

CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACTION AS EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Although abstract art can be difficult to interpret, it can evoke emotional responses in viewers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This suggests that art can function as a form of communication even when it does not rely on recognizable object or symbols. Current article proposes an Emotional Visual Language Framework (EVLf) model. This is an interdisciplinary look at how contemporary abstraction conveys emotion through elements such as color, texture, form, and compositional rhythm. The article draws on several studies, namely Nold's (2023) typology of emotional assemblages in art, Korom et al.'s (2022) empirical study of children's perception of paintings, Chojnicka and Wawer's (2020) computational analysis of linguistic abstraction and tonality, and Healy et al.'s (2025) work on how the level of abstraction influences the persuasiveness of an emotional message.	Abstract art; emotional communication visual language; affective response; emotion assembly; linguistic abstraction sentiment analysis; human-AI collaboration

Introduction

When a person encounters a non-objective painting, they may experience an emotional response even without reading an accompanying description. The possibility of experiencing emotion in response to an image without recognizable figures, objects, narratives, or symbols has interested researchers for many years. But despite the impressive volume of research in various disciplines, there is still no generally accepted model that explains how emotion is communicated through abstract visual forms. Existing works agree that emotion is not merely a by-product of perceiving abstract art but can be central to the artistic experience. In the work of Nold (2023), emotion is not a result that the viewer arrives at, but part of the artistic method itself. Korom and colleagues (2022) experimentally demonstrate that a child's attention to the emotional aspects of a painting can be influenced by simple instructions or prompts from an adult, that is, emotional engagement does not arise automatically but depends largely on how the interaction is structured. In parallel, computational linguistics has learned to measure the emotional coloring of text quantitatively, and there is reason to believe that the same principles apply to other sign systems (Chojnicka & Wawer, 2020). Healy and colleagues (2025), in turn, demonstrate that the level of abstractness of a statement changes its persuasiveness nonlinearly, as it moves from concrete, sensory-toned formulations to generalized, interpretive ones.

Based on all this, the article proposes that EVLF consider contemporary abstraction as a visual language. The value of this approach is that it brings together visual communication theory, the

psychology of emotional perception, and even the developments of artificial intelligence, overcoming the limitations of a single discipline's view.

2. Evolution of Abstract Art as Communication

The history of abstract art is closely intertwined with communications. Kandinsky's 1911 treatise *On the Spiritual in Art* is discussed that color and form possesses thus expressive power and can directly affect the viewer. His approach encouraged associations between particular colors, forms, and emotional states.

This statement has been revised and refined many times over the course of a century. Post-war abstract expressionists such as Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, and Motherwell perceived their canvases as direct recordings of psychological states, captured through gesture, scale, and the very physics of paint application. Rothko similarly described his paintings in terms of fundamental human experiences such as tragedy, ecstasy, and doom, while visitors to the Rothko Chapel have reported strong emotional responses to the works.

In the following decades, abstraction itself began to be examined more theoretically. Conceptual and post-conceptual art added linguistic and contextual mediation. Thus, abstract artists are invariably perceived as their work as an emotional statement. However, a model is needed that could describe the characteristics of an abstract painting and how it affects a person.

3. Emotional Theories in Visual Perception

In order to consider a model that could describe the characteristics of abstraction and how it affects a person, it is important to determine how emotion is integrated into visual perception. Early cognitive models described emotion as something that comes into play after meaning has been recognized. Modern research takes a different view.

Nold (2023), based on new materialism, describes emotion as a physiological state, in which material objects, social interaction and cultural context come together rather than existing separately. Citing Latour, Nold insists that sensation is not locked within a single nervous system. Thus, material and contextual conditions are required: the gallery space, the size of the canvas, the lighting, and what the viewer has seen before are all part of the experience itself, rather than remaining in the background.

If emotion is not conveyed directly, but is assembled from certain factors, then the scale of the work, its texture, the density of the surface, the relationships between colors no longer act as “means of expression” in the usual sense, but as part of the assemblage itself, according to Nold (2023).

Korom et al. (2022) describe how 84 children aged three to thirteen were observed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art during a single encounter with a painting. What the children's paid attention to depend heavily on the adult's prompting. Some people were interested in the characters' feelings, while others were interested in the painting's features. When asked to reflect on feelings, they used more emotional vocabulary. When asked to pay attention to shape, children were more likely to use descriptive words. This means that the perception of emotion in art is controlled by attention, if a person is directed in the right direction. The emotional content of the work is already in the painting, but to accurately capture it, the viewer needs to pay attention to it. Korom and colleagues called this the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processing.

