

Reading Pictures

Self-Teaching Activities in Art

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A Word to Students

You have probably looked at many works of art without really *seeing* them. Perhaps you have noticed whether they are portraits or landscapes or ballet dancers, or whether they are easy to understand or abstract. You may have quickly said which ones you like and which ones you don't. But most likely you have not noticed many, many things about art. Just as with learning to read, the language of art holds a large number of surprises.

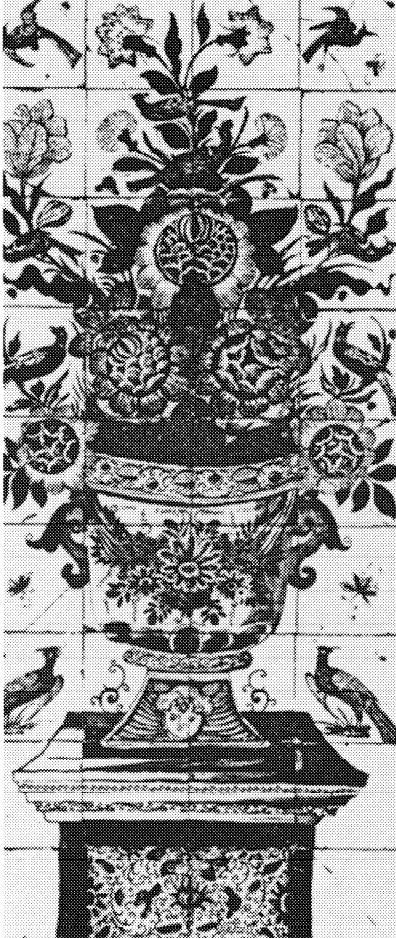
That is why we call this book *Reading Pictures*. These exercises are designed to let you discover for yourself what each artist had in mind, and why his or her work looks different from another artist's work. Each exercise will help you to find important characteristics of a work of art, compare it with others of a similar subject, and finally, figure out for yourself what each picture is about. Sometimes you will have the chance to try your own hand at making art, or to describe in your own words what you see. We hope that when you have completed these exercises you will not only look *at* art, but will see what is in it and get new enjoyment from it.

Please remember that these are not competitive exercises. Sometimes there is no "right" answer. Look at these pieces of art and try to "read" what they have to say. Try to capture the aims and mood of each artist. Do not rush through these questions. (In fact, you may find lots of instances where you will want to continue your answers on another sheet of paper.) Refer to the pictures as you answer and try to keep an open mind about each work of art, whether you find it beautiful, strange, or ugly. Enjoy yourself!

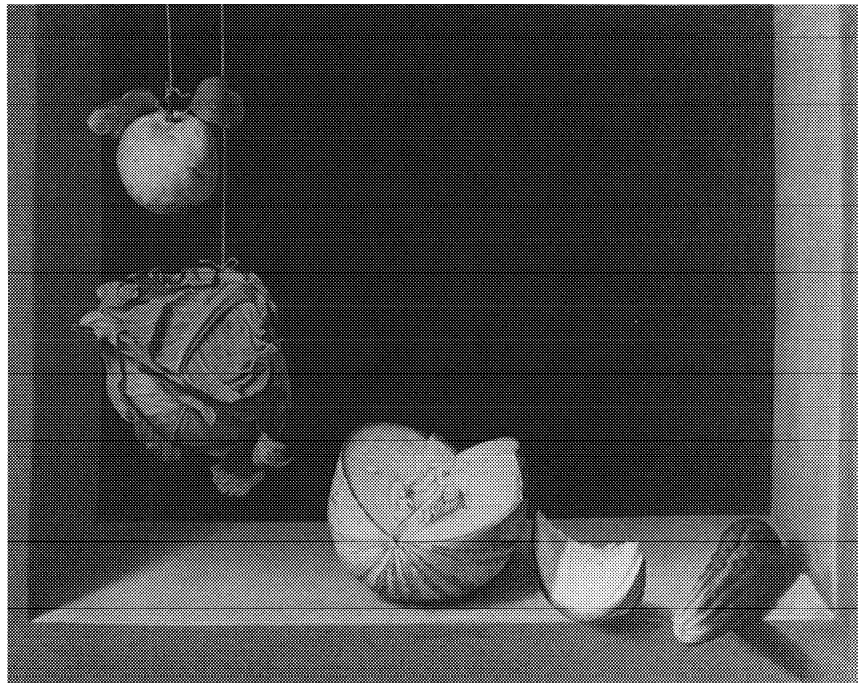
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Exercise 20

What Is Symmetry?



1. Dutch tile design. Early 17th century.



2. Juan Sanchez Cotán. "Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber." c. 1602.

Do you know what *symmetry* or *symmetrical* means? Symmetry is the basis for design in thousands of different kinds of art. See if you can discover some things about symmetry and its opposite, *asymmetry*.

