Preliminary Terms & Concepts for Introduction to the History of Modern Art

General Art Historical Terms and Concepts

* **Styles or movements in art**: In order to understand the progression and development of art history, artworks are often grouped within styles or movements that designate artists working at the same time, in the same place, or using a unifying style or similar visual vocabulary and sharing similar ideas in their work.
* Long before the modern era, many important requirements and features for painting were established during the Renaissance, which means ‘rebirth’ and indicates that Western artists were looking back at the ancient Greek example as a means of revitalizing culture after the Medieval era. The Renaissance is followed by the Baroque period, then into the 18th Century, the Rococo, followed in the late-18th into the 19th Century, by Neoclassicism, Romanticism and in the 1850s, with Realism and the birth of the modern era.
* The first style or movement of the modern era is Impressionism. Other styles we will consider this semester include Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Fauvism, Cubism, German Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, De Stijl, Russian Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art.
* Notice that a style or movement in art is a proper noun. Like a person’s name, or a place or a major historical event, proper nouns use capital letters. When we are writing out the title of an artwork, all of the nouns in the title are capitalized, and the artwork’s title appears in italics. These are the same two rules used for names of books. When you handwrite something that should be *italicized*, you simply underline it.
* Let’s get in the habit of correct form for these things. See how I have written this information throughout this text and in the powerpoint as a guide.)
* **Context**: An artwork’s historical, political, social, and cultural context will impact how the meaning is understood by viewers and will help explain why the artist chose to depict this subject at this time. Nothing happens in a vacuum with art responding directly to current events in the society around its creation.
* Use the information in an artwork’s caption, including the date it was made, with its subject matter and style to begin to establish the artwork’s context in a general sense. This will help determine why an artwork’s iconography or subject matter and its formal characteristics appear the way they do and why they are relevant and important. In the powerpoints, you will see the basic information contained in a caption, including the artist’s first and last name, the title of the artwork, the date it was made, its medium or materials, and its size or dimensions. Sometimes where the artwork was made or is now located will appear.
* **iconography** / **subject matter**: Subject mat­ter is what an artwork is about – what story, narrative, idea, event, or personal expression from the artist’s imagination is the artwork depicting and what information about this is being conveyed to viewers. Like a book or movie, every artwork has a subject. It is about something that the artist has decided upon and then determined the best way to represent. The artwork’s title will often be the most direct clue to the subject matter.
* There are roughly five different types of subject matter: history painting (also includes religious paintings), landscape, portraiture, still-life, and genre painting, which means scenes of everyday life.
* A still-life is an arrangement of inanimate objects on display, like a bowl of fruit, a candlestick and some flowers. It is not a scene of everyday life that is not moving or ‘still.’
* For centuries, between the Renaissance and the modern era, history paintings and religious scenes, or portraits of important political figures, like a king, were thought to be more important than the other subjects and were commissioned by the church or government to educate and instruct audiences. Still-lives, landscapes and genre scenes were popular for decorating people’s private homes in the 17th and 18th Centuries and into the 19th Century when the middle-class grew in size and began to acquire art.
* In the mid-19th Century, the artist Gustave Courbet, associated with the Realist movement, said, “If you can show me an angel, I will paint one!” His statement opened the door for other artists to use subject matter drawn from everyday life and their own experiences.
* In the modern era, as individual artists began to have greater freedoms, there became less strictness about what was considered a more impressive or more relevant subject matter as artists increasingly explored what they wanted.
