

## Imitation and Imagination

### On the relation between them in naturalistic realism

Gezien van de Riet

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This first engraving by Dürer shows a method of imitation; the second is full of fantasy, imagination.



Albrecht Dürer. Woodcut depicting a device for drawing. Illustration in Dürer's *Unterweisung der Messung*, 1525



Albrecht Dürer. *Nemesis*, engraving, ca.1500

Imitation and Imagination are two important components in the history of representational art. The balance between them varied all the time. I will try to shed some new light upon their relationship, directed at naturalistic realism, or naturalism.

Questioning my own painting practice, the theoretical background of realism in the Dutch Golden Age was a great inspiration for me. I learned about that from publications by Ernst van de Wetering and Boudewijn Bakker.



Gerard Huysman. *Utrecht, street in backlight*, oil on panel, 2013

Naturalism is one of many expressions of representational art, one with a very high degree of imitation. I will contest the opinion that naturalism lacks imagination.

### Questions

In October 2014 I posted this *Street in Utrecht in backlight* by Gerard Huysman on The Representational Art Group of Facebook. A comment of one Joe was:

*"I can't understand why an artist would work so hard to make a painting like this that is so much like a photo. That's what cameras are for. I can see the artist's skill, but not the soul."*

This is an opinion often heard. Because really: isn't imitation getting in the way of imagination? Exactly! No soul, no artistic creativity. And that's what this discussion is all about. I would agree spontaneously with Joe, if it weren't for the fact that I was struck by the atmosphere of this painting.

However, his criticism does fit in with my doubts about my own work. I was haunted by questions:

- Is naturalistic realism actually the same as copying?
- Is it a lower form of art? Boring?
- A lot of people enjoy this kind of work, but that doesn't mean it is relevant art.
- Does it add something? After all, reality, the real world, is already there. You should do something to it, with it.
- Shouldn't you put your personal feelings into your art?



Henk Helmantel. *Stillife with Cheese and Eggs*, oil on panel, 1987, Collection Museum MORE. Photo Art Revisited.

### Good art, who judges?

Contemporary realism in The Netherlands has been flourishing for about thirty years now.

Nevertheless the official art institutions and the media mostly neglect its existence. Recently a journalist wrote in a prestigious Dutch newspaper that realism can be dangerous. Yes, virtuosity is a must, she writes, but the comment '*It looks like a photo*' is not a compliment. '*It looks like the real thing*' even less. The artist has to expose himself, otherwise his painting will be only an illustration, not more than a picture. She mentions Henk Helmantel, who said not to be in search for

expressing his personal feelings.<sup>1</sup> In her interpretation he is deemed to produce mere illustrations, far from high art.

Nothing against personal feelings in art. But there seems to be a consensus that the personality, the feelings of the artist are primordial, while other approaches are excluded or rejected.

Although it's not quite the same, this reminds me of Giorgio Vasari who pointed out that besides imitation and invention, good art should possess style and *maniera*, a personal artistic elegant style.<sup>2</sup> True, an own style will add something to the art.

Well, you could say that my development until now just seems to have taken the wrong direction. Some twenty years ago I made *The painter and her model*, see the picture on the



Gezien van de Riet. Left: *Drawing her model*, acryl/oil on linnen, 1996, and right: *Daphne*, oil on canvas, 2016,

left. On the right a recent work:

*Daphne*. It went from a loose touch, free colors and free imagination to naturalism.

And naturalism is less focussed on style and handwriting.

Yes, in my beginner's years I often had a personal spontaneous handwriting.

These works will never be dubbed copies or photo's. Why on earth did I

choose a more naturalistic way of painting? It only complicated things!

The crazy thing was: I couldn't help myself. More and more I wanted to

celebrate the beauty I had seen, to make it my own.

## Ancient Greeks

Could it be that the history of art had witnessed earlier discussions about this question? I started on a search.

The Ancient Greeks had a great appreciation of the naturalistic detail. Birds should see painted grapes as real and try to pick them. An anecdote about Apelles clearly illustrates their admiration for imitation. The horse he painted was so life-like, that it is said that the horse of Alexander the Great started whinnying spontaneously on seeing it.



