

# Realism

## When?

Mid 19<sup>th</sup> century

## Where?

France

Realism is an approach to art in which subjects are depicted in as straightforward a manner as possible, without idealizing them and without following rules of formal artistic theory. Basically, realism refers to a peculiar artist's attitude in front of reality, which - independently from the medium and the technique used - aims to reveal and point out the actual contemporary life, often with a social purpose. Even though the word Realism properly indicates an art movement born in 19<sup>th</sup> century, the same term can be used for any artwork showing similar formal features and intentions. Walker Evans' photographs of tenant families in southern Alabama shot in 1941 during the Great Depression are an example of realism in art.

**Subject matter** The Realist movement in French emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848 that overturned the monarchy of Louis-Philippe. Around mid-century, in the midst of class struggles and the wake of civil uprisings against an oppressive government, Realism in the visual arts and literature focuses on modern subjects and the lives of the lower classes. Rejecting the idealized classicism of academic art and the exotic themes of Romanticism, Realism was based on direct observation of the modern world. As French society fought for democratic reform, the Realists democratized art by depicting modern subjects drawn from the everyday lives of the working class. Realism was based on direct observation of the modern world. In keeping with Courbet's statement in 1861 that "painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things," Realists recorded in often gritty detail the present-day existence of humble people. Somehow Impressionism was influenced by Realism in terms of subject matters drawn from contemporary city life, without any particular social intention though.

**Formal aspects** Figurative images with a strong emphasis on texture and volume. Courbet employed a deliberately simple style, rooted in popular imagery, which seemed crude to many critics of the day.

The groundbreaking works by **Gustave Courbet** (1819–1877) exhibited at the Paris Salons of 1849 and 1850–51—notably *A Burial at Ornans* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *The Stonebreakers* (destroyed)—portrayed ordinary people from the artist's native region on the monumental scale formerly reserved for the elevating themes of history painting. At the time, Courbet's choice of contemporary subject matter and his flouting of artistic convention was interpreted by some as an anti-authoritarian political threat. To achieve an honest and straightforward depiction of rural life, Courbet employed a deliberately simple style, rooted in popular imagery, which seemed crude to many critics of the day.

When two of Courbet's major works (*A Burial at Ornans* and *The Painter's Studio*) were rejected by the jury of the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris, he displayed his paintings privately in his Pavillon du Réalisme, not far from the official international exhibition. For the introduction to the catalogue of this independent, one-

man show, Courbet wrote a Realist manifesto, echoing the tone of the period's political manifestos, in which he asserts his goal as an artist "to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch according to my own estimation." In his autobiographical *The Painter's Studio* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), Courbet is surrounded by groups of his friends, patrons, and even his models, documenting his artistic and political experiences since the Revolution of 1848.



For further information please explore the Realist collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris: <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/courbet-dossier/realism.html> or look at the museum's short guide in the school library (709.03 Ors).

You can browse the Library of Congress's digital collection to look at some photographs by Walker Evans: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=walker%20evans>