

Glossary of Art Terms

Adapted from Nancy Doyle

abstract/abstraction - Abstract means the modification of a (usually) natural form by simplification or distortion. Abstraction is the category of such modified images. (See also non-objective.)

alla prima - (pronounced ah-la **pree**-ma) - Italian term, meaning to paint on canvas or other ground directly, in full, opaque color, without any preliminary drawing or underpainting done first. (Underpainting is often done to establish the larger masses of the composition, or to establish tonal values (lights and darks)).

assemblage - (pronounced as-**sem**-blidge) - A type of modern sculpture consisting of combining multiple objects or forms, often 'found' objects. (A found object is one that the artist comes upon and uses, as is or modified, in an artwork.) The most well known assemblages are those made by Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950's and '60's; for example, one assemblage consisted of a stuffed goat with an automobile tire encircling its stomach, mounted on a painted base. The objects are combined for their visual (sculptural) properties, as well as for their expressive properties.

atmospheric - A quality of two-dimensional images which has to do more with space than with volume; an 'airiness,' seen more in contemporary than traditional images. Also refers to atmospheric perspective, which is a less technical type of perspective, using faded and lighter colors to denote far distance in landscapes.

atmospheric perspective - Atmospheric, or aerial, perspective, is a less technical type of perspective, which consists of a gradual decrease in intensity of local color, and less contrast of light and dark, as space recedes into the far distance in a landscape painting or drawing. Often, this far distance will also be represented by a light, cool, bluish-gray. (See also perspective.)

automatic (writing) - Automatic writing was a technique first used by the Dada and Surrealist artists in the early 20th century, to tap into their subconscious to write poetry (Freud's ideas on the subconscious had been introduced in the early part of the 20th century). They would try to connect with their subconscious to access a 'stream of consciousness,' or more 'free' type of poetry. Visual artists in these movements also tried to draw or paint "automatically," by allowing their subconscious to play a large part in the creative process. The Abstract Expressionists of the 1940's and '50's also used this method, for example, Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings.

broken color - Broken color was first used by Manet and the Impressionists in 19th century French painting, where color was applied in small "dabs," as opposed to the traditional method of smoothly blending colors and values (lights and darks) together. This method results in more of a "patchwork" effect, where the dabs render the facets of light on forms, and/or the planes of the forms' volume, by means of color and value. Broken color has continued to be used in much modern and contemporary painting.

calligraphy/calligraphic - Calligraphy is beautiful personal handwriting, which has also been practiced in the Orient and Near East for many centuries. The term calligraphic is also applied to drawing or painting which contains brushstrokes reminiscent of calligraphy.

camera obscura - A system of lenses and mirrors developed from the 16th to the 17th centuries, which functioned as a primitive camera for artists. With the camera obscura, painters could project the scene in front of them onto their painting surface, as a preliminary drawing. Vermeer, among others, is thought to have used the camera obscura.

chiaroscuro - (pronounced kyar-oh-**scoor**-oh) - Italian term for light and dark, referring to the modeling of form by the use of light and shade.

collage - (pronounced col-**laj**) - French word for cut and pasted scraps of materials, such as paper, cardboard, chair caning, playing cards, etc., to a painting or drawing surface; sometimes also combined with painting or drawing.

complementary colors - Colors which are located opposite one another on the color wheel (e.g., red and green, yellow and purple, blue and orange); colors which when mixed together will (in color theory) produce a neutral color (a color which is neither warm nor cool). In the case of the three primary colors (red, yellow and blue), the complementary of one primary will be the mixture of the other two primaries (complementary of red will be a mixture of yellow and blue, or green). When placed next to one another, complementary colors will make one another appear much more intense, sometimes in an "eye-popping" sense, which was utilized by Op artists of the 1960's to create optical effects. Also in color theory, an object's primary color has its complementary color in its shadows (e.g., the shadows on and around a painted yellow apple will contain some purple).

composition - The process of arranging the forms of two- and three-dimensional visual art into a unified whole, by means of elements and principles of design, such as line, shape, color, balance, contrast, space, etc., for purposes of formal clarity and artistic expression.

