

## Abstraction in Art

Let's begin by closely considering the definition of the term itself.  
Some general concepts are highlighted in bold.

### Abstraction (noun)

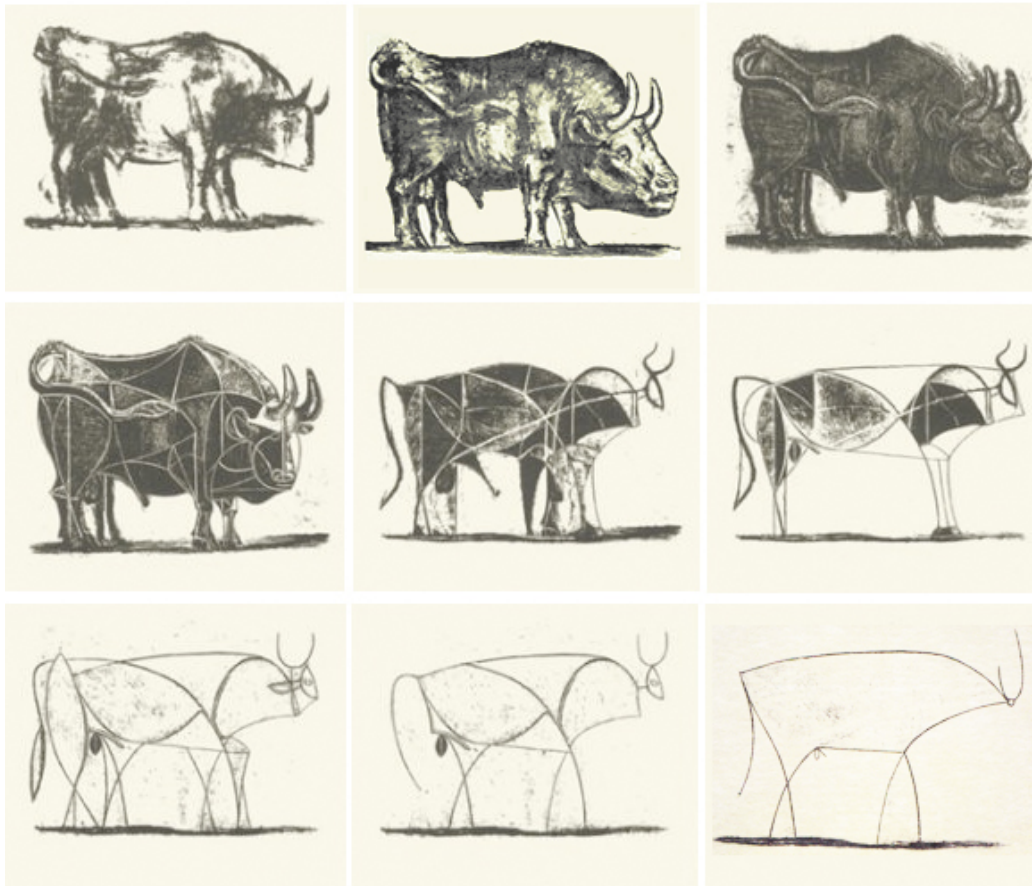
1. An abstract or **general idea** or term.
2. The act of **considering something as a general quality or characteristic**, apart from concrete realities, specific objects, or actual instances.
3. An impractical idea; **something visionary and unrealistic**.
4. The act of **taking away or separating**; withdrawal:  
*The sensation of cold is due to the abstraction of heat from our bodies.*
5. Secret **removal**, especially theft.
6. Absent-mindedness; inattention; **mental absorption**.

### 7. Fine Arts.

**The abstract qualities or characteristics of a work of art.**

**A work of art, especially a nonrepresentational one, stressing formal relationships.**

Now let's look at an illustration that shows how Pablo Picasso progressively abstracted the image of a bull in his drawings.



Let's move on to examine different kinds of **REPRESENTATIONAL** and **ABSTRACT** styles of painting as different artists have applied them to the same subject. To **simplify** this tutorial I will only use **AMERICAN** painters **exploring US cityscape**.

**Photorealism or Hyperrealism:**

1. detailed and unidealized representation in art, especially of banal, mundane, or sordid aspects of life.
2. Detailed visual representations, like that obtained in a photograph, in a nonphotographic medium such as painting, animation or computer graphics.

When we speak about **REPRESENTATIONAL** art and **REALISM** this is the first thing that comes into a lot of people's minds. Mainly because we live in a world that is saturated with photographic imagery. In many people's minds, if it doesn't look like a photo then it's not real. Not true. Not true at all. As the many examples that follow this one will show, you can have many degrees of representation, and abstraction in art.



