



The History of Abstract Art

Abstract Art is also known as Nonrepresentational Art, which is art without figurative and recognizable representation. Abstract Art is typically in two styles;

- forms that have been abstracted and inspired from nature but depicted in such a manner that they no longer reveal a predictable reality,
- and subjective, or pure abstract art forms, which have no reference to reality to begin with.

Origins of Abstract Art

Till the end of the 19th century, most art was representational art, meaning it depicted images and pictures that were very straightforward and easy to see and understand. This was the only type of art at the time and there was this need felt to create something different and unique. To satisfy this need of artists, a movement arose in 1870 in Europe, called Impressionism, which first introduced abstraction in paintings. Art, for the first time, did not represent images that were fully recognizable.

Artists, during this time, wanted to create art and images, which represented the reality of nature as in the depths of water and the different effects of light on things and natural objects. Most paintings were done with the same subject but at different times of the day and during different seasons so as to show how the same thing could look different because of the changing effects of light.

At much the same time, the Neo-impressionism movement began, taking inspiration from the Impressionist movement. Art, during this time, was created using side by side dots to make shapes and images, which were again not wholly representational.

Later, in the 1890s, wanting to move away from the obsessions of changing light effects, which were prominent in impressionist works; a new movement started called the Post-Impressionist movement. This era saw a range of striking and unique paintings being created that were anything but representational and finally moved into the realm of abstract.

Thus, during the last couple of decades of the 19th century, art had started moving from representational to abstract and the whole purpose of art took on new meanings. Up until the beginning of abstract art, the main aim of art and paintings was to portray images and objects, but abstract art created a new purpose for art, and that was to evoke emotions and feelings.

In the early 20th century, abstract art started gaining importance as artists could now delve deeper into themselves and create art that was not just depicting things and objects as everyone saw them. Abstract art sprang up at around this time and in many places around the world almost simultaneously. Different variations of abstract art were developed and were known by different names; in Moscow and Petersburg (Rayonism, Constructivism), in Netherlands (De Stijl), in Paris (Cubism), and in Munich (The Bauhaus). Then came the ultimate defining point in the history of art; and that was Abstract Expressionism. Up until this point, abstract art was mostly practiced in Europe, specifically in Paris. But in 1940, with the advent of Abstract Expressionism, the popularity of abstract art took the United States by storm. This form of abstract art emerged in New York in the 1940s and wasn't so much a school of art as it was a new way of thinking. The abstract expressionists broke away from the conventions of the past and began creating art that was previously not deemed as acceptable in the art world. Thus abstract art can be called a type of rebellion by artists of that time.

The history of abstract art can thus be seen as a process that evolved slowly but surely and reached its culmination with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism or true Abstract Art.



About Abstract Art & Artists

Abstract Art is art, which distorts figures and forms from their true appearance. In abstract art, there are very slight references to the original look of any object or feature and these references are also often not recognized and understood by most viewers of abstract art. Abstract Art is art that does not show reality as it is seen. This type of art is generally spontaneous and usually takes a form depending on the moods and emotions of the artist. Abstract art is often a release of the unconscious creativity of the artist. It is inspired by objects and things which are very much real, but its aesthetic content is depicted in shapes and colors and not its actual appearance and form. For someone who views abstract art; they rarely are able to distinguish what it actually depicts and can find no resemblance in the art and its name.

What are the Names of Some Famous Abstract Artists?

Some of the famous abstract artists of the last century include names such as:

Wassily Kandinsky
Jackson Pollock
Arshile Gorky
Mark Rothko
Franz Kline
William de Kooning
Guston Philip
Kenneth Noland
Scott William
Mark Tobey

Forms of Abstract Art

Abstract art has many forms and manifestations. Abstract art could be in the form of a painting or even just a blank canvas. It could be some sculpture that is nowhere close to looking like what it should or could be a pair of sneakers that have been bronzed and put up on a pedestal and labeled as abstract art.

What are the Two Main Types of Art?

Representational Art: For the longest time, (in fact till the beginning of the 19th century) it was believed that art should ‘mean something’ or represent something. This meant that if a painting was labeled “Horses”, one would actually see some horses in the painting. Art, which describes definite and recognizable physical objects, things, people, and places is known as representational art. Sometimes such art is so true to life that it is like looking at a photograph.

Non-representational Art: On the other hand, non-representational art is completely the opposite. Such art has outlines, forms or colors that do not look like any particular and real physical objects; meaning that it does not represent anything specific, even though it takes its inspiration from real things. Such art is called Abstract Art. Thus it is more difficult to understand abstract art than it is to figure out representational art. Indeed, when you see abstract art, more often than not, you have no clue what it is you are actually looking at.



When Did Abstract Art Come About?