After Praxiteles. *Aphrodite*, and After Lysippos. *Alexander as hunter*, both 4th century BC

The Greeks had clear views on imagination. The artist should have in mind the Platonic Idea, the perfect form, the supernatural beauty of the object he wanted to portray. This did not come about automatically, because models were only ordinary mortals. Even the most beautiful human body could have fat ankles. Well, in that case you would take somebody else's ankles! Idealizing thus, the artist would transcend pure imitation.

So there we have it: Imitation and Imagination...

But suddenly I jumped up. I read about the sculptor Lysippos, who worked at Alexander's court. He wanted to convey *what he saw in a naturalistic manner!* Not following the current rules for perfect beauty, developed by the old masters, but his own observation.

We don't know much for sure about Lysippos. But the sculpture attributed to him, *Alexander the hunter*, clearly shows a naturalistic realism. Whoever made it, this artist was capable of far-reaching imitation.

I was happy about this Lysippos.

## Dutch Golden Age

Fast forward two thousand years into the Dutch Golden Age, the seventeenth century, when realism was flourishing. Several painters developed their ideas about art and wrote handbooks. They stressed the importance of imitation and observation. Of course they included classical elements such as perspective or anatomy.

Painter-author Karel van Mander described a great many natural phenomena in *Het Schilder-boeck*.<sup>3</sup> Rembrandt's former pupil Samuel van Hoogstraten also wrote an important manual.<sup>4</sup> These books belonged to the cultural baggage of every self-respecting painter.

It makes for fascinating reading, certainly also for contemporary realists. It stimulates awareness of many aspects of observation and representation. You can read all about it in *Rembrandt. The Painter at Work*, *Rembrandt. The Painter Thinking*, and other publications by Ernst van de Wetering. He dug up a real art treasure, that was forgotten.

Essential was to create space in order to get the illusion of reality. Besides perspective, an



Rembrandt. Details *Nightwatch*, 1642

important element was the ‘perceptibility’. It was found that putting a piece of sky-blue paper against a sky of the same color, you would still notice that the piece of paper is close to you, and the blue sky infinitely distant because of the relative roughness of the paper.<sup>5</sup>



Rembrandt. Detail *The anatomy lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, oil on canvas, 1632

Rembrandt applied this phenomenon quite often, see the detail of his *Night Watch*. The application of the discovery of perceptibility would contribute to three-dimensionality. Imagine painters pondering that! The idea that air has substance, that it *forms a body* over a short distance, and that its presence should be suggested around every object to create spatiality is wonderful.

Van de Wetering: “*The young Rembrandt had already applied this insight with great subtlety in the ‘Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp’*”. He argues: “*It is only when one consciously takes notice of these extremely refined modulations of light and tone from one head and collar to the other, from front to back, that it becomes clear that this is one of the main reasons for the strikingly atmospheric effect of Rembrandt’s paintings.*”<sup>6</sup>



Vermeer. *The art of painting*, oil on linnen, 1666-73

There was also a treatise on the degrees of shadows and what pigments should be used in painting them. Or the theory of the numerical diminution of a light beam falling into a room.<sup>7</sup>

Vermeer was probably familiar with it, as is witnessed by the interior light in his paintings. He created a genial combination of spaciousness and intimacy.

The level of knowledge among the painters of that age was exceptional. I don’t mean we should copy these theories, but we can learn from them, and even improve our art.



Frans Hals. *Laughing boy*, oil on panel, ca. 1620-25

### Realism, banal, vulgar

Another writer on this period is Boudewijn Bakker. He tells that the extreme realism of the Dutch invited criticism by the Italians: imitation, okay, but what about imagination? After all, art should lift reality to a higher level, creating perfect beauty, idealize. The Dutch subject matter was deemed banal, vulgar. Classical art theory taught that students should draw after antique statues, since these had perfect proportions. Samuel Van Hoogstraten, who later turned to a more classicist style, complained that Rembrandt brought ugly models into his studio.

*“Indeed, I bemoan my lot when I look over my old Academy drawings, that we were taught these so sparingly in our youth; since it is no more labor to imitate a graceful posture than an unpleasant and disgusting one.”*<sup>8</sup>

Rembrandt really went far... In one of his self-portraits I detected a pimple on his cheek; the ugly was also worth painting.

