

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 15

Realistic art of the West

by

Prof. Soumik Nandy Majumdar

Dept. History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan

Visva-Bharati

Hello viewers welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures.

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**Visual perception and art:
A survey across the cultures**

Visual Perception and Visual Culture

Lecture 15

Realistic art of the West



This is lecture number 15 in this course and we will be discussing the realistic art of the West, realistic art is something that we have already referred to when we were talking about the mimetic art now mimetic art are is a philosophical and a conceptual, a psychological and of course a technical process and there is also a whole range of variations within this category of mimetic art in that sense mimetic art and realistic art is pretty close to each other. But when you look at the whole tradition of realistic art separately of course my missus is there but more than

missus certain very special kind of visual perception is operational here and also we can see how not just the artists or the art language but the entire culture was obsessed with realistic art to the extent that anything and everything that was beyond the orbit of realistic art was considered to be not art at all or inferior art.

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Realistic art can also be replaced with the term Naturalistic art.



Realistic art can also be replaced with the term naturalistic art because by enlarge realistic art tries to not only imitate nature or follow nature faithfully but tries to visually record nature, visually recaptured nature in a way that evokes feeling as if you are looking back at the real nature again. Secondly naturalism also implies that everything that you drew in the work of art technically speaking as well as formally speaking in terms of representation speaking everything that you do in your work of art should derive primarily from nature.

Even if you are drawing or painting a character or a figure which is completely imaginative maybe from mythology or fossil from some story which never happened in real life even if the character is something that is absolutely a bit of imagination still the way you are supposed to reconstruct visually that character on your canvas or paper should follow a naturalistic model of rendering and representation.

So this is where realistic art also gets very problematic, on the one hand we are trying to say that realistic art is a very strong demonstration of mimetic art and on the other hand we are actually talking about a certain kind of visual perception which encourages the artist to mimic reality not

really to imitate reality and we make through a certain kind of technique, the technique that was developed over the years a technique of painting which is supposed to make the surface of the represented object very tangible.

Which is supposed to follow the exact anatomical distribution or structure of a body, which is supposed to follow the exact proportion of the body or the figure you trying to represent, which is also supposed to follow a sense of spatial depth that we encounter in our real life. So in a sense we encounter not exactly a reality but a virtual reality, virtual reality which is called technically called illusion and the whole process is called illusion result we have mentioned this concept of illusionism in one of our previous lectures and now we shall see some variants of it.

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Realistic art can also be replaced with the term **Naturalistic** art.

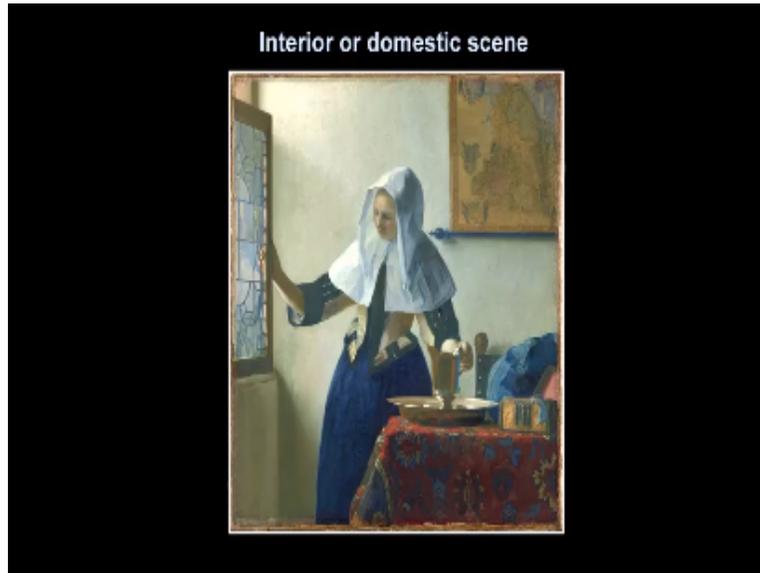
Scenic beauty of nature



Since realistic term can also be replaced with the term naturalistic art then let us see some of the main categories of various regard that dominated the history of Western art for a long time in realistic art you of course have this huge number of paintings coming under the category of scenic beauty of nature which in other words we call landscape or natural sense, but the point here is that as a painter belonging to this category you are supposed to represent nature in a picturesque mode A, you are supposed to represent nature in a particular technique that is supposed to give the viewer an illusion of looking at the real nature.

Thirdly it is supposed to be painted in a light situation in a kind of illumination which will always give you a sense of also position that is a tangibility a surface quality, so in realistic art whether it is scenic beauty of nature.

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Or an interiors or domestic scene there is always this tactile quality this touch quality the struck sensation which has been considered as imperative as something that is has to be there in any realistic painting. Then thirdly along with this quality of touch along with the sensation of tactile quality realistic painting is supposed to evoke a sense of possession a materialistic feeling so the visual perception which is part and parcel of realistic art involves this materiality of material position of great impact of the material culture form or society.

