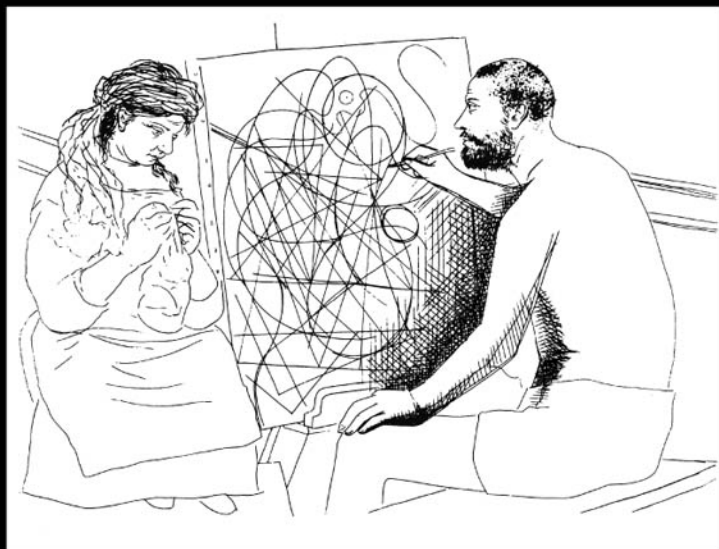


OXFORD

# UNDERSTANDING PICTURES



*Dominic Lopes*

## UNDERSTANDING PICTURES

There are many ways to picture the world—Australian ‘x-ray’ pictures, cubist collages, Amerindian split-style figures, and pictures in two-point perspective each draw attention to different features of what they represent. The premise of *Understanding Pictures* is that this diversity is the central fact with which a theory of figurative pictures must reckon.

Lopes argues that identifying pictures’ subjects is akin to recognizing objects whose appearances have changed over time. He develops a scheme for categorizing the different ways pictures represent—the different kinds of meaning they have—and he contends that depiction’s epistemic value lies in its representational diversity. He also offers a novel account of the phenomenology of pictorial experience, comparing pictures to visual prostheses like mirrors and binoculars.

The book concludes with a discussion of works of art which have made pictorial meaning their theme, demonstrating the importance of the issues this book raises for understanding the aesthetics of pictures.

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

Against Equality of Opportunity

*Matt Cavanagh*

Causality, Interpretation, and the Mind

*William Child*

The Kantian Sublime

From Morality to Art

*Paul Crowther*

Semantic Powers

Meaning and the Means of Knowing in Classical Indian Philosophy

*Jonardon Ganeri*

Kant's Theory of Imagination

Bridging Gaps in Judgement and Experience

*Sarah L. Gibbons*

Determinism, Blameworthiness, and Deprivation

*Martha Klein*

Projective Probability

*James Logue*

Wittgenstein, Finitism, and the Foundations of Mathematics

*Mathieu Marion*

False Consciousness

*Denise Meyerson*

Truth and the End of Inquiry

A Peircean Account of Truth

*C. J. Misak*

The Good and the True

*Michael Morris*

Hegel's Idea of Freedom

*Alan Patten*

Nietzsche and Metaphysics

*Peter Poellner*

The Ontology of Mind

Events, Processes, and States

*Helen Steward*

Things that Happen Because They Should

A Teleological Approach to Action

*Rowland Stout*

Metaphor and Moral Experience

*A. E. Denham*

# Understanding Pictures

DOMINIC LOPES

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Dominic Lopes 1996

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 1996

First published in paperback 2004

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Lopes, Dominic.

Understanding pictures / Dominic Lopes.  
— (Oxford philosophical monographs)

Based on the author's thesis (doctoral)—Oxford University, 1992,  
originally presented under the title: Pictures as perceptual  
symbols.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Aesthetics. 2. Pictures. I. Title. II. Series.

BH39.L596 1996 701'.71—dc20 95-42043

ISBN 0-19-824097-X (hbk.)

