

Glossary

A-C

Abstract

Simplification, extracting parts of a subject or image.

Abstract texture

The appearance of texture in an abstract work. The texture is represented in a pattern-like or stylized appearance. In other words, the texture is abstracted in the same way the object is.

abstract expressionism

Abstract expressionism was a movement in American painting that developed in the years following the Second World War. Many abstract expressionist artists were invested in notions of the subconscious, the intuitive, the automatic-- and the movement has a theoretical relationship to earlier 20th century art movements, like surrealism, which coincide with the general popularization of psychoanalytic thought during the Modern era. Abstract expressionist painting is characterized by a rejection of figurative representation in favor of a newly radical emphasis on process, gesture, composition, surfaces and the material application of paint during the act of painting. Many abstract expressionist painters conceived of these latter qualities of their work as producing a kind of psychic registry, where the paintings themselves operate as an expressive record of the collision between the artist's identity and the painted surface.

[Abstract Expressionism \(The Metropolitan Museum of Art\)](#)

The Académie des Beaux-Arts

French, "Academy of Fine Arts." One of the five academies of the Institut de France, the Académie des Beaux-Arts is responsible for the administration of several awards offered to both musicians and visual artists by the French government. When it was founded in 1816, the Académie aimed to set the artistic standards for the country through a series of training programs and schools, most of which deliberately rejected avant-garde practices of the time in favor of historical painting. For many years, acceptance to the Académie's influential yearly Salon exhibition was viewed as the only way to achieve substantial monetary success and establish a reputation as a serious artist in France.

Avant-garde

A French term meaning "vanguard" or "advance-guard"; typically applied to art movements or artists who make innovative or unconventional works that deliberately reject or push the boundaries of contemporary artistic standards.

Academic

Conforming to conventional rules. Academic art follows traditions set by formal schools of art.

Achromatic

Colors or values including black, white, and grays; these are considered without *hue*.

Actual shape

Shape that has a definitive border.

Actual texture

Texture that can be felt, such as the canvas of a painting and the chunky plasticity of heavily applied acrylic paint, or the cool, smooth stone of a sculpture. Texture can be inherent, as in natural stone, or created by the artist, as in a clay surface that is roughened by tools.

Aesthetic

Theories and ideas of beauty; *Aesthetics* is the philosophical study of art and beauty.

Amorphous shape

An indistinct shape without a definitive border or area, such as a cloud of vapor.

[An example of amorphous shape.](#)

Analogous colors

Colors that are close or next to each other on the color wheel; they appear harmonious.

Approximate symmetry

A sense of balance achieved by similar, but not identical, imagery on either side of the center axis of a work. Compare to *symmetry*.

Assemblage

A grouping of materials or objects.

Asymmetrical

A work of art that is not symmetrical; if divided on a central axis, it is different on each side.

Automatism

A random, chance-based art practice.

Background

The area of an artwork that appears furthest from the viewer.

Balance

A sense of stability achieved by the relation of elements in a work, for example a sense of balance in color, scale, or placement of elements within a composition.

Baroque

An artistic style which gained popularity in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is characterized by its opulence, high level of detail and ornamentation, dramatic poses, and rich color schemes, which can be found in a wide range of disciplines, including painting, sculpture, furniture design, and architecture.

[Baroque Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum](#)

Biomorphic shape

Also called organic; a shape that is reminiscent of irregular or curved forms found in nature.

Bourgeois

A French term meaning the Middle Class in society. Used as both an adjective and noun, the word typically implies conventional modes of thought, capitalist interests, and complacent mediocrity.

Carte de visite

A photographic format developed in 1854 by Parisian photographer Andre Adolphe Disderi. The *carte de visite* (French, "visiting card") is a photographic portrait of an individual, or sometimes a small group of individuals, printed on a 64 mm (2.5 in) × 100 mm (4 in) paper card. As the process was relatively inexpensive, the *cartes* were often exchanged amongst family and friends as a calling card. The format was eventually replaced by the slightly larger but similar cabinet card towards the end of the 19th century, which remained a popular photographic format until the advent of snapshot photography in the early 20th century.

Chroma

Color; the relative intensity of color or hue; chroma is called *saturation* in digital art software.

Chromatic

hue, such as red, yellow or blue.

Closed-value composition

A work in which different values are enclosed within shapes.

[An example of closed-value composition.](#)

Collaborative

Two or more people working together; a collaborative artwork is created by more than one person.