conception/execution - Conception is the birth process of an artistic idea, from the initial creative impulse through aesthetic refinement, problem-solving, and visualization/realization. Execution is the second half of the creative process: the actual carrying out of the idea, in terms of method and materials, which often involves compromises and alterations of the initial conception. Artists often see the initial conception as the guiding force for their aesthetic decisions, in terms of formal elements of design, and in terms of the expressive content desired. Contemporary conceptual artists place more emphasis on the first part of the creative process; traditional artists are somewhat more concerned with the techniques and methods involved in producing the artwork. The painter Henri Matisse advised, in his essay *On Painting*, that artists should keep their initial impulse in the front of their minds when working on a painting, to make the best expressive and formal decisions.

contemporary art - The term contemporary describes the most recent art, in this case as distinguished from modern art, which is generally considered to have lost its dominance in the mid-1950's.

content - As opposed to subject matter, content is the "meaning" of the artwork, e.g., in *Moby Dick*, the subject matter is a man versus a whale; the content is a complex system of symbols, metaphors, etc. describing man's existence and nature.

contour - The outer edge of forms which implies three dimensions, in contrast to an outline, which is a boundary of two-dimensional, flat form. Also, a type of line drawing which captures this three-dimensional outer edge, with its fullness and recession of form.

contrapposto - (pronounced con-tra-**pos**-to) - Italian term, meaning to represent freedom of movement within a figure, as in ancient Greek sculpture, the parts being in asymmetrical relationship to one another, usually where the hips and legs twist in one direction, and the chest and shoulders in another.

cool colors - In color theory, colors are described as either warm, cool, or neutral. A cool color generally is one which contains a large amount of blue, as opposed to a warm color, which will contain more yellow. In theory, cool colors seem to recede in space, as the distant mountains or hills tend to appear light bluish-gray, and the closer ones will be more green or brown (warmer). In landscape paintings, artists often paint the distant hills in this pale blue color; and it is generally thought that cool colors will recede

into space in any painting. However, color is a complex element, and colors often misbehave - it is usually best to go on a case-by-case basis, because colors are influenced greatly by what colors they are next to, appearing "warm" in one setting, and "cool" in another. (I recommend reading the abbreviated version of *The Interaction of Color*, by Josef Albers, for his ideas and exercises.)

cross-hatching - The practice of overlapping parallel sets of lines in drawing to indicate lights and darks, or shading. (Hatching is one set of parallel lines, cross-hatching is one set going in one direction, with another overlapped set going in a different, often perpendicular, direction.)

diptych - Two separate paintings which are attached by hinges or other means, displayed as one artwork.

directional movement - A principle of visual movement in artworks, which can be carried by line, dots, marks, shapes, patterns, color, and other compositional elements. Directional movement in paintings or sculptures directs the viewer's eye around or through the artwork, in a way which the artist consciously or unconsciously determines. One important function is to keep the viewer's eye from "leaving" the work, and instead cause the viewer to follow an inventive (interesting) path within the work, or exit in one area, only to be brought back in another area.

drawing - Pencil, pen, ink, charcoal or other similar mediums on paper or other support, tending toward a linear quality rather than mass, and also with a tendency toward black-and-white, rather than color (one exception being pastel).

engraving - A general term used to describe traditional printing processes, such as etching, aquatint, drypoint, etc., where an image is made by the use of metal plates and engraving tools, and printed, usually through a printing press. The image can be incised into the plate, or drawn with fluid and then dipped in acid to etch the uncovered areas. These processes are still used by artists, but of course have been supplanted by more modern processes for general printing purposes.

expressionistic - A characteristic of some art, generally since the mid-19th century, leaning toward the expression of emotion over objective description. James Ensor, Edvard Munch and Vincent Van Gogh were perhaps the first expressionists, though there was not really a movement per se, but individual artists. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, expressionism became widely espoused, particularly by German and Austrian artists, such as Emil Nolde, Kirchner, Gustav Klimt, and others. Though there is variation, certain characteristics predominate: bright, even garish, color; harsh contrasts of black and white (as in woodcuts); exaggeration of form; and distortion or elongation of figures. There are still many artists whose work has expressionistic tendencies; in the 1980's there was a period of art called Neo-Expressionist. (The word 'neo' before an art label means that there is a reprise of work similar to the original movement.)

