

art & surrealism glossary

Abstract

Breaking away from the figurative representation of objects, **abstract** art reimagines imagery as a study of the relationship between shape, form, color, and line. Abstraction occurs on a continuum, including the fractured-yet-recognizable forms of [Cubism](#) and the totally non-pictorial nature of [Abstract Expressionism](#).

A term generally used to describe art that is not representational or based on external reality or nature.

Abstract Expressionism

The dominant artistic movement in the 1940s and 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was the first to place New York City at the forefront of international modern art. The associated artists developed greatly varying stylistic approaches, but shared a commitment to an abstract art that powerfully expresses personal convictions and profound human values. They championed bold, gestural abstraction in all mediums, particularly large painted canvases.

Abstraction

Non-representational works of art that do not depict scenes or objects in the world or have discernable subject matter.

Academic

Of or relating to the conservative style of art promoted by an official academy.

Aesthetic

Relating to or characterized by a concern with beauty or good taste (adjective); a particular taste or approach to the visual qualities of an object (noun).

Appropriation

As an artistic strategy, the intentional borrowing, copying, and alteration of preexisting images, objects, and ideas.

Automatism

Strategies of writing or creating art that aimed to access the unconscious mind. The Surrealists, in particular, experimented with automatist techniques of writing, drawing, and painting.

Avant-garde

French for “advanced guard,” this term is used in English to describe a group that is innovative, experimental, and inventive in its technique or ideology, particularly in the realms of culture, politics, and the arts.

Baroque

A term meaning extravagant, complex; applied to a style in art and architecture developed in Europe from the early seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century, emphasizing dramatic, often strained effect and typified by bold, curving forms, elaborate ornamentation, and overall balance of disparate parts.

Ben-Day dots

Colored dots (generally in four colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) used to create shading and secondary colors in the mechanical reproduction of images.

Biomorphic

Derived from the Greek words *bios* (life) and *morphe* (form), a term referring to abstract forms or images that evoke associations with living forms such as plants and the human body.

Brushwork

Brushwork refers to the way a painter applies paint to a surface. It is typically characterized by the size, texture, and precision of the strokes.

Canon

A group of artistic, literary, or musical works that are generally accepted as representing a field.

Caricature

A rendering, usually a drawing, of a person or thing with exaggerated or distorted features, meant to satirize the subject.

Chiaroscuro

Italian for “light-dark,” chiaroscuro is the use of strong contrasts between luminosity and shadow to achieve a sense of volume and dimensionality. This unique technique was developed during the Italian Renaissance by Leonard da Vinci, the Baroque period by Caravaggio, and the Dutch Golden Age by Rembrandt.

Classicism

The principles embodied in the styles, theories, or philosophies of the art of ancient Greece and Rome.

Composition

The composition of a work of art is the way in which its visual elements are arranged, especially in relationship to one another.

Collage

Derived from the French verb *coller*, meaning “to glue,” collage refers to both the technique and the resulting work of art in which fragments of paper and other materials are arranged and glued or otherwise affixed to a supporting surface

Column

A decorative or structural feature, most often composed of stone, typically having a cylindrical or polygonal shaft.

Composition

The arrangement of the individual elements within a work of art so as to form a unified whole; also used to refer to a work of art, music, or literature, or its structure or organization.

Dada

An artistic and literary movement formed in response to the disasters of World War I (1914–18) and to an emerging modern media and machine culture. Dada artists sought to expose accepted and often-repressive conventions of order and logic, favoring strategies of chance, spontaneity, and irreverence. Dada artists experimented with a range of mediums, from collage and photomontage to everyday objects and performance, exploding typical concepts of how art should be made and viewed and what materials could be used. An international movement born in neutral Zurich and New York, Dada rapidly spread to Berlin, Cologne, Hannover, Paris, and beyond.

École des Beaux-Arts

French for “school of fine art,” a term for art schools that advance a classical approach to art, design, and literature based on ancient Greek or Roman forms.

Exquisite Corpse

A game in which each participant takes turns writing or drawing on a sheet of paper, folds it to conceal his or her contribution, then passes it to the next player for a further contribution. The game gained popularity in artistic circles during the 1920s, when it was adopted as a technique by artists of the Surrealist movement.

Figurative

A work of art is considered figurative when its subject matter is representational. Representing a form or figure in art that retains clear ties to the real world.

