

The Window in Modern European Painting (Features and Significance)

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Abstract

The research titled “The Window in Modern European Painting: Features and Significance” comprises four chapters. The first chapter addresses the methodological framework, presenting the research problem, which is articulated through questions such as: 1- What are the key features and significances of the window in modern European painting? The objective of the study is to explore these features and significances. Additionally, the chapter outlines the research’s temporal, spatial, and thematic boundaries, spanning from 1658 to 1935, and defines key terms.

The second chapter is divided into two sections. The first section delves into the semantic dimensions of the window and its relationship with space, while the second section examines the role of the window in modern art movements. The third chapter is dedicated to research procedures, including the analysis of four selected samples.

In pursuit of the research objective, the fourth chapter presents several findings and conclusions, among which are:

1. The window served as a source of inspiration in painting, transcending the temporal and spatial confines of the artwork by reviving aesthetic and semantic moments within a vanished spacetime.
2. The window is distinguished by its poetic representation of reality, acting as a pivotal element in the painting, positioned between two worlds. This imbues the artwork with intellectual value, rich in contradictions, prompting an automatic renewal of the creative process. The window is not confined to itself but is charged with an interactive space brimming with visual discoveries, yielding varied outcomes over time.

Keywords: Feature, Significance.

Chapter One: Methodological Framework of the Research

First: Research Problem

The window is considered the oldest means of communication devised by humanity, beginning with its presence in the walls of simple homes, symbolizing shared meanings between two spaces, and extending to the windows of space stations overlooking our small planet. This enduring element has embodied various concepts, meanings, and manifestations—cultural, expressive, semantic, aesthetic, and symbolic. These are not far removed from the images and drawings of animals, plants, and hunting scenes created by human hands, which serve as windows offering glimpses into external worlds. From early depictions to the windows of space stations exploring the cosmos, the window remains a vital outlet, alleviating psychological pressures while granting the static wall a tangible three-dimensionality.

Artists from classical and medieval periods to modern art have engaged with the motif

of the window, imbuing it with diverse cultural and aesthetic significances. The window has contributed to the realism of depicted spaces while embodying humanistic meanings, offering views into dreams, imagination, and the unconscious. Art history reveals that windows appeared alongside religious themes in the fifteenth century, recurring in Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Realist, Expressionist, and Surrealist art. Thus, the research problem is encapsulated in the following questions:

1. What are the key features and significances of the window in modern European painting?
2. Does the window carry realistic, symbolic, expressive, and surreal qualities?

Second: Research Significance

The importance of this research lies in its focus on the pivotal features and significances of the window in modern European painting. It highlights the significance of space, time, and place, both interior and exterior, expanding the spatial boundaries to become a metaphor or symbol that assumes a tangible reality.

Third: Research Objective

To explore the features and significances of the window in modern European painting.

Fourth: Research Boundaries

- Subject Boundaries: Artistic works executed in oil paints.
- Temporal Boundaries: 1658-1935.
- Spatial Boundaries: Europe.

Fifth: Definition of Research Terms

A- Feature

1. Linguistic Definition:

“Feature” (samt) refers to a path or the demeanor of virtuous people. (Al-Qader, 2011, p. 267)

2. Terminological Definition:

“A feature is any characteristic observable in a work of art or any of its established meanings. It is an abstract quality that does not exist independently of the tangible object.” (Monroe, 1972, p. 41)

3. Operational Definition:

A feature is what can be relied upon to distinguish one form from another based on their structural formations and inherent characteristics.

B- Significance

1. Linguistic Definition:

“Significance” derives from the word for evidence or guidance, referring to what leads to understanding. (Al-Qader, 2011, p. 187)

2. Terminological Definition:

“Significance” is the study of meaning or the branch of linguistics that addresses the theory of meaning. It concerns the conditions required for a symbol to convey meaning. (Omar, 2006, p. 11)

“Significance” is also defined as “what leads to the understanding of something, such as the indication of words on meanings.” (Al-Asfahani, 1412 AH, p. 171)

3. Operational Definition:

Significance refers to what enables the comprehension of something, akin to how shapes convey meanings.