figurative - A term used to describe art which is based on the figure, usually in realistic or semi-realistic terms; also loosely used to describe an artist who paints or sculpts representationally, as opposed to painting or sculpting in an abstract or non-objective manner.

focal point - In two-dimensional images, the center of interest visually and/or subject-wise; tends to be used more in traditional, representational art than in modern and contemporary art, where the picture surface tends to have more of an overall importance, rather than one important area.

foreshortening - Perspective applied to a single object in an image, for a three-dimensional effect, which often results in distortion with possible emotional overtones. It is used particularly with the human figure, in Renaissance and Mannerist art.

formal - A term used by artists to describe the visual elements of a work of art, such as composition, space, color, etc., i.e., formal elements.

fresco - Wall painting in water-based paint on moist plaster, mostly from the 14th to the 16th centuries; used mostly before the Renaissance produced oil paint as a more easily handled medium.

genre - (pronounced **jahn-re**) - A type of painting representing scenes of everyday life for its own sake, popular from the 17th century to the 19th century.

gesso - An undercoating medium used on the canvas or other painting surface before painting, to prime the canvas; usually a white, chalky, thick liquid. In the mid-20th century, gesso became available already commercially prepared; before this time, artists often mixed their own gesso mixture.

gesture/gestural - The concept of gesture in drawing is twofold: it describes the action of a figure; and it embodies the intangible "essence" of a figure or object. The action line of a figure is often a graphic undulating line, which follows the movement of the entire body of the figure being drawn or painted. The term gestural is an extension of this idea to describe a type of painting which is characterized by brushstrokes with a gestural quality, that is, flowing, curved, undulating lines or forms. Gestural composition means a type of composition based on gestural directional movements. The work of Arshile Gorky, the Abstract Expressionist, is an example of gestural painting, which often connotes a spiritual or emotional content.

glaze/glazing - A glaze is a thin layer of translucent oil paint applied to all or part of a painting, to modify the tone or color underneath. Glazing is the process of using this technique.

graphic/graphic arts - The graphic arts (drawing and engraving) are said to depend for their effect on drawing, as opposed to color. The term graphic describes drawings or prints which lean more toward drawing (line) than color (mass). I think that this division is less pertinent in modern and contemporary art than in traditional art or art of the past.

grid - A formal visual vehicle much in currency during 20th century art, the grid is a geometric construct of squares or rectangles that form the underlying or actual structure of some two-dimensional modern art. Though the meaning of the grid to artists is hard to describe in words, it is more than just a visual armature. In a way, it can be said to represent the modern and postmodern stance of the 20th century; and often seems to inspire almost a reverence, as a symbol of aesthetic purity and integrity, particularly of modernism. Many artists have used the grid; two who come to mind are Jasper Johns (paintings) and Louise Nevelson (sculpture).

guild - During the Middle Ages, tradesmen formed guilds for economic, social and religious purposes; there were often several trades in one guild. Originally, painters were in the same guild as physicians and apothecaries (pharmacists), in Florence, Italy. All painters had to join the guilds, unless they were in the personal service of a ruling prince. Only a Master could set up a studio in business, take pupils and employ journeymen. To become a Master, a painter had to submit a 'master-piece' to the guild as proof of competence. Guild officers supervised the number of apprentices, work conditions, and also materials (they bought in bulk, chose panels to work on). They had a trade union mentality, which centered on uniformity of performance; this led to painters like Michelangelo and da Vinci insisting on the freedom and originality of the artist, with the status of a professional and scholar/gentleman (an inspired being, rather than an honest tradesman). This new attitude toward artists led to the decline of the guilds, and the use of academies, which took over the teaching of art.

hatching - A technique used in drawing to indicate light and shade, or form, consisting of parallel lines of varying width, darkness and spacing. Cross-hatching is simply two or more overlapping sets of these parallel sets of lines, at a perpendicular or other angle to the first set of lines.

hue - Referring to the actual color of a form or object, e.g., a red car.