ISBN 0-19-927203-4 (pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd., Hong Kong  
Printed in Great Britain  
on acid-free paper by  
Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn, Norfolk

*For*  
*Anita Macfarlane and Anthony Lopes*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No first book is a solo effort. This one began as a thesis for the D.Phil. degree at Oxford University in 1992. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for awarding me a Doctoral Fellowship at a time when there was little other material incentive to pursue graduate studies. The advice of Adrian Cussins and Timothy Williamson was particularly useful at crucial stages in writing the thesis, and the criticisms of my examiners, William Child and Paul Snowdon, led to some rethinking that shaped this volume. Above all, I was most fortunate to have benefited from the guidance and teaching of John Campbell and Patrick Gardiner. Their enthusiasm for my work and their different yet complementary insights into it were a constant stimulus and encouragement.

My debts to those who eased the transition from thesis to book are many. A grant-in-aid of research from Indiana University Kokomo defrayed the cost of picture research and permissions, while a faculty fellowship enabled me to devote the summer of 1993 to writing Chapter 11. The introduction was written during a visit to the Institute for Advanced Study in Bloomington, and I would like to thank Henry Remak and his staff for making my stay there a productive and pleasant one. My thanks also go to Lynn Perrill for teaching me the art of grant-writing, to Jenny McCoy for her efficient way with paperwork, to Lauren Keach at the Indiana University Fine Arts Library for her picture-sleuthing, and to Peter Momtchiloff and Jennifer Scott at Oxford University Press for their help guiding this book through the publication process. I am indebted to the Press's reviewers, as well as to Víctor Krebs, Robert Strikwerda, Crispin Sartwell, and Stephanie Ross for taking the time to read through my revisions in whole or in part—I hope I have done their suggestions justice. My final debt I know will be forgiven: to my brother Damian Lopes, for a steady and nourishing diet of kind words and good cheer.

D.M.L.

*Lafayette, Indiana*  
*January 1995*

# CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
Introduction	I
PART ONE PICTURES AS PERCEPTUAL	
1 Representation and Resemblance	15
2 Depiction and Vision	37
PART TWO PICTURES AS SYMBOLS	
3 Goodman's Symbol Theory	55
4 Symbols and Substitutes	77
5 Pictorial Reference	93
PART THREE ASPECT RECOGNITION	
6 Pictorial Content	111
7 Pictorial Recognition	136
8 Pictorial Meaning	157
9 Pictorial Experience	174
PART FOUR APPLICATIONS	
10 Fictive Pictures	197
11 Picturing Pictures	209
BIBLIOGRAPHY	228
PICTURE CREDITS	235
INDEX	237



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Canaletto, <i>Piazza San Marco</i>	2
2. 'Split-style' drawing of thunderbird	9
3. ASL for 'duck', 'rabbit', and 'truth'	16
4. Running rabbit	17
5. Dürer, Artist drawing on 'picture-window'	26
6. Non-Albertian planes	26
7. Holbein, <i>The Ambassadors</i>	27
8. Picasso, <i>Ambroise Vollard</i>	28
9. X-ray drawing of man and kangaroo	29
10. Trident illusion	29
11. Pictorial depth test picture	31
12. Duck-rabbit	41
13. Chardin, <i>Soap Bubbles</i>	45
14. Plaque from <i>Pioneer</i> space probe	61
15. Bruegel, <i>The Peasant Dance</i>	61
16. Gillray, cartoon of Wellington	61
17. Picasso, <i>Françoise Gilot</i> , 'Femme Fleur'	95
18. Ponzo's illusion	103
19. Man reading newspaper	117
20. <i>Scenes from the Life of Gensei Shohin</i>	122
21. Hockney, <i>A Walk around the Hotel Courtyard Acatlan</i>	123
22. Room from two viewpoints	126
23. Rembrandt, <i>St Jerome in a Hilly Landscape</i>	170
24. Fictional groundedness	203
25. Picasso, <i>Déjeuners</i>	212
26. Delacroix, <i>Femmes d'Alger</i>	214
27. Picasso, <i>Femmes d'Alger</i>	214