Chapter Two: First Section - The Semantic Dimensions of the Window and Its Relationship with Space

According to Herbert Read: “The primitive man was a tool of his emotions, living in a state of constant agitation, unable to distinguish clearly between image and reality.” (Read, 1980, p. 31) This represents the ongoing quest for meaning in the conflicting emotions between interior and exterior, evident in his wall creations that reflect inner worlds and the situations he encountered.

Behind the visible lies the secret effectiveness adhering to objectivity, as demonstrated in the works of Italian painter, architect, and sculptor Giotto (1267-1337). His frescoes surpass technical flaws with lyrical poetry, expressing the essential significance of the subject. His use of light and shadow reveals the necessary volume and mass for the desired form, making his symbolic depictions resonate with universal concepts, evoking intellectual rather than sensory perception—a retreat into the self.

A similar theme is found in Giorgione’s (1477-1510) painting “The Three Philosophers,” where he positions figures representing different philosophical schools, reflecting the hope in human capacity to comprehend nature. This interplay between human form and surrounding space breaks free from medieval and ancient constraints, embracing the revival of classical aesthetic and intellectual values.

Such dual visual and intellectual perspectives of human thought emerged during the early Renaissance, as seen in the symbolic use of light in Jan van Eyck’s (1390-1441) works. His use of mirrors within paintings, reflecting both the artist and depicted figures, emphasizes a deeper symbolic interaction, a theme prevalent in Northern European art of the 15th century. Objects like candles, candlesticks, towels, basins, and abandoned shoes carried rich symbolic meanings widely understood in the 17th century. (Roskell, 2004, p. 201)

The significant advancements of the Renaissance era shifted focus towards still life painting, adopting a new, systematic approach to studying objects, their light and shadow interplay, and textures, with an emphasis on meticulous detail. This approach aimed to uncover hidden meanings by imbuing objects with symbolic and metaphorical significance. These visual windows inspired artists to explore new techniques and open new avenues of expression, transforming the mundane and everyday into complex relationships that reflect humanity’s connection with the surrounding world.

This is exemplified in the Baroque Spanish painter Diego Velázquez’s (1599-1660) work *Las Meninas* (Figure 4), where, from within the painting, he gazes upon us.

			
Figure 1: Giotto	Figure 2: Giorgione	Figure 3: Jan van Eyck	Figure 4: Velázquez

Velázquez positions himself opposite his painting, and to his right, which is our left, there is a painting in the process of being born, accompanied by a team of ladies-in-waiting, all set within a room lit by windows to our right. On the deep wall above, a

mirror reflects the King and Queen of Spain. Intriguingly, Velázquez himself becomes part of his painting, both as the artist and the subject, standing within the scene while simultaneously observing and painting it. He is the painting, the spectator, and the self-drawing entity all at once. (Al-Maskini, 2014, p. 149)

The influence of medieval symbols and techniques, such as those found in Japanese prints, is evident in the works of French painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). There, a reaction unfolds across numerous artistic climates, shaping modern visual arts, emerging schools, and a retreat to ancient artistic practices, seeking a more spontaneous and humanly sincere environment. (Ismail, 2021, p. 39)

Similarly, the German painter Emil Nolde (1867-1956) returned to medieval times as a measure of comparison, examining stained-glass windows from Augsburg and Strasbourg, alongside colored wooden blocks and illuminated manuscripts from seven or eight centuries ago. (Reid, *The Present Art*, 1986, pp. 59-60)

In the surrealist works of Spanish painter Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), a peculiar and absurd visual language arises, conveying irrationality. Most of Dalí's works rely on the automatic spontaneity dictated by the unconscious mind and the dreamlike exploration of form. His paintings often appear as though viewed through a mirror, distorting human imagery to suggest unstable, masked appearances, indirectly conveying meaning through symbolic metaphor. (Al-Khamisi, 2008, p. 74)

