

DISCOVER

Definitions & Visual Art Vocabulary



Abstract expressionism: A movement of the late 1940s and 1950s that conveyed attitudes and emotions in a nonobjective manner (without a subject). Also known as the New York School, it is considered a significant independent American art form.

Aesthetics: The branch of philosophy that raises questions about what is beautiful and what is art.

Aquatint: This type of print resembles a watercolor; thus, the name. It is produced print from a copper plate etched with nitric acid. It is a variant of etching that produces areas of tone rather than lines. It is a form of etching use used by printmakers to achieve a broad range of tonal values.

Arbitrary color: Any color that is used to express feelings of that artist rather than the realistic appearance of the subject - a purple apple for example.

Art criticism: The skill of making discriminating evaluations about art.

Art history: The study of art within a cultural and historical context as well the study of the artistic contributions which individual artists make to their society and culture.

Art Students' League: The Art Students' League was first organized in 1875. By the late 1890s it had more than a thousand students. Students chose their own course of study, attending classes of their choice. Over the years the school has attracted a distinguished teaching staff and its list of former students have included some of the best-known American artists of the 20th century.

Assemblage: A work of art made by assembling a group of miscellaneous three-dimensional objects. Comparable to a collage.

Asymmetry: A balance achieved when each side of a work of art does not mirror the other in a symmetrical manner.

Atmospheric perspective: The notion of creating space by the diminishment of value, intensity, and detail of objects as they recede from the viewer in a work of art.

Background: The area of a two-dimensional work of art that is furthest away from the viewer.

Balance: The equilibrium of equal or different parts to create unity. There are three basic types:

Symmetrical compositions provide a sense of stability and balance on either side of a central axis. They may be identical or a mirror-image. Even if there is some variation on either side of the central axis, as long as there is significant symmetry on both sides the work is symmetrical. Artists use symmetry to express strength and stability.

Asymmetrical compositions are different on each side of a central axis. This does not mean that they are not balanced. Asymmetric compositions can express energy and excitement.

Radial compositions have lines or shapes growing from a center point. The axis is the center point and the design or pattern radiates outward from that point.

Benday dot: The Benday process is a photomechanical reproductive process named after the American printer, Ben (jamin) Day (1838-1916). A screen, laid over an image, breaks it up into hundreds of small dots allowing the image to be quickly and cheaply printed by the thousands. Contemporary artists interested in commercial images have often incorporated it into their work.

Cartoon: Originally a cartoon was a full-sized drawing for a painting or tapestry. Since the 19th century, the word means a caricature or comic drawing with humorous or satirical meanings. Since the early decades of the 20th century cartoon also refers to comic strips or books that have become widely popular.

Chess: a game for 2 players each of whom moves 16 pieces according to fixed rules across a checkerboard and tries to checkmate the opponent's king

Collage: A work of art made by assembling a group of miscellaneous two-dimensional images. Comparable to an assemblage.

Color: Hue is the color itself – red, green, blue etc. Red, yellow and blue make up the **primary** colors. Theoretically all other colors can be made from them. **Secondary** colors are those made from the primary colors - green, purple, and orange. **Cool** colors are those hues associated with cold - blue and green. **Warm** colors are those associated with heat - red and orange. **Complementary** colors are those that are opposite of each other on the color wheel - orange and purple. **Intensity** is the brightness or dullness of a color.

Composition: The organization of art forms and elements within a work of art.

Contemporary: Works of art completed in the last few decades are often called contemporary.

Contour line: The outline of an object is the contour of that object. In painting artists will sometimes emphasize contour line, making it look stronger by using color or varying the thickness or thinness of the line.

Contrast: The opposition or juxtaposition of different forms, lines, or colors in a work of art to intensify each element's properties and produce a more dynamic expression. Examples: light and dark; rough and smooth.

Contrapposto: a pose where the human figure bears its weight on one leg causing a tilting of the hips diagonally in one direction and the shoulders diagonally in the opposite direction.

Design: Organization or structure of formal elements in a work of art; the art of combining the elements of a work of art into a satisfactory visual whole.

Detail: The small elements that collectively constitute a work of art.

Dimension: a measurable extent with depth, height, length, etc.

Two-dimensional (or 2-dimensional): a flat plan that has only height and width.

Three-dimensional (or 3-dimensional): having length, width, and depth, as a human in the real world.

Double-loading: A technique in which the brush is dipped into two colors which are then applied simultaneously.

Drama: A composition intended to portray life or character or telling a story involving conflicts and emotions through action.

Drypoint: A printmaking technique of the intaglio family, in which an image is incised into a plate (or "matrix") with a hard pointed "needle" of sharp metal or diamond point. The name comes from the act of drawing with a "dry" pointed needle, without ink. The scratched surface is then inked pushing it into the scratches. The surface is then wiped clean, and damp paper is pressed into the etched areas of the plate to create an impression.

