Texture

Launching the Imagination:
A Comprehensive Guide to Basic Design

Chapter One
pp. 22-29

by Mary Stewart
The surface quality of a two-dimensional shape or a three-dimensional volume is called **texture**. Texture engages our sense of touch as well as our vision, and it can enhance the visual surface and conceptual meaning of a design.
Types of Texture

Physical texture  —  actual variations in a surface
• the woven texture of canvas
• the bumpy texture of thickly applied paint
• the rough texture of wood grain

Visual texture  —  is an illusion
• can be created by using multiple marks or through a simulation of physical texture
Albrecht Durer’s *The Knight, Death and the Devil* employs both visual and physical texture. The knight’s armor, the horse’s glossy hide, the dog’s furry coat, and other details were created through cross-contours, cross-hatching, and patterns of dots called stippling. All are examples of visual texture.
Furthermore, this print is an *engraving*. Each dot and line was carefully carved into a thin sheet of copper. Ink was pressed into the grooves, and the surface metal was wiped clean. The plate was then positioned face up on a printing press, and damp paper was laid over it. Both were cranked through the press, transferring the ink and creating a subtle embossment. As a result, physical texture accentuates the visual texture in this image.
Invented texture is one form of visual texture.

Using invented texture, the artist or designer can activate a surface using shapes that have no direct reference to perceptual reality.
Bruce Conner used invented textures from many sources to construct his paper collage *Psychedelicatessen Owner*. Floral patterns, visual gemstones, and cross-contours were combined to create a witty and improbable portrait.

Bruce Conner  
*Psychedelicatesson Owner*,  
March 31, 1990  
Paper collage  
8 x 6 in.
By contrast, Brad Holland drew all of the textures in *Illustration for Confessions of a Short-Order Artist* in pen and ink. As the density of the marks increases, the face dissolves into dark masses of pure energy.
In this ink drawing by Bruce Conner, the density of the mark and variety of mark both dark mass create a separation of figure and ground.

Bruce Conner
*Brunetto Latino*
1956
8 x 6 ¾ in.
ink on paper
Creating Texture

When creating any type of texture, two basic factors are taken into account. First, every material has its own inherent textural quality. Charcoal is characteristically soft and rich, while linocut creates crisp, distinct edges. It is difficult to create soft, atmospheric textures using linocut or to create crisp textures using charcoal.

Lynette Weir is an Australian artist specializing in limited edition hand coloured linocuts, drawing and illustrations of Australian wildflowers and wildlife.
Creating Texture

Second, the support surface contributes its own texture. This surface may be smooth, as with most photographs, or quite bumpy, as with the canvas and embedded collage Jasper Johns used for his *Target*. Thus work with texture requires a heightened sensitivity to both the support surface and the medium used to create the design.

Jasper Johns
*Target with Plaster Casts*
1955
Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects
51 x 44 x 2 ½ in.
Texture and Space

Visual texture is created whenever lines, dots, or other shapes are repeated. Variations in size, density, and orientation of these marks can produce different spatial effects.

Larger and darker marks tend to advance outward.

Finer marks, tightly packed, tend to pull inward.
These marks have been organized into a loose spiral.

The overall impact is strongest when –

• size
• density
• and orientation

are combined.
Douglas Smith combined texture and linear perspective to produce a dramatic illusion of space. The lines of mortar between the bricks all point toward the truck in the center, while the bricks themselves diminish in size as the distance increases. The truck at the bottom of the wall of bricks seems to be trapped in a claustrophobic space.

Douglas Smith
*No Turning*
1986
Scratchboard and watercolor
11 ¼ x 15 in.
By contrast, Robert Indiana’s *The Great American Dream: New York* is spatially shallow. Indiana constructed a three-dimensional model of a coin or medallion from layers of cardboard. He then laid his drawing paper on top of the construction and made a rubbing, using colored pencils. This seeming simple composition can be interpreted in at least three ways.

First, creating a design through rubbing can remind us of the coin rubbings we may have made as children.

Second, in many cultures, rubbing coins evokes wealth or good luck.

Finally, the rubbing itself creates the illusion of the coin or medallion, not the reality. Perhaps the Great American Dream is an *illusion*, ready to dissolve into economic disarray.

Robert Indiana
*The great American Dream: New York (the Glory-Star Version)*
1966
Wax crayon on paper,
Sheet: 39 13/16 x 26 1/8 in
Both spatial and flat textures can be created using letters, numbers, or words. Variations in size, density, and orientation can strongly affect the meaning of these verbal textures.

African-American painter Glen Ligon repeatedly wrote, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” on a gallery wall. As the density of the words increases, the words begin to fuse together, creating variations in the visual texture while reducing verbal clarity.

Glenn Ligon, Untitled (I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background), 1990. Oilstick and gesso on wood, 6 ft. 6 in. x 30 in.
Trompe L’Oeill

Taken to an extreme, visual texture can so resemble reality that a deception occurs. This effect is called trompe l’oeil, from the French term meaning “to fool the eye.” Trompe l’oeil can be come a simple exercise in technical virtuosity or can significantly alter our perception of reality.

By simulating architectural details, Richard Haas created an amazing dialogue between illusion and reality. Using the textures of stones, stairs, and smoke, he created a wall-sized trompe l’oeil painting that actually appears to expand architectural space.
Kirk Hayes (b. 1958, Fort Worth, TX) lives and works in Fort Worth, TX.

