

# **Why Realism Survives**

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Sometimes it surprises me that Realist painting survived the 20th century. There are many reasons it might not have. The camera, which produces images less expensively and more quickly than painting, became ubiquitous. Modernism, which defined itself by its break with artistic tradition, dominated culture for most of the century. The consequent derailing of traditional art education assured Modernism's hegemony, but made it difficult for a student to find training in traditional skills. An onslaught of entertainment media offered easier recreation than contemplating art. Marshall McLuhan warned that "the medium was the message," only to have the phrase taken by some as a mantra. New technology provided images of events nearly simultaneous with their occurrence. And yet, at the beginning of our new century, there are still people who like to look at paintings that look like something, and people like me who feel compelled to paint them.

Why Realism survives, flourishes actually--we are in the midst of a Realist revival--is not obvious, even to those who love the art. And although we may have quit the 20th century knowing what we like, our vocabulary for discussing it is in disarray. One concept especially surrounded by confusion is verisimilitude, or having the semblance of truth. With regard to painting, it refers to how convincingly a work mimics the appearance of visual reality.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to Realism has been the loss of its monopoly on verisimilitude. Other media--photography, film, video, computer graphics--routinely offer images that also appear real. They can even be seen as competing for niches in an ecosystem of imaging. That painting could endure this jostling for audience and purpose and emerge with both intact was not always certain. In fact, it is still not certain, for all the inherent worth of painting. Why it, or any medium perseveres, as others fail, is a topic which touches anyone who finds himself writing e-mail rather than letters, or scanning newspaper headlines over the Internet. The survival of Realist painting tells us something about the nature of Realism, and the relation of media in general. Realist painting remains viable after a tumultuous century for one reason; it offers a way of seeing which people still find relevant.

Realism's troubles began in the 19th century, in France. Conservative painters, through their positions at various academies, held stifling control over the yearly Paris Salon. Exhibition in the government-sponsored Salon bestowed upon an artist the official recognition required for financial success. The Academics refused Realist, and later Impressionist, art; it challenged their prevailing orthodoxy. From our vantage across the extremes of 20th-century art, it can be difficult to appreciate the profundity of this schism. To us,

both Realist and Academic works appear realistic. This is because their difference lies not primarily with technique, but rather with subject matter. Realist Gustave Courbet said, "Show me an angel and I'll paint one"--a direct challenge to the Academics who earned comfortable incomes painting angels, Roman soldiers and seraglios. Conversely, the Academics viewed Realist subjects, such as a peasant nursing a baby in the third-class compartment of a train, as inappropriate and lacking nobility. Moreover, in a century pummeled by aftershocks of the French Revolution, aesthetic positions took on an extra fervor through their association with political stances.

There were also differences in technique between Realists and Academics, but the wide range of technical practices among Realists makes generalization inaccurate. There was no Realist technique. Realism "was simply a name applied to those who sought to revitalize the centuries-old artistic tradition of accurate, truthful recording of the world and to give this tradition contemporary relevance," writes Gabriel P. Weisberg in *The Realist Tradition* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980). Many of the names associated with French Realism are familiar: Gustave Courbet, Jean François Millet, Edouard Manet, Henri Fantin-Latour, Jules Bastien-Lepage, Jules Breton, Eugène Boudin.

The close of the 19th century found artists splintered into several camps: Academics, Realists, Impressionists, and a budding avant-garde. Accompanying this divisiveness was the increasing presence of photography. The varied reactions of painters to the camera complicates our understanding of its impact upon them; but by the early 20th century, champions of the avant-garde were arguing that photography had rendered pictorialism obsolete. The 1913 Armory Show in New York introduced the work of Modern artists--Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Duchamp and others--to the American public. In an article about the exhibit published in the *Sunday Times*, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz gave voice to an idea that would echo through later art history and criticism; namely, that the camera was better at recording visual reality than the brush. He wrote, "A score or more of painters and sculptors who decline to go on doing merely what the camera does better, have united in a demonstration of independence...that will wring shrieks of indignation from every ordained copyist of 'old masters' on two continents and their adjacent islands."

The argument that photography displaced naturalistic painting has a facile logic, but one observation cuts it short: most paintings would make uninteresting photographs, and most photographs would make su-

perfidious paintings. That simple fact suggests that photography and painting achieve their impact differently, that they do not do the same thing.

The task before any image-maker is twofold: to observe the world and to remake that observation. Each medium lends itself to a different way of going about this. These differences can be profound, but subtle; they define the place of a medium in our lives. Toward a deeper appreciation of the place of painting, this essay will first discuss the nature of pictorial observation, followed by an analysis of how artists remake that observation into illusion. It does so in light of the proliferation of new media, and with special regard to photography, the medium most often compared to realist painting.

