

**abstraction & abstract art**

At its purest, abstraction uses shapes, colors and lines as elements in and for themselves. Abstraction can also be conceptual, such as when a sentence or subject matter is cut up so as to make its meaning nonsensical or unreal. A characteristic trait of 20th century and Modern Art, many artists working today combine representational and abstract elements while others make works without recognizable people, places, or things.

**aesthetic**

Used to describe something as visually-based, beautiful, or pleasing in appearance and to the senses. Aesthetics is a term developed by philosophers during the 18th and 19th centuries and is also the academic or scientific study of beauty and taste in art.

**aperture**

A small, narrow opening through which light is focused. Found in cameras, microscopes, and other devices, apertures are often adjustable so as to increase or decrease the amount of light.

**allegory**

An image or story that refers to a related or overarching concept such as good or evil.

**alter-ego**

A fictional self, different from one's own, in an idealized or transformed version.

**animation**

Giving movement to something; the process of making moving cartoons or films that use cartoon imagery.

**appropriation**

The act of borrowing imagery or forms to create something new.

**architecture**

The art of designing and constructing buildings, architecture can also refer to the building or space that an artist is making a work in relation to, such as with installation art. Architecture has close ties to the visual arts, and many artists' works are very sensitive to the ways in which their art interacts with buildings and exhibition spaces.

**artifact**

An object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a rudimentary art form or object, as in the products of prehistoric workmanship. different and yet share the same commitment to questioning artistic conventions.

**beat generation**

A group of American youth, writers and artists in the 1950s who experimented with communal living, a nomadic lifestyle, and Eastern philosophy. Often associated with jazz music, the improvisational works by authors such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg challenged traditional forms of literature.

**byzantine**

A religious style of art developed in the eastern part of the late Roman Empire. Colorful and ornate, Byzantine art is characterized by its use of mosaic and by its flat, graphic style. Before the aesthetic and scientific advances of the Italian Renaissance, Byzantine paintings have shallow perspective and rely heavily on symbols and iconography to convey a story or meaning.

**calligraphy**

The art of handwriting, or letters formed by hand.

**caricature**

A representation of a person or thing that exaggerates their most striking or characteristic features. Famous people and political figures are often drawn as caricatures by cartoonists to humorous ends. Caricatures, when thought of as an accurate likeness, are transformed into stereotypes.

**casting**

A sculptural process, done by pouring a liquid material into a mold and allowing it to cool or harden. Casting is used to make a replica of an object or to make groups of identical objects. Many mass-produced commercial objects, such as toys and dinnerware, are casts.

**cinematography**

The art of photographing and lighting films. Cinematography can also refer to the style or genre of a movie or motion picture, such as black-and-white cinematography or documentary cinematography.

**classical art**

Referring to the art of ancient Greece and Rome (300–400 BCE) and characterized by its emphasis on balance, proportion, and harmony.

**collaboration**

A working arrangement between an artist and another person, group, or institution. Present throughout art history, collaborations are considered unusual today when artists tend to be valued for their individual voice and contribution to society. Some artists even form long-term working partnerships with other artists—these are seen as distinct from collaborations which are often temporary.

**collage**

The process or product of affixing paper or objects to a two-dimensional surface.

**colonialism**

The practice of ruling over another country for the purpose of developing trade, or enforcing one's own culture and values on people from a different culture.

**commemoration**

To remember or mark a particular event or person from the past through ceremony or memorial.

**composition**

The arrangement of an artwork's formal elements.

**conceptual art**

Works of art in which the idea is equally if not more important than the finished product.

Conceptual art can take many forms, from photographs to texts to videos, while sometimes there is no object at all. Emphasizing the ways things are made more than how they look, conceptual art often raises questions about what a work of art can be. Conceptual art is also often difficult to collect or preserve as it can be the artist's own experience that is the work of art.

**consumer society**

A society in which mass-produced goods are made attractive and are advertised through mass-communication and media. People who participate in a consumer society by purchasing goods are known as consumers.

**consumption**

The intake of objects, images, and popular ideas into one's home, body, or daily life. Be it in the form of food, furniture, art objects, or mass media advertising, consumption is rooted in the sale and purchase of goods in a modern, consumer society like the United States. Involving stuff in the world, from products to slogans, artists whose work deals with consumption are often concerned with what a thing is, how it looks, and how it came into existence.