Collage

An artwork made by combining various parts of other media or objects in one design. The individual parts may have texture, such as pieces of fabric, or crumpled and smoothed paper. The collage itself, with pieces overlapping, develops a surface texture in its construction.

Color

The visible light spectrum. Color is described by *hue*, such as red, blue, and yellow, *intensity*, which is the concentration or depth of the hue, and *value*, the lightness and darkness of the hue.

Color triad

Any three colors that form a triangle on the color wheel.

Color tetrad

Any four colors that form a rectangle on the color wheel.

Color wheel

The representation of hues in a circular grid.

Complementary colors

are colors across from each other on the color wheel.

Composition

The way the parts of an artwork are arranged. In a drawing or painting, composition is the decision of where to place designs on the paper or canvas.

Conceptual art

A work in which the idea is as important, or more important, than the form or appearance of the work.

Content

Why an artwork is created. Differing from subject, but related to it, the content is the intention of the artwork. For example, a drawing of trees may be variously designed to express a concern for environmentalism, to capture the mysterious quality of a forest, or to symbolize something entirely different from actual trees.

Contour line

A linedrawn to indicate the outer edge of an object, with variation of width and value to represent dark and light areas of an object.

[An example of contour.](#)

Contrast

Difference; in an artwork dramatic contrast may create interest, such as an orange sphere painted on a blue background.

Craftsmanship

The skill evident in the making of an artwork. If there is evidence of the expert manipulation of materials, a work may be described as having good craftsmanship.

Cross-contour lines

A series of lines that describe the surface of an object, with variations in width and value. Similar to lines used in topographical maps. [An example of cross-contour.](#)

Cross-hatching lines

Lines made by layering hatching strokes in different directions, to achieve a darker value. [Example of cross-hatching.](#)

Cubism

Cubism refers to a development in artistic theory and practice initiated by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in Paris, during the first two decades of the 20th century. The term refers to the loose geometrical system of abstraction that Cubist artists developed in response to traditional perspectival and representational dictates inherited from earlier forms of practice. The Cubist method emphasized the surface of the image by 'unfolding' its subjects--attempting to represent them from multiple perspectives, or as occupying multiple positions, at once. [Lecture 1.1]

[Cubism \(The Metropolitan Museum of Art\)](#)

D-G

Daguerreotype

An innovative early photographic method invented in 1839 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in Paris, France. A very labor intensive process yielding only one unique image per exposure, daguerreotypes are notable for their exceptional detail and distinctive, highly-polished surface.

[The Daguerreotype Collection at the Library of Congress](#)

Decalcomania

Random printing with painted glass or sponges.

Decorative shape

A shape that appears flat due to one value.

Decorative value

A value that is used to create flat areas of different intensity, rather than value used to create a three-dimensional effect in a two-dimensional work.

Depth of Space

The illusion of three-dimensions (space) in a two-dimensional (flat) artwork.

Dominance

The area of an artwork that is most noticeable, such as a large shape of a bright color.

Economy

The elimination or simplification of the unnecessary in an artwork.

Elements of Art

The ingredients in artworks, the elements of line, shape, value, texture and color are also useful terms for describing art.

Enlightenment

Also called the *Age of Enlightenment* or the *Age of Reason*. A movement in Western philosophy that began in the 17th and 18th centuries; it is marked by a call for rational thought, scientific thinking and skepticism, and free exchange of intellectual ideas.

[Enlightenment \(The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Exquisite corpse

A game of arranging random words into nonsense; can also be played by adding random additions to a drawing or collage.

Fin de siècle

French, "end of the century." This expression is similar to the English phrase "turn of the century" in that it denotes the close of one era and the beginning of another. In art criticism, the term is used in reference specifically to the shift from the 1800s to the 1900s. Works of art and literature bearing the *fin de siècle* label are typically noted for their subtle aura of dread, boredom, or social anxiety.

[Fin de siècle at Oxford Bibliographies](#)

Foreground

The area of an artwork that appears closest to the viewer.

Form

How an artwork is created. The material of an artwork and how it exists. To describe the form of an artwork, describe what it is made of and what it looks like, for example: a marble sculpture, shaped like an egg, on a wooden pedestal. As an element of art, form may also refer to the 3-dimensional quality of shape.

flâneur

A French term meaning "stroller"; it refers to men in 19th century Paris who idly explored

the streets of the city. The German art and cultural critic Walter Benjamin popularized the study of the flâneur as a figure uniquely emblematic of modern urban life.

