

Art Styles - Realism

Realism in the visual arts is a term which has four main meanings. In the most general sense, the term is applied to works which depict scenes from the life of the poorer classes or that could be described as 'ugly' rather than scenes of conventional beauty. In a more specific sense the term refers to works that are the opposite of 'abstract' or works where subjects are not distorted. 'Realism' is linked closely to the idea of 'naturalism' where the subjects in works aspire to be like natural objects. Finally, realistic is the opposite of idealized and almost the equivalent of 'individualized'. In the broadest sense, realism in a work of art exists wherever something has been well observed and accurately depicted, even if the work as a whole does not strictly conform to the conditions of realism.

The quest for 'realism' in the visual arts has been a current in the arts since very early times. While the art of ancient Egypt, for example, had very rigid and artificial conventions for the depiction of important personages, minor figures and animals were often very well-observed and lifelike. This same concern for 'realism' is also witnessed in sculptures and paintings from ancient Greece and Rome.

In the Early Renaissance, the development of a system of linear perspective in Italy and the inclusion of naturalistic detail in Early Netherlandish painting both contributed to the advance of realism in Western painting. One of the earliest artists to take advantage of these innovations was the Northern European master, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Dürer's watercolours mark him as one of the first European landscape artists, while his ambitious woodcuts revolutionized the potential of that medium.

While Dürer is most famous for illustrating Biblical stories, he was also one of the first artists to view animals as a subject worthy of attention. At the beginning of the 16th century the natural world of animals and plants was becoming a focus of interest as explorers and travelers were returning from distant lands with examples and illustrations of new species.

Dürer's famous woodcut of a rhinoceros is an excellent example of his interest in the natural world. Dürer based his image on a written description and brief sketch by an unknown artist of an Indian rhinoceros that had arrived in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1515. Dürer never actually saw the animal, the first living example of a rhinoceros in Europe since Roman times, which explains some of the anatomical errors in his work. Despite this, the image has such force that it remains one of Dürer's best known and was still used in some German school science textbooks as late as the 19th century. Dürer's watercolour *A Young Hare* of 1502 offers the viewer an even better example of this artist's skill in capturing the natural world. This work has been described as a virtuoso piece of watercolour illustration, particularly as it is believed that the image was based on a stuffed model, and has been frequently reproduced.



Art Styles - Realism continued

Realism as a movement in European art continued to grow in importance and be a primary aim of artists throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In the 19th century realism reached its height in the works of French artists such as Rosa Bonheur, Gustave Courvet and Honoré Daumier and also found expression in works by a number of British and American artists of the time.



Rosa Bonheur
The Horse Fair, 1852-1855
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York



Honoré Daumier
The Third Class Carriage, 1862-1864
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

Art Styles - Realism continued



Gustave Courbet
The Artist's Studio
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Courbet led the Realism movement in France and in 1855 wrote a Realist manifesto for the introduction to the catalogue of an independent, personal exhibition, echoing the tone of the period's political manifestos. As expressed by Courbet in this manifesto:

The title of Realist was thrust upon me just as the title of Romantic was imposed upon the men of 1830. Titles have never given a true idea of things: if it were otherwise, the works would be unnecessary. Without expanding on the greater or lesser accuracy of a name which nobody, I should hope, can really be expected to understand, I will limit myself to a few words of elucidation in order to cut short the misunderstandings. I have studied the art of the ancients and the art of the moderns, avoiding any preconceived system and without prejudice. I no longer wanted to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor, furthermore, was it my intention to attain the trivial goal of "art for art's sake". No! I simply wanted to draw forth, from a complete acquaintance with tradition, the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality. To know in order to do, that was my idea. To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my time, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; in short, to create living art – this is my goal.

Despite the movements popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, however, in the later half of the 19th century developments in technology, changing artistic aims, and artistic influences from outside Europe had the affect of transforming western art and lessening the hold realism had on artists. The development of photography, for example, had a profound affect on artists as it was believed that the camera could perfectly record the world and so the artist no longer needed to present reality. While new artistic styles developed, however, realism continued as a means of expression throughout both the 20th century and into the 21st.