**contemporary art**

Art made after 1970 or works of art made by living artists. A loose term that at times overlaps with Modern Art, many museums specialize in showing art by living artists in isolation while other institutions show contemporary art along with works dating back thousands of years.

Unlike Modern Art, contemporary art is not defined by a succession of periods, schools, or styles.

**content**

The subject matter, concepts, or ideas associated with a work of art. A work's content is shaped by the artist's intentions, the context of its presentation, and by the experiences, thoughts, and reactions of the viewer.

**context**

The location, information, or time-frame that informs how a work of art is viewed and what it means. Works of art often respond to a particular space or cultural climate. If the context for a work of art is changed or recontextualized, the way in which the work is understood may change as well.

**culture**

The rarely questioned system of beliefs, values and practices that form one's life. Cultures are often identified by national borders, ethnicity, and religion — while some cultures cross borders, ethnicities and organized faiths. A culture which involves a select portion of a population and which is organized around a particular interest (such as cars, graffiti, or music) is known as a subculture.

**curator**

A person who is responsible for the collection, care, research, and exhibition of art or artifacts.

**design**

Relating to popular forms of art including architecture, books, the internet, furniture, and mass media. Today, things that are designed are often mechanically produced or made with the help of a computer.

**displacement**

The act or feeling of being removed or alienated from a place or people.

**ecology**

The relationship between organisms and their environment, ecology is also concerned with the relationship between people and nature.

**ethics**

A system of morals or judgments which govern one's behavior, ethics often intersect with a work of art or the process of its making. Artists often feel that they have an ethical responsibility to voice political concerns or make changes to society.

**façade**

An artificial or deceptive appearance or the front or public facing side of a building.

**fluxus**

Implying flow or change, the term fluxus was adopted by a group of artists, musicians, and poets in the 1960's to describe a radical attitude and philosophy for producing and exhibiting art. Often presented in non-traditional settings, Fluxus forms included impromptu performances, mail art, and street spectacles.

**form**

The shape and structure of a work of art, formal elements include color, shape, pattern, and duration. Many artists strive for a relationship between form and content, so that the way something is made fits with what the artist intends the work to be about or how it will be seen.

**genre**

A means of categorizing works of art based on style, form, and subject matter. History painting and landscape are genres of painting; horror and romantic comedy are genres of film; detective and science fiction are genres of literature.

**gesture**

A description of figural movement; the embodiment of the essence of a figure.

**graffiti**

Art made on a public surface, such as a building or a street sign, that is not owned by the artist. Dating back to ancient Egypt, graffiti today is often made with spray paint and marker. Seen by some as vandalism, others view graffiti as an important expression of opinions.

**graphic**

A description applied to flat, two-dimensional images or primarily graphic media such as fonts, comic books, and cartoons.

**history painting**

Large-scale painting which represents either historical events or scenes from legend and literature. Considered the highest form of art in the 19th century, history paintings are generally grand in execution. Much of Modern Art has been a reaction against history painting, while some contemporary artists have found ways to incorporate the genre into their work.

**iconography**

Symbols and images that have a particular meaning, either learned or universal.

**identity**

How one views oneself, how others perceive you, and how a society as a whole defines groups of people. Important to one's identity are ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class, as well as education, childhood, and life experience. For many, being an artist is not just an occupation but also an ethical responsibility. Much art today deals with what it means to be an artist in today's rapidly changing world.

**ideology**

An organized system of values and opinions which form the basis of a social, political, or economic agenda. Informed by a culture, ideologies often take the form of rules, codes, or guiding principles.

**illusion**

A visually misleading or perceptually altered space or object.

**installation**

A work of art created for a specific architectural situation, installations often engage multiple senses such as sight, smell and hearing. The placement of individual works of art in a gallery is also commonly referred to as an installation. Installations are generally temporary and stationary, but some installations travel to different locations and exist over longer periods of time.

**juxtaposition**

The state or position of being placed close together or side by side, so as to permit comparison or contrast.

**kinetic**

Having mechanical or moving parts that can be set in motion; art that moves.

**kitsch**

Used to describe items that are overly decorative or sentimental, kitsch may also have negative connotations—meaning tastelessness or bad taste in art. Things generally considered to be kitschy in popular American culture include ceramic figurines, black velvet paintings, rhinestones, and glitter. However, what is kitsch in one cultural context may not be in another.

