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HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety
Summer 2012

LEARNING ENHANCEMENT SITES:

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Sessions - History of Art: Realism in Painting

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4 min 17 sec - Jun 6, 2008

Tutorial video from Sessions Online Schools of Art & Design's "History of Art" course

THE AGE OF SOCIAL REALISM: THE VIEW FROM BELOW

"Realism" is used to describe a particular approach to artistic representation regardless of time-period, indicating a close attention to visual or social detail and authenticity. It is also used to define an aesthetic style which, rejecting Romanticism's subjectivity and grandiosity, became the predominant mode of expression roughly between 1830-1900.

Because of the emphasis placed on an unvarnished, "photographic" style of representation, with typical subjects including humble scenes of rural workers or factory workers or other commonplace scenes, realism also is often socially progressive in conveying and being sympathetic to the democratic masses. Sometimes, Realism more luridly focuses on urban scenes of squalor and deprivation. Charles Dickens, in novels such as his 1838 Oliver Twist, describes unromantically the plight of those living in early-industrialized London, with all its pollution and general seediness. Because it sheds light on what we customarily might not see--the urban poor, for example--Realism often has an edge of social critique, and thus is part of the sociological examination of societal problems in the nineteenth century, which will result in, for instance, Karl Marx's political writings on behalf of the working classes, which you will become familiar with when reading The Communist Manifesto (1848) in the next week or two.

The previous overview is very general, and there are many subsets of Realism, such as the psychological realism of the late 19th-Century American author

Henry James who describes psychological perceptions of social interactions with an almost unbearable finesse. Or, what is known as "Naturalism," in which humans are reduced to their biological/animalistic destinies; Naturalist fiction emphasizes raw greed, lust, and crude survival instincts.

"Realism" is helpful to know as an aesthetic term, but use caution beyond its aesthetic connotations: you cannot really make a straight line of connection between or make comparable, say, the aesthetic style of a Dickens' novel and the communistic ideas of Karl Marx.

The egalitarianism that comes out of the Enlightenment's non-hierarchical view of rights (Locke's notion that we all have equal rights) is picked up by Romantic enthusiasts who wished to bring democracy to all (Mary Shelley's husband and William Blake) and is a view that is continually regenerated throughout the entire 19th century, during which time supporters of democracy are battling the still-strong forces of aristocratic privilege as well as the inequalities of wealth brought about by the Industrial Revolution. From the Enlightenment on, "Realism" could be said to be developing both as an aesthetic style and as a sober ideological/sociological attitude towards the scenes of life--but the latter should not be emphasized too much in politics, for certainly many radical egalitarianists, Marx in particular, were driven by very idealistic, almost prophetic concepts of apocalyptic revolution. The evolution and history of progressive political ideas is, in short, extremely intricate.

The examples below emphasize the gritty and socially critical aspects of Realism. But many Realist painters depicted calm, serene scenes of rural farming life or simply represented the everyday (bowls of fruit, carriages going by on the street, and so on)--see #4, French painter Manet's scene of a bar and bar-maiden.

Some Examples of Realism:

1. Dickens, Oliver Twist (1838): from the 1st chapter, in which Oliver is born in a work-house (Victorian institute for the indigent & impoverished):

Although I am not disposed to maintain that the being born in a workhouse, is in itself the most fortunate and enviable circumstance that can possibly befall a human being, I do mean to say that in this particular instance, it was the best thing for Oliver Twist that could by possibility have occurred. The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration,--a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next: the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter. Now, if, during this brief period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by,

however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer; and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract; Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes and a quarter.