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Robert Doisneau's famous 1950 photograph of a couple embracing in front of the Hotel de Ville is a staple of frame shop windows. A few years ago newspapers reported that this photo, which had become an icon of French romance, was, indeed, posed; the couple were hired models. For many, this knowledge robbed the image of much of its impact. That impact relied on our belief that the couple really existed, that they loved one another, and that Doisneau just happened to stumble upon the scene. For this very reason, a similar treatment of an embracing couple would not make a good painting. One assumes that a painter hires models, and that the scene is carefully staged. The fortuitous juxtapositions of a passing moment, the subject of many great photographs, look trite when painted. A painting must evoke emotion differently. The emotional impact of Realism comes from the viewer's slow realization of the magnitude of the painter's observation, not from anything particularly interesting about the subject itself.

Occasionally, someone asks me if I work from photographs. I do not, nor do my paintings look like photographs. The questioner merely wants to know how I achieve a naturalism which has impressed him. The misunderstanding arises because, for most of the recent past, painting abnegated verisimilitude, which consequently became the sole domain of photography. "Photographic" has mistakenly become an adjective for anything that looks real.

The other question people ask me is how long it takes me to paint a picture. The answer is usually "two to three weeks." This also never fails to impress, whether because the work was done so quickly, or so slowly, I'm not sure. Nevertheless, the amount of time is significant; much of it spent looking. At bowls of

apples, plastic bags, barns, snow, walls, nuts, donuts, naked ladies--you name it, I have spent months of my life observing it, working from life.

If one spends time observing, the overwhelming nature of the visual world makes itself known, particularly when looking at a landscape, but also in the controlled environment of a north-lit studio. Moreover, this world changes quickly. Not only can the vagaries of natural light transform every color instantly, but subjects themselves move, rot, melt, and wilt. Outdoors, the range of luminance from the brightest patch of sun on the sidewalk to a shadow under a bush can vary a thousandfold; the grayscale from white to black on a canvas varies by about twenty. Thus, it is not physically possible to copy what one sees. The challenge to the painter or photographer is to select and compress, to remake observation onto something finite and flat.

There are several practical differences between how photographers and painters observe. Cameras are very good at capturing details. They mercilessly record what's there, even if you didn't notice it, or didn't think it was important. A good photographer learns to see what the camera will record, and to control it.

A painter, on the other hand, learns to ignore. He simplifies to arrive at an essential statement. Some painters even squint; this blurs their vision and eliminates detail. When I paint a tree, I don't start with the leaves, I start with big masses of light and shadow. Although my paintings could be described as very detailed, I myself never put in detail. Rather, I make big, essential statements on smaller and smaller areas of canvas, down to the stroke of a small brush, in a kind of painterly recursion called working the parts. The challenge of working the parts is to keep the big picture in mind--a concept familiar to chess players and baseball managers.

A painter's eyes wander--all around, at different focal lengths, and over time. A painting does not recreate a single moment. It is composite of the way things looked over a period of days, weeks, or perhaps years. Extended observation gives the best paintings a timeless quality. They have a sense of the infinite within the finite, a feeling of immortality, which differs from the photograph's frozen moment. Perhaps this is why so many Realists describe their efforts as meditative.

Crucially, a painter makes an image manually. A photographer can control the image using camera settings and darkroom techniques; he can further modify it with a computer. But the image itself is captured mechanically, when the shutter opens.

These few examples serve to illustrate the distinctness of the photographic and the pictorial observations. They also explain why I do not work from photographs, even my own. It isn't that a painting of a photograph can't be interesting; photo-realism, for example, is visually and conceptually engaging. But a painting of a photograph is not the same thing as a painting of life. I want the full visual feast to draw upon, not the preselected subset of another medium.

Each medium, by its nature, engenders a characteristic way of viewing the world. How and what a painter, director, or photographer observes is intimately linked to their medium. Eventually, their audience internalizes that view and notices the world in terms of it. Thus, a vista can be "picturesque," one can feel like one was "in a movie," a funny conversation might be "straight out of a sit-com." Many people have found a stroll downtown forever a richer experience because of the paintings of Edward Hopper.

What distinguishes Realist painting from other media is its penetrating observation of visual reality. This quality of observation characterizes the work of artists that lived prior to the label, such as Vermeer and Velázquez, and it can be seen in artists who are not labeled Realists, for example, the Impressionists. Regardless of label, a spirit of Realism has driven European art forward since the Renaissance. It led European artists to explore deeply and profoundly how we see. Their observations evolved, as did the illusions they made to portray them. The direction of European art until the 20th century was toward greater naturalism. Each of its innovations--perspective, chiaroscuro, tonality, rendering form as color--represent the triumph of observation over formula and convention.

