1.5: How to Compare and Contrast Art

Comparing modern paintings and historic paintings brings an understanding of how the past influences the present. Learning the elements of art, design, and art methods will help you communicate and write with a new language to compare and contrast art. In this textbook, we will be comparing and contrasting ordinary images of horses, figures, sunflowers, and dots. Like a new language, it becomes more familiar the more the terms used in written descriptions. Looking at art is the foundation of learning how to write descriptive essays. The longer you look, the more information you begin to see, like the brush marks. Asking yourself questions about the brush marks can help you define the type of art you are looking at: Impressionism uses significant broad-brush marks with visible slabs of paint. While Renaissance artists used oil paint with almost hidden brush marks giving a life-like look to the painting. These observations will help you decide what period of art painting can belong in when you do not know the answer.

Comparing Horses

The two paintings, *Relay Hunting* (1.9) and *Foundation Sire* (1.10) were created 170 years apart yet are as realistic as photographs taken yesterday. Similar instances, the horses predominantly face away from the viewer displaying the sturdy hind legs and taut muscles. The shining sun marks their coats, reflecting highlights and emphasizing the muscle structure of the animals. Both artists realistically depict the horses causing the viewer to take a second look at the exquisite details of the horses and the surroundings.
In realistic paintings, both artists focused on detail based upon their study of horse anatomy. Rosa Bonheur, who painted the three horses in *Relay Hunting* (1.9), actually went to meat processing plants and studied the anatomy of the horses while she dissected the animals. Most artists study human anatomy as part of their education. Understanding the body's muscle and bone structure benefits the artists' ability to draw realistic people and animals.
1.11 Image of a horse from Lascaux Caves

1.13 *Study of Horses*, Leonardo

The representation of horses throughout human time began on the cave wall, Image of Horse (1.11). We see horses immortalized in bronze statues, captured on film, or drawn in *Study of Horses* (1.13). Painted in *Blue Horses* (1.14), etched in *Knight, Death and the Devil* (1.12), and colored. Horses have been a mode of transportation for thousands of years, and the equine image has been traditional portraiture throughout the ages. These pictures of different types of horses demonstrate they can be drawn or painted in many types of styles. The details in the etched Knight, Death, and the Devil (1.12) establishes the artist as a detail orientated person as opposed to the Blue Horses (1.14), which has a looser painting style and bolder colors.
Comparing Figures

At first glance, *The Birth of Venus* (1.15) and *Rara Avis* 19 (1.16) look completely different from each other, or are they? Let us look closer at these two figures—what is the one object in both paintings that is similar? The woman in the center! Both poses are similar, expressionless except what the viewer reads into it, and they display no movement, a very static pose with elongated legs and feet. Neither one of the artists give any weight to the body or use any type of deep perspective space. Both figures have an impossible pose, the shifting of weight over one hip. They both appear to be emerging from the water as if being born from the sea.
They are both colorful and have the impression of a background; land, sea, and trees. However, these two paintings are over 500 years apart, the Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli in 1486 and Rara Avis 19 by Jylian Gustlin in 2014. Botticelli painted in oils on canvas, and his Venus is aloof and uninterested in her surroundings. Gustlin works in acrylic and oil paints on board, using the effects of layers to achieve her distinct and intricate paintings. The figures in the landscape frequently show a moody and brooding figure, yet at the same time, depicting a sense of future. One figure set in a literal translation and the other in a modern view, yet each one escapes from reality.

Comparing Sunflowers

These two pieces of art display the gorgeous sunflower at the height of its flowering. The yellow petals open up towards the sunshine, offering seeds to passing birds. The hint of brown color on the leaves tells the viewer that the fall weather is on its way. These two art pieces are about 140 years apart, one is in paint, and the other is painted fabric. The Sunflowers (1.17) in the vase is by Vincent Van Gogh in 1887, and the sunflower quilt (1.18) is by an unknown quilter, 2004.
The two pieces have many similar components, for example, the colors of the sunflowers are yellow, brown seed pods in the centers, both pictures fill the space, and both painted. The differences are more significant because the quilted sunflowers highly contrast against the dark brown fabric; the flowers in the vase are against a pale blue background. The quilt shows flowers arranged in space not anchored to stems or in a vase, as seen in the painting.

The painting process is also different. Van Gogh painted his sunflowers on canvas with oil paints. The painted quilt fabric became the palette for the sunflowers with mostly yellows, with browns, greens, and oranges in a random array of colors for highlights, cut into individual leaves, and arranged on the background fabric. Both pieces are similar works of art created in different periods with different materials.
Comparing Dots

Dots or points are single primary forms in art. In art, dots can be one or many thousands of dots abstracted into images we may or may not recognize. The dots can be far apart or close together, different colors, monochromatic, or one color. All drawings begin with a single dot from the point of the pencil, and as the pencil moves, it becomes a continuous line of dots, thereby making the dot one of the essential elements in art.

Dots become the focal point of the art, and space in-between the dots are as crucial as the dot itself. The dot can cause tension or harmony depending on the color, size, and how close the dot is to another dot. As dots placed closer together, they start to become an object, a recognizable form.

Yayoi Kusama (born 1929) is considered the 'Princess of Polka Dots' using large distinct polka dots in her two sculptures *Flowers* (1.19) and *Life is the Heart of a Rainbow* (1.20). They are red and white polka dots surrounding the trees or the entire room. The polka dots are distinctly circles, especially in the room, as they are far apart and only in two contrasting colors. The red wrapped trees with white polka dots are closer together but still distinct in various sizes in the high contrast. The dots are not touching, and the negative space between them is about the same size throughout.

![1.19 Flowers](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/A_World_Perspective_of_Art_Appreciation_(Gustlin_and_Gustlin)/01%3A_A_W...)

![1.20 Life is the Heart of a Rainbow](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/A_World_Perspective_of_Art_Appreciation_(Gustlin_and_Gustlin)/01%3A_A_W...)

George Seurat developed a technique of painting with tiny colored dots called Pointillism as he branched out from Impressionism. Pointillism relies on small dots of color that blend in the viewer's minds creating a large scene. Up close, each colored dot and brush mark are visible; however, when the viewer steps back several feet, the viewer is surprised with a lifelike painting. The large-scale piece, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1.21), transformed art at the turn of the 20th century and inspired artists to work with dots.

The three paintings are all created from dots, small dots, large dots, colored dots on the canvas, on walls, suspended from the ceiling, or suspended in space. The size and color of the dot do matter and can give the viewer a completely different experience.
Video: How to do visual (formal) analysis in art history

Art is everywhere you look, everything you wear, and art is beauty. Just look around....