

Realism

Realism, in the arts, the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism rejects imaginative idealization in favour of a close observation of outward appearances. As such, realism in its broad sense has comprised many artistic currents in different civilizations. In the visual arts, for example, realism can be found in ancient Hellenistic Greek sculptures accurately portraying boxers and decrepit old women. The works of such 17th-century painters as Caravaggio, the Dutch genre painters, the Spanish painters José de Ribera, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco de Zurbarán, and the Le Nain brothers in France are realist in approach. The works of the 18th-century English novelists Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett may also be called realistic.



Gustave Courbet: *The Artist's Studio**The Artist's Studio*, showing Gustave Courbet at the easel, oil on canvas by Courbet, 1854–55; in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © AISA—Everett/Shutterstock.com

Realism was not consciously adopted as an aesthetic program until the mid-19th century in France, however. Indeed, realism may be viewed as a major trend in French novels and paintings between 1850 and 1880. One of the first appearances of the term *realism* was in the *Mercure français du XIX^e siècle* in 1826, in which the word is used to describe a doctrine based not upon imitating past artistic achievements but upon the truthful and accurate depiction of the models that nature and contemporary life offer the artist. The French proponents of realism were agreed in their rejection of the artificiality of both the Classicism and Romanticism of the academies and on the necessity for contemporaneity in an effective work of art. They attempted to portray the lives, appearances, problems, customs, and mores of the middle and lower classes, of the unexceptional, the ordinary, the humble, and the unadorned. Indeed, they conscientiously set themselves to reproducing all the hitherto-ignored aspects of contemporary life and society—its mental attitudes, physical settings, and material conditions.

Realism was stimulated by several intellectual developments in the first half of the 19th century. Among these were the anti-Romantic movement in Germany, with its emphasis on the common man as an artistic subject; Auguste Comte's Positivist philosophy, in which sociology's importance as the scientific study of society was emphasized; the rise of professional journalism, with its accurate and dispassionate recording of current events; and the development of photography, with its capability of mechanically reproducing visual appearances with extreme accuracy. All these developments stimulated interest in accurately recording contemporary life and society.

Painting

Gustave Courbet was the first artist to self-consciously proclaim and practice the realist aesthetic. After his huge canvas *The Studio* (1854–55) was rejected by the Exposition Universelle of 1855, the artist displayed it and other works under the label “Realism, G. Courbet” in a

specially constructed pavilion. Courbet was strongly opposed to idealization in his art, and he urged other artists to instead make the commonplace and contemporary the focus of their art. He viewed the frank portrayal of scenes from everyday life as a truly democratic art. Such paintings as his *Burial at Ornans* (1849) and the *Stone Breakers* (1849), which he had exhibited in the Salon of 1850–51, had already shocked the public and critics by the frank and unadorned factuality with which they depicted humble peasants and labourers. The fact that Courbet did not glorify his peasants but presented them boldly and starkly created a violent reaction in the art world.

The style and subject matter of Courbet's work were built on ground already broken by the painters of the *Barbizon School*. *Théodore Rousseau*, *Charles-François Daubigny*, *Jean-François Millet*, and others in the early 1830s settled in the French village of Barbizon with the aim of faithfully reproducing the local character of the landscape. Though each Barbizon painter had his own style and specific interests, they all emphasized in their works the simple and ordinary rather than the grandiose and monumental aspects of nature. They turned away from melodramatic picturesqueness and painted solid, detailed forms that were the result of close observation. In such works as *The Winnower* (1848), *Millet* was one of the first artists to portray peasant labourers with a grandeur and monumentality hitherto reserved for more important persons.

Another major French artist often associated with the realist tradition, *Honoré Daumier*, drew satirical *caricatures* of French society and politics. He found his working-class heroes and heroines and his villainous lawyers and politicians in the slums and streets of Paris. Like Courbet, he was an *ardent* democrat, and he used his skill as a caricaturist directly in the service of political aims. Daumier used energetic linear style, boldly accentuated realistic detail, and an almost sculptural treatment of form to criticize the immorality and ugliness he saw in French society.



Honoré Daumier: *At the Palais de Justice* At the Palais de Justice, pen and ink, wash, black chalk, watercolour, and gouache on paper by Honoré Daumier, c. 1850; in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Petit Palace, Paris. *Giraudon/Art Resource, New York*

Pictorial realism outside of France was perhaps best represented in the 19th century in the United States. There, [Winslow Homer](#)'s powerful and expressive paintings of marine subjects and [Thomas Eakins](#)'s portraits, boating scenes, and other works are frank, unsentimental, and acutely observed records of contemporary life.

Realism was a distinct current in 20th-century art and usually stemmed either from artists' desire to present more honest, searching, and unidealized views of everyday life or from their attempts to use art as a vehicle for social and political criticism. The rough, sketchy, almost journalistic scenes of seamy urban life by the group of American painters known as [The Eight](#) fall into the former category. The German art movement known as the [Neue Sachlichkeit](#) (New Objectivity), on the other hand, worked in a realist style to express the cynicism and disillusionment of the post-[World War I](#) period in Germany. The [Depression](#)-era movement known as [Social Realism](#) adopted a similarly harsh and direct realism in its depictions of the injustices and evils of American society during that period.

