

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

What is Realism?

2017

[7:30]

Peyton Skipwith, Director of the Fine Art Society 1961 – 2005:

Herbert Read described as the most meaningless art historical terms there is because Realism goes way, way back into history. You could even say it goes back to prehistoric times when they were trying to draw animals in the caves.

Sasha Llewellyn, Curator and Director, Liss Llewellyn Fine Art:

I mean, what is realistic, what is realism? It can be applied to anything. I think even some abstract artists would think that their work was real or realist in its message. Realism or realist painting has a very different connotation between the two World Wars. It wasn't a movement per se, but critics were using the term under many different forms as they tried to categorise the various styles that artists were working in.

Peyton Skipwith:

It was a way of trying to be modern without being abstract. A reaction partly against all the horrors of the war and the Vorticists who'd lauded the machine, the tank, the guns, the death which was all a part of the futurist aesthetic. And, with the coming of peace in 1918, there was a very strong reaction, not exactly a return to pastoralism, but a return to very precise figurative painting.

Sasha Llewellyn:

Well, we're standing into the Stephen's Hall in the Palace of Westminster and this is probably the most important mural commissions that emerged from the 1920s and 30s. The idea was that it was supposed to portray Rome School Classicism, so realistic painting that you could literally run past and you'd be able to read the story easily. It's very clearly designed and was very admired for its design. One critic suggested that the figures look like Slade School students dressed up for the Chelsea Arts Club ball. The trouble is, however hard artists try to recreate historical scenes, they were so often criticised for being costume dramas, and in some ways the muted response to this whole scheme saw the demise of this kind of realist genre. The next important mural scheme was for the Bank of England and that

showed modern day bank workers and officials rather than the history of the Bank of England.

Peyton Skipwith:

They're looking at modern day life, most of them. If you think of the great seaside posters of the period there is a sort of immediacy about them, a simplification- if you actually have to stop and read it it's lost its impact. The impact is something that is so spontaneous, and of course, the 20s was the great moment of the advertising of London Underground, Shell, and so that's certainly an interaction, both ways, from painting to the poster art, and poster back to painting.

Sasha Llewellyn:

The increasing access to leisure activities and holidays provided a boon for figure painters. There are many paintings of sunbathers, sportswomen and sportsmen, because this was a period where people returned to nature and seeing the countryside as a place for leisure. They very much painted idyllic scenes of pre-industrial England, putting to one side factories or industrialisation. But also a lot of these artists were focusing on gardens and allotments as a sort of secure green space counteractive to the horrors they had witnessed during the First World War.

Peyton Skipwith:

Mackintosh Patrick didn't sit in front of a landscape and paint it, he drew a lot and he painted a lot in the studio, and he rearranged the landscape. He was actually creating something more real than the actual outside world. I always remember his son, my old colleague Andrew Patrick talking about a painting that some American had bought and he remembered he'd been born in Scotland and he knew precisely the location of it. This was in fact very interesting as, in fact, the farm was in one place, the landscape somewhere else and there were some trees actually drawn in North Africa, and yet it was so true to this man that he felt he knew that landscape, and it was where he'd been born and brought up. Memory's a funny thing, it does lie as much as anything else.

Sasha Llewellyn:

The photograph was the perfect vehicle for representing the world as we see it, but they wanted to give meaning to their pictures. One of the critics of the period called Frank Rutter, called it the 'chocolate box complex'. He regretted the fact that there were no more pretty women that lined the walls of the Royal Academy because artists were so preoccupied with design, and really, the emphasis was on the character, the meaning, the thoughts of the sitter, rather than producing these very elaborate, exotic portraits that were associated with Edwardian and Victorian painters.

Peyton Skipwith:

This is the other portrait by [Meredith] Frampton we have here at the [Art Worker's] Guild. The sitter here is Sir Edwin Lutyens, the great architect. You've got his beautifully sharpened pencil here; the bit of the architectural drawing that he's working on; the burnt matches. But if you look at the way it's painted, the very crisp precision of his jacket, of his waistcoat, it looks very, very naturalistic and yet, nobody looks precisely like that, I mean you never see somebody looking as clean, as pure, as immaculate, and that is what the whole of this realism is about.

Sasha Llewellyn:

Their art school training where they were told to accurately represent what was in front of them definitely had an influence on the way that they were painting in a realist style. Whether they called themselves realists, I'm not sure. This type of art has suffered prejudice right from when it was made: as parochial and conservative and not worthy of serious attention. But this was the main stream during these two decades. Most artists were painting in a realist style or, even if it wasn't realist, it referenced life in some ways.

Peyton Skipwith:

Well I suppose the thing that happened, of course, was the Second War, which, obviously, again, changed the world, and shortly after the realist painters were suddenly part of a world that was gone. People didn't want to have anything to do with it, it was connected with their parents' generation or the generation that had brought the world into the sorry state it was in at that stage and, I'm afraid the baby got thrown out with the bath water at that point. I think it's [a] very important legacy, it may have lain dormant for a while, but David Hockney's explosion, and Ossie Clark and those ones owe a lot to that tradition. A lot of the pop artists of that generation were actually very aware of the earlier paintings from the 1930s. There was really a lot of very exciting work.

End.