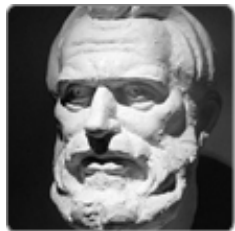


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## Pictorial Realism

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### Introduction

The term *realism* has multiple meanings in the study of pictures. Roughly speaking, it concerns both what pictures depict—that is, “realism-what”—and how pictures depict, or “realism-how.” Realism-what reflects a particular interest in the selection of a picture’s subject matter, which is self-consciously championed by the 19th-century Realist school of painting but can also be found throughout the history of art. Realism-how, on the other hand, deals with a special way of depiction that is characterized by the accuracy and informativeness of pictures. Although both of these aspects of realism are of historical and theoretical interest, but it is realism-how that has received more attention in the philosophical discussion and is considered a central topic in the philosophy of pictorial representation within the analytic tradition. There are three widely accepted features of pictorial realism, as I shall call it. First, pictorial realism is a property that can be attributed to individual pictures, pictorial systems, styles, genres, and techniques. It makes perfect sense to say that the *Mona Lisa* is a realistic picture and color photography is a pictorial system that is realistic. Second, realism is comparative and a matter of degree. For example, arguably, Picasso’s last self-portrait (1972) is less realistic than his first (1896). Third, realism can be relative in the sense that the judgment of realism can vary due to different factors, such as cultural conventions, contexts of use, etc. In the contemporary literatures, there are at least three kinds of theories of pictorial realism: resemblance theories, information theories, and habituation theories. Both resemblance theories and information theories spell out pictorial realism in terms of the depiction of properties. The difference is that resemblance theories appeal to the concept of resemblance, or the sharing of properties between pictures and their subjects, whereas information theories focus on how the properties a picture depicts its subject as having can convey information about its subject. Nelson Goodman rejects both kinds of theories and proposes instead the habituation theory, which claims that realism is just a matter of familiarity or habituation. There are also accounts of pictorial realism that are hard to categorize which appeal to perception and make-believe theories but are closely related to one or other of these kinds of theories in various ways. (For theories of pictorial representation in general, which would shed light on the understanding of pictorial realism, see the separate *Oxford Bibliographies* in Philosophy entries “Depiction” and “Images.” For realism in film or photography, see the section “Film Realism” in the separate *Oxford Bibliographies* in Philosophy entry “Philosophy of Film”).

### General Overviews

Hyman and Bantinaki 2021 is a detailed encyclopedia entry on depiction and it has a short but helpful section on pictorial realism. Abell 2023 is another encyclopedia entry that is dedicated to realism in painting and sculpture but can be used as a guide to pictorial realism in general. Gombrich 1960 is a seminal work on pictorial representation that focuses especially on the development of realistic techniques in Western art. Hyman 2006 discusses the concept of realism in general and specific realistic techniques such as perspective in particular. Kulvicki 2013 introduces different theories of pictures and images, and it has a chapter on pictorial realism that is organized in a useful conceptual framework. Lopes 2006 introduces the various notions of pictorial realism in a comprehensive way. Prinz 2021 is an article discussing the topic from the perspectives of both art history and philosophy.

**Abell, Catharine.** “Realism.” In *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophies of Painting and Sculpture*. Edited by Noël Carroll and Jonathan Gilmore, 167–175. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Suggests a way to understand realism by applying the norms of narrative realism to the field of pictorial realism, and makes an interesting distinction between extra-representationally realism and intra-representationally realism. The former concerns what a picture is about, while the latter concerns the figurative content of a picture.

**Gombrich, Ernst. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon, 1960.**

A seminal work on the psychology of pictorial representation. Gombrich argues that the development of Western art—essentially the art of ancient Greece and Rome and the art of western Europe from Giotto to Cezanne—consists in a series of discoveries about the nature of visual perception, and the means by which the effect of visible objects on our senses can be simulated.

**Hyman, John. *The Objective Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.**

A general study of the visual arts, focusing on the relationship between optics and the theory of art. The three sections of the book discuss the reality of colors, the theory of depiction, and the nature of realistic art. The last three chapters explore the analogies and dis-analogies between pictures and descriptions in words, the concept of realism in art theory, and the Renaissance system of perspective.

**Hyman, John, and Katerina Bantinaki. "Depiction." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2021.**

Has a section on pictorial realism that distinguishes two different notions of realism: realism in terms of subject matter and realism in terms of technique. Also provides a critical examination of the theory proposed in Goodman 1968 and a brief introduction to the theory developed in Hyman 2006.