Ekphrastic: (Ekphrasis) Using one form of art to inspire another form of art (poetry to visual art/visual art to poetry, etc).

Emphasis: Dominance; increased importance of a particular element over the others in a work of art.

Expression: The facial aspect as indicative of feeling.

Expressionism: A work of art in which artists emphasize the subjective emotions rather than objective reality.

Foreground: The area of a two-dimensional work of art that appears closest to the viewer, usually in the lower third of a work of art.

Fragment: A piece of a whole design, shape, or object.

Geometric: Using simple geometric shapes, either actual or implied, in compositions.

Gesture: a movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude.

Gypsograph: A type of relief printmaking technique using a plate is made of hardened plaster. The plate is essentially a bas-relief mold. Ink is then painted in or onto areas of the plate. A dampened paper is then pushed into the plate creating an embossed surface and lifting up the ink. This technique was invented by Pierre Roche (French, 1855-1922).

Happenings: An event, seemingly impromptu, developed to encourage participation by all. The purpose was to "rupture the barriers between art and life." It often involved performance, music, dance and the visual arts.

Harlem Renaissance: Following World War I, dozens of talented African American intellectuals, writers, artists and musicians were drawn to Harlem, a predominantly African American neighborhood in New York City. These people expressed the African American heritage through their work. The resulting artistic and literary expression became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hatching: Hatching is a series of parallel lines used primarily in drawing and printmaking to darken or lower the value of an area. Crosshatching is a series of lines that overlap to create interest and shade to areas in a work of art. These lines might be straight or curvilinear.

Heritage: Something passed down from preceding generations. Traditional.

Hue: a gradation or variety of a color or tint. The property of light by which the color of an object is classified as red, blue, green, or yellow in reference to the spectrum.

Imagery: Figurative language that produces images in the mind.

Intaglio: The family of printmaking techniques in which the image is incised into a surface and the incised line or sunken area holds the ink. It is the direct opposite of a relief print. Examples include drypoint and engraving.

Line: A continuous mark made with a moving tool. Lines can have different lengths, widths, directions, colors or textures. Lines can be straight or curved. A line also a pathway through space and used by an artist to control the way a work is seen. There are five kinds of lines: vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved and zigzag.

Linocut: A linocut is a relief print similar to a woodcut that uses linoleum as the surface into which the design is cut. The lino block consists of a thin layer of linoleum usually mounted on wood. The soft linoleum can be cut away more easily than a woodblock and, in any direction, (as it has no grain) to produce a raised surface that can be inked and printed.

Lithography: A printmaking process developed at the end of the 18th century and popular throughout the 19th down to present. Essentially it is based on the principal that oil and water do not mix. A greasy medium (lithographic crayons or ink) is use. is used to draw directly onto a prepared litho stone (or aluminum). Then a solution of gum Arabic and nitric acid is applied over the surface, producing water-receptive non-printing areas and grease-receptive image areas. With the printing surface wet, a roller charged with oil-based ink is rolled over the surface. Ink will only stick to the grease-receptive image area. Paper is then placed against the surface and the plate is run through a press.

Local color (or flat color): The true color of an object in ordinary daylight. Any color that is broadly applied with little or no variation of hue, value or saturation. Some artists use one color to describe an object or pattern. For example, an apple painted with only one type of red would be considered painted with local color.

Metaphor: A description without the use of the comparative words 'like' or 'as.' To liken something that is not literally true.

Middle ground: The intermediate position between two opposites. In a two-dimensional work of art, the middle ground is between the foreground and the background.

Minimalism: A style of art, predominantly American, characterized by a rejection of expressive content and its reliance on formal elements in a work of art. It dates from the mid-20th century and was a rejection of abstract expressionism.

Mixed Media: The use of different materials or techniques in one work of art.

Monochromatic: One color or range of color hues.

Monoprint: One print. The artist paints onto a piece of glass or plexiglass then lays down damp paper to lift the ink to make a print. A reverse monoprint requires that the glass be completely inked. The paper is placed on the ink, and the artist draws on the back of the paper causing the ink to stick to the front of the paper.

Monumental: Impressively large and sturdy.

Motif: An element within the design of a work of art, often repeated, or the subject of a painting.

Narrative: The visual representation of an event or story.

Naturalistic: The representation of a subject easily recognizable but not necessarily realistic.

Organic: Pertaining to the shapes or forms in a work of art that have irregular contours and seem to resemble or suggest forms found in nature. Floral forms are organic.

Orphism or Orphic Cubism (1910-13): The term coined by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, was a little-known art movement during the time of Cubism that focused on pure abstraction and bright colors influenced by Fauvism and the dye chemist Eugène Chevreul. This movement was pioneered by the Delaunays, a couple who re-launched the use of color during the monochromatic Cubist movement.

Pattern: Formed by a repeating element in a work of art.

Parallel lines: Lines or implied lines that never intersect.

Photorealism: Sometimes known as super realism, this technique uses photographs as the source for the image that is then enlarged to almost herculean size and painted onto a canvas.

