

Chapter 4: Describing Art: Formal Analysis, Types, and Styles of Art

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4.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Employ a vocabulary of art specific terms and critical approaches to conduct a formal analysis of works of art.
- Identify different types of art based on the degree of representation or nonrepresentation a work displays.
- Distinguish between variations of representational qualities within a work of art.
- Identify characteristics that relate an individual or group of works to a cultural style, stylistic movement or period, or an individual artist's style.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

Developing the ability to examine and understand works of art makes sense for many good reasons. For one, art is powerful. In subtle but real ways, we are influenced by the visual culture that surrounds us.

In Chapter Two: The Structure of Art—Form and Design, we identified, defined, and discussed the elements and principles of design. Now, we will focus on the analysis of art. **Formal** or **critical analysis** is an examination of the elements and principles of design present in an artwork and the process of deriving meaning from how those elements and principles are used by visual artists to communicate a concept, idea, or emotion.

How and what is communicated in a work of art is linked to the type or category in which it falls: representational or non-representational. Within the broad category of **representation**, that is, a visual reference to the experiential world, we can further characterize the work of art using terms such as naturalistic, idealized, or abstract. Art that does not attempt to present an aspect of the recognizable world is **non-objective** or **non-representational**. In such work meaning is communicated through shapes, colors, and textures.

Style can refer to the general appearance of a work or a group of works that were created

in accordance with a specific set of principles about form or appearance. Style can refer to the art as a whole that was made during a particular era and within a certain culture. More specifically, we can consider whether the artwork belongs to a stylistic movement such as the Italian Renaissance, Realism, or Abstract Expressionism. Style can also refer to how elements and principles of design are employed by an individual artist: the visual characteristics of that artist's work.

4.3 FORMAL OR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

While restricting our attention only to a description of the formal elements of an artwork may at first seem limited or even tedious, a careful and methodical examination of the physical components of an artwork is an important first step in “decoding” its meaning. It is useful, therefore, to begin at the beginning. There are four aspects of a formal analysis: **description**, **analysis**, **interpretation**, and **evaluation**. In addition to defining these terms, we will look at examples.

4.3.1 Description

What can we notice at first glance about a work of art? Is it two-dimensional or three-dimensional? What is the medium? What kinds of actions were required in its production? How big is the work? What are the elements of design used within it?

Starting with line: is it soft or hard, jagged or straight, expressive or mechanical? How is line being used to describe space?

Considering shape: are the shapes large or small, hard-edged or soft? What is the relationship between shapes? Do they compete with one another for prominence? What shapes are in front? Which ones fade into the background?

Indicating mass and volume: if two-dimensional, what means if any are used to give the illusion that the presented forms have weight and occupy space? If three-dimensional, what space is occupied or filled by the work? What is the mass of the work?

Organizing space: does the artist use perspective? If so, what kind? If the work uses linear perspective, where are the horizon line and vanishing point(s) located?

On texture: how is texture being used? Is it actual or implied texture?

In terms of color: what kinds of colors are used? Is there a color scheme? Is the image overall light, medium, or dark?

4.3.2 Analysis

Once the elements of the artwork have been identified, next come questions of how these elements are related. How are the elements arranged? In other words, how have principles of design been employed?

What elements in the work were used to create unity and provide variety? How have the elements been used to do so?

What is the scale of the work? Is it larger or smaller than what it represents (if it does depict someone or something)? Are the elements within the work in proportion to one another?

Is the work symmetrically or asymmetrically balanced?

What is used within the artwork to create emphasis? Where are the areas of emphasis? How has movement been conveyed in the work, for example, through line or placement of figures?

Are there any elements within the work that create rhythm? Are any shapes or colors repeated?

4.3.3 Interpretation

Interpretation comes as much from the individual viewer as it does from the artwork. It derives from the intersection of what an object symbolizes to the artist and what it means to the viewer. It also often records how the meaning of objects has been changed by time and culture. Interpretation, then, is a process of unfolding. A work that may seem to mean one thing on first inspection may come to mean something more when studied further. Just as when re-reading a favorite book or re-watching a favorite movie, we often notice things not seen on the first viewing; interpretations of art objects can also reveal themselves slowly. Claims about meaning can be made but are better when they are backed up with supporting evidence. Interpretations can also change and some interpretations are better than others.

4.3.4 Evaluation

All this work of description, analysis, and interpretation, is done with one goal in mind: to make an evaluation about a work of art. Just as interpretations vary, so do evaluations. Your evaluation includes what you have discovered about the work during your examination as well as what you have learned, about the work, yourself, and others in the process. Your reaction to the artwork is an important component of your evaluation: what do you feel when you look at it? And, do you like the work? How and why do you find it visually pleasing, in some way disturbing, emotionally engaging?

Evaluating and judging contemporary works of art is more difficult than works that are hundreds or thousands of years old because the verdict of history has not yet been passed on them. Museums are full of paintings by contemporary artists who were considered the next Michelangelo but who have since faded from the cultural forefront.

The best art of a culture and period is that work which exemplifies the thought of the age from which it derives. What we think about our own culture is probably not what will be thought of it a century from now. The art that we believe best embodies our time may or may not last. As time moves on, our evaluations and judgments of our own time may not prove to be the most accurate ones. We live in a world full of art, and it is almost impossible to avoid making evaluations—possibly mistaken—about its value. Nonetheless, informed evaluations are still possible and useful even in the short term.

4.3.5 Examples of Formal Analysis

Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth by J. M. W. Turner



Figure 4.1 | *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*

Artist: J. M. W. Turner

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Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851, England) is a chaotic, atmospheric oil on canvas painting. (Figure 4.1) First, on the level of description, the dark structure of the foundering steamboat is hinted at in the center of the work, while heavy smoke from the vessel, pitching waves, and swirling snow surround it. The brown and gray curving lines are created with long strokes of heavily applied paint that expand to the edges of the composition. Second, on the level of analysis, we note that the paint application, heavy, with long strokes, adds dramatic movement to the image. We see that the design principle of scale and proportion is being used in the small size of the steamboat in relation to the overall canvas. Now let us interpret these elements and their relation: The artist has emphasized the maelstrom of sea, snow, and wind. A glimpse of blue sky through the smoke and snow above the vessel is the only indication of space beyond this gripping scene of danger, and provides the only place for the viewer's eyes to rest from the tumult. This scene is of humanity's struggle for survival against powerful forces of nature. And finally, we are ready to evaluate this work. Is it powerfully effective in reminding us of the transitory nature of our own limited existence, a memento morii, perhaps? Or is it a wise caution of the limits of our human power to control our destiny? Does the work have sufficient power and value to be accepted by us as significant? The verdict of history tells us it is. J.M.W. Turner is considered a significant artist of his time, and this work is one that is thought to support that verdict. In the end, however, each of us can accept or reject this historical verdict for our own reasons. We may fear the sea. We may reject the use of technology as valiantly heroic. We may see the British colonial period as one of oppression and tyranny and this work as an illustration of the hubris of that time. Whatever we conclude, this work of art stands as a catalyst for this important dialogue.

Another example of formal analysis. Consider *Lady at the Tea Table* by Mary Cassatt

***Lady at the Tea Table* by Mary Cassatt**



Figure 4.2 | *Lady at the Tea Table*

Artist: Mary Cassatt

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

Mary Cassatt (1844-1925, USA, lived France) is best known for her paintings, drawings, and prints of mothers and children. In those works, she focused on the bond between them as well as the strength and dignity of women within the predominantly domestic and maternal roles they played in the nineteenth century.

Lady at the Tea Table is a depiction of a woman in a later period of her life, and captures the sense of calm power a matriarch held within the home. (Figure 4.2) First, a description of the elements being used in this work: The white of the wall behind the woman and the tablecloth before her provide a strong contrast to the black of her clothing and the blue of the tea set. The gold frame of the artwork on the wall, the gold rings on her fingers, and the gold bands on the china link those three main elements of the painting. Analysis shows the organizing principle of variety is employed in the rectangles behind the woman's head and the multiple circles and arcs of the individual pieces of the tea set. The composition is a stable triangle formed by the woman's head and body, and extending to the pieces of china that span the foreground from one edge of the

composition to the other. Let us interpret these observations. There is little evidence of movement in the work other than the suggestion that the woman's hand, resting on the handle of the teapot, may soon move. Her gaze, directed away from the viewer and out of the picture frame, implies she is in the midst of pouring tea, but her stillness suggests she is lost in thought. How to evaluate this work? The artist expresses a restrained but powerful strength of character in her treatment of this subject. Is the lack of obvious movement in the work a comment on the emergence of women's roles in society, a hope or a demand for change? Or is it a monument to the quiet dignity of the domestic life of Victorian era Paris? The gold of the frame, the rings, and the china dishes appear to unify three disparate objects into one statement of value. Do they symbolize art, fidelity, and service? Is this a comment on the restrictions of French domestic society, or a claim to its strength? One indication of the quality of a work of art is its power to evoke multiple interpretations. This open and poetic richness is one reason why the work of Mary Cassatt is considered to be important. The above examples are only one of many ways in which we can interpret and evaluate works of art. We will examine a few more approaches to analysis and critique. The point of this exercise is to equip the interested student with tools to become more fully aware of the dynamics and content of works of art, not only in museums and textbooks, but in the world of images that continually surrounds us today.

