

Ask the Experts: Photographs and Realism



Helene Schjerfbeck, "The Convalescent" 1888, a painting executed with highly realistic rendering of the subject and surrounding objects

Ask the Experts: "If the goal of "realism" is to make art that looks real, why not just copy photographs?"

A: Art that is considered "realism" strives to depict the subject as it appears to the senses, as it exists in the actual world. What is considered "realistic" is heavily influenced by the knowledge, memory and beliefs of the artist and viewer, however.

Photography forever changed what is considered a true depiction of reality in art. Once the clarity, detail and immediacy of photography was revealed, the concept of what looks "true to life" was altered for every viewer of art.

The advent of photography is not the first time a major development in imagery changed how people define "realism". Linear perspective had a similar impact on earlier viewers. The first depictions of objects in a landscape systematically shrinking as they approached the horizon changed what contrast in size between compositional elements means in a work of art. Before perspective, scale in art was influenced by the importance of the subject. An important person like a monarch was often shown as larger than subordinate figures, who sometimes looked like dolls by comparison.

After the introduction of perspective systems, people became used to the idea that all lines converge to points,

and the tendency of all objects to appear smaller with distance became a "law" of realistic art.

Perspective also established the fixed point of view in realism, a principle further reinforced by photography. A photograph is captured from a single, stationary point- the position of the camera- and anyone viewing a photograph occupies that point as the observer.

Another aspect of what is considered "realism" is the accurate rendering of details, like hair, grass, fabric, metal and glass. Prior to photography, artists had mastered this skill, but the ability of the camera to capture every detail further raised expectations for painters to capture the minutest elements with total veracity. Still today, many artists consider "realistic" almost synonymous with "detailed".

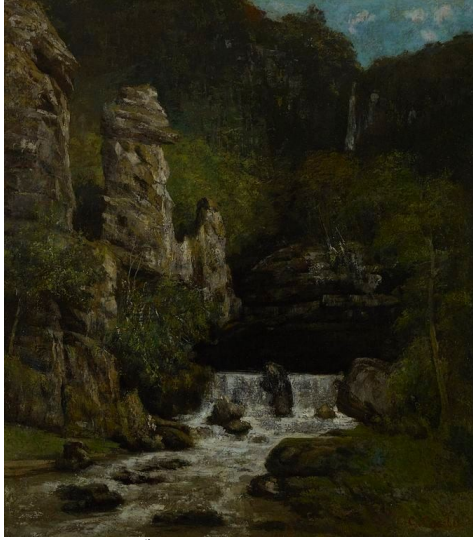
So, why do some works of art seem more "real" than reality? And, why do some photographs seem flat or "unreal"? The answer has to do with how our perception works. When we "see" the world, the brain is assembling a representation of reality based on input of the senses, but also on memory, assumption and bias. Depiction of motion is a good demonstration of the shortcomings of photography compared to painting.



Running water appears foggy and unrealistic in a photograph

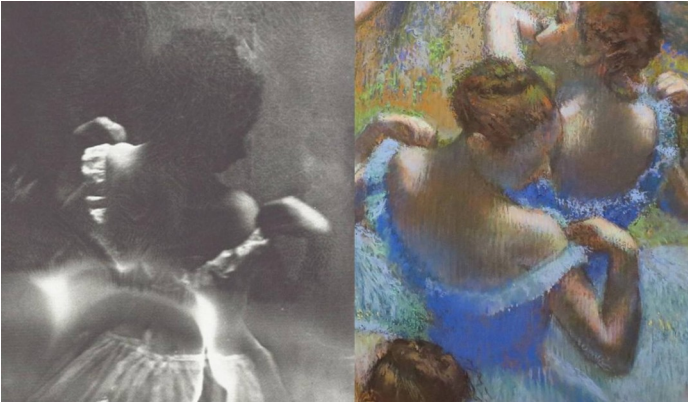
When a boxing match is photographed, for example, the fighters seem static and posed, even though in reality, we see them in dynamic motion. A painter depicting the same boxers will often show exaggerated postures with

sweeping arcs, capturing the essence of action. A photograph of rushing water in a stream looks like misty fog, compared to the painter's imagery, which looks more like how we experience moving water, as fluid and in motion.



Running water in a 19th c. painting by Courbet looks much as we experience it

The painter can also arrange and compose elements in ways that emphasize the most recognizable aspects of each, in a way that communicates or even exaggerates space, depth and volume. A photograph, by comparison, may create a flat depiction of a subject that, in reality, has great depth and volume, depending on how lighting, juxtaposition and overlap are used.



Photograph by Degas, and a pastel created using the photograph as reference

It's knowledge of how perception works that gives artists, including photographers, the ability to communicate reality through their work, instead of a static, neutral inventory of things, materials and textures. Knowing the weight, feel, taste, smell and temperature of the world can be as important as visual appearance in creating art that seems real or true to life, and not just in academic realism.