Till the end of the 19th century, most art was representational art, meaning it depicted images and pictures that were very straightforward and easy to see and understand. This was the only type of art at the time and there was this need felt to create

something different and unique. To satisfy this need of artists, a movement arose in 1870 in Europe, called 'Impressionism' which first introduced abstraction in paintings. Art, for the first time, did not represent images that were fully recognizable.

How Should One Look at or Interpret Abstract Art?

When interpreting Abstract Art or any art for that matter; there is no fixed right or wrong way to look at it or understand it. Abstract Art has always evoked a gamut of emotions and reactions, which have not necessarily been positive. But one thing has been certain; and that is the abstract art has kept art historians and the general viewer conjecturing for decades.



How to Interpret Abstract Art

Have you ever found yourself in an art gallery, looking at an abstract art painting and wondered to yourself as to who did such a ‘weird’ painting? Did you ever think why a gallery would spend good money to buy and exhibit a canvas that was just painted entirely red? Well, if you did, you are not alone. A lot of people feel the same way when they see or view abstract art in any of its forms; be it a painting or a sculpture. This is because abstract art does not really look like anything that is easily recognized and thus is very difficult to understand or interpret. It usually comes down to every person’s individual way of looking at abstract art and also interpreting it in their unique way.

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Abstract art often takes on a form that is different from what the artist himself originally contemplated, and thus becomes all the more difficult to interpret. This is where it may help to be an informed viewer, as the connections you make with a piece of abstract art may discover a whole new meaning. Here are some things that you can take into account when viewing abstract art.

One Scene, Varying Opinions: People generally see things and think that they mean the same to everyone. For instance, we assume that the color of trees, the clouds in the sky; all are viewed in pretty much the same manner by most people. But if you actually get down to asking people what they see when they look at the sky or the trees, you will be amazed at all the different reactions that you get from different people. The same is the case with abstract art. When seeing a work of abstract art, you have to see what the scene means to you and what emotions it evokes in your mind. It may not be the same as anyone else’s opinion, but this will be your unique interpretation of the work.

Outside Influences: Very often, you may hear someone else’s interpretation of an abstract art painting and then try to look for that very thing in the painting. If you cannot look at the painting in the same manner; this may lead you to believe that you do not ‘understand’ abstract art. So you have to be conscious of the fact that you are not being influenced by someone else’s interpretation while trying to figure out a piece of abstract art.

Title of the Abstract Art Painting: Do not try to interpret abstract art after looking at the title given to the work. This will more often than not confuse you even more as you are not likely to find the title in the painting. Try not to be influenced by the title of the work of abstract art and then you will see that it is so much easier to understand it as you will what the painting has to offer, irrespective of what its name suggests.

Looking Beyond The Obvious: While trying to interpret abstract art, look beyond the canvas, the paints, and the colors. Do not focus on physical things such as an empty cave, the bright sun, or a racing car; but instead try to see the darkness, the energy, the brightness, and the speed that these things reflect and you will find that you finally ‘understand’ abstract art.

Whichever way you choose to look at abstract art; remember that abstract art is meant to bring out different emotions in people and that your way of looking at it or interpreting abstract art is not wrong but just different.



What is Abstract Art?

At some point in your life, you must have surely looked at some painting and wondered to yourself, Is this what you call art? Very often people look at modern art that they don't understand and think to themselves, I could have done this when I was a kid or My three year old makes paintings exactly like this one! Well, all these reactions are very common where abstract art is concerned. Here are a few details about the subject of abstract art.

Abstract Art Defined

Abstract art is any art where actual objects in nature are depicted in a manner, which entirely or at least partly differs from their true form and conveys it in patterns of lines, colors and shapes, which are largely unrecognizable as what they were intended to represent.

In essence, Abstract Art is art which distorts figures and forms from their true appearance. In abstract art, there are very slight references to the original look of any object or feature and these references are also often not recognized and understood by most viewers of abstract art.

Abstract Art Explained

Abstract Art is art that does not show reality as it is seen. This type of art is generally spontaneous and usually takes a form depending on the moods and emotions of the artist. Abstract art is often a release of the unconscious creativity of the artist. It is inspired by objects and things which are very much real, but its aesthetic content is depicted in shapes and colors and not its actual appearance and form. For someone who views abstract art; they rarely are able to distinguish what it actually depicts and can find no resemblance in the art and its name.

Representational and Non-representational Art

Broadly speaking, there are two types of art Representational and Non-representational. Let us see what the difference is in these two types.

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Most of us believe that art has to be something that is beautiful. But that is not necessarily true. Art should be striking, compelling, provocative, inspiring, and should evoke emotions irrespective of what those emotions are. Their could even be confusion and bewilderment, which is what Abstract Art usually evokes!