4.4 TYPES OF ART

4.4.1 Representation and Abstraction

The most basic point of style, perhaps, is type or category, whether a work is **representational** or **abstract**. In the broadest terms, if the work has visual reference to the phenomenal world, we consider it to be representational. That definition suffers from over generality, though, since any physical or visual expression that has some reference to the physical world includes some aspect that we see as reflecting the physical world. And, to some extent, all works are also **abstract**, in that they might remind us of what we see in the phenomenal world by only reflecting some physical feature(s) rather than detailing the object, place, or person itself. Having said that, we can proceed to see art in terms of its relative representation or relative abstraction of the original form.

It may help to start here by examining a number of works; each is based on the artist's observations of cows but is distinctive in what the artist elected to convey in their artwork about cows on the continuum from representation to abstraction. The first of these works is by Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899, France), who depicted a variety of animals in great detail with regard to

their anatomy and physiognomy, and took great care to render her illustrations with fidelity to the appearance to the actual animals she had observed. (Figure 4.3) Artistically gifted and thoroughly trained, she went on to deepen her own knowledge and to hone her skills by visiting farms, veterinarian dissections, and slaughterhouses in order to develop extensive knowledge of her preferred subject matter, with which she created imagery of animals and other features of rural farm life. Her cows would be correctly described as very **naturalistic** in appearance—their forms are quite similar in appearance to actual cows.



Figure 4.3 | *Ploughing the Nevers*

Artist: Rosa Bonheur

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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In comparison, if we examine the renditions by folk artist Edward Hicks (1780-1849, USA), we see cows that are much less rigorous in their resemblance, most likely the result of his not having had exacting training and practice in precise replication. (Figure 4.4) A Quaker minister, Hicks treated his painting at first as a supplemental avocation, then as his primary means of supporting his family. He used it to express themes of spiritual and historical community events that interested him, generally in simplified landscape settings that emphasized narrative and symbolic messages rather than exact proportions and details.



Figure 4.4 | *The Residence of David Twining*

Artist: Edward Hicks

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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In some works, though, the difference in correspondence to natural appearance can be due to the artist's very different purpose for the work. *The Yellow Cow* by Franz Marc (1880-1916, Germany) clearly does not slavishly reproduce natural appearances but instead seeks to convey through abstraction a sense of light-hearted lyrical expression for the animal. (Figure 4.5) To achieve this end, Marc took great liberty in creating an image that went far beyond what he saw, to make an expression that carries messages of what he thought and felt about his subject. Marc created a great many images of animals in nature that were metaphorical reflections of his views of mankind and the human spirit. Such a movement towards abstraction often derives from the artist's wish to express an emotional or intellectual commentary on the subject, or to use the subject as a starting place to diverge from visual appearances of the purely physical phenomenal world in order to create a statement of some other ideas.



Figure 4.5 | *The Yellow Cow*

Artist: Franz Marc

Source: Wikiart

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Another artist bearing investigation in this regard is Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931, Netherlands), who used his own philosophical probing to frame a systematic path from naturalism in his renditions of the cow to an abstraction that is visually quite far removed from what most of us see in the phenomenal world. (Figure 4.6) Beginning with a series of exploratory sketches, he sought to reduce the linear forces of a cow's form to the three he thought were essential components of the physical and metaphysical world, that is, vertical, horizontal, and diagonal, while reducing the three dimensions of the cow's form to the painting's two-dimensional surface. At the same time, he tried to simplify the forms and volumes, progressively creating a strongly abstracted picture that few of us would likely recognize as of a cow if we were not led through the process by which he developed the image. Indeed, we have evidence of the process and its result in *Composition VIII (The Cow)*, a fully developed instruction that provides us with great insight into Van Doesburg's train of thought and work, as well as his process of abstraction. (Figure 4.7)

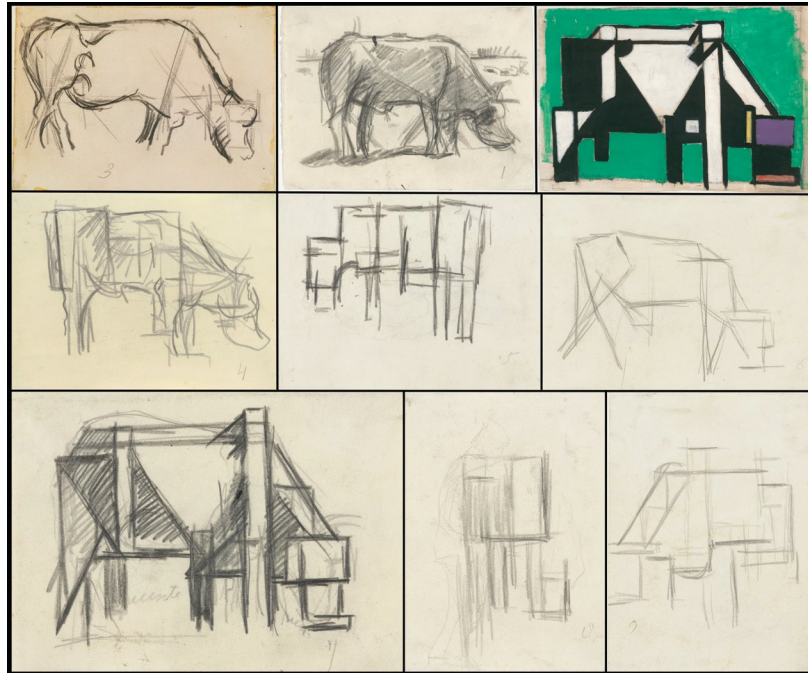


Figure 4.6 | *Composition (The Cow)*

Artist: Theo van Doesburg

Source: MoMA

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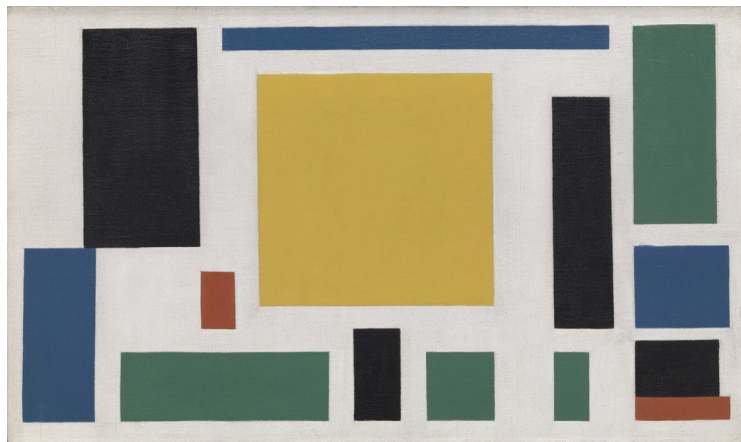


Figure 4.7 | *Composition VIII (The Cow)*

Artist: Theo van Doesburg

Source: MoMA

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Representation, then, shows us some broad vision of what we see in the original, be it a person, landscape, interior, event, or such, with some level of detail. To one degree or another, all art is abstract in that it is not the original form but instead the artist's response to the original form rendered in artistic terms—although, clearly, not all of it is so strongly abstracted that we

lose the plainer references to the physical world.

4.4.2 Idealization

Sometimes artists create an **idealized** version of a natural form rather than truly reflecting its actual appearance. This was the norm, for example, in depictions of royal figures in ancient Egypt. There was a **canon**, or set of principles and norms, for the representation of royals that was very specific about just how they must look, including norms for the proportions of the different parts of the body to one another, their stance, and other details. The canon also set standards for their garments, headgear, the false beard, the arm and fist positions, and other details. The canon was remarkably conservative and unchanging, altering very little over the many centuries that ancient Egypt existed.

