

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning(NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 12

Mimetic and Non-mimetic art

by

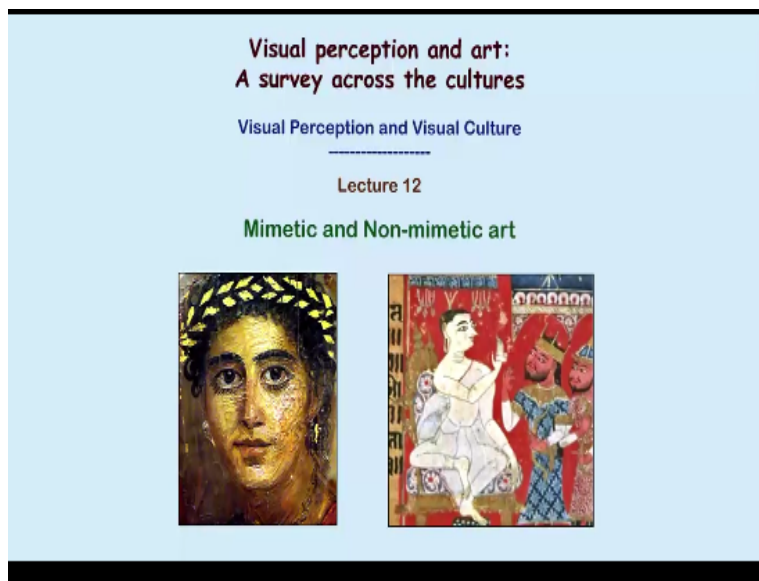
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Visva – Bharati

Hello viewers welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures.

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This is the 12th lecture in this course, and today we shall be looking at not any particular tradition or culture but two particular art terms called mimetic and non-mimetic. Across the globe of course, no mimetic and non-mimetic we take are two terms that refer to two different kinds of visualizations. Generally speaking mimetic art is that kind of art being it painting or sculpture where the reference to the real world is very strong.

I mean all arts generally speaking unless it is a purely abstract painting the reference to the real world the reference to the natural world is usually there. It is just a matter of degree that in some

cases the reference is very strong. And in certain cases the reference is not so strong but the reference is always there. So the difference between my metric art and non magnetic art is at one level a matter of degree.

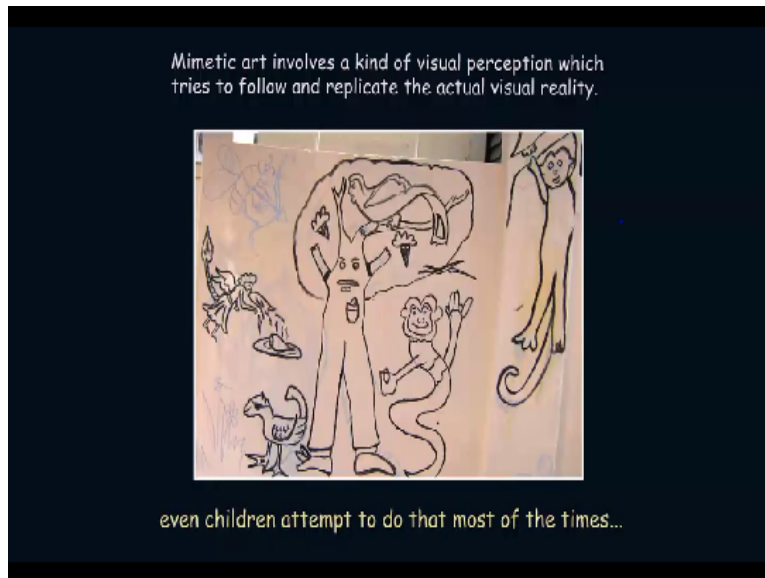
That in certain magnetic paintings in certain kinds of paintings which are-- which come under the category of my medic art you find the reference to the natural world is very strong. And in works of art coming under the category of non-magnetic art the reference to the real world is less. But that is only one aspect and that does not really explain, this two terms or categories properly.

