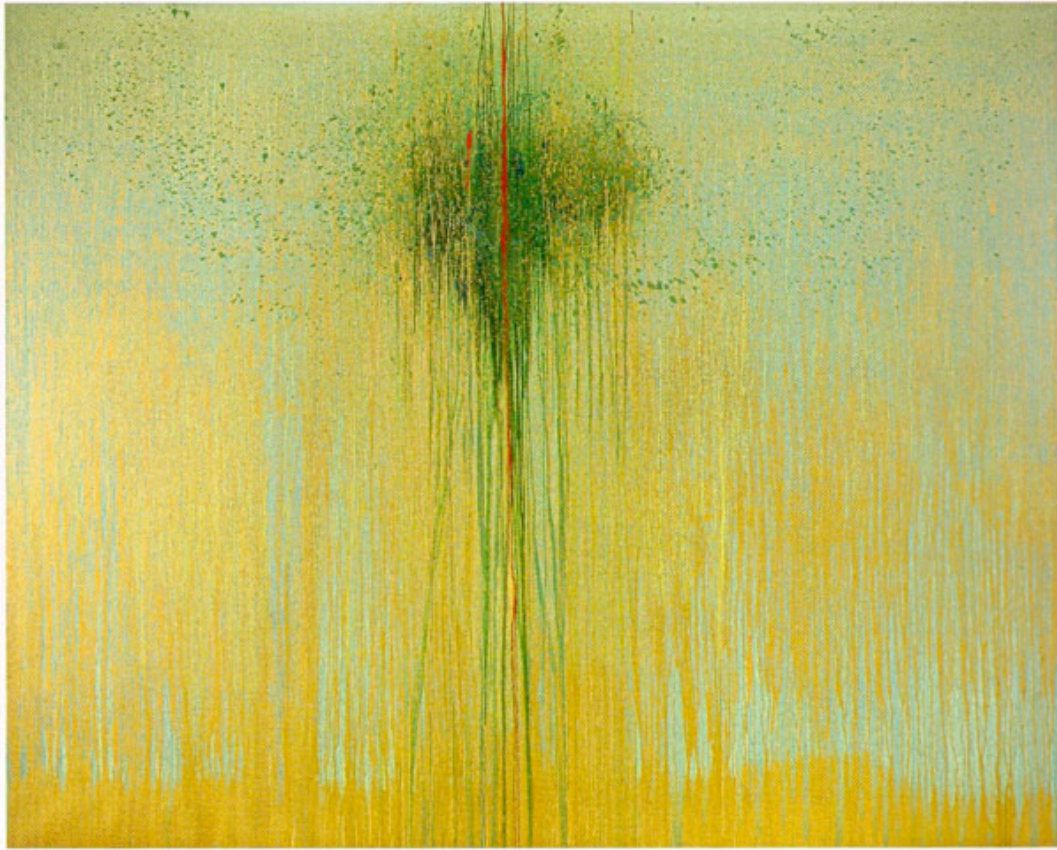


The Physical Characteristics of Line

The physical characteristics of line are many. Lines may be short or long, thin or thick, straight or curved, direct or meandering, zigzag or serpentine, distinct or blurred. These characteristics have certain built-in associations that the artist may make use of. When we say that a person is a “straight arrow,” we mean that he or she is straightforward and reliable; a “crooked” person, on the other hand, is devious and untrustworthy. In most cases, we have adjectives that fit the lines we see. And, like the word associations just cited, those meanings are part of line’s subconscious power of suggestion.

Measure

Measure refers to the length and width of line – its measurable properties. A line may be of any length and breadth. An infinite number of combinations of long, short, thick, or thin lines can, according to their application, unify, divide, balance, or unbalance a pictorial area. This emotional dynamic is set up by line’s measure. For example, thick lines tend to communicate more of a sense of stability than thinner lines. When applied to the development of typeface, a thick font seems more forceful than a thinner one and provides a hierarchy for delivering information like titles, subtitles, and so forth. Thin lines are generally more elegant, gentle, or delicate.