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Historical painting



So it appears that the visual perception regarding realistic art is integral to certain kind of material culture of the West, even when you are looking at a historical painting like this when the incident depicted is not a contemporary incident resident took place hundreds of thousands of years back before this painting was painted yet, the way the depiction has been done look at the representational detail the representational character the entire approach to represent and to defeat that historical event is tied up with this materiality I was talking about.

In fact if you are not told it is difficult to believe that the incident took place two thousand years before the painting was painted, so the whole idea is to create a representation as a mate belief which will experience the whole idea is to make the painting not only the painting even history the past an incident that we have never seen and even that even the painter have never seen but he is trying to make it tangible, he is trying to make it real.

So realistic art in the West or realism in the West is on the one hand tied up with this materiality or this overwhelming presence of a material culture and on the other hand this realistic art or realism is also tied up with this idea that an incident an object and event no matter whenever it might have happened can be made very tangible very close very palpable to the viewers who are looking at it.

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Religious (Christian) subject matters / themes



Religious subject matters Christian themes for that matter in the West from Renaissance period onwards have always been shown rather realistically to the extent that one is almost made to believe that this religious figures like Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary lived in the time when this particular paintings were painted. The realistic art and realistic painting more specifically always try to employ the idea of perspective not only to create special depth.

But also to give you a feeling of the ability or the entitlement to capture that space by the same token when a realistic painter paints a painting based on either religious theme or a historical theme none of which he had ever seen or observed but by virtue of this realism by virtue of this tactile quality by virtue of this very convincing spatial construction the distance between when that particular painting is painted and when that particular religious or mythological or historical film ever happened is reduced is reduced to an illusion of experience so realistic painting since it ultimately gives birth to illusionism and also makes evil non-existing team tangible existence for the viewers as far as the visual perception is concerned. Nothing is left to imagination.

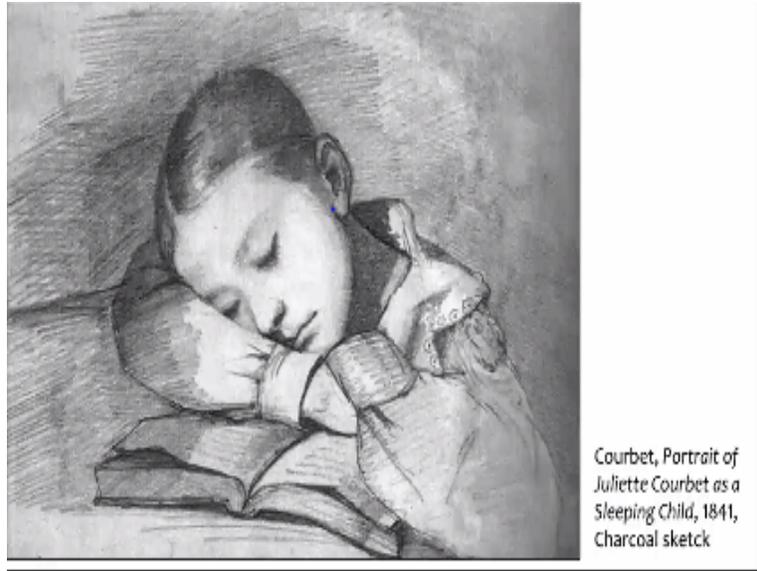
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Everything is visible everything is physical everything intangible right in front of their eyes on the canvas or in a stone sculpture like this even in sculpture the great sculptors like Michelangelo was able to bring that sense of illusion to the extent that it is almost hard to believe when you have a look at this cultures the first time that they are made in stone marble stone has been transformed into a material character that leaves behind is a stone character and imitate the feel of the drapery the feel of the skin the feel of the flesh depicted.

It is this transformation that realistic painting is all about whether you are doing it in oil paint or you are carving out a sculpture in stone you need to transform the materiality of the medium into an illusion of the materiality of the things depicted.

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Courbet, Portrait of Juliette Courbet as a Sleeping Child, 1841, Charcoal sketch

And as a result our visual perception also when we are looking at realistic art begins to adjust with this transformation in an Indian sculpture like that of a a sculpture made in red sandstone an example of that we have already seen in one of our previous lectures if you remember we have seen that the whole strength character the pride glory and the power and a sense of authority of that character of that King which are nothing precisely has been partly expressed through the form that is the body gestures posture and oh great extent through the material character of the stone.

In order to do that the Indian sculptor never got rid of the original material character of the stone rather he always tried to retain that character because he noticed that within the material character of a stone lies the message that he wants to convey through the figure of the Kush an Hakeem but in case of Western realistic art it is just opposite the whole idea the whole approach is to get the marble stone rid of its own characteristic features and make it look like whatever you are trying to depict if it is a cloth thought is made in marble it should give you a feeling .

That you are looking at real close to the extent we almost feel like touching it but the moment you touch you know you are touching a stone not a close when it is a human body the carving is done in such a way that it replaces the character of the stone in stone with the character of and the palpability of human flesh, human body, human warmth so on and so forth to the extent that you always tend to forget that it is made installed and you are about to touch that body and then you realize that it is not real human body it is stone in India not because it is not basically a

realistic art they have always maintained the balance between the material quality of the medium and the message that it wants to convey through their art.