Art Styles - Contemporary Realism



Mary Pratt
Rolls Cooling, Glazed with Stars, 2012
Oil on canvas
Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Canada

All three of the artists featured in the Travelling Exhibition *Lure* utilize meticulous detail and a heightened sense of reality to draw viewers into their works. As such, the works created by these artists can be placed within the art style of Contemporary Realism.

Contemporary Realism is a North American style of painting which came into existence during the 1960s and 1970s. The term Contemporary Realism encompasses all post-1970 sculptors and painters whose aim is to create representational art where the object is to portray the 'real' and not the 'ideal'.

Artists classified as Contemporary Realists form a disparate group but share a desire to work in more traditional forms of representational art. Some focus on naturalistic imagery while others share approaches and methods of Photorealism. Others, meanwhile, continue to follow the legacy of 19th century American realist painting which attempted to portray the cultural exuberance of the figurative American landscape and the life of ordinary Americans at home. The American Realists introduced modernism and what it means to be in the present into American art, concepts which would have a conceptual influence on later art movements such as Pop Art.



Edward Hopper
New York Interior, 1921
Oil on canvas
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Kathy Hildebrandt
Inside the Toy Box, 2015
Pastel on paper
Collection of the artist

Art Styles - Photorealism and Hyperrealism

The works created by the three artists in the exhibition *Lure* can be described as examples of Contemporary Realism. Artists within this style often share approaches and methods borrowed from the styles of photorealism and its off-shoot, hyperrealism.

Photorealism is a genre in art where an artist studies a photograph and then attempts to reproduce the image as realistically as possible in another medium (painting, drawing or other graphic media).

Photorealism evolved from Pop Art in New York during the late 1960s and, like Pop Art, was a reaction against Abstract Expressionism and other abstract movements. As a genre it was also a reaction to the overwhelming abundance of photographic media which threatened to lessen the value of imagery in art. While photorealists create paintings that are as lifelike as possible and mimic photographs, they are also trying to reclaim and exalt the value of an image.



Chuck Close
Phil, 1969
Whitney Museum of Art, New York



Jackson Pollack
No. 31
Genre: Abstract Expressionism



Dennis Peterson
Genre: Photorealism

In photorealist works, technical precision and sharp result are at the center of the work. Photorealists, in contrast to abstract expressionist artists, reintroduced the importance of process, deliberate planning and draftsmanship into the making of art. For such artists, the traditional techniques of academic art are of great significance and meticulous craftsmanship is prized over spontaneity and improvisation.

Art Styles - Photorealism and Hyperrealism continued

Photorealist painting cannot exist without the photograph as change and movement must be frozen in time so that objects can be accurately represented by the artist. Photorealists gather their imagery with the camera and photograph and transfer the image onto canvas. The resulting images are often direct copies of the original, though usually larger, and the photorealist style is tight and precise, often with an emphasis on imagery that requires a great degree of technical prowess and virtuosity to simulate. For this reason reflections and the geometric rigor of man-made environments are very popular.



Mary Pratt
Canadian artist

The focus on the photograph and the attention to detail result in an absence of individualism in photorealist works and gives such works a visual coolness and emotional detachment.



Charles Bell
Circus Act, 1995
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Though still a practiced genre in the visual arts, the height of photorealism was in the 1970s. **In the early 21st century a movement called Hyperrealism came to the fore and it is this genre that is most influential to the works in the exhibition *Lure*.**

Hyperrealism builds on the techniques and aesthetic principles of photorealism. It contrasts the literal approach of photorealist works, however, in that while hyperrealism often uses photographic images as a reference source, hyperrealist works are usually more narrative and emotive. Photorealist artists tend to imitate photographic images and often omit human emotions, political values and narrative elements. Hyperrealists, on the other hand, incorporate emotional, social, cultural and political thematic elements as an extension of the visual illusion.

In essence, the difference between the two genre is that hyperrealism is about something more than technique. While photorealists distance themselves from adding emotion and intent into their work, hyperrealist artists insert narration and feelings into their paintings and drawings. This allows for a less strict interpretation of images and hyperrealist artists will construct their works from a variety of images and details culled from multiple sources.