## Introduction

COMPARE Canaletto's painting of the Piazza San Marco, reproduced in Figure 1, with the following passage from Luigi Barzini's book *The Italians*:

Loiterers discuss grave matters and wave their hands to emphasize some important point. Some are opera singers without a job, waiting for an engagement to drop from the sky, to sing *Rigoletto* or *Trovatore* in the provinces, abroad, in South America, anywhere. Other strollers are visibly from the country, red-faced, fat, solid. . . . Handsome and well-dressed young men stroll there with feline steps, to look disdainfully at women; handsome and well-dressed women stroll languorously to look at and be looked at by men. . . . The noise and the gestures fill the empty space.<sup>1</sup>

For all they have in common—in representing Venice's famous public place, in vividly and fancifully evoking its character, and, perhaps, in entertaining us—it is the difference between Canaletto's picture and Barzini's description that lies at the heart of what follows. If pictures represent, they do not represent in the same way as descriptions. Yet, as manifest as this difference is, it is far from obvious how to explain it.

Let me begin by drawing some distinctions and, as often happens when distinctions are drawn, introducing some special terminology. I will then reflect briefly upon what I intend to look for in a theory of how pictures represent, raising some questions about the aesthetics, history, and anthropology of pictures that a theory of picturing should keep, if only peripherally, in its sights.

### *Explaining Depiction*

How can I claim, as I just did, that it is far from clear how pictures represent? Surely the difference between pictorial and linguistic representation is plain: pictures represent because they look like what they

<sup>1</sup> Luigi Barzini, *The Italians* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 72.



**Fig. 1.** Canaletto, *Piazza San Marco, Looking South-East*, 1742–4

represent. When I look at *Piazza San Marco*, I have an experience of what it represents, and this experience is like seeing the piazza itself. The marvel of pictorial representation is that it replicates visual experiences of objects; descriptions do not have this power.

Admittedly, we experience pictures *as of* their subjects. Our intuitive concept of a picture runs something like 'a two-dimensional representation that looks like what it represents', and I am willing to let this serve as a working definition of 'picture'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that 'looking like' explains depiction harbours a serious error, for it is precisely the fact that when looking at a picture we experience what it represents that needs explaining.

This error is masked by a failure to make certain distinctions. First, I call the real-world entities a picture represents its 'subject'. In doing so, I depart somewhat from ordinary usage in so far as a fictive picture, according to my definition, has no subject—there are no real-world entities that a picture of a manticore represents.<sup>3</sup> But the principal advantage of my choice of terminology is that it encompasses not only objects but also scenes, events, and states of affairs. *Piazza San Marco*'s subjects include San Marco's basilica (an object), the piazza (a scene), people gesticulating (events), and the fact that people gesticulate in Venice (a state of affairs).

Of course, pictures are objects in the world, too. They have physical properties that vary with their physical composition, size, age, and the like. Among these is a privileged set of visual properties, those by means of which pictures represent their subjects. I shall speak of these properties as making up pictures' 'designs'. An incomplete list of pictorial design properties would include marks, directions, boundaries, contours, shapes, colours, hues, relative contrasts between light and dark, and also textures, such as smoothness of surface or invisibility of brushwork. Design properties are typically laid down in paint, ink, charcoal, or some other substance, on a flat surface. (However, the image of a slide projected on a screen shows that pictorial colours and shapes need not be comprised of any pigmented substance.)

Distinct from both a picture's subject and its design is its 'content'. The content of a representation of any kind, whether mental, linguistic,

<sup>2</sup> This will serve only as a working definition. The word 'four' contains four visible elements, f o u r, and so looks like what it denotes, but it is not a picture.