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Courbet, *The Wounded Man*,
1844–1854, Oil on canvas

But then in many of this realistic art examples like this one and this one within a span of a couple of hundred years the Western artists picked up the trick of making realistic art really very well and that includes not just perspective and proportion it also includes the technique of oil painting the technical pencil drawing the technique of pen and ink drawing so it's a medium that is very important for them as well of course they never wanted to retain the original quality of medium always .

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Eugène Delacroix – a French painter – in 1830 creates this painting titled "Liberty Leading the People".

Liberty Leading the People was made in response to the political upheaval that would result in the overthrow of the reigning monarch, Charles X.

Clearly, this work too is based on contemporary reality with direct reference to an event.

But there was a transformation a process of transformation that has always been the prime concern for many of these realistic artists another aspect of realism or realistic art in the West was directly addressing the contemporary reality like this painting painted by Delacroix a French painter in 1830 he creates this painting titled Liberty leading the people Liberty leading the people was made in response to the political upheaval that would have resulted in the overthrow of the reigning monarch Charles and clearly this is a work that is based on contemporary reality with direct reference to an event.

So the realistic perception the visual perception with regard to the radius regard in the West is on the one hand about making a tangible representational language or a statement and on the other hand like this example it's about directly addressing the contemporary reality like this painting but Delacroix which is about the French Revolution and also this painting .

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A Spanish painter Francisco Goya painted this painting as in 1814. Titled "3rd of May 1808", this painting is painted as an immediate reaction to the horrific incident that took place in Madrid on 2nd & 3rd of May, 1808. Hundreds of Spanish freedom fighters were massacred by the French army. Goya in this painting not only depicted the incident but expressed the brutality. This painting is considered by many as the first modern painting in the world art history.

By Francisco Goya which he painted in 1814 and it's called the 3rd of May this painting is painted as an immediate reaction to the horrific incident that took place in Madrid on 2nd and 3rd of May 1808 hundreds of Spanish freedom fighters were massacred by the French army. Goya in this painting not only depicted the incident but expressed the brutality this painting is considered by many as the first modern painting in the world history whether in this painting by Goya or the earlier painting.

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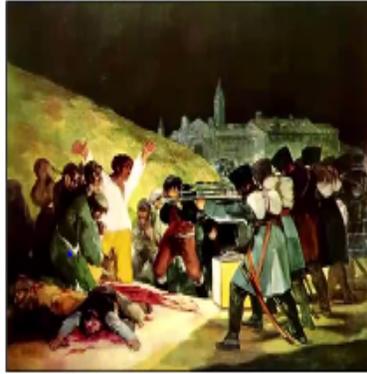
Eugène Delacroix – a French painter – in 1830 creates this painting titled "Liberty Leading the People".

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By Delacroix in both this paintings of course certain principles.

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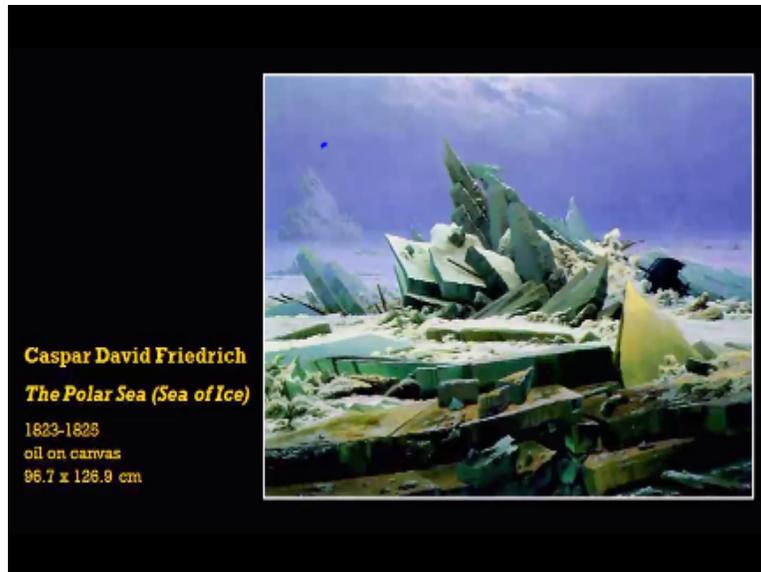
Of realistic art are there but more than that it is about the expression of a or a direct expression of an immediate realistic situation political and social that provides a new definition a new dimension to the whole notion of realistic art in the West so in the hands of Delacroix and Francisco Goya realistic art a kind of graduated from merely a project of tangible representation to a project of social and political commitment.

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So whether it is a new classical painting where accurate principles of realistic art has-been applied on the painting or a romantic painting by Turner where you see the realism transgresses the warder of optical accuracy and moves on to the real of pictorial turmoil and pictorial expression they all become a part of the larger notion of realistic art in the West.

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But during the same time of Romanticism in early and mid 19th century we have somebody like Caspar David Friedrich from North Europe in Germany who was doing highly romantic unusual very discomfoting paintings but with accurate realistic details like this one or this one.

