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Art and the Approval of Nature: Philosophical Reflections on Tom Roberts, Holiday

Sketch at Coogee (1888)

Michael Newall

ABSTRACT

This paper, based on a talk given at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is presented as an example of philosophy done in an art gallery. Its subject is Tom Roberts' painting *Holiday Sketch at Coogee* (1888), and as well as responding directly to the painting in the environment of the gallery, it draws on the author's memories of seeing that painting in other times and places. It draws on these personal experiences to relate Roberts' painting to a controversial idea laid out by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, and to more recent conventionalist and resemblance theories of pictorial representation. It finishes by affirming one of Roberts' important achievements: his discarding of inherited European ways of picture-making, and his place among the first generation of non-indigenous artists to represent the real colours of the Australian landscape.

ANIMALS AND ART

I begin with a story that will seem entirely unrelated to Roberts' painting. It is a story that everyone who studies art history knows, told by Pliny the Elder in his encyclopaedic *Natural History*, compiled in the first century AD. In it, Pliny describes how Zeuxis, an ancient Greek artist of the fifth century BC, "represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited" (Pliny, 1857, 35.36). Similar stories occur throughout Pliny's history of ancient painting, in which animals, and humans too, are tricked by a painter's skill. In another, Apelles, said to be the greatest painter of ancient Greece, and court painter to Alexander the great, enters a competition to paint a horse. He is

convinced that he has made the best painting. But he is also concerned that his competitors have rigged the competition. He therefore insists that horses take the place of human judges. Each of the paintings is shown to the animals, to no response, until Apelles' painting is brought in, and they give an appreciative whinny, acknowledging the lifelikeness of the painting, and Apelles' superiority. "A thing", Pliny assures us, "that has always been the case since, whenever this test of his artistic skill has been employed" (Ibid.). The stories, of course, have a conventional character, and similar ones appear in the Renaissance, presumably inspired by Pliny. Vasari, for instance, tells that Giotto, apprenticed as a boy to the painter Cimabue, painted a fly on the nose of one of his master's figures. Returning to work, Cimabue "set himself more than once to drive it away with his hand, thinking that it was real" (Vasari 1912, 94).

But it is the stories of dumb animals giving nature's approval to art which interest me here. We are naturally, and probably rightly, sceptical about whether these events really took place. It is not just the fact that the same story is repeated with a changing cast of artists, artworks and animals. Highly realistic pictures are much more common than they were in ancient Greece or the Renaissance. We see them not only in art, but in popular culture, advertising, on phones and tablets. Yet I have never seen birds fly down to peck at foodstuffs seen in a catalogue, on a billboard or on Instagram. A more sophisticated criticism can be made. Regardless of their truth, these stories tell us little about the art that they are ostensibly about. They show that the artists and viewers of these periods prized lifelike images of the world, and could be deeply impressed by *trompe l'oeil*. Beyond attributing this quality, they don't tell us anything about artworks or artists. They don't tell us, for example, how the works of Zeuxis, Apelles and Giotto differed from each other, what made them so special (beyond their realism), or help us imagine what they were like.

STYLE AND SEEING

At the start of his *Principles of Art History*, the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin tells a contrasting story. He describes how the nineteenth century painter Ludwig Richter went on a painting expedition with a group of three friends. They agreed to set their easels up in front of the same landscape scene and to paint it as accurately and exactly as they could.

[A]ll four firmly resolved not to deviate from nature by a hair's breadth; and although the subject was quite the same, and each quite creditably reproduced what his eyes had seen, the result was four totally different pictures, as different from each other as the personalities of the four painters. (Wölfflin 1950, 1.)