<sup>3</sup> Since fictive pictures purport to represent real objects, ordinary talk of pictures' subjects embraces the things they purport to represent as well as the things they do represent. This violates my definition of 'subject'.

pictorial, or musical, consists in the properties it represents the world as having. Pictorial content, by extension, consists in the properties a picture represents the world as having. The content of a picture, if we grasp it aright, determines the content of our experience of the picture. When we experience a picture in the right way, we have an experience which represents the world as having the properties the picture represents it as having. It is because *Piazza San Marco* represents a basilica that, when we look at the picture, we have an experience as of a basilica.

Content is not easily confused with design. A picture's line, shading, colour, and textural properties are rarely properties it ascribes to its subject. *Piazza San Marco* does not represent San Marco's basilica as a few centimetres in height, though that is the height of the brush strokes comprising its design. But there is a much greater temptation to equate a picture's content with its subject, confusing properties the picture ascribes to the world with properties the world has. What is wrong with this is that a picture can have a content that misrepresents its subject, attributing properties to it that it does not have.

It is the equation of content with subject that underlies our erroneous intuition that pictures represent because they 'just look like' their subjects. While they need not do so, the contents of pictures frequently match properties of their subjects, and, as a result, the contents of our experiences of pictures frequently match the contents of our experiences of actual scenes. These matches acquire a paradigmatic stature in our pre-theoretic conception of depiction: we conceptualize our experiences of pictures as like our experiences of their subjects. However, noticing that a picture's content matches its subject or that our experience of a picture matches our experience of its subject is no explanation of how the picture comes by that content. The task of a theory of pictorial representation is to explain how it is that pictures come to have content in the first place. The common-sense view that pictures represent because they 'just look like' their subjects simply takes depiction for granted.

An explanation of how pictures come by their contents, thereby enabling them to give rise to experiences as of certain scenes, must begin with an examination of the relationship between design and subject. A genuine resemblance theory of depiction, for instance, holds that a picture has a content as of its subject because its design resembles its subject—but more of this in the next chapter. For the present let us take care always to distinguish between design, content, and subject, explaining content by means of design, subject, and the relation between them.

*Figurative and Abstract Pictures*

Some readers might have some misgivings about my characterization of pictures as representing objects and scenes. A guiding principle of this book is that pictures come in many varieties, and this diversity is something which a theory of picturing must take into account. But, in apparent violation of this principle, I am proposing to limit my discussion to what are commonly called 'figurative' pictures.

The red cows and Chinese horses of Lascaux, *The School of Athens*, the royal visages engraved on notes of legal tender, doodles, maps, ink-blots, Ansel Adams vistas, suprematist compositions, mythological scenes, family snapshots, Pollock drips, Mondrian grids, and psychology textbook representations of illusions all count as pictures. Of these, maps, vistas, banknotes, and philosophical group portraits are figurative (and in this respect may be classed with descriptions), while drips, grids, and many doodles are not figurative but 'abstract'.

In overlooking abstract pictures, I do not mean to endorse the view that abstract pictures are not representational. It is true that abstractions do not represent objects and scenes as do still lifes or landscapes, but abstractions may represent in other ways. Pictures such as Rothko's coloured clouds or Rorschach ink-blots may *express* subjective psychological states—of anxiety, exhilaration, conflict, mystical union, and the like. Others *make manifest* features of the process of their production, as a Pollock drip painting manifests the direction and force of the artist's movements, the liquidity and stickiness of the paint, and the effects of gravity.<sup>4</sup> Expression and manifestation are species of representation in so far as they draw our attention to features of the world—subjective mental states in one case and processes of making in the other.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the prospects for bringing such pictures within the representational fold, I propose to sweep this issue under the rug and avail myself of the traditional, intuitive division of pictures into those that represent physical objects and scenes and those that do not. By no

<sup>4</sup> See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd edn. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), ch. 2; and Patrick Maynard, 'Drawing and Shooting: Causality in Depiction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1985), 115–29, from which I borrow the term 'manifestation'.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, expression and manifestation are not found only in abstract pictures. A picture may express psychological states or manifest the history of its production by representing objects and scenes.

means do I reject the principle that a complete account of pictures should explain abstract pictures as well as figurative ones. I merely restrict myself to the less ambitious task of attempting to explain pictures that, like descriptions (though in their distinctive way), represent objects, properties, and states of affairs. I henceforth follow standard philosophical practice in using the terms ‘pictorial representation’ and, more conveniently, ‘depiction’ to apply only to figurative representation.