What a Realist painting is, what it can offer, is evidence of a quest for visual truth. It is a truth perceived by one mind and remade in paint for another. Realists pursue this quest with intensity, and that pursuit still has meaning.

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As media vie for audiences, it too often becomes convenient for their promoters to downplay or blur the distinctions between them. The motivations for doing this seem to be commercial, cultural and psychological. Realist painting, in particular, gets hit from all sides. More disturbingly, it is the legitimacy of direct observation that is being undermined. Three examples illustrate my point.

In its "Year in Ideas--2002," *The New York Times Magazine* ran an article about an exhibit of images "photographed" by a flatbed scanner. In the on-line introduction to the exhibit, Kevin Kelly, a founder and editor-at-large of *Wired* magazine, writes, "whatever distinction there may have been between painting and photography, Photoshop [a computer program for image manipulation] has completely vanished it." In describing the scanner as an art medium, he asks the reader to "Imagine a painter who could, like Vermeer, capture the quality of light that a camera can, but with the color of paints." Kelly is obviously a technology booster. Promoting a technology-rich view of the world helps his magazine sales. But having used Photoshop, I have to wonder whether he believes his own hyperbole. Also, since Vermeer preceded the invention of the camera by 200 years, wouldn't it be more appropriate to say that the camera captures the quality of light that Vermeer did? The problem, of course, is that it doesn't.

*Art Through the Ages* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 5th ed., 1970), a standard art history text, neatly explains in a two-page tour-de-force how the camera, by offering a mechanical way of recording light and shade, seemed to replace the pictorial artist, "much as the medieval scribe was displaced by the invention of printing." --a jarring enough statement from my worn 1970 fifth edition to land me in the public library for an afternoon of comparing editions. (By the 1986, 8th edition, the statement has been toned down to "Here, then, was a mechanism that could displace the painstaking artist who busied himself with such matters in the interest of truth to his subject.") This opinion is not unique. The cognoscenti have argued for decades that photography "liberated" painters from having to portray visual reality. This supposedly allowed artists to explore the introverted, subjective, psychological and emotional "realities" which find expression in much 20th-century art.

On a different tack, some claim that technology has always been part of painting. In his controversial book, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Techniques of the Old Masters* (New York: Viking Studio, 2001), artist David Hockney opines that the old masters needed and used optical aids such as the camera oscura, the camera lucida, and mirrors to create their paintings. His thesis:

...from the early fifteenth century many Western artists used optics--by which I mean mirrors and lenses (or a combination of the two)--to create living projections. Some artists used these projected images directly to produce drawings and paintings, and before long this new way of depicting the world--this new way of seeing--had become widespread...to my knowledge, no one has suggested that optics were used as widely or as early as I am arguing here.

As to the dearth of written primary source material supporting his theory, he responds that “artists are secretive about their methods, they are today, and there’s no reason to suppose they were ever any different.” This hasn’t been my experience, but refuting a theory for which little evidence exists is not satisfying work. More interesting is why Hockney might find this thesis attractive. I sense a psychological desire to topple the Gods, to pull the curtain back on the wizard. Even the book’s title implies gnosticism exposed. The seductiveness of the revealed secret puzzles me. People don’t try to explain Einstein’s genius by claiming he owned a calculator. Is it so hard to believe that the old masters were just really good? Is the greatness before us too much to comprehend?

Each of these writers in some way diminishes the importance of human observation. They exemplify attitudes that, taken collectively, amount to a pervasive denial of greatness. That a photo can render reality better, or more truly, than a painting is wrong. Yet this idea has so ingrained itself in our culture that many have trouble believing that breathtaking verisimilitude can come from direct observation. We have too easily renounced the superiority of our awesomely subtle and complex visual system in favor of a mechanical and chemical process--the photograph. Having ceded seeing to machines, some dismiss the skills of drawing and painting as mere copying. Why shouldn't a scanner do it better? Their conclusion is that verisimilitude is best achieved electronically.

The problem with this reasoning is that it shows a lack of appreciation, not only for the immense accomplishments of Western painting, but for seeing itself. Two excellent books are tonics for our dwindling sense of awe: *Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing* by Harvard neurobiologist Margaret Livingstone (New York: Harry N. Abraham, 2002) and E. H. Gombrich's classic, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1960).

Amid its gorgeous coffee-table graphics, Livingstone's book offers the best explanation of how we see that I have come across. She summarizes what scientists know about how the brain interprets visual information, using artwork as examples. It is significant that she is able to illustrate science with art, for it means that science has advanced enough that it can begin to explain the tradition of visual discoveries made by artists.

