

Ask the Artsperts

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Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL

Glossary of Art Terms

Avant-Garde (aka vanguard): first used to describe artists by the 19th century French social reformer Henri de Saint-Simon; today used to describe artists who push boundaries and stir up controversy and often tied to artists of the modernist movements of Dadaism and Cubism.

Bas-relief (aka projecting): a sculpture with an image that projects only slightly from the background. The technique gives the illusion that the image was raised from the background, but, in actuality the background is lowered away from the image. A coin is the most common example.

Catalogue Raisonné (aka catalog of all works): a detailed catalog of every work made by an artist, that may be broken down by medium such as just drawings or just prints by an artist. These volumes are what scholars and collectors often use to help authenticate a newly uncovered work as by a particular artist.

Craquelure (aka cracking): fine pattern of dense “cracking” formed on the surface of materials, either as part of the process of ageing or of their original formation or production. This can often occur with tempera or oil paintings.

Diptych or Triptych: artwork consisting of more than one painted panels or canvases. Diptych consists of two panels and triptych, three. The panels can be attached together or hung next to one another, sometimes with space between each panel.

En Plein Air (aka in the open air): a painting completed outdoors rather than in a studio. The Impressionists were the early advocates for working en plein air to better study first-hand the effects of light and atmosphere on a scene.

Fresco (aka fresh): a wall-painting technique dating back to antiquity, made by artists applying a mixture of powdered pigments and water to wet lime plaster.

Gouache (aka opaque): a type of watercolor that is opaque and heavier than standard watercolors. Like watercolor, this medium dries quickly.

Gesso (aka chalk mixture): a white paint mixture consisting of binder mixed with chalk or other substances that is used to prepare the painting surface.

Giclée (aka reproduction): a print reproduction using a high-quality inkjet printer to make copies of an original work. These can be made on paper or on canvas and look very similar to the original.

Impasto (aka in paste): term to describe a painting with thickly applied paint. To determine if a painting has areas of impasto, stand to the side of the artwork to view it in profile and see if the work has any brushstrokes that sit thickly on top of the canvas. Then look head-on at the work in these areas to note how they may add a natural highlight or shadow to the scene.

Lithograph: a printing technique based on the principle that oil and water don’t mix. The image is drawn on a stone using oil-based crayon. The stone is then treated with acid, etching the crayon drawn image into the stone. Water is applied which only absorbs in the areas that were not etched into the stone. An oil based ink is then applied, which only sticks to the etched in drawing. Paper is then pressed on the stone and the oil based ink image is transferred onto the paper.

Mise-en-scène (aka setting a scene): often used in film, this term can also refer to an artist setting a scene, such as a still life, from which to paint.

Monoprint: an image is painted on a thick piece of glass. Paper is pressed onto the glass and it is run through a rolling press. This creates a single print. A second print can be made, called a ghost image.

Non-Finito (aka not finished): usually used to describe sculpture that is purposely left unfinished. The artist only carves part of the material. The figure appears to come out of the unfinished rough portions of the material.

Oeuvre (aka body of work): often used by art historians in terms of whether an individual artwork is either representative of or a departure from an artists’ oeuvre. Interesting fact: hors d’oeuvre translates to “outside the work” as the pre-meal snacks are not part of the main serving.

Pentimento (aka alteration): is an alteration in a painting, evidenced by traces of previous work, showing that the artist has changed his or her mind as to the composition during the process of painting. There may have been an element, for example a head or a hand, in a slightly different place, or that an element is no longer distinct in the final painting, though traces are still evident. Black light and x-rays can further reveal pentimento in greater detail.

Provenance (aka origin): chronology of the ownership, custody, and location of a work of art. Documented evidence of provenance for a work can help to establish that it has not been altered and is not a forgery, a reproduction, or stolen. Provenance helps assign the work to a known artist, and a documented history can be of use in helping to prove ownership.

Repoussoir (aka pushing back): A method of creating or enhancing perspective in a painting, for instance by placing a large figure/object in the foreground.

Serigraph: screen printing where ink is applied to the paper through a mesh. Stencils of the image are used to direct the ink.

Surmoulage (aka sculpture forgery): a re-cast of an often well-known and desirable sculpture made by taking a mold of an existing piece and re-casting it. Often the surmoulage can be identified by its slightly smaller size than the original work.

Tondo (aka round): dates back to the Renaissance and describes a circular work of art. Circular paintings and circular sculpture are both referred to as Tondo. However it is usually reserved for works over 2 feet in diameter.

Trompe l’Oeil (aka fool the eye): term used to describe hyper realistic still life paintings or any paintings that fool the viewer into believing that what is depicted on a two dimensional canvas or wall is actually three dimensional and real.

Vernissage (aka varnishing): during the 19th century artists would apply varnish to their works the day before their public opening of an exhibition. As early as 1809, patrons and other members of the art-world elite would traditionally view the show on varnishing day. Today artists seldom apply varnish the night before a show but vernissage is still used to refer to an early exclusive preview of an art exhibition.

Wheretobuy'Art (aka Harmon-Meek Gallery): 54-year legacy of representing established artists, who have works in the permanent collections of museums. Family-owned, honest, and reputable.