

[Voiceover] Michigan State University presents the second program in the series, Language of Art, dealing with some of the fundamentals of art. These discussions are being offered by James McConnell and are a presentation of the Department of Art of Michigan State University. [James McConnell] Twenty thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries, an artist sat in a damp cave in Spain and hacked away at the wall and daubed paint on to achieve this example, perhaps one of the earliest of the painter's art. Now, it's interesting to us, especially on this occasion, to be able to think that we can understand his art language perfectly well, and yet we haven't the faintest idea how he would speak vocally. He might have grunted or used consonants or vowels, perhaps, or spoken a kind of Basque or Catalanian, but that's entirely beside the point. It's interesting that the art itself speaks to us just as plainly, probably, as it did when it was made, even though we don't know whether the artist considered himself artist or magician, whether this was done as a work of art and to be felt only as such or whether it had other purposes. But the point tonight is that it serves as a good starting point for a discussion of this particular piece of phraseology in the language of art which I'd like to talk about, namely, tone. One speaking of color, one usually says value, simply referring to a light red or a dark red, whatever the case may be, but since we're limited to grays, black and white, I think tone perhaps is simply a better term, and that's all it does mean. Lightness or darkness, or the combinations of light areas as opposed to dark areas which an artist uses for a number of purposes. We hope that his highest aim is to use these elements to express not only himself with something of the society in which he lives and functions and to do this he uses a manner of a number of devices. We've seen that in our study of line for example that element can be used descriptively and it's the same with tone. Maybe if I just make a sketch here. For example, we understand this perfectly. It's an abstract symbol, a kind of oval shape, which suggests that, a moving line. It also suggests that it is a imaginary outline that's been transferred to the paper and has reference to something inside. And this particular kind of handling we see in art, used quite extensively in early Western art to describe form and to make a statement at the same time. In some painting in the Byzantine period, for example, a very strong reliance upon line is made, and yet we understand perfectly well what it is. It's a head of a woman in this case, and the line is there. It's augmented slightly by tone, of course. Since the artist is using paint, he can't help but experiment a little with color to do more than the line itself can achieve and then if in addition then to just the line as the artist in the Renaissance did, early Renaissance, began tentatively to experiment with shading in addition to the line so that there was no longer much doubt that the line was intended to describe a volume or a solid within it. Looking at Renaissance painting from Piero della Francesca, for example. We still see the line because it's just the way they paint it. But within that line a very subtle but forceful use of value to add to the description of this particular person. And this manner of working went on for quite a while until, well, let's say Leonardo was responsible for it. The artist began to want more than just that hard line to define his shapes. Began to be interested in atmosphere. And the description then begins to be done in a relativity sort of way. First of all, we have the object, but to see the object we have to realize that there's something around it, some kind of atmosphere, so that the line is then taken over by the edge of a light value meeting a dark value, or vice-versive, coupled with very complete light and dark distribution within that area. And if this is done well, of course, you'll be able to see that this is maybe a more powerful and descriptive reference to the shape we talked about here than the earlier one, where you rely on line. Carried to its logical extreme in the Baroque period, we see the El Greco, where the line and the light and dark work together to make a very strong statement and about a specific image. At the same time giving the artist a chance to