Because in mimetic art it is not just a matter of reference that makes the mimetic art—mimetic art, because the reference to the real world is there in both the cases, both mimetic and non-mimetic. So what discriminates Mimetic art from non my Mimetic art is not merely the reference. But actually the approach of visualization I mean the visual technique or method that you are applying.

For example, in my Mimetic artist generally applies a certain technique or visual language which kind of enables him to follow nature as faithfully as possible. I mean we are talking about a kind of realistic kind of painting or a realism, where the whole intention of the artist is to capture the real life or capture in terms of real life as faithfully as closely as possible. Whereas in non-mimetic art across the world.

The this whole idea of being faithful to nature in terms of his visual appearance in painting and sculpture is simply not there as a serious concern. In non-magnetic art here more concerned with creating of parallel visual world. A parallel pictorial world and that distinguishes non-mimetic art from mimetic art.

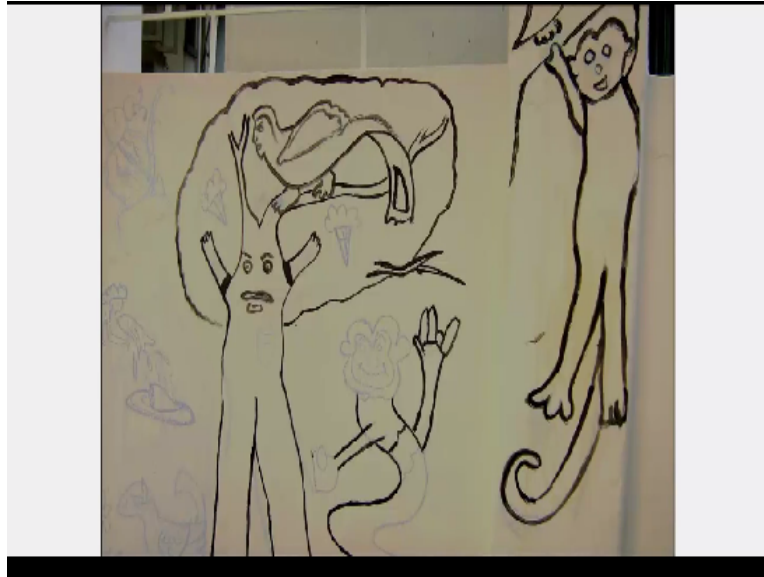
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Now mimetic art involves a kind of visual perception which tries to follow and replicate the actual visual reality. And it is such a tendency that you find the tendency even among the children. So children attempt to do this kind of mimetic process most of the times, though what they come up with may not be so convincing in terms of a realistic portraiture or a realistic depiction.

But the entirety of a child is generally to be as faithful as possible to the real world. And that is the reason if you remember what we discussed when we were discussing childhood that what looks like almost an abstract shape or form in child art to us is never an abstract or meaningless shape or form shape or form to the child himself. The child knows very well what he or she has drawn or painted.

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So when you look at these drawings done by children, you know very well by following the trajectory of the lines the process of the drawing that whether it is from imagination or from the real life. The method of drawing generally follows the life as directly as possible.

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In other words children too desperately want to replicate the real world I will bet in a different language or mode.

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So the idea of my missus that art is supposed to be an imitation of life is there almost in every child but the outcome is different.

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In real examples of mimetic art, when we look at and we will be looking at just now examples from Roman painting, when we will be looking at examples from Greek sculpture or Renaissance painting. Then they will know that mimeses or mimetic art has become a singular concern.

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So in case of children then at the end of their process you may also say that though they try to make a mimetic art. They try to mime or imitate the visual reality or the nature around they end up with something that is not purely mimetic and it is true. That they end up with something that is not purely mimetic. Due to several reasons either they lack the skill of making the only accurate and convincing Mimetic art or they do not want to do that. But there is an element of mimeses within the process inherent in the process itself.