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Photography

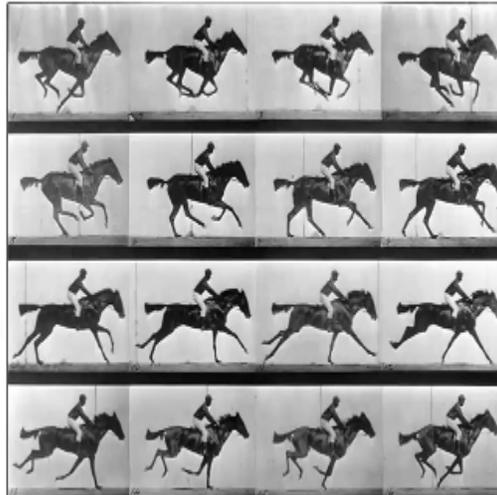
Not just a new way of making images...
a new way of seeing.



Meanwhile we must remember that photography came into being around 1840. And photography as we have already seen was not just a new way of making images but it proposed a new way of looking or seeing the visual world.

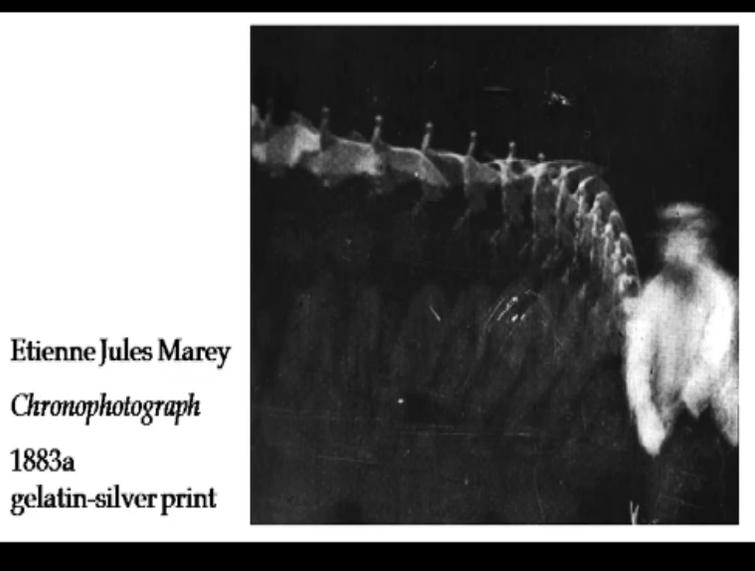
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Eadweard Muybridge
Horse Galloping
1878
collotype print



And with the advent of photography and with the advent with emergence of these kind of photographs the painter soon realized that they would be very soon surpassed by this new art of photography in terms of capturing the real-life details.

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Etienne Jules Marey

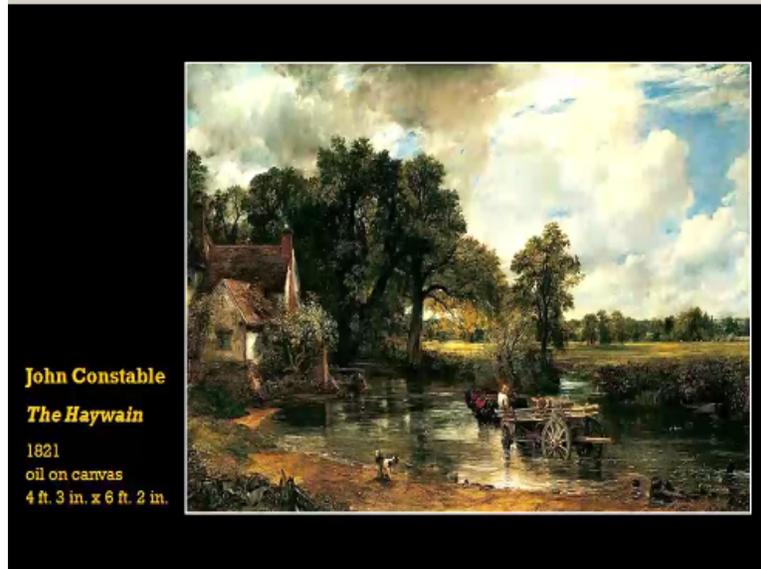
Chronophotograph

1883a

gelatin-silver print

And also the real-life movements within one single frame. So there was a crisis in the realistic art. A crisis in the mimetic philosophy at this point during the mid 19th century yet.

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Before that sometimes around 1820 that is early 19th century there was this British painter called Constable who was continuing with a certain kind of realistic painting of nature with accurate details and light.