3.3 Pat Steir, *Summer Moon*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 109½ × 137 in. (278.1 × 348 cm). In this image, the artist presents a very personalized and subjective use of line, which makes the viewer aware of line's flowing movement across the canvas. Her application is reminiscent of the technique perfected in her waterfall series. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

In Pat Steir's *Summer Moon* the repetition of fine fluid lines ties the image together and suggests movement. The measure of the line must be appropriate for the development of the image. A property of fragility in a flower like a translucent bougainvillea could be destroyed by a rendering using a bold wide line; but that same vigorous line quality could be used to convey strength in an architectural presentation.

Type

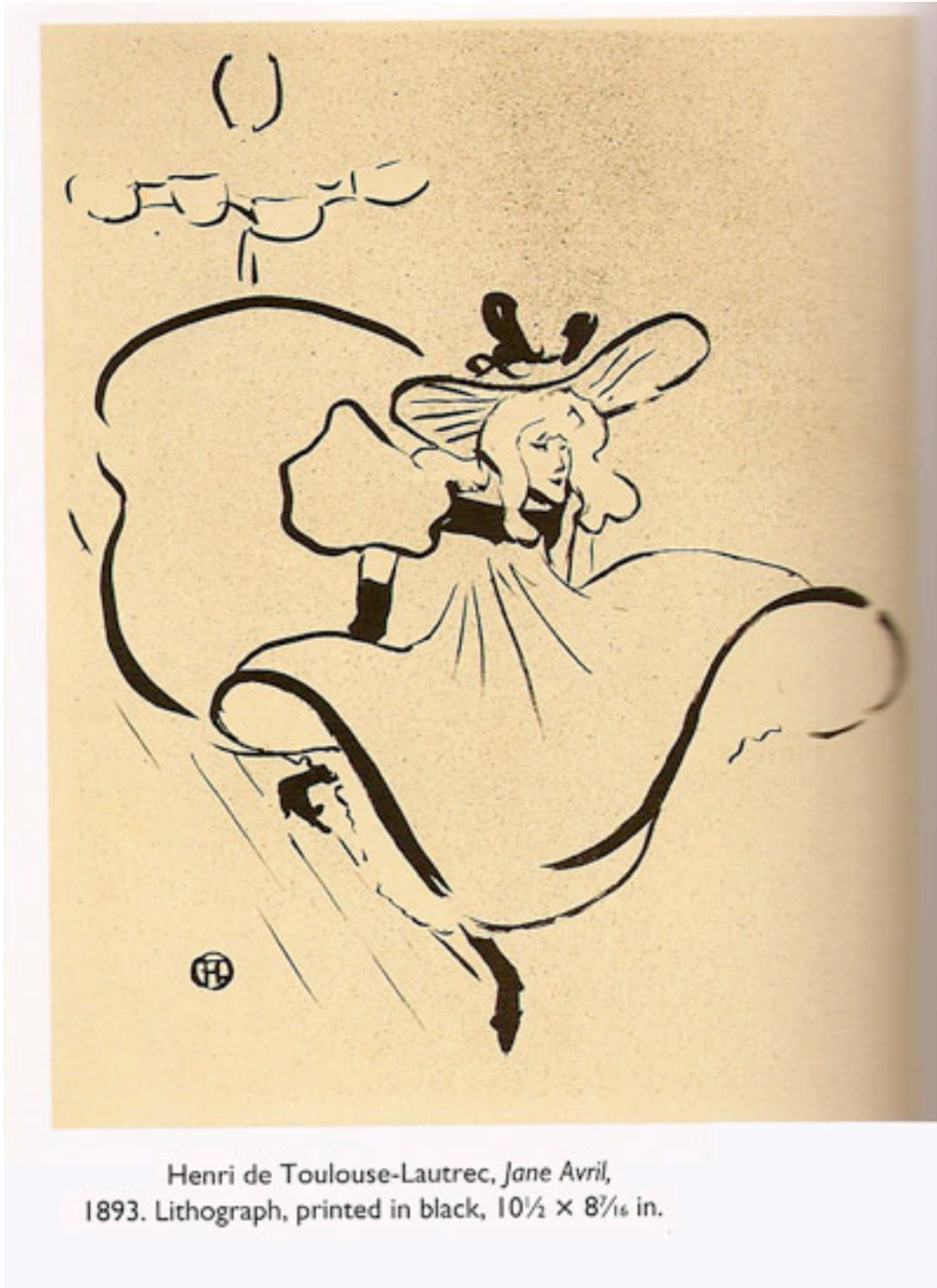
There are many different types of line. If the line continues in only one direction, it is straight; if changes of direction gradually occur, it is curved; if those changes are sudden and abrupt, an angular line is created. By joining the characteristics of

