Art and representation: ‘Good art should portray authentically’

The numbered artworks referred to in this handout are listed, with links, on the companion website.

THE VALUE OF REPRESENTATION

The desire to make pictures of the world goes back tens of thousands of years. The caves of Lascaux containing over 2,000 paintings, some dating from 30,000 years ago. Today, we put photos up on websites for other people to see. Human beings have a drive to represent the world and a desire to see these representations.

The most common starting point for understanding a painting is to think about what it is a painting of. We often praise a picture for the way in which it has managed to capture a scene. Constable’s The Hay Wain (1821) is so true to nature, you can almost see the clouds moving across the sky. We praise a bust for its likeness to the person it represents, such as Oscar Nemon’s depiction of Churchill (c. 1955). We praise a play, such as Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, for being true to life.

Paintings represent objects in such a way that we can see the object in the painting. If we don’t know who or what the painting is a painting of, then it loses its point. Knowing that a painting is of King Henry VIII (c. 1536; after Hans Holbein the Younger) makes a difference to what we think about it. Hude’s Still Life with a Lobster (1650-9) is impressive in its accuracy and complexity. If a painting claims to represent some object, but we just can’t see the object in the painting, then the painting has failed as a painting.

All this supports the claim that the ability to portray objects or situations authentically is one we value. We can point out, further, that artists spend many years developing and perfecting techniques that enable them to gain this ability. To portray a character convincingly, actors may even temporarily live life the way the character would (in Marathon Man, whenever there was a scene in which his character was breathless from running, Dustin Hoffman would run half a mile to become breathless before filming the scene). The artists, then, are clearly attempting to get the audience to recognise what is being depicted in the artwork.

That art should represent authentically also explains why certain real events, such as the Holocaust, or objects, such as bodies mutilated by torture, can seem ‘off-limits’ for art. The horror, terror, wrongness of the original event or object stops the work from becoming art. An attempt to turn real-life horror into art can seem tasteless and disrespectful.

HOW IS ART SUPPOSED TO STAND FOR REALITY?

Imitation and copying
What is the relation between an artwork and what the artwork is of? Plato argued an imitation or a copy of reality.
We first need to remind ourselves of his metaphysics. Plato argued that the ultimate reality is the Forms. Particular things, what we detect with our senses, are a kind of ‘copy’ of the Forms. The Form of Beauty is perfect beauty. All beautiful things are beautiful because they ‘share’ or ‘participate’ in the Form. But none do so perfectly — nothing we experience with our senses is ever perfectly beautiful. So we can say that particular things are a kind of imperfect ‘copy’ of the Forms.

In Book X of the Republic, Plato argued that art copies particular things. He gives the example of a bed. There is the perfect Form of a bed; then, as a kind of copy of that, a carpenter makes a bed; a painting of a bed is a copy of the carpenter’s bed.

Whether or not particular things are copies of the Forms, is all art an imitation or copy of particular things? In any literal sense, we can argue it is not. Imitation first. To paint a facial expression is not to imitate a facial expression. We do not confuse a painting of a facial expression for a real face; nor do pictures try to fool us into thinking that we are looking at reality, not a picture. (An exception is trompe l’oeil paintings, such as 6. Pere Borrell del Caso, Escaping Criticism (1874). (Trompe l’oeil is French for ‘trick the eye’.) But even here, we only enjoy the painting when we cease to be fooled.) Actors do not imitate the characters they play, they ‘become’ them temporarily. If they had to imitate them, how could they discover what the character ‘really’ does, so as to imitate it?

Copying does no better. First, copying presupposes there is an original to copy. Second, the success of a copy is judged by the degree to which it accurately resembles the original. Neither seems to be true of art.

Many philosophers have argued that experience is interpreted by concepts. There is no real ‘experience’ before this process of interpretation. If this is right, then an artist cannot ‘copy’ from the world, because no experience of the world is prior to interpretation. What we see is conditioned by the concepts we have.

We can object that there is still better or worse resemblance between a painting and what it is of. A painting with red grass and a green sky does not resemble the world as well as a painting with green grass and a blue sky. Nevertheless, we can argue that even when an artwork resembles reality resemblance is captured by an artwork, there isn’t always some particular scene or situation the artist had in mind before they completed the work; they may invent it as they go. And so they cannot be copying from the world.

