Visualizing Poetry

What would these artworks sound like if they were poems?

How do both writers and artists use repetition, rhythm, pattern, contrast, and balance?

Many compositional elements in poetry have parallels to choices artists make when composing images. This Permanent Collection Portfolio Guide of historic and contemporary paintings and photographs features a sampling of works from the Addison’s collection offering varied perspectives and discussion points for connections between poetry and visual art.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison’s online database.

Selected Thematic Approaches

Tone, Mood, and Atmosphere – What details tell us how the artist might feel about this person, place, or subject matter?

Rhythm, Meter, and Rhyme as Framework – How can using a visual framework ground elements within a composition?

Repetition: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance – Why might artists choose to repeat elements that feel soft, or round, or sharp, or angular?

Repetition: Motif – How do motifs create unity and add to the work’s larger meaning?

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Tone, Mood, and Atmosphere

What details tell us how the artist might feel about this person, place, or subject matter?

What compositional decisions shape how a viewer might feel about this person, place, or subject matter?

Artists use numerous compositional tools, including color, line, light, and shadow, to impact the emotion expressed by their work. George Tooker added layer after layer of egg-tempera paints to build luminous surfaces, often including smoothly modeled sculptural figures with masklike faces that convey a sense of anxiety and alienation. In his landscapes, Ansel Adams patiently waited for the perfect light and utilized special lenses and filters to heighten contrast and create visual drama as he photographed Yosemite. Georgia O’Keeffe eliminated extraneous details, flattened space, and simplified composition to reflect her recollection of her experience of York Beach, Maine: “I loved running down the board walk to the ocean—watching the waves come in, spreading over the hard wet beach—the lighthouse steadily bright far over the waves in the evening when it was almost dark.”

Similar techniques can be used in abstract images. Just as Jackson Pollock’s abstract markmaking echoes the energy of his action painting (see image on page 4 of this guide), Mark Tobey’s Happy Yellow uses darting line and slight shifts in color to differentiate plane from plane and image from image. Imagery of the Northwest—a sea gull, fish, a frog, totem fragments—interact with bright color to imbue place with emotion.
Rhythm, Meter, and Rhyme as Framework

*How can using a visual framework ground elements within a composition?*

*How does repetition create a feeling of organized movement within a work of art or poetry?*

Repetition of elements, such as shape, pattern, or color, can create an organizing sense of movement and rhythm. The underlying structure of George Bellows’s painting *The Circus* balances lively activity with a sense of calming control. The viewer’s eye is drawn into a calculated triangle, from the central performer to the corner figures, while the vertical lines of the receding tent poles and the horizontal bands of the crowd create an organizational grid over the canvas. Charles Sheeler devised complex compositions by overlapping two or more photographic negatives of the same subject, and in his painting *Ballardvale* he repeats color and shape to unify the mill, tower, and sky into a balanced composition. Terry Winters’s rhythmic swoops and line breaks evoke abstract interpretations of blueprints or topographical maps, as additional lines layer the framework from the left and swirl in the center.

This visual framework can also be emphasized through photographic compositions. 1930’s street photographer Aaron Siskind’s rhythmic, pattern-focused image belays his future interest in abstraction. Ansel Adams, known for his high contrast nature photography, uses the darkness between aspen trees to highlight each tree individually as well as the pattern or rhythm they create.
Repetition: Alliteration, Consonance, Assonance

How can the placement of repeated elements in art direct the viewer’s attention in the way aural elements can in a poem?

Why might artists choose to repeat elements that feel soft, or round, or sharp, or angular?

Repetition can be used to direct and highlight. **Winslow Homer** uses yellow and olive sweeps of grass to form compelling diagonals rising to the left, emphasizing the power of nature via the wind against which both the right-leaning figure and shrub struggle. The angular geometry of city architecture, with its repeated verticals, juxtaposes the horizontal lower half of **Edward Hopper**’s *Manhattan Bridge Loop*. The exaggerated horizontal format of the canvas emphasizes the outstretched emptiness of the sidewalk occupied by the lone figure and his shadow.

Action painter **Jackson Pollock** often bent over a canvas on the floor, flinging and pouring paint, repeating the same physical motion over and over again. The results are a three-dimensional rhythmic record of his actions. Loosely gridded and often map-like, **Mark Bradford**’s works reference the artist’s interest in the urban communities from which he excavates his materials. The ridges in his collaged work condense in some areas and spread apart in others, forming patterns that move the viewer’s eye throughout the work.
Repetition: Motif

What connections can be made between motifs in poetry, music, and art?

How do motifs create unity and add to the work’s larger meaning?

Artists often repeat key ideas in their work for emphasis and to create unity. The painter Stuart Davis wrote about the angle and the triangle as the basic units of pictorial construction, and depicted the vertical, angular structure of ships’ masts and the grid pattern of their rigging in his work Red Cart. This grid pattern reappears throughout the composition in different guises, including along the top edge as the backdrop against which the harbor scene appears to hang, attached by rope through an eyelet. Grid or checkerboard pattern unites areas of Berenice Abbott’s photograph EL 2nd and 3rd Avenue Lines, as well.

Albert Bierstadt, known for his dramatic 19th century landscapes, represents a sunlit summit surrounded by shadowed ridges through a series of enlarged, minimized, and inverted triangles in his composition The Snow Mountain. Similarly, Frederick Remington constructs a series of repeating shapes in Moonlight Wolf, as the triangle of sky mimics the triangle of water, the arch of the wolf’s back parallels the line of the sloping hills, the white-tipped tail mimics the shape of the tip of the shoreline, and the wolf’s eyes reflect the yellow of the stars.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

History/Social Studies
- reflections of world history in literary and art history

English
- repetition
- rhythm
- meter
- end rhyme, internal rhyme, slant rhyme
- enjambment
- alliteration, consonance, assonance
- motif
- onomatopoeia
- mood, tone, atmosphere
- ekphrastic poetry

Art
- abstraction
- minimalism
- impressionism
- abstract expressionism
- action painting
- repetition
- pattern
- motif
- composition
- mood, tone, atmosphere
- negative space
- perception and point of view
- line and shape
- color theory and color relationships

Science
- color theory and perception

Math
- geometry
- patterns
- ratios
- scaling

CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS

Visualizing Math
Visualizing Science
Visualizing Music
Representing the Land

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

artnet news. “10 Art Works Inspired by Great Literature for Your Summer Reading List.”
https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-inspired-literature-559481
A collection of artworks, both historic and contemporary, inspired by literature.

http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/listed-poems-inspired-paintings
A selection of ten poems and the paintings that inspired them.

http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/poetry_and_art/
Discover a myriad of lessons, ideas, and multimedia that explore creative expression and inquiry at the crossroads of poetry and visual art.

http://www.metmuseum.org/connections/poetry
In this poetry-focused episode of their staff perspective video series, the museum’s website editor reflects upon the intermingling of poetry and art.

https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/tag/poetry/
Posts from the MoMA blog tagged ‘poetry.’