

# Realism Relativized: A Cultural-Historical Approach to What Images Capture

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**Abstract** It is sometimes assumed that there can be a unified and universal analysis of pictorial realism, but this seem implausible. Realism has been understood differently at different times in Western art history, and art-making traditions elsewhere often aspire to forms of realism that contrast with forms operative in the West. Such variations are presented here, with examples from European, African, and East Asian art. Contact between cultural traditions is also considered. Within analytic aesthetics, some definitions of realism are designed to accommodate cultural diversity, but they face challenges. Leading definitions are critically examined. For example, there are theories that focus on entrenchment, visual skills, and informativeness. None of these constructs captures what realist systems share in common, and none provides an ideal framework for explicitly describing how such systems differ. An alternative theory of pictorial realism is presented. On that theory, realist systems each aim to capture aspects of reality, but they focus on different aspects and provide different manners by which those aspects may be captured.

**Keywords** Realism. Art. Depiction. Culture. Relativism. Art History.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Preliminary Problematisations. – 3 A Genealogy of Western Realisms. – 4 Realism Across Cultures. – 5 Cultural Contact. – 6 Philosophical Definitions of Realism. – 7 Relativizing Realism.



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari

## Peer review

Submitted	2021-03-25
Accepted	2021-04-30
Published	2021-06-30

## Open access

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**Citation** Prinz, J. (2021). "Realism Relativized: A Cultural-Historical Approach to What Images Capture". *JoLMA. The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts*, 2(1), 49-72.

**DOI** 10.30687/JoLma/2723-9640/2021/01/004

## 1 Introduction

Realism has been a central theme in the analytic philosophy of images. Images or pictures are said to depict, and they can depict things more or less realistically. This has spawned numerous theories of pictorial realism, theories involving resemblance, illusion, convention, recognition, information, and much else. In recent decades, there has been an appreciation of the fact that pictorial realism may be relative. Indeed, numerous dimensions of relativism appear in the literature. First, the very concept of realism has been used in a number of ways (e.g. Lopes 1995; McMahon 2007); realism can apply to different things: works, features, manners, styles, systems, etc. (e.g. Abell 2007; Kulvicki 2014); realism has been said to be culturally relative (e.g. Goodman 1968; Grigg 1984); realism has been said to vary with the knowledge, interests, and experience of each observer (e.g. Lopes 1995; Abell 2007); there can be incompatible pictorial systems that qualify as equally realistic (e.g. Newall 2011). I aim to contribute to this crowded literature in three ways. First, combining relativism about both culture and the concept of realism, I want to explore how the aims of realistic depiction have varied across time and place. Second, I will draw an implication from these observations. Leading theories of realism may be too ambitious: they try to identify a notion of realism that cuts across diverse traditions. In so doing, they end up being either parochial – overemphasizing recent Western standards – or uninformative – distracting away from the standards by which cultural groups assess their images. Third, I will offer an alternative that places more explicit emphasis on the relativity of realism.

I begin by raising some questions that problematize the notion of realism. Then I turn to art history. After a brief genealogy of realisms in the history of Western art, I survey pictorial aspirations across cultural contexts, along with cases of cross-cultural contact. Some philosophically oriented readers may be impatient with historical details, but, like empirical results more generally, they provide the evidence against which theories of realism must be weighed. With the historical examples in hand, I will turn to philosophical theories of pictorial realism and raise concerns about them. I will end by sketching an alternative that is more overtly relativistic.

## 2 Preliminary Problematizations

Philosophers usually construct theories based on intuitions. A theory of realism is no different. It begins with a sorting task. A theory of realism is supposed to explain why some pictures are intuitively realistic *simpliciter*, or more realistic than others. Theories live and die by these cases. For example, Abell (2007) saddles Hyman

(2005) with the embarrassing implication that cubist paintings are realistic. Sometimes these intuitions are not shared. For example, Abell complains that Lopes (1995) is committed to the realism of diagrams with exploded perspective (like a schematic used to build an Ikea shelf), but Lopes is happy to treat such diagrams as realistic in their intended context of use (assembling furniture). Who is right? How do we decide?

It is easy to generate cases where intuitions are unclear or unstable. For example Michelangelo, deft with *disegno*, rendered bodies where every muscle can be discerned, even on babies. Giorgione, a master of *colorito*, paints anatomy with far less definition. Is one more true to nature than the other? Or, to take another Renaissance example, consider Benozzo Gozzoli's *Feast of Herod* (1461), a continuous narrative painting showing several consecutive episodes all at once. Is this a break of realism? Moments are condensed, which seems unrealistic, but we see more of the story, so it is more informative. Plus, every painting artificially freezes time, so is this any worse? Moving into the Baroque, what should we say about Goya's early work in comparison to his "black paintings". The former are rendered from observation, but the latter express feelings and anxieties more sincerely. Similarly, in twentieth century art, should we regard Georg Grosz as less of a realist than the Nazi artists he despised? His paintings are caricatures, but Nazi art is highly idealized and propagandistic. We might also ask about Tanguy versus De Chirico. Tanguy renders three-dimensional forms more convincingly, but his objects cannot be identified, whereas De Chirico's can with ease. Is one more of a realist? Or, to take a simpler case, is black and white cinema less realistic than color? Are 3D movies more realistic than both?

Things are just as unclear when we move beyond Western art. Consider erotic *shunga* prints from Edo and Meiji Japan. Male and female genitalia are anatomically oversized, but that device allows them to be rendered with more detail. Also, when one attends to sexual organs during an erotic encounter in real life, they become more salient, perhaps occupying more of the visual field. Is the graphic enlargement a distortion or a faithful representation of the effects of attention? We can also ask about Japanese prints more generally, are they realistic? Or, if such questions require comparisons, we can ask, are they more realistic than ancient Egyptian paintings? Ranking for realism seems difficult here.

There may, of course, be clear cases. Ingres painting are more realistic than Byzantine icons, for example. Ife bronzes are more realistic than Akan goldweights. But we might also wonder about the utility and stability of such comparisons. As we will see, the Byzantines seemed to regard their work as comparable in realism to classical statuary, and the Akan goldweights represent far more varied activities than Ife bronzes. Is there even any meaning to such cross-

cultural comparisons? I don't want to suggest that no such comparisons can be made. Perhaps a rough underpainting by Gentileschi is less realistic than the final product. But the idea that we might arrive at a general theory of realism, based on firm intuitions and capable of sorting the undecided cases seems optimistic. Hard cases are not fatal to the theorist of realism, but they provide a *prima facie* reason for wondering whether the messy *explanada* demand a tidy *explanans*, or whether, we should, instead, rethink our theoretical ambitions.

