

- isms: a brief guide to major developments of abstraction in art 1864 - 1920

In the early 20th century the concept of abstraction was embraced by many artists as a means for unleashing the power to communicate complex ideas. They created novel, sometimes startling, interpretations of the world around them which challenged viewers to reassess preconceived notions of what constitutes art. A dizzying array of “movements” burst forth, many with their own manifesto. This diagram charts some of the most well-known “-isms” with connecting bars linking one development to another in a roughly chronological design.

1845 Realism (Naturalism) Most conspicuously present in France, realism was a movement in which **actual**, instead of **idealized**, appearances of people, places, and things were emphasized.

1890 Symbolism: Loose Northern European movement during the late nineteenth century. Advocated rejection of Realism and the everyday in art. Artists imbued work with a melancholy and generally darker quality than typically found in Realist paintings.

1870 Impressionism: Freed from the studio by the invention of portable lead paint tubes, French Impressionists experimented with ‘optical mixing’ to capture fleeting qualities of light while depicting informal subject matter.

1911 Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider): Centered in Germany, the name “*Der Blaue Reiter*” echoed the title of a Wassily Kandinsky painting. The group’s aesthetic program emphasized color, expressionism and a sense of spiritualism that pushed the images into full abstraction.

1905 Fauvism [FOV-izm]: Term earned at the *Salon d’Automne* where a group of artists’ paintings were compared to *fauves*, or “wild beasts.” Their love of line and flat areas of uninhibited color sets them apart from what, by 1905, was the tradition of Impressionism.

1880 Post-Impressionism: Name provided by a 1910 exhibition: *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*. Four artists who experimented with Impressionism but abandoned it in favor of idiosyncratic approaches to color theory and expression.

1880 Neo-Impressionism Also known as *Pointillism* or *Divisionism*, Neo-Impressionism codified the experimentation that the original Impressionists had conducted. Artists created highly-structured works composed of tiny dots of primary color knit tightly together to create paintings suffused with a luminous color sense.

1913 Constructivism: Addressing the sculptural issues raised by Picasso and Braque’s experimentation, constructivists explored pure abstraction and concentrated their attention on how sculpture occupies physical space, as opposed to the classical issues of mass and “pictorial” space.

1908 Cubism: Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque’s studios in the Parisian building known as the *Bateau-Lavoir* became ground-zero for a seismic shift in the direction of painting. Combining influences from “primitive” cultures, ancient Iberian motifs, and Cezanne’s classically austere pictorial analysis with imagination and wit, the two artists invented a new way of seeing.
1909 Analytic Cubism Systematic mining of the cubist potential for re-defining space and time in painting. Analytic Cubism emerged as the artists used a low-contrast palette of grays, greens, and browns to create shimmering, faceted surfaces of form, shifting the meaning of Painting from the **subject** (still life, portrait) to the **investigation of form**.
1912 Synthetic Cubism By 1912, they had exhausted the possibilities for Analytic Cubism: form had dissolved almost completely into an intricately faceted surface of limited color. Incorporating elements of popular culture (newspaper clippings, wall paper samples) and infusing their palette with color, they invented *assemblage*, *collage*, and *papier colle*.

1911 Orphism [ORF-izm]: “Color alone is form and subject,” wrote Robert Delaunay. Orphism, centered in Paris, took Neo-Impressionist color theory and made it the subject of Painting, creating the first *movement* dedicated to complete, or pure abstraction.

1915 Suprematism: Abandoning reality, Suprematists embraced the purity of geometric form as a route to a utopian aesthetic. The movement originated wholly in Russia and spread westward with the emigration of artists and designers after the initial flowering of the revolution.

1909 Futurism: “A roaring motorcar . . . is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace,” stated the Futurist Manifesto. This group of primarily Italian artists were committed to a volatile mix of anarchy, speed, and anything technological. Futurist paintings and sculptures depicted movement and ideas culled from Cubism and the emerging cinema with Neo-Impressionist color theory to create images of “unique forms of continuity in space.”

1913 Synchromism [SINK-ro-mizm]: The first manifesto issued by American artists heralded a movement closely related to Orphism. Synchromist compositions typically radiated outward from a central point and utilized a vigorous palette.

1917 DeStijl [de-SHTEEL]: Also known as *Neo-Plasticism*, the movement was centered in Holland. Its artists rejected all recognizable imagery and espoused a strict adherence to the geometry of vertical and horizontal with a palette limited to fully saturated primary colors, black, and white.

1914 Vorticism [VOR-ti-sizm]: Cubist and Futurist thought were merged in Britain in a largely derivative movement emphasizing mechanical form and energetic diagonals.

1912 Rayonism: Existing wholly within Russia, rayonism was characterized by the “rays,” or shards of color that permeated the compositions. Rayonists created a synthesis of Cubism, Futurism, and Orphism.