

Best Practices in Art History

Verb tenses

While the term “art history” implies that everything we study is in the past, that is not really the case. Many of the artworks that we study still exist, and art historians refer to them in the present. Use **present tense** when describing an artwork that still exists—as if you are standing in front of it and saying what you see. Use **past tense** for historical information, such as biographical information or discussion of its context of creation. If you are explaining how the artist made the artwork, for instance, that would be in the past tense instead of the present.

Referring to an artist, scholar, or critic

At first mention, use both first and last name. In subsequent mentions, shorten to last name alone.

This is a professional convention. Do not refer to an artist by only his or her first name—doing so would imply that you are on a first-name basis with them, as if the artist is your personal friend. Even if that is the case, the first name would only be appropriate in a personal conversation and not in an academic one.

Example: Andy Warhol is known for a series of paintings of soup cans. Warhol was considered part of the Pop Art movement.

In some time periods and places, that last name may not be clear, but just check a textbook or other reputable source to see how the artist is referred to in that text.

Example: Leonardo da Vinci is most correctly referred to as “Leonardo” and not “da Vinci” because “da Vinci” is not really a last name—it simply means, in Italian, from the city of Vinci.

Titles of artworks are treated like titles of books. They should be formatted in *italics*.

Example: Leonardo da Vinci created the *Last Supper*.

Referring to art movements or styles

Names of art movements are capitalized.

Example: Impressionism

Example in use: Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* is an example of High Renaissance art.

Art History is often referred to as a string of isms. Those isms are the names of movements or styles. When using the names of styles, make sure to distinguish between the noun and adjective forms of the word. Nouns end in -ism, while adjectives end in -ist.

Example: A painting from the movement called Impressionism (noun form) would be described as Impressionist (adjective form).

Word usage issues

Artwork is one word, not two.

Rule: Compound words may be one word, two words, or hyphenated: double check if you aren’t sure!

Be on the lookout for homonyms that your spellcheck won't catch.

Example: complementary, not complimentary

- The first term refers to color. The second term is used to show appreciation or indicate that something is provided for free.

Example: tempera, not tempura

- The first term is a painting technique. The second one is a yummy food preparation.

Don't use words such as beautiful, magnificent, amazing (avoid superlatives), masterpiece, realistic, or other words—particularly superlatives—that reflect personal opinion.

Why? These words reflect your judgement and do not communicate information about the artwork. Art History focuses on objective language that everyone can verify by looking at the artwork.

Banned sources

Wikipedia: this source is banned because its articles are not authored and the author's credentials cannot be verified.

The Annotated Mona Lisa

Art History for Dummies

artchive.com

Illustrations

It is common in art history papers to provide illustrations of the key artworks that you discuss. You should not include images of every single artwork—focus on the ones that are important to your discussion. When you mention the artwork in your paper for the first time, you should include the figure number, such as this example of a reference to Karl Blossfeldt's photograph (Fig. 1).

The illustrations should be grouped together at the end of the paper. They should not interrupt the text of the paper.

Formatting: standard is two illustrations per page, appropriately labeled with figure numbers (Figure 1, Figure 2, etc.) and artwork information (artist name, artwork title, date, and source of the image). **See sample page at end of this document.**

Sample Illustrations Page

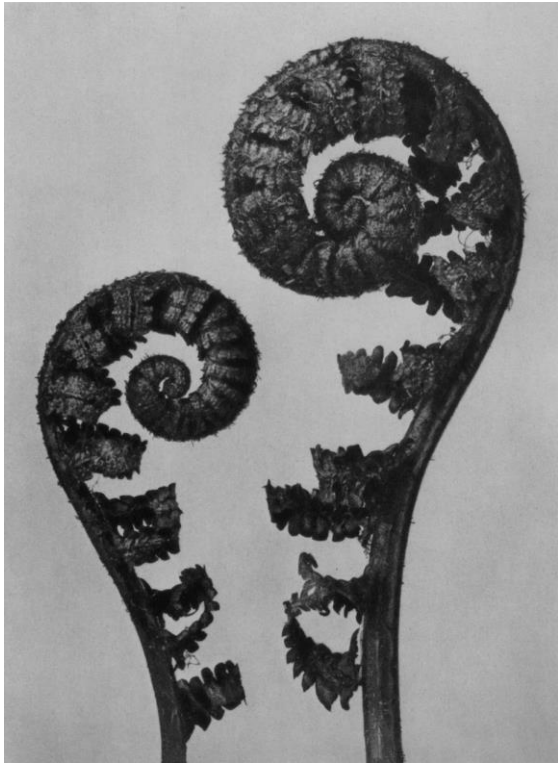


Fig. 1. Karl Blossfeldt, *Aspidium filix mas*, 1928, photogravure, unframed, 25x19cm. Los Angeles County Museum. From Edwards and Wood, *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, 405.



Fig. 2. Robert Capa, *Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1944*, 1944, gelatin silver print. From Arnason and Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, 408.