### 3 A Genealogy of Western Realisms

Efforts to explain historical realism often use examples from the Western canon, sometimes contrasting styles that span large swaths of history: Leonardo and Lee Kranser, for instance. Such efforts imply that realism is a timeless feature of depiction. In reality, concepts of realism have changed over time. We can apply current concepts to the past, of course, but at the risk of anachronism. There is something hegemonic about asking how our concepts apply to the distant times. There is also a missed opportunity to understand why we have the concepts we do, and why we care so much about their scope of application. With this in mind, I offer an abbreviated history of Western realisms.

Let's begin with classical Greece, since it is often regarded as a source for much subsequent thinking about realism in art. The Greeks were certainly concerned with realism, but they had more than one conception, and there are reasons to wonder whether those really coincide with our own. One idea, sometimes captured by the word *mimesis*, can be extrapolated from the famous fable of the painter Zeuxis, whose grapes were so realistically rendered that birds tried to eat them (Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.65; Rackham 1961, 309). This story implies that realism involves illusion. Plato was famously anxious about the deceptive potential of art, and illusion is a repeated theme (along with the Zeuxis tale) through Western art history. But it is unlikely that this notion was really operative in ancient artistic practice. Greek statues, for instance, were oversized and garishly painted. The realism at work there involves something more like fidelity to nature (e.g. anatomy), but with an important qualification. Greeks have no interest in rendering nature as it was experienced. Their approach was always to idealize, where this involves a search for ideas in the Platonic sense: perfect forms. Such idealization may be regarded as the principle concept of realism operative in classical Greece.

Moving on to the Middle Ages, it is commonly observed that the Greco-Roman preoccupation with anatomical perfection is replaced by an approach to art that is far less concerned with imitating nature. Byzantine icons and statuary are, to modern eyes, startlingly abstract and inaccurate. Curiously, there is textual evidence that

Byzantine observers did not view their own art this way. They seem to have regarded their work as both lifelike and comparable to ancient art (Mango 1963; Grigg 1984). Spectators report that depictions of people seemed so real that they expected them to open their mouths and speak. One explanation is that these images were believed to be copied from portraits of sacred personages that were drawn from life (cf. Grigg 1987). Saint Luke, of Gospel fame, was reported to have produced hundreds of portraits, with divine guidance, and these dictated the style of those that followed. It is no wonder, then, that Byzantine viewers would be stirred by the artworks they encountered in churches. But, in calling these images realistic, we need not assume that they were attending to the same features that enchanted the Greeks. They embraced a kind of spiritual realism (D-Vasilescu 2010). Images were assigned a spiritual significance that imbued a sense of animacy. Outward appearance is of less import here, than capturing the spirit of the person portrayed. The use of familiar visual templates afforded mediated contact with the depicted individuals.

The Renaissance witnessed a return to classical ideals, and, one might think, a revival of classical conceptions of realism. This idea gets some support from the pages of Vasari. He repeatedly praises artists for creating lifelike works. Some paintings, he says, seem to breathe (Vasari 1991, 56, 280, 315, 325). He also makes repeated reference to the imitation of nature (19, 95, 277, 280). This phrase, which is so important to Vasari, might imply that Renaissance artists were preoccupied with reproducing the way things appear in the natural world. One can see the sequence of artists in his *Lives* as moving ever closer to this ideal. Newall (2011) notes the progression from Cimabue to Giotto, to Masaccio, and to Leonardo. There is some truth to this reading, but the story is more complicated. Vasari is not concerned with photographic verisimilitude. For example, he praises Raphael for triumphing over nature and effortless invention (Vasari 1991, 280). He later applauds Pontormo for producing a “wonderfully lifelike” portrait of Bronzino in his *Joseph and Jacob in Egypt* (1515), but the word “lifelike” must be taken with a grain of salt (Vasari 1991, 403). Pontormo is a pioneer of Mannerism known for elongated figures and vibrant colors. His faces are highly stylized with hollowed eyes, and he uses *cangiante* techniques, which increases saturation in shaded areas, rather than decreasing saturation. His Pontormo portrait is no exception. Vasari’s narrative culminates with his mentor, Michelangelo, who he regards as the ultimate imitator of nature. But Michelangelo’s figures have oversized proportions, with muscular delineation one would never experience in life. Vasari’s emphasis on *disegno* and *maniera* is not, in the end, an injunction to recreate what we see. Rather, his favorite artists dramatize and distort. One can credit Masaccio with producing believable likenesses, and can revel in the naturalism of Leonardo’s *sfumato*, but Vasari reserves highest praise for a

different breed of artist. This is not idealization, governed by classical strictures of formal perfection, but something more akin to exaggeration. I think of Vasari as advocating a heroic realism, not unlike what comicbook artists seek. He is also preoccupied with the performative. His artists are as heroic as the works they produce. It is telling that his favorite story about Zeuxis is not the grapes that attract birds, but another tale in which Zeuxis paints Helen by combing numerous models because no living person has all the right traits (Vasari 1991, 381). Michelangelo's superheroes exemplify this approach: the real becomes a Frankensteinian assemblage.

Moving into the seventeenth century, we find a confluence of trends that depart significantly from Renaissance aspirations. First, we begin to see artists who prefer working-class models to triumphal superheroes, painters such as Velazquez and Caravaggio. Caravaggio was regarded by many as vulgar, but his gritty chiaroscuro went viral, and informs much Baroque figurative painting. Meanwhile, in the Low Countries, there was a growing middle class and a Protestant ethos that eschewed lavish liturgical art. The result was a radical secularization of painting, and new genres took hold: still lifes, landscapes, and genre paintings. There were experiments with *trompe l'oeil*, but illusion is rarely a goal in art from this period. Still, we do get a realism that aligns more with what we see in the real world. This was fueled by the Reformation and facilitated by technologies like the camera obscura. One might describe this as an earthly realism, and it is ideologically distant from the heroic realism of Vasari.