**land art**

Also known as earth art or earthworks, land art uses the raw materials of the natural world to make large-scale, outdoor sculpture. Often taking many years to complete, some earthworks made in the 1970s exist to this day while others are still under construction.

**lenticular**

A printed image that shows depth or motion as the viewing angle changes; of or relating to a lens.

**lexicon**

Literally, a vocabulary. A collection of terms or characteristics used in a particular profession, subject, or style.

**metaphor**

A relationship between disparate visual or verbal sources where one kind of object, idea, or image is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. Artists use metaphor to bridge differences between seemingly dissimilar images and ideas.

**minimal art**

A type of abstract art, primarily three-dimensional, which often uses industrial materials in geometric or repetitive ways. Reduced to basic shapes (cubes, spheres) or bare materials (steel, neon tubing, bricks), minimalist objects of the 1960s expressed more the artist's process than his or her emotions.

**modernism**

An historical period and attitude from the early to mid-20th century, characterized by experimentation, abstraction, a desire to provoke, and a belief in progress. Modern artists strove to go beyond that which had come before. Works of modern art may be visually different and yet share the same commitment to questioning artistic conventions. Modern Art is oriented towards developing new visual languages (rather than preserving and continuing those of the past) and takes the form of a series of periods, schools, and styles.

**monument**

A public work of art, usually large in scale, which commemorates a group of people, historical event, or ideal. Monuments are most often made at the invitation of a civic group or government. A type of monument, memorials come in a variety of scales, materials, and audiences. Less a tribute than an invitation to remember, memorials can also be subtle, inconclusive, or abstract.

**motif**

A recurrent or dominant theme in a work of visual or literary art.

**multicultural**

Influenced by a diversity of ethnic, religious, cultural or national perspectives.

**mythology**

An allegorical narrative often incorporating legendary heroes, gods, and demi-gods of a particular people or culture.

**narrative**

The representation in art, by form and content, of an event or story. Whether a literal story, event, or subject matter—or a more abstract relationship between colors, forms and materials—narrative in visual art applies as much to the work as it does to the viewer's "story" of what they see and experience.

**op art**

Short for Optical Art, a style popular in the 1960s that was based on optical principles and optical illusion. Op Art deals in complex color interactions, to the point where colors and lines seem to vibrate before the eyes.

**oral tradition**

The spoken relation and preservation, from one generation to the next, of a people's cultural history and ancestry, often by a storyteller in narrative form.

**originality**

The quality of being new and original; not derived from something else.

**palette**

A particular range of colors or a tray for mixing colors.

**performance & performance art**

Public, private, or videotaped, performances often involve the artist performing a creative, visually compelling action. Performance art is normally created by people with a visual arts education and relates more to the history of painting and sculpture than to theater or dance. Often taking place in a gallery or on video, performance art rarely involves trained actors or directors.

**perspective**

A visual formula that creates the illusion of depth and volume on a two-dimensional surface. Perspective also infers a particular vantage point or view.

**persona**

A personality that a person projects in public, often representing a character in a fictional context.

**photojournalism**

The profession or practice of recording and reporting real or 'newsworthy' events using photography.

**picture-plane**

The surface of a painting or drawing.

**place**

A geographic or imaginary location, landscape, origin, or relation in space. Artists are influenced by their surroundings and their works are often in response to a site or historical situation. In American history, places such as the antebellum South or the Wild West are mythic in their hold on the public imagination. Today, artists are continually drawn to the conceptual landscapes of cyberspace, television, and mass media.

**pop art**

Art which draws its subject matter or appearance from mass media and consumer culture. Transforming "low" culture such as advertisements, comics, and tabloid photographs into the "high" culture of painting and sculpture, Pop artists of the 1950s and 60s reached a wide audience with their cool, detached depiction of contemporary times.

**popular culture**

Literature, broadcasting, music, dance, theater, sports, and other cultural aspects of social life distinguished by their broad-based presence and popularity across ethnic, social, and regional groups.

**postmodernism**

A term that has come to describe the stylistic developments that depart from the norms of modernism. Postmodernism questions the validity of the emphasis of modernists on logic, simplicity, and order, suggesting that ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction may also have a valid place.

**process**

An artist's investigation, or the steps the artist takes to make a work of art, processes differ widely from artist to artist.

**protagonist**

A leading or principal figure.

**public art**

Works of art that are designed specifically for, or placed in, areas physically accessible to the general public.

