

# PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

## Principles of Design: *Marilyn (Vanitas)*

**Rhythm:** The repetitive use of similar shapes creates connections and rhythmic relationships throughout the painting.

**Technique:** The highly illusionistic technique is known as *trompe l'oeil*, meaning "trick the eye."

**Unity and variety:** Unity is achieved despite the emphasis on variety. Even though the objects are many and have different shapes, textures, and colors, they are thematically connected: they symbolize the transient nature of human existence and the meaninglessness of material objects. This theme is known as *vanitas*—related to the word *vanity*—and is one of a series of *vanitas* paintings by Flack.

**Emphasis and focal point:** Painters have conventionally placed the focal point of a composition in the center; that is where the eye naturally gravitates. Here an empty spot provides a backdrop for the only "active" image in the painting: a teardrop of red paint has just dripped off the tip of a brush that hovers like a magic wand.

**Medium:** The medium is oil paint over acrylic paint on canvas.

**Style:** Flack was a pioneer of the style called **Photorealism**.

**Balance:** Balance, or equilibrium, among the visual units is distributed so that the eye will move rather than fix on one object, cluster, or area. This is particularly evident in the black and white photo of Marilyn Monroe and its reflection in the oval, gilded mirror.

**Symbolism:** The hourglass, pocket watch, and calendar page symbolize the passage of time. Overripe and dried-out fruit pieces, a rose past its prime, and a half-burned candle signify the fleeting nature of beauty and the brevity of life.

**Scale and proportion:** Scale is conveyed through size relationships among the components of the still life object.



1 ft.

▲ 1.11 AUDREY FLACK, *Marilyn (Vanitas)* (1977). Oil over acrylic on canvas, 96" × 96". University of Arizona Museum, Tucson, Arizona.

# COMPARE & CONTRAST

## A Style by Any Other Name . . . Appropriation and Subversion in Contemporary Art

**IN THE LATE 1940S**, Jackson Pollock began painting compositions in which the “subject” consisted of the process of painting itself. Pollock rolled out a canvas on his studio floor. Spilling, dripping, flinging, and squirting enamels (Pollock sometimes used a turkey baster) onto the canvas culminated in radically different imagery that made no reference to the visible world; we call this *nonobjective* art (Fig. 1.12). With no single focal point, lines ebb and flow and weave in and out of the shallow pictorial space; rhythmic patterns begin to emerge as the eye traverses the expanse of canvas. To search for allusions to nature or anything else would be quite beside the point. What Pollock has given us is tangible evidence of the artist’s outward gesture, carrying with it his inner self.

There is more than a first-glance resemblance between the Pollock painting, *Number 19, 1948* and *Joseph Stalin Gazing Enigmatically at the Body of VI Lenin as It Lies in State in Moscow in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (Fig. 1.13). Painted by Art & Language (collaborative artists Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden), the title of the work compels the viewer to engage in a mad search for imagery—something that would be a preposterous and pointless exercise in looking at a Pollock work. Our instinct

to make sense out of things or events that seem senseless, or to try to find something recognizable in a sea of unrecognizable imagery, overtakes us. For those of us who know what Joseph Stalin looked like, the title prods us to search for his distinctive mustached face. If not, the best we can do is to try to make out a man’s face somewhere amid the chaos. Oddly enough, the pressure to seek-and-find forces our eyes to follow the streaks and spills and drips in the same way that Pollock intended to have the viewer take in his nonobjective works—keeping the eye on the painted surface, what he called the optical field. (*Hint*: Stalin can be found in the upper-right quadrant of the painting, his forehead interrupted by the top of the canvas. Look for his moustache.)

After 1947, Pollock avoided giving his paintings titles that reflected or suggested something about the form or content of his work and, instead, began to simply number them. It was essential for Pollock that the viewer not be distracted from the surface of the work; for him, surface was prime. In what way is Pollock’s intention subverted in the painting by Art & Language? How would you use vocabulary like *style* and *subject* and *content* to describe each of these works?



▲ 1.12 JACKSON POLLOCK, *Number 19* (1948). Oil and enamel on paper mounted on canvas, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ " × 22 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".



▲ 1.13 ART & LANGUAGE (MICHAEL BALDWIN AND MEL RAMSDEN), *Joseph Stalin Gazing Enigmatically at the Body of VI. Lenin as It Lies in State in Moscow in the Style of Jackson Pollock* (1979). Oil and enamel on board, 69 $\frac{3}{4}$ " × 49 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Lisson Gallery, London, England.