For a deeper understanding of that tradition, turn to Gombrich. He set himself an ambitious agenda; in the heyday of abstraction, he delivered an apologia of representation. His book explains why art-

ists cannot and do not just copy what they see, how they translate visual perception into illusion, and why art has a history.

It boils down to this: a painter must consider two sets of observations--his own, as he observes the subject, and yours, as you observe his painting. In consideration of your observation, the painter might not paint what he sees. In fact, what the painter sees and how he creates the illusion of it might actually conflict. Take edges, for example. Traditionally, painters blur and lessen the contrast of a receding edge to create the illusion of depth. That is not, however, what we necessarily see. I see the back edge of a table as sharply as the front. If I paint it that way, the table will look like it is tipping over, as Cézanne's still lifes wonderfully illustrate. If I paint the back of your head as sharply as your eyes, you will look flat, as do many of Manet's figures.

Now, Hockney would have you believe that we soften edges because that is how things look through a lens. Its fixed focal length brings objects at one distance into sharpness, while blurring those at other distances. He claims that artists introduced softened edges into paintings by faithfully copying the projected images of lenses. Eventually, this new way of seeing took hold and became conventional. An effect of optics begot a tradition.

Livingstone, however, explains that edge detection is a critical step of vision processing in the brain. Edge detection allows for stereopsis. Stereopsis is our mind's ability to perceive as depth the slight difference in angle between our two eyes. Blurriness interferes with this ability. Livingstone writes:

To see stereoscopic depth, the image needs to be detailed enough that we can detect the slight differences in the two eyes' images; if the images are blurry, we can't see the differences and therefore can't use stereopsis. By eliminating some spatial details and blurring others, the artist hinders stereopsis from telling us that the image is really flat. This allows other depth cues in the painting, such as shading and perspective, to produce a more powerful impression because they are not as strongly contradicted by stereopsis.

Thus, blurriness aids the illusion of depth by preventing the perception of flatness. Painters didn't blindly embrace an optical view of the world. They took advantage of a very human way of seeing to create an illusion.

In one of the most brilliant passages of her book, Livingstone analyzes illusion in Claude Monet's, *Impression, Sunrise*, the namesake of French Impressionism. The painting depicts a deep orange sun rising over a overcast, blue sky, all reflected in the bluish water of the foreground. The brilliant sun jumps from the canvas and is almost hard to look at. It flickers. Monet took on the impossible task of painting the sun and pulled off the illusion. How? Had he simply compressed the luminance linearly, the sun would be the lightest value in the range. "Paint it white!" one would think, "Make everything else black! That'll show how bright it is." Counter intuitively, Monet instead scaled his sun down to a medium value; it is not the lightest spot on the canvas, as a black and white photograph of the painting reveals. Shockingly, in the black and white photo, one can barely find the sun, it is equiluminant with the clouds.

Livingstone points out that the visual systems which process color and luminance are inches apart in the brain, and are "as anatomically distinct as vision is from hearing." The more primitive luminance-based "where" system determines position and movement. The higher-order color-based "what" system lets us recognize objects. When our minds process Monet's painting they encounter a contradiction. The "what" part of our brain sees the sun, a bright orange spot against blue; the "where" part sees nothing at all. As the mind works to reconcile this strongly conflicting information, it perceives a shimmering, a flickering, a strangeness which gives the semblance of truth--verisimilitude.

I don't know how Monet figured this out, but his invention of broken color relies on the same principle. I do know that during his life, and even in art history texts, he would never have been accused of achieving verisimilitude. That was reserved for Academic painters like Adolphe-William Bouguereau. I am positing a revisionist view of history. When Monet stated, "I am an eye," he was both giving voice to the prevailing spirit of scientific inquiry and divorcing himself from convention. However, to translate what his "eye" saw into a painting, he needed to invent a new set of conventions. If you doubt the conventionality of broken color and a high-keyed palette, visit any seaside village art gallery. Neither broken color, nor broken convention, made Monet great. Rather, the quest for visual truth that led him to invent broken color is what made Monet great. In this most important respect, the Impressionists followed in the European tradition. It is unfortunate that the Academics did not recognize the Impressionist contributions to painting convention.

Artists play with us using a body of tradition which fits like a key into the lock of human visual perception. They manipulate edge, gradation, color, value, finish, line, scale, and texture. They make the kind of

decisions that a camera or scanner cannot, dependent as those devices are upon chemical reactions and algorithms. These decisions define an artist. They become the history of art.

