

What Is a Triptych in the Art World?



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A triptych is a picture in three parts. The triptych is a very popular format in the arts for a range of reasons and they're designed to be displayed together as a single piece. Although traditionally applied to painting or relief-carved panels, the term has also been used refer to artworks in other media which are formed of three panels or screens, such as video.

Triptychs may be large or small and they may be hinged for a standing display or hung separately on the wall. It can be used in any art medium, including paintings, drawings, and photographs to create a compelling piece of art or to tell a story.

In the painting above, the first panel features a pioneering young couple in the Australian bush. The man is building a fire in the background whilst the woman ponders in the foreground.

The second panel features the couple with a newborn. There is more light showing through the trees in the background and a small house has been built.

The final panel features a male subject who is at a grave. It is uncertain if the subject is the pioneer from the earlier sections, the son of the couple or a stranger passing by. The bush in the background has been cleared and a city is emerging.

Another notable triptych artwork is **Three Studies of Lucian Freud** by Francis Bacon. It was sold for US\$142.4 million in 2013.

The Significance of the Triptych

The word triptych (pronounced *trip-tick*) has its origins in the Greek '*triptykhos*' meaning "three-layered." It is, quite simply, a picture that is painted or printed on three panels. Likewise, a diptych has two panels, a quadtych has four panels, and a polyptych has five or more panels.

Traditionally, the triptych is used for altarpieces. These include a large central panel and two smaller panels painted inside folding doors. As well as being functionally appropriate, the three-fold nature reflects the religious symbolism of the number three.

The three-act dramatic structure is also evident in the application of the triptych format by many artists, with the panels representing a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Reasons to Use a Triptych in Art

The way an artist uses the three panels of a triptych can vary. Sometimes they may flow together to form a single unified scene or they may each function as a separate painting. Typically, there will be a strong sense of visual coherence.

Artist may use a triptych for any of the following reasons:

- To give the art a narrative in the beginning, middle, and end sense of a story.
- To continue a theme along three pieces.
- To examine a subject from multiple perspectives or with varying techniques.
- To show the progression of a subject, such as its growth or decline.
- To showcase three separate elements that are related and complement each other.
- To break up a very large piece for easier transport, storage, and display.