Texture is the element of art that refers to how things feel, or look as if they might feel if touched.

Surface Qualities

Whether you are the viewer or the artist, you experience two kinds of textures: real and implied. **Real textures** are those that can actually be touched, such as the smooth surface of a bronze sculpture or the spiky surface of a cactus. **Implied textures** are those that are simulated, or invented. They include the roughness of a rock seen in a photograph or the fluffiness of a cloud as depicted by an artist. Real textures offer both look and feel; implied ones provide only the appearance of texture.

In the photos above, how do you think that the surfaces of the objects would feel if you were to touch them?
Imagine a life in which everything had the same surface look and feel. Fortunately, our world is full of a rich variety of surfaces that provide us with both information and visual pleasure. One of the features of surface quality is texture, the physical surface structure of a material. Woven fabrics, for instance, have particular textural surfaces. They range from the closely knit fibers of silk to the heavy weave of burlap. We can often readily identify a material by its texture: glass is smooth and slick; sand is gritty and fine.

Texture might create diverse effects in a design. Just as some artists or craftspeople may focus on line, shape, or color, others concentrate on texture to capture a particular look or feel. In this chapter, you’ll explore a wide range of textures, their effects on the viewer, and various methods of incorporating them into your own art.

Some artists delight in depicting textures as realistically as possible. In Alma-Ｔadema’s Interior of the Gold Room, Townshend House, London, c.1883, a remarkable number of different textures are represented.

Use the Link below to go to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, to view Alma-Tadema’s watercolour. In your visual journal, list as many different textures as you can find in one column. In a second column, list as many textures as you can find in the room that you are sitting in. Compare the two lists: how are they different? How are they alike?

http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase_ImageView.cfm?id=15538&theme=Euro

Notice the lifelike appearance of Hanson’s Old Man Dozing and Levine’s Work Boots, (page 6). Why might an artist want to represent reality so precisely? Write a paragraph in your visual journal that compares the work of these two artists. Think about why they might have wanted to create something so life-like. Do you think that this is art or do you think that this is just copying from nature? Why?

One of the features of surface quality is texture, the physical surface structure of a material. Woven fabrics, for instance, have particular textural surfaces. They range from the closely knit fibers of silk to the heavy weave of burlap. We can readily identify a material by its texture: glass is smooth and slick; sand is gritty and fine.

Texture might create diverse effects in a design. Just as some artists or craftspeople may focus on line, shape, or color, others concentrate on texture to capture a particular look or feel.

VOCABULARY
Texture
Real Texture
Implied Texture

Top, above: How would you describe the texture of this flower? Would the sharp thorns of this cactus feel different from the soft petals of a sunflower?

Left: Often, the forces of nature can change the texture of an object. These river rocks have been made smooth by the force of flowing water. What other natural or manufactured objects undergo such a change?

Real Textures

Real textures are important because they provide clues about an animal’s or object’s nature and, to a large degree, about its function. The rugged texture of an elephant’s skin seems quite logical for survival in the rough terrain and heat of Africa and Asia; the slick, smooth skin of a snake helps it maneuver swiftly in water and over the earth.

Many textures have a protective purpose. Fur provides warmth. Prickly plants and spiny animals give fair warning that their surfaces are unpleasant to touch – or eat; therefore, humans and other animals usually avoid them. Other textures attract. We enjoy the softness of cat fur, the smoothness of silk, and the reflective surface of polished wood.

Actual textures in artworks often provide visual interest – even when they cannot be touched. But for texture to be appealing, the artist much control its use. Too much texture or an inappropriate type can disturb the appearance of a surface. For instance, raised, bumpy, pebbly, or craggy textures are visually active; whereas smooth, woven and finely textured surfaces are more restful. Artists sometimes include areas of refined or minimal texture as a visual rest from highly textured areas.

Architects are highly selective in choosing textures to enrich the appearance of a building. Combinations of glass, wood, brick, stucco, stone, and metal offer textural variety and contrast. In this detail from a building at Ellis Island, notice how well the stone and brick surfaces work together.