4. Contemporary Abstraction and Emotional Encoding

Having concluded that emotion is formed from the properties of the work itself, as well as the viewer's attention and context. Chojnicka and Wawer (2020) adopted Semin and Fiedler's linguistic categorization model and applied it to the analysis of narratives from people with autism spectrum disorders. The model distinguishes three types of verbs, namely descriptive (concrete, linked to perception), interpretive (evaluative, but still linked to behavior), and state verbs, the most abstract. These no longer denote an action, but an internal state. It was concluded that the more abstract the speech, the more emotional it is. The correlation is robust and, most importantly, positive in both groups, both in people with ASD and in the control group.

If we transfer the findings of this study to painting, we can conclude the following. Abstraction, built on the interaction of color, on rhythm, is closer to the level of state, and it awakens a response in a person.

Healy et al. (2025) found that language abstraction and emotional valence influence jury decisions in court. Too much abstraction blurs emotional nuances. We can assume that similar nonlinearity exists in painting. Nold's "Gallery Emotion" (2023) is based on biofeedback. Thus, the physiological arousal of the viewer is transformed into a visual or sound effect in real time. "Public emotion" works differently, through objects with a personal or collective history, through joint performance. Accordingly, it can be concluded that there is no single mechanism for encoding emotion in visual art.

Table 1. Typology of Emotion Encoding Mechanisms Relevant to Contemporary Abstraction as Emotional Language

Assembly Type	Key Characteristics	Emotion Encoding Method	Viewer Role	Source
Laboratory Emotion	Controlled stimuli; measurable physiological response; emotion treated as interior to the body	Sensor data, neuroimaging, facial expression capture	Passive subject; not involved in staging	Nold (2023)
Gallery Emotion	Real-time feedback; multimedia installations; biofeedback drives visual output	Galvanic skin response, heart rate, gesture recognition	Active performer; co-creates the artwork	Nold (2023)
Public Emotion	Spatially situated; personal histories; cocreation with local participants	Touch, personal objects, narrative performance	Co-producer; shapes final representation	Nold (2023)
Art Museum (Children)	Single-session ; instructional manipulation; attentional focus on emotion vs. elements	Word selection, guided discussion, caregiver prompts	Engaged learner ; directed attention	Korom et al . (2022)
Linguistic Abstraction	Abstract vs. concrete language as emotional carrier; LCM typology applied to texts	Sentiment analysis, verb abstraction (DAV/IAV/SV)	Decoder of emotional-linguistic signals	Healy et al. (2025); Chojnicka & Wawer (2020)

Note. Assemblage typology and characteristics follow Nold (2023). Attentional direction and word-choice findings follow Korom et al. (2022). Linguistic abstraction and sentiment analysis follow Chojnicka & Wawer (2020) and Healy et al. (2025).

5. Proposed Emotional Visual Language Framework

5.1 Framework Overview

The proposed EVLF model brings together the results discussed above to describe emotional communication in contemporary abstract art. Abstraction is interpreted in it not as the absence of visual language, but as a different kind of it: representative precision here gives way to emotional density, and the viewer is involved in active decoding, and not in simple recognition.

The model identifies six stages in the transmission of emotion through abstract form: (1) the artist's emotional state and the decisions they make during the encoding process; (2) the translation of this state into formal visual elements—color relationships, texture, form, compositional rhythm, and degree of abstraction; (3) the finished composition itself as a physical object with specific properties; (4) the viewer's perceptual engagement, which depends on both sensory perception and the context, including the instructions; (5) the decoding of emotion from formal characteristics; (6) the viewer's actual emotional response.

Each stage is based on specific research: Nold's (2023) work on the deliberate selection of elements forms the basis of the encoding process; Chojnicka and Wawer's (2020) continuum of linguistic abstraction is transposed here into a visual form; the study by Korom et al. (2022) pertains to the perceptual engagement stage, which depends on attention and context; and the findings by Healy et al. (2025) on the interaction between abstraction and valence inform the decoding stage.

5.2 Visual Diagram of the EVLF

Emotional Assemblage Type modulates each stage

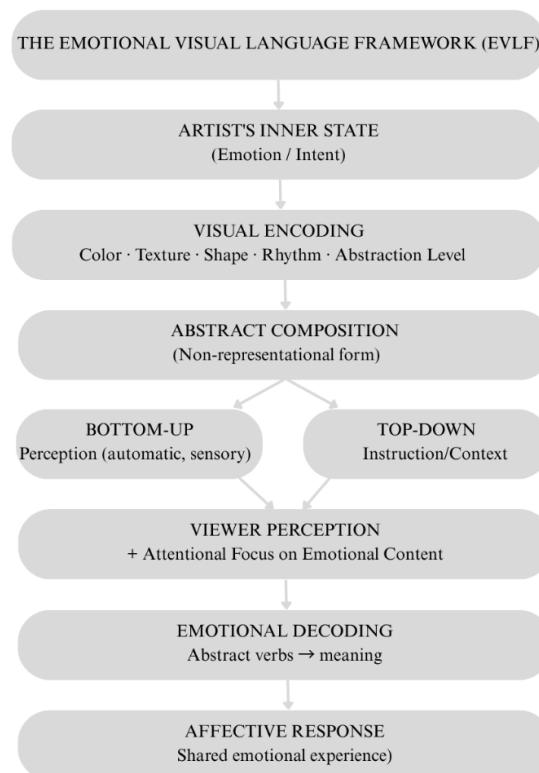


Figure 1. The Emotional Visual Language Framework (EVLF): transmission pathways from artist's emotion to viewer's affective response, with modulating factors at each stage