iconography - Knowledge of the meanings to be attached to pictorial representations; perhaps the visual equivalent of symbols or metaphors in literature. An artist may be aware of his/her iconography and use it consciously; probably just as often, the iconography is used in a semi-conscious way. An artist will intuitively choose images because of meanings they have for him/her, and over the course of time a pattern can often be found, as a logical progression or repeating images. An artist can be said to have a personal iconography, which is often noted and analyzed by others, including art historians, critics, writers and the public. Often, the meanings seen in an artist's work by others differs, somewhat or considerably, from what the artist has intended.

ideal art - Art which aims to be the true, eternal reality. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this included some Neoclassical art, which emulated the forms and ideas found in classical art (Greece and Rome). In modern times, this could include artists such as Mondrian and Malevich, who considered pure abstraction to be the manifestation of this pure reality. Perhaps the theoretical opposite of ideal art is realism, which tries to depict things not as some ideal, but as they 'really' are.

impasto - An Italian term for oil paint applied very thickly onto the canvas or other support, resulting in evident brushstrokes (visible).

linear - Describing a quality related to the use of line in painting or sculpture; can refer to directional movement in composition, or the actual use of the element of line in the image or sculpture, as contrasted with the use of mass or shape forms.

local color - The actual color of a form or object, uninfluenced by the effects of light or reflected color. For instance, a vase may be turquoise (the local color), but appear pale blue because of sunlight hitting it in certain places; dark blue because of areas in shadow; and many subtle color shades in certain areas because of reflected light from surrounding surfaces.

mannerism/mannered - Mannerism was a style of art in 16th century Italy, characterized by somewhat distorted (usually human) forms and a high emotional key. Practitioners included the artist Pontormo. In modern and contemporary art, the term mannered when applied to a style or work of art is somewhat critical, implying that the style or work of art is done not from the inner convictions and perceptions of the artist, but rather out of the artist's historical artistic habits or preconceptions. In other words, the work appears contrived or forced, as opposed to arrived at by genuine and self-aware creative impulses.

mass/masses - Shapes or forms used in visual art, as contrasted with lines; also masses often form the large part(s) of the compositional structure, without the additional complexity of detail.

medium - Material or technique an artist works in; also, the (usually liquid or semi-liquid) vehicle in which pigments are carried or mixed (e.g., oil, egg yolk, water, refined linseed oil).

modeling - Three-dimensional effect created by the use of changes in color, the use of lights and darks, cross-hatching, etc.

modern art - Generally considered to be the period from about 1905-6 to the mid-1950's, when Pop art ushered in what is referred to as the postmodern period in art. Modern art is generally characterized by

formal experimentation and exploration, and mostly seriousness of purpose. (Dada and Surrealism may be the exceptions to this rule.)

motif - (pronounced mo-**teef**) - A French term which refers to: the subject matter or content of a work of art (e.g., a landscape motif); also refers to a visual element used in a work of art, as in a recurring motif (i.e., Warhol used the motif of soup cans in his early works; or Mondrian used rectangles as a visual motif.

naturalism - A style of painting which uses an analysis of tone (value) and color of its subject, resulting in a representation of the appearance of forms or landscapes. Impressionism has naturalistic tendencies, because it analyzes tone and color in the play of light on surfaces. Naturalism can also have a sensual character (as against composition and drawing). The Impressionists were influenced by 19th century researches into the physics of color by Chevreul (a scientist) and others, which showed that an object casts a shadow which contains its complementary color (see complementary color). This theory eventually hardened into Neo-Impressionism, where Seurat and others sought the maximum optical truth about nature and the ideal composition and color relationships. This line of inquiry also led eventually to Post-Impressionism, where Gauguin and Van Gogh, among others, used color in a purely artistic and anti-naturalistic manner, which was non-intellectual. (Color used by Gauguin and Van Gogh is often deliberately independent of the local or light-influenced color of objects; and beyond that in the early 20th century, the Fauve painters used bright color and forms even more distant from their perceptual origins.)

negative space - In a painting or sculpture, the areas where there are no forms (the "empty" areas). In a painting, this means the areas which have no forms or objects (sometimes also called the 'background'). In sculpture, this means the "holes" between forms or within a form (e.g., Henry Moore sculptures). Negative space is the other side of the coin of positive space, which is space actually occupied by forms in a painting or sculpture (the figure in a portrait). The notions of positive and negative space were advanced during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, replacing the more traditional notion of a 'background' which was subordinate to and separate from the subject image - portrait, still life, etc. Since about 1950, the notions of positive and negative space have also been replaced by much contemporary art, which sees the picture surface not as positive and negative areas, but rather one continuous surface where every area is equally important, and at the same spatial depth. (See also positive space.)