Things change again in the eighteenth century. The center of gravity shifts from the Netherlands to France, where Enlightenment ideas were taking off. Within this new worldview, nature is something observed, but also controlled. At this stage of history, the control is discursive not physical, though the Industrial Revolution was brewing across the channel. Nature was to be analyzed and arranged: gardening became a fine art (with an emphasis on the orderly in France), and the *Encyclopédie* was written. The realism that emerges at this time emphasizes perfectibility. Diderot admonishes artists to improve on nature (Seznec 2007, 18). The aim was not Platonic or heroic ideals, but grounded in a new regard for human excellence. Pictures of the time are perfected in a variety of different ways: in Rococo aesthetics, there is an emphasis on beautification and the pursuit of sensory delight; in Neoclassical aesthetics, observation is combined with formal composition, and nature is seen through a historical lens; in history painting, grandiosity becomes an ideal. None of these trends concerns itself with the nature as it is given; they contrive to show that we can make things better. Thus each also becomes an opportunity to ostentatiously display human perfectibility. This in the century of Salon competitions and connoisseurship, the century in which aesthetics emerges as a field.

The nineteenth century saw a number of transitions in politics, economics, and culture. In the aftermath of the French revolution neoclassicism was still dominant, but a Romantic countercurrent emerged as well. Romantics were more fanciful (read, orientalist) in subject matter and more expressive in style, but they expressed a competing conception realism, linked, however loosely, to Rousseau's noble savage: they were interested in capturing our more natural state of being, untarnished by the constraints of modern civilization. They loosened brushstrokes to capture that untamed spirit, which they regarded our natural state of being.

Soon after, academic painting pushed in a very different direction: artists such as Gérôme began to copy from photographs. The camera obscura and other optical devices had been used by artists since the Renaissance, but photographs provided artists with a stable reference to render fine details and lighting with the mechanical precision of a lens. With their uniformly focused, monoscopic, rectangular format, photographs are by no means faithful to vision, and they co-evolved with painting, incorporating many Western pictorial conventions (Snyner 1980). Nevertheless, realism began to mean "photographic" for many in the West, and photography was equated with truth.

Meanwhile the civil unrest of the 1848 revolution, mass poverty, and the industrial revolution set the stage for a third innovation: the naturalism of Courbet and Millet. Both began to paint the working poor and other ordinary people. Courbet rejected ornament, artifice, and imaginative invention: "painting... can only consist of the representation of real and existing things". (Nochlin 1966, 35). This movement was called realism, but it rejected the photographic methods of the academy. "Real" meant mundane and proletarian. Courbet aimed to "translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch" (Nochlin 1966, 35). He painted from life in his studio, but his realist aspirations consisted more in subject matter. This gesture set the stage for the next revolution in French art. Young painters adopted Courbet's interest in ordinary life, but shifted focus to bourgeois and bohemian life, and they also took painting to the fields. Their realism was not photographic, but impressionist, capturing fleeting moments and the effects of light. Some heirs to this school, like the post-impressionist Seurat, were inspired by the new vision sciences. Realism took on the conflicting roles of capturing ordinary life and also shifting attention away from content and towards light, color, and form.

The shift towards form opened the floodgates to twentieth century modernisms. In one respect modern artists were opponents of realism. With the advent of photography, artists had no need to paint what could be captured mechanically. From another perspective, they simply replaced photographic realism with other forms. Abstraction was often seen a way to distill reality (Mondrian), or to get at the hidden essence of things (Hilma af Klint). There was also an interest

in capturing emotions (expressionism) and dynamic energy (futurism). It is also noteworthy that some cubists (like the early Duchamp) found inspiration in photographic experiments exploring simultaneity. Given that vision presents a coherent world only by assembling multiple saccades, the artist devotees of simultaneity were exploring an aspect of seeing, and doing so with scientific zeal. Modernist movements abandon traditional realisms while advancing new conceptions of the real.

With this brief chronology, it should be clear that realism is a moving target in Western art history. Those who seek a uniform analysis should specify which, if any, of these realisms they hope to capture. They should also ask themselves whether their preoccupation with realism is not itself a product of the modernist moment. The poles of the real and unreal that animate the debate in analytic aesthetics have as their paradigm cases the photographic and the abstract. That dichotomy is one of many in this history. If we fashion theories of realism to demarcate this divide, we may neglect and misclassify others.

#### **4 Realism Across Cultures**

Variation on conceptions of realism can also be found if we move beyond the West and consider attitudes towards images in other traditions. Much has been written about variation in pictorial styles across cultures, though it is not easy to find work directly bearing on realism. The principle exceptions are discussions of Chinese and Japanese art. Those will be my focus here, but I will begin with a few remarks on Sub-Saharan African cultures and Ancient Egypt.

There are many diverse artistic traditions in Sub-Saharan Africa, and these differ wildly in style. There has been some investigation of local attitudes, but it takes some extrapolation to apply to the present question. In one relevant study, Silver (1983) asked people (both carvers and non-carvers) in an Asante village in Ghana to assess photographs of sculptures from various parts of Africa and Oceania, including two Asante figures. They were asked to rank the photos in order of preference. Unsurprisingly, both groups included the two Asante works as most appealing. The third item in their top three was an Ife figure that Western art historians would describe as “naturalistic”. Respondents described the statue as “a real person” (66). In the next tier they ranked works that were moderately naturalistic. Less naturalistic works got lower scores. One exception was a Dan mask, which got the lowest ranking in both groups despite its naturalism. Silver says they found it frightening. This study indicates that naturalism (as Western observers think of it) is a salient dimension to the Asante. That is reflected in their own art, and it would be interesting to poll individuals who produce less naturalistic carvings.



A further complication is that their first choice was an *akuaba* fertility figure with an enormous flat head and long neck. They regarded her as a “well-rounded representation of the contemporary Asante woman”. This implies some sense of realism. If so, the Asante standard of realism may differ somewhat from those operative in the West.

