

Art Historical Terms

I. Contrapposto

An Italian term meaning “counterpoise” or “counterbalance.” It describes the pose of a standing human figure where most weight is placed on one foot, causing the shoulders and arms to twist off-axis from the hips and legs. This creates a dynamic, naturalistic sense of movement that was revived and perfected during the Renaissance, most notably in Donatello’s *David* and Michelangelo’s *David*.

II. Glazing

A painting technique where thin, transparent or semi-transparent layers of oil paint are applied over an opaque underlayer. Each glaze modifies the appearance of the layers beneath, creating luminous, rich colors and subtle tonal transitions. This technique was mastered by Renaissance and Baroque painters such as Titian, Vermeer, and Rembrandt to achieve depth and optical brilliance.

III. Guild

An association of craftsmen or merchants in medieval and Renaissance Europe that regulated trade, maintained quality standards, and provided training through apprenticeship systems. Artists were typically organized into guilds (such as the Guild of Saint Luke in Northern Europe), which controlled commissions, set prices, and ensured professional standards. Guild membership was essential for artists to receive commissions and establish workshops.

IV. Humanism

An intellectual movement of the Renaissance that emphasized the study of classical texts, the potential of human achievement, and the centrality of human experience in

understanding the world. Humanist scholars focused on *studia humanitatis* (grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy) based on ancient Greek and Roman sources. This philosophy profoundly influenced Renaissance art, leading to increased interest in anatomical accuracy, individual portraiture, and secular subjects alongside religious themes.

V. Linear Perspective

A mathematical system for creating the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, developed in Florence in the early 15th century. Based on the principle that parallel lines appear to converge at a single vanishing point on the horizon line, linear perspective allows artists to create convincing spatial depth. The technique was formalized by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi and theorized by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De pictura* (1435).

VI. Lost Wax Casting

An ancient bronze casting technique where a sculpture is first modeled in wax, then enclosed in a clay mold. When heated, the wax melts and flows out (hence “lost wax”), leaving a cavity that is filled with molten bronze. After cooling, the mold is broken to reveal the bronze sculpture. This method, dating back to ancient times, allowed Renaissance artists like Donatello to create complex, detailed bronze sculptures with high precision.

VII. Low Relief and High Relief

Two types of sculptural relief carving. *Low relief* (or *bas-relief*) features shallow carving where the figures project only slightly from the background plane, as seen on classical coins and Donatello’s *Saint George* relief. *High relief* (or *haut-relief*) involves deeper carving where figures are substantially undercut and may project more than half their natural depth from the background, creating more dramatic shadows and three-dimensionality, as in classical Greek temple friezes.

VIII. Neoplatonism

A philosophical system developed by Plotinus (3rd century CE) that synthesized Platonic philosophy with religious and mystical elements. During the Renaissance, Neoplatonism became influential in Florence through the Medici-sponsored Platonic Academy, particularly through Marsilio Ficino's translations. It provided a philosophical framework for understanding beauty as a reflection of divine perfection, influencing artists like Botticelli whose works often embody Neoplatonic concepts of divine love and ideal beauty.

IX. Oil Painting

A painting medium in which pigments are suspended in drying oils, typically linseed oil, which dries through oxidation rather than evaporation. Oil paint offers artists greater flexibility than tempera or fresco: it dries slowly, allowing for blending and reworking; it can be applied in transparent glazes or opaque impasto; and it produces richer, more luminous color. The technique was perfected by Northern Renaissance artists like Jan van Eyck in the early 15th century and later adopted by Italian painters, revolutionizing Western painting.

X. Polyptych

An altarpiece or painting composed of multiple panels (from Greek *polyptychos*, meaning “many-folded”). Common in medieval and Renaissance art, polyptychs typically consisted of a central panel flanked by side panels, often with hinged wings that could be closed. Examples include the *Ghent Altarpiece* by the van Eyck brothers and Giotto's *Bardi Chapel altarpiece*. The format allowed for complex narrative programs and hierarchical arrangements of sacred figures.

XI. Renaissance

French word meaning “rebirth,” referring to the period from roughly the 14th to 17th centuries that saw a revival of classical learning, artistic achievement, and cultural innovation.

Beginning in Florence and spreading throughout Europe, the Renaissance was characterized by renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman art and literature, the development of linear perspective, advances in anatomy and scientific observation, and a shift toward human-centered rather than purely divine concerns in art.

XII. Rhythm

In visual art, the principle of organizing elements to create a sense of movement or visual tempo through the repetition of lines, shapes, colors, or forms. Rhythm can be regular (with even intervals), flowing (with curved, organic repetition), progressive (with gradual changes), or alternating. Renaissance artists used rhythmic arrangements of figures and architectural elements to guide the viewer's eye and create visual harmony, as seen in the repeated poses of Raphael's *School of Athens* or the flowing drapery patterns in Botticelli's works.

XIII. Sfumato

Italian term meaning "smoky" or "vanished like smoke." A painting technique, perfected by Leonardo da Vinci, that involves applying subtle, translucent layers of glaze to create soft, imperceptible transitions between colors and tones, eliminating harsh outlines. This technique creates atmospheric perspective and a sense of three-dimensional volume, most famously seen in the enigmatic smile of the *Mona Lisa* and the soft modeling of faces in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*.

XIV. Triptych

A specific type of polyptych consisting of three panels, typically a larger central panel flanked by two narrower side panels. Often used as altarpieces in churches, triptychs could be hinged so the side wings closed over the center, protecting the painting and revealing different

images for different liturgical occasions. Famous examples include Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and Robert Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece*.

XV. Woodcut

The oldest printmaking technique, developed in China and perfected in Europe during the 15th century. The artist carves an image into the surface of a wooden block, cutting away the areas that will remain white (the negative space) and leaving the raised areas that will receive ink. When inked and pressed against paper, the raised areas transfer the image. Woodcuts were crucial for disseminating images during the Renaissance, used for book illustrations, devotional images, and playing cards. Albrecht Dürer elevated the medium to high art through his sophisticated mastery of line and tone.