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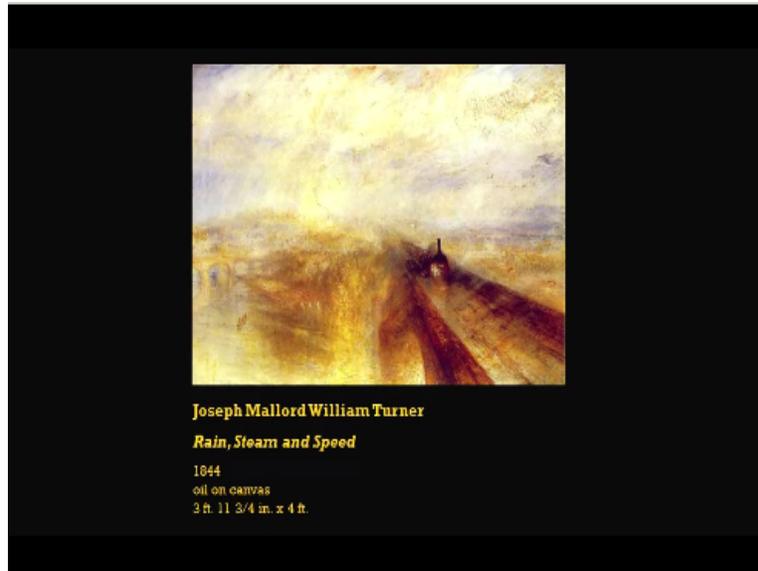
With the invention of camera and emergence of photography as a major mode of visual reconstruction, the accurate realistic art took a back seat and a new variant of realistic art came into being. This new version of realistic art never snapped the ties with the real visual stimuli but altered the visual perception in a way that certain techniques and methods of painting became more pronounced and the optical recognition of the depicted visual reality assumed a new challenge!



And shade and we also have somebody like Turner who upsets the notion of realistic art with his most unusual and extraordinary paintings like this. So with the invention of camera and emergence of photography as a major mode of visual reconstruction the accurate realistic art took a backseat and a new variant of realistic art came into being. This new version of realistic art never snaps the ties with the real visual stimuli but altered.

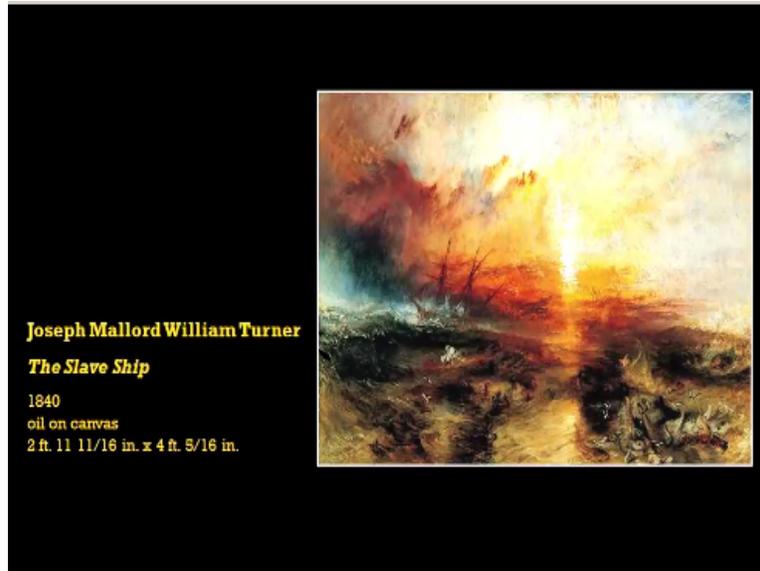
The visual perception in a way that certain techniques and methods of painting became more pronounced than the optical recognition of the depicted visual reality assumed a new challenge.

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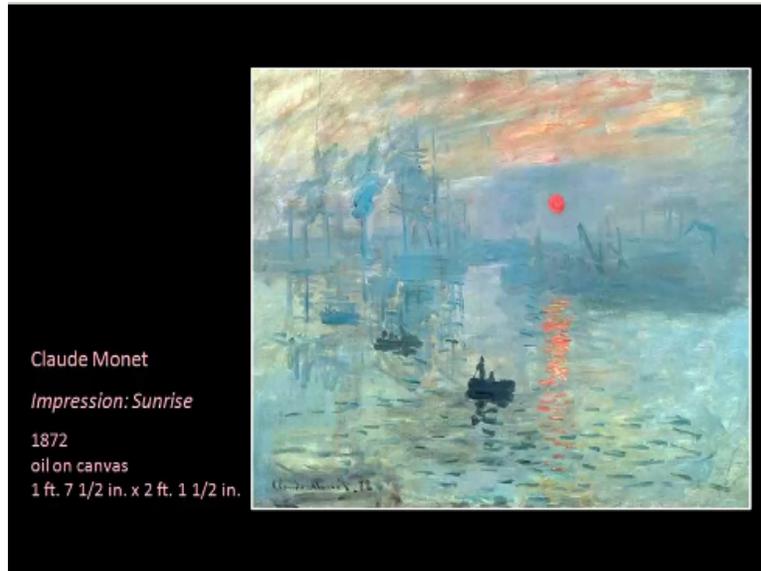
So Turner upsets the hitherto realistic notion of realistic art though he still realistic. We still trying to depict the reality that he was not imagining. What he was seeing he was observing, but he was using a different technique of representation.