Better known are studies by Hudson and Deregowski on picture perception in rural African cultures. Hudson (1962) found that Bantu laborers in South Africa did not recognize a common pictorial depth cue: objects at a distance look smaller, and we interpret them as further away. When presented with a picture of photograph of a hunting scene containing a distant elephant in the background, Hudson’s participants interpreted it as a small elephant in the foreground. Deregowski conducted studies in rural Zambia using pictures of elephants with splayed legs (1969) or split in half so both sides of the body can be seen at once (1970). In Western conventions of realism, objects are presented from a single vantage point, and that means some parts and surfaces are occluded from view. The Zambia respondents showed no preference for Western single-viewpoint images over those that are split or splayed when asked which images correspond best to a three-dimensional model of an elephant. This introduces a competing conception of realism: instead of representing a fixed viewpoint, images may seek to present objects in their entirety by presenting parts that could never be seen all at once. Some cultures, like the Tsimshian and the Haida people in the Pacific Northwest, regularly include split-representations in their art. This work is inconclusive, but suggests culturally divergent strategies for capturing reality.

Ancient Egypt offers a related example. Egyptian paintings canonically depict the head and legs in profile and the eyes and torso frontally. This is an impossible position to occupy but each body part is presented at an orientation that facilitates recognition (Pinna, Deiana 2019). Brunner-Traut (1986) calls such paintings “aspective”; they are “composed from the individual views which... [are] related artistically according to the image of the whole... without sacrificing the truth they contain” (424). The Egyptians used strict canons of proportion rather than drawing from life. The result is a style that distills the essence of things, even if it isn’t realistic in a photographic sense. Arnold (2013) calls such works “super-real” (13), “beyond-the-real” (4), and “more than just realistic” (15). This attitude may have been shared by Plato. He referred to Egyptian art as intrinsically right, correct, and identical in artistry to Greek art; Davis (1979) speculates that Plato regarded Egyptian art as capturing the formal essence of things. One might think of this as archetypal realism. There is little doubt that they aspired to represent things in the world faithfully - for example, the food painted on temple walls was meant to be reanimated after death and eaten - but their methods of doing so were based on enduring conventions rather than ephemeral observations.

Admittedly, Egypt broke from its rigid canons periodically. Royal portraits from the Middle Kingdom show signs of anxiety and age, and portraits from the Amarna period have willowy, curvilinear anatomies. The styles adopted here are not literal but ideological. Portraits from the Middle Kingdom reflect pessimism and mistrust during a tumultuous time (Russmann 2001, 35 f., 104). Amarna portraits coincide with Akhenaten's imposition of a new religion and imply a break from binaries that helped him delineate a new conception of kinship (male/female, god/human, beautiful/grotesque, aloof/accessible, timeless/ephemeral). Archetypal realism remains, albeit with new archetypes.

Let's turn from Africa to East Asia, focusing on China and Japan. Here we have more to go on, because there are written records of attitudes towards realism in art. China has one of the longest histories of artistic production in the world, and, for much of that history, scholarly commentaries were written and circulated. No analysis was more influential than Hsieh He's Six Laws of painting, formulated in the sixth century CE. Of these laws, two were picked up by later artists and authors as particularly fundamental: formal likeness (*hsing-ssu*) and spirit resonance (*ch'i-yun*). The former refers roughly to how shapes and lines generate identifiable objects, and latter is sometimes glossed as the vitality with which those objects are imbued. Both were seen as essential. Thus, a T'ang Dynasty critic, Chang Yen-yuan (ca. 847), remarks, "contemporary painters are but roughly good at describing appearances, attaining formal likeness but without its spirit resonance; providing their colors but lacking in brush method" (Bush, Shih 2012, 55). By the Song dynasty, the blue/green color palette common in the T'ang had been replaced by the monochromes that remain familiar today. With monochromes, it is plausible to say that shape conveys formal likeness, while strokes carry much of the spirit resonance.

For novice viewers, both then and now, spirit resonance may go unnoticed. A Yüan Dynasty commentator, Tang Hou (active ca. 1320-30), comments, "When ordinary people discuss paintings, they are not aware of the inspired subtleties of brush technique and spirit resonance, but first point out the formal likeness" (Bush, Shih 2012, 260). For connoisseurs, in contrast, spirit resonance often overshadows formal likeness. Consider *Early Spring* (1072) by Guo Xi, one of the most famous paintings of the Song Dynasty; the undulating mountain and spiny trees do not look like anything one might encounter in life, yet the landscape is animated by rhythmic energy, conveying expressive meaning (Murashige 1995). Around this time, literati painting (*wenrenhua*) emerged as an alternative to court painting, and spirit resonance became associated with subjectivity. Literati downplayed likeness and let resonance reign supreme. The famed literati painter, Su Shi (1037-1101) made this analogy:

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Looking at [literati] painting is like judging the best horses of the empire: one sees how spirit (*i-ch'i*) has been brought out; but when it comes to artisan-painters, one usually just gets whip and skin, stable and fodder... (Bush, Shih 2012, 197)

Powers (1995, 101-2) expresses this by saying the literati transitioned from naturalism to naturalness (*tianran*), and from artfulness to genuineness (*zhen*). In this context, he quotes Tung Yu (active early twelfth century): “Those who give priority to similitude are talking about phony painting” (103).

How should we think of these concepts with respect to realism? Answers can be found, again, in the primary texts. In an illuminating passage, Ching Hao (ca. 870-930) instructs that “Lifelikeness means to achieve the form of the object but to leave out its spirit. Reality means that both spirit and substance are strong” (Bush, Shih 2012, 146). This may be taken to suggest that formal likeness emulates external forms, but it fails to animate a work with living energy. This idea is colorfully captured by Yang Wei-chen (1296-1370):

Thus, when one judges the high or low quality of painting, there is either the “transmission of likeness”, or the “transmission of spirit”. And the latter is “spirit resonance [hence] life-movement” (*ch'i-yin sheng-tung*). For example, a painted cat hung on a wall may stop the rats. (Bush, Shih 2012, 246)

It is tempting to compare this to the Zeuxis myths, where art becomes illusion, but that would be a mistake. The emphasis is not on optical equivalence, but on the sense of vitality in the work.

The concept of spirit resonance and the resulting conception of realism have no obvious analogue in Western art. It is bound up with the Chinese emphasis on brushwork, which is also the locus of artistic innovation, and a place where the dynamic activity of painting leaves a mark. It is also important to appreciate that the concept of formal likeness may be distinctively Chinese. Chinese painters do not try to reproduce nature exactly as it is itself, much less what it looks like from a particular point of view. Mountains, for example, are not depicted from a viewer’s perspective, but from the impossible vantage point of a being who could see them in their entirety from an equal distance. There was no concern with fixed lighting sources, and there were conventions for partitioning nature into different planes: close, middle, and far. We get likeness without verisimilitude. In sum, traditional Chinese painting delivers two culturally-specific notions of realism, as well as a third emergent notion corresponding to their amalgam.