UNDERSTANDING ABSTRACT ART

If you've ever been to a museum, a dinner party, or seen a Woody Allen movie, you've probably heard people discussing "abstract art"—but it seems like every time the topic comes up, it gets more convoluted. What do people really mean by this phrase? Yes, abstract means something that is not attempting to represent reality. But how can it apply to so many different things? In popular culture, the term "abstract" has become like a parody of the art world itself, usually applied when "meaningless" or "impossible to understand" is meant.

Abstract art doesn't have to be so unclear. There is a way to "read" an abstract painting, just as there is to understand and interpret a more realistic painting. The history and progression of art through the ages illuminates the contemporary scene and provides a solid background from which to immerse yourself in seemingly incomprehensible works. And a basic understanding can take you a long way!

Walking through an extremely simplified history of modern art is a good way to gain an understanding of abstraction as a cohesive movement. Here's about 300 years of art history crunched down into the basic facts (with obvious simplifications and omissions!):

Realism

Virtually all visual art was completely representational until the mid to late 19th century. In fact, most great painters' ambition was to create such perfect illusions of reality that any trace of the their own work was invisible. Despite later trends toward depicting socially realistic subjects and "average" people, for the most part, painting served the purposes of religious dogma, commissioned portraiture, and historical commemorations.

Impressionism

Originally coined after a critic insulted Claude Monet's skill-level as only capable of a mere "impression" of a sunrise, this was one of the first movements away from pure realism. Artists like Renior, Degas, and Seurat emphasized the importance of the artist's way of seeing the world over a strict depiction of it, studying the effects of light, perspective, and time on a scene rather than its exact representation.

Expressionism

Starting in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, a set of artists around the world including Edvard Munch, Marc Chagall, and Paul Klee began infusing their paintings with explicit moods and emotions. The goal of painting became to depict mind-set of the artist at the time of painting a scene, sometimes completely separated from reality. Expressionism was one of the first iterations of a movement toward the deliberate revelation of brushstrokes and an intentionally "painterly" method.



Post-Impressionism & Cubism

As the 20th century progressed, the inclusion of the artist's perspective and alternative ways of seeing led to movements such as Cubism, founded by Pablo Picasso as an attempt to show objects and scenes in the way that the human mind perceives them. A cubist painting does not represent an object like a violin at only one angle, but as one vibrant, constantly shifting whole. Similarly, Post-Impressionist painters such as Paul Cezanne took the ideas of Impressionist artists one step further by moving closer to abstraction, intentionally distorting color and shape for the sake of more truthful representations of the world as they saw it.

Surrealism

As artists continued to favor a different sense of accuracy in representation, further movements sprung up throughout the middle of the 20th century. Surrealism was an important milestone in modern art, focusing on the inclusion of random chance in artistic practice, and attempting to describe the unconscious mind in ways that were necessarily non-representational. Choosing a place other than the real world as its subject was one of the greatest legacies left by the Surrealists to contemporary abstract art.

Abstract Expressionism

By the second half of the 20th century, art was transforming rapidly. A group of New York artists including Jackson Pollock, Dutch-born William de Kooning, and Franz Kline began to push the boundaries of previous movements by focusing on the paint itself as their subject. Large-scale canvases became about the action of painting; the canvas was meant to be the remnant of an artist's specific interaction with materials. AbEx paintings can have that "my kindergartener could have drawn that" quality to the untrained eye, but the very intentional approaches of these artists (and their tortured personal lives) reveal very real artistic contemplations.

Minimalism, Post-Painterly Abstraction, & 21st Century Pluralism

After the Abstract Expressionists stretched the properties of painting to their limits, countless waves of new movements responded to and expanded their ideas. Artists such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly continued to experiment with color, but moved away from the concept of paint as the star of a work and toward a less gestural, more "hard-edged" form. Known as minimalism, this movement spawned other movements with influences reaching to artists today. The Pop Art, Conceptual Art, and Performance Art movements of the latter half of the 20th century were yet other offshoots of the progression of modern art, expanding on the ideas of these abstract artists and introducing new themes such as consumerism and politics as the main tools of representation.

Which leads us to today.

The state of 21st century abstract art is difficult to encapsulate because it's still developing and because, in typical modern form, it defies categorization. In addition, all contemporary art is not the result of a logical progression from these art historical movements: returns to realism and myriad different styles and techniques contribute to a sense of Pluralism as the defining characteristic, if there is one, of today's art.



Ways of Reading

With a basic idea of the history of abstract art, you can apply a method to every painting you see—so when you're faced with a "what the heck am I looking at" piece, you'll know where to begin.

