The Pursuit of Reality

The Artemision Bronze   Venus de Milo

Classical Hellenistic Greek Sculpture. Greek sculpture is a steady progression towards greater naturalism and realism, but is idealised and conforms to a strict formula of ideal proportions. These are representations of gods in their perfection of bodily form, not of imperfect human beings.

Cimabue

St Francis of Assisi 13thc

Although the ideals of Classical Greek 'realism' persisted into the Medieval world, they were rejected, rather than 'lost,' in favour of an intellectualised symbolic language of forms to represent the heavenly plane, saints and the spiritual world. The representation of atmosphere is suppressed. In Heaven there is only light, no shade.

Jan van Eyke

The Ghent Altarpiece - **virgin Mary,** detail 1432

The Dutch and Flemish artists rediscovered naturalism in their art, and took it to new heights of minutely observed realism, as a reflection of God's creation of the world. Light and shade were introduced to give atmosphere and solidity to the forms. Although in appearance the Ghent Altarpiece is a representation of the real world it is still essentially an idealised and fabricated landscape, a setting for the divine story unfolding before us. All details and incidents are at the service of the Holy storytelling.

Peter Bruegel

The Peasant Dance 1567

In Bruegel's representations of the fables and customs of peasant life an accumulation of incident and detail serve to tell stories and accounts of the social life of the day. Serving principally as social comment they are set in landscapes based on observation, but probably mostly fabricated.

Titian

Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap c1510

In Titian we see the representation of textures of skin and fabric brought to its highest degree of realism, and set in an enveloping atmosphere.

Michelangelo

The Libyan Sibyl 1511

Michelangelo's figures stretch anatomy to its limits. They are used to give maximum expression to his feelings; and in their twisting, exaggerated poses are essentially Mannerist rather than realist.

Parmigianino

Madonna With the Long Neck 1534-40

In Mannerism the human form becomes distorted, elongated and used for maximum expressive effect.

Caravaggio

The Calling of St. Matthew 1599-1600

Rembrandt

The Night Watch 1642

Caravaggio in Italy and Rembrandt in Holland introduced an enveloping atmosphere of light and deep shade, in which the human players in the drama are alternately enveloped in light or lost in the deepest shadows. This dramatic chiaroscuro was unprecedented in the history of art.

Poussin

Landscape With the Ashes of Phocion 1648

Claude

A Mediteranian Seaport 1604-5

The classical landscapes of Poussin and Claude, although based on studies of the Roman campagna are made up theatrical settings for the classical and Biblical stories acted out in the foreground.

Gainsborough

Mr and Mrs Andrews c1750

Gainsborough's portrait of a wealthy, couple is as much a portrait, somewhat idealised, of the land they possess as it is of the complacent young land owners.

David

Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass 1801

Eighteenth and Nineteenth century portraiture reached its representational heights of anatomical and accuracy of detail with the French Neoclassical artists David and Ingres. Albeit hard edged and seen in a cold, all revealing light that leaves nothing to the imagination. David's portrait of the emperor Napoleon serves to deify him and glorify his achievements.

Ingres

Madame Rivièr 1805-06

Bathed in a clear light, in their observation, perfection of form, representation of flesh and fabric, and delicate balance of design, Ingres portraits are possibly among the greatest achievements of the genre.

Constable

Wivenhoe Park 1816

Constable regarded landscape painting as a branch of natural science. Although painted largely in the studio his pictures are based on close observation of the scene, weather and details of the subject. They are representations of the countryside in as accurate detail of weather, trees, figures and countryside activities as he could achieve. We could regard them as portraits of the specific scene that was before him. In that he was a revolutionary.

Courbet

The Artist's Studio 1855

Courbet was the arch, self styled realist. Of this work he noted: 'The Painter's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life.'

Monet

La Plage de Trouville 1870   ***The Magpie*** 1868-9

All 'literary' references were expunged from Impressionist painting, with the purpose of representing just what appeared before the eye at a specific time and place. All is enveloped in the painterly equivalent of light. Figures, buildings and factories, railway stations etc., anything included which might carry storytelling overtones, were there simply for their colour and the colour of light as it is reflected from the surface of things. Cezanne said of Monet, 'he is only an eye, but my God, what an eye!'

Cezanne

Woman With a Coffeepot c1895

Cezanne brought tight structure and reference back into art, but in a new and completely personal way. The surface and depth of the picture are locked in to a complete and unified whole, through the careful application of individual marks, each related to the others, like notes of music in a symphonic harmony of colour. He said that he wanted to 're-make Poussin from nature.'

Picasso called Cezanne 'the father of us all.'

In his 1945 essay entitled "Cézanne's Doubt", Merleau-Ponty discusses how Cézanne gave up classic artistic elements such as pictorial arrangements, single view perspectives, and outlines that enclosed color in an attempt to get a "lived perspective" by capturing all the complexities that an eye observes. He wanted to see and sense the objects he was painting, rather than think about them. Ultimately, he wanted to get to the point where "sight" was also "touch". He would take hours sometimes to put down a single stroke because each stroke needed to contain "the air, the light, the object, the composition, the character, the outline, and the style". A still life might have taken Cézanne one hundred working sessions while a portrait took him around one hundred and fifty sessions. Cèzanne believed that while he was painting, he was capturing a moment in time, that once passed, could not come back. The atmosphere surrounding what he was painting was a part of the sensational reality he was painting. Cèzanne claimed: "Art is a personal apperception, which I embody in sensations and which I ask the understanding to organize into a painting."

'Treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone, the whole put into perspective so that each side of an object, or of a plane, leads towards a central point. Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth. Lines perpendicular to this horizon give depth.' Cezanne

Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order. Maurice Denis