Let’s shift now from China to Japan, which has a strikingly different aesthetic tradition. During the Heian period, there was an effort

to develop distinctively Japanese styles of picture making, called *yamato-e*. One feature that emerged over the ensuing centuries was a tendency to flatten the picture plane, in contrast to Chinese landscape, which emphasizes depth. Japanese painting makes less use of modeling, and surface textures are also reduced or heavily abstracted. Japanese art has been called abstract, exaggerated, and decorative (Lee 1962). These tendencies culminate with the Rinpa school, epitomized by the work of Ogata Korin (1658-1716). Here landscape is reduced to bold graphic forms. Japanese landscapes are generally colored, but the Chinese preference for monochromes influenced another tradition in Japanese art: Zen painting. Some C'han artists (Chinese Zen), such as Muqi, were more popular in Japan than in their native country, and they were actively collected. Japanese Zen art, however, often abandons the subtle shading in Muqi, and adopts a coarser, more rustic approach, leaving ample negative space (*ma*) to connote emptiness. This work does not seek verisimilitude, but there is an aspiration to spiritual truth, which might be regarded as another kind of realism.

Most interesting for the present context is the evolution of *yamato-e* during the Edo and Meiji period when color woodblock prints (*nishiki-e* or *ukiyo-e*) became hugely popular. These prints became more colorful and elaborate over time, with elaborate textiles, dynamic actions, and carefully rendered backgrounds. They are in many respects the opposite of Zen paintings, which emphasize spiritual resignation. *Ukiyo-e* themes were drawn from history, mythology, and contemporary life (e.g. travel destinations, sumo wrestlers, courtesans, kabuki actors, and, during the Meiji, military conflicts). There is clearly an aspiration to realism here. There is great attention to detail, and, unlike most Egyptian art, the portraits of actors and athletes were recognizable likenesses (Bickford 1987). But the likenesses here differ markedly from the realism of European painting. Shading of figures is absent, and figures are drawn in highly stylized ways, obeying a variety of pictorial conventions. For example, the fury of warriors is represented by depicting the pupils of the eyes moving in opposite directions, and hands are sometimes twisted impossibly backwards in moments of combat. Still, unlike Egyptian art, these conventions allow for open-ended variation, and much care is taken to present things in believable ways, such as sumptuous textiles and the transparency of water. Many prints are also highly narrative in content. Thus, *ukiyo-e* integrate the reductive tendencies of Rinpa with a flare for opulent detail, dynamism, story-telling, and invention. Japanese realism can be regarded as iconographic in that it deploys abstraction in the service identification.

These examples suggest that different artistic traditions are equally concerned with capturing aspect of reality, but they adopt different approaches to that end. European methods contrast with what

we find in Africa and East Asia. To call European painting more realistic seems misleading, since it overlooks the fact that there are different ends at work across cultures, and, as we saw, those ends varied in Europe as well. European painting is, by these other standards, less real. In contrast to Egyptian art, it tends to capture ephemera rather than enduring truths, and, unlike classical Chinese art, it neglects spirit resonance. It lacks the crisp linearity of woodblock printing and the reliance on stylized forms that facilitate identification because of their iconographic constancy. Rather than adopting the European standard, and measuring realism everywhere against it, one can posit multiple realisms.

## 5 Cultural Contact

Against this relativization of realism, one might object that European standards were regularly adopted during moments of cultural contact, and regarded as more real. Under Ptolemaic rule, Egypt sarcophagi began incorporating individualized Greco-Roman portraits of the deceased. In China, some Italian missionaries were hired as court painters - the most famous of these is Giuseppe Castiglione, who served three emperors in the Qing Dynasty. In Japan, European influence began with Dutch and Portuguese traders. Even during its centuries of isolation, there was a field of Dutch Studies (*rangaku*). Shiba Kōkan (1747-1818) was among the first to learn European techniques and describe them for others in Japan. In his treatise, *Seiyō-gadan (Dissertation on Western Painting)*, Kōkan extols shading and exclaims “Only Western art techniques can capture reality” and “Japanese painting is mere child’s play” (French 1974, 82). *Ukiyo-e* artists also exhibit European influence in ways that suggest an appreciation of Western realism; most notably, many adopt linear perspective. When Japan’s borders were forced open in the Meiji period, European painting became immensely popular and was eagerly adopted, displacing traditional Japanese styles.

Still, we must be careful in drawing hasty conclusions here. Egyptian was under Greco-Roman rule when European styles impacted their art, and the “realistic” mummy portraits likely had foreign patrons. Furthermore, there is reason to believe these portraits were highly idealized, emphasizing wisdom, beauty, and youth (Riggs 2002, 91). What’s more, even under Greco-Roman rule, most Egyptian art doggedly preserves traditional conventions.

In China, too, there was much resistance and resilience. A Qing Dynasty court artist, Tsou I-kuei, remarked,

The Westerners are skilled in geometry, and consequently there is not the slightest mistake in their way of rendering light and shade

[*yang-yin*] and distance (near and far)... But these painters have no brush-manner whatsoever; although they possess skill, they are simply artisans [*chiang*] and cannot consequently be classified as painters. (Sullivan 1989, 80)

It is important to recall the association between brushwork and spirit resonance. Tsou I-kuei applauds the methods operative in European realism, but seems to regard them as a parlor trick, and he criticizes the lack of vitality. It is noteworthy, too, that European methods did not take off in China until they came under Western domination, despite centuries of exposure. Even Castiglione was given training in Chinese methods and asked to collaborate with traditional Chinese painters, resulting in a hybrid style.

Later, when photography came to China, notions of realism evolved, but there was resistance at first (Gu 2013). In an oft-quoted article, a Scottish photographer who traveled to Hong Kong in the nineteenth century reports conversation with a local portrait photographer. The Chinese photographer is alleged to have said that portraits ought not “have shadows about their faces, because, you see, shadows form no part of the face. It isn’t one’s nose, or any other feature; therefore it should not be there. The camera, you see, is defective” (Thompson 1872a, 569). In a follow-up article, we learn that the Chinese photographer would powder sitters’ faces white to minimize shadows (Thompson 1872b, 591). Moreover, traditional Chinese portraits were intended to capture the constancies in how a person looks over a lifetime, not their visage on a single occasion (Gu 2013, 126). Thus, while photography was embraced as an emblem of modernization, there were ways in which photographs were regarded as unrealistic.