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One casualty of Modernism was traditional art education. Academies and ateliers of past centuries followed a course of study that recapitulated the physiology of vision. Central to their approach was a strict division between color and value. Novices drew for months or even years from white plaster casts of antique sculpture. This exercise eliminated color and made apparent the essential problems of drawing--seeing the connection between light and value, modeling form, understanding the power of edges, getting the shape right. Once the student had mastered these skills, he moved on to the more difficult task of applying them to a colored object, the human figure. Only after producing a competent figure drawing, or académie, did the student get to use color. Not only the Academics, but the Realists, even to an extent the Impressionists, received this training. Likewise, during the 19th-century, scores of American painters, among them Thomas Eakins, Abbott Thayer, William Paxton, Robert Henri and Mary Cassat, flocked to Parisian academies. They brought home their lessons to American art schools.

Unfortunately, academic training was largely abandoned in this country by the middle of the 20th century. One notable exception was the private atelier of R. H. Ives Gammell. Concerned that the oral tradition of studio practice might be lost, he fervently passed on the European traditions to a younger generation of artists, some of whom, in turn, founded their own ateliers.

Today, young artists in pursuit of academic training ironically turn to unaccredited private ateliers to complete their education. A friend recently expressed to me his delight with this phenomena--"we get to belong to an underground!" The best young artists from these ateliers go on to earn decent livings, not from university teaching positions or grants, but through the sale of their art. Many of these artists are under forty. We are witnessing the rise of a new generation of very talented Realist painters. They offer a contemporary art that is knowledgeable and respectful of the European tradition. Appreciatively, a public responds.

Perhaps Realism's current popularity is due to a swing of the pendulum, or as my friend suggested, the end of Postmodernism. But to me, it has another significance: despite the hype, new media do not necessarily shove older ones toward obsolescence. The presence of an animated Bart Simpson on television does

not make a one-frame, pen and ink, *New Yorker* cartoon less funny. Rather, what most often happens is that a new medium creates new uses for itself. For example, I have never seen a painting of a child's birthday party, from any century, but images of birthday cakes and candles fill the pages of photo albums. Photography created our need to compulsively record events. By eliminating the expense of film processing, video and digital cameras urge us to record raw minutiae. Examples abound. I saw a tourist experiencing his entire *Haunted Mansion* ride at Disneyland through the lens of a video camera. I myself took hundreds of digital photos of houses before I purchased one. For the most part, these technologies have created a market for themselves. They have not taken one away from painting.

Nevertheless, other media have impacted the Realist's portrayal of a certain type of subject. One of Velázquez's masterpieces, *Surrender at Breda*, commemorates an incident between opposing warriors in which humanitarianism prevailed. It depicts the two commanders gracefully greeting one another, after agreeing to end further bloodshed. Visually, the painting reminds me of a similar handshake: that of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. Yet a painting commemorating that handshake would seem redundant, a false afterthought to an image already seared in our minds. Thus, because of photography and cable television, painting does not provide the initial image we associate with a recent event. The Realist contributes his image in a wake of others. This does not mean that the painting cannot have emotional power, but rather that it must compete with a plethora of previous images for relevance.

This comes with a loss. I am not sure that Goya's *3rd of May, 1808*, or Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* would be painted anymore, or were they, if they would have the impact of these earlier masterpieces. *Guernica* is the only 20th-century painting I can think of that provides the dominant image of an entire war. It's obviously not a realist work, and Picasso painted it in 1937, half a century before CNN brought real-time images of an invasion into our living rooms. Modern media created our desire for instantaneous reportage. Clearly, this is not a desire that painting ever fulfilled, but reportage effects the Realist's more considered image-making.

In other areas such as portraiture, landscape, still life, and genre, Realism has successfully defended its niche. What would it take for one medium to displace another? The answer lies with observation. Each medium encourages a way of observing the world. If that quality of observation were to lose relevance, or if it could be produced more efficiently, the medium would fade away.

Realism's quality of observation is unassailable. Anything that mimicked it would be as labor intensive as painting itself. Only if people cease to appreciate the greatness of observation which gives rise to Realism, will Realism become vulnerable.

Realism has survived the inexpensive, plentiful images of other media because this greatness of observation still speaks to us; it bears witness to the beauty of the ordinary. It attends. To observe like this requires humility. When I stand before a painting that moves me, whether by an old master, or a contemporary realist, the humility with which the artist approached his task overwhelms me. The work radiates an integrity of effort, an honesty, that can bring me to tears. I am struck by the mortality of the artist's subjects. I feel a poignant connection, sometimes across centuries, to his humanness. Those are the feelings that Realism can evoke. I cannot help but believe they will continue to matter.