Dalí's works seek to destabilize the visual realm, creating doubt and differentiation between the world of illusion and reality. This is seen in his unconventional representations that provoke both humor and absurdity, often in works reminiscent of the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), particularly during World War I. In his works, houses appear hollow (Figure 5), uninhabitable, surrounded by a mysterious space that seems to question the very existence of interiority. This technique mirrors the intersection of two worlds—places and times—that intersect like myths filled with vision and psychological states. (Müller, 1988, p. 107)





Subsection Two: The Window in Modern Painting Schools

The metaphor of the window served as a major source of inspiration for Renaissance artists, particularly in portraying our instantaneous vision of time and space. Windows appeared as backgrounds to their artworks. For instance, in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, windows frame landscapes with open spaces and distant mountains. The same technique is used in the work of Dutch Baroque artist Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), particularly in his painting *The Artist's Studio* (1665) (Figure 6). Vermeer's work amplifies the visual experience by dividing the studio space into areas of perception and perspective, with the framework of the painting reflecting our view of the artist's work and the overlapping representations. He used light to symbolize kindness, simplicity, and familiarity. Even when light quietly filters through a narrow window into one of Vermeer's darker indoor scenes, it is welcomed as a friendly companion. (Eliot, 1979, pp. 26-27)

In the Baroque style, another painting by Vermeer (Figure 7) depicts an astronomer or architect touching a globe with his right hand. While the work appears scientific, an ideal atmosphere prevails, alongside the professional use of various elements: a carpet laid out on the table, books seemingly about astronomy, and a window transformed into the corner of the room. A double window to the left appears within the frame of the painting, suggesting an astronomical study.

A man with thick hair, dressed in blue with a robe, is seen examining the globe, shifting it with his fingers while his left hand rests on the table's edge, which is covered with a thick cloth.

The illuminated interior element also became a focal point for Romantic artists, such as in *The Violinist* (Figure 8) by German painter Otto Franz Schüderer (1834-1902). In this work, the character's interaction with light adds profound significance to the piece.

			
Figure 5: De Chirico	Figure 6: Vermeer	Figure 7: Vermeer	Figure 8: Franz Schüderer

The musician, whose gaze is directed outward towards an undefined distance, represents the focal character of the piece. Consequently, the painting encapsulates a contradictory symbolic structure, urging a departure from the mundane routines of daily life. There are other artworks by Romantic artists (Figures 9, 10, 11) who sowed the seeds of liberation within the same movement, such as the German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). In his works, the window serves as a mediator between the internal and external worlds. He gazes upon a vibrant world that contrasts with the dull, greyish-brown interior. For him, the window is the port through which ships sail towards unknown realms, opening toward encounters and experiences that are both unexpected and uncharted.

		
Figure 9 David Friedrich	Figure10 David Friedrich	Figure 11 David Friedrich

However, the dimensions of the window in realism, as seen in the painting by Valentin Alexandrovich Serov (1865-1911) (Figure 12), lean toward an aesthetic quality, focusing on the subject's materiality and translating it, rather than pondering symbols or deeply felt images. The window serves as an element of authenticity, capturing a scene from daily life.

There is also the painting *The Balcony* (Figure 13) by the French Impressionist painter Manet, which, in its relationship to realism, is far removed from imagination. It is “immediate and instantaneous in recording what is seen, more than understanding what lies beyond. Upon closer inspection, the image appears unfinished when compared to the cold, glossy surface of *Madame Moitessier*, yet it holds the clarity and influence of real life” (Levari, 2000, p. 132).

