

Realism, Expressionism, Constructivism Allen Fisher

Realism, Expressionism, Constructivism are concepts that recur during the sessions of *Painting and Sculpture in the Twentieth Century before 1940*. A summary of these concepts may assist in understanding them.

Realism refers to work in which the artist has combined accurate reportage of phenomena with a capable ability of depiction. A Realist work is composed from a range of observations, observations in the process of one session or over many opportunities involving sketches and notes. Realist work gives the initial impression of a caught moment, when in fact it is usually a synthesis of moments into a coherent whole.

Expressionism refers to a work of art in which the artist achieves reportage of phenomena in harness with a deliberate and intense or heightened emotion, which facilitates a permission to provide a disruptive or incomplete depiction. An Expressionist work gives the initial impression of depicting a celebrated or fraught occasion, even when the subject is a straight-forward portrait or description of a landscape. The Expressionist work is as much cerebral and deliberate as subject to happenstance or strong feelings. It is often signified through the use of a rich palette of contrasting colours and often through the use of strong outlines that invent the shapes of natural forms derived from perception.

Constructivism refers to a work of art in which the artist uses the reportage of phenomena or aspects of phenomena as the basis for the organisation and facture of a composition and its design. A Constructivist work usually gives an indication of analysis using, however basic, a measured geometry often characterised by straight lines and clear curves.

All of these ideas have been highly elaborated and given considerable nuance over the past century and, it should be said, many compelling works of art have been achieved using a combination of different aspects of more than one of the above concepts.

These are of course generalising tools for thought. The following examples from sessions two and six might help to explicate the above.

	Original Perception	Treatment	Facture	Result
<p>Eric Henry Kennington, <i>The Kensingtons at Laventie</i>, 1915, Imperial War Museum, London (Currently in IMW store and not available to see.)</p>	<p>A group of soldiers from a platoon known as the <i>Kensingtons</i>, after a battle at Laventie, a village in France, 12 miles west of Lille, during World War I. (The painter supplied a detailed naming of all the figures depicted. Eric Kennington himself is depicted at the back left in a balaclava.)</p>	<p>The figures are all clearly depicted in a variety of positions together with a variety of rifles and baggage in the snow in a derelict environment. There has been a recurring use of gold (brass) across the picture highlighting metals on a helmet and buckles on soldier's uniforms.</p>	<p>The work could only have been composed from a number of drawings of the scene brought together into a single plausible composition. The work was in fact composed over a period of six months during a convalescence in England. Kennington was wounded in 1915.</p>	<p>A Realist, convincing description of what was seen made possible by direct observation and drawing.</p>
<p>Kennington's list of the soldiers' names appears on the Imperial War Museum's website.</p>	 <p>The painting depicts a group of World War I soldiers in a snowy, desolate landscape. In the foreground, a soldier lies motionless on the ground. Other soldiers stand around him, some looking on with somber expressions. The scene is filled with military equipment, including rifles, packs, and a horse. The overall atmosphere is one of the harsh and brutal conditions of trench warfare.</p>			
<p>Henri Matisse, <i>Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)</i>, 1907, Baltimore Museum of Art</p>	<p>A naked woman lying on the ground in a garden setting.</p>	<p>The figure has been described in summary by a number of pronounced lines contouring the shape. The plants are also summarised. The colours are partly invented.</p>	<p>The work was factured using a small sculpture as its basis. Matisse factured the sculpture in his Paris studio from drawings and memory of the figure from an earlier observation. The use of the small sculpture has encouraged the brevity and discrepancy of the description.</p>	<p>An Expressionist description combining a small three-dimensional model and a memory and factured with an attention to colour and shapes both in terms of aesthetic excitement and decorative effect.</p>



Ben Nicholson,
1930-1936
(Composition: still-life),
Abbots Hall Art
Gallery, Kendal,
Cumbria

(The titling using the date as the primary title and putting a secondary title in parenthesis, is Nicholson's preference.)

A group of objects including a cup and saucer, two drinking mugs and a vase on a table.

The table is depicted from above and from in front. The objects are depicted in profile encouraging a flatness. These profiles are overlapped but prevent a perspective view. Some of the shapes may derive from a plan view of some of the objects.

The work was factored in Nicholson's St. Ives studio. The paint application is flat. The edges of the table and objects have been described with straight or clear curved edges without any three-dimensional implication, as if they were paper cut-outs.

A **Constructivist** painting combining shapes into a set of overlapping rectangles. The parallel vertical internal edges are juxtaposed with straight edges shifted with a lean towards the right side at an angle of about 10 degrees from the vertical.



Historical Background.

Realism came to the fore in the nineteenth century, particularly through the work of Gustave Courbet and exemplified by his *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50 and *The Painter's Studio, Real Allegory Determining a Phase of Seven Years in My Artistic Life*, 1854-55. Realism was subsequently developed by such artists as Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet and Thomas Eakins. The subject was elaborated by the writer Émile Zola in his discussion of the real and the natural.¹

Expressionism is a twentieth century mode partly derived from Romanticism and Symbolism and subsequently influenced by aspects of late nineteenth century paintings by Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch. The mode has strong affiliations with nineteenth-century *Orientalism*,² but probably more importantly with ideas of *Primitivism* with its celebration of sculpture and artefacts from the South Seas, Africa and medieval Europe.³ This came to the fore with the *Fauves* group in France 1905-08, with *Die Brücke (The Bridge)* group in 1905 Dresden and with *Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)* group in 1911 Munich. Matisse and Picasso both collected small sculptures and masks from Africa and elsewhere.

Constructivism is usually attributed to the period after the Russian Revolution in 1917, but it has its pictorial and conceptual roots in the some of the work of Paul Cézanne, the developments of *Cubism* and then *Futurism* and the work of artists such as Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg.⁴ Russian Constructivists, such as Alexandra Exter and Kazemir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova developed geometry directly from Cubist practice. Constructivists also use drawings from forms in the natural world and domestic environments to design sculptures and paintings. Mondrian used wave forms seen on the sea, canals and windmills, and street layouts to design structures on his canvases. Naum Gabo used rocks and land forms. Josef Albers used the visual experiences of being in woodlands. Nicholson used domestic still lifes and views from windows. Much of the work of all of these artists encouraged the drawing, sculpture and painting of Barbara Hepworth, Peter Lanyon and Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, among many others.

¹ See for example Nasrullah Mambrol. 'The Naturalism of Émile Zola', 2018, <https://literariness.org/2018/01/08/the-naturalism-of-emile-zola/> [In portable document format (pdf) on the course edublog.]

² Edward Said. *Orientalism*, London: Pantheon, 1978.

³ See for example, Robert Goldwater. *Primitivism in Modern Art*, rev. ed., New York: Vintage, 1967.

⁴ In 1914 Piet Mondrian wrote, 'Art is higher than reality and has no direct relation to reality. To approach the spiritual in art, one will make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual. We find ourselves in the presence of an abstract art. Art should be above reality, otherwise it would have no value for man.' Michel Seuphor. *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work*. New York: Abrams, 1956, p.117