

▶ POSITIVE/NEGATIVE SPACE



Art Concept: Positive/Negative Space. Positive and negative space refers to an art object and the space around it. Architects and Sculptors need to think of their work of art in relation to the space in which it is placed – or in other words, how it will be framed by the air or other buildings and landscape around it. Often visual artists use this as well, creating negative spaces that are quite interesting in their work.

Sometimes Positive and Negative space are meant to be ambiguous or are meant to switch back and forth between each other. Draw a square and a shape such as a hand in it. The square is the space the object exists in or how it is framed. Talk about the hand as the positive space and the space around it (within the square) as the negative space. Then draw a hole in the hand and color it in. Now is the positive space the hand or the hole?

Look at the images below. What is the positive or negative space? How is the object “framed” in the picture? This can be very confusing at first. Just let the students look, explain a little and move on! They will get it after seeing a few pictures.

Sample Projects:

- **Pattern Initials** (Kindergarten) art lesson.
- **Letter Photography** (5th Grade) art lesson.
- **Assemblage Sculptures** (5th Grade) art lesson.
- Have students glue cut out shapes onto a piece of paper, thinking about which is going to be positive and negative. (For example, black landscape horizons on a colorful sunset)
- Make or even just color a simple Escher drawing. As a class project, have each child color one frog or whatever from an Escher drawing and then place them together to make a complete “Escher”.
- Make or plan a sculpture, thinking about where it will be placed.



Meridian, Barbara Hepworth (English), 1958. Is the sculpture the positive space or is the air through and around the sculpture the work of art?



Madame X, Sargeant, 1884. Because her dress blends into the background, it becomes part of the negative space. Only her body sticks out as the positive space.



Stone Enclosure Rock Rings, Nancy Holt (American), 1977. Are the holes the work of art of the rocks?



Mosque Interior, Tlemcen (Almoravid), 1082. Are the arches the work of art or the space they create?



Sydney Opera House, Joern Utzon, 1972. Notice how the architecture relates to the sky. Would it be the same if it were crammed into a tiny space with a lot of other tall buildings around? Doesn't it seem to continue on into the wide sky?



Red, Fuji Hokusai (Japanese) 1830. Notice how the shape of the background is almost a mirror image of the mountain. How do we know that the mountain is what is important? Could it be the color that makes it the positive space?



Minaret of the Mosque of Abu Dulaf (Samarra), 860. Like the Sydney Opera House, this is effective because of how it is placed in a huge sky.



Pallas Athena Berlin Painter (Greek) 480BC. By placing Athena on a background completely devoid of details, she becomes the whole focus of attention. The Amphora shape of the vase then creates another space.



Spiral Jetty, Great Salt Lake Smithsonian (American) 1969. This is a slightly confusing picture – the jetty actually goes into the Great Salt Lake. This is a picture looking down a mountain into the lake. The concept is the same as the Sydney Opera House or Minaret – the expansive lake makes the shape of the jetty so striking.