This is not to say that I assume that the line dividing the figurative from the abstract is always sharp. Looking at a picture like Pollock’s *Out of the Web*, in which the ghosts of figures linger, we may be unsure whether anything is depicted. But our uncertainty does not impeach the principle that every picture either does or does not depict an object, scene, or state of affairs. A theory of depiction should provide a more or less effective procedure for deciding whether any given picture represents some subject and, if so, what. It will do so by explaining how pictures with certain designs acquire contents as of certain objects or scenes.

### *Art Pictures, Demotic Pictures*

Some readers may wish to divide pictures along aesthetic lines. Pollock’s drips and *The School of Athens* are works of art; doodles and family snaps are (generally) not. No theory of depiction can afford to ignore pictures’ aesthetic potential.

The fact that pictures can sometimes be works of art, having properties that capture and hold our aesthetic interest, imposes a burden on a complete theory of pictorial representation. Whatever account we supply of how pictures represent their subjects should lay a foundation for an explanation of how it is that the fact that a picture does represent objects and scenes can be aesthetically interesting.<sup>6</sup> In addition, if our aesthetic engagement with pictures differs from our aesthetic engagement with other kinds of representations (e.g. novels or songs), we will want to know what it is about *pictorial* representations that occasions a *pictorial* aesthetic. There is an ancient view (with modern adherents) that works of art are representational, bearing certain kinds of meaning. The challenge for this representation theory of art is to explain how

<sup>6</sup> I therefore contest radically ‘formalist’ conceptions of art according to which artworks’ representational properties are never relevant aesthetically.

different representational media, bearing different kinds of meaning, can make for different kinds of art.<sup>7</sup>

I do not attempt to trace out fully and systematically the aesthetic implications for the theory of depiction I propose. Nevertheless, Chapter 11 is designed to serve, in a limited capacity, as a model for uncovering the roots of a pictorial aesthetic in pictorial representation.

Although we should be aware of the contribution that a theory of representational pictures can make to a theory of art pictures, we must not take the tie between accounts of pictures and art pictures too seriously. Theories of depiction have traditionally been the province of aesthetics, so it is no surprise that they have been influenced by the concerns of those whose main interest is art. The principal danger of this 'aestheticization' of depiction has been a neglect of the vast majority of representational pictures—heads of state engraved on banknotes, polaroids of Space Mountain, maps, architectural elevations, and the like—which do not qualify as works of art. These I call 'demotic' pictures, since they are a product of the people rather than the art world.

In my view, a theory of depiction should take demotic pictures as fundamental, while also providing the basis for an explanation of how pictures can transcend the commonplace and enter the realm of the aesthetic. This parallels methodology in the philosophy of language, which begins by attempting to explain ordinary linguistic communication, and only then tries to shed light on metaphor, fictional narrative, and other modes which are parasitic on ordinary language but also underwrite its aesthetic potential.<sup>8</sup>

A central claim of this book is that pictures are at bottom vehicles for the storage, manipulation, and communication of information. They put us in touch with our physical environment, especially our visual environment, often parts of it that are beyond our reach, across space or time. Pictures share language's burden in representing the world and our thoughts about it. And this function of pictures is at the forefront in the demotic rather than the aesthetic.