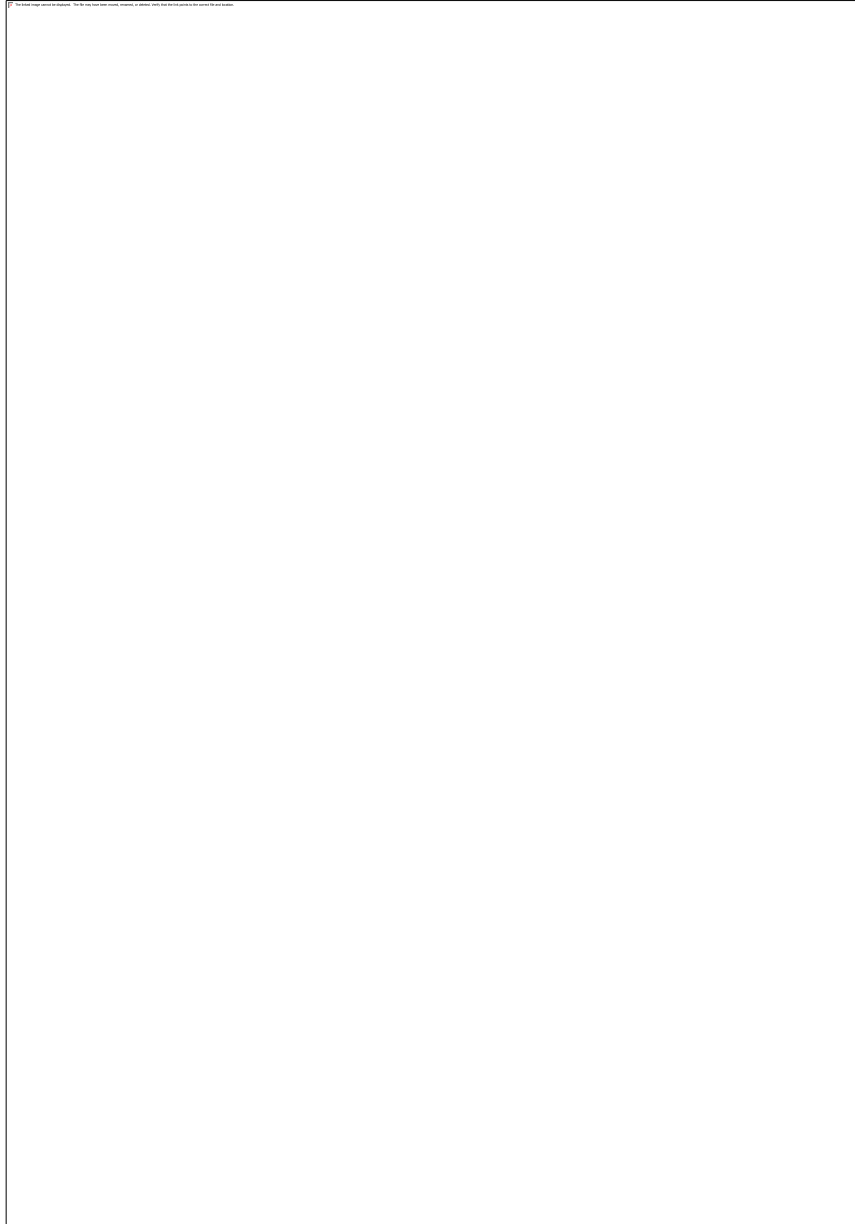
As Oliver gave this first proof of the free and proper action of his lungs, the patchwork coverlet which was carelessly flung over the iron bedstead, rustled; the pale face of a young woman was raised feebly from the pillow; and a faint voice imperfectly articulated the words, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The surgeon had been sitting with his face turned towards the fire: giving the palms of his hands a warm and a rub alternately. As the young woman spoke, he rose, and advancing to the bed's head, said, with more kindness than might have been expected of him:

'Oh, you must not talk about dying yet.'

'Lor bless her dear heart, no!' interposed the nurse, hastily depositing in her pocket a green glass bottle, the contents of which she had been tasting in a corner with evident satisfaction. . . .

2. Thomas Eakins (American painter) "The Gross Clinic" (1875):



"Gross" is the name of the physician conducting the operation on the reclined patient, whose buttocks and thigh are visible. Note the other figure--a relative--shrinking back in trepidation, so unlike the detached, precise attitude of Dr. Gross. The point of the painting is less to shock us than to show us a "disturbing" scene in cool, calm objectivity.