As for Japan, Kōkan’s efforts to popularize European methods largely failed. There was uptake of Dutch science, but the influence of European art was more selective. Indeed, Kōkan himself has been described as interpolating, rather than appropriating, European methods; his works are a “strange hybrid” (Lee 1983, 191). Likewise, perspective was adopted inconsistently, and often looks contrived and unnatural in Japanese prints. It is worth recalling an anecdote cited by Gombrich (1956) about the Japanese painter, Yoshio Markino, whose father was unable to understand perspective when he first encountered it; the lines of a foreshortened box made it look crooked to him (Markino 1913, 272). Beyond perspective, Japanese artists were slow adopters. Meiji period *ukiyo-e* artists such as Chikanobu, Kiyochika, Kyosai, and Yoshitoshi were well versed in Western styles but highly selective in what they appropriated. Ultimately, younger artists abandoned printmaking in favor of Western oil painting, but that transition was fueled by an ideological shift: there was keen interest in modernization, and the West represented modernity. Even so, there was a strong backlash against Western-style painting (*yōga*),

and a concerted effort emerged to update Japanese styles (*nihonga*). It is also noteworthy that Japanese *ukiyo-e* exerted an enormous influence on the West at the same historical moment, inspiring artists such as Manet, Degas, Lautrec, and Whistler, who were seeking out new forms of realism.

Let me end this cross-cultural exploration with another observation from Yoshio Markino. Markino moved to the West in 1893 and studied Western art, but he continued to revere Japanese aesthetics. In the same book from which Gombrich recounts the perspective anecdote, Markino describes the European approach to art as scientific. The Japanese approach, in contrast, draws on “human sense”. Markino argues that both are necessary, and he ridicules Europeans for pushing the science too far:

I must say [Western] art has got into the delusion by photography... The sense of our eyes is not as sharp as the machine... I have observed another disastrous delusion of some Western artists. They often go into the theory of perspective more “scientifically” than the reality. That is to say, they paint the objects out of the visible circle. The human eye cannot see more than 60 degrees, which I call “visible circle...” This is what I call the scientific theory, which represents the nature into falsehood. (Markino 1913, 61-2)

Here we see an artist steeped in two artistic traditions recognizing a conflict between photographic realism and the content of experience. He sees Japanese art as more truthful in this respect, and his contrast between science and sense implies two different ideas about what it means to paint realistically.

## 6 Philosophical Definitions of Realism

The foregoing is a small and speculative sampling of artistic traditions and their attendant notions of realism. The guiding hypothesis is that artists from different times and places had different aspirations with respect to the depiction of reality. Members of each tradition would have been able to evaluate images for their success in meeting those aspirations. An Ancient Egyptian might criticize an image for flouting anatomical canons, Vasari might complain about musculature being inadequately articulated, and Song Dynastic scholar might complain that a picture lacks spirit resonance. I am suggesting that these traditions are governed by different conceptions of realism, and this raises a question for philosophical theories: do efforts to analyze the concept of realism have the flexibility to capture such variation or do they end up saying more about contemporary Western ideas?



In seeking an answer, I will briefly describe some prevailing theories, leaving out many of their details for ease of exposition. As noted at the outset, I should make clear that many theories allow for variation in standards, and may therefore have resources to accommodate the cultural differences I've described. I want to suggest, however, that there is a tendency in these theories to treat "realism" as a monolithic concept. The relativism lies elsewhere, for example in the interests of individual judges. Some theories do better: they allow us to relative "realism" itself. These, however, still look for a common denominator, and, in so doing, tend to miss the mark in ways that distract from the actual sources of variation. Or so I shall argue.

In surveying theories of realism, I will restrict myself to proposals from analytic aesthetics. Interest in this topic owes much to Goodman's (1968) conventionalist theory, which has been used as a foil by just about every subsequent author. Goodman claims, provocatively, that realism has little to do with resemblance between picture and world, and involves, instead, habituation in a symbol system. A person experienced with pictures of a certain type will be able to determine what they represent because they have learned the operative conventions. The degree of realism will be relative to the assessor's entrenchment in that system. Goodman's theory is attractive in the present context, because it acknowledges the importance of systems of representation (see also Goodman 1960; 1975). Curiously, however, his official account of realism neglects the specific aspirations of such systems and reduces realism to a single phenomenon. Goodman is right to invoke conventions, but, in that very gesture, he expunges the very differences that make conventions interesting. Indeed, by emphasizing habituation, he profoundly mislocates the basis of success in realistic representation: realism is not merely a matter of familiarity and practice, but about conformity to operative norms.

In the years since Goodman, many wage a different complaint: his refusal to concede that there is some visual process at play in judgments of realism. Theorists have tried to bring vision into the analysis in a range of different ways. Peacocke (1987) proposes that realism is a function of experienced similarities between pictures and the things they represent. He focuses on similarity of shape. "Similarity" is a vague concept, but it seems inapt when thinking about the aspirations of, say, icon painters, Egyptian carvers, and *ukiyo-e* printmakers. If they wanted to create images that were experienced as like seeing real entities in the world, then why did they fail so badly, and why didn't they correct their methods by observing more carefully?

Pushing even harder on the link to vision Newall (2011) relates realism to the number of features that are "non-veridically seen" in a picture (i.e., visually recognized and experienced without an object). The examples just mentioned, however, indicate that seeing such art is very different than seeing things in the world, and it doesn't aim to recre-



ate world-directed visual experience. Recognition may play a role, but much of what we recognize is the pictorial conventions, not the thing itself. Think, for example, of the split-representations used in the Pacific North West. We recognize the depicted animals, in part, because we recognize that these are images that obey rules of a certain type.

