Line
The difficulty about working with line is in the knowing what it is, how far it can be pushed, and when it stops being line and becomes something else. Dictionaries and art books offer lengthy explanations of line. Paul Klee’s definition is “A line is a dot out for a walk.” In general, a line is a mark whose length is considerably greater than its width.
The distinction between lines and shapes is a subtle one that sometimes depends on *scale* - the relationship between the size of an image and the size of its surroundings. Large surroundings can dwarf a shape and turn it into a line;
small surroundings can make a line appear to expand into a shape.
A letter of the alphabet blown up far larger than its usual scale may stop being linear and instead become a shape.
In Robert Smithson’s earthwork *Spiral Jetty* a point of rocks 15 feet wide seems to be a curling line if seen from a distance, for it is surrounded by an even greater expanse of water. But if you take four pieces of paper and gradually cover up more and more of the surroundings of the spiral, at some point you may see it too, as a shape.
Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Black rock, salt crystals, earth, red water (algae); coil 1500’ (457 m) long, 15’ (4.6 m) wide. Great Salt Lake, Utah.
Creating Lines
Lines can be used to create texture or gray values.
A line is formed along an edge where two values meet.
A line is formed along an edge where two surfaces meet.
A line is formed along an edge where two surfaces intersect.
By heightening the value contrast (the degree of difference between light and dark areas) along the hairline and features of her self-portrait, Kaethe Kollwitz has created lines without actually drawing them.

Kathe Kollwitz (German, 1867 - 1945)
Selbstbildnis (Self-Portrait)
1919
Original lithograph on handmade Vellum paper. An impression from an edition of 175. Hand signed by the artist in pencil, lower right. The lithographic stone was destroyed.

Image size: 14 3/4" x 12"
Sheet size: 19 3/4" x 15 3/4"
Catalogue Reference: Klipstein 133, Knesebeck 143 II
Inventory# 50513
By heightening the value contrast (the degree of difference between light and dark areas) along the features of her self-portrait, Kaethe Kollwitz has created lines without actually drawing them.
Architecture may use striking lines. The line of water Louis Kahn placed in the center of the Salk Institute court is totally nonfunctional, but it is an exciting focal point in this architectural environment.
Reuben Nakian uses a sharp edged tool to draw into terra cotta. The clay’s bulky structure heightens the sharp, thin quality of the lines by contrast.
Reuben Nakian (American, 1897-1986), *Europa and the Bull with Cupid*. Ink & brush drawing, 1959-1960. Frank O'Hara's Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalogue illustrates 4 of the Europa series drawings on p. 23, one of which also includes Cupid. O'Hara also includes photographs of two of the Europa sculptures on p. 13. Nakian is known as well for his sculpture. An important modernist sculptor who favored mythological themes, his work was featured in a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966. Drawn on a thin white sheet and later folded (though not quite so prominent a fold as appears in our photograph). Signed lower right with the brush. Image size: 225x192mm.
In some designs, the motion used to create line is part of the excitement. In Japanese *calligraphy* (the art of fine handwriting) the first lessons are given as large arm movements in the air. The calligraphic tradition of line as arm movement has strongly influenced many Western artists. The result of these fast brush strokes, as in the book cover designed by Antoni Tapies, is a spontaneous and free-flowing line.
7½ × 8″ (19 × 20 cm). Filograf R.G.M., Institute of Graphic Art, Barcelona.
A flowing quality in line does not indicate that the motion used to make it was totally spontaneous. There is a certain element of chance in such works, but Japanese calligraphers train for years before they can "spontaneously" produce beautiful lines. When Jackson Pollock flung paint from a brush onto huge canvases, he did not do so randomly. He worked with this technique for so long that he developed tremendous control of his arm movements, making possible carefully calculated effects such as exciting color juxtapositions.
Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956
Lucifer, 1947
Implied Lines
Sometimes we see lines that do not exist. These are *implied lines*. If someone draws a circle or square shape in the air with fingers, you “see” the shape.
Implied lines: a square “seen” in the middle.
Implied lines: a circle “seen” in the middle.
In Josef Albers’ *Sanctuary* very strong implied lines can be seen along the diagonals where the true lines of the composition change direction.
The same illusion can be created in a three-dimensional piece such as Sol LeWitt’s cube.
Expressive Quality of Line
By themselves, lines have little emotional character. There are fat lines and thin lines, light lines and dark lines, straight lines, curving lines, and jagged lines. Within a work of art, however, lines may be used to express the emotional attitude toward the subject the artist wishes to convey.
Manas Halder  Sometime 2006  hand & ink  Kolkata
Cy Twombly creates a happy, spontaneous feeling by using thin lines that keep crossing each other, reminiscent of a child’s scribblings.

