20 Art History Terms to Help You Skillfully Describe a Work of Art

By Kelly Richman-Abdou on June 13, 2018

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Like any creative field, art history has its own language. While this reality can be overwhelming for aspiring art historians, having a handy **glossary of art terms** can make analyzing a work of art a lot less intimidating.

In this list, you'll find 20 words that will help you discuss art with ease. Ranging from general concepts, like brushwork and composition, to specific techniques, including *chiaroscuro* and *troupe l'ceil*, this arsenal of art terms offers everything you need to make the most out of your next museum visit.

Analyze art like a professional with this art history glossary:

ABSTRACT

Breaking away from the figurative representation of objects, **abstract** art reimagines imagery as a study of the relationship between shape, form, color, and line. Abstraction occurs on a continuum, including the fractured-yet-recognizable forms of Cubism and the totally non-pictorial nature of Abstract Expressionism.

AVANT-GARDE

The French term *avant-garde* literally translates to "advance guard," but is used to describe artworks, movements, or artists that are experimental and forward-thinking.

BRUSHWORK

Brushwork refers to the way a painter applies paint to a surface. It is typically characterized by the size, texture, and precision of the strokes.

Oil painting on canvas (Photo: Sweet Art via Shutterstock)

CHIAROSCURO

Italian for "light-dark," *chiaroscuro* is the use of strong contrasts between luminosity and shadow to achieve a sense of volume and dimensionality. This unique technique was developed during the Italian Renaissance by Leonard da Vinci, the Baroque period by Caravaggio, and the Dutch Golden Age by Rembrandt.

COMPOSITION

The **composition** of a work of art is the way in which its visual elements are arranged, especially in relationship to one another

CONTRAPPOSTO

In sculpture, **c**ontrapposto ("counterpose" in Italian) is an asymmetrical posture in which most of a figure's weight is distributed onto one foot. This results in a realistic stance, as famously evident in Michelangelo's *David* statue.

Michelangelo, 'David' (ca. 1501-1504) (Photo: Alfonso de Tomas via Shutterstock)

FIGURATIVE

A work of art is considered **figurative** when its subject matter is representational.

FOREGROUND

The **foreground** of a work of art is the part of the composition that is closest to the viewer. It is typically discernible from the background, which appears to be further away.

FORESHORTENING

Foreshortening is a technique in which an artist distorts perspective to evoke an illusion of depth. Foreshortened subjects often appear to recede into the picture plane.

Giorgione, 'The Tempest' (ca. 1506-1508)

(Photo: Ismoon via Wikimedia Commons Public Domain)

GENRE

A **genre** refers to a type of art (typically painting). Examples of genres include landscape and still life.

ICONOGRAPHY

Iconography refers to the subject matter, or images, used to convey meaning or communicate a message in a work of art.

MEDIUM

A **medium** is the material used to create art. Examples of mediums are watercolor paint, pastel, clay, and charcoal.

(Photo: Happy Person via Shutterstock)

MODERN

As a movement, the term "**modern**" refers to art created between the onset of Impressionism and Pop Art, which ushered in contemporary art. On a more general scale, however, "modern" can mean current or cutting-edge.

MOTIF

In the visual arts, a **motif** is an element of the iconography. In paintings, a motif can refer to any pictorial feature of the composition. In the decorative arts and architecture, it often denotes a recognizable symbol that repeats.

PENTIMENTO

Pentimento ("repentance" in Italian) refers to the presence of evidence that an artist has painted over a previously-rendered subject. In *The Old Guitarist* by Pablo Picasso, for example, the vague outline of a woman's face is apparent beneath the final brushstrokes.

Detail of Picasso, 'The Old Guitarist' (1903)

(Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago via Wikimedia Commons Public Domain)

PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is the representation of 3-dimensional depth and space on a flat surface. There are two main types of perspective: linear and atmospheric. Linear perspective employs intersecting lines and vanishing points as a means to make objects appear far away. According to Leonardo da Vinci in *A Treatise on Painting*, atmospheric perspective, on the other hand, illustrates the idea that "colors become weaker in proportion to their distance from the person who is looking at them" through tonal changes.

SCALE

Scale refers to the size of an object in relation to another. Often, as in the case of large-scale paintings, this comparison is based on the portrayed object's real-life size.