**punk rock**

An aggressive and rebellious genre of music which emerged in the 1970s, punk is characterized by a do-it-yourself attitude, rawness, and distrust for authority and standards of good taste. Brash colors and a second-hand or recycled aesthetic are stylistic features of punk rock.

**quarry**

An open pit or excavation from which stone is taken by cutting, digging or blasting.



**realism**

The realistic and natural representation of people, places, and/or things in a work of art; the opposite of idealization.

**render**

To reproduce or represent by artistic or verbal means.

**representational**

Works of art that depict recognizable people, places or things—often figures, landscapes, and still lifes.

**ritual**

A ceremonial act, or a detailed method or process or accomplishing specific objectives.

**satire**

Exposing human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.

**scale**

The comparative size of a thing in relation to another like thing or its 'normal' or 'expected size.' Scale can refer to an entire work of art or to elements within it.

**silhouette**

An outline drawing of a shape. Originally a silhouette presented a profile portrait filled in with a solid color.

**site-specific**

Works of art that are tied to a unique place, site-specific art is sometimes impermanent. For people unable to visit site-specific works, an experience of the piece is often limited to photographic documentation and word-of-mouth.

**spectacle**

A mediated or constructed view or image that is of a remarkable or impressive nature, sensationalizing its subject.

**spirituality**

A questioning of humanity's place in the universe, marked by an interest in self-reflection, mortality and meditation. Spirituality is often associated with things that are mysterious, felt before they are understood, and beyond the scope of human thought, time and history. Distinct from religion, spirituality is an attitude and not an organized set of rituals or beliefs.

**stereotype**

A generalized type, or caricature of a person, place or culture, often negative in tone. Visual as well as verbal, stereotypes tend to be reduced or oversimplified images.

**studio**

The place where an artist works and reflects. Artists often employ studio assistants to help them execute work and manage their careers.

**stylized**

Used to describe works of art which conform to imagined or invented visual rules. Work that is stylized tends to be less spontaneous or visually responsive to changes in subject matter.

**sublime**

That which impresses the mind with a sense of grandeur and power, inspiring a sense of awe.

**symbolism**

The practice of representing things by an image, sign, symbol, convention, or association.

**synesthesia**

A feeling evoked in one sense when another sense is stimulated. Examples of synesthesia include seeing the color yellow and smelling lemons, or smelling hot chocolate and feeling warm.

**tagging**

The act of writing graffiti, a tag is often an artist's name or visual trademark.

**textile**

Materials that are woven, knitted, or made from cloth.

**typography**

The appearance of fonts, letters, or characters, typography involves the printed word and graphic design.

**uncanny**

Peculiarly unsettling, as if of supernatural origin or nature; eerie.

**utopia**

An ideal or perfect society, utopias are imagined communities where everyone lives in perfect peace and harmony. Projects as recent as the internet have been proposed as places where a utopia may be possible. Evocative of people's hopes and wishes, utopias are ultimately unrealizable. The negative corollary of utopia is dystopia.

**vantage point**

A point of view, or a place from which subject matter is viewed.

**vernacular**

Everyday language specific to a social group or region; the everyday language spoken by a people as opposed to the literary language.

**visual sign**

A visible, conventional figure or device that stands for a word, phrase, or operation.

**voyeur**

An observer who derives pleasure viewing sensational subjects at a distance.

**wunderkabinett**

A German term, a Wunderkabinett is a "cabinet of wonders," and a Wunderkammer is a "chamber of wonders." Both are exhibition spaces in which miscellaneous curiosities—odd and wondrous rarities—are brought together for private contemplation and pleasure. The objects on display in these storage/display spaces were primarily marvels of nature. A precursor of the museum, these cabinets were developments of the Renaissance.

**xenophobia**

Irrational fear or hatred of anything foreign or unfamiliar, especially other social or foreign groups. A xenophobe is a person who is unduly fearful or contemptuous of anything foreign, especially of strangers or foreign peoples. Subcategories include racism, sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance; and specific to the art world, the off-hand dismissal of art by a viewer without attempting to understand it.

**zeitgeist**

The spirit of the times. A German word for the taste, outlook, or general trend of thought which is characteristic of the cultural productions of a period or generation. The zeitgeist of the early modern period may have been faith in salvation through technological advancement, whereas that of the postmodern period would be disdain for such expressions of certainty.