Frottage

Rubbing graphite on paper over a textured surface.

Geometric shape

Shapes found in geometry, such as polygons and circles.

[Example of geometric shape.](#)

Gesamtkunstwerk

A work of art that is a synthesis of multiple artistic disciplines. From the German *gesamt*, whole; *kunst*, art; *werk*, work.

Gestural lines

Gestural lines and gestural drawings are made quickly and spontaneously in an attempt to capture the liveliness of the subject.

Grottage

Printing made by pressing on a textured surface with oil paint.

H-L

Harmony

The use of elements that relate to each other and do not contrast, such as colors that are adjacent on the color wheel. Blue, blue-green, and green are a harmonious color combination. The opposite of harmony is variety.

Hatching lines

A series of short strokes drawn to blend together and indicate shading. .

[Example of hatching](#) lines

High-key value

The lighter range of values on the value scale.

[Example of high-key values.](#)

Highlight

The lightest portion of an object or area in an artwork.

[Example of highlight.](#)

High Cubism

Also known as Analytic Cubism, was a development of Cubism wherein the Cubist methods of abstraction and fragmentation were elaborated and intensified to what might be considered a categorical limit, in order to more rigorously interrogate form and representation.

[High Cubism \(The Metropolitan Museum of Art\)](#)

History painting/historical painting

These terms describe a genre of painting that is organized by its common subject matter, rather than by determined or common stylistic and formal theorization (though they are often large in scale and rendered with some realism). History paintings typically depict a moment in a narrative story--often one adopted from religious parable, mythology, folklore, or social and political histories that are antecedent or relevant to the cultural moment in which the artist is working. This type of painting was the dominant form of academic painting in the West during the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. [Lecture 2.1]

[History Painting at the National Gallery](#)

Hue

The name of a color, such as red, blue, or yellow, and the position of the color on the color wheel.

Iconography

Symbolic imagery.

iconography

Refers to the identification and description of the specific content in a painting or other work of art. Iconography attempts to isolate the meaning of things such as the poses of the figures, the number of figures in the scene, objects represented in the image, etc.

Illusionism

The realistic appearance of unreal subjects; achieved by careful attention to detail.

Implied line

A minimal line that still indicates the outline of the object.

[Example of implied line.](#)

Implied shape

An apparent shape without a solid boundary, such as an image of a circle made from a pattern of unconnected dots.

Installation

Artwork that transforms a particular space

Intermediate colors

Colors created by mixing a primary and a secondary color. They are red-orange and red-violet, yellow-green and yellow-orange, blue-violet and blue-green.

[Example of intermediate colors.](#)

Interpenetration

Overlapping elements in an artwork that appear interconnected and integrated.

Invented texture

A texture that does not necessarily represent a real world counterpart. It is designed by the artist.

[Example of invented texture.](#)

Juxtapose

To place side by side. In an artwork, juxtaposition of different images can create interest and new meanings.

Line

Considered the most basic element. A line is a path between points. A stroke or mark on a surface, made by a tool, line may also refer to the overall contour of a design, as in the lines of a building or the lines of a dress.

Linear Perspective

A system of drawing used to create the illusion of space and depth on a flat (two-dimensional) surface.

Low-key value

The darker range of values on the value scale.

luminescence

Light that is produced by reactions, processes or objects that do not involve significant measures of heat.

M-P

Manipulate

Move or arrange. In an artwork, manipulation refers to alteration, such as manipulating a photograph by adding paint to parts of the photo.

Media

The plural form of *medium*.

Medium

The material used to make artworks, for instance clay, oil pastels, fabric, or ink.

Metamorphosis

Transformation; the development of an organism.

metaphorical

Having to do with metaphor, which is a figure of expression that complicates the denotative

meaning of a word/object/image/sign by using it in a sense other than that given by its literal meaning. A metaphor makes a comparison between two or more objects/subjects by substituting one term for another. Metaphor uses association and resemblance to map the qualities of each term in a metaphorical construction onto the other, or to confuse and combine their qualities.

metier

Something upon which one is focused, or at which one excels. An area of focus and emphasis. Generally: vocation or career. At Calarts, we use this term to refer to one's program of study-- School of Critical Studies, School of Dance, School of Art, School of Film/Video, School of Music, School of Theater.

milieu

The environment and atmosphere in which something occurs or develops. From the French word meaning "mid-place."