The figures of the Pharaoh Menkaure (r. c. 2530-c. 2510 BCE) and his Queen Khamerernebtj are shown as being well proportioned, physically fit, and in young adulthood. (Figure 4.8) Because the king was regularly assessed with regard to his favor with the gods and fitness to rule, he was required to be in top physical condition—or so he must appear in any official imagery. This necessity resulted in the **idealization** of the natural physical form. So, while it is a representational image of the royal body, the need to depict him as a fit and worthy ruler meant that he was generally shown as being in the prime of life, with a trim and perfectly proportioned physique, and with no apparent hint of weakness or vulnerability. By contrast, the image of an Egyptian state official, Ka-Aper, who was not of royal rank, was created with a different idea. ([Statue of Ka'aper](#)) As a commoner, he is shown with a very different physique—rather pudgy and more relaxed, certainly not governed by the rules for the royal imagery. It is more naturalistic, not idealized like the royal works.



Figure 4.8 | Statue of Menkaura and Queen Khamerernebty II

Author: Keith Schengili-Roberts

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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To study idealization further, we will explore the evolution of nude male sculptural forms in ancient Greece. We know Greek sculptors began with ideas they gleaned from the Egyptian forms they knew but then altered them in some very significant ways that reflected their own distinctive culture. They presented the forms in the nude (only sculptures of males were nude at first, female sculpture remained clothed until the fourth century BCE) and, over time, they increasingly sought to capture more accurate physical details and the principles of movement in the body, rather than the static sense of permanence the Egyptians had favored.

From early on, Greek artists had the opportunity to observe the Olympic contests, athletic competitions that were held every four years in honor of Zeus, the ruler of their gods. The

Olympics featured nude male athletes in a great many physical activities and diverse exercises, games, and sports. Over time, Greek artists developed a keen understanding of human physiognomy, how various movements and feats were achieved, and how bones, muscles, and tendons coordinated and functioned. They increasingly rendered the human form with great anatomical accuracy. When we look at the sculptures in Figure 4.9, we can see the evolution of depiction from the two figures dating to the Archaic period (800-480 BCE), when kinship with Egyptian work is apparent, to the Early Classical (c. 480-450 BCE), and then the High Classical period (c. 450-400 BCE), considered to be the epitome of naturalism in artistic depiction of the male physique.

Figure 4.9 | Sculptures of the human form demonstrating anatomical accuracy

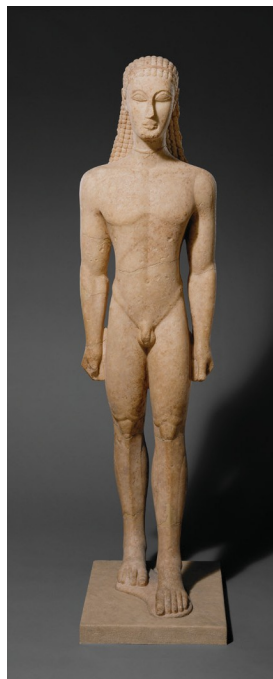


Photo A | Marble statue of a kouros

Source: Met Museum

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Photo B | The Kroisos Kouros

Author: User "Mountain"

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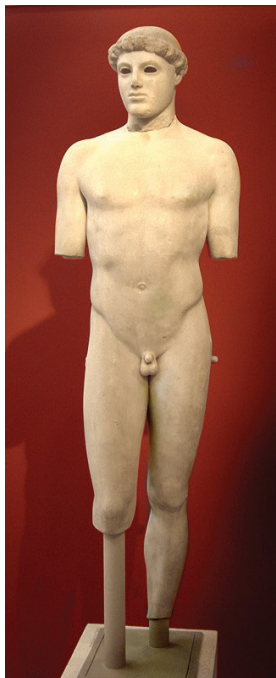


Photo C | Kritios Boy

Author: User "Tetraktys"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Photo D | Doryphoros from Pompeii

Artist: Polykleitos

Author: User "Tetraktys"

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The turning point in this evolution—the moment when the achievement of naturalism was pronounced—was with the creation of the *Kritios Boy*, c. 480 BCE. (Figure 4.9c) At that point, the beginning of the Classical period in Greece, sculptors captured the potential for naturalistic movement and the ***contrapposto*** or weight shift of the knees and hips that occurs when standing with one leg at ease or walking. This soon gave way, however, to a canon of art for the refined form. So, again, true naturalism gave way to a notion of the “perfect” or idealized form.

4.4.3 Non-Representational or Non-Objective

One further note is needed in consideration of the relationship of type to response to the phenomenal world. Recurrent strains of abstraction appear throughout the history of art, when artists elected to streamline, suppress, or de-emphasize reference to the phenomenal world. In the twentieth century, though, this approach took on different character in some instances, with a stated rejection of the art as related to the natural world and concerned instead with the art itself, to the processes by which it was made, and with the product as referring to these processes and artistic qualities rather than to some outside phenomenon: the observed world.

Still, the art is never completely independent of some reference: the viewer might respond to the color, painterly effect, line quality, or some other aspect that is not necessarily associated with recognition of a particular physical object or “thing” but that relates to the qualities of the art in some way, that is, to some recognition of reference—although this recognition may be ephemeral and may be nameless. The response might be quite visceral or intellectual, nonetheless. The development of this idea was perhaps an inevitable phase of the abstraction and explorations of the formal means that had been conducted by various movements that evolved in nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Stories abound about the era in art and the push from abstraction to non-representation, with several artists claiming to have led the breakthrough. The first artist to use the term **nonobjective art, however**, seems to have been Aleksandr Rodchenko (1890-1956, Russia), ([Spatial Construction no. 12, Aleksandr Rodchenko](#); [Assembling for a Demonstration, Aleksandr Rodchenko](#)) and its most active early theorist and writer was probably Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944, Russia, lived Germany and France). (Figures 4.10, 4.11, and 4.12)

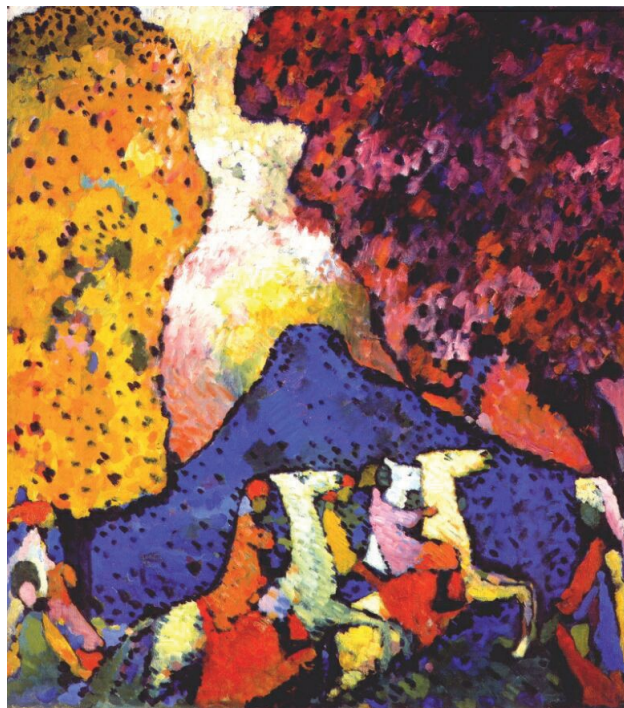


Figure 4.10 | Blue Mountain

Artist: Wassily Kandinsky

Source: Wikiart

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Figure 4.11 | *Angel of the Last Judgment*

Artist: Wassily Kandinsky

Source: Wikiart

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Figure 4.12 | *Red Spot II*

Artist: Wassily Kandinsky

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The artistic climate fostered widespread experimentation, and the synergistic atmosphere was a seedbed for new ideas and modes of working. Rodchenko sought to affirm the independence of artistic process and the “constructive” approach to creating artworks that were self-referential, and he explored the possibilities in painting, drawing, photography, sculpture and graphic arts. Kandinsky, also Russian but working in Germany, wrote an important treatise entitled *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) that was widely popular and soon translated from the original German into many languages. He explored color theory in relationship to music, logic, human emotion, and the spiritual underpinnings of the abstractions that for centuries had been viewed and absorbed through religious icons and popular folk prints in his native Russia.

4.5 STYLES OF ART

In addition to looking at where along the spectrum from representation to non-representation a work of art may fall, we can examine the style of the work. Style can encompass the principles about form and appearance shared within a certain culture or era. Style can refer to a movement or group of artists and their work, where the commonalities can range from employing like elements and principles of design, to using certain materials or processes, to following a set of religious, political, or ideological beliefs. Style also indicates the visual characteristics of an individual artist's work. We conduct a stylistic analysis by examining the artistic elements and considering how they have used, and how they relate to other works by that artist, group of artists, or in a certain time frame, culture, or region.

In general, artistic styles tend to fall into three broad categories: Period, Regional, and Formal styles. Period styles are groups of art in which the works derive their characteristic structure from the culture prevalent during a particular time period. A good example of a period style would be Gothic Art or Ming dynasty Art. Regional styles are groups of art in which the works derive their structure from the culture prevalent in a particular place. A good example of a regional style would be Dutch Art or Latin American Art. Formal styles are groups of art in which the works derive their structure from principles that are not characteristic of either one place or one time. A good example of a Formal style would be Surrealism, Impressionism, or Modernism. Formal styles tend to be the “isms.”