* Oftentimes a painting will fit within two categories. The important thing is to establish the context and identify what is being depicted in a general sense then begin to analyze why the artist has chosen to depict this subject matter. What are they communicating through this subject? Is it to educate society, is it to experiment with a style or an idea for themselves, or is it political propaganda?
* **formal characteristics**: A formal characteristic is anything that is giving ‘form’ or a unique appearance to an artwork. The artist is deciding exactly how, where, and why to make every aspect of the artwork look the way that it does in order to express what they want in the way they want. Decisions are made every step of the way; if something looks accidental or spontaneous, there are still decisions in the treatment of the lines, composition and arrangement of forms to give it that appearance.
* Each style or movement in art history will have a basic set of formal characteristics that unite the appearance of various artworks into a recognizable group or style.
* Formal characteristics to consider in a painting or in a sculpture include its size, the materials used, the colors, types of lines, types of shapes, the use of light and dark, and the overall organization or arrangement of individual elements within the composition.
* All of these formal characteristics are explained in more detail here. Review this information to understand the basic visual elements:
* Sculpture occupies a vertical plane in actual space, whereas a painting, drawing or print is a flat plane onto which the image will be arranged. The **overall** **size** of the artwork, as well as the sizes of the various parts, may indicate importance or a cultural or personal value placed on the subject of the artwork.
* **Overall organization within the composition** – the artist uses the organization of the composition to structure the narrative and bring attention to areas using the foreground, middle ground and background – the three spatial planes of a painting, drawing or printed work. Balance can be achieved either *symmetrically* or *asymmetrically*. The human body is symmetrical in that what is on the left side mirrors what is on the right side. Raphael’s *The School of Athens* and Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity* are symmetrical. When the weight of forms is not evenly distributed on either side of a center dividing line, balance is still achieved through the arrangement of forms using counterbalance. This is seen in Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*.
* **Spatial depth**: In the Renaissance, artists developed a system of linear perspective using mathematical proportions (also called one-point perspective) to organize their compositions giving them the appearance of spatial depth and volume. This made the flat two-dimensional plane of the canvas, page or wall appear three-dimensional, by mirroring the recession into depth of real space. When figures placed within this space were rendered using chiaroscuro – the blending of light and dark tones – and depending on their angle or position, using foreshortening, then their work looked extremely real and convincing.
* **Types of line** – a line has length and direction and has a width and height. Straight lines can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal and irregular lines can be zig-zag, wavy, curving or angular. All lines can be thin or broad. Lines can be arranged parallel to one another, which will feel balanced and stable, or they can be perpendicular, converging and intersecting with one another, which creates more movement. Find the two artworks by Georges Seurat: *The Sideshow* uses horizontal and vertical lines in an ordered, perpendicular arrangement resulting in a still and stable image, whereas in *Chahut*, which is a series of high-kicks in a dance, the diagonal lines of the dancing chorus girls, mirrored in the position of the instruments and even in the shape of the light fixtures, gives everything a sense of dynamism and movement.
* **Lines for modeling** – crosshatching and shading are lines and blending used to create the appearance of a three-dimensional form. *Shading or modeling* – the transition from light to dark in areas to recreate the appearance of actual light hitting an object - is chiaroscuro. Draw a circle. Now, how are you going to make that circle look like an apple? By applying shading. Or, draw a square. Now, how can you get that square to look like a cube? Add both lines and shading to make it appear as though it is extending backwards into space. For *crosshatching*, find the sketch by Albrecht Durer of his face, hand and pillow (slide 43). The pillow is essentially a rectangle or square but with the application of crosshatching, a form develops that looks volumetric, as though it has actual weight and mass to it. By comparison, Matisse’s figure in the image next to it doesn’t use any lines or shading, so the resultant figure appears flat and two-dimensional, lacking volume and mass.
