

REALISM (art and literature)

Realism in art and literature, an attempt to describe human behavior and surroundings or to represent figures and objects exactly as they act or appear in life. Attempts at realism have been made periodically throughout history in all the arts; the term is, however, generally restricted to a movement that began in the mid-19th century, in reaction to the highly subjective approach of ROMANTICISM, (q.v.). The difference between realism and NATURALISM, (q.v.) is harder to define, however, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. The distinction lies in the fact that realism is concerned directly with what is presented to the eye, without the artist or writer trying to shape the observed details; naturalism, a term more properly applied to literature, explores the relationship between environment, heredity, and human behavior.

Art.

In art, although a clearly defined realist school has never evolved, a realist approach has been manifested in different ways at various times. The term realist, used to describe a work of art, has often simply meant that “ugly” objects or figures are represented, as opposed to those considered “beautiful.” Frequently used to describe scenes of humble life, the term implies a criticism of social conditions. Thus, some of the work of the French artists Gustave Courbet (for example, *The Stonebreakers*, 1850, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, destroyed 1945), Honoré Daumier, and Jean François Millet has been described as social realism.

In the U.S., William Sidney Mount's quiet Long Island scene *Eel Spearing at Setauket* (1845, New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown) is in the realist style, very different from the romanticism of his contemporaries of the HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL, (q.v.). American realist painting also includes the honest, matter-of-fact portraits by Thomas Eakins, of his contemporaries, and the works of the American artists known collectively as the Ashcan school or The Eight, who at the beginning of the 20th century attempted to paint the American urban scene as it really was (see AMERICAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE,).

Later varieties of realism in art include surrealism and magic realism, the latter a movement in American art of the 1930s characterized by realistically detailed but fantastic images, sharply focused in deep space. New realism, a movement of the late 1950s and '60s, contended that art is a thing in itself, not merely a representation of things that already exist; therefore forms are presented simply as themselves. Today, the term realist is applied, in the most general sense, to any nonabstract work of art. See MODERN ART AND ARCHITECTURE,

Literature.

Realist literature is defined particularly as the fiction produced in Europe and the U.S. from about 1840 until the 1890s, when realism was superseded by naturalism. This form of realism began in France in the novels of Gustave Flaubert and the short stories of Guy de Maupassant. In Russia, realism was represented in the plays and short stories of Anton Chekhov. The novelist George Eliot introduced realism into English fiction; as she declared in *Adam Bede* (1859), her purpose was to give a “faithful representation of commonplace things,” just as the 17th-century Dutch genre painters had done in their work. Mark Twain and William Dean Howells were the

pioneers of realism in the U.S. One of the greatest realists of all, the Anglo-American novelist Henry James, drew much inspiration from his mentors, Eliot and Howells. James's concern with character motivation and behavior led to the development of a subgenre, the psychological novel.

In general, the work of these writers illustrates the main tenet of realism, that writers must not select facts in accord with preconceived aesthetic or ethical ideals but must set down their observations impartially and objectively. Concerned with the faithful representation of life, which frequently lacks form, the realists tended to downplay plot in favor of character and to concentrate on middle-class life and preoccupations, avoiding larger, more dramatic issues.

For further information on this topic, see the Bibliography, section 660. History of modern art.

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