



# 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](#)
2. [Representation vs. Abstraction](#)
3. [Complete and Gestural Abstraction](#)

## 1. Naturalism vs. Illusionism

Artistic representation can be broken down further into two categories:

1. Naturalism
2. 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.



William Bliss Baker (1859 - 1886)

*Fallen Monarchs*

Provo, Utah, USA

1886

Oil on canvas

The next image, an example of illusionism, is of the ceiling fresco of a 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.



**Andrea Pozzo (1642 - 1709)**

*Interior ceiling in the Jesuit Church (aka. University Church)*

Vienna, Austria

**1703**

**Fresco**

The image below is a mural painted on the side of a building in Stockholm, Sweden, by the Brazilian artists Os Gêmeos ("The Twins" in Portuguese). If you look at it closely, you will see that there are

multiple examples and layers of *trompe l'oeil*.

The use of one point perspective makes the flat side of a building look like the interior of a room. The artists made the outline of the roof into a series of ceiling beams in the mural. There are other aspects of *trompe l'oeil* in this image if you look closely. The shirt of the male figure contains a landscape image. The purse of the female figure looks like a mask with other faces on it, and her shoes feature images of landscapes with figures on them. One is of a clown that is holding his hat in one hand.

- Can you find any other examples of *trompe l'oeil* in this image?



Os Gêmeos

*Untitled*

Stockholm, Sweden

2017



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.

### Trompe L'oeil

A highly realistic optical illusion of three-dimensional space and objects on a two-dimensional surface.

## 2. Representation vs. Abstraction

The term “**representation**” refers to artistic images that refer to something that can be seen or experienced. A bronze sculpture of a Yoruba king is a representation. It refers back to the idea of a king who lived during a specific place and time, as well as to the idea of kings in general. 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.

↗ EXAMPLE 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. Although art historians agree that this work of art idealizes the queen, making her look like the Egyptian equivalent of a supermodel, this is still a representation because it is recognizable as a human being.



**Thutmose**

*Bust of Queen Nefertiti*

**Amarna, Egypt**

**1345 BCE**

**Painted stucco-coated limestone**

Below is an example of abstraction. Writing in Arabic Kufic script has been abstracted into geometric shapes using square ceramic tiles. The tiles surrounding the panel with Kufic script also involve twisting lines and shapes that look like flowers and vines but are also abstractions.



**Artist unknown**

***Exterior example of Kufic calligraphy from Imam Mosque***

**Grand Bazaar, Tehran, Iran**

**c. 1611 - 1629, Qajar period**

**Ceramic tile**



## 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 a mural by Miró made of ceramic tiles. Some of the shapes appear biomorphic, resembling faces of animals and people, or maybe amoebas and other microscopic creatures.



**Joan Miró (1893–1983)**

***Miró Wall***

**Wilhelm Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany**

**1979**

**Ceramic**

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



Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931)

*Counter-Composition V*

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

1924

Oil on canvas



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

#### 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.

## Gestural Abstraction

A style of painting in which paint is spontaneously dribbled, splashed or smeared onto the canvas, rather than being carefully applied. The resulting work often emphasizes the physical act of painting itself as an essential aspect of the finished work or concern of its artist.



## 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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