From the earliest times, we can see that some artists sought to make their depictions conform closely to what they saw in the world around them, but that for various reasons they often chose to emphasize certain aspects at the expense of great naturalism. It is a mistake, however, to assume that the degree of naturalism that you see in the artwork is necessarily and primarily related to the skill level of the artist.

Artistic and stylistic change is generally a matter of evolution, and often rather reactionary. The artistic choices about style (and other matters) made at any particular point are influenced by what other works of art look like at that moment. So the artist will likely try to create an expression that goes further in one direction, or changes directions in some way. Thus, art might become more naturalistic, as we have seen, or it might become less so, because the artist thinks the art might express the idea better by using a slightly different style or a radically different idea. The divergence is related to current “thinking” within the culture and other more specific circumstances.

4.5.1 Cultural Style

There are artistic choices with regard to style in every work. While these choices are generally made at the discretion of the individual artist today, for much of history style has been a reflection of the broader cultural currents that influence so much of life in any time and place. These cultural factors have often led to the general approaches to representation that art historians call “conventions of representation.” To acquaint ourselves with these conventions and how they pertain to a cultural style, we will look at a few examples.

4.5.1.1 Ancient Near East

These conventions are evident to us when we examine a broad selection of works from those created in the ancient Near Eastern cultures during several centuries. Look at the way figures are depicted in a detail from the Standard of Ur (c. 2600-2400 BCE) from ancient Mesopotamia, today Iraq, a wooden box with scenes of war and peace made from inlaid pieces of iridescent shell, red limestone, and blue lapis lazuli. (Figure 4.13) We see the figures have sufficient naturalism to allow us to easily recognize the human body. But we also see that they include a range of naturalistic detail.

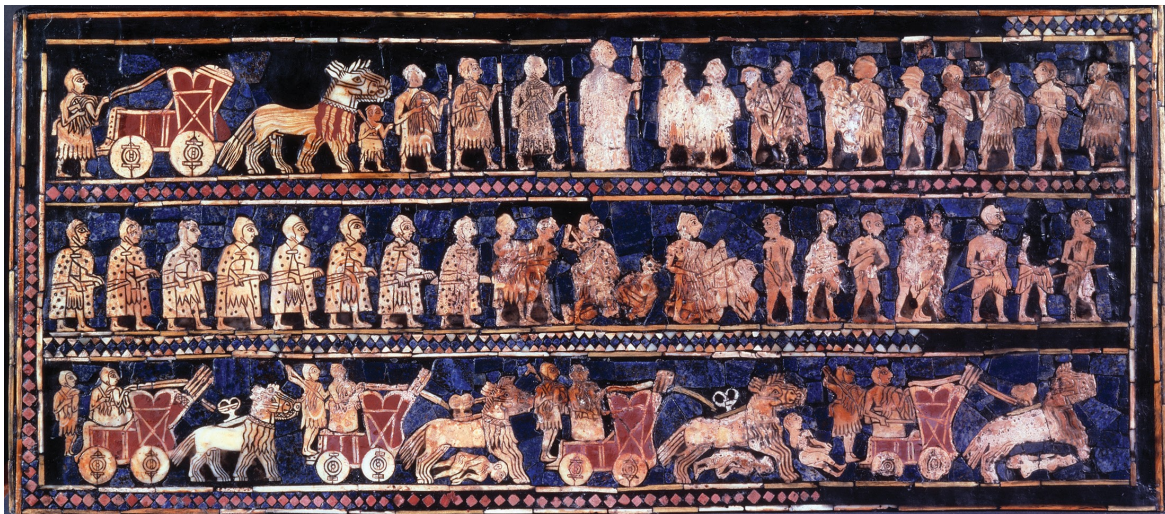


Figure 4.13 | Standard of Ur, 26th century BCE, “War” panel

Author: User “Dbachmann”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The figures appear static, even when they are shown to be moving through space. They are shown in a **composite view**, that is, with portions of the body shown in profile and others in frontal view so the artist can provide details that would not be visible in a strict profile. They turn the body in space so that the viewer sees the hips and shoulders, along with a twisted torso, turned

slightly towards the viewer. For warriors and leaders, this is a heroic stance, showing power and command. The composite view is completed by giving a frontal view of the eye on the profile of the face and head shown.

This approach to figural forms continues in additional ancient Near Eastern works. The *Stele of Music* (c. 2120 BCE), depicting Gudea with attendants in one register and musicians below, shows the king ceremonially preparing to lay out a temple in the city of Girsu while accompanied by music and chanting. (Figure 4.14) In the relief of Sargon II, an Assyrian king who ruled 722-705 BCE, created approximately 1,400 years later, we see the use of these devices again, along with more variations of costume and headgear. (Figure 4.15)



Figure 4.14 | Music Stele

Author: User "Jastrow"

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Figure 4.15 | Sargon II and dignitary

Author: User “Jastrow”

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These instances drawn from across many centuries but from the same geographical region that is today Iraq, show the persistence of a set of conventions of representation shared by the related cultural groups. We can also observe here that, when there is more emphasis on naturalism of the human body, it is at the service of conveying a sense of power, usually to give more detail to musculature—especially in the chest and shoulders. This slight abstraction or deviation from absolute naturalism is also used to create a sense of greater physical stature and presence, a manipulation of actual sizes known as **hierarchical proportion**, meant to show the figures’ relative importance. These conventions of representation serve to convey dignity and significance within the broad cultural style shared by these associated groups.

As noted, **abstraction** is not a modern method of art, but has been used purposefully in many eras. Abstraction, simplification of naturalistic forms, appears in the conventions of representation in the ancient Near East; unlike most later instances of abstraction, however, these conventions did not follow upon and show a reactionary counter-movement to a naturalistic approach, nor were they a stage that further amplified certain features for purposes of expression or emotional exaggeration.

4.5.1.2 Ancient Greece and Rome

We earlier discussed the progression of cultural style in ancient Greece from the Archaic period to the High Classical period. The latter was also the era when the Parthenon temple and

the other structures on the Acropolis in Athens were rebuilt or renovated as a statement of the power of that city-state. (Figure 4.16) The work of this era of artistic pinnacle is called **classical**.



Figure 4.16 | Acropolis of Athens

Author: User "A.Savin"

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By extension, the ancient Roman work that was created to emulate the Greek Classical style is sometimes defined, as well, as classical art. Careful distinctions, though, need to be made amongst the strictly classical, the imitative, and the revival of classical form in later eras. Examining these styles further, let us first look at what happened after the Greek High Classical era. Art in Greece, in what are called the Late Classical (400-323 BCE) and Hellenistic (323-31 BCE) periods, shows changes that move away from the High Classical norms in becoming variously more dynamic, more expressive, more emotional, more dramatic. (Figures 4.17 and 4.18) That is, they are exaggerated in some way from the calm composure of the Classical style that had expressed the cultural value of complete balance achieved by “a sound mind in a sound body,” a rather sober and self-contained ideal.



Figure 4.17 | Apollo Sauroctonus

Artist: Praxiteles

Author: User "Baldiri"

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Figure 4.18 | Hercules Farnese

Artist: Glycon of Athens

Author: User "Marie-Lan Nguyen"

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In later Greek culture, we can see changes in an expansive political spirit, the influx of foreign cultural forces, the development of drama in theater, increasing materialism, and other factors that change the artistic and aesthetic spirit, consequently requiring different modes of artistic expression. The Romans, although deeply admiring the classical Greek art, held different cultural ideas and ideals, so Roman art, unless directly copying the Greek, would express their different views of life and the world. These included especially Roman worldliness, their boundless interest in expansion (which brought in a great variety of additional influences), their great ingenuity and inventiveness in such arenas as engineering and architecture, and their stress on individualism.

The Roman Republican period (509-27 BCE) overlaps the Greek late Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods. During the Republican period, Romans favored an anti-idealized approach to portrayal of people that went beyond simple naturalism to a very frank and unvarnished study of individuals, with a measure of veneration for the more mature citizens as models of an accomplished life. (Figure 4.19) The Romans honored their ancestors and kept their venerable images as portrait heads, which they carried in funeral processions and kept in their homes; they valued the accomplishments of old age, so their views on aging and the aged were often expressed through **veristic** or truthful renditions of their likenesses.