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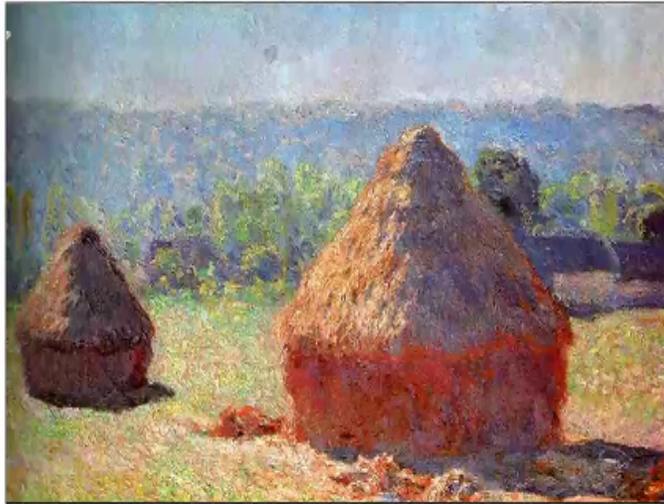
Which was a radical kind of which-- which made a radical shift from the academic realistic art which was prevalent before?

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And around the same time a little later around 1873, we also have somebody like Claude Monet coming up with its most unusual kind of painting called impression sunrise. And again it dependent it relied highly on a real-life observation of a sunrise but the method of depiction did not follow the usual technique and method of realistic art.

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So where do you place the paintings of the likes of Turner and mourning like this one as well.

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Meanwhile as a continuation of the social realism we have seen that how figuration excessive change from a proper anatomical kind of construction to both free rendering of drawing or figures depending upon their social plight. So even figuration changed a great deal under the impact of this new variant of realism and social realism and social concern was one of the major factors.

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Even figuration changed a great deal under the impact of this new variant of realism!



Pictorial realism was another!

And then you have different kinds of figurations when pictorial realism and different kind of pictorial framing became the new concern for many painters for example, thy God.

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Gustave Courbet
The Stone Breakers, 1849, oil on canvas
5 ft. 3 in. x 8 ft. 6 in.

Even Gustavo Courbet who was known as a foremost painter of the realism movement was more or less conforming to the realistic principles but. Yet he had already started playing with the notion of realism by leaving out certain details by focusing on certain details at the cost of the others and this is all happening because of their social engagement with the real-life observation.

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Toulouse-Lautrec

Then we have this post-impressionist painter in Paris called Toulouse Lautrec. So Toulouse Lautrec was exercising whole lot of freedom in the figuration.

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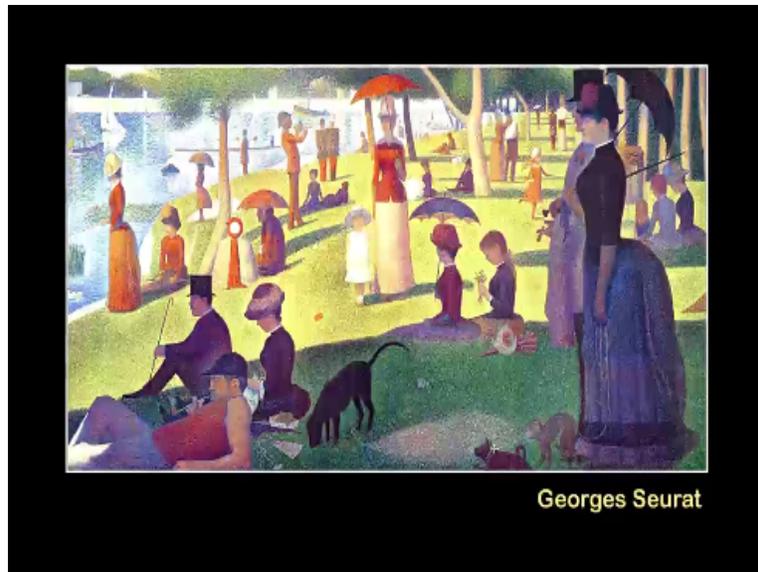


Pierre-Auguste Renoir

Le Moulin de la Galette, 1876
oil on canvas, 4 ft. 3 in. x 5 ft. 8 in.

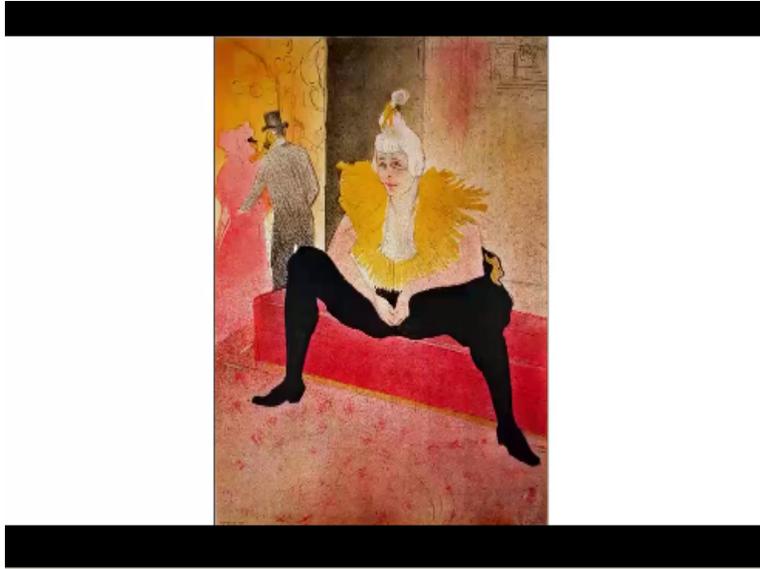
Reign over was not only dealing with this new figuration but also he was dealing with the light and shadow in a completely new way. Now all these things in a way are part of this larger tradition of realistic art but at the same time creating new avenues for our visual perception via ways realism in western art.