<sup>7</sup> Modern adherents include Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988). Wollheim predicates a theory of art pictures on a theory of pictorial representation. A work of art is a work in which meaning is thematized; a work of pictorial art is not just a picture in which meaning is thematized, but a work in which a specifically pictorial kind of meaning is thematized.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent theory of depiction that disregards this stricture, see Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). I critique Walton's approach in Ch. 4.



Moreover, giving pride of place to non-art pictures lends some justification to my strategy of limiting my account of pictures to figurative ones. One source of resistance to that strategy stems from the fact that it is among works of pictorial art that we find most examples of abstraction. A theory of figurative representation therefore comprises only part of a complete theory of art pictures, and should be developed from the outset alongside theories of expression and manifestation.<sup>9</sup> But demotic pictures are almost exclusively figurative. So to the extent that we seek an account that takes demotic pictures as paradigmatic, it seems reasonable to proceed with a theory dedicated to figurative pictures.

### *Explaining Pictorial Diversity*

The pioneering study of theoretical issues in pictorial representation was a book written by an art historian, E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*.<sup>10</sup> The greater part of Gombrich's legacy to philosophical research on pictures, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is the illusion theory of depiction. Yet Gombrich's primary concern was with the problem of why pictorial representation has a history—and, for that matter, an anthropology. The importance of this for accounts of how pictures represent has not been recognized.

The problem of the history of depiction arises, for Gombrich, in the following way. To begin, Gombrich endorses the standard view that an explanation of depiction will depend on facts about perception. When we look at pictures, we enjoy visual experiences of what is not there—experiences of Venetians strolling about the Piazza San Marco or a mandolin on a table, as the case may be. This suggested to Gombrich that pictures represent objects and scenes by triggering perceptual illusions that induce experiences as of those objects or scenes. But while artists have always claimed to copy what they see, the pictures of different cultures and different eras represent the world in strikingly different ways. Egyptian tomb paintings, medieval miniatures, ukiyo-e prints, north-west coast First Nation totems, the cows and horses at

<sup>9</sup> However, my hunch is that we will get the aesthetics of figurative pictures right only once we recognize that they function in the first place as conveyors of information and seek to ground our aesthetic interest in them in this fact. Abstraction distracts us from this point.

<sup>10</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 2nd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).



**Fig. 2.** Kwakiutl, Thunderbird, painting from house front

Lascaux, the collages of Picasso and Braque, all illustrate not only the diversity but also the cultural embeddedness and historical development of depiction.<sup>11</sup> Hence Gombrich's problem: how can depiction have historical and cultural dimensions if pictures are perceptual and perception is ahistorical and universal across cultures?

The traditional response to this question simply assumes the superiority of Western post-Renaissance canons of realistic representation, putting pictorial diversity down to either a taste for non-figurative ornamentation or a lack of technical sophistication. Hoping to avoid this response, with its overtones of Whig history, Gombrich argued instead that pictures are 'conceptual' as well as perceptual. By this he meant that pictures are like language in so far as design–subject correlations are more or less arbitrary—brown paint can be and was used to represent green grass, for example. Gombrich called different sets of design–subject correlations 'schemata'. Egyptian tomb paintings belong to one schema, impressionist canvases belong to a second, and north-west coast First Nation split-style drawings to a third (e.g. Fig. 2). Pictorial schemata, like languages, are conventional. The split style is the convention prevalent among the Kwakiutl, while cubism was conventional in the Parisian art world between the wars.

<sup>11</sup> The pictures reproduced in this book illustrate this diversity. Interestingly, most of these are art pictures. This is due in large measure to the relative freedom of those who make art to explore diverse modes of representation, but it is also due to a tendency, especially in recent years, to aestheticize the historically or culturally exotic.

The history of depiction and its cultural embeddedness are therefore the result of a tension between its perceptual and conceptual origins. Changes in the way people represent things are sometimes attempts to correct the prevailing schemata so as to achieve a closer match with visual experience; sometimes they represent a pull towards the 'primitive' and the conceptual.