This is a painting by Robert Cottingham, it's called Radio City. It is photoreal or hyper real. He took the picture and copied it so faithfully many would not be able to tell the difference between them were it not for scale and the brush-strokes on the surface of the painting.

As you can see, the degree of detail in his painting is exacting!

Here's another view of New York City. It is by the painter George Bellows. Critics called his style of **REALISM** **ASH CAN**, because his work explored the grittier side of city life

Representational painters in the Ash-Can school differ from the Photorealists substantially. Notice that this painting is in some ways more realistic because it looks like how the human

eye sees. Unless the photographer makes a point of messing with depth of field, a camera lens records details the same all over the focal plane. Humans don't see that way. Our eyes see things up close in greater detail than things at a distance. Bellows shows more details in the foreground than in the background. In the background, he has **SIMPLIFIED** forms. He **has taken away** details...he has applied some **ABSTRACTION**. Because his painting represents reality truthfully, we don't call this abstract, even though there is some degree of abstraction going on.



Here's another **ASH-CAN** realist painting, this time by John Sloan. It differs from Bellows in that it was created from **MEMORY**! It's titled *The City from Greenwich Village*. The apparent spontaneity in the piece is deceptive. Noting it was "painted from memory," Sloan made more preparatory studies for this canvas than for any of his other pictures. One pencil sketch shows the elevated train tracks at the slight angle they would create from a sixth-story rooftop. In the final oil painting, the railway is pushed down at a steeper perspective, opening the foreground into a vast space of reflections off wet pavement. The soaring Woolworth Building dominates the distant skyscrapers. Since that shimmering



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vision actually would not have been visible from this low level, the skyline derives from other studies done at higher elevations.

This is a much more personal kind of **REPRESENTATIONAL** painting, one in which the artist shows us the poetry of the city view instead of slavishly copying what his eyes see. He shows us what his mind sees. His **REALISM** is much more **visionary** and shows signs of **mental absorption**. This means that it is even more abstract than Sloan's painting. Why is it considered **REALISM**? Because despite the visionary treatment it is still pretty truthful to what you might actually see.



Here is a highly **ABSTRACT** painting by beloved **REALIST** painter Edward Hopper. It's called Early Sunday Morning. If we take away the fire hydrant, barbershop pole and smudges representing the signage on the storefront windows, what are we left with? A bunch of rectangles!

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Let's look at it upside down. Maybe now you'll believe me that this masterpiece of American realism is really a **GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION** in disguise. But it's still considered **representational** and **realistic**. We can all tell it's a city block with storefronts despite how abstract and stylized the painting is.





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Now let's look at another beloved American painter, Georgia O'Keefe. This is titled East River From the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel. It's from her **PRECISIONIST** period. **PRECISIONISM** is a form of **REALISM** and a kind of **REPRESENTATIONAL** art. The details of each building have been removed. She is **more interested in a general idea** of the geometric rhythms she sees. The edges of the building and smoke stack shapes are really sharp, and gives this style of painting it's **precision**. Despite that, aren't the clouds of smoke just gorgeous against all those hard edges?



Compare it to East River No. 1. This is still considered **REPRESENTATIONAL** but has become much more **ABSTRACT**. We know what it is showing us. We recognize buildings, water, sky, even atmospheric effects **but not everyone would consider this REALISM.**



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Let's go more **ABSTRACT** still, and only keep the faintest whiff of **REPRESENTATION** alive in the painting. This is by John Marin, and it is titled From The Bridge, NYC.

Marin has not bothered to show us any details at all about any of the buildings in this particular cityscape. He uses a bunch of hatches to indicate rows of windows, and a series of rectangles layered on top of each other to represent urban congestion. The Hudson and the sun show up in stamp sized rectangles on the left of the painting, because in a big city that's what we get of nature...bits and pieces. This painting is all about his ideas about the energy of the city. It's visionary, symbolic, generalized, stylized...all indications of abstraction. Some art critics and curators might still refer to this style as **REPRESENTATIONAL** because we can recognize some forms, but others would call it an **ABSTRACT**. As an abstract it has a pretty organic feel to it. Even the geometric shapes of buildings are a little imprecise; you can definitely tell he didn't use a ruler!