measure and *type*, we find that long, short, thick, or thin lines can be straight, angular, or curved. A straight line, in its continuity, ultimately seems stiff and rigid and, if rendered thinly, may appear brittle. The curved line may form an arc, reverse its curve to become wavy, or continue turning within itself to produce a spiral. Alterations of movement become visually entertaining and physically stimulating if they are rhythmical. A curved line is inherently graceful and, to a degree, unstable.



Honore Daumier, *Street Show*, 1865-66. Black chalk and watercolor on laid paper, 14 3/8 x 10 1/16 in.

Though subjects are often static and immobile, Daumier used the excitement of gestural line to interpret the gyrations of the dancer and the frenzied beating of the drummer.



The abrupt changes of direction in an angular line create excitement and/or confusion.

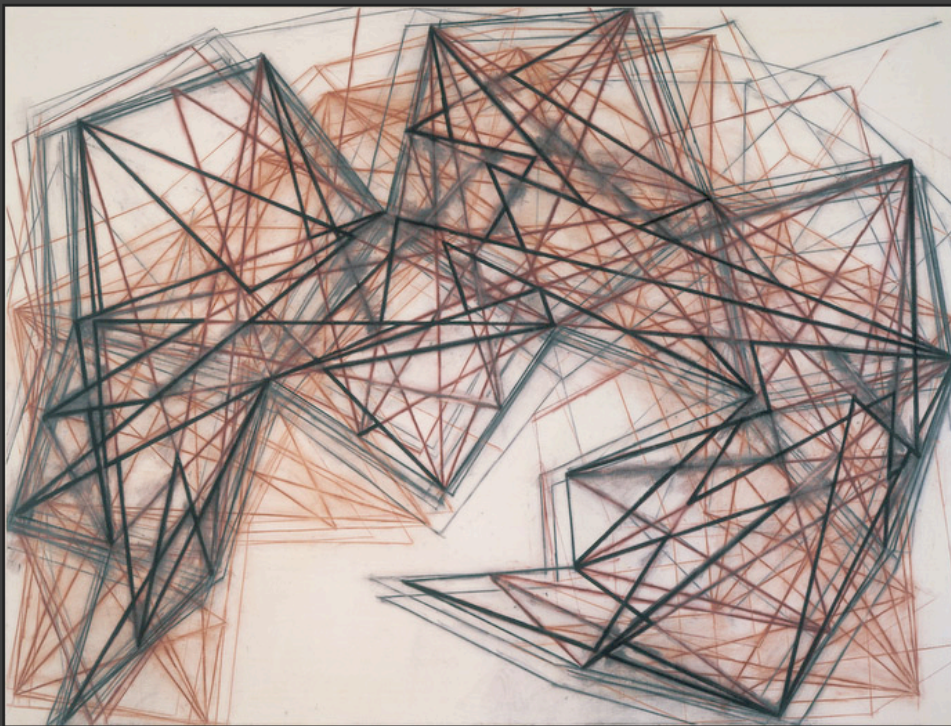


Clouret Bouchel, *Fight or Flight*, 2000.
Mixed media, 9¼ × 12½ in. The abrupt changes
of direction in the diagonal angular lines in this
drawing create the excitement and tension of
combat. Courtesy of the artist.

Our eyes frequently have difficulty adapting to an angular line's unexpected deviations of direction. Hence, the angular line is full of challenging interest.

Direction

A further complication of line is its basic *direction*; this direction can exist irrespective of the component movements *within* the line. That is, a line can be a zigzag type but take a generally curved direction. Thus, the line type can be contradicted or flattened by its basic direction. A generally horizontal direction indicate serenity and perfect stability, whereas a diagonal direction might imply agitation, motion, and instability.



