

Buying Paintings: Realism

In literature as well as art realism is the depiction of subjects as they appear in practical, everyday life. Realism does not deal with interpretation or embellishment. The point of realism is to capture people or situations in a gritty and real way. Similar to realist photography, the realist painter does not place emphasis on stylization but is most interested in depicting situations just as they appear to the naked eye.

While realism depicts real characters in real situations, there tends to be emphasis placed on the sordid or ugly. In this way, realism is very much the opposite of idealism. In idealism the theory is that the reality and regular world around us is merely a reflection of a higher truth. With realism, however, it's as though we're saying "all I know for sure is what my eyes and other sense organs tell me".

As a reaction to the idealism of Romanticism in France during the middle of the nineteenth century, realism became the popular cultural movement in many ways. Realism is often linked to demands for political and social reform, as well as ideas about democracy. Dominating the literature and visual arts of England, France and the United States between the years 1840 and 1880, realism was popular throughout many facets of life.

Realists tend to throw out such hubris as classical forms, theatrics and lofty esoteric subjects in favor of the most commonplace subjects and themes. A very famous example of a realist painting is Jean-Francois Millet's 'The Gleaners' from the year 1857. This painting portrays three women working in the fields. The colors are very realistic, almost drab, by contrast to non-realist paintings.

Realism as an art movement appears as early as 2400 BC in India in the city of Lothal. Examples of this type of art can be found around the world and throughout art history. In a very broad sense, realism is art that shows any subject or object that has been observed and accurately depicted, though the entire art piece may not conform to realism conditions.

During the late sixteenth century the most prominent mode of art in European art was a form called mannerism, which showed artificial and elongated figures in very unreal, though graceful positions. Then an artist by the name of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio emerged and changed much of the direction of art simply by depicting real humans doing real things. His work shows images painted directly from everyday life and shows an immediacy that had never been seen before.

Dutch art had any realism entries, with their fondness for homely details and humble situations and subjects. Rembrandt is a very well known example of Dutch realism in paintings. The Barbizon School took realism in a whole new direction when, by observing and painting nature, the beginnings of Impressionism took shape.

Realism still plays a role in paintings and art of all kinds today. From film to television and the fine arts, realism is still a major player in the world of creative and expressive processes and productions. Throughout human history there have been those that wish to see things as they are and those that see in reality a hint of the divine. Realism went a long way in providing the one extreme with which we've discovered several in between in more modern and contemporary art.

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