

Realism in the AMAM Permanent Collection



During the 2013-14 academic year, special exhibitions at the Allen Memorial Art Museum will explore the theme of Realism. In addition to works on view in these exhibitions, other works from the permanent collection may be studied from the viewpoint of Realism—through both subject and the materials used. This packet features some of these works, which were created to play with the viewer’s perceptions of space, to capture everyday life, or to serve as likenesses of specific people. Many different materials were used to create these representational images, from traditional media such as bronze and oil paint, to forged metal and even a seashell.

As you browse the museum galleries, look for the still-life logo (shown above left) and use this booklet to learn how the objects indicated by this symbol reflect the concept of Realism.

Catherine Hughes (OC 2013) and Charlotte Vari (OC 2014), both summer interns in the Education Department, prepared this booklet.

Jean-Baptiste Oudry (French, 1686–1755)

A Young Rabbit and Partridge Hung by the Feet, 1751

Oil on canvas

Mrs. F.F. Prentiss Fund and Special Acquisitions Fund, 1982.47

Still-life paintings gained popularity in the Netherlands during the 16th century with depictions of floral, banquet, market, and kitchen images. By the late 17th century, the subject matter had shifted to a focus on dead animals and raw meat, or “hunting trophies.” These images spread quickly throughout Northern Europe, and by the turn of the 18th century, many other regions had adopted these subjects.

In France, images of dead game hanging against a light, neutral backdrop quickly grew in popularity. In his characteristic “white ground” paintings, Oudry uses both space and texture to create a realistic and believable still life of two animals hanging against a wall. The life-size rabbit and partridge appear to be in three-dimensional space and positioned some distance from the wall behind them. The refined and harmonious color palette enhances the tactile detail in the fur and feathers. The painting’s realistic qualities make it a *trompe l’oeil* work—one made to “deceive the eye.”



Italian

Cameo Shell Depicting the Triumph of Bacchus, late 18th century

Carved shell

Gift of Charles F. Olney, 1904.1077

Traditionally, artists used semiprecious gemstones and other hard-surfaced stones for cameo carving. Less expensive material, such as shells and glass, became more popular after the Renaissance. After designing an image for the cameo carving, an artist used sharp tools to remove the negative space from the image, carving down to the darker material underneath. The positive image is left raised, and the contrasting colors of the two layers heighten this effect. That the shell is intact here is perhaps unusual, as cameos were often cut down into brooches or other forms of jewelry, though full shells like this one would have attracted tourists, for whom cameos made important souvenirs.

Often, cameos depicted mythological or classical subjects. Certain gods and goddesses appeared more frequently than others—Bacchus was among the more popular subjects. After the Renaissance, however, interest in mythological and classical subjects declined in favor of portraiture. Cameo carvings of idealized, anonymous female busts were frequently worn as brooches, and industrialization allowed for the mass production of these images. The Victorian Era saw a revival of mythological depictions in cameo carving due to a renewed interest in the classics.



Flemish

Ecce Homo, late 16th–early 17th century

Boxwood

Mrs. F.F. Prentiss Fund, 1971.50

Between 1230 and 1380, ivory proved a popular material for sculptors working in Europe. With the demise of the ivory trade between Europe and Africa in the late 14th century, however, sculptors working on a small scale came to favor boxwood for its similarities to the now less-available material. One of the few woods whose density is greater than that of water, boxwood resists chipping and yields a smooth, fine finish when carved and polished. It also allows for great expressiveness in the carved object. A talented sculptor can produce the fine detail that makes this and other examples so stunningly realistic. Because of the box tree's size—more like a shrub—boxwood sculptures are often small, lending a certain intimacy to the finished object.

The depiction of the *ecce homo*, literally “behold the man,” developed in Europe in the 13th century and became popular in Northern European devotional imagery. Full-length sculptures like this one began appearing in the 14th century. Christ is seen here at the moment he is condemned to death, with the expressiveness of his face and body taking on a great intensity.



Raoul François Larche (French, 1860–1912)

The Dancer Loïe Fuller (lamp), ca. 1900

Gilded bronze

Gift of Mrs. Robert Gale, Caroline McNaughton, and Fred R. White Jr., 1962.33

The Art Nouveau movement swept through Western Europe and the United States around 1900, bringing a new style of art, architecture, and design inspired by the forms of nature. The movement's curvilinear lines and rhythmic patterns echoed vines and vegetation, and artists strove for a synthesis between craft and art. Many artists, deploring the mass-produced objects of the Industrial Revolution, focused on turning everyday objects into art through quality craftsmanship and design. For example, Raoul François Larche turned an ordinary lamp into an extraordinary work of art.