Cy Twombly
*Leda and The Swan* 1962. Oil, pencil and crayon on canvas 6' 3" x 6' 6 3/4" (190.5 x 200 cm)
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<tr>
<td><strong>ARTIST:</strong></td>
<td>Frank Auerbach</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>WORK DATE:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GALLERY:</strong></td>
<td>Marlborough Fine Art Ltd.  +44 (0) 20 7629 5161</td>
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Honore Daumier

Study of Female Dancers

Black Chalk and Conte Crayon on Paper

Musee du Louvre, Paris, France
Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi. Sketch for Kakemono-e of Takiwa Gozen. Ink on paper, $9\frac{1}{2}\times 22\frac{3}{8}$".
Collection, Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde,
Leiden, The Netherlands.
Three Men Laughing - Honoré Daumier, 1808-1879
2. „Nu au rocking chair“ (Weiblicher Akt im Schaukelsessel), Lithographie 1913, 50,3 x 33 cm, Abbildung 49,3 x 27,2 cm
Exemplar signiert, nummeriert, Auflage ca. 55 Exemplare
Duthuit 410, pl. 17
18. „Danseuse“ aus „Dix danseuses“ („Tänzerin“ aus „Zehn Tänzerinnen“), Lithographie 1927, 32,8 x 50,4 cm, Abbildung 15,7 x 41,5 cm
Exemplar „épreuve B“ (hors commerce) signiert, bezeichnet, Auflage ca.166 Exemplare
Duthuit 486, pl. 94
Egon Schiele self-portrait
Egon Schiele self-portrait
Egon Schiele self-portrait
Line Drawings
When a line is used to depict forms that can be linked to the objective world, artists must be keenly aware of the cultural experiences that shape viewers’ responses. To people in our culture, the child’s drawing is obviously a human body. Even though it does not really look like one, it approximates the conventional model for figures children in this culture learn to use at an early age. To people from a different culture, this sight might not suggest a human figure at all, since their shorthand for a figure might be entirely different.
Since the mind refuses to accept chaos, it will try to fit lines it perceives into some category it has built up from previous experiences. For example, scribbled spirals may be interpreted as seashells. In some ways, this tendency restricts artists’ freedom to make viewers see what they intend, but it also opens up new possibilities. Skillful designers play with the tendency to see familiar forms in everything by using only a minimum of visual clues to evoke a far more elaborate response. The forms outlined in Ellsworth Kelly’s Apples could be anything or less spherical - rocks, oranges, bean bags. But the addition of a tiny clue - a stem like mark sticking out of the tops of some of these shapes - allows viewers to recognize them immediately as apples. Seen by themselves, the marks would not really look like stems. In juxtaposition to the apple shapes, however, they allow viewers to interpret the drawing as Kelly intended.
Henri Matisse.
*Maria Lani.* Drawing.
A Matisse head assumes the same kind of visual sophistication on the part of the viewer. It actually consists of only a series of disconnected lines. People are so accustomed to looking at faces that they immediately see these lines as whole face, interpreting one line as an eyebrow, another as a mouth, another as a chin, and so on. The line that suggests an ear is merely a half-circle, but viewers easily associate it with the far more complex shape of the human ear. If these lines were separated, they could be rearranged to form a totally nonobjective unit. Here the lines have lost all identity other than their own. But the way Matisse put them together gives viewers no choice but to interpret them as a face.
Nonobjective rearrangement of the lines in *Maria Lani*.
Positive and Negative Areas
Use of line also involves issues of what are sometimes called positive and negative areas in a work of art. A positive area appears to be occupied or filled in contrast to negative areas, which appear empty or unoccupied. What is positive in a design is not necessarily the equivalent of areas that have been worked with a medium. Viewers will not automatically respond to lines laid down as positive figures seen against the negative background of an unworked surface. Rather than drawing the viewer’s attention to themselves, lines may draw attention to shapes they define in unworked areas. Many people see two lines as a strip of something on a background. Two diagonal lines might be seen as three triangular shapes. Even when a line clearly exists as a linear figure against a background it is seen not in isolation but in relationship to the edges of the paper.
Two lines that may be seen as a shape.
Two lines that create three shapes.
Relationship of a line to the edge of a design.
Line’s potential for controlling viewers’ response to unfilled areas should not be overlooked - and can, in fact, be skillfully used to advantage. In Picasso’s Nude very little area is actually covered by line, but the unfilled areas are working as hard as the drawn-in lines. In Picasso’s drawing the deceptively simple lines tell viewers to construct in their imaginations a woman’s body on the left side of the design. The left side is no more filled in than the right side, yet viewers obligingly see a form rounded outward on the left and receding space on the right. If you crop off some of the empty space on the right, you will find that the figure tends to flatten out. The unworked area is actively helping to create the desired three-dimensional illusion.
It is inaccurate to view unworked space as the “passive” part of a design, and worked areas as “active.” The principle involved is more dynamic: In an effective design, unworked areas are as active as anything else; they just happen to be made of the surface with which the designer started. Unworked areas can advance, recede, or enhance illusions and the same is true of worked areas.
Design: Principles and Problems
Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher
pp. 46-55