Figure 4.19 | Togatus Barberini

Author: A. Hekler

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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However, the use of these unidealized depictions varied from one phase to another throughout ancient Roman history. It is especially noted that in the Early Imperial era (27 BCE-197 CE), with the rise of Augustus to Emperor, the practice of idealization in portraiture was again favored for the imperial likenesses, often seen clearly as part of the political propaganda used to promote the positive perception of the emperor and the promotion of his political goals and programs. The portrayal of the man Augustus, regardless of his age at the time of the creation of a portrait, was made to be the image of a powerful young man, heroic in stature, fit and fine. (Figure 4.20) Ensuing emperors varied their choices in this regard, some opting for a return to the age prior to the Imperial Age and notions of Republican virtue and the value of age and experience, others using the idealizing and propagandistic approach, to some degree.



Figure 4.20 | Augustus of Prima Porta

Author: User "Till Niermann"

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In the late Roman Empire (284-476 CE), though, we see suppression and streamlining of natural detail in art that followed and was a reaction to that long period of naturalistic representations of the human figure. Scholars interpret this abstraction as a means of stressing other-than-natural features that are ideological, spiritual, or philosophical in character. For example, in the *Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs* from c. 300 CE, we see that the *idea* of the

tetrarchs, or four co-ruling emperors, working together to rule the four divisions of the vast Roman Empire is more important than the *representation of likeness* of any one of these co-rulers as an individual. (Figure 4.21)



Figure 4.21 | The Tetrarchs

Author: User "Nino Barbieri"

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Naturalism has given way to uniformity, with nearly identical figures of men in the same costume, crown, armor, and stance, as they embrace one another to show their joint office and efforts in the service of the Roman citizenry. Even though there is considerable detail in their clothing that links their joint rule to Roman traditions of military rulers and leaders, the suppression of distinctive, individual physical characteristics is used convey the concept of how they will function as one.

A few years later, when the Roman Empire briefly returned to a singular rule under Constantine the Great, the new Emperor opted for an even more abstracted and simplified portrait representation. (Figure 4.22) He thus removed himself even further from the tradition of imperial portraits that had each varied in its extent of naturalism and idealization—even though the head emulates some in being clean-shaven, with a fringed cap of hair, and having an air of imperial hauteur. But it is far less personal and less intimate in its address to the viewer, both in large part to

its marked suppression of detail, than depictions of earlier rulers. Further, Constantine appears to be focused on the heavens above, towards which his gaze is directed. The portrayal has been read as being more spiritual, linking him to the emerging Christian faith. Thus, the portrait is associated with a societal and cultural turn from worldly to spiritual matters, and that is likely reflected in this change in artistic interpretation.



Figure 4.22 | Marble portrait head of the Emperor Constantine I

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

4.5.1.3 Indian Subcontinent

Strictly speaking, Greece and Rome were the classical civilizations of antiquity in the West, and some would even limit the use of the term “classical” in art to the High Classical period in Greece. The same principles and conventions of representation, however, include numerous works from other times and places. The revival of characteristics associated with the cultural styles associated with ancient Greece and Rome recur repeatedly throughout history in the West, and also appear sometimes in non-Western cultures. Becoming familiar with a few examples will make more apparent the variations of a naturalistic style, whether subtle or quite pronounced, that can be further investigated with regard for the cultural and individual values that are influential at the

moment of the work's creation and use.

In India, naturalism was not usually as restrained as those of the classical ideal we have been exploring. The Emperor Ashoka (r. 268-232 BCE), who reigned over most of the Indian subcontinent, oversaw the construction of 84,000 **stupas**, dome-shaped shrines, to house Buddhist relics. In this **Yakshi**, or female nature figure, guarding one of the four gates at the Great Stupa at Sanchi, the emphasis is on fleshy form, voluptuous and prosperous, indicating a robust healthy physique with connotations of earthly blessing and prosperity. (Figure 4.23)



Figure 4.23 | Elephants on North Torana, Sanchi, India

Author: User "Bernard Gagnon"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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During Ashoka's reign and in the succeeding centuries, influenced by increasing contact with Western cultures and artistic styles that came with both friendly trade and aggressive military incursions by Greeks and Romans, many changes occurred in Indian art. A notable example is the Buddhist sculpture of Maitreya from Gandhara (today Pakistan), dating to the third or fourth century CE. (Figure 4.24) Maitreya, derived from the Sanskrit word for "friend," is a **bodhisattva**—a person who is able to reach nirvana but compassionately chooses to help others out of their human suffering. Maitreya, a successor to the current Buddha, will appear in the future. The influence of Greek and Roman art can be seen in the treatment of drapery and the physical form. Although the figure is somewhat fleshier than Western counterparts, retaining the Indian penchant for more full-bodied physique, it is somewhat less substantial and certainly more concealed by the envelopment of abundant cloth than what had earlier been the norm for figural interpretation in India.



Figure 4.24 | Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

4.5.1.4 Romanesque and Gothic Eras in Europe

Returning to Europe, Romanesque art of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is noteworthy with regard to the idea of expressing a prevalent preoccupation among Christians about the ends of their lives and the end of time. For spiritual purposes, they often made a choice for greater abstraction and distortion, rather than the emphasis on a naturalistic depiction of the human form as seen in ancient Greek and Roman art. Their forms are not only simplified with suppression of naturalistic features in some ways, but are also twisted and turned in space, while their garments

have a lot of linear detail that does not correspond well to the physical forms of the bodies they adorn. The effect is to remove their meaning from a focus on worldly phenomena, redirecting it to a sense of spiritual agitation.

Many of the depicted scenes relate to the Christian expectations of the event of the Last Judgment, reflecting warnings to the devout that their lives and deeds now will be assessed at that point in the future. At Autun Cathedral (1120-1132) in France, we see a graphic array of elongated figures in the Last Judgment within the **tympanum**, the space above the **portals**, or doors. (Figure 4.25) The scene and surrounding decorative reliefs, created by the sculptor Gislebertus (active c. 1115-c. 1135, France) between 1130 and 1135, are centered on the flattened figure of the judging Christ. He presides over the resurrection of the dead and the ensuing assignment to a heavenly welcome or a grotesque greeting by the denizens of Hell. Despite the lack of naturalism, the messages are clear in reference to human experience and prevalent beliefs of the era. Following the Romanesque style in Europe was the Gothic era, which spanned the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in Italy and continued into the sixteenth century in northern Europe. The Gothic style included a return to greater naturalism, as focus shifted back to the natural world in many ways. (Figure 4.26) Figural forms began to reflect the observation of physical facts, and a phase of artistic evolution began that would eventually culminate in the intense naturalism of the Renaissance, especially in Italy from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

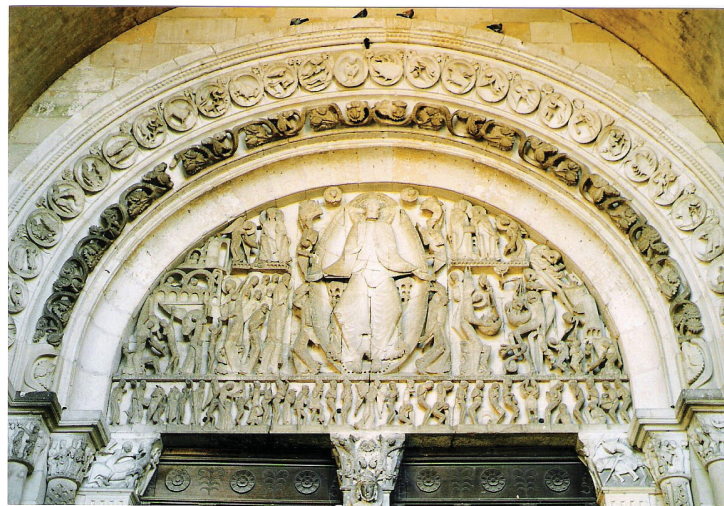


Figure 4.25 | Last Judgement

Artist: Gislebertus

Author: User "Lametrie"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Figure 4.26 | Saints Martin, Jerome, and Gregory

Author: User "Jedhunsaker"

Source: Wikipedia

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Along the way, however, conventions of representation in Italy and in northern Europe diverged, producing increasingly different cultural styles. For example, the “Court Style” was prevalent in the royal works of the Late Gothic era (late fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), particularly in France, and lingered into the early Renaissance of the late fifteenth century in northern Europe. The approach reflected the prominence of aristocratic tastes and the exaltation of earthly rulers and the conception of God and the saints (especially the Virgin Mary) as the court in Heaven. ([*The Virgin of Paris, Notre-Dame, Paris*](#))

While there is a clear change from the Romanesque style, the figures are not yet really naturalistic, with an emphasis on elegance and aristocratic attitude dominating the figural imaginings. As seen here, there is often abundant drapery falling in rich and graceful folds, so exaggerated that one cannot discern the space for a full figure beneath. The hips and knees, rather than showing the classical contrapposto positioning that the ancient Greeks developed, are gracefully swayed into an S-curve, connoting sophistication and refinement.