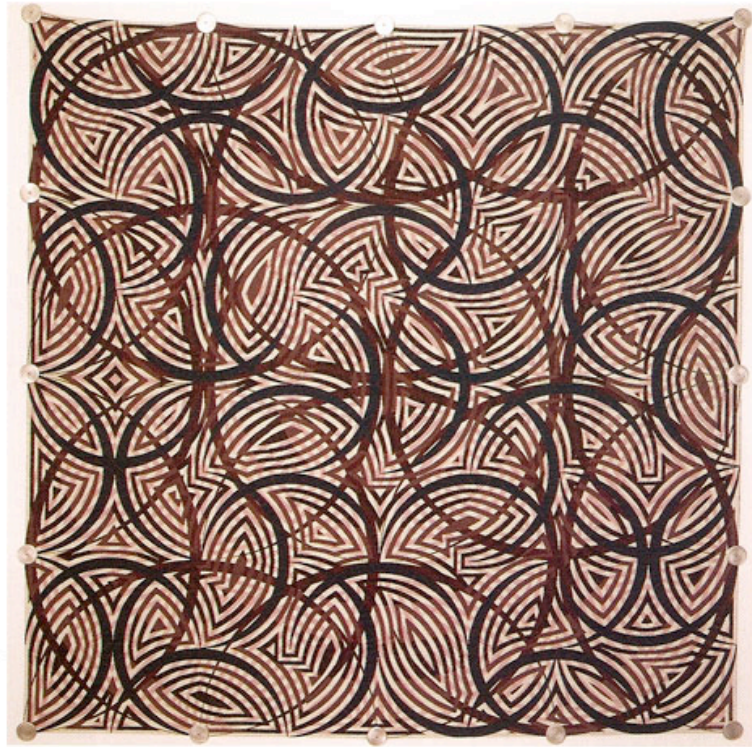
Mel Bochner

Threshold, 1982
charcoal and conte on sized canvas / 86 x 112 inches

A vertical line generally suggests poise and aspiration.

The direction of line is very important, because in large measure it controls our eye movement within the composition.

3.6 Janice Lessman-Moss, #305-703, 2003. Cotton, stainless steel, jacquard tapestry, power-loom-woven, Beljen Mills, NC, 71 × 70 in. The curving lines in this woven tapestry guide our eyes throughout the work while creating both harmony and variety. Many of the dark lines seem to imply circular shapes before they fade and disappear into other lines, while the patterns in light values act as a background, providing additional rhythm and movement. The image and ground seem to be in constant motion. © 2003 Janice Lessman-Moss. Photo: Gerry Simon.



A slanted line could move our eyes in either direction, but when it becomes a line of type in a layout, it has a direction implied by the way it's read. Generally, when words or sentences slant upward, there is a sense of strength, expectation, or positive energy. When slanted in a downward direction, the message delivers less energy. In addition, direction can facilitate a sense of continuity in a composition that contains lines with contrasting properties. For example, lines of various widths and lengths can be made to harmonize if they all share the same direction.