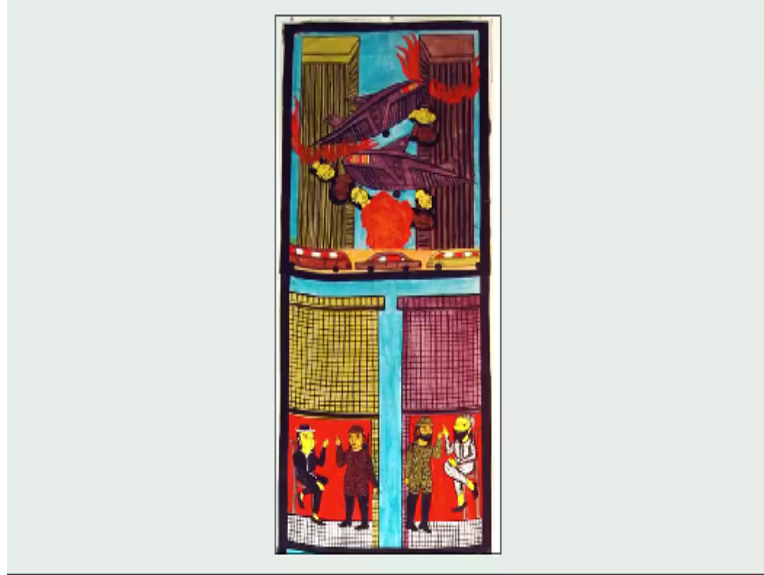
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And the similar kind of minuses can also be found in folk art but to a lesser degree in many cases like this. This form is symbol of fish also but the tail kind of transforms itself into a tree branch with lot of foliage. Then the fins do not look very convincingly like fence and the body of the fish which is supposed to be full of scale here is full of decorations and designs. Really speaking this particular example of folk art is not magnetic at all.

In any sense this any kind of resemblance of fish with the form that you see it is only a very fast rate and remote reference. As the painting itself the suggests there is no intention on part of the painter to make the form look like a fish rather the intention is to make the fish or this creature looked like a composite beam which is-- which does not belong to any fixed category. It is neither fish nor tree nothing but it is good.

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So when you come across this kind of examples of course then you know that you are slowly moving away from magnetic art and you are entering into the world of non-mimetic art. Now look at this one this is an example of a Bengal photo Chitra or school painting from Bengal and the subject is the demolition of World Trade Center when it was attacked on plane by Osama bin Laden way back many years back.

Now how this folk painter is trying to depict that how he is drawing the airplanes why aeroplanes also has heads of people or maybe they are beheaded people. And there are lot of stories inside this painting of course but I'm talking about the visual configuration that this painter is trying to arrive at which has a desperation to be as faithful as possible but not visually conceptually. Conceptually faithful to the event to that trajectory incident.

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And when a port or from a similar tradition is painting a scene from a mythology of course that port or painter does not have any responsibility of making his figures look as if they are from the real world. For example this huge black figure is a mycological demon and he exercises all is freedom to be asked non-mimetic as possible. So known mimesis also gives you an opportunity of freedom to imagine or build up an imagination may be based on a mythology may be may waste on a different story.

But it allows you to build up a visual imagination more strongly because you are free from any real life references and that is very important for non-magnetic art.

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Even in folk terracotta sculpture like this the reference to a real animal is there because of the white bear update because of the trunk. You can make out that this is a figure of an elephant but again the long neck refers to the horse maybe it is a composite creature having characteristic features of both the elephant and horse we do not know but the point is that up to a point the reference was there very strongly in the mind of the person the artist who was making it.

But then he left these references behind and he plunged into wild imaginations so - is strictly speaking does not work in folk art. It also stops working in chill child are after a point.

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And in these cases the reference is dead- a mother and a child but it just stops there lest that is a visual form the configuration the loop the eyes the posture everything is a visual imagination rather a visual imitation.

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So in other words if you want to identify mimetic art as visual imitation. Then you can safely say that non-mimetic art is visual imagination. Now this is not a very water tight compartment distinction because visual imitation may entail imagination and visual imagination also on certifications may enter visual imitations. But predominantly mimetic art is based on an imitative visual language whereas non-magnetic art like this one is based on and imaginative or imaginary pictorial language.