Ellis Island, Main building, by Boring and Tilton, 1898. Detail of cornice, arch and carving.

For decades, Ellis Island, in the harbor of New York City, was the prime immigration station of the United States. The building that housed the immigration processing offices was built in 1898 by Boring and Tilton. In 1907, its peak year, 1,285,349 immigrants passed through the Great Hall of the building. When the station closed in the early 1950’s, the building fell into disrepair. In the 1980’s it was restored, and in 1990 it was reopened to the public as part of the Statue of Liberty and the Ellis Island National Monument of the National Park Service

http://www.ellisislandghosts.com/
Work of Stephen Wilkes
Ghosts of Freedom

Over the course of five years, photographer Wilkes has captured the dark underbelly of Ellis Island—the south side—where immigrants who failed health inspections were brought to be held and evaluated. Those that convalesced were given passage, while those deemed too ill or contagious were left to perish in confinement just a solitary, tantalizing mile away from their hoped-for new beginning in New York City. Obsolete for over half a century, the facilities on the south side have been left to decay, and Wilkes’s camera catches crumbling corridor walls, chipped and faded paint, and heavily fortified containment cells that have become brittle with age and overrun by aggressive vegetation.

In the artist’s words, the architecture “was 50 percent the work of man, 50 percent the triumph of nature.” Wilkes’ perspective evokes the hopeless limbo of the facility’s residents, capturing the view from the inside looking outward: through the steel grates of a detention cage, through windows of shattered glass; at the Statue of Liberty, a monolithic paradox for those trapped beneath it. Quotations from immigrants, peppered throughout, add context and gravity to the stark imagery: “Nobody said a word to me for twenty-three days.” In an appendix-like “Image Directory,” Wilkes gives a short, insightful description of each photo. Historical in both scope and timing, Wilkes’s book has been released just as Ellis Island’s south side is being renovated, largely thanks to Wilkes’s attention; soon the haunted desolation captured in these photographs will vanish forever.

Left: Some artist create real textures on the surface of a canvas.

Below: This tree displays several textures. Can you describe what they might feel like?
MTPage, Tree with hole; Digital image, 2006

We often describe animals in terms of their texture. What words would you use to describe the texture of cat fur, snake skin or porcupine quills?
MTPage, Sleeping Cat, Corignillia, Italy. Digital image, 2004
Jan Vermeer

Why are most people so fascinated when viewing a painting by Jan Vermeer? Vermeer’s talent lay in his ability to transform an ordinary scene—he often painted people doing an everyday task, such as writing a letter—into a poetic and lasting impression. We are drawn into these scenes, often without realizing exactly why they hold such interest.

This sense of mystery is often heightened by visual devices: figures placed behind an object such as a table or chair, or seen through a doorway. Vermeer brings us into the mood of the scene with his great sensitivity to color and light, his skill in using (and subtly altering) perspective to create depth, and his amazing ability to render textures.

Vermeer rarely dated his paintings, but art historians have determined that he mastered the ability to portray textures by the time he was in his thirties. Highly skilled in painting surface appearances, he used a combination of impasto (thickly applied paint) and thin glazes. Whether depicting the sheen of a pearl or the roughness of bricks, he carefully recorded each material’s unique texture. The exactness of these implied textures gives an air of great realism to his work.

Son of art dealer, Weaver, and innkeeper Reynier Jansz, Jan Vermeer was born in Delft, Holland, in 1632 and lived there until his death, in 1675. Nothing is known of his artistic training, and only thirty-eight paintings are firmly attributed to him. When he signed his paintings, Vermeer often used different signatures, or marks, making the art historians’ task—to verify certain works as his—more challenging. Nothing is known of his personality. However, he is considered one of the most accomplished painters in art history. We can only guess at the kind of legacy he would have left had he lived longer.