1. Which of these two pictures matches one side to the other, almost exactly? Which is symmetrical, or equally balanced?

2. Which picture is asymmetrical, so that the balance is not equal from one side to the other?

3. Which picture looks more decorative, like the designs you see on wallpaper, pottery, or fabric?

4. Which picture's design moves your eye from one direction to another? Put an arrow on each picture that indicates which way your eyes move when you look at it.

5. In which picture do you see the design as a whole unit, and in which do you look first at one thing and then at the next? Explain your answer.

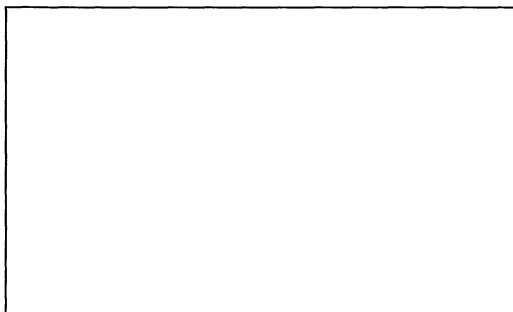
6. Why do you suppose the artist of picture 2 hung two objects on strings?

7. What would you suppose is the relationship between the different fruits and vegetables in picture 2? (Clue: Note that some of the fruit is cut and opened, some whole, and that they have different shapes.)

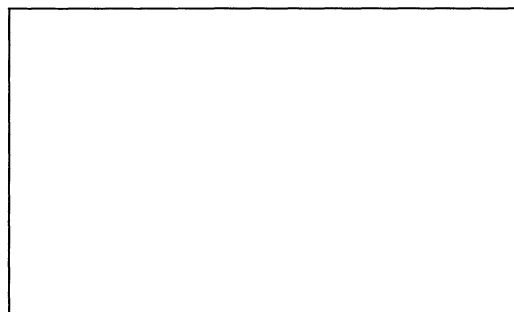
8. What symmetrical objects can you see in your classroom? (Clue: Look for a clock, a vase, etc.)

9. Which kind of balance—symmetry or asymmetry—is more peaceful to look at? More interesting? More disturbing? Which do you prefer? Explain your answer.

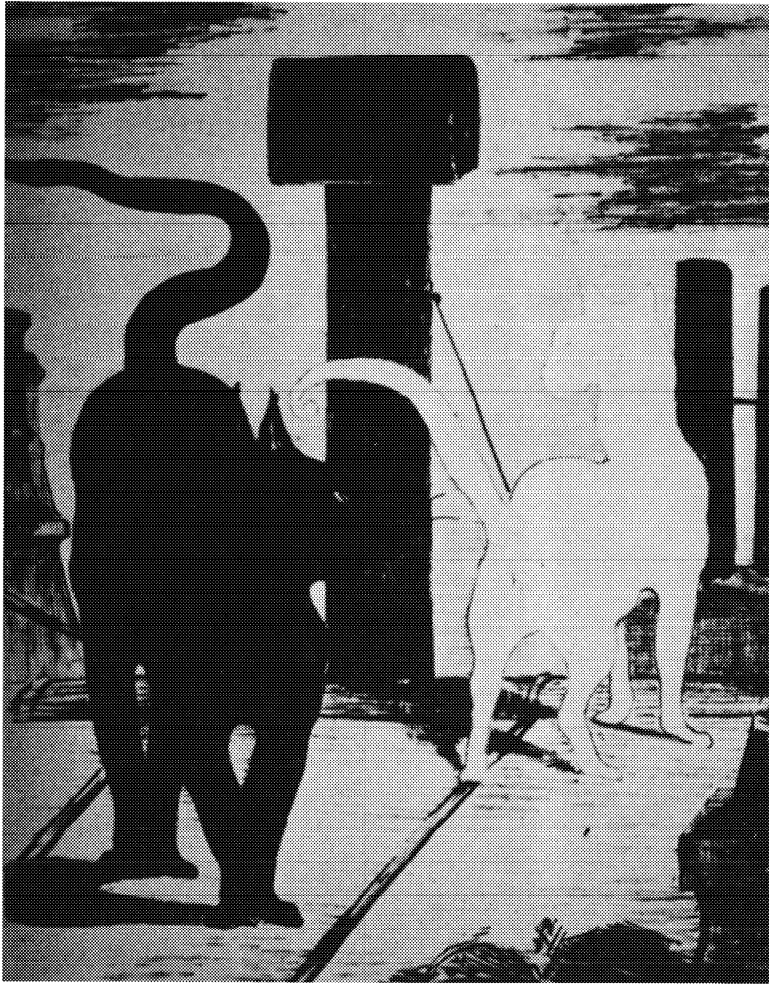
10. In the two boxes below, draw four balls or other objects of your choosing, like fruit, bottles, or flowers. In box 1 set them in a symmetrical pattern (but not exactly like the Dutch tile design). In box 2 set your four objects in an asymmetrical pattern so that they do not balance evenly (but not exactly like the still life).



