Topic Page: Realism in art

Definition: realism from Philip's Encyclopedia

Broad term in art history, often interchangeable with naturalism. It is frequently used to define art that tries to represent objects accurately and without emotional bias. It also denotes a movement in 19th-century French art, led by Gustave Courbet, that revolted against conventional, historical or mythological subjects and focused on unidealized scenes of modern life. Superrealism is a 20th-century movement, in which real objects are depicted in very fine detail so that the overall effect appears unreal. See also socialist realism

Summary Article: realism

From The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

In the arts and literature generally, a ‘true-to-life’ approach to subject matter; also described as naturalism. Taken to its extreme, trompe l'oeil paintings trick the eye into believing objects are real. More specifically, realism refers to a movement in mid-19th-century European art and literature, that was a reaction against Romantic and classical idealization and a rejection of conventional academic themes, such as mythology, history, and sublime landscapes. Realism favoured themes of everyday life and carefully observed social settings. The movement was particularly important in France, where it had political overtones; the painters Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier, two leading realists, both used their art to expose social injustice.

Realism was initiated by Courbet, who explained that he wanted to be truthful to his own experience and that, having never seen an angel, he could certainly never paint one. Courbet's work was controversial both for its scale and subject matter; his Burial at Ornans (1850), a large canvas depicting life-size, ordinary people attending a burial, is typical.

In literature, realists include the novelists Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Stendhal, George Eliot, Theodor Fontane, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nicolai Gogol, and Leo Tolstoy. Realism was superseded by Impressionism in painting and naturalism in literature.

With the arrival of avant-garde art in the late 19th century, realism was gradually rejected in favour of more abstract styles.

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