5.3 The Role of Abstraction Level in Emotional Transmission

The degree of visual abstraction is the central mechanism in this model that determines how emotion is conveyed. Analogous to the linguistic model, three levels are distinguished here: descriptive visual language, in which recognizable forms trigger semantic processing; interpretive visual languages, which consist of condensed evaluative gestures that convey mood without direct representation; and state language, the most abstract register, where color combinations, scale, and surface texture function similarly to verbs of emotional state in language.

Healy and colleagues (2025) observed that a concrete negative text is more persuasive than an abstract, which raises the question: why does abstraction weaken the emotional impact in speech but, apparently, strengthen it in painting? The likely answer lies in the different goals of communication. In a courthouse, one must convey both a specific fact and its emotional connotation; excessive abstraction detaches the emotion from the specific event and thereby weakens the message itself. Abstract painting, on the other hand, is not tied to a specific subject from the outset but seeks to convey a state of being. Freed from its attachment to a referent, emotion is able to connect with the personal emotional history of each individual viewer, rather than being rigidly tied to a single narrative.

5.4 Emotion Assemblages and Staging in Contemporary Practice

Nold's (2023) typology of emotional assemblages aligns well with the actual practices of contemporary abstraction. "Laboratory emotion" refers to interactive systems with biological feedback, where the viewer's physiology directly shapes what they see; here, the artist projects conditions and connections rather than creating a finished object. "Public emotion" refers to participatory practices rooted in a specific place, where collective memory and shared history are encoded through abstraction, and abstraction itself becomes a kind of shared emotional vessel.

6. Future Directions for Human-AI Artistic Collaboration

It would be worthwhile to develop computational tools for decoding the emotional content of abstract artwork, similar to how NLP analyzes text. These tools would be able to quantitatively assess color gradients, the direction of energy, compositional entropy, and the degree of ambiguity, and would thus allow for an empirical verification of the central tenets of EVLF regarding the connection between abstraction and the conveyance of emotion.

AI-assisted emotional coding could expand an artist's range of possibilities, systematically exploring color and composition options with a predictable emotional effect, going beyond what can be achieved manually through trial and error. The point here is not to replace the artist's choices, but to complement them.

Data from therapeutic art practice (Reynolds et al., 2008; Haeyen & Joosten, 2025; Kalthom & Ghamarani, 2025), research on aesthetic perception in a scientific context (Inácio-Barbosa et al., 2017), and studies on the role of art in activist education (Grosvenor & Roberts, 2025). It confirms that visual art, including abstract art, carries emotional and social meaning in a wide variety of contexts, and therefore the logical framework of EVLF is applicable quite broadly.

Based on the findings of Korom et al. (2022), it is possible to envision AI systems that generate personalized instructions for viewers, these systems could guide viewers' attention and provide a context for interpretation, helping to bridge the gap between what the artist intended and what the viewer ultimately perceives.

Nold (2023) makes an important point: an artist has a duty to make conscious and ethically sound decisions about which elements of the emotional assemblage to include in a work and which to delegate. With the advent of AI, these decisions also extend to determining which computational processes are trustworthy enough to handle part of the coding.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, the article proposed the EVLF model as a way to explain how contemporary abstraction functions as a system of emotional communication. In itself, the idea that abstract art conveys emotion through formal visual codes rather than through representation is not new. What is new is the attempt to describe the very mechanism of this transmission, drawing on data from several disciplines at once, which, most importantly, do not contradict one another.

The level of visual abstraction is directly related to the amount of emotion a work is capable of conveying : form elevated to the level of a “state,” color and texture freed of their descriptive function, conveys emotion more directly than form that retains its representational specificity.

Tools developed from natural language processing, tone analysis, measurement of abstraction levels, and valence tracking, serve both as a useful analogy and as a fully functional set of tools for the quantitative analysis of emotions in abstract art.

EVLF is not a definitive theory, but rather an invitation to further, more structured research. The questions range from measuring levels of visual abstraction to the cultural variability of emotional decoding and the ethics of AI-assisted affect encoding, set a whole research agenda where art historians, psychologists, computer scientists, and artists themselves still need to work together.

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