How could this be? Wölfflin's conclusion is that each painter saw their subject in different ways. For Wölfflin this illustrated an idea that in the late nineteenth century was not especially controversial: that "form and colour are always apprehended differently according to temperament".¹ On this view – which I am sceptical of – there is no such thing as objective vision: we all see, or are capable of seeing, the same thing in different ways. If you want to know how an artist sees, you just have to look at their paintings. Individual painters have their own styles, because each sees things in their own way (Ibid.).² As Wölfflin suggests, style was often understood as being shaped by an artist's personality, or temperament. The novelist Émile Zola (a keen appreciator of the visual arts and friend of Cézanne) gave the idea its most vivid formulation: "a work of art is a corner of nature seen through a temperament" (Zola 1959, 73). As I say, I am sceptical about whether individuals actually see things in different ways; but even so, the idea can be useful. For even if artists don't *see* things differently, it acknowledges something that is undoubtedly true: that artists have their own distinctive ways of *picturing*, and these can be shaped by their personality (as well as their many other things, such as their culture, interests and values).³

<PLACE FIGURE 10 and FIGURE 11 side-by-side HERE>

Figure 10: Tom Roberts, *Holiday Sketch at Coogee* (1888)

Figure 11: Charles Conder, *Coogee Bay* (1888).

I now turn to Tom Roberts' *Holiday Sketch at Coogee* (1888). I compare it to another picture, in much the same way that Richter compared his painting with those of his friends. Roberts painted this work on an outing with another artist, his friend Charles Conder. Judging from their paintings, it appears that the two sat side by side painting the same view, Roberts working on canvas, the younger Conder painting on a rectangle piece of cardboard. Conder and Roberts shared the ethos of Impressionist painting, and so it is reasonable to think that as they painted, part of what they were trying to do was to reproduce what they experienced as faithfully as possible. They were, of course, Impressionists, so it is not the details of individual leaves, branches, rocks, clouds, and so on, that they laboured to reproduce, but the colour, atmosphere and effects of light with which Impressionist painters worldwide were famously preoccupied.

I had last seen Roberts' painting in London, where it was part of the exhibition, *Australia's Impressionists*.⁴ There, it hung next to Conder's painting of the same view, *Coogee Bay* (1888). (Conder's little painting is one of the jewels of the National Gallery of Victoria collection in Melbourne, and so the two works are rarely on exhibition together.) As I have suggested, Roberts and Conder can be seen as acting out Richter's story within the context of the Antipodes. Looking at the two paintings together (whether in life or in reproduction), we can see something credible and informative about the comparison. While both are avowed Impressionists at this stage of their careers, both clearly have different styles, and in describing those, it is hard to keep them separate from the artists' contrasting personalities. Roberts' seems more aware of concrete matter, more empirically-minded than

Conder, subtly stressing the underlying geology and dry earth of the Australian landscape.

Conder, who would relocate to Europe two years later where he would befriend Oscar Wilde and Toulouse-Lautrec, is more of an aesthete, finding delicate rhythms of shape and colour in the same landscape. Roberts is straightforward, more down to earth. Conder being more taken with Whistlerian aestheticism than Roberts, is playful, more decorative. Conder brings out delicate pastel colours; Robert's palette is earthier. Conder's landscape suggests a stage for a picnic, an Antipodean *fête galante*. Roberts' seems an epic but beautiful stage for the nationalist stories he would come to tell, showing white Australians at work in the landscape.

This comparison brings us to the heart of the distinctive value of these paintings; not only regarding the artists' style and personality, but also their conceptions of landscape, Australian identity, and their diverging artistic destinies. But without disowning these kinds of insights, I want to tell another story, one that has a distinctly Plinian flavour.

INSECT INVASION

In the mid 1990s I visited the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) for the first time. It was not busy, and I was able to spend a lot of time with the paintings, many of which I knew from Robert Hughes' book, *The Art of Australia*, which I had read as a child (Hughes 1970). I recall standing in front of a painting by Roberts. It was not *Holiday Sketch at Coogee*. Perhaps it was *Sherbrooke Forest* (1924), or another that is now not on display. I saw something hidden among the dull khaki coloured brushstrokes, similar to those brushstrokes which depict Australian vegetation in the foreground and background of Roberts' *Holiday Sketch at Coogee*. Settled on the painting, and rather well-camouflaged in the spot it had chosen, was an insect, a native moth. Nobody else seemed to notice it. I remember it as being a very decent size, but it was more likely a bogong moth, which are only an inch or so long. Bogong moths migrate in massive numbers across South-East