I have argued elsewhere that Gombrich's account of depiction fails in its aim to provide a basis for rich historical or anthropological explanations of pictures.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, Gombrich maintains a monolithic conception of an ideal match between pictures and objects. This means that artists interested in enhancing pictures' perceptual aspect have their goal set out for them: the route of the march towards a better match is predetermined. Moreover, as pictures approach illusionism, they reflect fewer particularities of the context in which they were made, so that illusionistic art is beyond social explanation.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, if the adoption of a schema in a context is a matter of convention, then choices of schemata are arbitrary, for conventions are arbitrary.<sup>14</sup> And to say that it is an arbitrary matter what schema is used in a context is to forestall any explanation of why particular schemata are suited to particular contexts. The Kwakiutl, on this view, use the split style simply because it is customary among them to do so, just as Britons drive on the left for no other reason than that it is better that they all drive on the same side of the road and it is customary among them to drive on the left. If schemata are arbitrary, then there can be no explanation of the adoption of a schema in a context that refers to its suitability for the needs of picture-users in that context.

Gombrich's account explains why depiction is diverse and why it is possible for pictures to belong to different modes or schemata of representation. But it cannot explain why particular schemata prevail in particular contexts, since what is conceptual in depiction is arbitrary, and what is perceptual is predetermined. What we want to be able to

<sup>12</sup> Dominic Lopes, 'Pictures, Styles, and Purposes', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32 (1992), 330–41. See also Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, illusionistic art thrives only in certain cultural and technical conditions. But it hardly explains why a schemata was adopted at a particular place and time merely to assert that it had become possible to adopt it.

<sup>14</sup> For the classic argument that conventions are arbitrary, see David Lewis, *Convention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969). For an argument that depiction is not conventional, see Sect. 6.5.

explain is what it is about the style invented by Alberti that answered to forces at work in Renaissance Europe, and what it is about split-style pictures that suits them to the purposes of the Kwakiutl.

This is the merest sketch of Gombrich's problem—how pictures, if they are grounded in perceptual processes, can reflect features of culture. My aim has been not to assemble a decisive refutation of Gombrich, but rather to illustrate that different theories of depiction have different implications for how we can explain pictures as social and historical artefacts. A theory of depiction must identify the features that pictures have in virtue of which they have a history and an anthropology. It must explain, first, how pictures can belong to different schemata or styles or modes of representation and, second, how pictures in those schemata, styles, or modes can be more or less suited to particular times and places.

### *Perceptual or Symbolic?*

In describing Gombrich's model of the perceptual and social determinants of pictorial meaning, I have touched on two schools of thought concerning pictorial representation. According to one, pictures depend on perceptual processes. Perceptualism takes seriously our intuition that what distinguishes pictures from other kinds of representations—what distinguishes Canaletto's painting from Barzini's prose—is that pictures 'look like' their subjects. The alternative to perceptualism is any theory that stresses analogies between pictorial representation and other kinds of symbols, particularly linguistic ones. Linguistic analogies give us access to the sophisticated tools of the philosophy of language, enabling us to study what I call the 'logic' of pictures. Their drawback is that they threaten to assimilate pictures to descriptions.

Although perceptualism and the symbol theory seem at loggerheads, I am in sympathy with Gombrich's attempt to reconcile them in a way that retains the advantages of each. My own view is that convergence is natural in light of recent advances in our understanding of perception, cognition, and language. In particular, we now know enough about the visual mechanisms pertaining to object recognition to see that they possess the right kind of flexibility and the right kind of structure to explain how we recognize objects in pictures. At the same time, it has become apparent to many philosophers of language that linguistic understanding is intimately bound up with the exercise of perceptual

capacities. I have found Gareth Evans's conception, in *The Varieties of Reference*, of the links between language, cognition, and perception a particularly illuminating model for what might be called a perceptual theory of pictorial symbols.<sup>15</sup>

Parts One and Two of this book review and assess perceptual and symbolic accounts respectively. Although the best versions of each have flaws, a careful analysis of their relative strengths and weaknesses offers clues as to what a successful theory should ultimately look like. In Part Three, I introduce and defend my 'aspect-recognition theory' of depiction, a hybrid incorporating perceptual elements within a symbolic framework. I believe that this theory is equipped to ground rich historical and anthropological explanations of pictures. Finally, in Part Four, I use my conception of pictures' distinctive power to communicate certain kinds of information to show how pictorial representation can be aesthetically interesting.