neutral color - A color which in color theory is neither warm nor cool. Neutral colors are said to result from the combination of two complementary colors (e.g., red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and purple). Neutral colors can also be mixed by other means. (See also complementary colors, and warm and cool colors.)

non-objective - A term used to describe visual art which is not based on existing, observable forms, but rather on abstract or idealized forms, such as geometric, mathematical, imaginary, etc. Non-objective art came into existence in the early 20th century, often with much theoretical accompaniment. Mondrian is an example of an artist whose work is non-objective. (See also abstract.)

non-representational - Non-representational art is art which is not based on external appearances; this covers several types of art - abstract, non-objective, and decorative; as contrasted with representational art, which is art based on "real" imagery, whether actually existant or existant only in the artist's imagination.

one-point linear perspective - Developed in 15th century Italy, a mathematical system for indicating spatial distance in two-dimensional images, where lines converge in a single vanishing point located on the horizon line, as seen by a stationary viewer. (See also two-point linear perspective.)

organic - A description of images which are partly or wholly derived from natural forms, such as curvilinear, irregular, indicative of growth, biologically-based, etc.

painterly - An adjective used to describe a style of painting which is based not on linear or outline drawing, but rather patches or areas of color. In painterly two-dimensional images, the edges of forms tend to merge into one another, or into the background, rather than be separated by outlines or contours. Titian and Rembrandt are two artists with painterly approaches; Botticelli's work is not painterly, but more linear/drawing oriented.

palette - A thin piece of glass, wood or other material, or pad of paper, which is used to hold the paint to be used in painting; also, the range of colors used by a particular painter.

pastel - A drawing stick made of pigments ground with chalk and mixed with gum water; also, a drawing executed with these pastel sticks; also, a soft, subdued tint (light shade) of a color.

pentimenti - Italian term, from the word meaning 'repent'; refers to the lines or marks which remain after an artist corrects his/her drawing (or painting). Traditionally, this meant that these lines or marks remained unintentionally, in the quest for the perfectly drawn figure, for instance. However, at the end of the 19th century (with Cezanne), these marks became part of the visual expression; his figure drawings, for example, often show several contours in the search for the "correct" one contour. With Cezanne's drawings, these multiple contours in fact aid in the expression of three dimensions, more than one contour alone would do, giving a sense of roundness and volume. In addition, these pentimenti contribute in an expressive sense. In drawings and paintings since, some artists have taken advantage of this expressive function of pentimenti, particularly in painting, and have left the marks/lines deliberately, or even created them on purpose. They can add richness to a work.

photomontage - (pronounced photo-montaj) - A two-dimensional combining of photographs or parts of photographs into an image on paper or other material (a technique much used by the Surrealists in the 1920's, such as Max Ernst).

pictorial/picture surface - The flat plane of the canvas or other support, which is the two-dimensional arena of the image.

picture plane - The flat surface on which an image is painted, and that part of the image which is closest to the viewer. (In modern and contemporary art, the picture plane is synonymous with pictorial surface, meaning that the entire image is located on the picture plane, as contrasted with art from the Renaissance until the mid-19th century, where the picture surface was considered as a window into which the viewer looked into the illusion of distance.)

positive space - The areas of a painting or sculpture which are occupied by forms or images, as contrasted with negative space, which are the "empty" areas where no forms/images are located. For example, in a portrait, the figure would be the positive space, the "background" would be the negative space. In painting since around 1950, the differentiation between positive and negative space has given way to a sense of a continuous surface/space/plane, where all the forms are located on the picture surface, rather than on different planes in space. (See also negative space.)

postmodern - A term used to describe the period of art which followed the modern period, i.e., from the 1950's until recently. The term implies a shift away from the formal rigors of the modernists, toward the less formally and emotionally stringent Pop artists, and other art movements which followed.

