aluminum
paint on canvas.
48 ¼ X 38 ¼ in.

Schneemann performed this work nine times between 1971 and 1976, always intending to make it into an installation. In a comment on what she has described as the “physicalized painting process” of Jackson Pollock, she marked the walls and floor in a paper-covered enclosure with crayons as she raised and lowered herself in a tree surgeon’s harness, hovering just above the surface of the drawing; ultimately, the work records the lines her body made in space. The performances were videotaped, and that footage, along with the harness, rope, and drawings, is on display. Schneemann’s work has always focused primarily on painting, but her important forays into film and performance have allowed her to explore the links between art and everyday life.
Up To And Including Her Limits was the direct result of Pollock's physicalized painting process.

I am suspended in a tree surgeon's harness on a three-quarter-inch manila rope, a rope which I can raise or lower manually to sustain an entranced period of drawing—my extended arm holds crayons which stroke the surrounding walls, accumulating a web of colored marks. My entire body becomes the agency of visual traces, vestige of the body's energy in motion.
Set in a train station, this drawing explores the psychological dimensions of travel in modern life, relying heavily on line. In States of Mind: The Farewells, undulating lines express the chaotic, milling movement of people and the direct progress of the train through space as its steam billows into the sky. This richly layered drawing, together with the related works States of Mind: Those Who Go and States of Mind: Those Who Stay exemplify the Futurist equation of line with movement and modern technology.
Lyubov Popova (Russian, 1889–1924). *Space-Force Construction*. 1921
Using Line

Line can be used to define, enclose, connect, or dissect.

Line serves all of these purposes in a New York City subway map.
Path Station Maps

Description
Three-dimensional color images map multilevel pathways in a complex urban transportation center, helping passengers to visualize their path from the platform to the street.

Collections: Information Graphics, Design of Understanding
Discipline: Information Design
Format: Information graphic, Signage, Map

Credits
Art director: Louis Nelson
Designer: Jennifer Stoller
Client: Port Authority/Port Authority Trans Hudson
A curved line has been combined with an angular line to define the wheelchair logo.

Another line encloses this logo within a square, emphasizing its importance.
Diagonal lines connect the subway entrance to the elevators. Vertical lines dissect the drawing to highlight the location of the elevators.

This seemingly simple design communicates complex information clearly.

Using this map, a person in a wheelchair can navigate through a busy station and catch the right train.
Careful use of the four edges of a sheet of paper can strengthen any design. In a sense, the first line we draw is actually the fifth line in the composition. In his *Self-Portrait*, Joel Peter Johnson used drawn lines to repeat the four edges of the composition. The resulting box enclosed four small shapes on the left and the number on the right. Johnson’s head breaks out of this boundary. As a result the portrait appears to extend beyond the painting’s edge and into the world of the viewer.

*Joel Peter Johnson, Self Portrait.*
Oil on board, 9 x 8 in.
originally commissioned for the *philadelphia inquirer magazine*, the painting was later re-used by *aiga* for a national call for entries poster. the piece received a silver medal by the society of illustrators 40th annual exhibition.
Lines serve many purposes at once.

*Seeds of the Cities*
SenseTeam, Hong Kong, China, 2009

**Description:**
This is the visual identity system for Huasen Architecture Company’s touring exhibitions. Perforated characters are composed of and shown by dots. Every exhibition area employs dynamic LED to show its indicating system. We designed a new kind of LED character for this system that will be used on the logo, posters, books, invitations and handbags. The LED characters show texture through punching holes and circle from right to left. The posters symbolize the city’s endless extension.
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN DETOUR EXHIBITION
Juror Notes:
Loved the dimensionality of these pieces and the textures, seeing the light through the punctures. Didn’t really see the dots as “seeds” but liked the shapes they formed.
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