* **Shapes** – when lines enclose space, a shape is created. There are geometric shapes – circle, oval, square, rectangle, trapezoid - or irregular shapes, also called biomorphic or organic shapes.
* **Light and** **Color** – Light is electromagnetic energy of different wavelengths that create a sensation of color when these waves meet the retina of our eye. Darkness is the absence of light. When there is no light or darkness, there is no color. Beams of light contain all the colors of the spectrum (there are 7), but objects appear to be different colors because of their pigmentation. In a rainbow, we see each of the 7 colors in the light spectrum refracted through rain or mist. Objects that are white, grey or black are neutrals, reflecting all or none of the colors in a spectrum.
* Each of the 7 colors in the spectrum blend together in a continuum and have infinite variety depending on **hue, value and intensity**. Red, yellow and blue are the three primary colors or hues. Secondary colors are created by mixing the two primary colors: red and blue equals violet or purple; red and yellow equals orange, and blue and yellow equals green. Mixing these 6 colors in different combinations creates all colors in an infinite variety, but you cannot create one of the three primaries by mixing.
* **The color wheel** is the arrangement of these primary and secondary colors based on what hues they share. The color opposite a color on the wheel is its complementary or opposite and these will clash when placed next to each other. Mixing them will diminish or lessen the impact of each.
* **Monochromatic ­**– use of only one color or hue. See Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition*.
* **value and intensity (saturation)** – The value of a color indicates the amount of light it reflects back at its maximum intensity. Yellow contains a lot of light; blue does not. The intensity of a color can be changed depending on its brightness or dullness by adding white (red plus white equals pink, a less intense red), grey, black or adding its complementary to dull it.
* Colors have*moods and expressive properties* – red, orange and yellow are considered warm colors and blue is a cool color. Colors also have *symbolic associations* – red can indicate danger or love, blue sadness or melancholy. Lines do as well – go back to the Seurat comparison – one is somber, the other is upbeat.
* **Texture** – in a sculpture, the surface texture will depend on the type of materials or medium used and the treatment of the surface resulting in a smooth, polished or rough surface texture.
* In a painting, texture is created through **brushstrokes**. Until the modern period, it was expected that an artwork, seeking to mirror the real world, would have no visible evidence of brushstrokes. This was to convince the viewer that they were looking into real space, like through a window, so brushstrokes were smoothed out, with the surface showing no textural evidence of the artist’s hand or the application of brushstrokes.
* Beginning with the Realists then the Impressionists, brushwork began to be heavily applied, not smoothed out, and left visible in tactile surfaces. In Courbet’s *Burial at Ornan*, he used his palette knife instead of a paintbrush to spread large swaths of paint onto the canvas, giving it a rawness and an immediacy.
* In modern artworks, analyzing the type of brushwork is essential to understand what the artist is conveying because, when combined with color and line, brushwork signals an intention or purpose or a mood, energy or feeling.
* To review any of these visual elements or formal characteristics, especially color to see an image of the color wheel, use the website www.boundless.com, ‘Art History’ area, in ‘Thinking and Talking About Art’ section 2: Visual Elements or use this LINK: <https://www.boundless.com/art-history/textbooks/boundless-art-history-textbook/thinking-and-talking-about-art-1/visual-elements-39/>
* Keep in mind that on the computer and projected on the screen in class, it is difficult to understand the nuances of surface texture because everything looks smoothed out. The same goes for the size of a painting or sculpture, which is difficult to understand when everything is reduced to the size of the screen. This is why you will have assignments that take you to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art to view art in person. Yeah, New York!