▲ 1.14 RAFFAELLO SANTI (CALLED RAPHAEL), *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione* (1514–1515). Oil on canvas, 32 ¼" × 26 ¾". Louvre, Paris, France.

One of the best ways to observe and articulate stylistic differences is to compare a group of works with a common genre or theme (such as those illustrated in Figs. 1.14 through 1.18). There are some basic connections among them, but there are clear differences as well: materials and techniques, implied narratives, and the diversity of artistic styles employed to represent the subject.

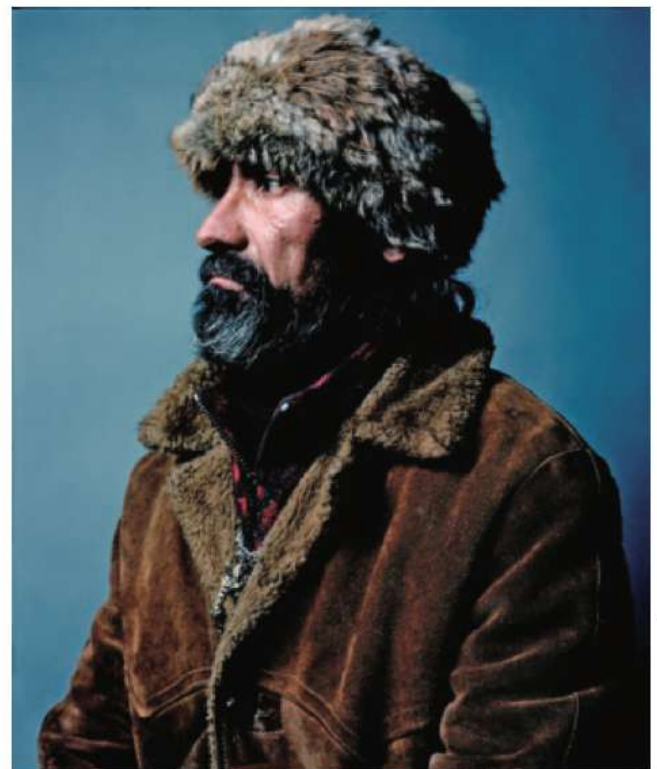
## Realism

**Realism** refers to the replication—through artistic means—of people and things as they are seen by the eye or really thought to be, without idealization, without distortion. In his *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione* (Fig. 1.14), rendered in a realist style, Raphael recreated the subtleties of human flesh along with the illusion of contrasting textures: soft fur, supple velvet, and the coarse hair of his sitter's beard.

Photographs are typically accepted as realistic representations of people and events; the very nature of

photography—shooting, capturing, and documenting by mechanical means—suggests impartiality, candid truth, and unadulterated reality. But, of course, photos can—and do—lie. Mediated and manipulated by the photographer, the conventional parameters of “truth” are challenged, rendering our own interpretations of what we deem to be reality invalid. Consider Andres Serrano’s photographic portrait of *Johnny* (Fig. 1.15) from his *Nomads* series. As in Raphael’s portrait, the sitter appears to have posed for the artist in a studio: both are placed before a neutral backdrop and are flatteringly lit in such a way as to emphasize their distinct facial features. Each wears clothing that seems to indicate something of their profession or station. Both have an air of dignity, of gravitas or solemnity.

We are likely to make assumptions about context and identity that, as it turns out, are faulty in the case of Serrano’s photographic portrait. In fact, for his *Nomads* series, the artist and an assistant offered ten dollars each to homeless people in New York City—including Johnny—to pose for his camera on subway platforms in front of a portable backdrop. As critic Wendy Steiner noted, “In these photographs the physical reality of homeless people—their neglected bodies, their hunger, their displacement—is hidden behind a surface of costume.”



► 1.15 ANDRES SERRANO, *Johnny* from *Nomads* series (1990). Dye destruction print, 59 ½" × 49".



< 1.16 Smiling figure, Mexico, Remojadas (7th–8th century). Ceramic, 18<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

**REPRESENTATIONAL ART AND REALISTIC ART** We may confidently state that all art in a realist style is also representational although not vice versa. The term *representational* is used to describe forms in the natural world that most people would find recognizable even if the maker has not rendered the details with meticulous realism. The painted ceramic figure from Pre-Columbian Veracruz (Fig. 1.16) depicts a man with an elaborately decorated skirt and headdress. His features are simplified—from almond-shaped eyes and a broad, stylized smile to the almost abbreviated treatment of arms and legs. The artist's technique is not as detailed as it is, for example, in Raphael's portrait, but there is no doubt that anyone would recognize this figure as that of a man.