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Besides folk art in the entire tradition of Indian miniature painting also the visual language that is employed is fundamentally based on non-mimetic art language or non-mimetic art idiom. Where the where there is no compulsion on part of the painter to be very faithful to nature or life in terms of rendering objects. So one can use false imagination like exaggeration distortion extension of names and features without bothering about whether it is matching with the real life or not.

Then of course in this kind of paintings like this one there are patients when the painter has to paint a dragon or a mythical animal. And then there is no question of mimeses all together because there is no dragon in real life who are you to imitate so you imagine a tracker.

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And this imagination is highly possible in this kind of non Mimetic art. And this kind of non-magnetic paintings like this one in the pertaining paintings.

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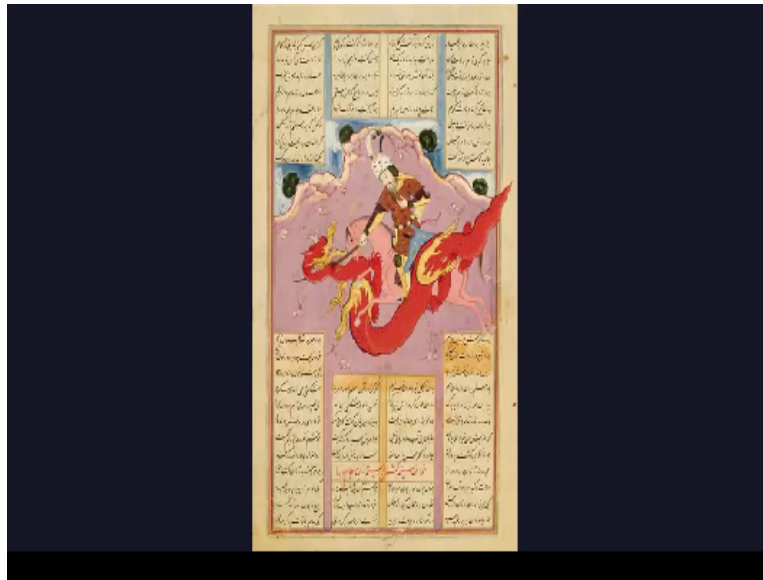
You look at these paintings carefully.

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You also look at very early examples of Persian paintings like this one and this one.

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And this one and I am sure by now you have been able to notice something, you know what that is non-mimetic art. Besides allowing the artist to imagine visual forms in most wildly it also allows the artists to play with the space the space concept in these non-mimetic paintings do not bother about the realistic space idea.

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The decorative traditions across the world are of course completely non-mimetic although motifs may be derived from nature and life...



It simply gets rid of this idea that the painted space has to be an extension of the real space. And in another category where we find a lot of examples of non-mimetic art is the decorative traditions across the world and of course including India where it is completely non-mimetic although the motives may be derived from nature and life. For example when you look at this design this kind of floor decoration you might be able to figure out okay.

This particular motif is derived from this flower this is from that plant but then ultimately when you look at the design.

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When you look at this huge flow decoration in front of a rural heart like this one. What you see is a non-mimetic decoration? Why non mimetic in spite of the fact that many of these motifs are derived from real life or real nature.

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It is not mimetic because the ultimate intention was not to retain the character or the form or the shape of the real nature.

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The ultimate motive or objective of these artists was to transform these motives into a pattern so it leaves behind its original identity that you find in nature. And assumes a new identity this is identity of a decorative form the identity of a pattern.

