**Biomorphism**

Biomorphism (also: Biomorphic Modernism, Biomorphic Abstraction, Organic Abstraction) is a twentieth-century style of painting, sculpture, photography and design with roots in the late nineteenth century. It is characterised by what are often termed “organic” forms: curvilinear rather than angular lines and surfaces, presumably more typical of “biomorphs” (life forms) than orthogonal arrangements. The term “biomorph” was coined by English anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon in 1895 to refer to designs derived from animate sources. It was applied to Modernist art by English critic Geoffrey Grigson in 1934, and was soon adopted by Alfred Barr in *Cubism and Abstract Art*, his 1936 account of Modernist movements. While Barr used it to designate one of two styles of abstraction (“geometric abstraction” was the other), the term has been used for both abstracted but recognisable depictions (usually plants, animals or geological formations) and non-mimetic or difficult-to-decipher curvilinear forms. In his 1932 article ‘Bioromantik’ the Hungarian critic Ernő Kállai – though he did not employ the term “biomorphic” – theorised that much abstract art reflected the deep-seated identity of nature and humanity, that it intuitively figured normally unseen forms revealed through scientific means like microscopy, telescopy, x-ray and undersea photography. A process of “aestheticisation” of scientific imagery had already begun at the turn of the twentieth century in the art of biologist Ernst Haeckel, and had been theorized in the writings of László Moholy-Nagy during the mid-1920s. In this sense, Kállai held that such art was deeply “realistic.” The analogy of scientific photography and abstract art – a trope of mid-twentieth century Modernist discourse, has been termed the “naturamorphic analogy.”

The mimetic Biomorphic style was pioneered by late nineteenth century figures such as Odilon Redon, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Georges Lacombe and Auguste Rodin. It was adapted during the early twentieth century by Constantin Brancuși, Arthur Dove, Franz Marc and Georgia O’Keeffe. While beginning with recognizable forms, Wassily Kandinsky and František Kupka’s paintings fed into an abstract style in which recognizable forms were difficult to discern. This gave rise to the interwar heyday of Biomorphic Abstraction in the work of, *inter alia*, Mikhail Matiushin, Hans Arp, Willy Baumeister, Alexander Calder, Naum Gabo and Jean Hélion, many of them involved with *Abstraction-Creation*. Some Modernists such as Paul Klee, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi, and Pablo Picasso retained a mimetic quality to their Biomorphic Modernist work. Surrealists Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, Ján Styrský, Yves Tanguy and Toyen often included recognisable but oneiric forms. Some of their work was inspired by the Surrealist technique of automatism, leading to the post-war period dominated by artists of the New York School such as Arshile Gorky, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, but also Clifford Still and members of the Montréal *Automatistes* such as Paul-Emile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle. Some interwar photographers “abstracted” their work by taking close-ups of living forms (Karl Blossfeldt, Imogen Cunningham, Paul Nash, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Edward Weston, Wols). It has been pointed out that many Biomorphic Modernist works reflect the nature-centric or “biocentric” (including Vitalist and Monist) worldviews of the artists, foregrounding themes such as life, gestation, origins, and birth, but also the “dark” side of nature such as chaos and destruction.

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