On the surface, Kirk Hayes' compositions appear to be collages of torn paper, corrugated cardboard, yellowing masking tape, or scraps of plywood, however these illusory scenes are created by the artist's hand through a self-taught process of using oil paint to imitate collage. Although Hayes' method of painting is distinctly contemporary, the artist draws reference from thousands of years of art history, from Renaissance masterpieces to Roman mural painting, through both his trompe l'oeil technique and through his historical allusions. In a contrasting vein to First-Style Pompeian frescoes, in which Roman painters sought to create the illusion of expensive marble with lesser materials, Hayes seeks to create the illusion of lower-grade materials with the use of oil paints, duping the viewer's eye on the surface.

Kirk Hayes, A Bomb, 2006, oil on panel, 41 × 31 1/8 inches.
Kirk Hayes, *Run my little foo foo run*, 2002... oil on signboard, 35 x 35 inches

Kirk Hayes, *Coronation*, 2002... oil on signboard, 42 x 28 inches
Kirk Hayes' "Protective Covering Smoldering," 2011

Courtesy of Conduit Gallery
It's literally the elephant in the room.

Only in Kirk Hayes' "Protective Covering Smoldering," someone is trying to cover him up. Desperately. But they're doing a terrible job of it. Terrible.
The pink blanket silhouettes what is clearly an elephant. Except, it's not just an elephant. It's also some sort of device with an electrical cord, a tube of red paint, a knife, and a plethora of other items.
And the cloth "covering" him is marked with tape, tied to eyes screwed into the floor with strings straining to hold it down, and smoldering, still, after being set aflame.
The background is a sky blue with clouds and the floor is wooden boards and the figure, the elephant, is all stillness. You imagine him like an ostrich thinking, "I can't see anyone so no one can see me." But we can see him. And he's made all the more obvious by the cloth and the straining and the taping and the smoldering.
It's an elephant under a cloth. But it's really everything.
Everything we try to hide, to brush under the rug, to keep under wraps. And the more we push it aside and cover it up, the more apparent it becomes.
And the more damaged it becomes as well. With that damage, comes the greater chance for discovery until the elephant or the addiction or the affair or whatever it is we're pushing down and aside and away becomes more than just apparent, it becomes all we can see.
Hayes' "Protective Covering Smoldering" is not a painting of an elephant. It's a painting of our elephant, whatever it might be. It's a cautionary tale. It's a cute, cartoony version of it (a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down and all of that) but it's a warning still.
Acknowledge the elephant. He can only smolder for so long. After that, he'll burn.
Each material has a distinctive physical texture, and each drawing method creates a distinctive visual texture. By combining physical and visual textures, we can unify a composition and add another layer of conceptual and compositional energy.

Blended graphite, pastel, or charcoal creates the smooth surface often favored for highly representational images. Claudio Bravo developed the visual textures in *Package* using pastel and charcoal. By carefully drawing every fold, he created a convincing simulation of a three-dimensional object.

Cross-hatching creates a more active visual texture. Dugald Stermer’s portrait of mathematician Bertrand Russell is constructed from a network of vigorous lines. The bumpy texture of the paper adds more energy to this lively drawing.

Physical and visual textures are combined in *Wayland’s Song (with Wing)*. In this myth, a metalsmith named Wayland is captured by the King of Sweden, then crippled and forced to create treasures on demand. In revenge, he murders the king’s sons and makes drinking cups from their skulls. He then flees, suing wings fashioned from metal sheets. By adding straw and a lead wing to the photographic base image, Anselm Kiefer was able to combine illusionistic qualities of painting with the physical immediacy of sculpture.
Every textural mark we make can add to or subtract from the composition as a whole. When the texture is random or inappropriate, the composition becomes cluttered and confused. On the other hand, deliberate use of texture can enhance the illusion of space and increase compositional unity.
Each brushstroke in Benjamin Marra’s Self-Portrait describes a different facet of the face. Just as a sculptor carves out a portrait in plaster, so Marra used bold brushstrokes to carve out this portrait in paint. There are no random marks. Using both visual and physical texture, Marra increased the painting’s immediacy and dimensionality.

thick textural sculptural brushstrokes of Lucian Freud

Freud, Lucian
*Leigh Bowery*
1991
oil on canvas
50.7x40.5cm
Freud, Lucian
*Tristram Powell*
1995-96
oil on canvas
16x30.7cm
Chuck Close’s *Self-Portrait* offers a very different interpretation of the head. Working from a photograph, Close methodically reduced the face to a series of squares within a grid. He then painted circles, diamonds, and other simple shapes inside each square. The grid provides structure, while the loosely painted interior shapes create an unexpected invented texture.
Chuck Close, American, born 1940
*Self-Portrait*
Painting
1997
Oil on canvas
8' 6 x 7' (259.1 x 213.4 cm)
He then painted circles, diamonds, and other simple shapes inside each square.

detail:

Chuck Close
*Self-Portrait*
Painting
1997
Oil on canvas
8' 6 x 7' (259.1 x 213.4 cm)
In Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, the texture of oil paint serves three distinct purposes.

First, it creates a physical texture, suggesting the actual texture of trees in the foreground.

Second, it brings great energy to every painted shape: we feel the wind; we become mesmerized by the glowing whirlpools of light.

Finally, we become connected to the artist himself. Van Gogh’s hand is clearly evident in every brushstroke he made.