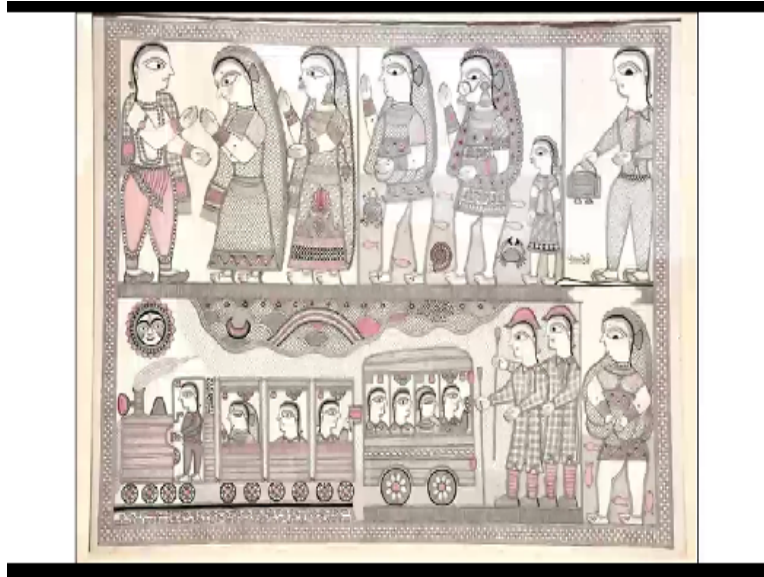
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So if your intention is to turn a motives into pattern then of course it has to be known mimetic. Even in those four paintings like this one. Without a wall painting of Gujarat there many of these rather most of these figures and objects and animals and human beings are clearly recognizable. They are clearly identifiable yet the language is not at all mimetic. It is very non mimetic why, because the painter or the painters because this is the collectively painted composition on the walls.

They do not try at all they do not bother to try at all to convey this idea that all the figures painted here have a very convincing reality as you find them in real nature. Their intention is are the different to give you a sense of a world where all these motives recite together a conceptual world a religious world a cultural space.

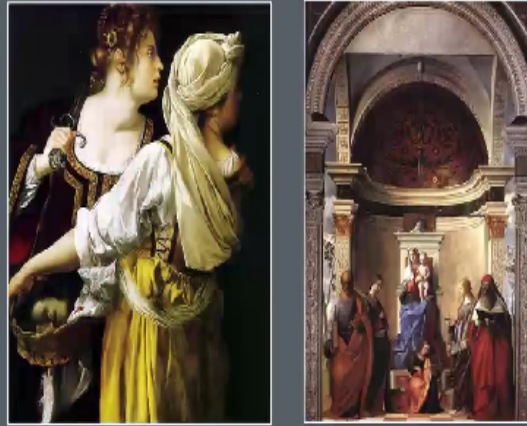
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Similarly in these madhubali painting by the famous painter Ganga Devi. You find that though the subject matter is pretty not realistic of course not even naturalistic but pretty recognizable that it has a very obvious narrative content. But the style of painting the style of representation is very non-magnetic it is it kind of adopts style. That is independent and that is the self-reference it does not refer back to the visual language itself.

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Opposite to the non-mimetic visual traditions, committed mimetic traditions in visual art are found in huge numbers in the history of Western art.



So in order to understand this kind of paintings you need to read the visual language but when you look at mimetic examples like this. As opposed to non-mimetic visual traditions mimetic traditions are usually committed- very strong reference and strong and very convincing rendering of visual forms and they are founded huge number in the Western art history but then in order to reach these paintings in order to understand these paintings you have to of course give some time to the visual language.

But then you also have to have knowledge of the visual world and how does actually a space exists in the real world. And how the painter makes it exists in this real world and how the paint is exist in the pictorial world.

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Hence in magnetic tradition you find certain principles of realistic art being employed which we shall discuss later. For example, perspective the laws and principles of perspective than the laws of gradually receding space gradually receding size or scale of human beings so on and so for. So that creates the sense of space which almost looks like an extension of a real space.

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In non-mimetic art nobody tries to create space which might look like an extension of the real space. It is different space altogether different from the space that you inhabit right now. Hence even in this kind of paintings of a landscape like and also to landscape you can see a sea sure with boats and with distant buildings it is possible for mimetic artist to go to the artwork details and create space.