Australia in the spring. Attracted by bright lights, they can cause problems in urban areas. As *Australian Geographic* says: “daylight drives them to shelter [and] they end up blocking air ducts, shorting electrical circuits and invading bedrooms” (Low 2017). Josephine Touma and Alexandra Gregg of the AGNSW, who were present when I gave this talk to the Symposium in July 2017, didn’t seem at all surprised by my story, so I expect the moths continue to be invaders in the area. Out of all the paintings it could have settled on, this moth had selected a Tom Roberts painting, and it had selected a particular part of it: the part that would camouflage it. The painting hung in a gallery of mostly earlier colonial paintings, many of them landscapes whose makers had done their best to capture the qualities of the Australian bush. It’s a cliché of Australian painting that white artists did not successfully capture the colours of the Australian landscape until the Australian Impressionists. And the moth seemed to agree, having chosen Roberts’ painting, over the others, on which to settle. I don’t want to overstate what this shows. I take it that the moth did not alight there by chance. But that is not to say that the moth understands pictures, or even that it was fooled into taking a painting for a leaf, a branch or something else. What it shows is that the moth responded to the paint as it would to those things, while it remained unmoved by other patches of paint. What gives one patch of paint this power to compel a response, while another lacks it?

<PLACE FIGURE 12 about HERE>

Figure 12: Michael Newall and Mohan Matthen, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, Australia

CONVENTION AND RESEMBLANCE

I wonder if the moth can help decide between two contrasting philosophical ideas about how pictures work. These two ideas are *conventionalism* and the *resemblance view*.⁵ Conventionalism was developed most influentially by Nelson Goodman (1968), and the general approach has been very popular in art history (e.g., Bryson 1983). It holds that

pictures are a kind of symbol: their meaning is set by conventions which communities of picture-users have agreed upon. Nonetheless, Goodman is mindful that pictures are very different from symbolic literal representation as we normally think of it – signs, codes, words, sentences, and so on. This difference, as he sees it, is due to structural differences between the syntax and semantics of pictures in contrast to literal symbols as we normally think of them. But even factoring in the obvious differences between pictures and literal representations like sentences, Goodman argues that they both convey meaning in virtue of similar processes. For those who notice how different pictures of the same subject matter can be (especially across cultures), this theory can be attractive, for it suggests that pictorial styles can be as diverse as different languages can be. For the conventionalist, we learn to make and understand pictures much as we learn to use and understand language. When a child learns to draw, they are learning a language of drawing particular to their culture. Goodman is also mindful that some pictures seem ‘lifelike’ or have *realism*, as I will call it, while others lack this quality. Realistic pictures give us a frisson of recognition; they somehow feel like being in front of the subject matter itself. This, of course, is the quality that Pliny’s anecdotes respond to, and it is something that we usually see in different ways in Renaissance painting, Impressionism, as well as in photographic imagery. Goodman notices how these kinds of images are more familiar to Westerners than pictures produced in other cultures. So, he proposes that the effect of realism arises from habituation to a system of picture-making (Goodman 1968, 34–39). It is because we are habituated to these systems of representation that we find them realistic. By contrast, systems of representation that are new to us (mostly, those from cultures outside our own), seem to lack realism.

My experience with the moth suggests to me that conventionalism is false. The moth responds to the painting much as it would to the khaki-coloured foliage which it represents: it seeks to camouflage itself amid it. But, if a picture is like a code or language that we learn,

why would it have this effect on the moth? The moth, of course, knows no systems of representation, and so can't become habituated to them. And we certainly wouldn't expect it to respond to the phrase 'khaki foliage' by trying to hide itself amid those words. So conventionalism has no way to explain what made the moth behave as it did.