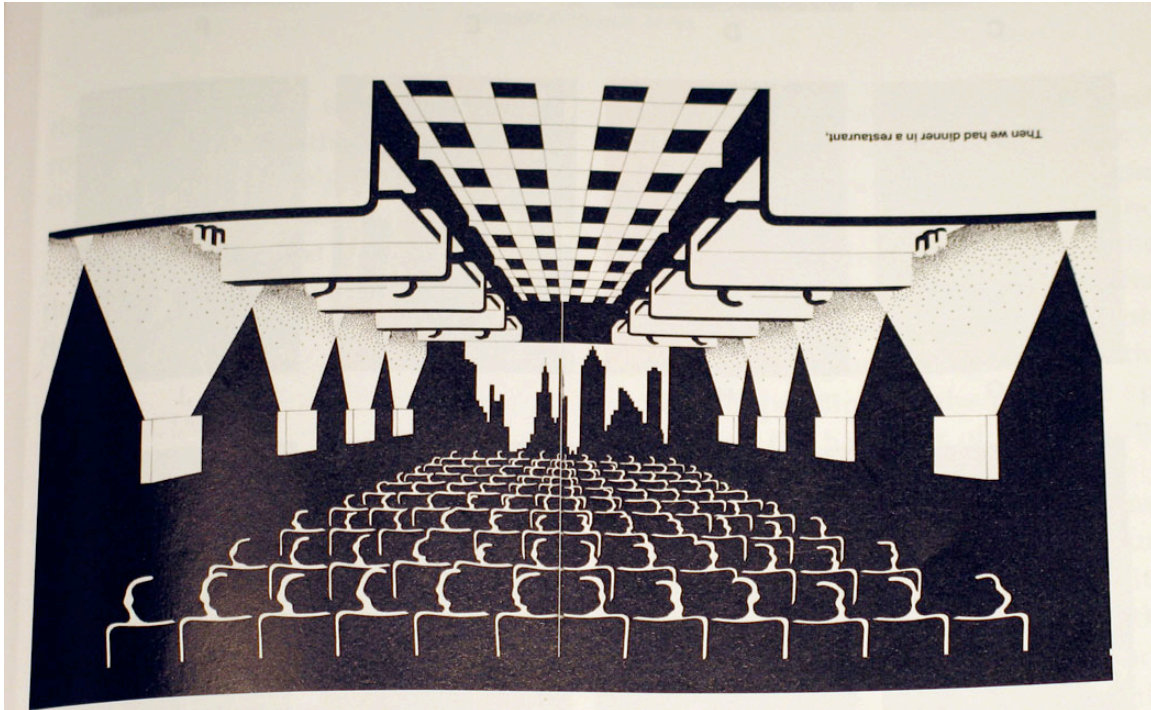
Location

The specific location of a line can enhance or diminish the visual weight and our psychological response to the other characteristics of the line. The location of an image on the picture plane, with regard to the effect of gravity, can create emotional

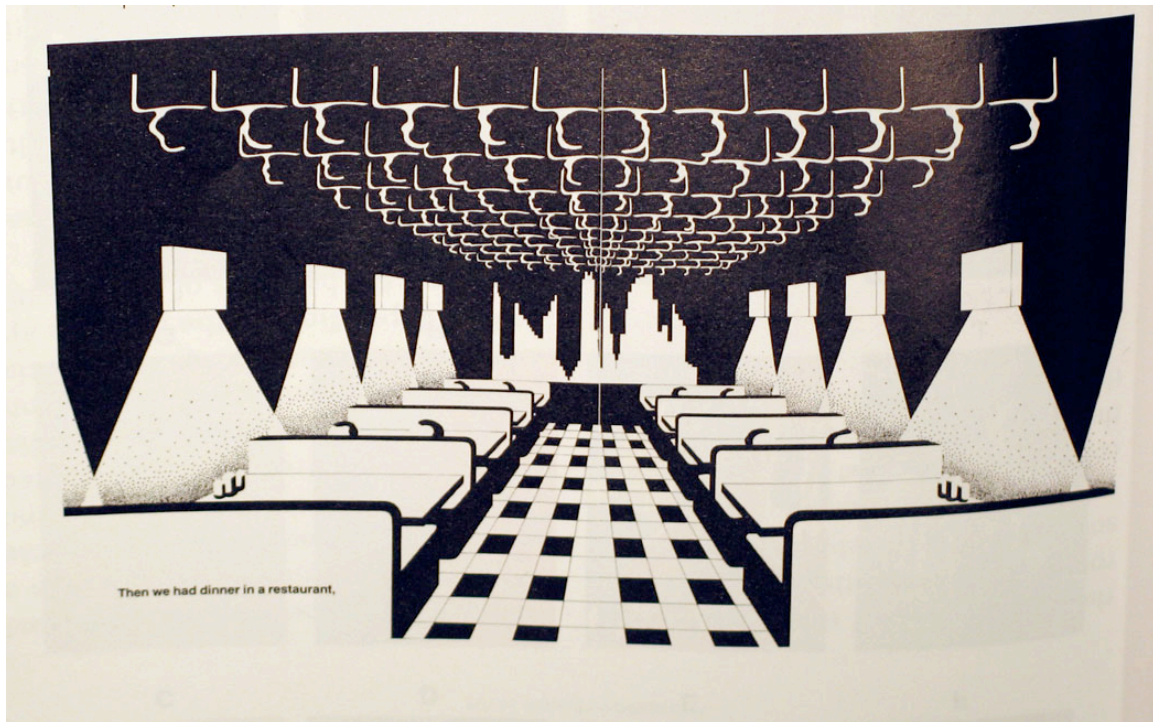
responses ranging from excitement and anticipation to relief and calmness. Line is affected by its location in the same manner. A diagonal line high in the picture plane might appear to be soaring, while that same line placed in a low position might appear to be plunging.