SFUMATO

Predominantly associated with the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, *sfumato* (derived from *fumo* or "smoke" in Italian) is a method of shading and color-blending that evokes a soft, "smoky" haze. This technique is apparent in the blurred background and softly-defined facial features of the *Mona Lisa*.
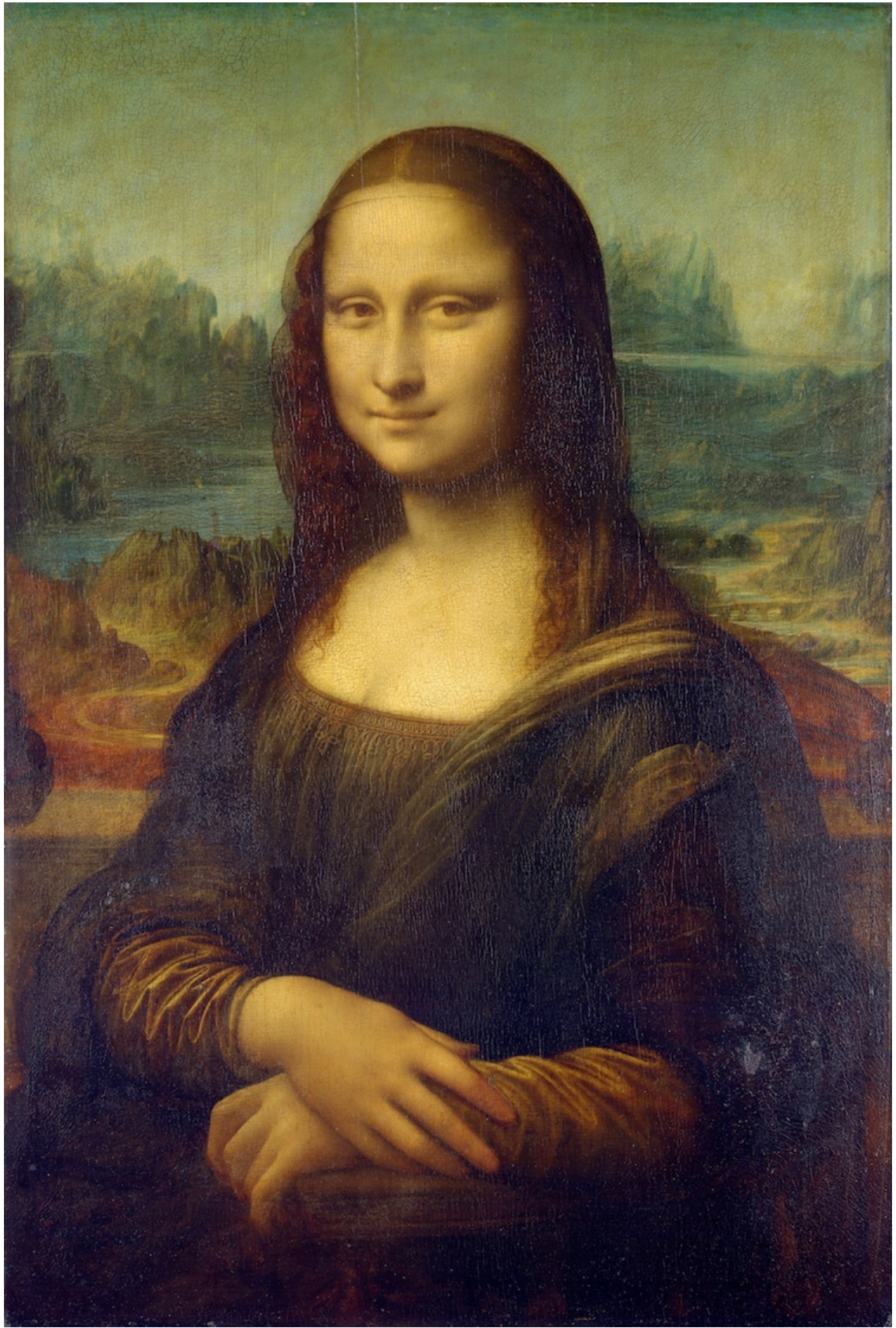
Leonardo da Vinci, 'Mona Lisa' (ca. 1503-1516) (Photo: Galerie de tableaux en très haute définition via Wikimedia Commons Public Domain)

STYLE

A work of art's **style** is a classification of its visual appearance. Often, style is characterized according to the distinctive aesthetic approach of an individual artist, art movement, period, or culture.

TONE

Tone refers to the lightness or darkness of a particular color.

TROMPE L'OEIL

In French, *trompe l'oeil* means "deceive the eye." It is a technique that creates optical illusions of three-dimensionality by employing eye-catching lifelike imagery.

Pere Borrell del Caso, 'Escaping Criticism' (1874) (Photo: Collection Banco de España via Wikimedia Commons Public Domain)