Such concerns are somewhat mitigated in McMahon's (2006) account. She says pictures strike us as realistic when we have internalized naturally generative second-order Gestalts. These are configurational properties of whole images that can be extrapolated from a set of examples and then reapplied. This allows McMahon to say we learn artistic styles and find pictures realistic where that stored visual knowledge can be used to discern the content of new cases. Still, I find the focus on Gestalt configurations limiting. Some conceptions of realism focus attention on small details: Consider Vasari and muscle delineation, or Chinese scholars and energetic brushwork.

Kulvicki (2006) shifts from visual processing to visual concepts. He says realistic pictures ascribe features that belong to our perceptual conceptions - "how we believe objects would look were we to see them". But do we really believe pictures capture the ways things look? Even Vasari wanted pictures to idealize and distort (recall his affection for Pontormo). And Japanese printmakers probably didn't have the false belief that warriors go cross-eyed when they fight. "Ascription" also feels wrong here. A Chinese landscape painting does not *ascribe* spirit resonance; it has or exhibits spirit resonance.

All these are plausible proposals for forms of art that aspire to be photographic - to capture the world as it might project through a lens from a fixed point of view. Even Kulvicki's move to visual concepts is best suited for traditions that regard realistic depiction and capturing appearances in this (literally) superficial sense. The focus on vision in these theories indicates that they are products of photographic artistic milieu. Ever since the camera obscura entered Western art, there has been a tendency to regard pictures as analogs of these devices that transmit light from objects to surfaces.

There is a second class of theories that place less emphasis on perceptual processing. These are theories that define realism in terms of information. One example is Hyman (2005). His analysis has three dimensions: accuracy, animation, and modality. Let's focus on modality, which he characterizes in terms of the range of questions one can ask. Realist picture systems allow us to ask about many features and are thus highly informative. This approach unwittingly discounts picture systems that restrict the range of contents, such as Chinese landscape painting. It would have been unacceptable to do a portrait in that style: a monochrome shaded with brushstrokes. *Ukiyo-e* art qualifies as more realistic than Chinese landscape painting because artists were encouraged to depict a wider range of subjects. One can also quibble with Hyman's emphasis on accurate information. Accu-

racy was more of a goal for Courbet and Dutch still-life painters than it was for Renaissance and Neoclassical painters, but it doesn't follow that their work is more realistic *tout court*.

Abell (2007) develops another information approach. Roughly, she says pictures are realistic to the extent that they present relevant information about how things look. Her key move is the appeal to relevance. Unlike Hyman who emphasizes the amount of information, Abell links realism to information that “warrants processing effort” (14). Stick figures, she says, fail this test, because all we learn from them is the platitude that people have four limbs. But many pictures are not meant to provide new information. Icons and Egyptian paintings, for example, present predictable contents in predictable ways. Likewise for Renaissance renditions of familiar themes, like the Madonna and child. These warrant processing when they are stylistically innovative or aesthetically compelling, not for the information they provide. Abell also remains focused on appearances, but there are forms of realism, such as expressionism, icon painting, and Chinese landscape, that capture things that lie beneath the surface.

The information theory developed by Lopes (1995) is, perhaps, better suited to the cultural diversity I have been emphasizing here. Lopes defines realism as a function of appropriate systemic informativeness. Like some others, Lopes prefers talk about realistic systems rather than realistic works, and a system is realistic, for him, when it “conveys more or less appropriate information in the context in which it is used”. Lopes uses this to accommodate relativism about realism:

[P]ictorial realism reflects... informativeness within a context of use... In Orthodox iconography, pictures are used to convey information about the relative theological importance of depicted figures whose size corresponds not to location in a projected space but to location in a divine hierarchy. Since Haida [split-representation] pictures of animals serve an heraldic function and must be readily identifiable, they belong to a system which conveys essential species-specific features. (282)

These conclusions look promising, but it is not entirely clear how they are derived. What does “appropriate” mean for Lopes? It seems to relate to goals of communication or use. For example, he says technical drawings are realistic when used for building things because they are appropriate to that end. So defined, it seems there are cases where appropriate informativeness does not track our intuitions about realism. (I say “our” intuitions because these may derive from prevailing concepts of realist depiction). Compare emojis to the emoticons generated using standard characters on a keyboard. An emoji smiley strikes us a more realistic that a colon and parenthesis, but both are equally suited to conveying an emotional reaction. Or consider a

subway map showing all stations with no regard to actual distances, turns or cardinal points. This is perfectly suited to its purpose, but not a paragon of realism. It's also important to remember that "appropriate" can have many meanings in communication: useful, polite, even morally proper. When adults judge that *hentai manga* (pornographic comics) are inappropriate for children, they are not suggesting they are unrealistic – quite the contrary! Without more analysis, Lopes cannot guarantee that that appropriateness delivers the desired relativism about realism.

Theories with a visual focus seem biased towards the more retinal realisms that have cropped up in Western art history. Theories that focus on information imply that pictures are principally communicative or didactic. Whatever their individual merits, all of these theories aim to provide a unified framework for thinking about realism. Some, like Goodman, McMahan, and Lopes, place emphasis on adaptability to different cultural contexts, but these efforts provide little opportunity to spell out the cultural differences in question. Entrenchment, learned Gestalts, and appropriateness provide flexibility, but they misidentify what realist systems share in common.

## 7 Relativizing Realism

Where does this leave us? One option is to abandon "realism" as a topic for philosophical analysis. We might make progress if we dropped the ambitious project of trying to find a theoretical framework flexible enough to accommodate all cases. Instead, we could analyze each species of realism separately: *mimetic*, spiritual, heroic, earthly, perfectible, untamed, expressive, photographic, simultaneous, archetypal, resonant, iconographic and so on. Each demands more detail than I have offered here, but there is no barrier to arriving at good accounts of the aspirations of different artistic traditions. Indeed, much art history aims to do exactly that, and we often have written testimonials and manifestos to help get things right.

This suggestion implies that the term "realism" is open-endedly ambiguous: no single analysis will do, because it means many things. Such a position casts doubt on the project of defining the term, which has been a popular pastime in analytic aesthetics. Or at least it suggests that such efforts may be driven by intuitions about the kinds of realism that are operative in our own time and place. From this perspective, analyses of realism look either futile or parochial.

