



## QUICK VIEW:

### Synopsis

The term "Minimalism" has evolved over the last half-century to include a vast number of artistic media, and its precedents in the visual arts can be found in Mondrian, van Doesburg, Reinhardt, and in Malevich's monochromes. But it was born as a self-conscious movement in New York in the early 1960s. Its leading figures - Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre - created objects which often blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture, and were characterized by unitary, geometric forms and industrial materials. Emphasising cool anonymity over the hot expressivism of the previous generation of painters, the Minimalists attempted to avoid metaphorical associations, symbolism, and suggestions of spiritual transcendence.

### Key Ideas / Information

- The revival of interest in Russian Constructivism and Marcel Duchamp's readymades provided important inspiration for the Minimalists. The Russian's example suggested an approach to sculpture that emphasised modular fabrication and industrial materials over the craft techniques of most modern sculpture. And Duchamp's readymades pointed to ways in which sculpture might make use of a variety of pre-fabricated materials, or aspire to the appearance of factory-built commodities.
- Much of Minimalist aesthetics was shaped by a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. Minimalists wanted to remove suggestions of self-expressionism from the art work, as well as evocations of illusion or transcendence - or, indeed, metaphors of any kind, though as some critics have pointed out, that proved difficult. Unhappy with the modernist emphasis on medium-specificity, the Minimalists also sought to erase distinctions between paintings and sculptures,

- and to make instead, as Donald Judd said: "specific objects."
- In seeking to make objects which avoided the appearance of fine art objects, the Minimalists attempted to remove the appearance of composition from their work. To that end, they tried to expunge all signs of the artists guiding hand or thought processes - all aesthetic decisions - from the fabrication of the object. For Donald Judd, this was part of Minimalism's attack on the tradition of "relational composition" in European art, one which he saw as part of an out-moded rationalism. Rather than the parts of an artwork being carefully, hierarchically ordered and balanced, he said they should be "just one thing after another."

## DETAILED VIEW:

### Beginnings

In New York City in the late 1950s, young artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Dan Flavin were painting in then dominant Abstract Expressionist vein, and beginning to show at smaller galleries throughout the city. By the early 1960s, many of these artists had abandoned painting altogether in favour of objects which seemed neither painting nor sculpture in the conventional sense. For example, Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* (a series of hugely influential, concentrically striped pictures from 1959-60), were much thicker than conventional canvases, and this emphasised their materiality and object-ness, in contrast to the thin, window-like quality of ordinary canvases. Other early Minimalist works employed non-art materials such as plywood, scrap metal, and fluorescent light bulbs.

Many names were floated to characterise this new art, from "ABC art" and "Reductive Art" to "literalism" and "systemic painting." "Minimalism" was the term that eventually stuck, perhaps because it best described the way the artists reduced art to the minimum number of colors, shapes, lines and textures. Yet the term was rejected by many of the artists commonly associated with the movement - Judd, for example, felt the title was derogatory. He preferred the term "primary structures," which came to be the title of a landmark group show at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966: it brought together many of those who were important to the movement, including Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd, though it also included some who were barely on its fringes, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Anthony Caro.

### Concepts and Styles

The Minimalists' emphasis on eradicating signs of authorship from the artwork (by using simple, geometric forms, and courting the appearance of industrial objects) led, inevitably, to the sense that the meaning of the object lay not "inside" it, but rather on its surface - it arose from the viewer's interaction with the object. This led to a new emphasis on the physical space in which the artwork resided. In part, this development was inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings on phenomenology, in particular, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

Aside from sculptors, Minimalism is also associated with a few key abstract painters, such as Frank Stella and, retrospectively, Barnett Newman. These artists painted very

simple canvases that were considered minimal due to their bare-bones composition. Using only line, solid color and, in Stella's case, geometric forms and shaped canvas, these artists combined paint and canvas in such a way that the two became inseparable.

### **Later Developments**

By the late 1960s, Minimalism was beginning to show signs of breaking apart as a movement, as various artists who had been important to its early development began to move in different directions. By this time the movement was also drawing powerful attacks. The most important of these would be Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood," published in *Artforum* in 1967. Although it seemed to confirm the importance of the movement as a turning point in the history of modern art, Fried was uncomfortable with what it heralded. Referring to the movement as "literalism," and those who made it as "literalists," he accused artists like Judd and Morris of intentionally confusing the categories of art and ordinary object. According to Fried, what these artists were creating was not art, but a political and/or ideological statement about the nature of art. Fried maintained that just because Judd and Morris arranged identical non-art objects in a three-dimensional field and proclaimed it "art", didn't necessarily make it so. Art is art and an object is an object, Fried asserted.

As the 1960s progressed, different offshoots of Minimalism began to take shape. In California, the "Light and Space" movement was led by Robert Irwin, while in vast ranges of unspoiled land throughout the U.S., Land artists like Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria completely removed art from the studio altogether, and turned the earth itself into a work of art. This achievement not only further blurred the boundaries between "art" and "object," but reinvented the more conventional definitions of sculpture.

