

Form and Shape

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Some artists choose to make realistic depictions in their work; others may choose to create artwork that is very abstract. Form and shape are just two elements in composition that can help artists cover the range of very realistic to very abstract in their artwork. In this lesson you will learn about:

1. Naturalism vs. Illusionism

Artistic representation can be broken down further into two categories: naturalism and illusionism. **Naturalism**, with the keyword "natural," is the discipline associated with reproducing objects as they appear to the eye of the artist, or to the viewer. The intention is to produce artwork that appears realistic or natural. **Illusionism**, with the keyword "illusion," is similar to naturalism with the exception that the artist's intention is to convince the observer that the artwork's subject matter is actually real.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look at the following examples of naturalism and illusionism. Notice the similarities and differences.

First is a painting by William Bliss Baker, titled *Fallen Monarchs*. This is an excellent example of naturalism and how it realistically depicts its subject matter. It almost looks like a photograph.



Fallen Monarchs by William Bliss Baker

The next image, an example of illusionism, is of the ceiling fresco of the Jesuit Church in Vienna, Austria. It is rendered in a technique called trompe l'oeil, which depicts realistic imagery in such a way that an optical illusion is created, suggesting the images are three dimensional. In this example, as realistic as it looks, this ceiling has no dome. It's flat.



Ceiling fresco of the Jesuit Church by Andrea Pozzo

The painting below, titled *Escaping Criticism*, uses the same technique, trompe l'oeil, and is another

example of illusionism.



Escaping Criticism by Pere Borrell del Caso



TERMS TO KNOW

Naturalism

An artistic approach that involves reproducing objects as they appear to the eye; this term is often used in our history as a substitute for realistic, to avoid any confusion with realism as an artistic movement.

Illusionism

Very similar to naturalism, it involves the attempt to convince the viewer that what is being seen is not representation, but rather the thing itself