That leads me to the second way of understanding pictures, which does a much better job of explaining this. This is the *resemblance* view. It holds that there are objective, real likenesses or resemblances between a picture and what it represents, and that pictorial representation depends on such resemblances. Plato (1961) took a simple version of this view to be right, and it was supported by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce in the nineteenth century (e.g. Peirce 1982–2000, 5.379). Following criticisms made by Goodman (1968, 3–5), *the resemblance view* lost popularity, but it has recently been revived and developed into sophisticated forms by a number of contemporary philosophers, including John Hyman (2006) and Catharine Abell (2010).⁶ It also has an obvious common-sense attraction: we speak of pictures being *likenesses*, after all. But developing and defending the resemblance view has proven challenging. A major question concerns the respect in which a picture is meant to resemble its subject. This question is trickier than it may first appear. Pictures are flat, marked surfaces, and the subjects they represent are usually three-dimensional scenes containing complex illumination and shadow. What features of such a scene could a picture share? Simply saying 'shape' and 'colour' is too coarse-grained an answer. So recent supporters of the resemblance view have identified properties such as outline shape, occlusion shape, and aperture colour.⁷ Let me put that challenge aside, to turn back to realism. Supporters of the resemblance view explain realism in a very different way to conventionalism. They usually see realism as a matter of a picture resembling its subject matter in a wide number of visual respects, or resembling it in particularly salient respects.⁸ So, realistic pictures seem more visually like the objects they refer to than other pictures.

The resemblance view thus allows us to see Roberts' paintings as more realistic than their predecessors because their colours more accurately resemble those of the Australian landscape. As I have said, I think the moth's choice lends support to the resemblance view. It responded to Roberts' painting as it would respond to the trees and foliage it represents. Why? I think it chose to camouflage itself among Roberts' brushstrokes because his colours really do resemble those of the Australian bush more than those of earlier painters. The moth is no philosopher, nor is it an art critic. But its choice dramatically demonstrated to me one of Roberts' important achievements as an artist: he was among the first white painters to discard inherited European ways of picture-making, and to discover what the colours of the Australian landscape are really like.⁹

NOTES

1. Wölfflin's own view of style accommodates this idea, but differs from it too.
2. There are provisos here: Wölfflin would have held that this will only apply to painters who have all the representational tools of painting at their disposal. So it does not apply to painters before the High Renaissance or outside Europe, as in those cases, painters did not have the tools to fully and accurately register their perceptions. It would also probably not apply to Modern and contemporary art, since these artists do not aim to register their accurately perceptions.
3. For my assessment of Wölfflin, see Newall (2015).
4. *Australia's Impressionists*, National Gallery, London, December 7, 2016 – March 26, 2017.
5. There are other accounts. For a survey, see Hyman and Bantinaki (2017).
6. Contemporary resemblance theories include My own theory (Newall 2011) gives resemblance an important role, but understands depiction to depend on non-veridical seeing of the subject matter. My understanding of seeing draws on Matthen (2005).
7. For outline shape, see Robert Hopkins, *Picture, Image and Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Hopkins' approach differs from the resemblance view as I described it here. He argues that depiction depends on the viewer *experiencing* a picture as resembling its subject, but that this experience typically depends on the presence of a real resemblance. For occlusion shape and aperture colour, see Hyman, *op. cit.*
8. This way of understanding realism is a result of combining the resemblance view with an information view of realism, which holds, roughly, that the more informative a picture is, or the more salient that information is, the more realistic it will appear. See, e.g., Abell (2007). For a survey of theories of pictorial realism, see Newall (2014).

9. How would the moth have responded to one of Conder's paintings of the Australian bush? Conder and Roberts were both Impressionists, and thus many aspects of their styles are similar, aiming to reproduce the appearance of the visible world. But as I have said, there are marked differences too. Conder tends toward pastel colours. So, would a moth be attracted to these colours, or insensible to them? Both seem to me possible – it is an empirical question – but for better or worse, not one ever likely to be resolved under experimental conditions.

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