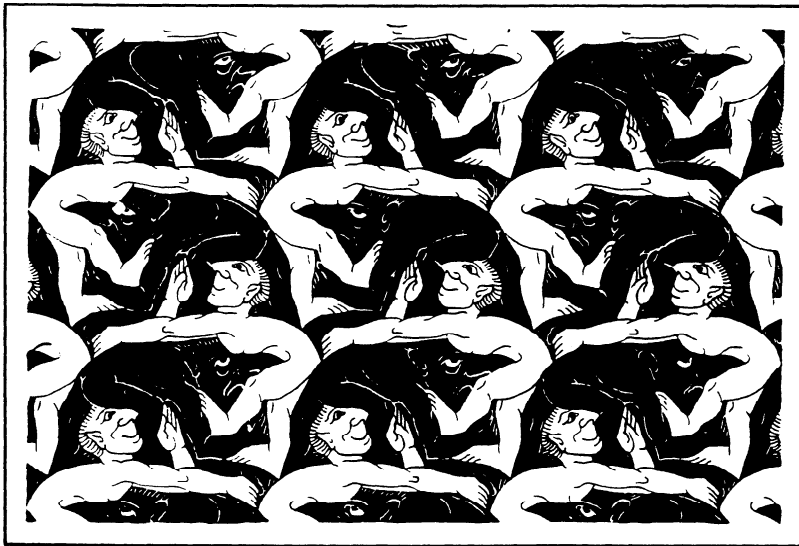
Box 1



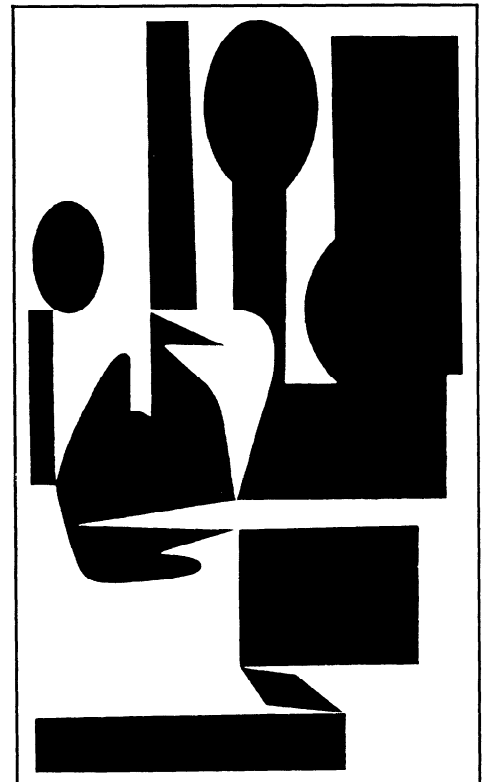
Box 2



1. Edouard Manet. "Cats on the Roof." 1868.



2. M.C. Escher. "Encounter."



3. Victor Vasarely. "Bhopal"

Exercise 21

Black-and-White Design

1. What do all of these pictures have in common?

2. What are the major black areas in picture 1, "Cats on the Roof"?

3. What are the major white areas in the same picture?

4. Are they of equal importance?

5. Which lines are curved; which are straight? Why do the two cats stand out?

6. In picture 2, describe what you see.

7. Which are the major black-and-white areas in picture 2? Explain fully.

8. Which is more important—the black design or the white design? Explain your opinion.

9. Is there "negative" or empty space in this picture? Why or why not?

10. In picture 3, which areas—black or white—seem more important? Explain.

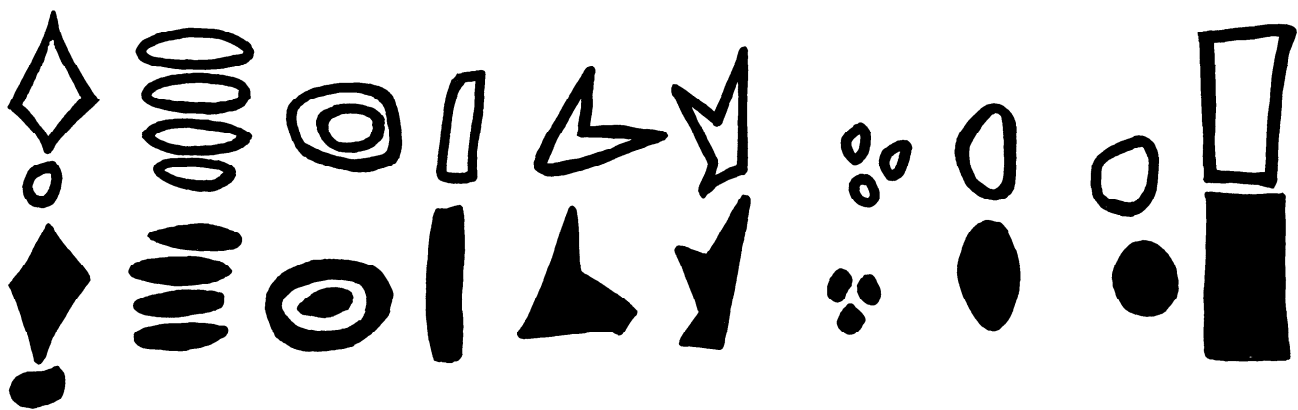
11. If you said you thought they were equal in importance, why do you suppose that is?