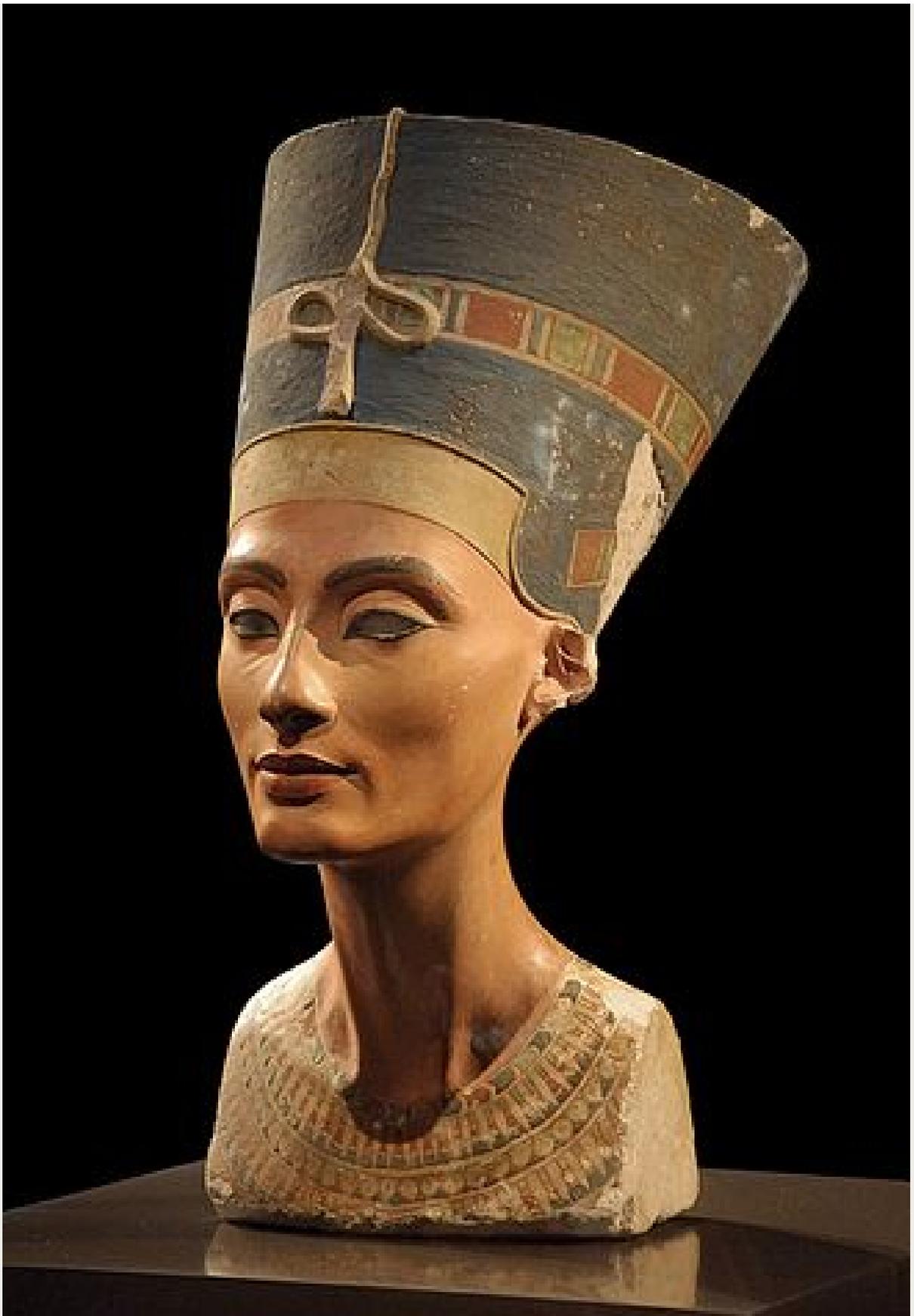
2. Representation vs. Abstraction

Representation has an element of congruity with real life. The depictions are recognizable by almost anyone in more or less faithful reproductions of what can be seen or experienced. In contrast, **abstraction** is an art style that emphasizes the simplification of form into shapes, lines, and areas of color. Abstraction begins to veer away from the literal representation of things, which can give the artist tremendous freedom in depicting the intangible. Take, for instance, emotions or music. These are both intangible, yet artists are able to use both of these to create artwork.

IN CONTEXT

Take a look at the following examples of representation and abstraction. Note the similarities and differences.

First is an Egyptian bust of the Queen Nefertiti. Clearly, this is a realistic representation of what she looked like.



Egyptian bust of the Queen Nefertiti

The second is a painting by a 20th century artist, Wassily Kandinsky. It is left to the viewer to draw their own conclusions or interpretations about the subject matter. Kandinsky was also a musician,

and he often experienced or experimented with the visualization of music.



Composition VII by Wassily Kandinsky



TERMS TO KNOW

Representation

The act of depicting what one sees or encounters in lived experience in a work of art

Abstraction

The simplification of form into shapes, lines, or areas of color

3. Complete and Gestural Abstraction

Complete abstraction relies on the use of purely geometric and biomorphic shapes as a means of rendering any discernible form. **Geometric shapes** are your basic hard-edged shapes, such as circles and squares, whereas biomorphism, which uses **biomorphic shapes**, refers to amorphic shapes, or no named shapes. These are shapes that resemble simple life forms, such as amoebas or bacteria.

Gestural abstraction, or action painting, is an art form where the paint is applied in a spontaneous manner. Just like gestural lines, action paintings are characterized by the way in which the medium, in this case paint, is applied. The forms may not be recognizable, but that doesn't mean there isn't a structure to the composition.



DID YOU KNOW

Jackson Pollock, a 20th century artist, was a well-known Gestural Abstractionist, and his drift-style

compositions became his signature form of painting.

IN CONTEXT

The De Stijl movement was an artistic movement of the early 20th century that depicted complete abstraction where artists only utilized very basic geometric shapes and primary colors in their works of art. Joan Miró is an artist who had a well-known appreciation for the artwork of children. He felt this type of artwork had a very pure form of artistic expression, and this was something he emulated during his career. Miró is one the best examples of an artist using biomorphic shapes in artwork.

Below is an oil painting by the official founder of the De Stijl movement, Theo van Doesburg, and it's titled *Composition Number V*.



Composition Number V by Theo van Doesburg



BIG IDEA

Form and shape refer to elements of an artwork's composition, and cover a spectrum ranging from very realistic to very abstract.



TERMS TO KNOW

Geometric Shapes

Basic hard-edged shapes, such as squares, triangles, rectangles and circles

Biomorphic Shapes

Shapes that are free form or amorphic, which are formless, and resemble amoebas, jellyfish, and other simple life forms



SUMMARY

Form and shape are just two elements in composition that can help diverse artists create artwork that ranges from very realistic to very abstract. In this lesson you learned about **naturalism vs. illusionism**.

Artists that use naturalism attempt to reproduce objects as they appear to the eye. Illusionism involves an artist attempting to convince the viewer that what is being seen is, in fact, the thing itself.

Finally, you explored **representation vs. abstraction**, including **complete and gestural abstraction**. Remember, abstraction is when form is simplified into shapes, lines, or areas of color, whereas representation is when an artist depicts what one sees or encounters.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Biomorphic Shapes

Shapes that are free-form or amorphic (formless) and resemble amoebas, jellyfish, and other simple life forms.

Geometric Shapes

Basic hard-edged shapes, such as squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles.

Illusionism

Very similar to naturalism, it involves the attempt to convince the viewer that what is being seen is not a representation, but rather the thing itself.

Naturalism

An artistic approach that involves reproducing objects as they appear to the eye. This term is often used in art history as a substitute for realistic, to avoid any confusion with realism as an artistic movement.

Representation

The act of depicting what one sees or encounters in lived experience in a work of art.