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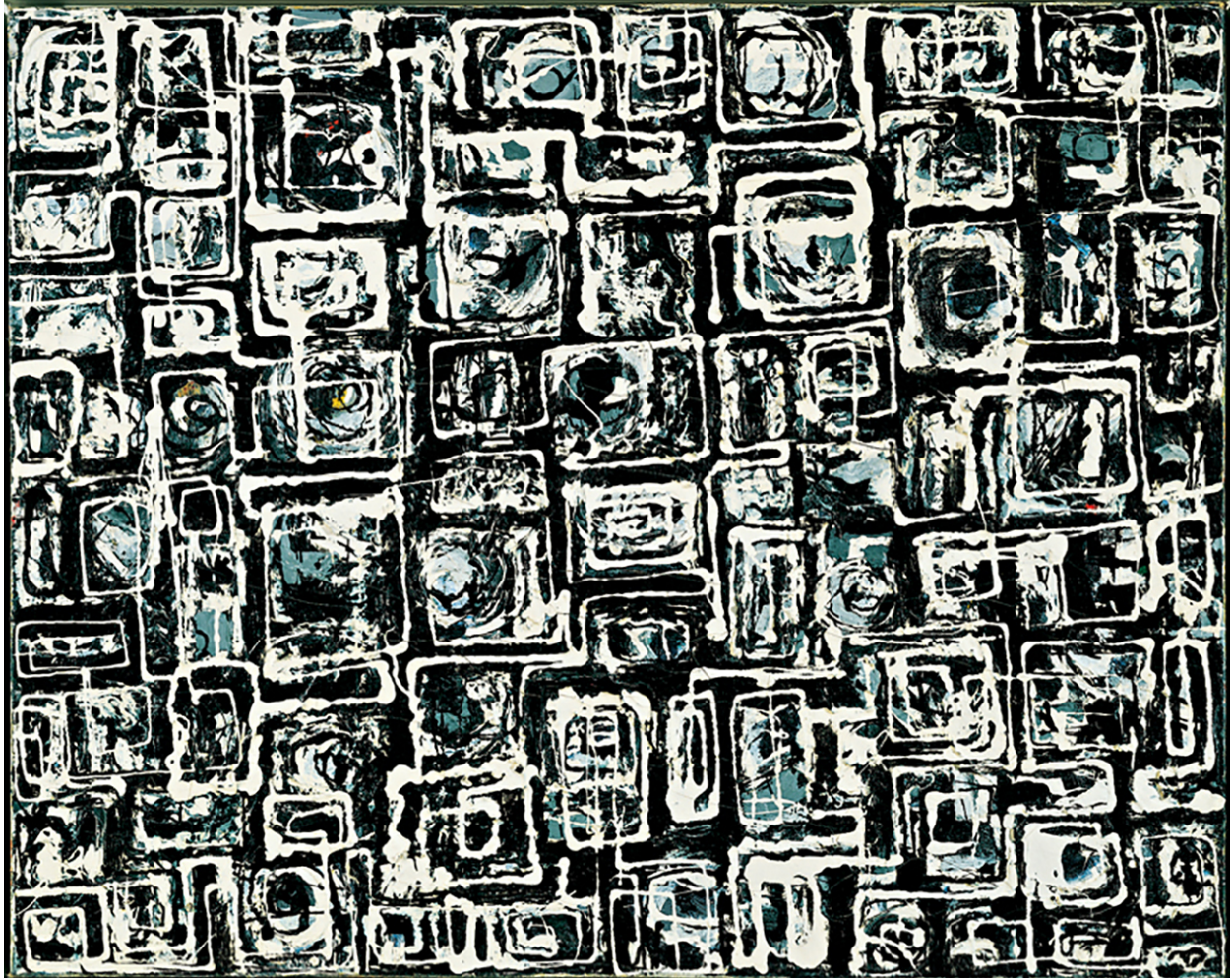
Compare this more **ORGANIC** form of abstract representation by Marin to that of Joseph Stella, below. In his painting *Voice of the City of New York Interpreted*, he has taken all the geometric structure of the city and it's bridges to it's maximum expression. Hardly any living soul in the world calls this **REPRESENTATIONAL**. It is clearly an **ABSTRACT** painting, and can be categorized a **GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION** because most of it's shapes are geometric in structure. Nonetheless, it does have a feeling, a vestige, and a sense of the city about it.





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We push further into pure **ABSTRACTION** and into the realm of **NON-OBJECTIVE** art with the work of Lee Krasner. Gone is all recognizable imagery. In her painting *White Squares* the geometry of city blocks is translated into calligraphic gestures of densely painted lines race around the canvas. The painting, like New York City itself is full of intense kinetic energy. Although the title tells us we are looking at geometric shapes, they feel very **ORGANIC**.





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Compare Lee Krasner's **NON-OBJECTIVE ABSTRACTION** with that of Piet Mondrian. His work is clearly **GEOMETRIC**, and like Krasner's does not represent anything specific in the real world, despite the descriptive title. That's why it is called **NON-OBJECTIVE**.

The title *Broadway Boogie Woogie* may make you think about the choreographed movement of traffic moving through the city, but nothing in this triadic yellow, red, and blue composition is strictly referential.