The documents that outline Vermeer’s life are those that relate to the history of Delft. Historians know that when he was twenty-one, Vermeer registered as a professional with a painters’ guild. He was then also starting out in business, with the art dealership he inherited from his father. Although Vermeer was considered a master painter, no records indicate that he took students. During his lifetime and for almost the next two centuries, his works were not widely known. Then in the eighteenth century, English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds “discovered” a Vermeer painting in Holland. Reynolds’s praise for the work led to worldwide recognition of Vermeer’s achievements.

http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/little_street.html

Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), The Painter and His Model as Clio, (detail). 1665-66. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8".

Implied Textures

All our experiences with real textures build memories that we experience again when we see similar implied textures. These memories also help us make judgments when we “fooling our eyes: in a sense. We are seeing an impression, or something that is not really there, because in our imagination we can feel the texture portrayed.

Naturally, implied texture plays an important role in photography. Texture is essential in paintings and drawings that portray objects realistically. Artists also use familiar and invented textures to enhance their abstract or nonrepresentational art. In such works, textures can suggest certain feelings and moods, or even remain purposely ambiguous. Textures and textural contrasts can also function as organizational devices: they may unify an area or create patterns and movement within a composition. In any successful work of art, the artist has paid careful attention to texture and its effects.

The music style called “jazz” is very versatile. Here the artist seems to be emphasizing the smooth sound that characterizes some jazz. How does the texture of the painting help create that impression?

Man Ray (1890-1976). Jazz, c. 1919. Tempera and ink (aerograph) on paper, 28 x 22".

Brushstrokes themselves create texture. Here, the artist used broad sweeping strokes. What kind of strokes do you think Vermeer used in Street in Delft?


Mariyn Ann Levine (b. 1935). Work Boots, 1983. Ceramic boots, approximately 9 x 11 x 5”.

http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/little_street.html

Jan Vermeer (1632-1675). The Painter and His Model as Clio, (detail). 1665-66. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 39 3/8".
Texture and Light

Because texture is mainly a surface quality, the way that light falls on an object has a definite effect on the readability of the surface: when light hits an object, it strongly defines the texture of the object. If that same object is in shadow or dim light, the surface texture may be reduced or become imperceptible. When the light is right – that is, when it is bright enough and in the best position – the texture becomes active and dominant.

Even in bright light, however, the surface appearance of an object may change, depending on whether the light hits it from above or from an angle. If a rounded surface is lit from above, its texture may be smoothed out on top, strongly evident on the sides, and lost in the shadows below. The late afternoon sun, ideal light for dramatic outdoor photographs, emphasizes the texture of an object and causes strong shadows to be cast.

An artist might find that bright light is too strong for a highly polished surface: the light bounces off the surface and creates a glare. For surfaces that are smooth or finely textured, an artist might use indirect lighting to bring out their definition and character.

Because light is such a significant element in creating texture, artists sometimes text how materials look in various lighting situations. Before creating an outdoor sculpture, for instance, an artist might explore how shifting natural light will affect the final work. For artwork that will be displayed indoors, an artist might experiment with placement of light sources, which can enhance surface effects and highlight even the finest textures. This kind of critical analysis helps artists achieve the desired results from their designs.

Images:
Above right: *Wall in Corniglia*, Italy, digital image.
Right: *Weathered wood*, from a sunken ship, Shebogan, MN.

Above: Note how the lighting in this student work emphasizes the subtleties in its texture.

Above right: The later afternoon sun emphasizes the surface detail of this building in historic Jerusalem.

Right: Here, the photographer represented the textures of this engine in stark light.
MTPage, *Farm Equipment*, Phoenix, AZ.
Artists and the Use of Texture

Think about all the materials that artists can use to express their ideas: paint, clay, cloth, wood, ink, glass, metal, and stone. Each of these has a unique textural surface. Artists can use these materials and others – alone or in combination – to convey a variety of messages and emotions.

Three-dimensional Art

When artists create three-dimensional works, they usually turn to materials that have real textures. Potters, for instance, commonly use clay. Sculptors and installation artists may explore the use of plastic, marble, and found objects – including broken plates, driftwood, and used car parts!