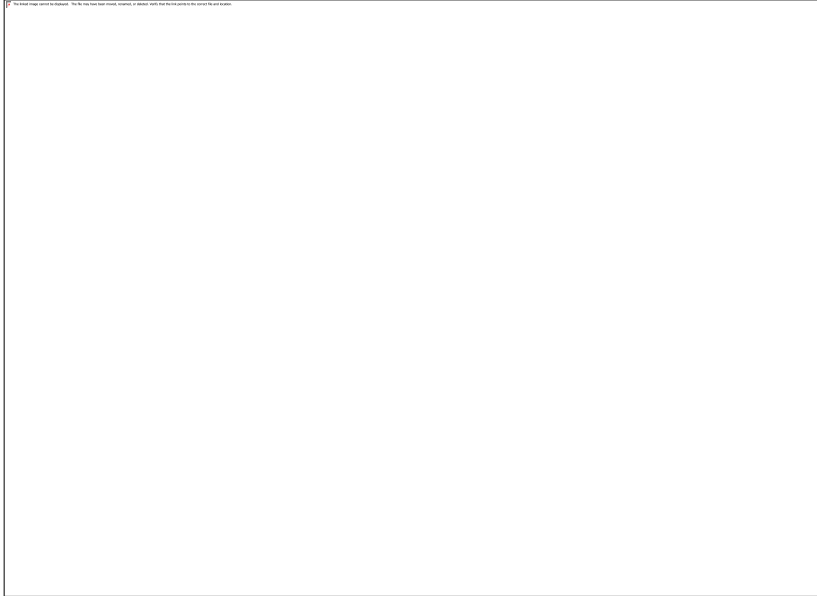
3. Friedrich Engels (pal of Marx, co-author of 1848 Communist Manifesto) on working poor of England (from Conditions of the Working Class in England):

Let us investigate some of the slums in their order. London comes first, and in London the famous rookery of St. Giles which is now, at last, about to be penetrated by a couple of broad streets. St. Giles is in the midst of the most populous part of the town, surrounded by broad,

splendid avenues in which the gay world of London idles about, in the immediate neighbourhood of Oxford Street, Regent Street, of Trafalgar Square and the Strand. It is a disorderly collection of tall, three- or four-storied houses, with narrow, crooked, filthy streets, in which there is quite as much life as in the great thoroughfares of the town, except that, here, people of the working-class only are to be seen. A vegetable market is held in the street, baskets with vegetables and fruits, naturally all bad and hardly fit to use obstruct the sidewalk still further, and from these, as well as from the fish-dealers' stalls, arises a horrible smell. The houses are occupied from cellar to garret, filthy within and without, and their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them. But all this is nothing in comparison with the dwellings in the narrow courts and alleys between the streets, entered by covered passages between the houses, in which the filth and tottering ruin surpass all description. Scarcely a whole window-pane can be found, the walls are crumbling, door-posts and window-frames loose and broken, doors of old boards nailed together, or altogether wanting in this thieves' quarter, where no doors are needed, there being nothing to steal. Heaps of garbage and ashes lie in all directions, and the foul liquids emptied before the doors gather in stinking pools. Here live the poorest of the poor, the worst paid workers with thieves and the victims of prostitution indiscriminately huddled together, the majority Irish, or of Irish extraction, and those who have not yet sunk in the whirlpool of moral ruin which surrounds them, sinking daily deeper, losing daily more and more of their power to resist the demoralising influence of want, filth, and evil surroundings.