4.5.2 Stylistic Periods or Movements

In addition to examining style as a broad expression and embodiment of cultural beliefs and values, we can focus more finely upon stylistic groups and artistic movements as artists and

works grouped together due to similarities in subject matter, formal approach, spiritual or political beliefs, or other commonalities. A stylistic movement can be based upon a pointed and conscientious revival of visual and philosophical traits of an earlier style. An artistic movement can also reflect the cyclical and recurrent evolution of style, with phases of moving gradually towards greater naturalism, and then rebounding towards some stylistic aberration that is less reflective of physical nature and instead expresses some other interest of human life and artistic attention.

4.5.2.1 Italian Renaissance

The first artistic era in the modern West that we can speak of as possessing more specific traits and commonalities than a more broadly defined cultural style is the period known as the Renaissance, which is French for “rebirth.” Originating in Italy in the fourteenth century, the Renaissance was a period of conscious and purposeful revival of the ideas and ideals of the classical past. Within a shared cultural interest in **humanism**, the philosophical belief in the value of humans and their endeavors, artists of the Italian Renaissance sought ways to express themselves as individuals in their art. Through study of ancient art and close observation of the world around them, Renaissance artists as a group—but each characterized by singular traits—realized another pinnacle of naturalism in the human form. Italian artists of the fifteenth century would also invent linear perspective, so that all lines parallel to the viewer’s eye recede to a vanishing point on the horizon line.

A good example of linear perspective is the fresco *The Holy Trinity* by Masaccio (1401-1428, Italy), the first painting in which the technique was systematically employed. (Figure 4.27) The work depicts the crucifixion of Christ, with God the Father behind and above him supporting the cross, and Mary and St. John the Baptist standing to either side. When we extend the **orthogonal lines** from the ceiling vault above the holy figures, we find they converge at a point on the floor where the images of the patrons kneel, below and outside the vaulted area. This line divides the fresco into two zones: the zone above that, which for Christians symbolized eternal life, and the skeleton beneath the line which symbolizes the waiting grave. The **vanishing point**—and the attention of the viewer—is on the line between them where the patrons kneel in prayer. It thus subtly but elegantly uses **linear perspective** to impart a message. The patrons and the viewer are “on the line between life and death” and have a religious decision to make.

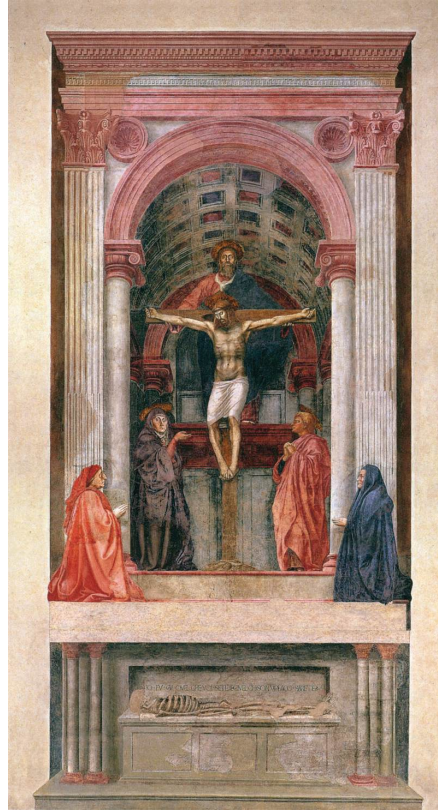


Figure 4.27 | *Holy Trinity*

Artist: Masaccio

Author: Web Gallery of Art

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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During the preceding Romanesque and Gothic eras, philosophical thought was shifting from a focus on achieving everlasting life through devotion and considering humans and their feats to be weak and insignificant; however, the power of religion and religious beliefs had not diminished. Humanism of the Italian Renaissance both celebrated human intellectual and creative accomplishments—as can be seen in use of linear perspective in *The Holy Trinity*—and embraced the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church that emphasized the humanity of Christ.

As a result, there was a shift away from distinct physical and emotional separation of holy figures within works of art to depictions that emphasized their spiritual presence among the faithful. For example, in the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* by Raphael (1498-1520, Italy), a hierarchy of Mary as the Queen of Heaven seated high on her throne with a ceremonial canopy and hanging cloth emphasizing her majesty is maintained. (Figure 4.28) The steps before her, however, are open for the viewer to symbolically ascend through devotion, and the serene landscape behind her is clearly on this earth and not a vision of a celestial heaven.



Figure 4.28 | *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints*

Artist: Raphael

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

Subjects such as the Madonna and Child, which allowed the artist to accentuate human qualities such as the love, mercy, and tenderness which these holy figures had in common with the worshipper, were favored during the Italian Renaissance. Not only did the choice of subject matter reflect the new value placed on human empathy and agency, the myriad approaches to such subjects indicate the new freedom artists felt to abandon a broad cultural style as seen in earlier eras. Instead, they adopted stylistic traits that embodied a collective desire to “rebirth” the forms and philosophy of art as practiced in Classical Greece and Rome. This resulted in artists accentuating the individual in their art making within the agreed upon stylistic standards and ideals of the period.

As an example, compare Raphael’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* to *Madonna and Child* painted approximately six years later by Titian (c. 1488-1576, Italy). (Figure 4.29) Both artists stress the tender connection between mother and child. Looking closely at the faces of all three women in Raphael’s work, however, we can see their features and the tilt of their

heads are nearly identical, suggesting the artist chose to depict them in a similarly idealized manner. The Madonna in Titian's work, on the other hand, has more individualized facial features. Titian places a greater emphasis on the naturalistic folds and flow of drapery than Raphael does, highlighting the transparency of cloth across Mary's lap, for example. Last, Titian brings the detailed landscape behind the figures closer to the picture plane, situating the figures in nature; Raphael focuses upon the grouping of figures in the foreground with a distant view of the land. In this way through their art, we have a front row seat to a changing cultural view about the proper relation of religious figures to the everyday physical world during the Italian Renaissance.



Figure 4.29 | Madonna and Child

Artist: Titian

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

4.5.2.2 Realism

We have already discussed naturalism as an approach to depicting objects that exist in the physical world in representational art. Now let us examine the terms naturalistic and realistic. These terms are often (incorrectly) used interchangeably, but their meanings and implications in art differ. Works that are **naturalistic** are those in which the appearance corresponds to nature, that is, to how the subject of the work looks in the natural, phenomenal world, such as the cows of Rosa Bonheur. In distinction, those that are correctly called **realistic** relay information or opinions about the underlying social or philosophical reality of the subject matter: they go beyond the natural appearance to express additional ideas.

Works created with a view to such realism may also be naturalistic in appearance, but they go beyond the naturalistic appearance to include social commentary in the pictorial message.

Examples include works such as those by Gustave Courbet (1819-1877, France, Switzerland) that were created to express the realities of the rural poor in mid-nineteenth-century France and that were partly artistic statements of rebellion against the prevailing norms of academically acceptable art. The *École des Beaux-Arts* was the nationally institutionalized body in control of training and exhibition of art in France, and its conservative tendencies went against such frank treatment of mundane subject matter. Rather, they promoted lofty subject matter, refined treatments, and their most highly prized works dealt with topics like history, religion, heroic narratives, and the like. Here, in the *Burial at Ornans*, Courbet presented not a grand ceremonial event, but an ordinary country funeral. (Figure 4.30) The scene includes a disparate group of common folk standing awkwardly in disarray—even though the grand size was associated with a more elevated subject and treatment.



Figure 4.30 | A Burial at Ornans

Artist: Gustave Courbet

Author: Google Art Project

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The academic norms would have dictated that such a ritual event be presented with a greater sense of formality and pomp, emphasizing the coordination of activities in an uplifting and reverential manner. Since Courbet had trained and achieved mastery in the official French system, the painting was shown in the annual Salon, the official venue of the *École des Beaux-Arts*; nevertheless, it was widely criticized as lacking decorum and having too much **realism**.

Another of Courbet's works, *The Stone Breakers*, also shown at the Salon in 1851, garnered its share of the same sort of criticism, for it presented the hard labor of rural peasants as though it were a heroic activity. (Figure 4.31) Courbet again used realism to make a strong visual statement

of the nobility of people and tasks that lay far outside the refined academic definitions of art. By doing so, he condemned not only the Academy but also the societal standards that supported such judgment and ranking of art and human activity. Thus, the art movement known as Realism was begun. Many works created in this vein were condemned and refused for exhibition in the official Salons, resulting in an anti-Academic movement among artists and the quest of many for independence from the state-controlled system for training and exhibition.