Modern

In visual art, this term generally refers to a period in art history that extends roughly from the mid-19th century into the 1970s, though many of its theories, values, tactics and techniques persist within more contemporary practices. The beginning of the Modern period in art coincides loosely with the development and proliferation of photography, and could be broadly characterized as a period of intense experimentation with, and reevaluation of nearly every aspect of artistic practice-- subject, material, method, authorship, meaning, value, economy, politic, etc. The Modern is an enormous umbrella term, under which many, many different objects, developments and histories are often noisily collected together. There are many competing narratives of the Modern.

Monochromatic

A color scheme using one hue and values of that hue.

Mosaic

An artwork of small combined pieces. Tile floors are an example of a mosaic.

Motif

A design, an image used as a pattern.

Movement

A feeling of direction within an artwork, or the way one's eye travels in looking at the work. The artist purposely plans this sense of movement.

Mughal

Of or relating to the Mughal Empire, which controlled significant territories in India and Pakistan from the mid-16th to mid-19th centuries.

[Mughal Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum](#)

Narrative

A story. A narrative artwork is one which depicts a story.

nature morte

French: "nature dead." The English equivalent of this phrase is "still life," which refers to a form of painting that depicts tableaux of carefully arranged inanimate objects.

Negative space/shape

A space or shape that is empty.

[Example of negative space.](#)

Neutrals

A color mixed with a complementary color so that its hue is subdued or made less intense.

Neoclassicism

A prominent European art movement of the 18th century, inspired in large part by the extensive excavation and cataloging of classical Greek and Roman artifacts at the time. Neoclassical art typically depicts Greco-Roman myths and deities or borrows key stylistic and compositional features from classical works.

[Neoclassicism at the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

New media

Refers broadly to work produced using digital technologies, or produced for digital contexts.

Odalisque

A concubine in a Turkish harem, most often a concubine of the Ottoman sultan. Odaliques were a common subject in the Orientalist paintings of 18th and 19th century academic art in Europe. Odaliques (called *odalik* in the original Turkish) were usually rendered as passive female nudes, with painters using the exoticism of the subject to justify deliberately erotic content that would have otherwise been unacceptable at the time.

Orthogonal

In artworks that use the methods of linear perspective, the 'perspective lines' that radiate out from the vanishing point in the image are known as 'orthogonal lines.' This usage departs somewhat from the mathematical applications of the term.

Open-value composition

A work in which different values may bleed or seep into adjacent shapes and portions of the work.

[Example of open-value composition.](#)

Optical perception

The actual appearance of an artwork.

Organic

A reference to nature, or to living organisms.

Organic Unity

The effective use of subject, form, and content leads to organic unity. The artwork seems complete, with each facet working together.

See: *subject, form, and content*.

Ornamental

Decorative. Ornamental designs may be integral to a work, or an unnecessary but attractive additional embellishment.

Outline

A drawn line that eliminates detail and attends to only the outer edge of an object.

Pattern

The repetition of a motif or element across a surface. Pattern may be regular and geometric, such as checkerboard tiles on a floor, or irregular and random, such as the look of camouflage fabric or the varying spots on a leopard.

Performance art

A time-based, presentational form of visual art. Participatory art that crosses disciplines; for example visual arts and dance.

Perspective

Point of view.

Picture plane

The surface of a picture.

Pigment

The substances used to make artists' colors such as paint. Pigments may come from minerals, plants, or other sources, and they are mixed with liquids to make paints and other materials.

Plastic

Sculpted; three-dimensional.

Positive space/shape

A space or shape filled with something.

Primary colors

The three basic colors of red, blue, and yellow. Theoretically, all others colors may be created by mixing these three in different combinations.

[Example of primary colors.](#)

Principles of Organization

Guidelines for using the elements of art, the seven principles are harmony, variety, balance, proportion, dominance, movement, and economy. All principles are not always used in every artwork. If successfully used, the elements and principles may yield an artwork with visual unity. The principles also provide a useful vocabulary for describing art.

Profile

A side view; usually refers to a face.

Proportion

The relations of size within a work. Used with balance, for example, one large shape may be balanced proportionally by two smaller shapes.

physiognomy

Refers to an individual's facial features, often the study of an individual's facial features as a way to assess their personality. It is also used more abstractly to refer to the particular qualities and character of an inanimate object or place.

pictorial

Refers to something expressed in images. Describes something having to do with, or having some qualities of images, illustrations, pictures, etc.

perspective

In art, an effect, produced through various methods, which renders the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface.