Printmakers know of the importance of location and the development of line's visual weight. Having spent many hours developing a composition on a plate or woodblock with a left-to-right orientation, they find the image location reversed during printing. The feeling of balance within the composition is often so disturbed by the new location of the linear image that it requires adjustment. The same line in a new location appears to assume a new visual weight. As with any other characteristic of line, location should be carefully considered, since a line's placement can serve to unify or divide, balance or unbalance a composition.

A line's location is also important because it can affect the way in which we perceive the line. In the work of Ann Jonak, noted children's illustrator, the line's location has a bearing on the interpretation of what image the line is suggesting. In the illustration from *Round Trip*, you will find lines depicting people in a movie theater. However if the illustration is rotated 180 degrees, the image becomes something completely different; what we previously saw as people now become ceiling tiles. The way we interpret the line is greatly influenced by its location on the picture plane.



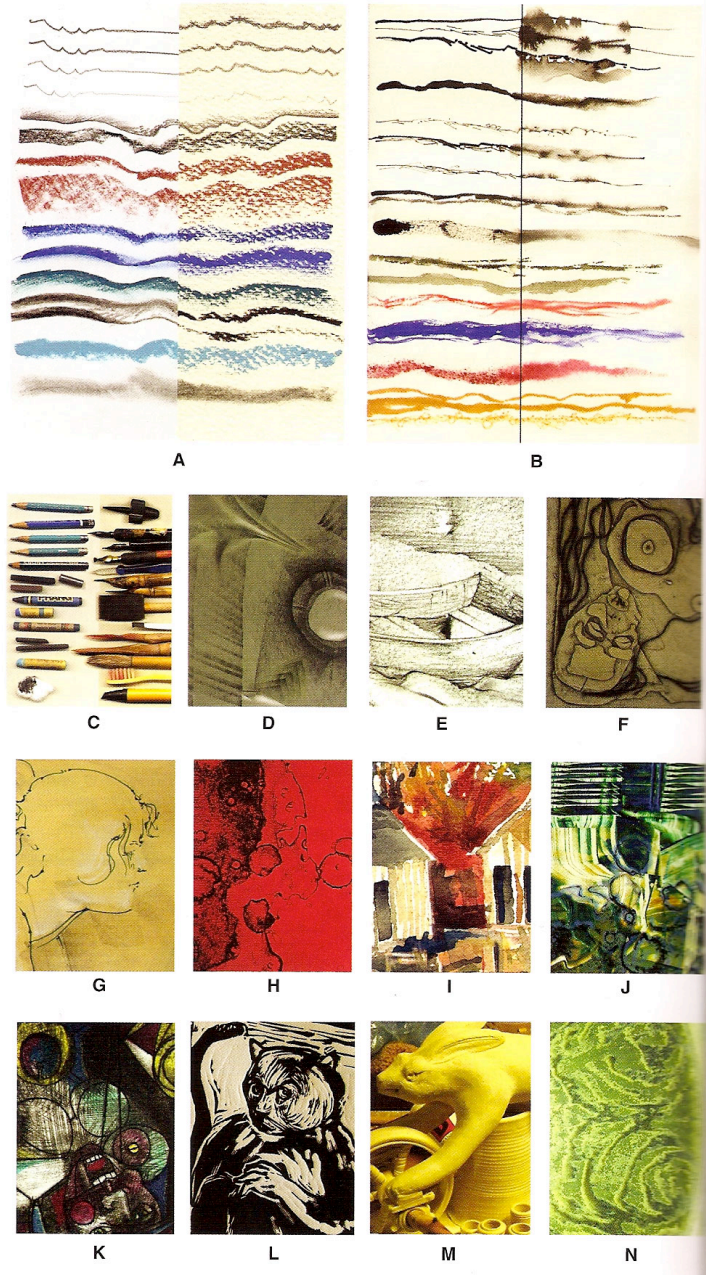
Ann Jonas, illustration from *Round Trip*, 1983. Printed illustration, 10 × 15 in. Ann Jonas has designed this illustration to be viewed from two directions. In the current orientation, the lines at the bottom appear to be people in a movie theater. However, by turning the illustration upside down, those lines appear to be ceiling tiles in a diner. This shows how the location of a line can influence how we interpret it. Illustration © 1983 by Anne Jonas. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.