In a similar vein, the Dutch painter Van Gogh grounded his paintings in a barren, desolate life observed through a window resembling a prison cell. The still life consists of a vase with sunflowers, a chair, and the rural surroundings of Arles, which he often viewed through the window of the room he was confined in (Levari, 2000, pp. 147-148). Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* (Figure 14) in 1889 through a window that offers a panoramic view extending endlessly beneath a sky teeming with life, movement, and chaos, crowded with stars. He captured the twisting, intertwining branches of cypress trees in the foreground, moving in strange rhythms, emphasizing the expressive power of the scene with the contrasting use of orange and yellow hues against the blue sky. These colors reflect the turmoil of his tragic life. This period marked a profound shift in his art, moving away from the grim realism of rural scenes and peasant life toward an expressionism filled with dynamic motion



Figure 12: Valentin Serov



Figure 13: Manet



Figure 14: Van Gogh

On the other hand, the window opens to the mysterious inner world, its surfaces of color from the French painter Matisse (1869-1954) offering a design and expressive dimension through windows that acquire a symbolic and metaphorical significance—if one may say so—being windows through which we look into his inner world, reflecting the intensity of human emotion and expression towards nature. The light that Matisse creates flows from the brilliance of color harmonies, and the form is suggested by the lines, lines which also possess the ornamental value of Arabesque decoration. He has constructed a space by choosing colors and through the relationships between objects, which work as distinctive relationships together (Elgar, 1988, p. 69).

In another direction, the window in the works of surrealist René Magritte ventures into an unknown, undiscovered world linked to dreams, images, and illusions. It is the language of art venturing into the unknown. He uses the window as a symbol to express something else. Therefore, “One often detects in Magritte’s images puzzles that raise

troubling questions about the nature of objective truth, and about humanity's desire to control it by naming and depicting things. It posits claims which suspend the human predicament, but one might ask: If Magritte's brilliance sometimes led him to transform images into visual riddles, these would lose their meaning once they became familiar" (Bowness, 1990, p. 246). It is no coincidence that the window overlooking the sea is considered a symbol of freedom, travel, and absence. There is always a sense of negativity embodied in the inability to predict the future with certainty. These are meanings uncovered by the basic principle of Surrealism, as stated in Breton's manifesto, which speaks of a passage from rationality to the unknown and the unconscious. This world of dreams unfolds through incomprehensible visual scenes filled with encoded images. Figures (15-16-17-18).



Figure15 Magritte



Figure16 Magritte



Figure17 Magritte



Figure18 Magritte

Chapter Three: Research Procedures



First: Research Community:

The research community consisted of 150 works of modern European painting, encompassing the time frame from 1658 to 1935. These works were gathered from various sources, including the internet, artists' websites, and other relevant references.

Second: Research Sample:

A purposeful selection was made, consisting of four samples from the Baroque, Romantic, Surrealist, and Fauvist schools of art.

Third: Research Tool:

The theoretical framework's intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic indicators were used as the research tool for the present study.

Fourth: Research Method:

The descriptive method was applied to analyze the selected sample.

Fifth: Sample Analysis:



Model (1)

Artist: Johannes Vermeer

Title: The Milkmaid

Medium: Oil on canvas

Year: 1658

Dimensions: 45.5 x 41 cm

Provenance: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

The iconic painting “The Milkmaid” depicts a young woman pouring milk from a seemingly ceramic jug held in her right hand, while her left hand supports it. To the right of the woman, a bottle rack hangs at the intersection of two walls, and a window on her right casts its light across the room, illuminating the back wall, which serves as a focal point of the composition. Vermeer captures a fleeting moment bathed in serene morning light, gently streaming through the window to touch the right side of the figure, including her headscarf, face, hands, and the utensils placed on a table covered with a thick, blue linen cloth.

The painting's quiet allure lies in its documentation of a tranquil moment, where the woman's contemplative stillness harmonizes with her fixed gaze. Vermeer imbues the figure with profound wisdom, transcending the mere physicality of the scene to elevate it into a contemplative experience. The interplay of the softly diffused light with the static interior evokes a subtle tension, as the serene light caresses the woman and her surroundings, imbuing the space with a touch of anticipation. Her dark blue apron, echoing the hue of the table, enhances the depth of the composition without disrupting its calm.