printmaking - The category of fine art printing processes, including etching, lithography, woodcut, and silkscreen, in which multiple images are made from the same metal plate, heavy stone, wood or linoleum block, or silkscreen, with black-and-white or color printing inks.

proportion - The relation of one part to the whole, or to other parts (for example, of the human body). For example, the human body is approximately 7 to 7-1/2 times the height of the head; the vertical halfway point of the body is the groin; the legs are halved at the knees, etc. Proportion also refers to the relative sizes of the visual elements in a composition, and their optimum relationships for good design.

realism - Representational painting which, unlike ideal art, desires to depict forms and images as they really are, without idealizing them. Courbet was one of the first realists, in opposition to the previous reigning Neoclassical art in France; 19th century realist artists wanted to depict life "as it is," warts and all.

representational art - Art which is based on images which can be found in the objective world, or at least in the artist's imagination; i.e., images which can perhaps be named or recognized. For instance, an objectively faithful depiction of a person is representational art; also, a depiction of an alien from outer space can also be considered a representational image. (See also non-representational.)

rubbing - A product of rubbing a crayon or other tool onto paper or other material over a textured surface, in order to reproduce that texture into a two-dimensional image. For example, a rubbing of a gravestone, a penny, etc. (See also frottage.)

shade - A dark value of a color, i.e., a dark blue; as opposed to a tint, which is a lighter shade of a color, i.e., light blue. Also, to shade a drawing means to add the lights and darks, usually to add a three-dimensional effect.

sfumato - (pronounced *sfu-ma-to*) - Italian term meaning smoke, describing a very delicate gradation of light and shade in the modeling of figures; often ascribed to da Vinci's work (also called blending). Da Vinci wrote that 'light and shade should blend without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke', in his *Notes on Painting*.

sgraffito - (pronounced *sgraf-ee-to*) - Italian term meaning scratched; in painting, one color is laid over another, and scratched in (with the other end of the brush, for example) so that the color underneath shows through.

spatial cues - Methods of indicating three-dimensional space in two-dimensional images. Examples are: the modeling of forms with light and shade to indicate volume; overlapping of forms to indicate relative spatial position; decrease in the size of images as they recede in space; vertical position in the image (the further away an object is, the higher it is normally located in the image); the use of increased contrast of light and dark (value) in the foreground; the decreasing intensity of colors as they recede in space; the use of a perspective system, of lines converging toward the horizon line. Spatial cues are used also in abstract or non-objective art to indicate relative position in relation to the picture plane, by means of overlapping forms, color and size relationships, and other spatial cues, but generally without perspective and other indications of Renaissance (illusional) space.

study - A preliminary drawing for a painting; also, a work done just to "study" nature in general.

subject matter - As opposed to content, the subject matter is the subject of the artwork, e.g., still life. The theme of Vanitas (popular a few centuries ago) of vanity, death, universal fate, etc., used in the still life, can be considered the content. The still life objects used in the image are the subject matter. (See also content.)

tint - A light value of a color, i.e., a light red; as opposed to a shade, which is a dark value, i.e., dark red.

tone - The lightness or darkness of an area in terms of black to white; also called value, i.e., a light or dark red, or light or dark gray.

two-point linear perspective - A more recent version of perspective than one-point perspective; using two (or more) points instead of one on the horizon line gave artists a more naturalistic representation of space in two-dimensional images.

triptych - A painting which consists of one center panel, with two paintings attached on either side by means of hinges or other means, as "wings."

underpainting - A layer of color or tone applied to the painting surface before the painting itself is begun, to establish the general compositional masses, the lights and darks (values) in the composition, or as a color to affect/mix with subsequent layers of color. Underpainting is generally a thin, semi-opaque layer of paint.

value - The lightness or darkness of a line, shape or area in terms of black to white; also called tone; e.g., a light red will have a light value; a dark red will have a dark value.

warm colors - In color theory, colors which contain a large amount of yellow, as opposed to cool colors, which contain more blue. For example, a yellow-orange color would be warm; a greenish-blue would be cool. Warm colors are thought to appear to be closer to the viewer, while cool colors are thought to recede into the distance. (See also cool colors.)

wash - A thin layer of translucent (or transparent) paint or ink, particularly in watercolor; also used occasionally in oil painting.