Figure 4.31 | *The Stone Breakers*

Artist: Gustave Courbet

Author: The Yorck Project

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Such subject matter and approach to making art appeared in many different places throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such artwork invariably was associated with other signs of social change and upheaval, frequently reflecting the lives and interests of the peasantry—both rural and urban—and highlighting the oppressive conditions of their lives. In Russia, among other places, the movement included a spirit of probing and of artists expressing the distinctive cultural characteristics and specific social issues of their countrymen. Ilya Repin (1844-1930, Russia), in *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, presented a realistic view of the arduous labor of men bringing the river barges to shore for unloading; the artist took great care to present each of them as an individual to be respected. (Figure 4.32) He also defined them in terms of age, physique, stature, and ethnicity, conveying the group as a sort of cross-section of Russian peasantry of the day.



Figure 4.32 | Barge Haulers on the Volga

Artist: Ilya Repin

Author: User "Thebrid"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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In Germany, the influence of Courbet's Realism, coupled with study of portraits by Old Masters (European painters of renown c. 1200-1800), appears in a study by Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900, Germany) called *Three Women in the Church*. (Figure 4.33) In this painting, the detail of the individual women is remarkable, delineating as it does their rustic costumes, their strongly individual characters, their large workworn hands, and their other physical features. Leibl had rendered these peasants with realistic attention to the effects of their hard life at their different ages, while conveying a great sense of respect for their traditions of family and faith. He sought to counter the legacy of glorified German history and myth with unflinching views of the ordinary people he knew.



Figure 4.33 | *Three Women in Church*

Artist: Wilhelm Leibl

Author: The Yorck Project

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Stylistic components of and ideas behind Realism were also used by American artists, notably in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the crowded urban centers fostered harsh living conditions for the poor working class citizens. One important group within that stylistic movement, known as the Ashcan School, included painters such as George Bellows (1882-1925, USA), whose *Cliff Dwellers* shows the crowding and chaos in a Lower East Side New York City neighborhood on a hot summer day. (Figure 4.34)



Figure 4.34 | *Cliff Dwellers*

Artist: George Bellows

Author: User "Achim Raschka"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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These artists were often making commentary on the undesirable effects felt by newly arrived immigrants and the rural poor who had been lured into large metropolitan areas in hopes of better prosperity and lifestyle, especially as many remained on the lower rungs of the industrialized and commerce-oriented society. Again, the overall definition of form may be seen as naturalistic, but his efforts for realism led Bellows to a rather painterly, brushy approach that does not have definitively naturalistic detail throughout.

One further particular point needs to be made about the idea of realism in art. It is a mistaken notion to believe that photographic works are inherently or necessarily more realistic than any other work because they record some actuality. The artist who uses photography has as many opportunities for choice as one who works in any other medium and can make choices that alter that actuality or its appearance. The photographer selects the subject matter and then can choose viewpoint, lighting, compositional field, a variety of photo processes and materials, and exposure time. The process of development and printing offers further options for manipulating the imagery, and sometimes changes are made after the printing process is complete. There is not necessarily any more "truth" or "realism" in a photo than in any other type of art.

For example, in the works of some photographers such as Edward Steichen (1879 1973, Luxembourg, lived USA) and Lucas Samaras (b. 1936, Greece, lives USA) we see that the artists have manipulated the photographs to alter their appearances. Steichen used layers of **gum bichromate** to add color and to create a sense of hazy atmosphere for a mysterious nocturnal landscape. (Figure 4.35) Samaras, on the other hand, created a type of photography he called **Photo-Transformation** by using his fingers and a stylus to move and smear the dyes of a Polaroid print while still wet. ([Photo-Transformation, Lucas Samaras](#)) Leaving the protruding hand untouched, Samaras altered the spatial relationships in his photograph by blurring the surrounding imagery, including his own face, which became quite indistinct in the process. The stages of creating photographs offer innumerable opportunities for altering the imagery from its “natural” appearances, while still often retaining the sense of “authenticity” of the photograph itself.



Figure 4.35 | Moonlight: The Pond

Artist: Edward Steichen

Author: User “DcoetzeeBot”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

4.5.2.3 Expression(ism)

As we have seen, choices made to move away from naturalism can reflect both the culture at large and the issues with which artists concern themselves as they seek to express ideas and/or feelings of the moment. **Expression** has been sought for many purposes related to thought, belief, emotional impetus, and any human concern that might prompt the creation of artistic articulation, in its various forms and media. Often, though, the idea of **expressionism** in art is more narrowly used to define the idea of foregoing a measure of naturalism in favor of the emotional content, emphasizing how the culture and the artist felt about the subject matter. This may be used

in the West or East.

Examples are numerous in the illustrations of narratives, such as the Indian mythological story of the Hindu Goddess Durga, who dramatically slays the Buffalo Demon, using weapons borrowed from the male gods. (Figure 4.36) Such a story lends itself well to a dynamically expressive interpretation in art, as does the sort of devotional idea presented in the German works called *andachtsbilder*, devotional images used to aid prayer, as seen in Figure 4.37. These works were created on both small and large scale to provoke contemplation of the sufferings of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ as prompted by the stories of the Passion of Christ. Such works were further inspired by the relation of the holy figures' sufferings to the physical effects of the Black Plague, rampant from Asia to Europe during the fourteenth century.



Figure 4.36 | The Great Goddess Durga Slaying the Buffalo Demon

Author: User "DcoetzeeBot"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



Figure 4.37 | Pieta Liebieghaus

Author: User "FA2010"0

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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A more specific movement of Expressionism in Germany arose in the early twentieth century to give artistic form to the emotional and societal reactions to unrest caused by political and cultural upheavals. Reflecting the desire for social reform that was part of Realism as well as the long history of expressiveness in German art, the group was named the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). In the aftermath of World War I (1914-1918), these artists presented harsh and piercing glimpses of the effects of the war's devastation on German society in the 1920s and of the ensuing societal unrest accompanying the emergence of the Nazis and the Third Reich in the 1930s. Artists such Max Beckmann (1844-1950, Germany, Netherlands, USA) and George Grosz (1893-1959, Germany) used their craft to level harsh and cynical criticism against what they saw in the society around them, at home and across Europe.

In *Paris Society*, Beckmann showed a group of businessmen, aristocrats, and intellectuals (many of whom emigrated to Paris to flee conditions at home) gathered for what ought to be an evening of social pleasantries, but was instead one clearly pervaded by a sense of foreboding and

gloom. ([Paris Society, Max Breckmann](#)) The realism here shows the lack of connection among the partygoers, even to the extent that they apparently avoid or ignore one another, crowded as they are into an uncomfortable space. Beckmann himself, once a celebrated artist in Germany, became an object of censure and ridicule by the time of the Nazi regime, and his artwork is often full of a sense of the malaise of the age.

Grosz, also despised by the Nazis, tended to make much more specific use of his critical realism, delineating especially harsh condemnations of the military and governmental establishments. For example, in *The Hero*, Grosz used graphic realism to convey his view of the anti-heroic treatment of individuals—especially World War I veterans—that he saw all around him. ([The Hero, George Grosz](#)) In the work of these two artists, we can note that the realistic approach sometimes moves away from strong naturalism. The artists seem to have deliberately chosen to make their renditions somewhat abstracted and unrefined—even crude—for the sake of expressive emphasis.

4.5.2.4 Abstract Expressionism

We examined differences between representational and abstract art when we explored Van Doesburg's exploration of cows and the work of other artists who manipulated form by reducing its visual components or altering its appearance so that the form did not conform to the ways it might appear in nature. These artists chose to limit the degree to which they would carry the investigation of abstraction, opting to avoid losing references that were more or less clearly recognizable.

In the middle of the twentieth century, based in New York City, a movement called **Abstract Expressionism** included works of drawing, painting, print, and sculpture that were focused on the physical properties of the medium used as opposed to pictorial narrative, although not all of them were without reference to the figure or the phenomenal world altogether. In the work *Untitled* of 1957 by Clyfford Still (1901-1980, USA), we see how the imagery can remind us of a jagged crevice in a mountain landscape, but without definitive representation, and the artist himself denied that there was such a subject there. ([PH-971, Clyfford Still](#))

Other artists associated with Abstract Expressionism used less sense of representation in their work. Included in the category were Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko (1903-1970, Latvia, lived USA). ([The Deep, Jackson Pollock](#); No. 61 ([Rust and Blue, Mark Rothko](#)) Abstract Expressionist artists were more concerned with artistic process and formal means than with the creation of narrative pictures. In examining a small cross section of work by the Abstract Expressionist artists, we can see that it may not be appropriate, after all, to call this a stylistic

category, as there is not really a stream of visual similarities among them; rather, they are characterized as much by their freedom from the constraints of stylistic rules and their lack of unifying visual features.