When looking at any artwork, most people's first question tends to be "What is this about?" That's a good place to start, but it won't take you very far when looking at an abstract work—unless you're willing to think more creatively. With abstract painting, the piece can be "about" the paint on the canvas, as with Abstract Expressionism; it can be "about" the process of painting for an artist personally; it can even be about the meaning of abstract art itself! Does the painting convey a mood-state or atmosphere, like an Expressionist painting? What does it prompt you to think about? Are you confronted with a particular color or shape? How does what you're looking at make you feel? These are all sure-fire points of excavation: begin with asking yourself these kinds of questions and you'll find the answers a lot less mysterious.

Understanding

When applying these historical and analytical methods to taking in art, lingering doubts about certainty and "doing it right" may surface. At times like these, a little research can always be helpful, even if that just means reading the descriptions of a piece on a museum wall or consulting a gallerist about their featured artist. It can be so interesting to know the artist's or curator's ideas behind a piece. Be careful, however, of over-doing it with the descriptions: don't fall into the trap of believing that you need to do more reading than observing. Trying to filter what you see through what you know can be a rewarding experience, but it is one that can begin to inhibit your true appreciation of a piece if you let it.

Another important thing to remember when trying to understand abstract art is that you are always in dialogue with the piece by virtue of being its viewer. The artist has probably carefully considered your role as the viewer of the painting and wants it to speak to you on some level. So you don't have to feel like you're solving a mystery that has one correct answer! Artists are often delight to hear what different viewers uncover in dialogue with their artwork, even if it's nowhere near the artist's intent. If a piece just doesn't speak to you, that's ok. It's probably not for you.



Abstract Art Artists

Most of the art till the end of the 19th century was representational art, which focused on portraying images that were real and often so life-like as to seem like a photograph. Sometime during the last few decades of the 19th century, there was an increasing need amongst artists to create something different that not only depicted images but also revealed their feeling and emotions; at the same time evoking emotions from the viewer. Thus began the transition from representational art to abstract art and the emergence of Abstract Art Artists.

A Few Famous Abstract Art Artists

Here are some abstract art artists who have made Abstract Art a popular form of art over the years:

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944): This artist was the first important abstract art artist. He is regarded as the founder of non-representational art. Wassily Kandinsky was born in 1866 in Moscow. He grew up learning to play the piano and the cello. In 1895 Kandinsky saw some paintings of Monet and others, and would later describe how he thought that artists should not do paintings in a manner that was difficult to understand. In 1896, he joined the Academy of Fine Arts for four years until 1900. From 1910 to 1914, Kandinsky painted many paintings which were called 'Improvisations and Compositions'. His work was a great inspiration to other artists and helped to start different movements in abstract art.

Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956): Jackson Pollock was a great American abstract art artist. He grew up on the west coast of America and was greatly influenced by the Native American and Mexican cultures in his region. The impetuous styles of Benton and the Regionalists also had a hand in influencing Jackson Pollock's work. He used to paint in the Surrealist style, spontaneously and so as to convey subliminal feelings and emotions. Pollock's art was highly misunderstood and due to the fact that he was becoming an alcoholic, he was pushed into loneliness until 1947, the year in which he established his 'drip' method of painting. The procedure of dripping paint right from a can onto the canvas made Pollock very famous. In 1956, he met with an auto accident, which proved to be fatal.

Arshile Gorky (1904 - 1948): Arshile Gorky was born in Turkish Armenia but ran away from the genocide in his country at the time of World War I and came to the United States when he was only 16 years of age. Gorky's mother was unfortunately not as lucky as him and did not survive the genocide, which had a significant impact on many of the artist's works. Arshile Gorky initially created in the style of Miro, Cézanne, and Picasso but subsequently moved on to biomorphism and Surrealism. Towards the end of his career, he had developed a distinctive approach to his paintings, which were in true Abstract Expressionist style.

Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970): This artist was born in Dvinsk, Russia as a Marcus Rothkovitch but shortened his name to Mark Rothko when he moved to the United States at the age of ten. Rothko enrolled himself at Yale University and also studied at the Art Students League in New York. His painting style was established slowly in the course of many years which he spent teaching art to students for a livelihood. His original paintings were Expressionist portraits and city landscapes but he later went on to painting in the Surrealist style after witnessing and being inspired by Arshile Gorky's work. Rothko started painting color-field pieces in 1947, which brought him great fame. Even this success as an artist did not stop him from becoming depressed and turning to alcohol, which ultimately led to him taking his own life in 1970.



Other Famous Abstract Art Artists Include:

Franz Kline
William de Kooning
Guston Philip
Kenneth Noland
Scott William
Mark Tobey

Learn More About The Evolution of Abstract Art

<http://www.abstractart.ws/articles/evolution-of-abstract-art.html>