

Writing and Tutorial Center

Art History: Vocabulary and Concepts

Most academic disciplines have specialized terminology used to describe concepts in very precise or specific ways, and art history is no exception. The field uses a rich vocabulary to discuss styles, techniques, movements, and visual elements, from terms like *chiaroscuro* and *contrapposto* to movements such as Fauvism or Surrealism. For newcomers, these words can be tricky because they often come from other languages (especially Italian, French, or German) or have meanings that differ from everyday usage. Learning this terminology is essential for understanding art historical texts and discussions, but it can take time to become fluent in the language of the discipline.

When studying or writing about art history, these are some common terms you may encounter:

Avant-garde – Art that is innovative, experimental, and ahead of its time, typically challenging traditional norms.

Canon – A set of accepted standards or idealized rules in art, often referring to proportions or styles.

Contre-jour – A lighting technique in which the subject is backlit, producing a silhouette effect.

Grotesque – Decorative art featuring fantastical, distorted, or monstrous imagery, sometimes blending human and animal forms.

Icons / Iconography – Symbols or images used in art to represent specific ideas, figures, or religious themes.

Idealization – The artistic process of representing subjects in a perfected or improved form.

Kitsch – Art considered overly sentimental, gaudy, or lacking in aesthetic value, sometimes due to mass production or cliché.

Medium – The material or technique used to create an artwork (e.g. oil, clay, digital). Art that combines multiple materials or techniques in a single work is called Mixed Media.

Modernity – A cultural and artistic condition associated with the industrial age and a break from traditional forms.

Memento mori – A visual element intended to remind viewers of mortality and the inevitability of death.

Motif – A recurring element, theme, or symbol in a work of art.

Oeuvre – The complete body of work produced by a particular artist throughout their career.

Patrons – Individuals or institutions who commission, fund, or support artists and their work.

Phallic Symbols – Imagery that represents or resembles the male genitalia, often used in psychoanalytic or symbolic analysis.

Yonic Symbols – Imagery that symbolizes or resembles female genitalia, often used in spiritual or feminist contexts.

TIPS

Highlight or write down any other words you see in your art history textbook that you aren't familiar with. Don't just skip over them! Showing your professor that you know these terms (and can use them correctly), often indicates a deeper understanding of the material as a whole.

When writing about a two dimensional work of art, such as a drawing or a painting, try using some of these words:

Chiaroscuro – The use of strong contrasts between light and dark to create a sense of volume.

Figurative – Art that represents recognizable figures or objects from the real world.

Foreshortening – A technique that depicts an object or figure in perspective to create the illusion of depth.

Fresco – A painting technique where pigments are applied onto freshly laid wet plaster.

Genre Painting – Art depicting scenes of everyday life or ordinary people engaged in common activities.

Naturalism – A style aiming for accurate, lifelike representation of the natural world.

Painterly – A style characterized by visible brushwork and emphasis on the qualities of paint.

Pentimento – A visible trace of an earlier painting beneath a layer of paint, showing changes made by the artist.

Plein air – Painting created outdoors, capturing the natural light and atmosphere of a scene.

Sfumato – A painting technique using subtle gradations of tone and color to create a smoky, soft-edged effect.

Tenebristic – A dramatic style of painting that uses stark contrasts of light and dark, often with deep shadows.

Tint / Tone – A tint is a color mixed with white, and a tone is a color mixed with gray.

Trompe l'oeil – A technique that uses realistic imagery to create the optical illusion that depicted objects exist in three dimensions.

Underpainting – The initial layer of paint applied to a canvas, serving as a base for later layers.

Vanitas – A genre of still-life painting symbolizing the transience of life and the futility of earthly pleasures.

When writing about a three-dimensional work of art, such as a sculpture, terms like these might be more relevant:

Additive / Subtractive – Additive sculpture builds form by adding material, while subtractive sculpture carves away from a solid mass.

Assemblage – A three-dimensional composition made by combining found objects or materials.

Bas-relief – A low-relief sculpture where figures slightly project from a flat background.

Biomorphic – Art characterized by organic, life-like forms that resemble shapes found in nature.

Contrapposto – A sculptural pose in which a figure stands with weight shifted onto one leg, creating a naturalistic stance.

Façade – The front or outward-facing exterior of a building, often decorated or architecturally significant.

Frieze – A horizontal band of sculpted or painted decoration on a wall or building.

Installation – A large-scale, often immersive, mixed-media artwork designed for a specific space.

Maquette – A small-scale model or draft version of a sculpture or architectural work.

TIPS

You may notice that some of these words are *italicized*—and that's by design. Generally it indicates they are considered "foreign" terms (in this context, primarily derived from Latin, Italian, or French) and they're not fully integrated into the English lexicon. If you see a word italicized here, you should also do so in your own papers.