Foreground

The foreground of a work of art is the part of the composition that is closest to the viewer. It is typically discernible from the background, which appears to be further away.

Foreshortening

Foreshortening is a technique in which an artist distorts perspective to evoke an illusion of depth. Foreshortened subjects often appear to recede into the picture plane.

Found objects

An object—often utilitarian, manufactured or naturally occurring—that was not originally designed for an artistic purpose but has been repurposed in an artistic context.

Frottage

A technique that involves rubbing pencil, graphite, chalk, crayon, or another medium onto a sheet of paper that has been placed on top of a textured object or surface. The process causes the raised portions of the surface below to be translated to the sheet. The term is derived from the French *frotter*, which means “to rub.”

Genre

A category of artistic practice having a particular form, content, or technique. Examples of genres include landscape and still life.

Gouache

A water-based matte paint, sometimes called opaque watercolor, composed of ground pigments and plant-based binders, such as gum Arabic or gum tragacanth. The opacity of gouache derives from the addition of white fillers, such as clay or chalk, or a higher ratio of pigment to binder.

Grotesque

Characterized by ludicrous, repulsive, or incongruous distortion, as of appearance or manner; ugly, outlandish, or bizarre, as in character or appearance.

Hue

A particular gradation of color; a shade or tint.

Iconography

Iconography refers to the subject matter, or images, used to convey meaning or communicate a message in a work of art.

Subject matter in visual art, often adhering to particular conventions of artistic representation, and imbued with symbolic meanings.

Illusion

An unreal, deceptive, or misleading appearance or image.

Impressionism

A label applied to a loose group of mostly French artists who positioned themselves outside of the official Salon exhibitions organized by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Rejecting established styles, the Impressionists began experimenting in the early 1860s with a brighter palette of pure unblended colors, synthetic paints, sketchy brushwork, and subject matter drawn from their direct observations of nature and of everyday life in and around Paris. They worked out of doors, the better to capture the transient effects of sunlight on the scenes before them. With their increased attention to the shifting patterns of light and color, their brushwork became rapid, broken into separate dabs that better conveyed the fleeting quality of light. In 1874, they held their first group exhibition in Paris. Most critics derided their work, especially Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1872), which was called a sketch or impression, rather than a finished painting. From this criticism, they were mockingly labeled Impressionists. They continued exhibiting together until 1886, at which point many of the core artists were taking their work in new directions.

In situ

In its original position or place.

Juxtaposition

An act of placing things close together or side by side for comparison or contrast.

Manifesto

A public declaration, often political in nature, of a group or individual's principles, beliefs, and intended courses of action.

Medium

A medium is the material used to create art. Examples of mediums are watercolor paint, pastel, clay, and charcoal.

The materials used to create a work of art, and the categorization of art based on the materials used (for example, painting [or more specifically, watercolor], drawing, sculpture).

Modern

As a movement, the term “modern” refers to art created between the onset of Impressionism and Pop Art, which ushered in contemporary art. On a more general scale, however, “modern” can mean current or cutting-edge.

Monochrome

A work of art rendered in only one color.

Motif

In the visual arts, a motif is an element of the iconography. In paintings, a motif can refer to any pictorial feature of the composition. In the decorative arts and architecture, it often denotes a recognizable symbol that repeats.

A distinctive and often recurring feature in a composition.

Muse

The guiding spirit that is thought to inspire artists; source of genius or inspiration (noun).

Naturalism

Faithful adherence to nature; factual or realistic representation.

Neo-Impressionism

A term coined by French art critic Fénéon in 1886, applied to an avant-garde art movement that flourished principally in France from 1886 to 1906. Led by the example of Georges Seurat, the Neo-Impressionists renounced the spontaneity of Impressionism in favor of a measured painting technique grounded in science and the study of optics. Neo-Impressionists came to believe that separate touches of pigment result in a greater vibrancy of color than is achieved by the conventional mixing of pigments on the palette.

Pentimento

Pentimento ("repentance" in Italian) refers to the presence of evidence that an artist has painted over a previously rendered subject. In *The Old Guitarist* by Pablo Picasso, for example, the vague outline of a woman's face is apparent beneath the final brushstrokes.

Perspective

Perspective is the representation of 3-dimensional depth and space on a flat surface. There are two main types of perspective: linear and atmospheric. Linear perspective employs intersecting lines and vanishing points as a means to make objects appear far away. According to Leonardo da Vinci in *A Treatise on Painting*, atmospheric perspective, on the other hand, illustrates the idea that "colors become weaker in proportion to their distance from the person who is looking at them" through tonal changes.

