

Realism in French and British Art

Courbet and French Realism - 26 September 2018

19th Century British Realist Art - 17 October 2018

Background Notes

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Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*, (1849–50), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



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What's in a name? Realism sounds like something that would be easy to define, but it is a term that throws up a number of problems.

First, every artist who claims to be representing the world faithfully is necessarily paying attention to the real, but faithful representation embraces a very broad spectrum of approaches and many of them are not classified as Realist at all. For example, a *trompe-l'oeil* still-life only works if it is realistic enough to fool the eye, but *trompe-l'oeil* paintings are not conventionally called Realist works. Likewise, Constable's cloud studies are empirical investigations of observed phenomena but he is known as a Romantic artist, and sometimes described as a Naturalist painter; he is never designated a Realist.

Second, although Realism is conventionally opposed to Idealism, realistic elements (precise details, accurate perspective, appropriate light and colour) can regularly be found in representations of idealised subjects, if only to make them visually credible. To take two instances, the details in many Netherlandish paintings are often intricately realistic; Caravaggio's approach to painting revels in real, rather than ideal representations of holy figures.

Third, Realism does not necessarily imply verisimilitude. Indeed, many artists have believed that a strictly imitative art is banal and only by going beyond superficial resemblances can they represent the essential nature of the world. As Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger wrote in their manifesto of Cubism (1912), objective knowledge should be regarded as chimerical; the modern artist 'will fashion the real in the image of his mind.' When the Constructivists Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner published *The Realistic Manifesto* in 1920, they asserted that non-figurative works, dispensing with all the conventional attributes of art, were Realist insofar as they alone properly represented the nature of things.

All of these considerations bear on the emergence of Realism in the mid-nineteenth century. When certain French artists and critics identified particular works as Realist, they were responding to what was felt to be a new orientation in contemporary art. That orientation was not formal or technical but social, portraying without condescension the real circumstances of everyday life and championing especially those fractions of society hitherto overlooked by the fine arts. Choosing subjects from ordinary life was an implicit rebuke to the academy's traditional assertion of value as lying principally in 'elevated' literary, religious, mythological or historical subjects.

As such, Realist works can be distinguished from contemporary paintings of high verisimilitude, whose mimetic effects even rivalled the new photography but whose subject-matter was traditional. Equally, they can be distinguished from works that took poverty as their subject matter but used academic means to depict it. Finally, Realist paintings differed rhetorically from other works exploring similar subjects. As the critic Ernest Chesneau wrote: 'Realism has been more contemptuous than it should be of any poetic interpretation of reality' (*Salon de 1852*). Chesneau's disquiet stemmed from Realist artists believing that simply holding up a mirror to society was sufficient. Their subjects were not to be made palatable by appealing to a bourgeois audience's sentimental understanding of the working classes.

In 1855 Gustave Courbet published a manifesto of Realism (*Le Réalisme*), when exhibiting his works in a one-man exhibition in the so-called Pavillon du Réalisme. Six years later he again articulated a Realist credo that stressed the importance of objectivity and the repudiation of the Ideal: 'painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the representation of *real and existing* things. It is a completely physical language.' (Letter to the *Courrier du dimanche*, 25 December 1861.) Courbet's achievement as an artist has long been recognized as central to any understanding of Realism. He was not, however, its sole representative and his work is best understood within the context of contemporary artists like Jean-François Millet and Honoré Daumier and also members of the next generation, such as Léon Lhermitte who addressed similar themes. The relationship between Courbet's politically focused Realism in his most significant paintings and a less charged, Naturalist approach to the world should also be considered, as for example the paintings of Jules Bastien-Lepage in the 1870s and 1880s. Equally, some works by Édouard Manet and the Impressionists taking the painting of modern life as their subject may be usefully understood within a broader understanding of Realism.



Jean-François Millet, *Gleaners* (1857), Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Honoré Daumier, *The Third-Class Carriage* (c.1862-4),
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Les foins (Hay Making)* (1877), Musée
d'Orsay, Paris

The development of Realism in nineteenth-century Britain is complicated by the fact that it has no artist of Courbet's stature at its centre and it lacks any sort of manifesto to assert its tenets. Moreover, socially-aware painting in British art was less politically charged than its French equivalent. Lacking state sponsorship, the visual arts in Britain had rarely been required to perform the explicitly ideological functions associated with French patronage of the arts and the Royal Academy and its values did not present an identical target to the French Salon's expression of the nation's core beliefs. In short, any emergent British Realism would have operated in very different cultural circumstances. It would also be fair to say that the production of Realist paintings in Britain was often tempered by the Naturalist tendency which reached back to the 1810s and evolved steadily over the course of the century.



Henry Wallis, *The Stonebreaker* (1857), Birmingham Museums Trust

Nevertheless, the contemporary social observation that is one of the hallmarks of Realism can be found in a number of British nineteenth-century works, especially in the second half of the century. As with French Realist painting, subjects that had once seemed inappropriate in a fine art context were being painted on a large scale for public exhibition. The question arises whether such works should be called Realist? It may seem like terminological hair-splitting but it is arguable that the test of whether these works are Realist lies in their uncompromising approach to truthful depiction, their power to disturb the comfortable or complacent assumptions of their audience. The evidence for that lies in the critical reaction to them. Courbet's intransigence saw his work regularly attacked; in contrast, many of these British paintings received much warmer welcomes.

In short, although many instances of socially-aware images were produced in the nineteenth century the cause of Realism, as Courbet understood it, was pursued sporadically for the most part in Britain. Nevertheless, a roster of such paintings can be assembled, whose authors include the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their associates in the 1850s and after, artists connected with the *Graphic* illustrated newspaper from the 1860s onwards, the Newlyn School in the 1880s and 90s and the works of George Clausen in the same period.



George Clausen, *Winter Work* (1883-4), Tate



Stanhope Alexander Forbes, *A Fish Sale on a Cornish Beach* (1885), Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery

The relationship between French and British art in the 1870s and after is significant insofar as artists like Millet, Bastien-Lepage and others were highly influential on British painters who saw their work in British exhibitions and collections and/or were exposed to these new approaches when participating in European art colonies in the 1880s and 1890s. This affinity to less contentious examples of the new tendency is telling, and it reinforces that fact that British pictures of everyday life were rarely free of the trappings of genre painting, which had such a hold on the Victorian imagination. Even images of poverty and destitution may not be Realist pictures, in the sense outlined above, if they tend primarily to elicit sympathetic or even sentimental responses to the plight of the poor.

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