[Linear Perspective \(Museum of Science\)](#)

Q-Z

Radial

A design that develops from a center point.

Rayographs

Photographs that do not use a camera, originated by Man Ray.

Ready-mades

Art that incorporates manufactured objects; the manufactured object is claimed as art by its labeling and placement in an art venue. Originated by Marcel Duchamp.

Scale

Relative size or proportion.

[Example of scale.](#)

Secondary colors

Colors made by mixing two primaries; they are orange, violet, and green.

[Example of secondary colors.](#)

Shade

Mixing black with a hue to achieve a darker value.

[Example of shade.](#)

Shadow

A dark area of value in a work. In a still life, the shadows appear on the part of the object furthest from the apparent light source.

[Example of shadow.](#)

Shallow space

The opposite of creating an illusion of depth in a work, the space seems flat and close to the viewer.

Shape

An area enclosed within a boundary, such as a circle or triangle.

Silhouette

A shape filled with a value (traditionally black) and lacking interior detail.

Simulated texture

The creation of apparent texture in a work of art. An example is hair drawn so realistically that the viewer can imagine the feel of its texture.

[Example of simulated texture.](#)

Spectrum

The range of visible colors.

Still life

A painting, drawing or other image that represents a careful arrangement of objects, whether decided or found.

Stipple

Drawing consisting of small dots.

[Example of stipple.](#)

Stylized

Simplified or exaggerated in design.

Subject

What the work of art portrays. The subject may be representational, that is it may resemble something in the real world such as a person or an object or scene. Or it may be abstract and more difficult to identify. In non-representational works, the subject may not be evident, or it may be a feeling, a mood, or a focus on the elements of art such as line or color.

Subjective

A personal point of view.

Symmetry

Imagery that reflects identically on both sides of an artwork; that is, the artwork is the same on both sides. The two wings of a butterfly are a recognizable example of symmetry.

Tactility

Texture; how something feels to the touch.

Tapestry

Textile art that is woven.

Tautology

The repetition of a statement with the intention of reinforcing its truth; the recursive practice of arguing the truth of a statement using a different wording of that same statement as the primary evidence.

Taxonomy

The practice of organizing, classifying, and naming specific things and concepts.

Technique

How an artist uses a medium. For instance, techniques of painting include *wash*, which is touching paint to a wet surface so that it bleeds and spreads, or *splattering*, which is flicking a paint-laden brush so that the paint splatters and hits the surface in random splotches.

Texture

The quality of a surface. Hard, fuzzy, smooth, and rough are some terms for different textures. Texture may be real or implied.

Three-dimensional shape

Shape that has height, width, and depth; also called form. An artwork may have the illusion of depth, such as in a drawing, or actual depth, such as a sculpture or a vessel.

Time-based work

Any artwork in which time is a necessary or selected material in the work. A work which takes place across, over or through time. Typically video, performance, interactive media, etc.

Tint

A color made by mixing white with a hue to achieve a lighter value.

[Example of tint.](#)

Tone

The appearance of a color when affected by another color adjacent to it or actually blended with it; also the overall color appearance of a work depending on the colors within it.

[Example of tone.](#)

Transparent

Able to be seen through. A transparent wash of paint would allow a drawing to be visible beneath the paint.

Two-dimensional

Flat, as a piece of paper.

Two-dimensional shape

Shape which has height and width but no depth.

Value

The lightness or darkness of a work or an area in a work. Value is often thought of in terms of *gradation*, the transition between dark and light areas in a work. For example, in a black and white photograph, the lightness and darkness within the image are what allows it to be perceived. Learning to use value often starts with a

value scale; making a series of values that progress from white to black with progressively darker shades of gray in between.

[Example of value.](#)

Variety

The quality of difference among elements within a work. It is used to add interest.

Veristic

The realistic appearance of unreal subjects; common in Fantasy art and Surrealism.

Visceral

Deeply felt within the body.

Visual flow

A sense of movement in an artwork; the way the eye travels around the work.

Visual Unity

A quality of a successful artwork. The elements and principles work together, and the overall work appears complete.

Visual representation

An image, object or act that attempts to visually render an object or idea from the lived world.

Woodblock print

A print produced by carving a negative image into the surface of a piece of wood, which can then be rolled with ink and pressed onto paper or other materials.