**Kulvicki, John. *Images*. London: Routledge, 2013.**

See especially pp. 111–131. The book as a whole argues that the theory of depiction must be based on an analysis of the syntactic and semantic structure of pictures. Contains a chapter on pictorial realism that covers the majority of the literature and structures it into a three-layered taxonomy, comprising content realism (realism-what), manner realism (realism-how), and kind realism, by distinguishing three different ways of representing in general.

**Lopes, Dominic. "The Special and General Theory of Realism: Reply to Abell, Armstrong, and McMahon." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2006).**

Introduces ten different special conceptions of realism that can be multiplied further along three dimensions: pictorial realism as of individual pictures or of pictorial systems, pictorial realism as relative in different ways, and pictorial realism as descriptive or normative. In addition, it examines two methods of constructing a unified or general conception of pictorial realism.

**Prinz, Jesse. "Realism Relativized: A Cultural-Historical Approach to What Images Capture." *JoLMA: The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts* 2.1 (2021): 49–72.**

Briefly presents the genealogy of realism in Western art, as well as how the conception of realism varies across different cultures. Also critically examines the habituation theory, information theories, and the attempts to explain pictorial realism in terms of visual skills. Defends that pictorial realism is essentially relative, and proposes a model to explain how it is so based on the idea that realism involves capturing specific aspects of reality in certain manners.

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## Habituation Theory

According to the habituation theory of pictorial realism proposed in Goodman 1968, realism has nothing to do with the resemblance between pictures and what they depict, or the amount of relevant information pictures provide to their subjects. A woman can resemble her twin sister to a high degree without being a realistic depiction of her, and two pictures can convey the same amount of information but differ in the degree of realism when one of them is produced in ordinary perspective and normal color while another is produced in reverse perspective and complementary color. A viewer's judgment that a picture is realistic will depend on whether they are familiar with the pictorial system to which it belongs. According to Goodman, the notion of familiarity is elucidated by considering the deviation of the pictorial system in question from the standard or orthodox system of depiction within a given culture at a specific time. Thus, the closer a pictorial system is to the standard depictive system, the more realistic it is perceived by viewers in that culture. Goodman 1983 explores more on realism-what. Hyman 2005 is a systematic critique of Goodman's view from the perspective of philosophy, and Mitchell 1991 is one from the perspective of media theory and visual culture theory.

**Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1968.**

See especially pp. 34–39. Offers insightful criticism to both the resemblance theory and the information theory of pictorial realism. Puts forward an original but widely criticized account of pictorial realism, arguing that realism is essentially a matter of habituation or familiarity. Although this view is not very plausible, it has had an important impact on the subsequent theories of pictorial realism.

**Goodman, Nelson. "Realism, Relativism, and Reality." *New Literary History* 14.2 (1983): 269–272.**

Repeats the habituation view of realism developed in Goodman 1968 and distinguishes two senses of realism-what in correspondence to Goodman's distinction between a picture's denotation and classification.

**Hyman, John. "Realism and Relativism in the Theory of Art." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 25–53.**

The first half of this paper is a thorough and comprehensive critique of Goodman 1968. The second half argues that pictorial realism manifests in three dimensions: accuracy, animation, and modality.

**Mitchell, W. J. T. "Realism, Irrealism, and Ideology: A Critique of Nelson Goodman." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25 (1991): 23–35.**

A careful critique of the habituation theory from the perspective of a pioneer of media theory and the theoretical study of visual culture.

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## Resemblance Theories

The resemblance theory of pictorial realism is in line with the resemblance theory of depiction, although the former is not implied by the latter. According to the resemblance theory of depiction, pictures represent via resemblance. Therefore, the resemblance theory of pictorial realism holds that resemblance is the measure of realism in the sense that the more a picture resembles what it depicts, the more realistic it is. The challenges for the resemblance theory of pictorial realism stem from the difficulties for the resemblance theory of depiction, the core of which is to explain how pictures can resemble their subjects (especially in the cases of non-existents and non-particulars) in a meaningful way. Sartwell 1994 is a relatively early version of this approach that develops the theory by identifying the aspects of resemblance required for pictorial realism. Blumson 2014 is a more contemporary proponent of the resemblance theory that, on the one hand, provides a systematic account on how pictures resemble their subjects in virtue of the sharing of properties, and, on the other hand, argues that the degree of realism can be measured by the degree of resemblance.

**Blumson, Ben. *Resemblance and Representation*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2014.**

See especially pp. 179–198. Has a chapter dedicated to the issue of pictorial realism from the perspective of the resemblance theory of

depiction. By appealing to discussions of the metaphysics of properties, Blumson argues that the degree of resemblance between a picture and what it depicts is the sum of the weights of the properties they share divided by the sum of the weights of their total properties.