put a little of his own ideas and feelings into it simply through this kind of overstatement where the lights are lighter than they really need to be in the darks are the same character. Well this particular way of working where we're relying largely on description of form is the easiest to understand and perhaps the one we're most familiar with. And to think about it a little, perhaps it would be easy to see then why we no longer cling to that particular form of expressing ourselves. In the first place, if you're doing this full shading sort of thing, the objects you're describing as carefully as you can, providing life and atmosphere in and around them. These objects need a particular kind of environment in which to function. You can't just paste them on the wall, they'll stick out. And if they're made to resemble the wall, then you lose this strong modeling that you just learned how to do. So that in order to accommodate these sort of varying concepts, the artist provided a house for these little round objects to live in. He thought of his canvas as something other than what it really was, a flat surface. He thought of it as a shadow box. He thought of the edge of it, the edge of his canvas, the frame, if you will, as the edge or opening into a rather well-defined but deep space in which there was plenty of room for these little puppets to function and atmosphere in which to move. And we see this happening. Well this diagram that you were about to see will explain this concept of space rather briefly or that the ceiling and so on is removed at a slight distance from the subject matter and perhaps the whole purpose is to make the spectator and the personalities involved in the picture seem rather small and insignificant in the environment in which they're functioning. This began to happen in the Renaissance carried right on through into the Baroque where it began to be carried to a rather ridiculous extreme. As the artists became more skilled perhaps they became less of an artist and were simply engaged in showing us what wonderful things they could do. This late example is painted on a perfectly flat ceiling and yet it represents architectural details, horses flying through the sky, clouds, and all kinds of elaborate operatic goings-on up in there, the whole effect will be one of extreme grandeur. The spectator looks very insignificant when he sees it, and perhaps that's the rule in this case, where the thing becomes such a skillful maneuver on the part of the artist that it loses its statement value. Then later on in Dutch art, the individual became much more important. The artist got closer into his picture space. He was more concerned with getting closer to the subject matter involved, too. So if there were people in the picture, they were presented much larger in relation to their space in which they were functioning. We still have air, we still have value used to describe form, but perhaps not to the extreme that we did in the earlier example. Now Vermeer is a perfect example of this sort of compromised space. We're much closer to the people although light and dark is here used to describe three-dimensional form and rather effectively you get a wonderful feeling of space in a Vermeer and of air and atmosphere. If you want to look at it in another way without being aware that there are people it becomes a very neatly and concisely arranged design in just black and white. Now the collapsing factor goes on in the beginning of the 19th century. The space has almost met the front of the canvas and in this example of a Seurat, the figures are almost nothing but silhouettes. We see what they're doing, we recognize them as figures, yet the artist is making his biggest statement in the way he has spread his light and dark pattern across the canvas and giving us a series of contrasts that must in itself carry most of the message. The flattening idea carried to its absolute extreme would be represented by a diagram of this sort probably where everything is allocated a definite value of its own and each shape is placed in close relationship to each other space. All the shapes and the values that they contain are intent only on making a statement in terms of a specific kind of contrast: one against the other. This still life, and it is a still life, by Juan Gris is one example of this

particular kind of painting. It's very difficult maybe to pick out all the various things that are there, there's a coffee grinder and some dishes and spoons and so on and a tablecloth. Yet its gross meaning, its overall meaning, must be read on the basis of just the impact it makes aside from what the names of all the things are. Now I think this explains a certain kind of rather concise abstraction. We find that there's a certain amount of diffusion coming into painting nowadays. No longer does the painter limit himself to a sharp edge and the edge that meets another edge. But I think it nonetheless puts us in a position where we can talk just about value and its own power. And in order to kind of demonstrate that, maybe you'll permit us to make a real scientific experiment. First I'd like to show you a set of two geometric shapes, which if you read English you'll be able to read, but these will be presented in a very limited range of value contrast. And later I want you to look at one in which the values themselves have been pushed to the limit. Now this is a light gray against the dark gray. If you read English it's a word, if, however, we intensify the value relationships and make it extremes as light and as dark as possible what I hope has happened is that we get a great deal more emphasis in this last syllable than we did in the first one so that this is soft maybe and this is very loud. In any case I think it will illustrate that it is possible to make a very definite contrast between the elements that we're using and only on the basis of value because we haven't changed the thing we've inverted the letters but that's artistic license. Now, it's hard to believe, perhaps, that an artist will limit himself exclusively to such abstract terms. And it's true that we don't always. But nonetheless, they are present in all examples of art. We can see two things in almost every painting we encounter. We can read it, we can puzzle out who the people are, if there are people, and what they're doing, and get a meaning from that. Or we can take a larger view as in the case of this El Greco which you'll see in a moment and go beyond just the bare subject matter. Now, these are people doing a certain thing. It's Laocoon and snakes and so on. If we don't know that if we have squint our eyes at it, throw it out of focus, let's say, and concentrate only on the pattern of lights and darks I think we'll get the same feeling that we would get if we knew all about the footnotes involved in this painting. Or if we carried it a stage farther and completely eliminated all representational pictorialism. It may seem a little strange to ask you to recognize this as art, but it's reducing the El Greco to its absolute components. And as I have said, I don't think the artist does this every time. We don't always set to work to destroy an El Greco in order to make some kind of a statement but I hope I simply showed you to a certain extent that light and dark in themselves put together in certain ways can make as definite a meaning as a line or a picture that has a specific representational value. This usually happens, I hope that you agree with me, thank you. [Voiceover] You have been viewing Language of Art, a program dealing with some of the fundamentals of art. The discussions are being offered by James McConnell and they are presentation of the Department of Art. This program was directed by Bob Page, produced by Don Pash. Language of Art has been a presentation of Michigan State University Television.