Nor is St. Giles the only London slum. In the immense tangle of streets, there are hundreds and thousands of alleys and courts lined with houses too bad for anyone to live in, who can still spend anything whatsoever upon a dwelling fit for human beings. Close to the splendid houses of the rich such a lurking-place of the bitterest poverty may often be found. So, a short time ago, on the occasion of a coroner's inquest, a region close to Portman Square, one of the very respectable squares, was characterised as an abode "of a multitude of Irish demoralised by poverty and filth". So, too, may be found in streets, such as Long Acre and others, which, though not fashionable, are yet "respectable", a great number of cellar dwellings out of which puny children and half-starved, ragged women emerge into the light of day. In the immediate neighbourhood of Drury Lane Theatre, the second in London, are some of the worst streets of the whole metropolis, Charles, King, and Park Streets, in which the houses are inhabited from cellar to garret exclusively by poor families. In the parishes of St. John and St. Margaret there lived in 1840, according to the Journal of the Statistical Society, 5,566 working-men's families in 5,294 "dwellings" (if they deserve the name!), men, women, and children thrown together without distinction of age or sex, 26,850 persons all told; and of these families three-fourths possessed but one room. In the aristocratic parish of St. George, Hanover Square, there lived, according to the same authority, 1,465 working-men's families, nearly 6,000 persons, under similar conditions, and here, too, more than two-thirds of the whole number crowded together at the rate of one family in one room. And how the poverty of these unfortunates, among whom even thieves find nothing to steal, is exploited by the property-holding class in lawful ways! The abominable dwellings in Drury Lane, just mentioned, bring in the following rents: two cellar dwellings, 3s., one room, ground-floor, 4s.; second-storey, 4s. 6d.; third-floor, 4s.; garret-room, 3s. weekly, so that the starving occupants of Charles Street alone, pay the house-owners a yearly tribute of £2,000, and the 5,566 families above mentioned in Westminster, a yearly rent of £40,000.

4. Edouard Manet, "A Bar at the Folies-Bergere" (1881-82):



5. Stephen Crane, passage from The Red Badge of Courage (1895), from Chapter 7:

This passage comes from Crane's famous realistic depiction of the American Civil War. Note how the perspective/mood is conveyed, realistically, through the eyes of the protagonist-soldier. The encounter with the corpse is intended to shock us, but ultimately only to inform us that war is neither noble nor glorious.

A dull, animal-like rebellion against his fellows, war in the abstract, and fate grew within him. He shambled along with bowed head, his brain in a tumult of agony and despair. When he looked loweringly up, quivering at each sound, his eyes had the expression of those of a great criminal who thinks his guilt and his punishment great, and knows that he can find no words.

He went from the fields into a thick woods, as if resolved to bury himself. He wished to get out of hearing of the crackling shots which were to him like voices.

The ground was cluttered with vines and bushes, and the trees grew close and spread out like bouquets. He was obliged to force his way with much noise. The creepers, catching against his legs, cried out harshly as their sprays were torn from the barks of the trees. The swishing saplings tried to make known his presence to the world. He could not conciliate the forest. As he made his way, it was always calling out protestations. When he separated embraces of trees and vines, the disturbed foliage waved their arms and turned their faces toward him. He dreaded lest these noisy motions and cries should bring men to look at him. So he went far, seeking dark and intricate places.

After a time the sound of musketry grew faint and the cannon boomed in the distance. The sun, suddenly apparent, blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing.

Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that Nature had no ears.

This landscape gave him assurance . . . Once he found himself almost into a swamp. He was obliged to walk upon bog tufts and watch his feet to keep from the oily mire. Pausing at

one time to look about him he saw, out at some black water, a small animal pounce in and emerge directly with a gleaming fish.

The youth went again into the deep thickets. The brushed branches make a noise that drowned the sounds of cannon. He walked on, going from obscurity into promises of a greater obscurity.

At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light.

Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing.

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a column-like tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle along the upper lip.

The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was for moments turned to stone before it. He remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look. Then the youth cautiously put one hand behind him and brought it against a tree. Leaning upon this he retreated, step by step, with his face still toward the thing. He feared that if he turned his back the body might spring up and stealthily pursue him. The branches, pushing against him, threatened to throw him over upon it. His unguided feet, too, caught aggravatingly in the brambles; and with it all he received a subtle suggestion to touch the corpse. As he thought of his hand upon it he shuddered profoundly.

At last he burst the bonds which had fated him to the spot and fled, unheeding the underbrush. He was pursued by the sight of black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.