Pop art: A movement begun in the 1960s that rejected abstract expressionism and concerned itself with using the anonymous, mass-produced images of advertising, comics and television to provide its content.

Portrait: A picture of a person or group.

Print: An image existing in several copies from a plate. Twentieth century prints are usually printed in an edition and are numbered accordingly. For example, the third print from an edition of ten would be numbered "3/10."

Profile: A representation of something in outline; a human head or face represented or seen in a side view.

Proportion: Alludes to the relationship between parts of a work of art; how one part exists in relation to the next, and so on.

Props: Objects placed in a work of art to communicate something about the subject.

Relief Print: Printing on a raised surface. A relief print is where the surface of a plate is cut or etched away to reveal the design on the surface of the plate to be printed. It is possibly the oldest form of printmaking. Woodcut and linocuts are relief prints.

Representational: When artists create representational work, they are trying to represent the real world. Thus, a dog looks like a dog, a horse a horse.

Repetition: Repeated elements such as color, shape, and line repeated to create rhythm and unity.

Rhythm: A principal of design that suggests movement by the repetition of elements. Rhythm often employs positive spaces separated by negative spaces.

Rhyme: Similar sounds, especially at the end of a line of poetry

Screen Print: A print in which images are printed through a screen mesh stretch over a frame and using stenciling techniques. The stencil blocks the ink from transferring to the substrate. Screen printing first appeared in a recognizable form in China during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD).

Sculpture: The art of carving, modeling or assembling a three-dimensional form, either relief or freestanding. If material is taken away to form the work, it is known as **subtractive**. If material is added to create the work, it is known as **additive**.

Self-portrait: A portrait of one's self.

Shading: The darkening of parts of an object in a work of art to suggest shadow. It provides contrast to the lighter areas of an artwork. In drawing it may be done by hatching, while in painting it may be done by using values.

Shape: Shape defines an object in space. It can be geometric, free-form, organic or angular. Form is shape that is three-dimensional. There are two basic types of shapes:

Geometric shapes include shapes we know as squares, rectangles, circles, cubes, spheres, and cones. Geometric shapes are often man-made but there are natural geometric shapes.

Organic shapes characteristically have irregular contours. They are often associated with things found in nature but can be man-made. Floral forms are organic.

Simile: Comparing one thing to another using the comparative words 'like' or 'as.'

Size: relative or proportionate dimensions

Space: Volume that is available for occupation by a shape or form. It can be a negative or positive space. **Negative space** is that space surrounding an object in a work of art. A **positive space** is the area where an object exists.

Still life: A presentation of an arrangement of a group of objects.

Stylized: A distinctive way of presenting art forms within a given work of art; to make a work conform to a particular style.

Syllable: A part of a word that is a sound or 'beat.'

Subject: presented for consideration in discussion, thought, or study

Symmetrical: Compositions provide a sense of stability and balance on either side of a central axis. They may be identical or a mirror-image. Even if there is some variation on either side of the central axis, as long as there is significant symmetry on both sides the work is symmetrical. Artists use symmetry to express strength and stability.

Technique: The procedure in which a work of art is completed.

Texture: the visual or tactile surface characteristics and appearance of something

Three-dimensional: Any object that exists in three dimensions, having extension in depth as well as height and width. Sculpture is three-dimensional.

Transfer: A drawing, design, pattern or the like that may be transferred to another surface.

Unity: The arrangement of a work of art so that all parts seem interrelated.

Value: The relationship between light and dark tones in a work of art. Value is how light or dark a color is. Artists use value to heighten effects, describe a scene or create different moods.

Dark colors can suggest a lack of light, as in a night or interior scene. Dark colors can be used to create mystery and drama, even foreboding. **Light colors** often describe light either from the outside – striking a person or object – or inside the composition itself. Light colors can be used to create buoyancy, optimism and joy.

Variation: Varied or diversified. Different types of things. An aspect or feature that gives the artwork character. Variety occurs when an artist creates something that looks different from the rest of the artwork. It can be used to emphasize a part or make the whole more interesting to see.

Weaving: There are three main weaving techniques: coiling, plaiting and twining. All involve wefts and warps.

Coiling: Using a base material (such as roots or twigs) is coiled and as the coil rises, another material is used to stitch it into place.

Plaiting or Checker Weave: A technique in which the weft crosses over and under one warp at a time.

Twining: A technique in which two wefts cross over each other between warps.

Woodcut: A relief print in which an image or design is cut out of a woodblock. The surface is then inked and printed.

Word bubble: The name for the bubble that appears above a cartoon character in which words are printed allowing the character to “speak.”

Workmanship: the quality imparted to a thing in the process of making.

WPA (Works Project Administration): Federal Art Project: An integral part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s recovery plan for the Great Depression, the WPA Federal Art Project employed hundreds of artists to create paintings, murals and designs for public buildings and spaces.