4.5.3 Individual Style

Johannes (or Jan) Vermeer lived in the seventeenth century, a time of artistic flowering often referred to as the Golden Age of Dutch art. During his lifetime, Vermeer was a painter of some renown in his hometown of Delft whose work was purchased by a small number of collectors. After his death in 1675 at the age of forty-three, however, he and his work were largely forgotten, in part because the few works he painted were in private collections and rarely seen. For example, Vermeer's painting *The Geographer* was in the hands of more than two-dozen private owners before it was sold to the Städel Museum (Städelsches Kunstinstitut) in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1885. (Figure 4.38) And, Vermeer himself was not "re-discovered" until 1860, when museum director Gustav Waagen recognized a work attributed to another artist as a painting by Vermeer. Working with Waagen, art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger published a **catalogue raisonné**, a detailed, comprehensive list of the artist's work, in 1866, launching Vermeer toward the fame he and his thirty-four known paintings enjoy to this day.

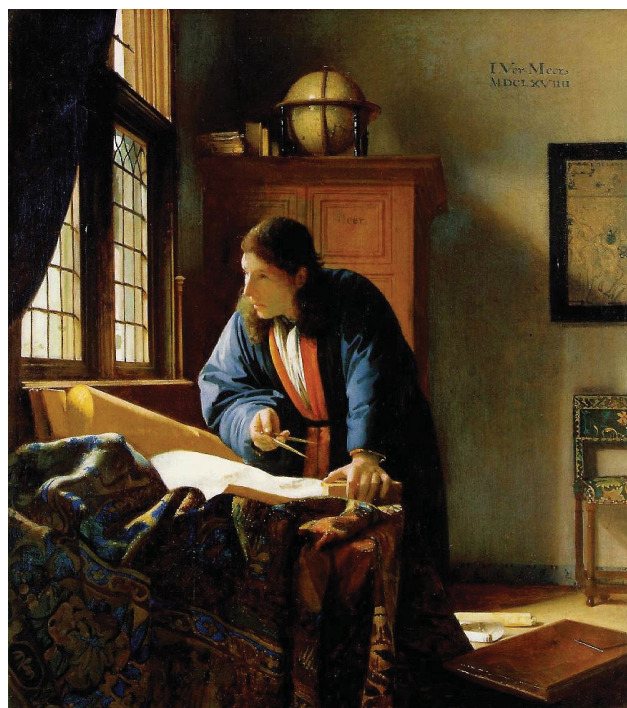


Figure 4.38 | *The Geographer*

Artist: Johannes Vermeer

After such a long period of obscurity, it is all the more interesting that Vermeer is considered today to have such a distinctive style. As in *The Geographer*, the great majority of his works are set in a domestic interior, strongly lit by a multi-paned window to the left. Sunlight washes across the table at the window and the figure standing there, to the floor and the wall behind. The objects in the room are both those commonly found in a Dutch household of the day and specific to the occupation of a geographer, namely, the celestial globe, charts, and compass the man holds. Vermeer achieved the luminosity of the scene, with small details warmly highlighted to a fine glow, by applying multiple layers of translucent glazes of paint. The palette of earth tones interspersed with the vivid blue of ground lapis lazuli and brilliant vermilion of powdered cinnabar provide a richness, clarity, and stillness that are distinctively Vermeer's, as well.

The life and work of Vincent van Gogh also provides us with a good example to talk about the individual style of an artist. In addition to what can be learned about the artist through his drawings and paintings, the more than 800 letters Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo, other family members, and friends, provide valuable information about his artistic intentions and thoughts about his art and life. After a childhood the artist described as troubled and lonely, he found happiness in 1869 at the age of sixteen when he took a position with the art dealer Goupil & Cie, first in the Dutch city of The Hague and then in London, England. After leaving the firm in 1876, however, he spent the next seven years in a series of vocational and romantic pursuits that left Van Gogh disillusioned and adrift. In 1883, he began to pursue drawing and painting, for which he had shown promise as a child. The two years he spent in Paris, 1886-1888, provided him with seemingly endless opportunities to study and grow as an artist. Overwhelmed by the pace of life there, however, in 1888 he settled in Arles, a small town in the south of France, where he spent the last two years of his life.

Largely based on the prolific artistic output during and biographical details about those last two years, Van Gogh is well known as an emotionally troubled artist who struggled artistically, financially, and socially. His work from that period does not look like that of any of his contemporaries, so we feel confident that his choice of subject and technique reveals something personal and intimate rather than polished, distant, and conventional. (Figure 4.39) His swirling brush strokes and vivid colors seem to indicate the chaotic and emotionally turbulent life he was experiencing. His choice of cypress trees as symbols of eternity reveal a concern with the spiritual

that is well documented in his letters of the time. His passion, dedication to painting, and perhaps even a kind of desperation all seem to drive Van Gogh's individual stylistic approach.



Figure 4.39 | *Wheat Field with Cypresses*

Artist: Vincent van Gogh

Author: Met Museum

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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4.6 BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Key Concepts

Visual art can be usefully interpreted using a variety of approaches to discovering meaning in the elements, principles, and relationships present in works of art. A structured approach using description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation is presented and exemplified as one mode for understanding how works of art can carry meaning.

Other modes of interpretation recognize many approaches to art-making. Works of art may be idealized, representational, non-objective, or abstract. Issues of historical and personal style also become important in understanding what artists hoped to communicate with their artwork.

Types of art revolve primarily around representation, abstraction, idealization, and non-objective art, which is a rejection of representation.

The historical progression of artistic style simultaneously relies on and is limited by

technology, socio-cultural, and religious constraints. Examples of cultural or Regional style are drawn from the ancient Near East, Ancient Greece and Rome, and the Indian sub-continent. Examples of period styles exemplified include the Romanesque and Gothic periods of Europe and the Italian Renaissance. Examples of formal styles, i.e., the “isms,” include nineteenth century realism, expressionism of Weimar Germany, and the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School.

Test Yourself

1. Discuss the difference between the categories of representational art, abstract art, and nonrepresentational art.
2. Cite and briefly describe the four phases of critical analysis presented in this chapter.
3. Cite one example of an idealized work of art and discuss potential reasons for and goals of this idealization, especially as relates to the work’s culture of origin.
4. Restate the three types of art historical **style** mentioned in this chapter, citing one example of each, and illustrate this example with a specific work of art

4.7 KEY TERMS

Abstract: in art, the property of representing selected essential features of a particular subject instead of relying on objective appearance alone.

Andachtsbilder: a German term to denote devotional images used to aid prayer.

Bodhisattva: in Buddhism, an enlightened person who remains in the world in order to help others attain enlightenment.

Catalogue Raisonné: a published collection of all the works of a given artist or art exhibition.

Composite view: the construction of a human figure from both profile and frontal views, for example, as in ancient Egyptian art.

Contrapposto: an asymmetrical arrangement of the human figure in which the line of the arms and shoulders contrasts with and balances the line of the hips and legs.

École des Beaux-Arts: an influential art school in France.

Expressionism: one of several art movements of the twentieth century that were concerned with conveying emotional and mental responses through art (German Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism).

Gum Bichromate: a photographic print process which uses gum Arabic and bichromate.

Hierarchical proportion: the condition in which the size of figures is determined by social importance rather than observation.

Humanism: the belief that people are naturally good and that problems can be solved using reason instead of religion.

Idealized: an image that is represented as being ideal or perfected.

Linear perspective: a geometric system for representing the illusion of receding space.

Naturalistic: of or pertaining to the appearance of nature, without idealization.

Non-objective: unrelated to or exclusive of perceptions of objective external reality.

Non-representational: artwork which intentionally avoids the strategy of representation, instead selecting only novel and original experience as subject matter.

Orthogonal lines: in linear perspective, diagonal lines that recede into fictive space.

Photo-transformation: a type of photography created by Lucas Samaras which uses fingers and a stylus to move and smear the dyes of a Polaroid print while still wet.

Portals: in Gothic architecture, doorways, traditionally embellished with sculptural decoration.

Representation: in art, the use of signs or images which stand in for or take the place of something else.

Stupas: in Buddhist religious architecture, rounded mounds which contain religious relics, mark sacred places, or are used as sites of meditation.

Tetrarch: in Roman political history, the term for one of four co-emperors of the Roman Empire installed by Diocletian in 293 CE.

Tympanum: in Gothic Architecture, the semi-circular area above the Portal, traditionally embellished with sculptural decoration.

Vanishing point: in linear perspective, the point on the horizon to which orthogonal lines converge.

Yakshi: in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies, female counterparts to male Yaksha, who are both mythical beings that guard treasure hidden in the Earth.