A principal sculptor in the Art Nouveau movement, Larche was among the many inspired by modern dancer Loïe Fuller. Known for her *Danse Serpentine*, Fuller wore filmy costumes and twisted into organic and natural forms. Her movements epitomized the Art Nouveau obsession with using the uninhibited fullness of nature to counter the influences the industrialized world. In this way, Larche's lamp perfectly embodies the spirit of the movement: he took a revolutionary modern dancer and captured her sinuous motions in a synthesis of craft and art.



Flemish

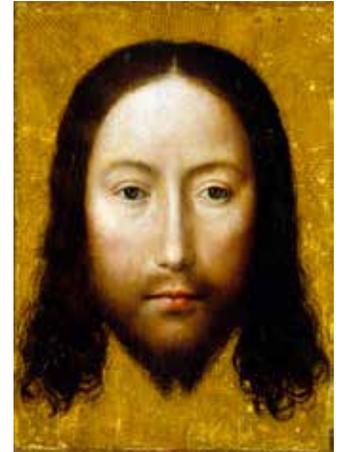
Holy Face, ca. 1510–15

Oil on oak panel

Charles F. Olney Fund, 1959.113

According to Catholic tradition and legend, St. Veronica passed Christ on the road to his crucifixion. After wiping the blood and sweat from his face with her veil, she found Christ's countenance miraculously imprinted on the cloth. Though this interaction is not recorded in any of the four Gospels and instead comes from centuries of tradition, the Western Church popularized the veil, a relic known as the "vera icon."

This depiction of Christ's head, detached from a body and surrounded by a halo, relates to the "vera icon" image, although it doesn't purport to be the same, since Christ is not wearing the crown of thorns. In keeping with spiritual trends at the time, the image is meant to inspire meditation through its intimate, close-up depiction of Christ's face. Realistically rendered details of the face emphasize Christ's humanity; his direct gaze is piercing yet serene. Easily transported because of its small size, panels like this were meant for individual and personal devotion.



Barthélemy Prieur (French, ca. 1536–1611)

Woman Cutting Her Nails, ca. 1600 [?]

Bronze

Mrs. F.F. Prentiss Fund, 1954.22



This intimate work depicts a scene from everyday life. Its smooth casting, modeling in the round, and detailed carving all indicate it was made to be held and turned in the hands of the viewer. Indeed, writers have commented that this work is both “tempting to the fingers” and “enticing to the eye.”

Many versions of this particular figure are known to exist, as it is one of a group of statuettes depicting women in the process of bathing, combing or styling their hair, or cutting their nails. The AMAM work differs from others in that the woman’s hair band rests higher on the head and she sits on a raised surface that is more obviously identifiable as a tree trunk than in other versions.

The subject is thought to derive from prints circulating in artists’ studios of a composition created during the High Renaissance, a fresco for the bathroom of Cardinal Bibbiena that was executed in 1516 by the workshop of Raphael.

Jan Steen (Dutch, 1626–1679)

Merry Company, 1667–69

Oil on panel

R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, Mrs. F.F. Prentiss Fund,
and Charles F. Olney Fund, 1957.14

Genre painting flourished during the Dutch Golden Age, a time when the Netherlands saw great advances in science, medicine, and art. An important aim of genre painters, including comic painters like Steen, was to create a convincing illusion of real life accompanied by a moralizing message. In order to include warnings against folly, drunkenness, and frivolity in their paintings, genre painters carefully constructed their scenes and employed symbols and visual devices to alert the contemporary viewer to the painting's illusory qualities.



In front of the open doorway, a figure, identified as a self-portrait of the artist, looks directly out at the viewer. The device is not uncommon for Steen, and serves many purposes in the painting. First, as an eyewitness to the scene, Steen's presence lends credibility to the notion that the depiction is one of actual, everyday life. His glance and smile invite us to take part in the revelry of the tavern, implying our complicity. Yet Steen's look, position, and engagement are more than just an invitation; his smiling face lets viewers know that, indeed, this painting is a comic one.