**Sartwell, Crispin. "What Pictorial Realism Is." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34.1 (1994): 2–12.**

Argues that a picture is realistic to the extent that it resembles its subject through the sharing of some visually discernable properties (such as shape, color, etc.) that are relevant to the recognition of its subject such that the viewers can discern the pictorial subjects in a quick and easy way.

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## Information Theories

Information theory is the predominant view in the contemporary literature on pictorial realism within analytic philosophy. According to information theories, pictorial realism is explained in terms of the information pictures convey to their subjects, which is always specified via the depiction of properties. As mentioned in the Introduction, pictorial realism is characterized by accuracy and informativeness. Therefore, the degree of realism is measured along these two dimensions: accuracy goes with the quality of information, and informativeness is linked to the quantity of information. Different information theories identify different sorts of information to account for pictorial realism. Schier 1986 is an early attempt that explains pictorial realism by considering the quantity of properties a picture depicts its subject as either explicitly possessing or explicitly not possessing. This view is developed in Lopes 1995. Kulvicki 2006 argues that pictures are realistic to the extent that they provide information that is true to our conceptions of what is depicted. Buckman 2015 suggests a different view from Kulvicki's along this line. Hyman 2006 and Abell 2007 are attempts to explore what sorts of information are relevant in determining pictorial realism by considering how such information contributes to the appearance of the depicted subject.

**Abell, Catharine. "Pictorial Realism." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85.1 (2007): 1–17.**

Offers a brief but helpful examination of Schier 1986, Lopes 1995, and Hyman 2006. Distinguishes between realism qua pictures of particulars and of object types, and argues that a picture is realistic to the extent of the amount of information it conveys about the appearance of the depicted subject. This view is developed in Abell 2023 (cited under General Overviews), which deals with the issue of how pictures of non-existents can be realistic.

**Buckman, Christopher. "The Realistic Angel: Pictorial Realism as Hypothetical Verity." *Aesthetic Investigations* 1.1 (2015): 49–58.**

Develops the account proposed in Kulvicki 2006. Argues that pictures are realistic to the extent that they are true not to our conceptions of what things look like, but rather to what things actually look like or would look like were they to exist.

**Kulvicki, John. "Pictorial Realism as Verity." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64.3 (2006): 343–354.**

Argues that pictures are realistic to the extent that they depict their subjects in a way that is true to our conceptions of their subjects. This view is slightly refined and compared to other information theories in Kulvicki 2013, cited under General Overviews.

**Lopes, Dominic. "Pictorial Realism." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53.3 (1995): 277–285.**

Makes a finer distinction than Schier 1986 among the ways of a picture's taking a position on whether pictorial subjects possessing certain properties. Also argues that a pictorial system is realistic to the extent of the amount of information it provides within a given context of use.

**Schier, Flint. *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986.**

Defends a recognitional theory of depiction. One of the earliest attempts to distinguish pictorial realism in two senses: realism of accuracy and realism of informativeness. Argues that a picture is realistic with respect to a visually recognizable property in virtue of depicting its subject as either explicitly possessing or explicitly not possessing this property.

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## Perception and Make-Believe

There are some other works in the literature about pictorial realism that provide insights on this topic but may not fit neatly into any of the three kinds of theories introduced in this article. Walton 1990 introduces realism of various sorts within the conceptual framework Walton develops to explain representational art in general. Newall 2011 and McMahon 2006 explain pictorial realism by appealing to the perception of pictures.

**McMahon, Jennifer A. "The Perceptual Constraints on Pictorial Realism." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4. (2006): Article 22.**

Can be interpreted as proposing a recognitional theory of depiction as well as of pictorial realism. Argues that a necessary criterion for a picture to be realistic is for it to be configured in a certain way that can trigger the gestalt-like subpersonal perceptual mechanisms in viewers.

**Newall, Michael. *What Is a Picture?* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.**

See especially pp. 114–171. This book has two chapters on pictorial realism. One proposes a theory that combines the idea that realism is measured on the number of properties a picture depicts its subject as having with an account of pictorial perception, and suggests that the relevant properties are non-veridically seen. The other chapter is a detailed examination of various methods used to achieve pictorial realism.

**Walton, Kendall L. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.**

One of the most influential texts in the analytic philosophy of art. Discusses realism of various sorts by appealing to concepts such as make-believe, work-world, game-world, etc. Compatible with resemblance theories and some information theories of pictorial realism.

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