<sup>15</sup> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

## PART ONE

### *Pictures as Perceptual*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# I

## *Representation and Resemblance*

RESEMBLANCE is deeply implicated in our intuitive understanding of what it is to be a picture. When asked how the pictures it contains represent things, any visitor to the local art gallery will readily agree with Samuel Johnson's commonsensical definition of a picture as a 'resemblance of persons and things in colours'. Unlike Barzini's words, Canaletto's deft applications of pigment to canvas do indeed look like what they represent. What sets pictures apart from other kinds of representations is that they resemble their subjects. Does this fact explain how pictures represent?

### *1.1 The Independence Challenge*

Nobody denies that visual resemblance has something to do with pictures; nor does anybody advocate severing the intuitive link between pictures and resemblance.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is by no means self-evident that resemblance explains depiction. According to the resemblance theory, identifying what a picture represents is a matter of recognizing a similarity between its design and its subject. But to deny that we understand pictures by noticing similarities is not to deny the intuitive significance of resemblance for depiction. Design–subject similarities may well be invisible until we know what is represented, and the fact that a picture depicts an object may itself explain our noticing similarities between them.

Resemblance's grip on our intuitions is so firm, though, that to give fair consideration to this point, we would be wise to set pictures aside for a moment and concentrate on other representations with imitative elements. For instance, while resemblance plays a role in the sign languages used by the deaf, it does not follow that it explains how they represent.

<sup>1</sup> Even Nelson Goodman, the arch anti-perceptualist, grants that pictures resemble their subjects. See Goodman, quoted in E. H. Gombrich, 'Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation', in *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1982), 284.





**Fig. 3.** American Sign Language—*left*: ‘duck’; *middle*: ‘rabbit’; *right* ‘truth’

The hand shapes, movements, and positions making up sign languages fall into three categories.<sup>2</sup> Some, like the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for ‘truth’, obviously do not visually resemble what they stand for (see Fig. 3). Understanding these signs neither depends upon nor promotes any perceived similarity between them and their referents.<sup>3</sup> Other signs we can grasp just by noticing their resemblance to what they signal; the ASL sign for a duck can be understood just by noticing its resemblance to a duck.<sup>4</sup> When a similarity can be seen between a sign and its referent without first knowing its meaning, the similarity is ‘representation-independent’. The third class of signs consists of those whose similarity to their subjects is evident only once we know what they refer to. Only once you know what the sign for a rabbit stands for do you see its resemblance to a rabbit. Its resemblance to its referent is ‘representation-dependent’.

In the case of pictures, some design–subject resemblances are obviously representation-dependent. Only once we learn that streaked lines behind a figure represent movement do we notice how they capture the

<sup>2</sup> See Trevor Pateman, ‘Transparent and Translucent Icons’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 26 (1986), 380–2; and Margaret Deuchar, ‘Are the Signs of Language Arbitrary?’, in Horace Barlow, Colin Blakemore, and Miranda Weston-Smith (eds.), *Images and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 168–79.

<sup>3</sup> Often lack of resemblance between sign and signified can be attributed to the impossibility of manually imitating what is signed. This is not the case with the sign for truth: if, for instance, truth is correspondence with reality, then parallel lines drawn through the air visually resemble truth.

<sup>4</sup> Such signs *can* be but *need not* be interpreted by noticing what they resemble. ASL signs are not normally interpreted by noticing resemblances; signers do not communicate by playing elaborate games of charades.