

Abstract Art: Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism

Abstract Art: Art that uses forms having no direct reference to external or perceived reality; it is usually synonymous with various types of 20th-century avant-garde art. The term abstract also refers to images that have been abstracted or derived from nature, but which in the process have been considerably altered or have been simplified to their basic geometric or biomorphic forms.

Constructivism: Russian art movement of the early 20th century that had an important influence on later schools of art. Constructivism was founded by Russian sculptor and painter Vladimir Tatlin. Its name derives from the "construction" of abstract sculptures from miscellaneous industrial materials, such as metal, wire, and pieces of plastic. Tatlin's relief constructions of 1913 to 1917 were the first works of the movement. He was joined before 1920 by artists Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Naum Gabo, and Antoine Pevsner, among others.

Although the movement split into several factions in the 1920s, in general Constructivism stood for the ideals of abstraction, functionalism, and utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, the dominant attitude toward art in the then newly born Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), held that art should be easily comprehensible and socially useful. Tatlin merged his Constructivist dogma with that of the new Communist state and became a powerful and influential designer for the new order. Constructivism had an important influence on mid-20th-century sculpture, architecture, and especially industrial design, where its advocacy of modern materials and clean design reinforced the emerging aesthetic of functionalism.

Cubism: a movement in modern art, especially painting, that was primarily concerned with abstract forms rather than lifelike representation. It began in Paris about 1908, reached its height by 1914, and developed further in the 1920s.

Cubism was a revolt against the sentimental and realistic traditional painting of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and against the emphasis on light and color effects and the lack of form characteristic of impressionism. It drew inspiration from tribal art, especially that of Africa and Oceania.

The doctrines of the cubist school follow the dictum of the French postimpressionist Paul CÙzanne, "Everything in nature takes its form from the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder."

The most common type of cubism is an abstract and analytical approach to a subject, in which the artist determines and paints the basic geometric solids of which the subject is composed, in particular the cube or cone, or the basic planes that reveal the underlying geometric forms. In another type of cubist painting (synthetic cubism), views of an object from different angles, not simultaneously visible in life, are arranged into a unified composition. In neither type of cubism is there any attempt to reproduce in detail the appearance of natural objects. Harlequins and musical instruments figure prominently in cubist portrait and still life because they seemed favorable subjects for geometrical dissection. To avoid simple, naturalistic, and emotional effects the early, or analytical, cubists used mainly restrained grays, browns, greens, and yellows and often executed their works in monochrome. After 1914 in the synthetic cubist period many cubists introduced brighter colors into their painting. Cubism is important in the history of Western art as a revolutionary, passing style that marked the beginning of abstract and nonobjective art.

The leaders of the cubist school were the Spaniard Pablo Picasso, who worked in Paris, and the Frenchman Georges Braque. Notable cubist sculptors, who followed the same approach to art as cubist painters, include Picasso, and the Russian born Americans Jacques Lipchitz and Aleksandr Archipenko.

Futurism: early 20th-century movement in art that rejected all traditions and attempted instead to glorify contemporary life, mainly by emphasizing two dominant themes, the machine and motion. The principles of futurism were originated by the Italian poet

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and published by him in a manifesto in 1909; the following year Italian artists signed the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting. Futurism was characterized by the attempted depiction of several successive actions of positions of a subject at the same time. The result resembled somewhat a stroboscopic photograph or a high-speed series of photographs printed on a single plate.

"Pure" Abstraction

Shapes and colors have always had their own emotional force: the designs on ancient bowls, textiles, and furnishings are abstract, as are whole pages of medieval manuscripts. But never before in Western painting had this delight in shape as such, in color made independent of nature, been taken seriously as a fit subject for the painter.

Abstraction became the perfect vehicle for artists to explore and universalize ideas and sensations. Several artists claimed to be the first to paint an abstract picture, rather as early photographers had wrangled over who had invented the camera. For abstract art, the distinction is most often given to Wassily Kandinsky, but certainly another Russian artist, Kasimir Malevich, was also among the first.