[Socialist Realism](#), which was the officially sponsored [Marxist](#) aesthetic in the [Soviet Union](#) from the early 1930s until that country's dissolution in 1991, actually had little to do with realism, though it purported to be a faithful and objective mirror of life. Its “truthfulness” was required to serve the [ideology](#) and the propagandistic needs of the state. Socialist Realism generally used techniques of naturalistic idealization to create portraits of dauntless workers and engineers who were strikingly alike in both their heroic positivism and their lack of lifelike credibility.

The [Novel](#)

In [literature](#), the novelist [Honoré de Balzac](#) was the chief [precursor](#) of [realism](#), given his attempt to create a detailed, encyclopaedic portrait of the whole range of French society in his [La Comédie humaine](#). But a conscious program of literary realism did not appear until the 1850s, and then it was inspired by the painter Courbet's [aesthetic](#) stance. The French journalist [Champfleury](#), who had popularized Courbet's [painting](#) style, transferred the latter's theories to literature in *Le Réalisme* (1857). In this influential critical [manifesto](#) Champfleury asserted that the hero of a novel should be an ordinary man rather than an exceptional figure. In 1857 [Gustave Flaubert](#)'s novel [Madame Bovary](#) was published. This unrelentingly objective portrait of the bourgeois mentality, with its examination of every psychological [nuance](#) of an unhappy and adulterous middle-class wife, was both the principal masterpiece of realism and the work that established the movement on the European scene. Flaubert's [L'Éducation sentimentale](#) (1870), with its presentation of a vast panorama of France under [Louis-Philippe](#), was another principal realist work. The brothers [Jules and Edmond Goncourt](#) were also important realist writers. In their masterpiece, [Germinie Lacerteux](#) (1864), and in other works they covered a variety of social and occupational [milieus](#) and frankly described social relations among both the upper and the lower classes.

Realist tenets entered the mainstream of European literature during the 1860s and '70s. Realism's emphasis on detachment, objectivity, and accurate observation, its lucid but restrained criticism of social environment and mores, and the humane understanding that underlay its moral judgments became an integral part of the fabric of the modern novel during the height of that form's development. [Charles Dickens](#), [Anthony Trollope](#), and [George Eliot](#) in England, [Ivan Turgenev](#), [Leo Tolstoy](#), and [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#) in Russia, [William Dean Howells](#) in the United States, and [Gottfried Keller](#) and the early [Thomas Mann](#) in Germany all incorporated realist elements in their novels. A significant offshoot of literary realism was [Naturalism](#), a late 19th- and early 20th-century movement that aimed at an even more faithful and unselective representation of reality. The French novelist [Émile Zola](#) was the leading exponent of Naturalism.

Theatre

Realism in the theatre was a general movement in the later 19th century that steered theatrical texts and performances toward greater fidelity to real life. The realist dramatists [Henrik Ibsen](#) and [August Strindberg](#) in Scandinavia and [Anton Chekhov](#) and [Maxim Gorky](#) in Russia, among others, rejected the complex and artificial plotting of the well-made play and instead treated themes and conflicts belonging to a real, contemporary society. They dispensed with poetic language and extravagant diction, instead using action and dialogue that looked and sounded like everyday behaviour and speech. Realism had no use for the declamatory delivery and the overblown virtuosity of past acting and replaced this style with one demanding natural movements, gestures, and speech. Realist drama also used stage settings that accurately reproduced ordinary surroundings.

Motion Pictures

Like 20th-century drama and literature, the art of cinema has depended heavily on the 19th-century realist tradition for thematic material and often for structure. The nature of film, however, has lent itself to a kind of realism halfway between life and fiction. Such films, called [Neorealism](#) in Italy and sometimes *cinéma vérité* in France, tried to achieve a documentary-like objectivity by using non-actors in leading roles and incorporating segments of actual documentary footage into the story. The post-World War II films of [Roberto Rossellini](#) (such as *Open City* [1945] and *Paisan* [1946]) and [Vittorio De Sica](#) (*Bicycle Thieves* [1948]) best exemplify this genre.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude, the semblance of reality in dramatic or nondramatic fiction. The concept implies that either the action represented must be acceptable or convincing according to the audience's own experience or knowledge or, as in the presentation of [science fiction](#) or tales of the supernatural, the audience must be enticed into willingly suspending disbelief and accepting improbable actions as true within the framework of the narrative.

[Aristotle](#) in his *Poetics* insisted that [literature](#) should reflect nature—that even highly idealized characters should possess recognizable human qualities—and that what was probable took precedence over what was merely possible.

Following Aristotle, the 16th-century Italian critic [Lodovico Castelvetro](#) pointed out that the nondramatic poet had only words with which to imitate words and things but the dramatic poet could use words to imitate words, things to imitate things, and people to imitate people. His influence on the French neoclassical dramatists of the 17th century is reflected in their preoccupation with *vraisemblance* and their contribution of many refinements in respect to appropriate diction and gesture to the theory.

The concept of verisimilitude was incorporated most fully by Realist writers of the late 19th century, whose works are dominated by well

developed characters who very closely imitate real people in their speech, mannerisms, dress, and material possessions.