Pottery and Ceramics

Pottery that has been thrown, or made on a wheel, usually has a uniform, smooth surface. But potters also use various tools and procedures to create pronounced textures. They may incise lines or draw into a piece. Before they fire, or bake, the clay, they might add glazes to produce a specific finish – smooth or rough, transparent or opaque, marbled or crackled. Some potters deliberately throw salt into the kiln during firing to pit the surface of the pottery and produce a texture similar to that of volcanic rock.

Sculpture

Sculptors achieve textural qualities by selecting and combining materials with certain surface attributes. They also use tools to alter those surfaces. They might carve, gouge, sand, or polish the surface of wood. They might alter a metal surface by cutting, welding, rusting, or polishing. For centuries, artists have sculpted marble to simulate the soft folds of fabric and the appearance of human skin and hair. Italian sculptor Desiderio da Settignano, for instance, perfectly captured the smooth flesh of a young child’s face.

Today sculptors explore the potential of plastic and synthetic materials using processes such as vacuum forming and epoxy laminations.

Desiderio has been called the greatest sculptor of children. The fluid and luminous nature of his carvings are unrivaled. He blurs the transition from one part of the form to the next, using no sharp edges. Bernini, Rodin, and other sculptors likely studied Desiderio’s expert and unique handling of marble.

The soft textures of the child’s hair and skin belie the cold, hard qualities of marble. Desiderio da Settignano (1429-1464). A little Boy, 155/1460, Marble, 10 3/8 x 9 3/4 x 5 7/8”
Two-dimensional Art
Most two-dimensional art relies heavily on implied textures, which may be drawn, depicted in paint, or achieved by means of a print process. Textiles, however, may incorporate both implied and real textures.

Drawing and Printmaking
In drawings, skillful artists can portray an array of textures – from wrinkles in a face to ripples in a point. Artists might use charcoal, ink, colored pencils, or pastels to achieve different surface qualities; or they might choose to work on paper that has a smooth or a coarse texture of its own.

Printmaking – which involves transferring an image from a carved or etched surface onto paper – creates additional opportunities for artists. To create implied textures, printmakers might use the grain of a woodcut; the sharp, etched lines of a zinc plate; or the uneven textures of a linoleum bloc.

Below: How has Schmidt-Rottluff incorporated the grain of the wood medium into the image?
Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884-1976). Wood-cut; left and below.

Painting
Like drawings, some painted image rely heavily on implied textures and the skill of the artist to reproduce them accurately. But painters also achieve textural effects with their materials. Painters might apply the medium thinly or thickly, or they might mix it with wax and other substances. Thick, textured applications of paint create highly energetic forms that almost seem to leave the surface of the canvas. Artists might apply paint with brushes, sponges, or palette knives, or by spraying or dripping. The surface on which they record images may range from finely textured canvas to rough burlap to smooth glass or wood.

Textiles
Throughout the centuries, artisans and weavers have produced fibers and fabrics with rich textures. Early Egyptian fabrics are still unparalleled and are treasured for their finely woven materials. Museums around the world preserve examples of European tapestries made during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The striking beauty of woven materials from the South Seas, the Andes, and Guatemala – as well as those crafted by Native Americans – also reflect great skill and inventiveness.
Texture in your Environment

Each day, you encounter texture, as well as lines, shapes, forms, colors, values, and space. These elements of design are unavoidable aspects of your environment and essential parts of everyday life. They are crucial to interior design and exterior landscaping. And they are significant in the clothes you wear and in the advertisements that sell them.

City planners introduce textures in parks and introduce textures in parks and squares, outdoor sculptures and fountains, and even the surfaces upon which we walk. Sidewalks and parking lots do not have to be great expanses of uninterrupted cement: they might contain textured bricks or other stonework, benches, and lighting fixtures. Even the simple addition of plants, grasses, and trees can provide relief, enjoyment, and visual interest.