**Types or Modes of Representation** (5 terms):

The choice of subject matter when combined with how the artist approaches the treatment of the formal characteristics to give form to their idea results in an artwork made with a type or combination of types of representation. The historical or cultural context will influence what type of representation is preferred or expected.

* We will begin with images that are more often ***naturalistic***or***realistic*** in appearance, meaning they correspond to what our eyes see in the outside world.
* Modern art is characterized by artworks in general becoming more ***abstract*** by using distorted or simplified lines, shapes and forms, and colors that are not meant to mimic how things actually appear in the outside world. Instead, in modern art, artists began to explore different ideas by breaking away from the appearance of the real world to bring in the imagination and personal expressions or ideas more than in the past when an artwork was appreciated for how well it mirrored the appearance of the outside world.
* Stylization is a type of abstraction from visual reality, in which abstraction is used but to individual or differing degrees. (See Pablo Picasso’s increasingly abstracted and stylized variations on a bull in the powerpoint’s final slide.)
* Soon, we will see artworks become ***non-representational***, meaning they bear no relationship to anything found in the outside world, like a painting made up of one square floating against a white background.
* ***Expressionistic*** imagery is seen at different times throughout art history. Every artwork, regardless of its style, expresses something, but when an artwork is specifically designated as ‘expressionistic’ in its style this indicates that the imagery has been made using bold shapes, energetic lines, vibrant colors and exaggerated forms that maximize their intensity and add a layer of information to their meaning in order to convey the content with maximum urgency, energy, feeling, or intensity.
* Vincent Van Gogh and his use of thick and heavy brushstrokes with bold colors is a good example of an expressionistic artist. He wanted viewers to feel the same passion or energy through his forms that he felt for them when he painted them, particularly his love of nature, so he used a lot of paint, sometimes squeezing the tube right onto the canvas. His thick brushstrokes, energetic lines and clashing colors next to each other maximizes the impact of his forms. Edvard Munch’s famous *The Scream* is another good example of an expressive image where his subject matter, a person who feels alienated and isolated in society, is paired with abstract colors and curving, exaggerated wavy lines in the sky and water that match the nervous energy of the figure to heighten the feeling of agitation or nervous anxiety throughout the image. (Works by Van Gogh and Munch’s *The Scream* are in the powerpoint.)
* ***Idealized*** representations were used in the ancient worlds of Egypt and Greece and Rome, and remained influential during the Renaissance and into the 19th Century, but idealization is not relied upon that much in the modern era. When something is idealized, it appears as though it is an ideal or a perfect example. In the chiaroscuro video, you saw Renaissance artist Titian’s painting *The Venus of Urbino*, painted in the early 16th Century. Titian is painting a modern woman from his era from the Italian city of Urbino as though she is the ancient Greek goddess of love Venus. Her body looks very similar to ancient Greek statues. He has idealized her body type for that time period giving her a curvaceous and voluptuous form and he has flattered her and her appearance by equating her with Venus.
* Why does idealization become less prevalent in the modern era? Two reasons: Artists became more concerned with what they saw and what they experienced and in modern society, there was more room for the subjective or personal expression. And, in modern society, there is no one ideal anymore. What is ideal for one is likely not everyone’s ideal. More importantly, living in a modern city, people quickly became aware that nothing is ideal, everything is more nuanced, and if painting is to reflect the real world, there isn’t going to be one ideal standard.

**Methodologies**: We employ different methodological approaches to examine art.

We can think about a methodology as a point of view that directs or focuses our questioning of an artwork.

* **Historical** **approach**: We will often consider when something was made in order to understand the relevance or importance of its subject matter within the context of time in which it was made. Was there a major historical event that the artwork is commenting on or responding to?
* **Formal** **approach** is a consideration of the formal characteristics or the work’s appearance in isolation from the broader social or cultural context. A form approach only considers how the artwork looks – the choices made that give it its form.
* Usually, we will employ a combination of historical and formal approaches and often add one or more of the following methodologies to shed more light on an artwork:
* **Marxism** (named after the economic philosopher Karl Marx): In the modern era, we are in a capitalist society where products are made/manufactured, bought, sold and accumulated as capital because they have a value. We also work for a wage and we accumulate our own capital, which we then use to buy goods and services. Artworks also participate in this larger economic system of commodification and value because they are assigned worth and value based on who made them. When we look at art through a Marxist perspective, what that means is we are considering the monetary and economic relationships within the image because we can learn a lot about what was prized and valued by a society at the time a work was made.
* A **psychoanalytic perspective** builds on psychology as a field of medical inquiry that coincides with the beginning of the modern era and the birth of psychiatry as a field of study largely begun by Sigmund Freud just before the turn of the century. This perspective focuses attention on the inner world or mental life of the artist to understand how that might direct and influence their choices.
* **Feminism**: In the past, the art world, much like society, was dominated by white men in positions of power. Because men were in positions of power, they made the decisions and set the standards. In art, women participated but mainly as the subjects of artworks that served to satisfy male desire. When we consider things from a feminist approach, we are seeking to understand how this balance of power has historically affected women.
* **Racial or gendered perspectives** are additional **socio-political methodologies** in which we examine these inequities through the lens of race or gender. Feminism in the 1970s led to these reassessments in art history to give a more complete picture that forced the inclusion of women as more than just passive objects of desire. This video provides a good summary of this issue: <https://smarthistory.org/unlock-art-where-are-the-women/>
* **Semiotics** is a study of language and words and how meaning is created, communicated and interpreted through these words, and through signs and symbols as a means of communication.
* There are additional methodologies that will come into play in our discussions, but this list is a good beginning for some of the most prevalent methodologies.
* We will run through how to apply each of these to paintings next week, so for now, it is enough to take in their different meanings.