12. Would you say there is empty space in this picture? If so, where is it?

13. What are the major contrasts in this picture? (Look at shapes, sizes, etc.)

14. What makes strong black-and-white designs interesting?

15. Photocopy the forms below, cut them out, and on another sheet of paper, arrange them in a design (either realistic or abstract) so that they make a unified, interesting, balanced, and strong black-and-white picture. (You need not use all of the shapes, and you may add lines if you wish.)



Exercise 22

**Mary Cassatt and the Design
of a Painting**



Mary Cassatt. *"The Boating Party."* 1893-94.

This is one of the American artist Mary Cassatt's most famous and beloved paintings. It reflected a number of new ideas in 1893 when it was made. See if you can spot these new ideas.

1. In what way is this picture like a snapshot, instead of a posed picture?

2. What gives it a sense of motion?

3. Impressionists believed in capturing the moment's impression. How does the design of this painting emphasize that idea?

4. Why do you have the impression that you are sitting in the rear of the boat?

5. In what ways is this a realistic picture? Describe what is taking place.

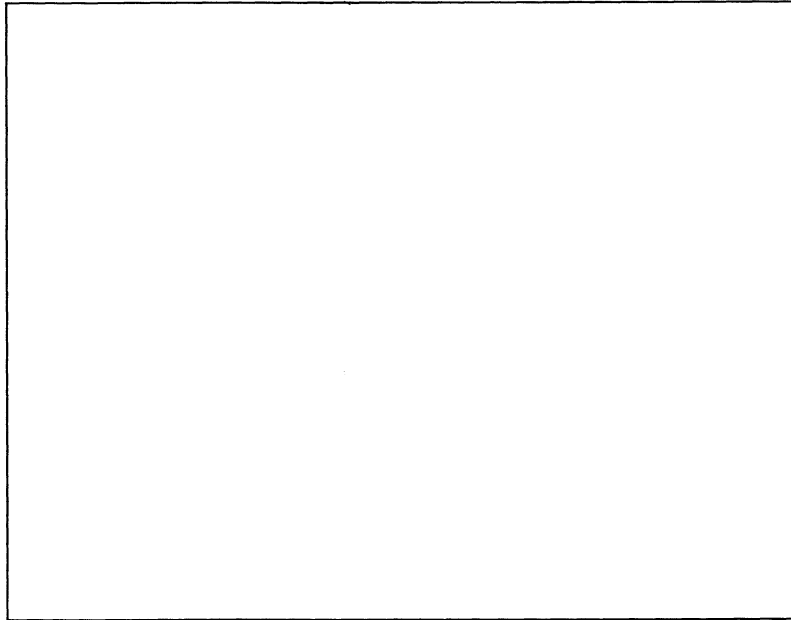
6. In what ways does it seem quite abstract or unrealistic?

7. What would you guess about the woman's social position? Explain your answer.

8. Cassatt almost always chose to paint mothers and children. Why would you guess they were her favorite subject?

9. Why do you think Cassatt's Impressionist-style paintings were poorly received in America, but accepted in Europe? What would be some reasons that Americans disliked her style of painting?

10. Two of the major influences on Cassatt were Japanese woodcut prints and the works of Edgar Degas. Both the prints and Degas' works explored asymmetrical, balanced design. In the box below, draw a big "X" dividing the space into quarters. (This will help you figure out what goes where.) Now draw in the major areas of the picture, such as the rounded outline of the boat, the oars, the sail, the horizon line, and the people.



11. Find the wide-edged triangle that is an important part of the design. Outline it.
12. Find the major diagonal "thrust" that cuts the picture in two. Draw it.
13. Blacken in the darkest area and outline the lightest.
14. Describe the design of the diagram you have made. Why do you think later abstract artists were so interested in this painting?

15. Do you like this painting? Why or why not?



1. One-dimensional *embroidered dragon*.
Early Ch'ing Dynasty, 17th century.



2. Two-dimensional *tile dragon*.
Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644.



3. Three-dimensional *pottery dragon*.
Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644-1911.