### Answer: a ‘find’

Karel van Mander answered the Italian criticism by stating: *“In life one finds all”*, there is no better textbook. In the ‘book of nature’ the visible creation is seen as the second or even first ‘book’ of divine revelation, next to the Holy Scriptures.



Rembrandt. *Girl in a picture-frame*, oil on panel, 1641

*Inventio, Imagination*, can also be seen as ‘a find’, something that is found in nature after long and sharp observation. Intensive looking is the entrance key to beauty. Beauty is enclosed in reality. Reality is created by God.<sup>9</sup>

As soon as possible the painter should start to work after nature. And what about style, *maniera*? His advice: don’t make things up, *“go from ornamentation towards truth!”*. Fabrications could affect the illusion of reality. The painter should not stylize or idealize, but *characterize*.<sup>10</sup>

For Rembrandt, ‘truth’ was life, to be captured in its ‘most natural liveliness’. Van de Wetering remarks that the painting *Young woman in a picture frame* gives the impression that the young woman is about to place her right hand on the frame, even the earring seems to be moving, life is caught in the act.<sup>11</sup>

Well, the Dutch diverged from current art theory.

Imitation was highly appreciated. But invention or

imagination was never far away. Beauty in truth, intensely observed by the artist, was transferred into the work of art.

For me, it was like homecoming. I had always felt that way.



Gustave Courbet. *The stone breakers*, oil on canvas, 1849

### 19th-century Realism

Two centuries later, in 1855, Courbet's painting *The Stone Breakers* was rejected as too vulgar by the Paris Salon. This sounds familiar.

Courbet then wrote his Realist Manifesto. He minted the term realism, true to nature, by form and by content. "No myths", said Courbet, "Angels? I've never seen them." Look at everyday reality, at ordinary people. There's no need for fabrication.

At the end of the nineteenth century there were all sorts of realisms; think of Lepage, Bougueraux, Sargent, Waterhouse, Alma Tadema, Zorn, Repin. They were famous in their

day, but afterwards largely forgotten. But realism can be 'fantastic' and in no way inferior to the so much appreciated impressionism of that age.



Shishkin. *Winter*, oil on panel, 1890

See the Russian Ivan Shishkin, an eminently naturalistic painter. His *Winter* is overwhelming by its greatness and realness. Extremely refined color and tone nuances in the snow. A wealth of details in the tree bark. That way, Shishkin enhanced the degree of reality in his painting. Some colleagues called him a 'bookkeeper of leaves'.<sup>12</sup> Also nowadays art teachers often shrink

away from painting many details, for understandable reasons. But if done rightly, you can compare detailing to music in which every note is clearly played without losing the melody, where variation in repetition only enriches. Greatness does not exclude attention to detail.



Shishkin. *In the barren North*, oil on canvas, 1891

And his own handwriting? In Van Mander's words: "no fabrication, no ornamentation". He lets Nature speak its own language. Do nothing more!

For that, great skill is required.

However successful he was, some critics thought his work too naturalistic because it was so much like reality itself. Where was the imagination? Shishkin succeeded in hiding it in his art. More about that later.

He painted in this naturalistic manner to capture the observed qualities, the breathtakingly beautiful.

"Just like the real thing", the public says, while getting a feeling of the artist's original experience.

What is it that makes these paintings so touching? It can't be just *Imitation*, can it?



### Observing, experiencing and representing

Obviously I wouldn't dare to put myself at the level of these masters, but I found that the painting process starts in my head the moment that beauty in the outside world hits my eye:... it must be *this* color... *that* pattern... *this* should be in... *that* should be left out...

Atmosphere and experience imprint themselves in my memory. I see more and more of that what hits me: the architecture of the tree, nuances, gradations, peculiarities. A *selection* of course, because it's impossible to paint every tiny branch. That selection stems also from my personality. An image is formed in my mind.



Gezien van de Riet. *The beech of Kijkuit-2*, alkyd/oil on panel, 2005

During the painting process the original feeling or experience works as a propelling force *and* as a severe critic: is the atmosphere still there? Then let me grab this brush, select that color.

Feeling, experience, joins with technique. That's the way feeling comes in the artwork.