Emanuel de Witte (Dutch, 1617–1692)
Interior of the Old Church at Delft, 1653–55

Oil on oak panel

R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1943.279

Rather than containing Biblical, mythical, or historical subject matter, genre paintings depicted everyday life for both the “high” and “low” classes. Genre paintings, along with still lifes and landscape painting, were important parts of the Realist traditions developed during the Dutch Golden Age. Here de Witte, whose specialty was church interiors, chooses to focus not so much on the human figures, but rather emphasizes the real space of the grand church. To articulate depth, he uses darker shadows in more distant corners of the building and bright white to highlight the walls. De Witte’s manipulation of sun and shadow demonstrates the interest of many 17th-century Netherlandish painters: depicting the world through an almost scientific execution of light.

The church itself is emblematic of the religious culture of the time; Protestant churches in the Netherlands, with their absence of images and decoration, differed greatly from Catholic places of worship. A few anonymous figures add an “air of homeliness” to the majestic church; their presence could be taken as a hint at the church’s inclusion of all people.



French, Poitou

Bishop Adeleme Standing on a Lion and **Bishop Grimoard Standing on a Bull**, 1142–55
Limestone

R.T. Miller Jr. Fund, 1948.1-2



These figures represent some of the earliest sculptures of contemporary people seen on church façades during the Romanesque period. The art and architecture of this period, in the 11th and 12th centuries, was heavily inspired by Roman art, as well as Byzantine and Insular styles. These Romanesque sculptures originally flanked the entrance to the Benedictine abbey church at Les Moreaux, in France.

The lion and bull on which they stand hold a variety of meanings. An inscription on the abbey alludes to them guarding its entrance just as they guarded the entrance to Solomon's temple. Along with the figures of the man and the eagle for Matthew and John, they symbolize the evangelists Mark and Luke. Although now headless, the scale of these figures is striking in their size and accuracy of proportions. While the bodies are carved in high relief, an 1844 photograph of the Bishop Grimoard shows that the bishops' heads and missing hands were carved in the round. This made them more vulnerable to damage and most likely contributed to their disappearance by 1865.

Indian

Scimitar, late 18th century

Metal, damascene work, gold

Gift of Harlen Fessenden Burkett (OC 1882), 1933.32

Crafted during the period of the great Mughal Empire (1526–1857), this weapon is considered a scimitar because of its backward-curved blade. These swords, which were widespread in the Middle East as early as the 8th century, were used primarily in horse warfare due to their light weight, which made them ideal for battle. The term “scimitar” describes a broad category of swords with curved blades, including various forms developed throughout the Middle East. The sword here, with its Indian origin, broad blade, and disk-shaped pommel, could be further categorized as a *talwar*—unique in its ability to cut as well as thrust.

The damascene work of gold inlaid in dark metal is oriented around the classic Islamic designs of calligraphy, vegetation, and geometric patterns. This is not an arbitrary or passing tradition; rather, it reflects a fundamental belief, anchored in Islam, that the creation of living forms is unique to God. Islamic art reflects this aversion to creating realistic depictions of life and possibly committing the great sin of *shirk*, or comparing oneself with God. By focusing on such decoration, the Islamic artist does not attempt to create actual life. This is a task left solely to God.



Roman

Head of Athena, mid-2nd century AD
(after a 5th century BC Greek original)

White Anatolian marble with remnants of bronze eyelashes

Gift of Edward Capps, Sr., 1939.139

The damaged marble head seen here was part of a fully realized, decorated, and nearly life-size sculpture of the ancient Greek goddess Athena. This work is a later Roman copy of a lost Greek original, possibly a cast bronze statue by the artist Phidias. Indications of the statue's more complete and realistic form are easily visible. For instance, boreholes line the top of the head, suggesting that dowels were used to hold in place a separate helmet. This helmet was probably made of bronze, perhaps with a lower rim in a different marble, which would have been painted to diminish its contrast with the metal.

A combination of materials and pigments heighten further the sculpture's sense of realism, an important element of ancient Greek marble statuary, which was often gilded and painted in bright colors. Athena's thin and only slightly raised eyebrows suggest that they would have been tinted. Similarly, the pupils (now lost) would have been crafted from colored glass or stone. Deposits of a dark metal around the eyes indicate that bronze eyelashes had once been attached, enhancing the face's lifelike appearance. Based on the differing materials used, it may be conjectured that the *Head of Athena* topped an acrolithic sculpture (a statue with a core of wood and stone drapery and limbs), which was common in classical antiquity.

