

19TH CENTURY REALIST ART

Gerald Needham

ICON EDITIONS



1817

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York

Cambridge, Philadelphia, San Francisco, London

Mexico City, São Paulo, Singapore, Sydney

For
LAURA ANDREW
and
BILL BUSBY

19TH CENTURY REALIST ART. Copyright © 1988 by Gerald Needham. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022. Published simultaneously in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Toronto.

FIRST EDITION

Designer: Ruth Bernschlegel

Copy editor: Ann Adelman

Indexer: Maro Riofrancos

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Needham, Gerald.

Nineteenth-century realist art
(Icon editions)

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Realism in art. 2. Art, Modern—19th century.

I. Title.

N6465.R4N44 1988 760'.09'03 86-46092

ISBN 0-06-435913-1

88 89 90 91 92 DT/MPC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-06-430156-7 (pbk.)

88 89 90 91 92 DT/MPC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Foreword

“Realism” is a word, unlike “Romanticism” with its myriad meanings, that at first seems easy to define and to apply to art. Courbet, generally recognized as the leading Realist painter, said that “the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist.” In laying down these principles, Courbet rejected an enormous amount of the painting of the nineteenth century that busied itself with recreating events from past history, depicting religious subjects and allegories of all kinds, or with illustrating scenes from world literature. In clearing away so much and presenting an apparently straightforward approach to art, he nevertheless created a great many ambiguities.

Questions about Realism immediately spring to mind. Is there a Realist style or is a variety of styles possible? Are certain kinds of subject matter more important, or are all subjects that can be observed by the artist equally Realist? Having chosen a subject, does the artist need to be selective in reproducing it on canvas? Where does meaning lie in a Realist picture? Then there are the questions about different media. What is the relation of Realist art to photography? Is not a photograph more Realist than any painting? Courbet was thinking of painting, but what is the role of magazine and book illustration depicting contemporary life, which was such an enormous part of nineteenth-century picture production? Was there such a thing as Realist sculpture?

The question of which art forms belong to Realism also leads us to ask about its historical limits. Can we apply the term to many periods of art, or does it apply in a special way to the nineteenth century when there was a self-proclaimed Realist movement in literature and art, and when the word “Realism” became a slogan or an insult that was violently debated in the press?

The purpose of this book is to examine these kinds of questions and

to analyze the issues of Realism in the context of their chronological development, and to provide an outline but not a detailed history of the movement, which would require at least two volumes and would obscure the issues. It has been necessary to omit several interesting artists, and I have included some less well-known artists from Scandinavia at the expense of artists working in France and England like J. S. Cotman, Alfred Stevens and James Tissot, in order to compensate in part for our usual imbalance towards France and England. In exploring the bounds of Realism, I shall also investigate kinds of pictures often omitted from histories of art. The inventive genius of the Industrial Revolution created new visual media like the Panorama, the Diorama, and photography, and expanded the print media with lithography and wood engraving. Prints, in their turn, combined with the new mass-circulation popular press, inundated the world with images. Meanwhile numerous visionaries, in order to achieve yet greater verisimilitude, struggled to set pictures in movement with picturesquely named devices like the Kinetoscope and the Phenakistiscope. Their efforts took almost the whole century before the Lumière brothers in France, Edison in the United States, and Max Skladanowsky in Germany almost simultaneously invented cinema, for many people the most Realist of all art forms.

I have stressed these new media because too often while proclaiming our modernity, we have unconsciously retained eighteenth-century concepts of the hierarchy of art even today. The insignificant place given to prints in many histories of nineteenth-century art, even though a superficial study reveals their importance, is an obvious example of this conservatism.

This book looks briefly at the origins of Realism at the beginning of the century, but the main period covered runs from the 1830s to the 1880s. The 1830s saw the flourishing of the popular illustration, the invention of photography, and the development of the Barbizon School of painting. The middle years of the century are the high point of Realism as a self-proclaimed movement, led in painting by Courbet, though independently finding expression in England, Germany, and Italy. Impressionism is presented here as a second phase of Realism, lasting from the mid-1860s to the 1880s. The Impressionists followed Courbet's dictum quoted above, yet created a quite different art with a remarkably different content. While Impressionism was developing in France, Realism spread more intensely through the rest of Europe, and we find important contributions from artists in Scandinavia and Russia. The "crisis" of Impressionism in the 1880s marks the end of Realism as a creative movement, though numerous young artists, inspired by their predecessors, tried to continue its aims into the early twentieth century.