Character

Along with measure, type, direction, and location, line possesses character – a visual surface quality related to the medium with which the line is created. Each instrument – brush, burin, stick, pencil, finger, and so forth – has its distinctive characteristics that respond in different ways to different surfaces. As such, the character of a line can vary from chalk’s grainy dots of varying density to the feathery reticulated edge of an ink line bursting across a wet surface. Some media, like ink, can provide a wide range of textures and edge qualities, from soft and blurred to crisp, while other media, like an assortment of pencils or conte crayons, have a wide range of potential values depending on the pressure applied and the hardness of the drawing material.

3.8 Line character of various media and techniques. (A) Lines on smooth (left) and rough (right) paper, made with (top to bottom): 6B pencil; 3B pencil; HB pencil; 2H pencil; ebony pencil; black conté; sepia conté on its end; sepia conté on its side; Prussian blue crayon; blue oil pastel; blue-green pastel; wide charcoal stick; thin charcoal stick; blue chalk; and graphite powder applied by charmois, finger, and cotton ball. (B) Lines on dry (left) and wet (right) paper, made with (top to bottom): eye dropper; narrow-nib Speedball; medium-nib Speedball; wide-nib Speedball; glass pen; medium bamboo-reed pen; narrow bamboo-reed pen; matt board on its edge; finger; foam brush, wet with ink; dry foam brush, dragged through ink; brush of rosewood fiber in red watercolor; Japanese brush in blue watercolor; toothbrush spatter in red watercolor; ochre medium felt-tip marker; ochre wide-felt-tip marker; ochre fine-felt-tip marker. (C) Examples of tools: (on left, top to bottom) 6B pencil; 3B pencil; HB pencil; 2H pencil; ebony pencil; black conté next to graphite stick; sepia conté; blue crayon; oil pastel; charcoal sticks; blue chalk; and powdered graphite on cotton ball; (on right, top to bottom) eyedropper; narrow-nib Speedball; medium-nib Speedball; wide-nib Speedball; glass pen; medium bamboo-reed pen; narrow bamboo-reed pen; foam brush; matt board; rosewood brush; bamboo brush; Japanese brush; toothbrush; and felt-tip marker. Lines made with additional media: (D) graphite stick applied with varied pressure; (E) pencil on very rough paper; (F) string and cardboard in collage; (G) felt-tip pen; (H) reticulating inks and tusche washes; (I) watercolor paint; (J) oil and enamel scraped with razor blades; (K) engraving and mezzotint rockers on copper printing plate; (L) linoleum block cut with chisels and gouges; (M) scratches on the sculptural surface and lines caused by the meeting of adjacent planes; (N) wax resist and two glazes on a ceramic bowl. Close-up sections of artworks courtesy of the artists.



The personality or emotional quality of the line is rooted in the nature of the medium chosen. In Rembrandt's sketch *Nathan Admonishing David*, the expressive qualities created by the soft brush lines of ink, juxtaposed with the precise and firm lines of pen and ink, can be clearly seen.



3.9 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Nathan Admonishing David*, no date. Pen and brush with bistre, $7\frac{7}{16} \times 9\frac{5}{16}$ in. (18.6 × 23.6 cm). The crisp, biting lines of the pen contrast effectively with the broader, softer lines of the brush. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.934) Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As artists become familiar with materials and the range of their **expression**, they will quickly discover the formal properties and expressive possibilities of each.

To create visual interest, the artist can exploit all the individual characteristics of a medium or use an assortment of different media in the same work. A consistent use of lines of the same character could result in monotony, unless the unity so gained were balanced by the variation of other physical properties. The artist, who is the real master of the situation, controls whether the viewer sees lines of uniformity or accent, certainty or indecision, tension or relaxation. It is the artist's ability, experience, intention, and mental and physical condition that determine the effectiveness of line character.