So it is not just about the things featuring in a painting it is about the space that you are creating which is also about the character of the space. Do you want the space in the painting appear as if it is an extension of the real space? Do you want to in other words create a sense of depth in your space?

Then please follow certain principles of mimetic tradition but if you want your painting to look like as if it is a separate world separate from your own world in terms of space then follow the non-mimetic tradition where artists do not bother to apply the rules of perspective and all that. And that is how in my mimetic traditions usually you get an incredible sense of space. And in non-mimetic traditions generally speaking you get a whole lot of possibilities to imagine. To exercise any amount of imagination. Because the space does not have a restricted notion with reference to the real space. It is a mental space it is a conceptual space in non-mimetic tradition whereas in mimetic tradition like this it is an extended space.

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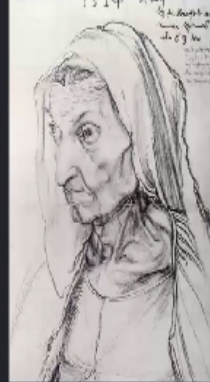
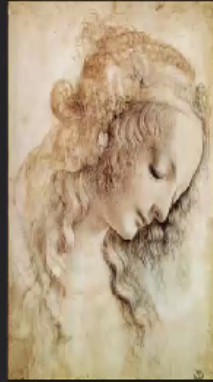


The Death of Marat,
Jacques-Louis David, 1793

So the body that you see human body with full flesh and volume and perspective is also an extension a tangible extension of the real human body.

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To achieve the best qualities of mimetic traditions the artists require to hone the appropriate skills to depict the objects and figures in exact details.



But interestingly in my mimetic traditions what you finally create is not a real life of course but an illusion of real life. Whereas in non-mimetic tradition nobody creates an illusion of real life. Because right at the outset you know when you are looking at a non-mimetic art that you are looking at a different pictorial or a visual world. But when you are looking at a mimetic work you have this feeling that these figures and this space almost look like an extension of your space.

But the surface on which it has been painted is obviously flat either a flat wall or a flat canvas or a flat paper. So literally speaking there is no extension of space literally speaking there is no depth of space what is created generally in mimetic tradition is an illusion of space. An illusion of three dimensionality an illusion of surface textured and ductile feeling like this one. So to achieve the best qualities of mimetic traditions the artists require honing the appropriate skills to depict the objects and figures in exact details.

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Like this one you almost feel like that you can go and touch the road you can touch the drapery, you can touch the cloth, you can touch the screen, and if you touch the skin you will get that kind of tactile feeling. But it is absolutely wrong I mean you cannot do that it is a canvas painting it is just an oil paint so using canvases a surface and oil paint as your medium and using certain techniques of painting you create a very convincing realism which forms a very important part of magnetic art.

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Even in the era of modern art, the mimetic tradition continues in new styles, with more emphasis on the technical and expressive aspects...



Even in the era of modern art the mimetic tradition continues but in new styles and new techniques and with more emphasis on the technical and expressive aspects and that is why when you look at a painting by Degas like the one on the left and you look at the painting by Van Gogh the painting on the right on this slide you know that. Yes, the artists the painters are still the still belong to that mimetic tradition but they are not really trying to create an illusionistic painting.

They given the kind of paintings they are doing it is pretty obvious that they don't want to evoke this feeling that you are looking at almost the real world rather they want to evoke this feeling that you are looking at a painted world.

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...until abstract art appears in modern western art.
Abstract artists clearly denied any chance of mimesis in their art.



But until I mean this is all fine, so far until abstract art appears in modern Western art and abstract art is clearly denied any chance of mimesis in their art. So within the tradition of Western art whereas on the one hand we do have magnetic traditions as it appears in Roman art as it appears Renaissance art onwards in NSRI renaissance arrow and all that. In of course realism new classicism then early modern art there is also an element of mimesis.

But in the 1940s when also earlier - that there are few artists who set on to create some artworks where there will be no chance no element no scope for any kind of mimesis they were creating abstract art. Thank you.

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