Museums, hotels, churches, and temples all integrate texture into their design. Houses and apartment buildings offer many textural opportunities: materials used in carpeting, draperies, furniture, and wall coverings both provide textural variety and enhance our surroundings. Look around and study your environment. You’ll discover that textures – and all the other elements of design – are essential aspects of seeing.

During the course of a day, we encounter so many textures that we usually do not notice them. How many common textures can you see in the image with the “Chicago Bean?”

Above: Grant Park, Chicago.

Right: A walk outside often lets us appreciate the textures in the natural environment.

M T Page, Near Lake Michigan, Shebogan, WI.

Antonio Gaudí

Güell Park

How might it feel to own a home in the midst of a city-garden fantasyland? Would you like to live surrounded by the wildly creative shapes, colors, and textures of Gaudí’s creation? The plan for this part included sixty houses, a market, a medical center, schools, a chapel, and other facilities. Work began in 1900, and although never completed, Güell Park is one of the best-loved destinations in Barcelona. Under the imaginative direction of architect Antonio Gaudí, enough work was accomplished to provide a magical space in which to dream and play.

There are fountains made of colorful mosaics, a walkway with an arcade of angled trees, fanciful gatehouses, pathways lined with leaning columns, and a monumental staircase flanked by ceramic walls leading to the Sala de les Cent Columnes – eight-six Doric columns supporting a mosaic-tile area decorated with dogs’ heads. A giant mosaic dragon is close to the famous bench: its mosaic bench surrounds the park’s “central square” with a series of glistening ceramic curves. From this area is a panoramic view of the city below.

The concept for the bench – believed to be the longest one in the world – was Gaudí’s, yet much of the detailed work was executed by artist Josep Jojol. To achieve mosaic tiling of the curved surfaces, traditionally-made flat tiles were broken and organically rejoined. This technique was also used by Gaudí in other artworks. The bench design was so innovative that some art historians see it as a forerunner of the abstract and surrealist movements. In fact, the park was known to be an inspiration for surrealist Salvador Dalí.

Güell Park was funded as an urban-development project by the financier and Barcelona art lover Eusebio Güell. Nearly fifty acres were acquired in a city area that needed renewal, and the site was intended to be a place where architecture was integrated into the natural surroundings. For the job, Güell commissioned Gaudí, who had a liking for nature and was known as an eccentric genius and religious mystic.

When Güell died, which brought a halt to the funding and the work, only two houses had been built. One of them was built as a model to encourage others to build and live there. The house was designed by Gaudí’s colleague, Francesc Berenguer, and Gaudí himself lived there from 1906 until shortly before his death in 1926. Gaudí completed his work there by 1914; in 1922, the project was given to Barcelona by Güell’s family for use as city parkland.

To see more: http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/spain/barcelona/gaudipark/gaudipark.html
Have you ever visited the Magic Gardens of Isaiah Zagar on South Street in Philadelphia? If not, use the link below to see how one man used texture to revitalize a section of the city. Does Isaiah Zagar remind you of another artist that you have read about in this chapter?

http://www.philadelphiasmagicgardens.org/history.php

Clockwise from the top left on THE NEXT PAGE:

Claude Monet. *Morning Snow Effect*. 1880
Monet painted dozens of paintings of haystacks during different times of the day. Why do you think that he might want to paint so many of the same thing? How has texture played a part in his studies of the haystacks? What do you think that he learned?

The figure of the young dancer is cast in bronze. Even the vest and the ballet shoes she wears are bronze. To that Degas added a skirt made of gauzelike fabric and a satin hair ribbon.

Why do you think he added real textures to the metal figure?

Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night*. 1889, Oil on Canvas
At times, van Gogh became so impatient with the progress of his work that he squeezed the paint directly from the tube onto the canvas. Then he used anything that was handy, including his fingers, to move and swirl the globs of paint around. In both his work and Monet’s, the paint is thick.

Compare these two works to that of Rembrandt’s. In his self-portrait, only the highlights are thick, while the shaded areas are painted very thinly. How does this use of texture affect how you see the portrait?


http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/