This masterpiece captures the essence of daily routine, yet Vermeer's meticulous attention to detail offers a rich glimpse into the cultural and social context of the 17th century. The painting juxtaposes two temporal dimensions: the immediacy of the maid's task and the timeless stillness of her introspection. This duality highlights Vermeer's iconic ability to balance color, spatial harmony, and the social fabric of Dutch

life, creating a timeless meditation on the interplay between the mundane and the profound.



Model (2)

Artist: Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1852-1909)

Title: A View from the Window

Medium: Oil on canvas

School: Academic

Year of Completion: 1881

In the artwork titled “A View from the Window,” a young girl gazes outward, her left hand resting on the inner window frame, while her right hand holds a yellow-orange fruit. Seated on the windowsill, she appears relaxed and at ease. Beside her, a chair faces the incoming light, and beyond the room’s confines, dense trees form a dark, natural backdrop. The glass, reflecting the girl’s delicate features and her loose white dress, captures the texture of her thick headscarf.

Alma-Tadema masterfully depicts the architectural elements, capturing proportions and surfaces with exceptional precision. The intricate details imbue the scene with a sense of tranquility and calm, accentuated by the luminous glow filtering through the square glass panes. The room is furnished with finely crafted wooden pieces, their intricate detailing rendered with care and beauty. Despite their scattered arrangement, each piece reflects the bright light from outside, showcasing the artist’s adept control over color and luminosity.

While the painting exudes a distinct aesthetic charm, it also carries an air of mystery. The visual transitions within the composition invite the viewer to explore the surrounding details, eventually leading back to the central figure. Her expression, the delicate transparency of her white dress, and her distant gaze evoke questions, adding depth to the scene. The interplay between the realistic depiction and the idealized atmosphere draws attention to the interplay of light and shadow, reminiscent of the works of Dutch masters like Vermeer. The white-painted walls, wooden furniture, and flowing light suggest an idealized Dutch or English domesticity, reinforcing a serene, contemplative ambiance inspired by Vermeer’s interior portrayals, where light flows through windows and reflects off surfaces, creating a harmonious balance between interior and exterior worlds.

Model (3)

Artist: Henri Matisse

Title: The Open Window

Medium: Oil on canvas

Year: 1905

Matisse's *The Open Window* stands as an early icon of modernism, a small yet pivotal work from the Fauvist school. Distinguished by its vivid, saturated colors applied with swift, bold brushstrokes, this piece embodies the technical maturation of Impressionism and its successors. Beneath the lyrical and aesthetic surface lies a complex visual and conceptual depth, characterized by Matisse's intense use of color, deliberately eschewing traditional light and shadow play and spatial depth.

Matisse divides the canvas into equal, color-drenched sections of blue, green, and red, exploiting the stark contrast between green and red—a recurring motif in his earlier works. This technique underscores his fascination with color juxtaposition. His brushwork varies from short, rapid strokes to longer, fluid lines, treating both interior and exterior elements—the room, window, balcony, and distant harbor view—with a unique rhythmic interplay.

The visual treatment diverges from Renaissance traditions, elevating the scene to a realm of vibrant abstraction. The window-framed view brims with light and movement; boats float on pink and violet waters, infusing the scene with vitality. Through his Fauvist palette, Matisse liberates the painting from conventional norms, as reflected in his assertion: "When I put down a blue, it is not a sky, and when I put down a green, it is not grass." This philosophy manifests in the dynamic interplay of contrasting hues, generating visual vibrations that resist stability.

Matisse's bold gradation of color, devoid of traditional shadows and defined forms, places the window off-center, creating a whimsical, geometrically intersecting composition that suggests multiple windows. The focal point shifts toward the harbor, framed by dark tonal variations, connecting the interior with the exterior. The open windows lead the viewer's gaze outward, from the flowerpots to the spatial depth of the harbor, crafting a seamless extension from the intimate to the expansive, capturing a harmonious blend of interior and exterior worlds.



