

## Henry Peach Robinson

### Idealism, Realism, Expressionism

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Closely allied with expression is the question of Idealism and Realism. Those who have only a superficial knowledge of the possibilities of our art contend that the photographer is a mere mechanical realist without power to add anything of himself to his production. Yet some of our critics inconsistently commit themselves to the statement that some of our pictures are nothing like nature. This is giving themselves away, for if we can add untruth we can idealise. But we go further and contend that we can add truth to bare facts.

A passion for realism is the affectation of the hour in art and literature, and is making some of our novels so dirty – in the name of art – that one scarcely likes to mention even the titles of them. It is the fashion to yearn for Nature, and to select her as bare, bald, and ugly as she is made, the particular kind being that which is the outcome not of nature, but of the errors of civilisation [sic!]. But when we examine the matter closely, we find that no art to be successful, however it may try, can entirely dispense with idealism. The stage heroine studies her part in the hospitals and dies before the audience without omitting a cough, a gasp, or a groan, but she cannot do without the idealism imparted by slow music and the limelight; the realistic novelist catalogues exactly the ugly, the sordid, and even the bestial, but he is careful of his “style”; the painter ostentatiously seeks ill-favoured models, uninteresting subjects, anything will do so that it is “not literary,” or amusing, or instructive or interesting, but he is careful about his drawing and colour [sic!]. The realism of the moment appears to select ugliness by preference, probably because it can be made more striking and sensational. There is still the possibility of realistic beauty, and this photography sometimes attains; but a photograph is too often neither more nor less than uninteresting, colourless fact, without the negative merits of ugliness or the charm of beauty. As I write I meet with the following which shows how exceedingly “mixed” some writers and artists are getting over some of the modern terms.

The author of a book on Velasquez calls that great artist a realist, on which his reviewer says: “It is difficult indeed to understand how the term could ever be applied to the supreme master of suppression and selection. There are some words which have lost all significance from the hard work put upon them. And realist is of the number. It has been asked to mean so much that it has ceased to mean anything at all. In fiction, realism is the glorification of the *Unessential*: it is that sacrifice of proportion which would exaggerate into a tragedy the drawing-on of a pair of boots; in painting it is the patient amassing of conflicting details, which exist, maybe, in nature, but which can only be observed by an eye of ever-shifting focus. And in painting, as in fiction, the single result of realism is falsity. When the novelist sets forth with his note-book you know that he will bring home a bundle of untruths. When he sticks to his fireside, he has a chance at least of inventing a probability: whereas, confronting the world with a hungry eye, he sees all things in a wrong relation, and the result is not truth but “copy.” So too the conscientious painter grovels in the dust of superfluous veracity, and finds only a false effect. One inch of his canvas may have some relation to nature. The whole must ever be meaningless and void.”

Idealism has been defined as the mental or intellectual part, and it is held by many that a picture can have no claim to art that does not contain its evidences to a more or less degree, and that, although the “foundation of all great work must be laid upon what is *real and true*, the further development must be *mentally and intellectually* conceived. Or, if the mental conception is the first step in the process, it must work on to what is evidently real and true.”

Realism began as a protest against conventionalism, and so far was useful, but it has now become a revolt against beauty, nobility, and grandeur of style, and it must be admitted that there are occasions when revolutions are salutary. Perhaps, after all, ugliness may have a useful qualifying effect on sweetness and affectation; at present it is itself one of the worst affectations of the century.

In a review of Mr. R. A. M. Stevenson’s *Art of Velasquez* (the same book noticed by another critic to whom I am indebted for the definition of realism) in the *Spectator*, a thoughtful writer gives the following definition of this little understood subject (misunderstood because it was seized on by charlatans for their own purposes). The real thing like good photography, has been so overshadowed by the spurious and bad that it has not often had a chance of being understood. I have always opposed the imitations, and have consequently been accused of opposing the theory itself, and am therefore glad to be able to give a clear definition from another pen than my own. “Once the impressionist theory of vision and painting is grasped, it is easy out of various writers, even out of Ruskin himself, to collect passages skirting it or glancing at it. It is the doctrine that Reynolds attempted to state. It is what painter after painter has more or less consciously applied, without being in words able to express it clearly.

“The name has been much against the thing with those to whom it was only a word.

‘Impressionism’ is a luckless enough term for a revolution in pictorial vision as radical as the introduction of chiaroscuro, of linear, or of aerial perspective. Inevitably it has been taken to mean hurried sketching. Now, a pre-Raphaelite may sketch hurriedly, but his sketch is not impressionistic, it is merely a hasty statement of his ordinary habit of vision. That habit is one of simple addition. If he has plenty of time he puts down 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. If he has less than half the time, he puts down 1, 2, and a bit of 3. This impressionist goes to work by summing these particulars before he puts down the result. He is therefore capable of a more rapid statement, but time is not of the essence of his procedure. His process of thought may take a longer time than the other’s thoughtless enumeration. Nor, again, is a pre-Raphaelite picture made into an impressionist by blurring it over, as some have fondly imagined. (Painters will tell you that they do ‘impressionist’ work *sometimes*.)

“Impressionism, then, does not mean hasty impression nor misty impression. It means *unity and order of impression gained by focussing the subject*. Just as linear perspective introduced a unifying natural action of the eye into painting, with one angle of view in place of a dozen, so does impressionism follow the natural eye, with one focus for a dozen.