Against this indictment, one might levy two objections. First, there has been much discussion in the cited literature of "revelatory realism" (e.g. Lopes 1995): someone confronted with an unfamiliar pictorial system may regard it as realistic. Recall Shiba Kōkan saying "Only Western art techniques can capture reality". Second, in this

remark, Kōkan also implies that artistic systems can be compared with regard to their realism. The first point suggests that we have a concept of realism that transcends mere acquaintance with the local meaning of that word. The second point suggests that there is a notion of realism that spans across artistic traditions. Both points indicate that there may be a notion of realism covering all traditions after all. Can't we analyze that overarching notion?

Three points in response. First, with respect to revelatory realism, another interpretation is available. When Kōkan saw Dutch art, he learned about things pictures can do - e.g. they can be modeled in ways that make objects look three-dimensional. Rather than answering to the Japanese conception of realism, Dutch art introduced a new concept of realism, which Kōkan found exciting. One can drop "realism" in his remark and say, "Only Western techniques capture three-dimensionality". This brings us to the second point. In making this declaration, isn't Kōkan implying that three-dimensionality is a better fulfillment of some goal inherent in Japanese art? Yes and no. Yes in so far as such art aims to capture features of the world we inhabit, but no in that Japanese art intentionally abandoned shading with the development of *yamoto-e*. Kōkan is suggesting that Japanese artists adjust their aspirations and aim for an aspect of reality they had hitherto elected to ignore. This brings us, finally, to the question of whether such revelations and comparisons allow an overarching notion of realism. On this, I offer a final thought for future reflection.

In discussing Kōkan, I suggested that Japanese and Dutch artists are both interested in capturing reality. The same can be said of Zeuxis, Guo Xi, Courbet, and the tomb painters of Egypt. At this level of abstraction, there may indeed be a concept that covers many art-making traditions. Representational art tries to capture reality. To do so, each system must specify what *aspects* of reality they wish to capture, and a *manner* conducive to that end. Relativism crops up for both the aspects in question and the manner. Different concepts of realism identify target aspects to represent and preferred ways of doing so. The word "capture" also points to another dimension of relativity. For some culture, capturing might require depiction, in others, symbolic representation (as with abstract art that represents metaphysical truths), instantiation (as with spirit resonance), expression (as with Goya's black paintings), or evocation (as with surrealists who try to capture the uncanny quality of dreams).

All this suggests that there may indeed be a commonality across pictorial systems that admits of philosophical analysis. I offer the following MCA (manners-capture-aspects) analysis:

(MCA) An artwork or style is **realistic** to the extent that it deploys a *manner* designated as suitable for *capturing*, in some designated sense, designated *aspects* of reality.

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Thus, for a late tenth century Chinese monumental landscape painter, realism might be measured by assessing an artist's success in depicting the magisterial qualities of mountains, along with the inherent character of trees, water and fog, in relation to the human realm, while simultaneously instantiating spirit resonance and achieving all this by means of diluted ink and calligraphic brushwork. The term "depict" here can be analyzed so as to reflect the aim of representing formal likeness - depiction may involve translating visual form onto a surface - by the modifier "magisterial" is important too, since the landscape artist is supposed to capture the stately grandeur of mountains, not how they would actually appear when standing at their base (e.g. not foreshortened). The MCA analysis allows each tradition to rank realism locally: some works succeed better in realizing the desired aspects (majesty), manners (consistent brushwork), and means of capturing (likeness and instantiation).

The MCA analysis can also help in articulating replies to the objections involving revelation and comparison. It draws attention to three different ways exposure to unfamiliar art might transform prevailing practices: unfamiliar art can reveal new manners, new aspects of reality, or new approaches to capturing. Casiglione's shading was a new manner, Courbet's worldliness was a new aspect, and Käthe Kollwitz expressionists works exemplify new modes of capturing: they are evocative not just descriptive.

Notice that the MCA analysis does not do much explanatory work on its own. It can be applied only by specifying the operative M, C, and A, which is to say, by describing the operative notion of realism. One must also determine who does the designation (the artist, the school, the judge, etc.). These are all placeholders that must be filled in. We can say of a work that it is realistic in some senses and not others. Each form of realism is unified by the shared desire to capture reality, but that aim gets cashed out in different ways (I leave it to another occasion to analyze what "reality" means here). The MCA analysis avoids parochialism by retreating to a level of abstraction that is applicable to many artistic traditions.

The utility of the MCA further borne out by examining artistic movements and styles within a culture. In introducing a new style, an artist may specify aspects of reality that warrant aesthetic attention and a manner of capturing them. Italian Futurists wanted to capture dynamism and whereas Italian Metaphysical Artists were interested in the dreamlike menace of deserted or claustrophobic spaces. German Expressionists were interested in primordial feelings whereas German New Objectivists want to capture the sordid, dispassionate vulgarity of contemporary life. Many artists introduce their own representational aims. For example, the Nigerian artist, Toyin Ojih Odutol is interested in surface patterns, such as textiles and the topography of skin. There is no effort to be more real than the compe-

tion, but rather to present aspects of reality that others may have neglected. No universal standards of realism are introduced thereby; rather standards are localized to the aims and manners advanced by individual artists or art collectives. The puzzle cases with which we began are pseudoproblems. To take one example, we cannot decide between de Chirico and Tanguy, because each introduces a different conception of the real.

It may be instructive to compare this view to an approach to realism developed by Elgin (2019) in the philosophy of science. Two incompatible theories, she says, may both get things right, because theories can set out their own internal criterion of truth. When we say two competing theories are both true, we mean T1 is true, and T2 is true, not that there is some shared feature “truth” that they both enjoy. A particle theory and a wave theory introduce different ontologies and different modes of observation, and each get confirmed by the standards they lay out when measured against the world. Likewise, the MCA analysis allows that there are different ways of getting reality right, different ways to capture reality.

As compared to other theories, the commonality adduced on the MCA analysis does not guarantee much overlap in other respects. There is no appeal to perceptual processes or informational goals. “Capturing reality” places few constraints and allows enormous diversity. MCA is also (virtuously) circular: it defines realism as capturing reality. To escape the circle, “reality” must be replaced by specifying the actual aspirations of a pictorial system. Thus, we are led back to the conclusion that one cannot define realism without defining realisms. MCA facilitates the characterization of realisms by sharpening focus on the features that must be investigated in describing distinct realist practices: aspects, manners, and the way the latter capture the former. It is here where philosophy meets art history, and our analytic projects serve as little more than a schema for framing the art-making practices that vary across time and place.

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