More importantly, we can argue that a good copy is not the same as good art. First, in art, resemblance is often besides the point. Compare two sunsets, 7. Vernet’s A Landscape at Sunset (1773) and 8. Turner’s The Scarlet Sunset (1830-40). The styles are quite different; in making a comparison, is accuracy or the degree of resemblance to a sunset the point? Both involve stylistic interpretations of a sunset. Or again, consider 9. Picasso’s The Three Dancers (1925). Its lack of resemblance does not detract at all from its power. If resemblance was the main reason we value art, then wouldn’t a photograph always be a better work of art than a painting? Second, copying does not involve the creative imagination as good art does. For example, a good forgery is a good copy, but that does not make it a good work of art (or a work of art at all).
All these points can be made about the visual arts, in which there is at least the possibility that the artist is copying from reality. But what about music or poetry or literature? In these cases, there is simply nothing the artist could be copying from.

**Representation**

Perhaps, then, to say that good art should portray authentically is to say simply that it should represent reality, where this is not taken to mean imitate, copy or even resemble. This avoids the objections above, but can we say what representation means, beyond the idea that there is something the artwork is of or about? We won’t have understood why we value art unless we can say something more specific.

There is this: we can point out that to understand a work of art, we need to master a system of conventions or symbols. For example, in medieval and Renaissance art, St Paul is always represented with a book and sword, as in 10. Cima de Conegliano’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint Paul and Saint Francis* (c. 1508-30); saints are always represented with haloes, as in 11. *The Wilton Diptych* (1395-9). These conventions, and many others, help us to understand the painting. Art uses the system of conventions to represent, just as language does. But is this enough to save the theory?

**ARE ALL ARTS EQUALLY CONCERNED WITH REPRESENTING?**

If there are works of art that do not represent, then the claim that we value art because it represents the world must be false. That is, at least, that this cannot be the only reason we value art; and perhaps it will not even be the main reason. And there clearly are artworks that are not representational.

Within painting, there is abstract art, such as 12. Karel Appel, *Untitled* (1960). However, we can respond that this is representational. The painting is itself two-dimensional, but in what is represented, some shapes are in front of others. In other words, three-dimensional space is represented. This is an important point – representation in its most general sense does not need to be representation of anything recognisable in the world.

However, some abstract art does not even represent three-dimensional space (13. Barnett Newman, *Adam* (1951-2)). Second, this response doesn’t help the claim that good art should portray authentically, because in cases of representing abstract three-dimensional spaces, no thing is represented, so we cannot talk about ‘authentic’ representation.

In music (not set to words or actions), the lack of representation is obvious – a sequence of sounds does not describe or try to describe anything else. It also shows that a system of conventions is not the same as representation. Classical music has a very large number of conventions – the idea of a ‘key’, acceptable key changes, which instruments are used, the organization of movements within a piece, and so – but for all that, it doesn’t represent anything.

We can reply that we can read something into music, that it reminds us of this or that. But we cannot say that it represents this or that unless it was part of the artist’s intention for it to represent in this way.

Could we say that a piece of music represents a mood or an emotion? But while Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7* is a very joyful piece, we don’t say it represents joy. Emotions can’t be seen the way the Virgin Mary can be seen in 11. *The Wilton Diptych*; they can’t be
heard the way sounds can. It is more accurate to say that emotion or mood is expressed rather than represented.

**EVEN IF ART INFORMS US, IS THAT WHY WE VALUE IT AS ART?**

Plato uses his theory of art as copying to criticise art. If art is just representation, valued for what it represents, why would we look at art rather than at the world? Anyone can create images, Plato says – just carry a mirror around and you can make an image anything in the world! For Plato, the Forms are reality, particular objects are a poor substitute, and art is a poor substitute for particular objects. As a copy of a copy, art is inferior indeed. If we want to be informed, we should turn to philosophy and the Forms, not art.

We can add a second criticism to this: if we valued art for what it represented, then we would value a forgery as much as the original artwork, because it would convey the same information. But we don’t, so there must be some other reason we value art.

We can reply that in saying we value representation, we don’t need to say that we value a painting for what it represents. Instead, we value it as a representation. For example, we enjoy imitations even when we do not enjoy what is imitated. While someone’s walk may be ungainly, an imitation of their walk may be amusing. Likewise, in art, we enjoy the skill involved, the choice of what to represent, how it is represented, and so on. But this reply takes us away from the idea that we value art because it informs us, and points to the activity of imagination, both of the artist and of the viewer.

Finally, focusing on how we are informed by art makes our appreciation of art too intellectual. We would always need to get the resemblance, the allusion, the message. But our response to art is much more than this. In particular, it involves our emotions.