“Focus affects the clearness of definition in two ways. If a number of objects, A, B, C, D, E, stand at different distances from the eye, and the eye rests upon and adjusts itself to C, the nearer objects, A and B, and the farther objects, D and E, are thrown out of focus and are blurred. This may be called the *focus of distance*, and to represent two objects at different depths in a picture with the same clearness of definition is to puzzle and contradict the eye.

“But there is also the *focus of attention*. According as the eye selects one feature of a scene, or allows itself to wander more freely, the definition of the parts will alter; and, if we wish in a picture that it should be known what we were looking at, a not unreasonable desire, we must follow this procedure of the eye. If I look at A and B together, my attention is more diluted than when I look at one of them, and the definition of each is weaker – it is the pattern including the

two that is defined. If I look at A directly, with B still there, but not attended to, the definition of B is fainter.

“So much for form. A similar law holds with regard to colour. The impressionist will not skin off all distance till his eye reaches a flayed local colour. He will fix with himself a distance that relates all local colours in a key. Nor will he scrutinise each patch of colour in turn with equal attention. If a yellow spot is focussed in a scene, all the other colours alter; if the eye leaves the yellow to play more freely, the yellow loses its insistence, and the *colour of the scene* asserts itself.

“It is only the unthinking who will accuse impressionism, thus understood, of being an easy slap-dash kind of painting. To appreciate the exactly right force of definition for the parts in relation to the whole is a task that employs the rarest faculties of vision, since to a sensitive eye a single false accent will destroy a whole picture. If it be argued that all this is a matter of mechanical and realistic rendering of facts, the assertion is manifestly untrue. Attention is governed by feeling, every change in the definition of an object means a change in our emotion about it.

Impressionism, in a word, employs the means of emphasis natural to vision. Other methods of emphasis there are, that of the decorative line, the silhouetted shape, the colour patch, and a painter may bind himself by the simpler conventions if he pleases; but, if he does not comprehend impressionistic vision, he is not full-grown in the theory of his art, and is blind to its later history and triumphs.”

A pure, unadulterated machine-made (man and instrument) photograph, if colour is allowed for, is the most perfect specimen of realism the world could produce; useful in a thousand ways, it would not be art any more than a minute catalogue of the facts of nature, however full of insight, is a poem. In early days we were surprised and delighted with a photograph, *as a photograph*, just because we had not hitherto conceived possible any definition or finish that approached Nature so closely, and here was something that actually had the effect of surpassing Nature on her own grounds. But we soon wanted something more. We got tired of the sameness of the exquisiteness of the photograph, and if it had nothing to say, if it was not a view, or a portrait of something or somebody, we cared less and less for it. Why? Because the photograph told us everything about the facts of nature and left out the mystery. Now, however hard-headed a man may be, he cannot stand too many facts; it is easy to get a surfeit of realities, and he wants a little mystification as a relief.

It has been denied that our art has sufficient plasticity to admit of modifications sufficient to enable a photographer to express himself in his material. We own it is limited, yet all arts have their limitations, and to be successful must work within them. There is this difficulty, however. The grammar and language of art can be taught, but it is quite different with its poetry.

Photographers want a formula for everything, but you cannot make a ten per cent. Solution of idealism and give minute instructions how it is to be applied; but I think it has often been very clearly shown that photographic pictorial effect depends entirely on the man, and that he is not limited to prosaic actuality. In some recent exhibitions there were sets of pictures shown, varying from the minutely defined to those of extreme diffusion, which could have come from no other hands and minds than those which produced them; they were as individual as the works of the most mannered painters, and represented not so much the subject which was before the camera as the photographer's individual impression of the subject.

Processes have been simplified, cameras have become more fearfully and wonderfully made, lenses have acquired a flatter field, and some of them can conjure a foreground out of the dim distance; societies and conferences have multiplied, technique has, up to a certain point, improved, and all the world produces good photography; many reach the dead level of excellence, but how few get beyond! What a pity, in one sense, it is that we do not have more that

contains the “little more”; but, after all, it is good to know that there is something not easily reached still left in photography, and it also teaches that in our art, as in others, “the man’s the man for a’ that.”

Clever writers are now discovering that it is not necessary that photography should make for realism, but, indeed, in its higher flights, may tend the other way. In an interesting article in a recent number of the *Nineteenth Century*, on “Realism of Today,” the author makes this interesting admission: -

“Perhaps one of the greatest enemies to the realism of the present day is the steady growth of photography. After all, what can be more realistic than its manner of working? A flash and there is the figure in its most natural and real condition. Laughing, crying, winking, jumping, you can fancy you see the movement, and almost hear the speech. But does that satisfy the sitter or the artist, or is it not the main object and effort of both to beautify the production by soft and harmonious effects, to tone down and shade off defects, and so to produce an idealised beauty in the subject? And is not the result far more really true to nature than the inartistic and unaided pictures that marked the first years of the raw invention? If photography has discovered that in order to be real and true it must also be ideal, it is thereby teaching us a lesson which we may do well to profit by.”

This is one of the most encouraging testimonials from the outside press that the “new movement” has received. It may, however, be said to refer only to retouching, which all good artists condemn. But the sentence I have quoted refers not to a detail of practice, but to principle. It is not, however, retouching in itself that is condemnable, but the *bad* retouching, at present almost universal, which turns the human face divine into a semblance of marble busts or, still worse, turnips or apple dumplings. This is one of the instances of bad art which it is the mission of the new movement to correct.

The author of the article on Realism concludes as follows: -

“So we come back to where we began. To be real and true is the first great quality; but to conceive and superadd the highest possible ideal is also indispensable if we would ever hope to reach that perfection which is, indeed, in this world unknown, but which, in a world to come, may yet be found attainable.”