The significance of Michael Fried's attack on the movement continues to be discussed, and, to the extent that, as critic Hal Foster has put it, Minimalism forms a "crux" or turning point in the history of modernism, the movement remains hugely influential today. However, some critics have challenged the reputations of some leading figures such as Donald Judd: in particular, feminists have criticised what they see as a rhetoric of power in the style's austerity and intellectualism. Indeed, it is the legacy of the movements that followed in Minimalism's wake, and that are often canopied under the term "Post-Minimalism" (Land Art, Eccentric Abstraction, and other developments) that is more important.

### **Quotes**

"A shape, a volume, a color, a surface is something itself. It shouldn't be concealed as part of a fairly different whole."

- Donald Judd



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## Key Artists:



### Carl Andre

Carl Andre is an American Minimalist whose prominence rose in the late 1960s with a series of large public artworks and sculpture. His linear sculpture was included in the famed 1966 Primary Structures group exhibition at the Jewish Museum.



### Dan Flavin

Dan Flavin was an American artist best known for his Minimalist constructions of color and light. Often using nothing more than a few dozen fluorescent bulbs for his work, Flavin was a crucial figure in the Minimalism of the 1960s and 70s. His light installations altered the physical exhibition space, and were designed as experiential art rather than visual art.



### Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin is an American painter, sculptor, landscape architect and installation artist. Coming of age during the Abstract Expressionist years in New York, Irwin remained in his native Los Angeles and devoted himself to creating largely experiential art, such as the Central Garden at Los Angeles' Getty Center.



### Donald Judd

Donald Judd's work placed him at the forefront of the Minimalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Judd rejected Abstract Expressionism through lack of imagery, composition, and by reducing painting and sculpture to its basic elements through using natural light, simple lines, industrial materials, and solid colors on flat surfaces.



### Kenneth Noland

Noland created several signature styles of abstract imagery. These styles were comprised of targets, chevrons, striped patterns and shaped canvases. Noland's paintings are characterized by reduced, minimalist and strikingly simple compositions of line and color.



### **Richard Serra**

Richard Serra is an American Process and Minimalist artist. His sculptures have ranged from hurled drips of molten lead to gigantic steel pieces installed in public places.



### **Frank Stella**

Throughout his prolific career as a painter, sculptor, printmaker and architect, Frank Stella has been known for helping to launch the Minimalism movement and then for breaking away from it. He has constantly reinvented himself, creating increasingly textured, dynamic and vivid work. Stella continues to work and advocate for artists' rights today.



### **Sol LeWitt**

Sol LeWitt was an American artist commonly associated with the Minimalism and Conceptual art movements. LeWitt's art often employed simple geometric forms and archetypal symbols, and he worked in a variety of media.



### **Agnes Martin**

Agnes Martin was a Canadian-born American painter, typically associated with Minimalism and at times Abstract Expressionism. Always something of a recluse, Martin's art was informed by Eastern Taoist philosophy and contained elements of spirituality. Her painting style employed simple lines, grid patterns and soft colors.



### **Robert Morris**

Robert Morris is an American artist whose early L-beam and column sculptures were key works in Minimalism. His work also includes felt and fabric pieces, Process Art, performance, body art, and earthworks, often with an emphasis on process and theatricality.

## Groundbreaking Works:



**Title:** Free Ride

**Artist:** Tony Smith

**Description:** A lot of Minimalism displays a "less is more" approach to art, and Tony Smith's work is no different. Smith minimized the number of shapes, lines and colors in his sculpture, and in *Free Ride* sought to create an ambiguous experience of form - partly evoking a figure, perhaps, or partly a landscape. Although he was close to Abstract Expressionists like Pollock and Newman, the most notable influence on him was his former teacher Frank Lloyd Wright. Some of his works even recall Wright's building designs, which famously sought to fuse harmoniously with the natural landscape in which they were situated.

**Year:** 1962 (re-fabricated 1982)

**Materials:** Painted steel

**Collection:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Title:** Untitled

**Artist:** Donald Judd

**Description:** Throughout the 1960s, Judd created multiple versions of this untitled work, always retaining the same scale but never using the same color or materials. He wanted his work to exist in real three-dimensional space, rather than *representing* a space, or another world, as painting or even traditional figurative sculpture tends to do. Referring to his sculptures as "primary structures," he discarded the conventions of traditional sculpture (the plinth, the figure etc.), and instead created objects which, although oddly cold, everyday, and industrial in appearance, seemed to aspire to the condition of art by the way in which their shape and size confronted the viewer's own body.

**Year:** 1969

**Materials:** Brass and colored fluorescent plexiglass on steel brackets

**Collection:** Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.



**Title:** Two Open Modular Cubes/Half-Off

**Artist:** Sol LeWitt

**Description:** LeWitt once wrote that "the most interesting characteristic of the cube is that it is relatively uninteresting." This comment speaks to what Minimalism aims to achieve, which is to use objects in and for themselves, and not as symbols or as representations (as Frank Stella put it on another occasion: "What you see is what you see.") According to LeWitt, cubes are uninteresting on their own, but when interlocked, as in *Two Open Modular Cubes*, they can serve a new purpose - as building blocks that evoke irrational systems.

**Year:** 1972

**Materials:** Enameled aluminum

**Collection:** Tate Gallery, London