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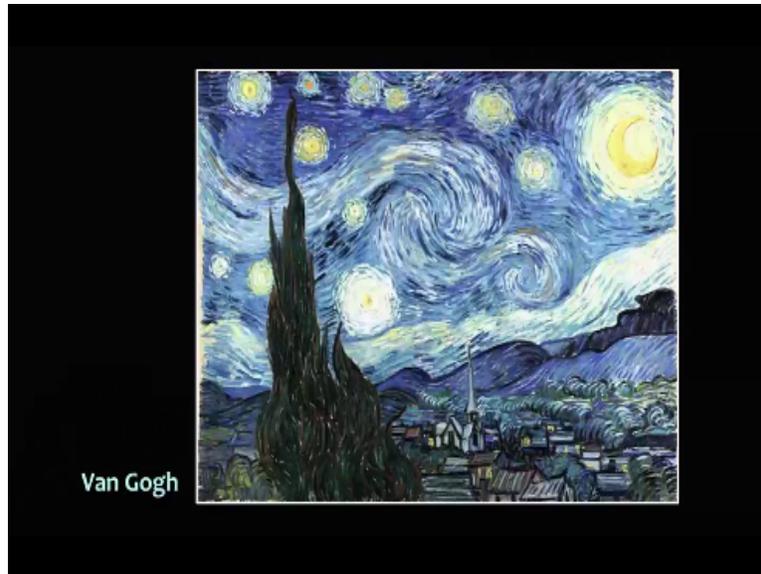
So these paintings like you cannot call this painting and non realistic painting. There is no way that you can categorize this painting as an example of non-magnetic painting. Yeah!. it is not realistic in the sense Leonardo's painting is realistic. It is not realistic in the sense Vermeer's painting is realistic or any render how bad of painters painting is realistic. It is the technique that makes it very nonrealistic, very technical but again the impression of the painting when you look at it from a distance is highly convincing.

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Another painting by Luke threat then van Gogh.

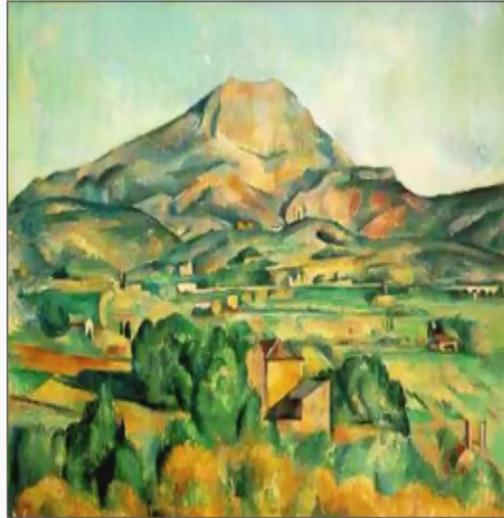
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You can look at there's innumerable beautiful paintings by Van Gogh whether it is a landscape or still lies or anything else.

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Paul Cézanne
Mount Sainte Victoire
1885
oil on canvas



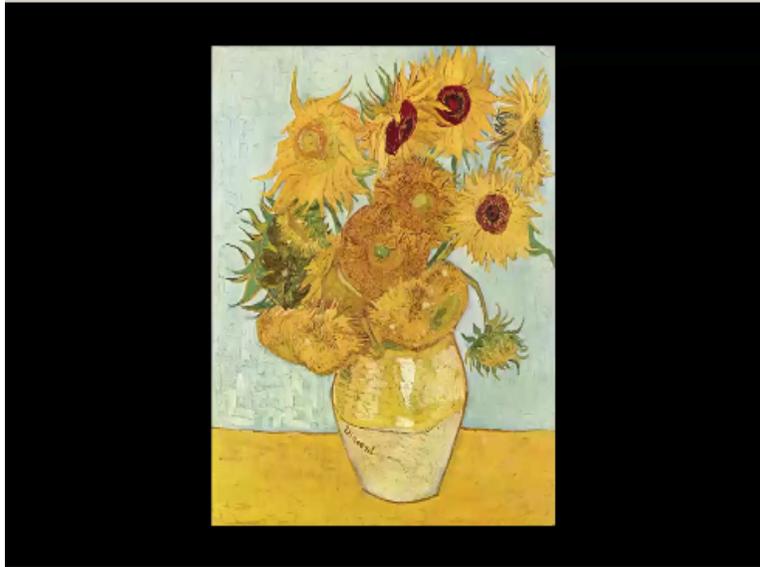
And then you will see or for that matter look at this painting by Cezanne you will see that they're all retained to a certain kind of allegiance to the observed reality that is the landscape nature people. Yet, they were all trying out working out their own methods and languages of communication now all these things together.