## Expressionism

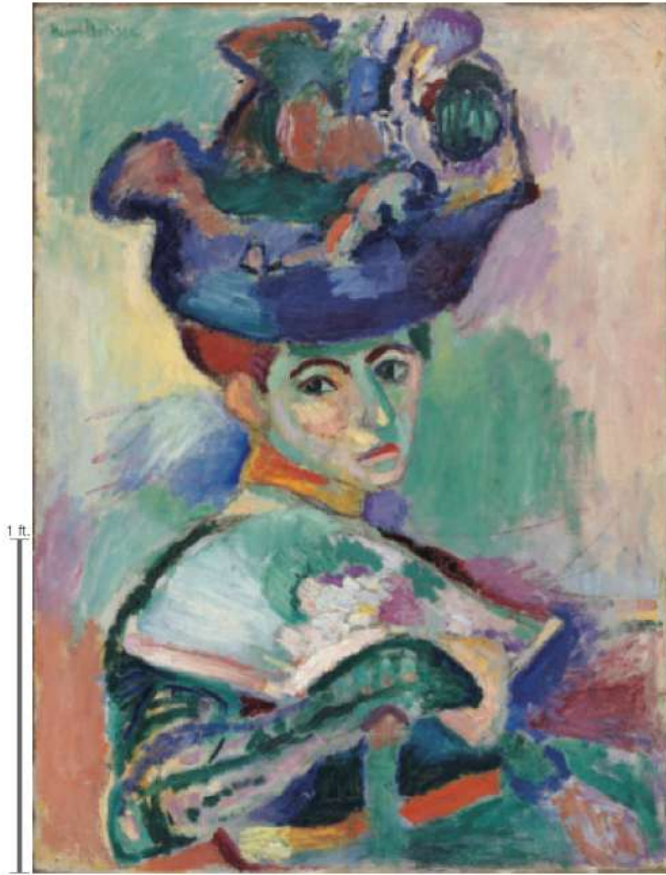
If realism can be defined as a style that is rooted in objective observation of the external world, **Expressionism** can be defined as a style that reflects a subjective, "inner

world"—a style that conveys the psychological and emotional state of the artist. Distortion and exaggeration of form, color, brushwork, texture, and other elements are often used as a vehicle for expressing the sentiments of the artist and, importantly, to elicit comparable feelings or visceral responses in the viewer.

Henri Matisse's *Woman with a Hat* (Fig. 1.17) departs from reality in many ways; in other words, our eyes would not see a woman who looks like this in reality. Matisse rejected the subtle modeling of flesh—rendered through a nuanced palette and gradations of light and shade—that contribute to the realism of Raphael's portrait. He replaced them, instead, by thick, wild brushstrokes of vibrant color that do not pertain to visible reality but rather to an instinctive, spontaneous, subjective response to his subject.

## Abstraction

Abstract art is usually defined as art that does not imitate or clearly represent visible reality. Abstraction is the opposite of realism, which aims to reproduce the world



▲ 1.17 HENRI MATISSE, *Woman with a Hat* (1905). Oil on canvas, 31 ¼" × 23 ½". San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, California.

as faithfully as possible. What abstract works of art have in common is a lack of readily distinguishable characteristics, but the level of abstraction can vary in degree. In some abstract works, the source—the object or objects that inspired them—remains visible or recognizable to some degree. This is often the way in a Cubist painting such as the *Study for a Portrait* (Fig. 1.18) by Liubov Popova, in which one can still make out the parts of the human figure even though they have been altered. The abstract artist often seeks to reduce objects to basic shapes and descriptive colors, focusing more on the elements and design than on the objects themselves. The

series abstracting of the shape of a cow by van Doesburg illustrates this process (see Fig. 1.7).

**ABSTRACT ART AND NONOBJECTIVE ART** Nonobjective art, often used a synonym for abstract art, does not begin with objects in the visible world. Rather, the artist creates compositions from the elements of art—line, shape, color, texture, and so on. The difference between abstract and nonobjective art is illustrated in the works by Kandinsky, Pollock, and Mitchell in this chapter.



▲ 1.18 LIUBOV POPOVA, *Study for a Portrait* (1915). Private collection, Moscow, Russia.