Oil Paint

A paint in which pigment is suspended in oil, which dries on exposure to air.

Old Master

A distinguished European artist of the period from about 1500 to the early 1700s, especially one of the great painters of this period, e.g., Michelangelo.

Palette

The range of colors used by an artist in making a work of art;

A thin wooden or plastic board on which an artist holds and mixes paint.

Paranoiac critical method

Emerging from psychological methods, a creative process, developed by Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí in the 1930s, for the exploration of the creative potential of dream imagery and subconscious thoughts.

Perspective

Technique used to depict volumes and spatial relationships on a flat surface, as in a painted scene that appears to extend into the distance.

Pop art

A movement comprising initially British, then American artists in the 1950s and 1960s. Pop artists borrowed imagery from popular culture—from sources including television, comic books, and print advertising—often to challenge conventional values propagated by the mass media, from notions of femininity and domesticity to consumerism and patriotism. Their often subversive and irreverent strategies of appropriation extended to their materials and methods of production, which were drawn from the commercial world.

Post-Impressionism

A term coined in 1910 by the English art critic and painter Roger Fry and applied to the reaction against the naturalistic depiction of light and color in Impressionism, led by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat. Though each of these artists developed his own, distinctive style, they were unified by their interest in expressing their emotional and psychological responses to the world through bold colors and expressive, often symbolic images. Post-Impressionism can be roughly dated from 1886 to 1905.

Primitive Art

A term initially used to refer to the arts of all of Africa, Asia, and Pre-Columbian America, later used mostly to refer to art from Africa and the Pacific Islands. By the late 20th century, the term, with its derogatory connotations, fell out of favor.

Proportion

Refers to the harmonious relation of parts to each other or to the whole.

Readymade

A term coined by Marcel Duchamp in 1915 to describe prefabricated, often mass-produced objects isolated from their intended use and elevated to the status of art by the artist choosing and designating them as such. The term “assisted Readymade” refers to works of this type whose components have been combined or modified by the artist.

Renaissance

A term meaning rebirth or revival; applied to a period characterized by the humanistic revival of classical art, architecture, literature, and learning, originating in Italy in the fourteenth century and later spreading throughout Europe and lasting through the sixteenth century.

Rendering

A representation, executed in perspective, of a proposed structure.

Representation

The visual portrayal of someone or something.

Scale

Scale refers to the size of an object in relation to another. Often, as in the case of large-scale paintings, this comparison is based on the portrayed object's real-life size.

The ratio between the size of an object and its model or representation, as in the scale of a map to the actual geography it represents.

Still life

A representation of inanimate objects, as a painting of a bowl of fruit.

Style

A work of art's style is a classification of its visual appearance. Often, style is characterized according to the distinctive aesthetic approach of an individual artist, art movement, period, or culture.

A distinctive or characteristic manner of expression.

Subconscious (in technical use, Unconscious)

In popular writing about psychology, the division of the mind containing the sum of all thoughts, memories, impulses, desires, feelings, etc., that are not subject to a person's perception or control but that often affect conscious thoughts and behavior (noun). The Surrealists derived much inspiration from psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams and the workings of the subconscious mind.

Surrealism

An artistic and literary movement led by French poet André Breton from 1924 through World War II. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, the Surrealists sought to overthrow what they perceived as the oppressive rationalism of modern society by accessing the *surréalisme* (superior reality) of the subconscious. In his 1924 "Surrealist Manifesto," Breton argued for an uninhibited mode of expression derived from the mind's involuntary mechanisms, particularly dreams, and called on artists to explore the uncharted depths of the imagination with radical new methods and visual forms. These ranged from abstract "automatic" drawings to hyper-realistic painted scenes inspired by dreams and nightmares to uncanny combinations of materials and objects.

Symbol

A form, sign, or emblem that represents something else, often something immaterial, such as an idea or emotion.

Tone

Tone refers to the lightness or darkness of a particular color.

Trompe l'oeil

In French, trompe l'oeil means "deceive the eye." A technique that creates optical illusions of three-dimensionality by employing eye-catching lifelike imagery.

Venus

The goddess of love and beauty in Roman mythology.

Sources:

[My Modern Met](#)

[MOMA](#)