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Give us an idea including this pin like by phase that realism despite the dominant notion that realism is only connected to realistic art and realistic art is only about the application of these few principles like the laws of perspective, chiaroscuro and spatial depth receding figures etc., etc., we have something else happening in the history of Western art from mid 19th century onwards. You cannot say these artists are not realistic artists they are all working in the ambit of realism.

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Yet they are all trying out different modes of realism, which in turn is compelling us the viewers and the students of art to understand the visual perception is realism from different angles. Is not about a direct correspondence there are many layers of realism as much as there are many realism many layers in visual perception as well.

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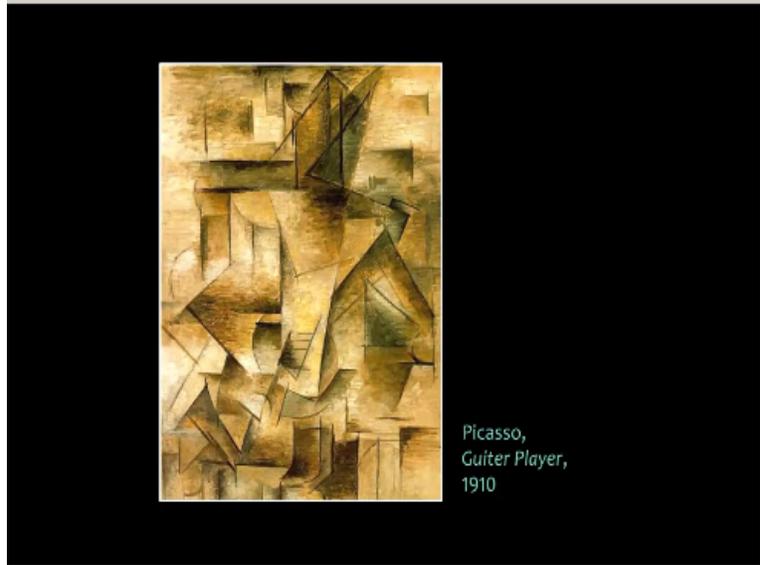
Realistic art received a major jolt when artists like Picasso and Braque altered the entire visual perception regarding 'realism' in art!

No! They did not go for abstraction straight away, they simply questioned and challenged the way we perceived realism in art so far.



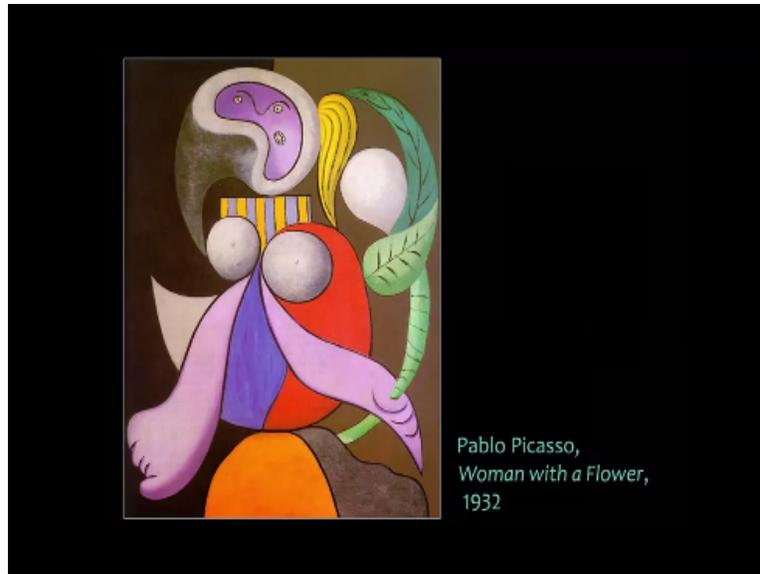
So realistic art around very early 20th century received a major jolt when artists like Picasso and Braque altered the entire visual perception regarding realism in art. No they did not go for abstraction straight away. The simply questioned and challenged what we perceived in realism in art so far.

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So Picasso who paints something like this which cannot be called a realistic art or something like this which also cannot be called realistic art.

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But there is an element of representation with reference to reality but more than that what they are doing is they focusing on the technical aspects of visual communication. That is the language the grammar the syntax of visual communication. And that in turn particularly the students of modern Western art. That in turn these for these people the students of modern Western art it becomes mandatory that you also keep expanding the possibilities of visual perception.

Otherwise you would not be able to have any clue whatsoever what because so is exactly doing in this painting or what rap was doing in its painting or even what exactly the later would call kind of artists and sculptors in modern art we are all talking about thank you.

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Co – ordinator, NPTEL IIT Kanpur

NPTEL Team

Sanjay Pal

Ashish Singh

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Tapobrata Das

Ram Chandra

Dilip Tripathi

Manoj Shrivastava

Padam Shukla

Sanjay Mishra

**Shubham Rawat
Shikha Gupta
K.K Mishra
Aradhana Singh
Sweta
Ashutosh Gairola
Dilip Katiyar
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