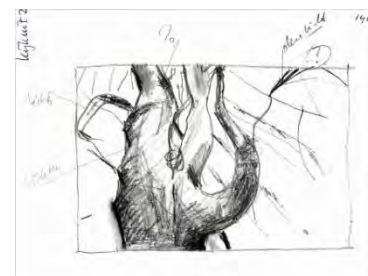
All manner of problems must be solved. Form and color work differently on a panel than in reality.

Picture yourselves an infinite space in which a tree extends its bare

branches. The painting has to make do with only a small square. I must make up for that. Because I want to evoke just that infinite space, that defines the atmosphere.

Roaming through the representation, the eye of the beholder should be able to enjoy itself unhindered. That is why there is a harmonious abstract pattern laid (as it were) *under* the representation; attention being paid to directions, light and dark, balance, etc.

That pattern can force you to remove branches or to bend them. I sometimes make a photo of the painting in progress and manipulate it in Photoshop; that can be quicker than sketching. The illusion of space on a flat surface can force you to change colors further away, even though that's not the way they were seen.



Gezien van de Riet. *Sketch beech of Kijkuit-2*, pencil on paper

### Inconspicuous distortions

In short, in naturalistic realism the painter *consciously* applies *distortions*, but as *inconspicuously* as possible. It must be hidden. The greater the skill, the more poignantly the experience is represented. Inconspicuous distortions can be found in many classical works of art. Personal feelings? Yes, very personal, but in the sense of total involvement. What is really added by the artist is the enchantment that was in the original experience, the beauty, the thrill, guided by her (or his) artistic talent.

Seeing *A Street in Utrecht in Backlight* you may think: "Oh, I know this already". Then you will move straight on and miss the beauty of it. That will be reserved to the attentive viewer. She will walk in her mind through that street, with that nice atmosphere. How was that achieved? By all sorts of choices made by the artist. He managed to hide them.



Gezien van de Riet. *Reaching for the sky*, pastel on paper, 2006

Is Imitation just virtuosity? It is more than that. Because how can it be that the art of the Dutch Golden Age still enchants millions of people? The painters themselves were enchanted by beauty and skilfully expressed that in their work.

Dennis Dutton states in *The Art Instinct*<sup>13</sup> that love for beauty is inborn. As long as that instinct is not weeded out, there will always be people gripped by beauty and artists driven to *re-create* the beauty found in reality.

Please, no dogmas. There are many ways towards beauty; contemporary naturalism is entitled to its own place in art and art history.

That is my creed.

Translation: Jeroen Strengers

## Notes

- 1) Roodnat, Joyce. “Met drift geschilderde ‘kleine onderwerpen’ “. *NRC*, 2018-02-28.
- 2) Vasari, Giorgio. *Lives of the Artists*. Volume 1. Introduction by George Bull. London, 1987. p. 19-20.
- 3) Mander, Karel van. *Het Schilder-Boeck*. Haarlem, 1604.
- 4) Hoogstraten, Samuel van. *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: anders de zichtbaere werelt*. Davaco Publishers, s.l., 1969.
- 5) Wetering, Ernst van de. *Rembrandt. The Painter at Work*. Amsterdam, 2000. p. 183.
- 6) Id., p.187.
- 7) Wetering, Ernst van de. *Rembrandt. The Painter Thinking*. Amsterdam, 2016. p.157.
- 8) Emmens, ) J.A.. *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst*. Amsterdam, 1979. p.220.
- 9) Bakker, Boudewijn. “Natuur of kunst? Rembrandts esthetica en de Nederlandse traditie.” In: Christiaan Vogelaar e.a., *Rembrandts landschappen*. Zwolle, 2006. p.163.
- 10) Id., p.167, 166.
- 11) Wetering, Ernst van de. *Rembrandt. The Painter Thinking*. Amsterdam, 2016. p.263.
- 12) Os, Henk van. “Voor het eerst: Russische landschappen”. In: Patty Wageman & David Jackson (ed.), *Het Russisch Landschap*. Groninger Museum, Groningen & The National Gallery, London, s.d. Schoten, België, 2003. p.39.
- 13) Dutton, Dennis. *The Art Instinct. Beauty, Pleasure & Human Evolution*. New York, 2009.