Model (4)

Artist: René Magritte

Title: The Human Condition

Year: 1935

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 100 x 81 cm

Provenance: National Gallery of Art, Washington, United States

In *The Human Condition*, Magritte presents a surreal interplay between two intertwined yet distinct themes: the painting on the canvas and the view through a window. The composition features an easel within a room, positioned before a window that reveals a natural landscape. The painted canvas seamlessly merges with the view beyond the window, creating an illusion where the canvas appears to be an unframed continuation of the external scene.

At first glance, one might assume Magritte has simply depicted the landscape outside, suggesting the canvas is part of the actual view. However, this illusion is deliberately deceptive, challenging the viewer's perception of reality. The painted canvas represents the real scene beyond the window, yet it simultaneously questions the authenticity of the visual experience.

Magritte incorporates a doorway within the composition, featuring a black sphere resting on the orange-hued floor. This element adds to the visual trickery, crafting a complex, layered scene. Despite utilizing commonplace, everyday objects, Magritte transforms them into enigmatic and uncanny elements by placing them in unconventional, puzzling contexts. His titles often contradict the depicted scenes, further emphasizing the surreal dissonance.

Through this approach, Magritte redefines painting as a critical tool, capable of challenging perception and provoking visual engagement. His method involves detaching objects from their familiar names and allowing the visual narrative to become a language filled with contradictions, deception, and doubt. By doing so, he invites viewers to question the relationship between text and image, and to reconsider the boundaries between reality and illusion.

Chapter Four: Results and Conclusions

Research Results:

1. The window is distinguished by carefully selected scenes that evoke wonder and intrigue, transcending its physical boundaries. (*Model 4*)
2. The window served as an inspirational element in painting, allowing the transcendence of temporal and spatial limits, recapturing aesthetic and semantic moments within the lost space-time continuum. (*Models 1, 4*)
3. The window embodies a poetic representation of reality, positioned between two worlds, imbuing the work with intellectual value filled with contradictions, leading to spontaneous regeneration. It is not self-contained but charged with an interactive space, rich in visual discoveries yielding varied outcomes over time. (*Models 1, 4*)
4. The window reinterprets reality, not through visible means but by exploring the transcendent, the different, and the unexpected. (*Models 3, 4*)
5. The window, by offering a view into the unknown and the external world, imparts a sense of tranquility and calmness, capturing everyday life scenes with attention to light

and shadow, expressed through sharp, fragmented brushstrokes that blend realism, symbolism, and expressionism. (*Models 3, 2*)

6. The use of indeterminate lyrical colors in framing and shaping both the interior and exterior of the window is a fundamental characteristic, aligning with abstract depictions of reality through imagination that portrays the formless and the intangible. (*Model 3*)

7. The window's symbolic meaning is guided by aesthetic and expressive sensory requirements, as artists in realistic painting ventured into exploring dreams and aspirations within their humanistic contexts. (*Models 1, 2*)

8. In European painting, the window brought together disparate elements of the interior and exterior, creating a unique harmony between light and shadow, culminating in a cohesive, distinctive work. (*Models 1, 2, 3, 4*)

9. The window conveyed various messages and meanings, blending realism with symbolic depth, intersecting with abstraction, offering the viewer interpretative layers beyond its visible aesthetic surface. (*Models 1, 4*)

Conclusions:

1. Windows in art serve as visual conduits through which artists explore themes of alienation and isolation, reflecting the human condition amidst modern technological advancements.

2. Space, as a visual, intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic value, is indispensable in painting, deeply intertwined with human intellectual, psychological, and existential aspects.

3. The overlapping representations shown through windows amplify the visual experience, oscillating between the literal scene on the canvas and perceptual states, making the viewer a part of an illusory theatrical act that mirrors introspective engagement.

4. While the window often serves as a source of light in artworks, it frequently becomes a focal point for external events, reflecting nature's volatility and the emotional turbulence of characters engaging silently with nature or awaiting significant moments.

5. The depiction of windows in modern art has overflowed with diverse and subtle styles, including abstraction, expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, and romanticism.